Confronting The Lack of Racial Unity In the American Christian Church

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Confronting The Lack of Racial Unity In the American Christian Church

Moses Barrios
Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

CONFRONTING THE LACK OF RACIAL UNITY
IN THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Written by

MOSES BARRIOS

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

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CONFRONTING THE LACK OF RACIAL UNITY IN THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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

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

BY
MOSES BARRIOS
MARCH 2019
This paper will focus on confronting the lack of racial unity in Sunday worship.

Why is America’s weekly hour of Christian worship so divided among racial lines? Some may choose to ignore the reality of racial separation in our country, however a race problem is at hand and the Christian church is at the center of it.

Nonetheless, the Christian church contains the answer to the problem. It must gain, however self-awareness and consider a new way to respond in view of its historical narrative. The people of God must participate in racial and liturgical reconciliation, rather than reverting to unhealthy ecclesiological systems that have plagued the church for centuries. Although this project will draw from different voices speaking on behalf of race in America, a dive into missional ventures within a local ministry context will offer practical insight and solutions.

Furthermore, theological concepts from Scripture such as Christian identity, racial equality and Christ-like love are key to transforming Sunday worship. Moreover, through strategic goals of leadership development, spiritual formation and missional ventures, togetherness over time will overcome segregation. Racial unity in worship is evident through multi-ethnic leaders and churches. Therefore, it should be seriously pursued by every believer, church and denomination.
To my wife Brenda and my children Hansel Lucas, Amelie Nicole and Penelope Danae without whom this work would been impossible to complete.

To my parents Rolando and Ana, my father and mother in-law Juan and Olga, my family and friends, thank you for your unconditional love.

To the members of Crave Life, Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd who remind me of God’s face and embody true racial unity and hospitality.
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I am also appreciative of my student cohort who offered their input, thoughts and participation to further enhance my learning and understanding of racial and urban ministry.

Still, the greatest acknowledge belongs to my wife Brenda who relinquished many hours, days, and weeks to the completion of this family goal. She demonstrated her love by allowing me to travel, study, read and write all in the name of love for God and the local parish. Brenda, I love you more than you will ever know and remain in love with you 25 years later after asking you to be my girlfriend.

To my kids, Hansel, Amelie and Penelope, you are the motivation to complete this work. I hope it offers something of worth to you and perhaps one day you will also complete your doctoral work! Hansel, you carry the heart of a pastor within you. Amelie, you remind me of what perseverance looks like. Penelope, your hard work is unmatched. Love all three of you, from your mama’s womb to now and forever. I am so rich in love.
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INTRODUCTION

The pulse of racial unity among the American people is faint. A heartbeat of division and tension has always permeated throughout American history and sadly, America’s archival colors continue to manifest in form of hatred. Although many would agree that racial tension has improved over the years, one cannot deny the feeling that racism is alive and well. It is not ordinary for White supremacists, White nationalists, Nazis and other similar minded groups to rally together in Charlottesville, Virginia and chant racist slogans. They did this while, carrying anti-Muslim and anti-semetic banners, Confederate flags, swastikas and of all things, Donald Trump for President signs.¹ These are some bizarre times.

Players of the National Football League (NFL) following the example of former NFL player Colin Kaepernick, began to kneel during the national anthem in protest of social and racial injustice in our country. The President of the United States (US) criticized these players for protesting and suggested they disrespected the flag. However, the players, coaches and even some NFL owners responded with team statements refuting the president’s remarks and the outcome was overwhelming unifying.

The Seattle Seahawk’s players wrote in a joint statement, “We will not stand for the injustice that has plagued people of color in this country. Out of love for our country

and in honor of the sacrifices made on our behalf, we unite to oppose those that would deny our most basic freedoms.”\(^{2}\) Speaking up for injustice today is in direct opposition to one’s national allegiance. Moreover, the popular ESPN Sports show “First Take” highlighted the overwhelming opposition of the American people towards those who are kneeling during the national anthem. Sixty-four percent of voters agreed with the president’s stance on standing for the National anthem and another survey indicated that 80 percent of voters want less politics in sports.\(^{3}\) Again, we are living in extraordinary times when American voters would rather watch football and stand for nationalism than address the social issues of racism and inequality.

In addition, the lack of response and support from the President of the United States towards Puerto Rico in times of natural disaster reveals a dysfunctional attitude towards neighboring countries. Puerto Rico continues to recover with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Initially, it was reported that the death toll reached 50 souls and at least another 117 people were unaccounted for.\(^{4}\) However, by late-August of 2018 officials in Puerto Rico increased the death count to 2,975 people and the mayor of the capital, San Juan, continues to accuse the US government of deliberately downplaying the impact of


the storm. There is a drastic misrepresentation of the force behind this hurricane and the loss of life from 50 souls to nearly 3,000 souls.

The Puerto Rican people, who have been US citizens for over a hundred years and part of the territory of the United States surely have a new perception of the US President and his lack of solidarity with all people, especially those of Spanish speaking African and Latino descent.

We are living in unusual times and therefore, the American Christian Church cannot stand by in silence. Although one would like to believe that the Church of Jesus Christ is listening to the throbbing pulse of our country, one cannot ignore the lack of solidarity and unity that exists within the Church itself. “It must be asked, ‘Is the church even capable of bringing about unity and hope to a world that is thirsty and hungry?’”

Whether one identifies with Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy or any other branch of the church is not the point here, as the Universal Church will always be beautiful and unique. For there is beauty in diversity of age, language, race, style, size and theology. Jesus said, in Matthew’s Gospel, “I tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gathers together as my followers, I am there among them, (Mt 18:19-20).”

The Universal Church is all of us. Individual expressions come in every size, from very small to super mega, but in each range of church size God moves equally and

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6 New Living Translation
deeply. Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus, (Gal 3:26-28).”

The point is that diversity of identities and diversification of people groups are at the core of the uniqueness of the universal church. For the people of God look different, sound different and do church distinctly, and that is what makes different congregations respond uniquely. Although this may be self-evident, the spiritual uniqueness of the church is discovered in the core belief that all of God’s people are one in Christ Jesus. No matter what faith tradition one identifies with, the believer must respond to God’s calling to oneness. However, responding to this kind of call is also to gain self-awareness of our collective spiritual illness as the people of God.

This project will focus on creating missional ventures to prepare the members of Crave Life for the purpose of moving towards racial unity in Sunday worship. Offering opportunities for the members of Crave Life to participate in service projects and worship gatherings that foster racial unification.

For this project, I will include three sections: 1) ministry context, 2) theological reflection, and 3) ministry practice. Part One of my project will focus on confronting the lack of racial unity in the American Christian Church. Using the cultural landscape of Whittier, California along with the ministry context of Crave Life, and our ministry partners, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran and Thai Shepherd.

Part Two of the project will center on providing a review of the different voices speaking on race in America. Moreover, presenting the legitimacy of a race problem in
America and the Christian church at the center of the problem. While also looking to enhance self-awareness of our collective spiritual illness as the people of God. Moreover, the people of God have the opportunity to participate in racial, liturgical and communal reconciliation, offering redemptive relationships and spiritual renewal that build up hope for racial unity.

Additionally, a theological platform for racial unity in Sunday morning worship will be compared to basic dysfunctional systems of the Christian Church already at work, including individualism, consumerism and racism. One must consider tackling these unhealthy systems within the Church in order to transform worship practices. As a directive, Scripture will present theological concepts such as spiritual identity, racial equality and Christian love to transform America’s Christian Church which lacks racial unity.

Part Three of this project will submit various strategies attempting to find a resolution to the challenge of racial unity in the Christian Church. One strategy will focus on leadership development and spiritual renewal of Crave Life leaders. Further, Crave Life will walk the steps of evaluation and will assess the outcomes of this work. Lastly, the evidence of this work will manifest itself through Crave Life’s involvement in missional ventures and participation in weekly worship that fosters racial reconciliation therefore, reclaiming racial unity in one local parish.

Although one may believe this is an ambitious statement, one must respond to the current times with spiritual assurances and the here, but not fully yet. With statements

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pointing towards the remedies that have yet to arrive. These are some interesting times to be alive. Surely generations before may have felt the same way, however this is our time to listen, to discern, and to respond to the prayer of Jesus, “May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me, (John 17:23).” The next great spiritual renewal of the Church is near, and racial unity will be at the center.
PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
CHAPTER 1

VIABLE HOPE IN WHITTIER, CALIFORNIA

To appreciate the origin of any American city one must begin with a historical analysis. Many American colonial cities were created with purpose and intentionality. William Bradford celebrated the city of Boston as a blessing from God, a great tree whose roots spread throughout New England as “all trade and commerce fell in her way.”¹ William Penn designed Philadelphia as “a green garden town” where every household would have “room enough for House, Garden and small Orchard.”² Therefore, each American city symbolizes their context and depicts a meaning. The city of Whittier is no different.

The earliest settlers of what would become Whittier began with the First Nation Peoples, The Tongva tribe stretched throughout the Los Angeles Basin bordering the Whittier fault line to the east and the coastal lowland area to the west. They are recognized as the first people to greet the Spanish ships that arrived in California in

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² Ibid., 15.
1542. Spanish Catholic missionaries followed after. Soon Mexican and American ranchers were able to obtain water for drinking and irrigation. One of the first known settlers was a man by the name of Pío de Jesús Pico. Pico was born in 1801 at the San Gabriel mission and was the last governor of Mexican Alta California. By the mid-1800s Pico became the owner of the large land which would one day become Whittier. He established himself building a home and a ranch along the east bank of the San Gabriel River. Moreover, Pico further developed his land including the building of a chapel, saloon and other guesthouses. In fact, Pico named his estate “El Ranchito,” a place that routinely celebrated fiestas, rodeos and dances. However, after some unfortunate business happenings, Pico was evicted from his property. His neighbor and friend Harriet Williams Russell Strong purchased the property, restored it and gave it as a gift to the State of California. In 1927 El Ranchito was designated as one of California’s first state historic parks.

By 1867, Pico established another town within El Ranchito land known as Picoville. This town included a riverside camp of Tongva Indians and Mexican laborers. Nearly twenty-five years later a man named Jim Harvey, a saloonkeeper, purchased the land, which by then had evolved into a town of undesirables. The land became known as

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5 Ibid., 110.

6 Ibid., 110.

7 Ibid., 118.

8 Ibid., 126.
Jimtown named after its owner. However, a group of Quakers settled in this area and disapproving of their neighbor’s habits, outlawed saloons and taverns, banning the development of any alcoholic establishment within the town limits.

The City of Whittier was founded in 1887 as a Quaker colony. These Quakers arrived in California with the goal of building a Christian community that would positively enhance the life of the state. After creating structure, selecting leaders and gathering to meet for the establishing of this town, the Quakers decided to name the city after John Greenleaf Whittier, an American Quaker and advocate for abolition of slavery from Massachusetts. At this time John Greenleaf Whittier was very frail, he wrote them a letter saying, “I am glad to know that a settlement of Friends is established in the loveliest section of Southern California with a climate of unsurpassed healthfulness and a soil of marvelous fertility, where mountain, vale and ocean combine to render it ‘beautiful for situation.’”9 These words are fitting for any city that is seeking meaning and purpose. Therefore, one can argue that John Greenleaf Whittier’s desire for the city of Whittier was to establish a Christian community that would enjoy the beautifully created lands of Southern California. However, today it is not that simple anymore, nor is the ministry landscape of Southern California so straightforward.

Today, the city of Whittier requires pastoral continued education, interpretation and spiritual navigation to effectively minister in such a geographical location as Southern California. Those who live outside of Southern California are blinded by the beautiful sunshine and the amazing beaches, not to mention the famous streets of

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9 Ibid., 169.
Hollywood and the popular taste of In-N-Out Burgers. Although, these are a large part of the Southern California culture, at times these same things are the greatest challenges to the development of missional living.

Although the term of “missional living” has changed in meaning over the years, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s work in *Public Church*, suggests the discussion of church in public life is embedded in the incarnation of Christ as seen in cross, resurrection, and living presence.¹⁰ Moe-Lobeda presents an ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) perspective on the matter of missional living providing a meaning, according to the ELCA constitution, “The church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world, to participate in God’s mission.”¹¹

According to Moe-Lobeda, through baptism God makes a covenant with us Lutherans, calling us to live among God’s faithful people. In other words, the Church is gathered by God and sent for the sake of the world, for the service and well-being of all of creation. Therefore, missional living begins with the understanding that all are called by the love of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to be witnesses of this love and embody it in public life.¹²

Moe-Lobeda describes that the ELCA as a denomination that seeks ecumenical efforts as a concrete way of celebrating unity and missional living. All centered on the faith that all groups share and in recognizing the denominational differences are the gifts

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¹¹ Ibid., 14.

¹² Ibid., 39.
that allow us to be the more complete version of God’s people to participate in God’s work. Moreover, Moe-Lobeda attests to the challenges of living life together not only within one’s familiar faith tradition, but among ecumenical and interfaith communities and therefore, insists on the power of prayer as the response. This is to say, being a people of prayer that is in communion with God only assists in overcoming all the barriers of division. She argues that the trouble with the call to prayer as a key to missional living is that most Christians do not zealously pray with intention. Perhaps Christians are more focused with the ambitious things of this world and culture, rather than with the spiritual mission of God.

As a native Californian, born in West Los Angeles and after living in ten different cities within both Los Angeles and Orange County Counties, I can share with you the temptation of awaking to a sunny Sunday morning with the endless possibilities of leisure and entertainment at one’s hands. There are hundreds of things one can do on the weekend after a long week full of insane traffic, commuting schedules and long hours of work. All to maintain the high costs of living and one can begin to get a glimpse of the demands of life.

As a pastor, interfaith chaplain, spiritual counselor and church planter, one witnesses the power of leisure and entertainment over that of spirituality and faith. This creates a different dynamic and ministry challenge in Southern California. Moe-Lobeda asserts that Martin Luther insisted, “we are selves curved in on self.” Meaning that one’s sin of wealth, privilege and comfort will be a barrier to living out the mission of

\[13\] Ibid., 43.
God in this world, of being public church. Moe-Lobeda points towards Lutherans as an example, who cannot fully live out neighbor love, because they do not identify with the impoverished due to their economic privilege. Lutherans who do not care for the earth, by exploiting its air, water and soil, demonstrating their embeddedness with America’s consumeristic mainstream culture. Nonetheless, Luther would agree that having been filled with the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist we are no longer selves curved in on self; we are people who, with Christ’s love, serve the widespread good.”

As the Church, we are rusty tools in which God continues to work on us to perfect us. This is no different in the historical development of a city center and its community of people.

The history of the city of Whittier, California is made up of generations upon generations of people have shaped the present-day rhythm. Many people have lived, worked, created, innovated, sinned, worshipped and inhabited this city. Whittier is located fourteen miles southeast from downtown Los Angeles. Once considered a suburb of Los Angeles, today its part of the Greater Los Angeles region.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of Whittier is estimated to be 86,838 as of July 1, 2018. The racial origin of Whittier is estimated to be (67.6 percent) of Latino descent, (24.8 percent) White alone, not of Latino descent, (4.6 percent) Asian descent, (3.4 percent) from two or more races, (1.6 percent) African American, (0.4 percent) American Indian and Alaska Native descent, (0.1 percent) Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. In comparison to the 2000 census, the

\[14\] Ibid., 43.

demographics remain consistent without much racial change. This consistency provides an established racial make-up where seven out of ten individuals are from Latino descent. The largest racial group in the city of Whittier are of Latino descent and has remained consistently Latino for 20 years. In fact, an article from 2011 presents this change as a social migration, as mostly retired White empty nesters decided to sell their large homes, and Latino professionals moved in.\textsuperscript{16} These Latinos are educated professionals that primarily speak English.

Additionally, the city of Whittier recognized their need for more Latino leadership within the City Council, which in October 2011 had no Latino City Council members. As of January 2018, Whittier has one Latino City Council member. Additional representation that reflects the community is necessary at the city leadership level. One must acknowledge the message that is being projected to its city’s residents when leadership that does not racially and ethnically reflect the community.

There are other similar communities such as Buena Park, California in Orange County that seem to be experiencing the same kind of imbalance. According to the 2010 United States Census, Buena Park’s racial makeup was 39.3 percent Latino, 27.7 percent White, 26.7 percent Asian, and 3.8 percent Black.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, Buena Park’s City Council consists of five members, all of European descent. This is also true of most city service organizations such as Rotary Club, Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Woman’s Club, Clergy


Council and faith communities from all faith traditions. There is an imbalance in leadership and membership in view of the surrounding community.

For example, the Whittier Clergy Council who meets once a month to engage relationship and partnership with interfaith clergy are a wonderful and amazing group of people. However, one cannot ignore the lack of racial diversity in the group and as the only member of color within the group I can testify to that. Moreover, the lack of racial and ethnic inclusion and representation offers an incomplete picture of the needs of Whittier.

Although there may be other factors to the lack of diversity within the City Council, the fact remains that the community is not being equally represented in the decisions of the city. Underrepresentation is critical, considering that 40% of the households have children under the age of 18 living at home and that 30% of the population is under the age of 18. Another 10% is between the ages of 18 to 24, while 30% are from ages 25 to 44, and about 12% are 65 and over. This means that about 70% of the population is under the age of 44, which is a promising factor for the future growth of the city.

Additionally, the median income for a family household is $55,726, which is also promising for a city seeking future financial endeavors. Whittier continues to grow economically with many new businesses and restaurants being built and restored around the city. Especially in the downtown area of Whitter known as Uptown Whittier. In fact, city business owners recently approved a decision to build more parking spaces for

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community purposes. A recent newspaper article confirms this saying, “A new four-story parking structure is being approved for construction as many Uptown business owners are in agreement with the necessity.”\footnote{Mike Sprague, “Long-Delayed Uptown Whittier Parking Structure” \textit{Whittier Daily News}, December 4, 2017, \url{https://www.whittierdailynews.com/2017/12/04/long-delayed-uptown-whittier-parking-structure-could-open-in-2019/}.} This article further confirms the agreement from business owners, city residents and city leaders that the city of Whittier is in a season of growth and development. This means that the city of Whitter will continue to change economically and certainly ethnically and racially.

In addition, the Whittier Chamber Business Focus offers a monthly newsletter that presents new members. In the month of June of 2018, the following business owners were presented: Wendy Mendez, Law Office of Francis R. Henriquez, Odette Khalil, Whittier Drugs & Medical Supply, Alan Kwan, Storm Properties Mandy Morlet, Beauty Lush Salon and Spa, and Kim Ortega, Whittier Hearing Center.\footnote{Whittier Chamber, \url{https://whittierchamber.com/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/bf-2018-06.pdf} (accessed February 15, 2019).} Photos of these business owners offer a diverse image of business owners within the city of Whittier, which represent future benefits to people all of races and ethnicities.

However, when discussing the spiritual growth of the city, all the once large European descent mainline churches have dwindled down to very small congregations. One can suggest that the city’s ethnic and racial evolution has contributed to the decline of the mainline church. However, one must also acknowledge the natural transition of time among the generation of churchgoers. Meaning that the once thriving generation of mainline European descent members has aged and the following generation has either
moved on to other cities or simply not continued the legacy of their parents towards the local church.

Take for instance, two congregations in the city of Whittier who merged together in the summer of 2015.\textsuperscript{21} Whittier Presbyterian Church averaged in worship about 20 and 25 parishioners. The church proceeded to complete a process of self-examination and self-reflection. Unlike most congregations, they agreed to let go of the facility and building that increasingly became more financially unsustainable. After some prayer, the leaders with the direction of their interim pastor decided to sell their large building and used the financial resources to do future ministry.

Similarly, another church named Salem Lutheran Church in Whittier was experiencing the same challenges. Nonetheless, both congregations were seeking to continue going forward. Eventually both Whittier Presbyterian and Salem Lutheran entered into a new partnership where both congregations began to worship together on Easter Sunday, while stepping into a new future filled with great excitement.\textsuperscript{22}

This new adventure provided an alternative response to the closing of two churches in the city of Whittier. Even more meaningful to this decision is the desire to focus financial resources on ministry rather than on facility maintenance. These two congregations seek to use their time, energy and money to serve the community.

The idea of ministry being attached to a building or church facility is evident among most Christians. However, these two congregations are moving in the opposite


\textsuperscript{22} Whittier Presbyterian Church, http://whitpresby.org/blog/ (accessed January 15, 2018).
direction. They are seeking to do ministry together, rather than focus on the maintenance of a church building. Moreover, several other churches in the city of Whittier are trending in similar direction of decline in worship attendance and financial sustainability. This is confirmed even more through personal conversations with Whittier’s Clergy Council who meet on a monthly basis. The council consists of pastors and spiritual leaders from several denominations including Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian Church of USA, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran, and Friends Quaker Church, to which the majority of the clergy are of European descent. The white European population in Whittier simply is not enough to fill the mostly white European led churches. The European descent population of Whittier makes up only 24.8 percent of the total population. Less than three of ten people are of European descent in Whittier and therefore, the lack of population may be contributing to the lack of Sunday worship attendance.

Additionally, Sunday morning worship attendance and leadership may be neglecting more than 70 percent of people of other racial and ethnic groups within the community of Whittier. This is not to say that all churches are dying. However, the larger churches of the city tend to be of Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical conservative traditions, but these churches are not necessarily growing either, they are merely the largest churches in town. The American Christian church within the city limits of Whittier is declining and therefore, one must wonder the spiritual state and wellness of the people.

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According to Sperling’s Best Places, a website focused on providing Americans demographics from city to city, depicts Whittier’s religious affiliation as the following; 53.43% of the total population of Whittier affiliate to a religious tradition. Here is the breakdown by religious affiliation: 36.96% Roman Catholic, 6.72% of Christian traditions such as (Baptist 2.2%, Pentecostal 1.8%, Methodist 1.2%, Presbyterian 0.9%, Lutheran 0.7%, Episcopalian 0.4% and others), 5.23% of Evangelical traditions, 1.55% as LDS, 1.15% of an Eastern faith, 1.11% Jewish, and 0.71% as Islamic. Nearly half of the people of Whittier are not part of any Christian tradition, which is both a challenge and opportunity for the local Christian church and its pastors.

Additionally, one must consider the socioeconomic epidemic of homelessness in most cities of Los Angeles county. In the city of Whittier, the homeless individual count for the last three years is as follows; 367 individuals in 2015, 258 individuals in 2016, and 214 individuals in 2017. If these counts are accurate then homelessness has decreased by 40 percent. While the rest of the country continues to increase in homelessness, Whittier seems to be on the opposite direction. This may be the result of city initiatives and other task-oriented groups who have been hard at work in assisting with the homeless community.

A number of organizations such as the Salvation Army Whittier Hospitality House, a shelter for women and children, the Whittier Area First Day Coalition, a shelter

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for 45 people that provides other services, the Women’s and Children’s Crisis Shelter, which helps victims of domestic violence and the Whole Child, a program that provides housing for families are significant in the decline of homelessness.26

Despite all these group efforts already at work in the city, the police Chief reports that incidents and calls regarding the homeless individuals continue to rise. However, this may not be directly related to the decreasing homeless population but some homeless individuals suffering with mental and behavioral disorders. Consider that Los Angeles city and county receives $132 million annually to fund programs, shelter, housing and services to homeless individuals.27

Therefore, homelessness is a decently funded program, but the Whittier residents and business owners are not in complete agreement with the recent reports of homelessness population declining. Whether it’s reality or not, the perception is that homelessness is present and causing negative dynamics across the city. Sometimes perception is more important to many than reality. Another challenge or opportunity for the local church and its pastors.

Even more concerning are the recent facts about student homelessness and lack of necessary nutrition. The Los Angeles Community College District released a survey stating that more than 60 percent of students are experiencing food insecurity while more


than 18 percent of the students are homeless in the past year.\textsuperscript{28} Rio Hondo College in the
city of Whittier falls under this college district and therefore, plans to address the issue.
Rio Hondo’s student body enrollment of 16,263 students is 92 percent of Latino/Hispanic
descent, which is significantly higher than the state average of 68 percent and only 23
percent of the students are full-time.\textsuperscript{29}

One former professor shares her experience with homeless and hungry students,
which has been going on for more than 35 years at Rio Hondo College. After a recent
survey at Rio Hondo students shared their concern over feeding themselves and their
families, 35 percent of the students skip meals because they don’t have money and more
than half of the surveyed students who receive financial aid said they spend at least some
of those funds on food.\textsuperscript{30}

These findings are troubling for one of the two major colleges in the city of
Whittier, the other being Whittier College. One response from the college is the creation
of the RioSource Room, a food pantry supplied by with the aid from Food Finders, Heart
of Compassion, and Emmanuel Presbyterian Church Food Bank.\textsuperscript{31} A food pantry for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Sandra T. Molina, “Rio Hondo College Considers How to Address its Student Homeless
hondo-college-considers-how-to-address-its-student-homeless-population/}.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Community College Review, \url{https://communitycollegereview.com} (accessed October 10,
2018).
\item \textsuperscript{30} Sandra T. Molina, “Nearly Half of Rio Hondo Students Go Hungry Sometimes, Here’s What the
College is Doing About It,” \textit{Whittier Daily News}, October 25, 2017,
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College is Doing About It,” \url{https://www.whittierdailynews.com/2017/10/25/nearly-half-of-rio-hondo-
\end{itemize}
students who are hungry either during finals week and beyond. It’s an assistance for students who are financially unable to have food. Moreover, it can become an obstacle to the completion of a student’s education.

Surely, circumstances such as these for students trying to take a finals exam while being hungry and lacking the nutrients to think clearly may prevent success. More than one third of student body of Rio Hondo College identify with lack of food due to limited financial resources. Rio Hondo College is a community college that resides in North Whittier and most students commute daily. The Metro board, which oversees the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority is considering the addition of a Metrolink Station at the base of Rio Hondo College.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, the students of Rio Hondo College need some basic meals to assist with their academic goals. Sounds like another challenge or opportunity for the local church and its pastors.

CHAPTER 2

THE MINISTRY AND TRIBE OF CRAVE LIFE

When telling the narrative of a new ministry one ought to begin with an ecclesiological foundation. For the meaning of church has multiple definitions. Since the inception of Crave Life, the core value of communal living has defined us as a family, a village or more precisely a tribe. The Hebrew scriptures offer several images of tribes, however the book of Joshua in chapters six and seven enhance the meaning of being part of a tribe. Although the Lord had set aside everything made of silver, gold, bronze or iron to be sacred, and returned to the Lord’s treasury, one member of one Israel tribe did not follow the instructions. Prior to the destruction of the walls of Jericho, Joshua sent out two spies to bring Rahab and her family to safety. Upon their return to safety, a man named Achan of the tribe of Judah violated the instructions of the Lord and stole some the items dedicated to the Lord. Unaware of the matter Joshua confidently sent out 3,000 warriors to attack the small town of Ai, however the Israelites were defeated easily. Joshua and his elders mourned the event until the Lord says, “Israel has sinned and broken my covenant! In the morning you must present yourselves by tribes, and the Lord will point out the tribe to which the guilty man belongs, (Jos 7:11,14).” Achan tells the truth and he and his entire family are stoned and burned to death. Although this story
sounds barbaric, the Lord demonstrated the importance of tribe to the people of Israel. It was not the individual that sinned, it was the tribe that was brought to account for the sin of its member. Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole bible offers this explanation of Achan’s sin, “He has done a great injury to the church of God: He has wrought folly in Israel, has shamed the nation which is looked upon by all its neighbours to be a wise and understanding people, has infected that nation which is sanctified to God, and troubled that nation of which he is the protector.”¹ In the same manner, this narrative demonstrates the significance of being in community and identifying with a tribe. A Jesus tribe provides spiritual growth through commitment in prayer, in neighbor love and response to God’s Spirit.

David Daubert, Director for Renewal of Congregations for the ELCA offers insight into the meaning of being part of a tribe, asserts, “Confession and repentance are central to the work of transformation. Most of us need to spend time repenting of who we are.”² Daubert is insisting that confession and repentance are a vital component of a tribe or congregation that is renewing.

Moreover, he suggests the renewing tribe or congregation finds meaning through a new identity in Christ, because the reality is that the old identity is broken and harmful. In other words, our spiritual tribe offers new meaning and leaves behind old fragmented


² Dave Daubert, Living Lutheran: Renewing your Congregation, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 62.
ways of living. In viewing church as a tribe, one discovers acceptance, assurance, and belonging to something greater than one self.

In fact, the initiation narrative of Crave Life clings onto this notion of church as a tribe. For a spiritual family and tribe suggests unity and togetherness that Christ prayed for on his last night of life on earth. Jesus said, “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one, as you are in me, Father and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me, (Jn 17:20-21).” Out of all the things that Jesus could have prayed about for his people, he chooses unity and oneness. Although good health, world peace, safety, financial security or happiness could have been at the top of the list, Jesus intentionally prays for us to be like him and the Father, to be in one with another.

Being part of a spiritual tribe fosters unity and more significantly unity creates love for one another. Unity does not mean that the tribe will agree in everything, nor does it mean that every problem is solved. However, it does mean that we share a higher common identity in Christ Jesus. It means that we carry within us the love of God and therefore, we should share that love with one another.

A spiritual tribe is at the center of unity and this should move us towards answering Jesus’ prayer for unity of all his disciples. Crave Life seeks to embody four core values that any Jesus tribe should consider pursuing; unity, inclusivity, diversity, and community. While living out these values seem straightforward, it is the power of confession, repentance and forgiveness that makes it all possible.
In the summer of 2009, while serving in a Reformed Church in San Jose, California, I began to sense the call to plant a new church of my people, for unchurched or dechurched English-speaking second-generation Latinos in their twenties and thirties. Nonetheless, one evening I was invited to share my heart with the church leadership of this reformed church and as I began to share my passion and sense of call to plant a church, I began to feel a huge knot in my throat and quickly became overwhelmed with emotion for I sensed that God was spiritually breaking my heart for the lost. Reluctantly, I approached this sense of call for the next six months believing that God was at work in my life. After a trip to Southern California to visit family and friends, and before returning home I received some words from my brother-in-law, which today I believe were words from the Lord, “I’m ready when you’re ready.” Within a couple weeks of my return from Southern California while sitting in the church sanctuary I heard another set of words as clear as I have ever heard saying, “What are you waiting for?” Those words were the final straw and the decision was made to return home to plant a new church in Los Angeles.

Upon my arrival to Los Angeles, I received a call to be the Chaplain for a homeless mission in downtown Los Angeles. I oversaw all spiritual matters of the mission, including preaching at daily chapel services and praying for people, assisting with dinner feedings and shepherding the skid-row homeless community on a daily basis. On free weekends, my wife and I created gathering events to share about our church planting vision with our family members and friends. Soon the church planting core of people began to grow from within the family.
Inception of Crave Life Church

On April 3, 2011, Crave Life began to meet in a small fellowship hall in the city of Norwalk, California. One year later the church was commissioned by partner churches and we officially launched our first preview service in March of 2012 with 117 people. The church planting adventure was off and running with the assistance of several partnerships including The Evangelical Covenant Church denomination.\(^3\) The ECC is a church planting centered denomination that is well known for their multi-ethnic churches and diverse leadership.

With the assistance of the ECC and other partner churches Crave Life Church continued to grow numerically and in faith for the next four years. People from various ethnicities, races, identities and church traditions began to find belonging at Crave Life. Over 39 people were baptized in water during this season of ministry. Countless others participated for the first time in the sacrament of Holy Communion. While many others responded with financial commitments to the church. 35 people completed denominational paperwork and became members of the church.

While significant ministry took place throughout the whole season of church planting, financial and property challenges were always present. Being forced to move over five times, into three different cities, over a three-year span, hindered church growth. Put differently, the development of the church significantly depended on location and finance to continue further growth. However, the moving from one city to another city only created inconsistency and instability. Although the moving portion was

\(^3\) The Evangelical Covenant Church, Partner churches: Life Covenant Church, The Rock Covenant Church, and Real Life Covenant Church.
unwanted, as a church leadership we realized that our people demographic reflected the urban poor and blue-collar workforce.

Additionally, reaching the marginalized and rejected, mostly young second-generation Latinos meant that financially the church would inadequately develop. The goal of self-sustainability was beyond reach for a church with this ministry demographic. Therefore, after countless meetings and times of prayer, and upon the completion of the Covenant Church contract and financial support, Crave Life Church was forced to close its doors in early 2015. The (ECC) Evangelical Covenant Church helped in exploring ways to continue gathering as a church, however the options were limited. One approach was to meet in church member’s homes, however with the demographic of the community this was impossible to secure a home that would accommodate the entire community and its ministries.

In addition, from a cultural perspective, a church facility or sacred designated space for worship is highly valued and honored. Therefore, gathering in living rooms was not a true viable option. Another option suggested by denominational leaders was to merge our congregation with another congregation that already owned a building. In other words, the idea was to merge our church plant with an existing ECC congregation. This would be challenging in terms of transitioning people to a new location that would not truly feel like home. Not to mention the challenges around new worship style, church branding, leadership, finance, decision making and relinquishing one’s church identity and unique calling. This option was the same as closing the doors of the ministry of Crave Life.
The ECC was ill equipped to support a non-traditional church plant with financial limitations. While this decision was not just purely financial; however, finances played an important role as the church would not be able to afford a meeting location, nor the ability to support ongoing ministries. Moreover, the financial dynamic would drive the pastor to look for work outside the church and therefore, diminish the time given to grow and establish the church. Additionally, with the denomination lacking in church property and without a viable denominational plan to support urban poor ministries under financial distress, several members became discouraged.

Another factor that influenced this season was that some families moved out of state for various reasons making way for members to reflect and celebrate the four years of ministry. Although this was a difficult decision, and without any confident alternatives, many members were encouraged to find a local church and move on with their spiritual journey. I remained near in relationship and connection with the members to provide spiritual support as needed. It’s important to mention that closing the church also meant I was left without a job and forced to find employment elsewhere. When I approached the ECC about this, the response I received was that I should begin to look for outside employment. There was a lack of support and care for the pastor from the denomination.

Additionally, the ECC church planting leadership team decided to deny any additional financial support to continue the ministry of Crave Life nor did it offer any other pastoral opportunities to support my upcoming financial situation. After some failed attempts to find employment with other denominations, I accepted a full-time hospice chaplain position and continued to pray about the next steps of my life. By the end of
year, some faithful Crave Life members remained in contact with me and unsure of the future, we simply gathered as friends to be with God.

Hence, Crave Life resurrected from the dead even if it was only a third of the people and no longer affiliated to any denomination. The important detail was that we were together as one tribe. A Jesus tribe that once again centered around unification of all of God’s people. The focus moved away from sustainability and survival, towards ministry and living out Christ’s commandments. Budgets, finances, denominations, facilities, membership, and board meetings were no longer at the forefront, instead our focus was on being the church, the Jesus tribe that God had called us to be.

The Mobility of the People

The people of Crave Life demonstrate an ability to gather as the people of God regardless of physical location. In other words, the members of Crave Life define themselves as people and not as a building. The story of people who have walked through the wilderness at times and the valleys at other times. They understand their calling to be the people of God, sent to share God’s love with whoever they come into contact with.

Counting our current season of ministry Crave Life Church has moved over 10 times in 6 years. Firstly, from a fellowship hall in the city of Norwalk, to another fellowship hall in Buena Park. Then from a Space Center in Downey, California to a Masonic Lodge in downtown Downey. Then to a United Methodist Church in Pico Rivera, which was not part of our denomination, but graciously allowed us to use. Followed by a season of not meeting, only to explore a partnership with the Salvation Army in downtown Los Angeles that did not fit well with our theology.
Thereafter, Crave Life restarted in the backyard of my father-in-law’s house and by early 2016, a Reformed Church in the city of Buena Park opened their doors to a very small group of Cravers. The reformed church known as Christ Community Church once before at the inception of Crave Life had offered space to gather and years later Crave Life was back. The journey of returning to the place where Crave Life started demonstrates the mobility of the people of Crave Life and the power of God’s call upon his people.

After a time of restoration and healing from all the moving, Crave Life Church began to draw in new people who would support the ministry financially. Moreover, the people of Crave Life extended the invitation to the local Reformed Church in Buena Park to merge as one ministry. One ministry working together and partnering in worship to reach the people of our community, however after a long process of discernment and prayer the leaders of the Reformed church decided to not to accept the invitation. Until this day I am not completely sure why they decided to not continue to the process. Nonetheless, this separation meant that Crave Life needed to look elsewhere for partnership and denomination affiliation.

The Organic Reach

Crave Life initiated a denomination exploration with several denominations. After meeting with one denominational leader in the church planting side of ministry, it was clear that Crave Life was seeking a unique denomination. In other words, Crave Life was seeking to find a church that would embrace our diversity. Not only referring to racial and ethnic diversity, but diversity in theology, faith tradition and gender inclusion. Some
denominations required Crave Life members to go through a theological indoctrination, which the members quickly rejected. Other denominations were suspicious of our seeking to join their affiliation, due to their own prior unhealthy experiences with other churches.

Still, other denominations rejected our theological view on welcoming and affirming the LGBTQ community into the life of our Jesus tribe. The hearts and minds of people from different church traditions coming together in the exploration of one denomination that invites and accepts both conservative and progressive views on scripture. This is no easy task considering that some of our members come from the American Baptist, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal traditions and may have a more literal understanding of the scriptures and therefore narrowing their theological lenses on theological stances such as same sex marriage and women in leadership. Not to mention other theological understandings such as the theology of soteriology, the sacraments and the proclamation of the word.

Therefore, Crave Life leadership proceeded to explore denominational affiliation with the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. (PCUSA). After an initial conversation with regional leadership, Crave Life pursued next steps toward partnership. However, a ministry interview with the committee for new ministries turned out to be a disappointment. Although the people of the committee were wonderful and kind, their questions were a bit puzzling. Regardless of the specific questions, the perception was that the PCUSA is under some pressure due to the continued exiting of churches in response to same-sex marriage decision. Even though one can understand those dynamics, attempting to join the PCUSA was challenging at that time. Crave Life was honestly seeking a denominational home and yet again were forced to look elsewhere.
Crave Life continued to remain faithful and open to God’s leading. Around then I remembered that a close Moravian friend and pastor who now serves in the Milwaukee, WI suggested I reach out to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Therefore, I reached out to my local synod and Bishop to begin the conversation. Within a few days the Bishop and I decided to meet in person. At our meeting, I shared about the people of Crave Life and the ministry journey we had endured. The Bishop and the assistant to the Bishop were present during the meeting and offered great insight into the ELCA and Lutheranism.

Eventually, Bishop Andy Taylor came out to visit Crave Life and provided a time of questions and answers. This experience was rich for all and provided insight into Lutheran theology. The Bishop of the Pacifica Synod offered a relational process that made the transition into the ELCA seamless. Crave Life continued learning about Martin Luther and the ELCA, which further created a sense of familiarity and belonging.

In May of 2017, Crave Life officially joined the journey towards becoming Lutheran. Also, I began the process towards ordination, which is essential for any pastor who is seeking to join a new denomination. For this process requires time and commitment, affirming the partnership between the pastor and the new larger Jesus tribe.

**The Mission Towards Unity**

After a long journey towards seeking a home or a place to belong, Crave Life Church arrived in Whittier, California. The church building of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church was the new home to those cravers that had been wandering for years. Shepherd of the Hills once had 500 people in weekly worship on Sunday mornings during the 1980s and 1990s, however upon leadership change the congregation
significantly began to decline in the 2000s. Today this congregation has less than 20 regular attending members. Officially 25 members on the records, however some of them are unable to attend worship due to health reasons.

Moreover, the congregation demographic is entirely of white European descent and folks in their 60s, 70s and 80s. To the surprise of Crave Life, another small mission church known as Thai Shepherd meets at the same location. Thai Shepherd is an even smaller group of less than 15 people of Thai and Chinese descent. Although the church is mostly family-based, it is pastored by a Thai pastor that is more proficient in English and able to assist with translation. According to their pastor, the Thai immigrant people are seeking community and the ability to learn the language and the American culture. Although a hand full of the Thai members are capable of speaking English, the language barrier still remains. Similarly, Soong-Chan Rah claims that the Korean immigrant church seeks to maintain the language and culture, and the Thai congregation seems to identify with that as well.4

Although many of the Thai congregation identify with Buddhism, they have come to the Christian faith here in the United States. Dr. Rah explains that one of the major reasons of conversion among the Korean immigrant community centers primarily on their practical needs associated with immigrant adjustment.5 Therefore, Thai Shepherd decided to begin worshipping with Shepherd of the Hills at the beginning of 2017 as a sign of


5 Ibid., 172.
solidarity and support. Together both congregations create energy and encouragement for one another.

Although the worship service is entirely in English, a few portions of the liturgy such as the words of institution, the gospel reading, and the Lord’s Prayer are translated in Thai. Both congregations worship together on Sunday mornings at 9:00am. Worship form derives from traditional Lutheran liturgy. Shepherd of the Hills had a financial agreement with a local larger Lutheran church that provides pastoral leadership and pulpit supply. In fact, this agreement has been ongoing for the last eight years without much consideration of the future ministry of Shepherd of the Hills.

Furthermore, Crave Life worships at 11:00am providing a unique more casual and present-day Lutheran worship experience for people of all cultures, identities and traditions. Therefore, three separate and distinct Lutheran congregations gather for worship on Sundays. Sharing the same church building and sanctuary. Meaning that three racially and ethnically diverse congregations with separate pastors, leaders, financial structures, and worship styles gather in the same church sanctuary each Sunday. Although we are part of the same ELCA family and share in the same theology and liturgy, we still gather separately for Sunday worship.

However, the Holy Spirit is currently moving the three congregations towards something new, beautiful and holy. There are many questions that all three congregations should be asking. Why are we all here? What does it mean to have three ELCA congregations in one location? What is God calling us to do? What is the Spirit whispering to our hearts? What is the purpose of being God’s people here in Whittier?
Before we explore these questions, it is essential to cover the core values and theological beliefs that form the minds, hearts and souls of the Crave Life people.

Crave Life Church is a faith community centered on the belief that love has no labels. Meaning that God has no labels and no favorites, we are all God’s children regardless of culture, gender, identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, citizenship, disability or any other human created label. We believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the triune God. Our desire is unity with people of all different backgrounds, colors and identities. This is the focus of our faith community for the view of God becomes fuller and clearer when we gather with different people.

Although our current society fosters racial separation, we choose to live in unity and our faith is the point of union. Additionally, our unity is in Christ, in obedience to the Father and through the Holy Spirit. Hence, Crave Life’s mission is unity with Christ and all of God’s people.

This mission derives from multiple stories from many people who have been hurt by the church and the many times a church says they are welcoming. Yet, after encountering the community, one realizes they are welcoming as long as you believe like them, look like them or dress like them. Crave Life believes “we are the church that shares a living, daring confidence in God’s grace. Liberated by our faith, we embrace you as whole person- questions, complexities and all.”

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Crave Life consists of about 45 to 50 members, attenders and friends with a racial and ethnic demographic of 70 percent Latinos (1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} generation) mostly 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, 17.5 percent Mixed (two or more races), 5 percent White, 5 percent African American, and 2.5 percent Asian. By these demographics Crave Life would be considered a multi-ethnic congregation with at least 20 percent of its members being of other racial groups differing from the dominant race.\footnote{\textsuperscript{7}}

Also, Crave Life intentionally gathers to worship with Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd once a month. As a result of these worship services, the three congregations are seeking to worship together more and praying about future ministry and service together. Although we are not calling this a merger, certainly the coming together of all three congregations as one is a possibility.

When we gather for worship our racial and ethnic demographic better reflects the fullness of the people of God. We gather about 60 to 80 people in worship and the racial and ethnic demographic increases in diversity. 35 percent Latino (1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Generation) 35 percent White, 15 percent Asian, 12 percent Mixed (two or more races) and 3\% African American. Together as one people creates a distinct congregation that has no major racial group. Instead a balance in race and ethnicity exists.

Crave Life is currently a Latino dominant faith community with mostly 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation middle-class Latinos. Eldin Villafañe’s work in \textit{Seek the Peace of the City} offers a unique perspective of second-generation Latinos. He is a Puerto Rican American

\footnote{\textsuperscript{7} Michael O. Emerson, “A New Day for Multiracial Congregations,” Yale University Reflections, Spring 2013, \url{https://reflections.yale.edu/article/future-race/new-day-multiracial-congregations} (accessed February 16, 2019).}
who works and serves the Latino church in the United States. Therefore, his view of the Latino Church is one of powerless, but also of partnership. He asserts, “The Hispanic Church as a church from the underside, lives out in barrios for its Hispanic pueblo model of true “Koinonia (or partnership) of the spirit. It is in partnership with the hurting, the needy, the poor and the oppressed in its midst.”

Villafañe’s assessment of the second-generation Latino church mimics that of Crave Life. Some members would be considered young professionals and others work in blue-collar positions. These couples are mostly in their thirties and forties with children under 10 years old. Moreover, they are bilingual in Spanish and English, able to adapt to any cultural setting and thrive in relationship and belonging. This is a strength for most 2nd generation Latinos, the ability to be relational and conversational with any people group. The reality of growing up and living within two cultures has created a special ability to adapt to any setting. Many of my childhood friends in my neighborhood were not Latino, they were of European and Asian descent. In High School, many of my friends were of various races and ethnic groups, which provided training shall we say in the area of race and culture appropriateness.

Even more working with various Christian denominations has further developed a sense of adaptability with ministry context and people groups. There is power behind the force of adaptability. Villafañe also utilizes the phrase “triple consciousness to describe the feeling of second-generation Latino Americans, saying, “The second and third generation or “new generation” Hispanic places them often in the role of being “insiders”

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8 Eldin Villafañe, Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 38.
and “outsiders” to the first generation Hispanic as well. They are “insiders” totally accepted and affirmed only among themselves [other second and third generation Hispanics].⁹ Identifying with this assessment of second-generation Latinos offers a strength for the Crave Life community. Dave Gibbons’ work in The Monkey and the Fish asserts that “without adaptability, we’re becoming increasingly out of touch with the global village taking shape around us.”¹⁰ Namely, as the church we need to learn to adjust to the constantly changing world around us. Therefore, one way to adjust or adapt is to listen to the movement of the Holy Spirit within the parishioners of our faith communities. What is God calling this church to be in our city? Trusting that God is speaking through everyone and ministry endeavors may come from unexpected individuals.

Crave Life’s range of ministry has always birthed from within the faith community. In other words, the outward focus of ministry consistently births within the heart of one of our church members. Sometimes the ministry needs arrive at the steps of our faith community and our response is to do something about it. I can think of one of our church families that arrived in 2013 with an autistic child. After several experiences of rejection from other faith communities, mostly because their autistic son was too much of a distraction in worship, this family finally experienced belonging and acceptance at Crave Life. Their son would speak loudly or would not remain seated for long periods of time, moreover would come up on stage to jump up and down as the band played. For all

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¹⁰ Dave Gibbons, The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 19.
these reasons and others, they experienced separation from God and the church. For a season of ministry our attention shifted towards understanding autism and marching in support of autism awareness. The ministry range of ministries have shifted over the years from initially serving the homeless population in our city to caring for the terminally ill in downtown Los Angeles.

However, our heart for the homeless and for the terminally ill still continues until this day in different forms. Part of my role as pastor of Crave Life is to connect with the community. Therefore, one ministry at work in Crave Life is hospice chaplaincy. Providing spiritual support for people who are terminally ill and in the process of end of life has been life giving to my congregation. Every opportunity I get to share a story from a hospice patient or family experience further enhances the meaning of caring for the sick and isolated.

Recently, I told a story about a young man in his mid-thirties who possessed multiple master’s degrees and a PhD in science and technology. Upon completing his studies and research, articles written about his work, he accepted a position in Los Angeles. One month after starting his new position, he began to feel ill and went to the doctor to get checked. After some initial tests, it was confirmed that he had a rare form of cancer and as I sat with him in his room, he said, “I’m not sure why this is happening, and I’ve given up all hope.” I told him that surely nothing will ever separate him from the love of God and without a doubt Christ has promised to be with him always as he promised his disciples. I know this does not answer his questions and doubts, however what I did share with him is the truth of God’s promises. Offering spiritual meaning and
enhancing spiritual connection through his Baptist faith tradition increases the sense of peace and acceptance of end of life.

Although I provide this one on one kind of ministry, my church is the one that fosters this form of outreach and care. They encourage me to be a pastor that is outside of the church office engaging the world and this is one approach to be the church in public life. Additionally, I provide a monthly grief support group for people of all backgrounds and circumstances, learning to grieve their loved one is a healing process that further enhances the ministry of presence of Crave Life. This is another approach that Crave Life fosters for the community’s spiritual well-being.

In regards, to the process of initiating a new ministry endeavor, this begins with our leadership team, which today within the Lutheran tradition is considered a Church Council. Our leaders consist of people who serve in both the spiritual and analytical side of the ministry. Some of our leaders tend to naturally shift towards the spiritual matters of the church and their calling is to care for the spiritual well-being of the people and the faith community. While other leaders organically tend to focus on the analytical and structural areas of the church and their sense of call is to organize and prioritize the physical needs of the people and the church.

From this foundation, Crave Life created a weekly prayer meeting for all to send prayers requests and petitions. Some of the leaders from the Church Council lead and organize this prayer meeting that occurs every Thursday morning at 8:00am. Prayers are lifted for our members and their friends, for our country and our world and for other churches and ministries. Prayer has become a vital ministry for Crave Life. This is a cultural and faith tradition development within our congregation fostered by a small
group of spiritual leaders and certainly this prayer time has proved to be effective for our congregation. We have experience many answered prayers. Although this practice is not a Lutheran practice, the reality of diversity within our faith community has enhanced our spiritual practices. The point is that our Crave Life leaders are diverse in calling and gifting.

Even more the ethnic diversity of the leadership team or church council is highly important, as it sends a message to our congregation, but also to people from the outside. Our leaders are men and women, young and mature, gay and straight, black and white, Latino and Native, single and married and so on. This is important as we seek to hear the voice of the voiceless and the heart of the oppressed, of the rejected and the neglected.

Additionally, Crave Life abides by a Church Constitution that clearly defines our beliefs and polity. The constitution offers Crave Life’s confession of faith, statement of purpose, church affiliation, membership, pastoral leadership, officers of the church and the annual meeting voting details.

Our preamble states the following: “We, baptized members of the Church of Christ, responding in faith to the call of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, desiring to unite together to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and carry out God’s mission, do hereby adopt this constitution and solemnly pledge ourselves to be governed by its provisions. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”11

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11 Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 3.
Our confession of faith is the following: “Crave Life Church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Crave Life Church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.”\textsuperscript{12}

Our statement of purpose is as follows: “The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.”\textsuperscript{13}

Our church affiliation is as follows: “Crave Life Church shall be a corporation and an interdependent part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or its successor, and of the Pacifica Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”\textsuperscript{14}

Our membership as follows: “Members of Crave Life Church shall be those baptized persons on the roll of this church at the time that this constitution is adopted and those who are admitted thereafter and who have declared and maintained membership in accordance with the provisions of this constitution and its bylaws.”\textsuperscript{15}

In regard to pastoral leadership the following: “Authority to call or appoint a leader for the church shall be vested in the Synod, in consultation with the church. The authority to alter, change or terminate the relationship also rests with the Synod. The specific duties of the Church called leader, compensation and other matters pertaining to

\textsuperscript{12} Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 3; 2.01, 2.02.

\textsuperscript{13} Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 4; 4.01.

\textsuperscript{14} Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 5; 6.01

\textsuperscript{15} Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 6; 8.01.
the service of the Church leader shall be included in a letter of call or letter of
appointment, which shall be attested by the bishop of the synod. The Church leader shall
submit a report of his or her ministry to the bishop of the synod at least 90 days prior to
each regular meeting of the Synod Assembly.”16

In regards, to the officers of the church as follow: “The officers of this Church
shall be a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. The officers shall be voting
members of Crave Life Church.”17

And lastly, the details of annual assembly as follows: “The annual meeting of this
Church shall be held in April of each year, or at a different time specified in a bylaw or
continuing resolution. A special Church meeting may be called by the Synod, Church
leader or the president of the Church Council and shall be called by the president of the
Church upon the written request of 25 percent of the voting members. 10% of the voting
members shall constitute a quorum. All actions by the Church shall be by majority vote
except as otherwise provided in this constitution.”18

The church constitution points towards the need for good church governance and
polity. Too often new churches or church plants lack a clear description of church
governance and pastoral authority and leadership. Crave Life’s initial contract with the
ECC although a church constitution was adopted from the ECC, it did not find much use

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16 Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 6 and 7; 9.01, 9.02, 9.13

17 Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 7; 11.01, 11.02.

18 Crave Life Church, “Preamble,” Constitution and Bylaws for Crave Life of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America. (Whittier: Crave Life Church, 2018), 7; 10.01, 10.02, 10.4, 10.06.
in moments of decisions and especially in the final steps upon dissolving a congregation. A good governing document would have been of great assistance. Moreover, all the dull language about the roles of church officers, who are important decision makers is often placed at the back. The lack of enthusiasm to put procedures and expectations in writing permits confusion in how decisions are made in the church. It can be highly problematic when a congregation is unclear about how spiritual, theological, financial and ethical decisions are made in the church.

It’s been my experience, that churches of color or of ethnic leanings inadequately abide to church governance documents and rarely call upon church polity, until is it absolutely necessary. By no means do I assume Crave Life is fully following their new Church constitution, however the awareness and mindfulness is higher than before. The joining of new denomination that values church governance has contributed to this point.

Nonetheless, a church that is governed well fosters clarity and transparency, which is highly important in reaching people who already distrust organized religion. Also, when considering our ministry context, Whittier contains many professionals that come from companies and organizations that highly value mission, vision, values, administration and financial accountability.

Although much of the church constitution is new to Crave Life, much of the same kind of church governance and polity has already existed under different labels and titles. In fact, our decision to join the ELCA was based on a majority vote system. While other decisions have been made in a consensus or in communication from the pastor to the congregation. However, the point is that the church and the leaders have been included in the decision-making process.
In Lutheran polity the church is a congregationally based, meaning that the baptized members of the church are the decision makers upon major decisions, however each church constitution presents diverse methods and approaches to decision making and voting procedures. One point of clarity is that only baptized members can vote, therefore any attending individuals must become members in order to vote.

Moreover, from my context and limited understanding, a church member usually consists of an individual who firstly is baptized, has communed in bread and wine (communion) at least one time in the last year and someone who has financially contributed at least once in the last year. These membership requirements vary from one Lutheran congregation to another. Nonetheless, participation among church members is highly important to the development of future ministry.

Crave Life’s future ministry is once again moving towards a deeper calling to unity among the other two existing Lutheran congregations in Whittier. Considering our historical journey of moving as a congregation year after year and the inability to find consistency and a denominational home, moving towards unity with our existing ministry partners is an answer to our prayers.

Moreover, the diversity and unity that has formed within our congregation is now spilling over into our neighbors at Whittier. In fact, all three congregations have been creating bridges of unity for the past year and half. In Peter Senge’s book, The Fifth Discipline, he asserts one of the laws, “Small changes can produce big results, but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.”

gesture, all three congregations have been participating together in the beautification of the church property and the results have been significant. Working together towards a simplistic facility goal has created improvement in relationship building.

Furthermore, the forces at work beneath the simple act of repainting a church wall or replacing the church cross with a new one has provided long lasting high-leverage changes towards unification. The ELCA has an annual day of ministry outside the church known as “God’s Work, Our Hands.” Although there are other similar days and events in which the entire denomination participates, this particular day of ministry outside the walls of the church provided a wonderful opportunity to serve together as one people, all three congregations. For one day, we all left behind the labels we carry and served as one people, God’s people.

After this day of ministry, and only about a week later, we again served together by replacing the old extra-large wooden cross of the church in the garden area with a new one. The cross had been established in the early 2000 and 17 years later, the cross was being replaced again by a group of people from all three congregations. This symbolical image of placing the new cross as one people may represent the future of the three congregations. Additionally, other small projects around the church has further developed a sense of ownership and partnership from all three congregations, being good stewards of the property, that God has provided for us to use for worship.

Another critical component in the relationship building of all three churches centers at the heart of outreach and service. At the end of summer Crave Life planned a free outdoor movie event for the community and the church’s preschool families. Several families from the preschool and the community attended including friends from the other
local congregations. Furthermore, the Thai congregation prepared a wonderful Thai meal for the Thanksgiving season including a wonderful time of worship for those in attendance, which again provided continued participation from all congregations. Sharing in daily living as three congregations.

Still another movement that Crave Life is experiencing at the moment is unification of worship. According to Sandra Maria Van Opstal’s work in her book, *The Next Worship*, “Reconciliation is central to and a mandate of the gospel. Reconciliation is not something we add to our worship; it is a practice in which we live out our true nature as one new humanity.”

Therefore, reconciling worship calls the people of God to experience oneness. Since the beginning of 2018, Crave Life has intentionally gathered in combined worship with Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd seeking to be one humanity. These Sundays have been labeled as “Together is Better Sundays,” a time to celebrate our diversity and move towards oneness in Sunday worship.

In fact, every time we have gathered together, the energy of anticipation of God grows with every passing minute. The presence of joy, hope, love, peace and unity is evident through the faces of those in attendance. For the gathered people of God are all together under one roof despite the expectations and assumptions of our American culture. From the front stage one can look out into the crowd and see the faces of every person. People of all colors, of all identities, of all traditions and of all ages. Furthermore, Van Opstal says, “Reconciliation in worship is expressed in three ways: hospitality, solidarity and mutuality. This biblical reconciliation therefore calls us to welcome one

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another, stand with one another and depend on one another.” 21 Van Opstal offers reconciliation in worship through living for one another.

Another beautiful image of the heavenly church is given by Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. For Paul understood that God had revealed his mysterious plan to him by the Spirit saying, “And this is God’s plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God’s children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus, (Eph 3:6).” There is good news, an inheritance and a blessed promise for all of God’s people, equally, Gentile and Jew. Moreover, John of Patmos later describes the scene in the book of Revelation, “After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands, (Rev 7:9).”

Once again, we see the beautiful image of all people from all backgrounds gathered in the same space before the same God in worship. There is no difference to the call for Crave Life, Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd. We are being called to embody the here and not yet. We are being moved towards unity as God’s people on earth to begin living heaven now on earth. It is a critical theological understanding for Crave Life and the other congregations, that we should be more concerned with life before death than life after death. The Lord’s prayer emphasizes this notion, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

21 Ibid., 6.
Moreover, the prayer says, give us this day our daily bread, which means that God is asking us to live for today and this moment. In view of this, Crave Life is seeking to listen, to obey and to respond to the Triune God. And the Triune God is saying the same words Jesus echoed in the Gospel according to John, “I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me, (Jn 17:22-23).”

Jesus is praying for unity of his people for a reason, as he probably understood the difficulty of such a thing. Unity among God’s people is no easy task to accomplish, and for all three congregations who worship differently and identify with their own cultural aspects of worship, coming together as one may mean to replace some of those cultural responses in worship for the responses of thy neighbor. There is a reason why Sunday worship continues to be the most segregated and separated time of the week for America.

However, Crave Life along with Shepherd of the Hills and Thai shepherd are seeking to break the rules and the assumptions of our day. Brenda Salter McNeil, author of the book, Roadmap to Reconciliation, suggests a theoretical framework to assist with moving communities towards unity. McNeil asserts, “Contact Theory, suggests that relationships between conflicting groups will improve if they have meaningful contact with one another over an extended period of time.”22 The three congregations have embraced contact theory to improve relationship with one another for over one year,

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22 Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 33.
while seeking to debunk the racial and ethnic stereotypes and assumptions of our society. Meaningful conversations and interactions have resulted from contact theory and an organic sense of unity has birthed from it. In fact, McNeil said, “Contact Theory was the key that unlocked the conceptual door of the Reconciliation Roadmap.”

Similarly, Jesus in his day, chose to ignore his own cultural stereotypes and assumptions loving his neighbor regardless. One can say Jesus practiced Contact Theory before it even existed. The Gospel of Mark demonstrates that Jesus was confronted with a cultural decision on the Sabbath, the day of rest, either to love or not love his neighbor. What is more important? To obey personal cultural assumptions or to love neighbor? Should one put the needs of others before one’s own?

The bible passage says, “Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” But Jesus reprimanded him. Be quiet! Come out of the man,” he ordered. At that, the evil spirit screamed, threw the man into a convulsion, and then came out of him, (Mk 1:23-26).”

Perhaps Jesus realized this man was under great distress and needed to be freed, therefore neighbor’s needs became more important than personal cultural needs. It is not too different when discussing racial unity in worship. If we seek to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, then consider this, don’t look out just for your needs and interests, take an interest in the needs of others as well.

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23 Ibid., 33.
In the coming sections of this paper I will elaborate on this theme of racial unity in worship, however there are several obstacles to consider along the way. Saint Paul said, “I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate, (Rom 7:15).” This is the reality that one finds within oneself. It is sin living within us that moves us to separation and isolation.

Martin Luther would describe people as “curved in on self” meaning that sin centers on self rather than other. Human sin is the center of the obstacles towards racial unity in worship. Luther would also say that we are living in a duality of both saint and sinner, which complicates matters even more. It is important to mention that some may view this theology of being both saints and sinners as not coherent with their view of scripture.

Some Christians look at St. Paul’s writings (Rom.7:17,20-24, 1 Pet.1:1, Col.1:2, 1 John 2:7) in the New Testament, where he doesn’t use the term sinner to describe Christians and therefore, take on the theological stance that we are not be called sinners, instead just saints. Although this way of reading the scriptures does not mean that Christians do not sin, instead it is pointing out that Christians should not be considered sinners, instead only saints.

Nevertheless, whether you understand it this way or view it another way, the point is that sinfulness, selfishness and racism will always exist in our world and therefore, one must consider that racial unity may never truly exist. Albeit, racial unity is the cause that Crave Life is willing to fight for.

Additionally, I believe at heart of this matter lies the inability to identify with our neighbor. The majority of people in mostly white, European descent churches and
denominations are participants of the dominant culture of wealth, opportunity, and privilege, which benefits at the cost of our planet’s air, water, soil and even humans. Hence, becoming indifferent to those who are impoverished, undocumented, discriminated and exploited. Most Christians of European descent are not living under those conditions and cannot identify with those who are suffering. Although these suggestions seem like human excuses, I will attempt in the coming sections to enhance the conversation by presenting other systemic problems of injustice already at work.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 3
RACIAL PROBLEM, RECONCILIATION AND BLESSING

There is a race problem in America. Awaking to the reality of this problem and gaining awareness is necessary. Some of the recent happenings offer proof through one of largest and most popular companies in America, Starbucks. Two Black men were waiting at a Philadelphia Starbucks for a friend to arrive, who happened to be White and requested to use the bathroom. However, the store manager denied them access because they had not purchased any items.

Moreover, the store manager asked them to leave and eventually the police were called out and two Black men were arrested for trespassing. This incident created much protest and outrage from various people and groups labeling Starbucks as a racist and anti-Black company. In fact, a video of the arrests sparked the Twitter hashtag #BoycottStarbucks. Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson responded with a video saying, “This is not who we are, and it’s not who we’re going to be. We are going to learn from this and we will be better for it.”

Nearly a month after this episode, a Latino man named Pedro made a routine coffee run for his restaurant coworkers at Starbucks in the city of La Cañada Flintridge. Upon returning with the coffee a coworker noticed that the label on the coffee cup had the name “beaner” written on it, instead of Pedro. This is a derogatory term used towards Mexican-Americans. Pedro’s friend Priscilla Hernandez called the local Starbucks to complain and one of their employees said, “they could not understand Pedro,” and offered a $50 gift card to make amends. Thereafter, Hernandez contacted Starbucks Corporate through Twitter, receiving the following response: “Thank you for letting us know, Priscilla. This is not the welcoming experience we aim to provide, and we have reached out to this customer to apologize and make this right.”² Although Starbucks leaders met with Pedro and Priscilla to offer apologies, the fact still remains, Starbucks has a race problem.

In fact, May 29, 2018 at 2:30pm marked the nationwide response to these racially problematic episodes as Starbucks shut down their 8,000 stores and 175,000 employees to discuss racial bias and receive racial training.³ The training consisted of five-minute videos helping employees understand what makes people feel welcome. Additionally, the training offers a documentary and other training materials. Starbucks’ video about the training closes with this message, “It won’t be perfect, but we’re all in this together.”⁴

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Still, today large major companies are providing training for racial bias and racial insensitivity. There is a race problem in America, however the problem is not only embedded within the secularized or business world, it even dwells within the religious realm.

The late great Billy Graham, one of the most influential Evangelicals in American history once said, “The racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today.”\(^5\) Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith’s work in *Divided by Faith*, presents the reality of America’s race problem pointing back at the Evangelical Church as part of the problem. In other words, religion has done very little to overcome the race problem in America, and the Evangelical Church is well rooted in the issue. It is highly critical to identify and define the Evangelical Church, which is made up of diverse people; however, 90 percent of Evangelicals are ethnically White or of European descent.

Further, many Evangelicals would affiliate with the Bible being at the center of their belief system and would consider themselves “born again,” which simply means to have a new and transformed spiritual life. Additionally, Emerson and Smith point out that Evangelicals use their Evangelical faith to respond to matters of social and cultural importance. Moreover, they suggest that Evangelicals want to use their conservative and traditional faith to offer solutions to pressing social problems, such as race relations.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., 4.

Nonetheless, many of the American values such as freedom, privacy, equal opportunity and individualism stem from this Evangelical way of living and are embedded within the subculture of White Evangelicalism.\(^7\)

For Emerson and Smith, the term racialized society is a better way to speak about the race problem rather than using words such as racism and prejudice. Although racialized society may work for some racial groups, within the Latino American culture, terms such as racism and prejudice offer a better understanding. Racism and prejudice are more identifiable among Latinos because of the historical weight those terms carry. For Emerson, a racialized society refers to a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships. A racialized society is a society that allocates differential economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed.\(^8\) Therefore, race is not based solely on outer physical appearance, but on how those physical characteristics provide social definitions. Simply put, physical appearance influences social assumptions of one’s race. For example, a White person would be considered educated and of middle economic class. However, a Black person would be considered less educated and of lower economic class.

Although one would like to think that this kind of racism is not a problem, Emerson and Smith point out it still is. They would say that the race problem in America is not based on constants, but rather on variables. Meaning that although ideology from

\(^7\) Ibid., 2.

\(^8\) Ibid., 7.
such groups as the Ku Klux Klan are in decline and responses to people of color are less prejudiced and more accepting, then one can arrive to the conclusion that racism is on the decline and not a problem.

However, Emerson and Smith assert that race and racial hierarchy are ever present in modern society and have simply changed in form. Therefore, racial division is not in decline. In fact, racialization reflects upon the adapting practices that reproduce racial division in America: “(1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in normal operations of institutions, (3) avoid direct racial terminology, and (4) are invisible to most Whites.”

9 Racism is a changing ideology with the constant and rational purpose of perpetuating and justifying a social system that is racialized. It is evident in mostly highly educated Whites, who would not oppose the notion of living among Black neighbors or sending their children to a diverse public school. However, this group is more segregated from Black people than less-educated Whites. The reason, according to Emerson and Smith, is based on two great American values, choice and freedom. Although highly-educated Whites would not associate with the traditional meaning of racism, choice and freedom lead them towards better schools, safer neighborhoods, larger parks and nicer homes ending up in “whiter” neighborhoods. These two American staples of choice and freedom recreate the adapting practices of social divide among racial lines. In other words, separation and segregation are alive and well.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 10.
When it comes to religious affiliation, seven major denominations account for more than 80 percent of Black religious affiliation in the US. The other 15 to 20 percent of Black people are affiliated with Catholicism and White Mainline Protestant traditions. Although it is difficult to account for all White people, the notion is that 95 percent of White people attend White churches and one can see the clear divide among racial lines. 80 percent of Black people attend Black churches and 95 percent of white people attend White churches. The racialized society is evident not only in America’s historical narrative, but increasingly more today in religious affiliation and weekly Sunday worship attendance.

Although a racialized society is often known for its conflict, pain, suffering and misunderstandings, many also believe the answer may come from religion and especially from Christians. Emerson and Smith interviewed hundreds of Christians, and they said, “If anyone should have the tools to do something about the racialized society and if anyone has the answers to the race problem, it is Christians.” Put differently, Christians believe they have the call to racial unity, and have the supernatural power and faith to overcome a racial society. Moreover, Christians believe they have the tools and moral abilities to create change in America’s race problem. This understanding cannot be ignored considering that religion and specifically Christianity has played in instrumental role from abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights movement.

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12 Ibid., 16.

13 Ibid., 17.
However, Emerson and Smith are quick to point out that religion in fact lifts up segregation and further continues to perpetuate division among racial lines. They assert that although religion can assist with bringing people into freedom, it cannot help in bringing people together towards racial equality and unity. Emerson and Smith would say that American religion is one big contradiction of itself and does not confront the matters of racial division as it should.

One cannot completely dismiss this notion from Emerson and Smith as American history demonstrates a story of continued progress, while holding on to racial separation at its core. Consider America’s historical white evangelical leaders moving towards the acceptance of black people by evangelizing or Christianizing them but still holding on to the belief that God’s law gave white evangelicals the right to continue having black slaves. Although many more laws and policies were presented and passed in view of creating equality among blacks and whites, the truth is that more separation occurred. Emerson and Smith say it this way, “they had gone from separate pews to separate churches.”

Moreover with the arrival of black power movement many blacks as well as whites sensed that racial separation and segregation was the best way to live among one another. By 1964, as slavery faded away from American society, another form of segregation emerged to replace the prior form of racial inequality, however, it was based on privacy and therefore, the racial divide among whites and blacks expanded as now a new generation removed itself from their parents.

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14 Ibid., 48.
Emerson and Smith suggest that blacks and whites knew less about one another and hence, as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported in 1968, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.” The point is that the racialized society had simply changed form, but remained fully present.

Further, Emerson and Smith point out with their research that American religion brought about freedom for people, but not racial unity, that American religion offered political change, but not racial togetherness. Simply put, white American Evangelicalism contributed is some ways towards ending slavery in America and assisted with the enhancement of civil rights and freedom for blacks, but failed in creating true equality, unity and community with their black brothers and sisters. Racialization remained.

Another example of attempted efforts to bring about racial unity and equality centered on the Promise Keepers movement of the 1990s. In 1996, Promise Keepers made racial reconciliation the central message of their national American evangelical ministry. However, Bill McCartney, the leader of Promise Keepers believes the message of racial reconciliation was the same reason for the demise and fall of the ministry. Moreover, McCartney, suggests that the message of racism was difficult for many white evangelicals to hear and their response lacked. Therefore, without the support of white evangelicals Promise Keepers support decreased and eventually all ministries ended. John P. Bartkowski shares insights from Promise Keepers in his book, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers and Godly Men*, suggesting that the strategy of including

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15 Ibid.
more economically and racially diverse group of men to their conferences by offering a
donation only entrance fee was the first sign of their decline.\textsuperscript{16} Once Promise Keepers began to strongly promote racial reconciliation under the banner of “Break Down the Walls,” the organization began to decline financially and numerically.\textsuperscript{17}

Part of Emerson and Smith’s work in their book was based on interview feedback and responses. One response for white evangelicals is that race is not problem because it is not a central focus to their daily living. In other words, race is simply another compartment in the life of white evangelicals, but certainly not the most prominent. In fact, two-thirds of White Evangelicals believe that conditions for blacks are improving, while only one-third of African Americans believe that.\textsuperscript{18}

Moreover, for White Evangelicals, their worldview is individualistic and racially isolated. Therefore, they view the race problem as a series of distinct incidents. This understanding of the world creates a desire to see a color-blind community and yearns to see all race problems go away.

However, for black people, the response is quite different, for they live in the reality of a racialized world where driving in a certain neighborhood may automatically call for the police to pull one over. Or for simply walking down a street the police are

\textsuperscript{16} Hartford Institute for Religion Research, \url{http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/religion_family_pksummary.html}. (accessed February 20, 2019).

\textsuperscript{17} Hartford Institute for Religion Research, \url{http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/religion_family_pksummary.html}. (accessed February 20, 2019).

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 88.
called to check in on one and the list goes on and on about other similar racialized experiences.

Meaning that white and black evangelicals view the problem of race differently and certainly these factors into the racialization of our society. Even more, it is suggested in the book *Divided by Faith* that if one is to discuss the race problem in America, one must not begin with the black people, instead one should begin by dismantling the American views, flaws, values and shortcomings that are profoundly embedded in America’s history of inequality and racial bias.

Nevertheless, Emerson and Smith lean on Peter Wagner’s research on this matter, a prominent evangelical leader. Wagner’s research and evidence in his book, *Our Kind of People*, advocates for the following, “the statement that 11 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America’ from a millstone around Christian necks into a dynamic tool for assuring Christian growth.”19 In other words, Wagner suggests that homogenous congregations should not be lamented, instead used as a church growth mechanism and offers the Southern Baptist Convention denomination as a model. They have planted one new church every day on average, centered around the belief of racial homogeneity.

Additionally, Wagner suggests that people of the race find belonging and meaning through being part of a homogenous faith community, because scientificaly people seek their own kind and prefer to be with those who are like them. In fact, paraphrasing Wagner’s thoughts, he suggests that people who are part of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural faith communities will eventually remove themselves and return to their own

19 Ibid., 150.
kind. This principle is based and focused primarily on numerical growth and evangelism, while ignoring the problem of race. Emerson and Smith have presented a strong argument on how American religion and Evangelicalism has contributed to an ongoing reality of racially segregated congregations.

While some evangelical leaders have voiced the message of racial reconciliation, by the time it arrived to most evangelicals, it translated as simply having respect for people of other races, or having a cross-race friendship. That is to say, when the message of racial reconciliation arrives at the doors of white evangelicals they “put the walls up and tune out” as said by Bill McCartney, founder of Promise Keepers. Emerson and Smith complete their work by presenting the facts and approaches of Evangelicalism, possibly the most influential religious group in America, in relation to the problem of race discovered that at the forefront of white evangelicals lies numeric church growth, marketing, targeting specific groups, and homogeneity.

Although this same group of people may contain the remedy to a racialized society and racial unity, their primary allegiance to homogeneity undercuts the efforts towards racial unification among all of God’s people. The answer to the problem of racial division in America begins with Evangelicalism’s lack of awareness and engagement.

Four distinct authors provide a pathway for the Evangelical church to reengage the race problem in America and enhance the self-awareness needed to create a change. Mae Elise Cannon, Lisa Sharon Harper, Troy Jackson and Soong-Chan Rah offer their

\[\text{Ibid.}, 168.\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
book *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*, as a guide of the various problems of injustice with the Evangelical church and offer an apology to God and the world in attempt to start over.

As a starting point these authors attribute the fall of human common goodness to those same humans. In other words, humanity is culpable for humanity’s demise in civility and common good. Although the Evangelical church would like to blame a fallen world as the reason for injustice and discrimination, one must begin with a self-reflection and this should lead one to confession. The authors of *Forgive Us*, offer their book as a confession saying, “Our unexamined and unconfessed history prevents our full expression of and witness to the Christian message.”

Specifically, the authors are using this book to reexamine America’s Evangelical Church history and its’s role in the harm, oppression and injustice of other humans. Within the ELCA Lutheran tradition, Moe-Lobeda asserts that although Lutheranism offers a robust history and a rich theological heritage, it is simultaneously flawed. She claims that Lutheranism like other ecclesial traditions, although with good intention still obscured the gospel and distorted the voice of a God through its history and heritage. Offering a critical view of how the same problem of injustice from initiation to actuality continues.

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24 Ibid., 5.
Moreover, without the proper understanding of one’s history one is unable to truly and fully move towards forgiveness and reconciliation. This is evident by the disclosure of the authors, offering their own racial, ethnic, religious and gender backgrounds as evidence of their heart for confession and forgiveness in this matter. They highlight all the groups that have been explicitly and implicitly hurt and unwantedly oppressed by the American Christian church. Included in the list are the following: God’s creation and wildlife, Indigenous People, African Americans and People of Color, Women, the LGBTQ Community, Immigrants, Jews and Muslims. Before exploring each group, one must consider the starting point.

From the beginning European settlers used their faith as a license to act on behalf of God’s will. Therefore, upon arriving to what we know today as America, Europeans conquered and destroyed all in the name of their faith. They had the blessing of God to conquer the lands, the earth and to destroy whatever got in their way. Including the trees, the land, the soil, the waters, and wild animals such as bears and panthers.

Although one would consider these acts as injustice towards the environment and wildlife, early American colonialism celebrated this as a great accomplishment. Believing that man was predestined to have power and dominion over creation. This notion diminished with the development of communities and the stability of human living, although one could argue that the need to conquer and destroy was no longer necessary and a time of admiration and conservation overtook the new settlers.

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26 Ibid., 37.
Nonetheless, the brief time of admiration gave way to more of early colonial degeneration and continued over the next two hundred years.\textsuperscript{27} In fact, Cannon, Harper, Jackson and Rah affirm this in the following manner, “Christians have not only sinned against the environment, but they have also failed to intervene when environmental degradation is perpetuated by their neighbors and others in society. In fact, because Christians often benefit financially from the very industries that have devastated God’s creation, they are often those industries’ strongest allies and supporters.”

Although in the recent years a push for sustainability and conservation has emerged, one cannot ignore the sins committed by the American church all in the name of God. Paul Tillich, the great German Lutheran theologian affirms that sin is the separation from God’s declaration of what is good in the creation story found in the book of Genesis. Therefore, humanity continues to “break the relationship” between humanity and creation by continuing to neglect and violate our environment and wildlife. However, sinning against the soil and animals is just the beginning of America’s Evangelical history.

Consider the indigenous people of the Americas. Historians projected that over 50 million First nation peoples lived across both American continents, with more than 5 million in what is the United States and Canada today, and over 375 languages were spoken among them.\textsuperscript{28} By 1800, the amount of indigenous people had dwindled to only about 600,000 in the United States as colonialists offered new diseases, insisted in using

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 61.
their faith and religion as a means to dehumanize these First Nation peoples. American historian Alan Taylor writes: “As a result, colonizers regarded as backward and impious any people, like the Indians, who left nature too little altered. By defaulting to their divine duty, such peoples forfeited their title to the earth. They could justly be conquered and dispossessed by Europeans who would exploit lands and animals to their fullest potential. It was a form of religious imperialism.”

Even more, European settlers viewed the decimation of the indigenous people as a sign from God in favor of them and as a result of the First Nation people’s rejection of conversion to Christianity. Even during times of peace among the indigenous and European colonialists, First Nations people were forced to abandon their cultural practices and traditions to assimilate. European colonialists believed their culture and religion were instrumental to the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity and therefore, all connected.

Nonetheless, conversion to Christianity played an integral role in early relational encounters with the indigenous people, however wealth was just as prominent. Consider the removal of tens of thousands of First Nation peoples from Georgia to Oklahoma all in the name of Gold. The newly elected President Andrew Jackson came into office with an agenda of racism, claiming that the First Nation peoples were aliens who had no rights. The Trail of Tears resulted from this era and thousands of natives

29 Ibid., 62.
30 Ibid., 68.
lost their lives due to malnutrition and exposure to the elements. This story and several other events of genocide and murder occurred over and over again, well into the 20th and 21st centuries.

These happenings have certainly contributed to the pain and suffering of many descendants today. Many communities of Native Americans are ridden with drugs, alcohol, domestic violence and crime. Cannon, Harper, Jackson and Rah say this in response to the treatment of indigenous people, “Christians must confess the many ways we have contributed to this tragic history by acknowledging and repenting of our sins. We need to repent of our attitudes about the divine rights of conquest, white supremacy, ethnic superiority, Manifest Destiny, the pursuit of wealth, and the brutalization, domination, and murder of thousands of Native people who have lived before us.”

Although I completely agree with this statement, the notion that it was thousands and not millions of indigenous people that were murdered is to be questioned. Furthermore, Forgive us, identifies the principle of response to all the death of indigenous people: “The people who were wronged know better than anyone else what it will take to make things right.” However, repentance is required when discussing response to one’s sin. Genesis says, “Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us, (Gn 1:26).” Therefore, all humanity, including the indigenous people are made in the image of God and when one group dehumanizes another group, it is

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32 Ibid., 70.
33 Ibid., 70-71.
34 Ibid., 79.
essentially violating the dignity of the image-bearers. Nevertheless, the damage has been done and repentance, confession and reconciliation are needed in order to move forward. The same goes for the next group.

African Americans are marked by their countless centuries of slavery and racial discrimination and the American church are considered the promoters. In fact, the authors of *Forgive us*, describe this reality, “Christian slave owners propagated the common belief that Africans were less than human and of another species altogether. The idea that black slaves were not created in the image of God eased the consciences of their Christian enslavers and justified their decision not to seek their conversion.” No matter how one reads this sentence above, the truth is that the entire thinking and belief system stems from religious and cultural supremacy.

Although some preachers of mainline denominations fought against white supremacy, the South became even more entrenched in their beliefs to the point of creating a whole Christian doctrine based on the approval of slavery. Moreover, the choice of silence and indifference is just as damaging. How can one stand by while thousands of humans are being lynched, abused and killed? The White American church stood by as this occurred.

Some may point towards the movement of civil rights as an anchor of the white American church standing against racism, however the amount of White church participation deeply lacked. Additionally, although some positive racial strides were accomplished through the civil rights movement, as Emerson and Smith suggested, 

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35 Ibid., 86.
“white evangelicals have great difficulty in seeing and responding to systemic injustices.”\(^{36}\)

Today, systemic racism continues through various avenues. Consider the incarceration rate of African Americans. From the 1980’s which consisted of about 300,000 inmates to nearly 2 million in the present, and studies show that although drug use and trafficking is equally the same among both white and black communities, police have narrowed their war on drugs specifically on communities of color. The fact is that more black males are in the criminal justice system today than were enslaved in 1850.\(^{37}\)

Racism is embedded in American society and religion, as such the Evangelical church’s history cannot disassociated themselves from being advancers of the sin of racism. As defined by Cannon, Harper, Jackson and Rah, “Racism provides us with an example of the human attempt to elevate human standards in the place of God. Racism, therefore, is best understood in light of the doctrine of the image of God. In other words, racism is humanity’s way of co-opting the image for its own elevation.”\(^{38}\) They argue that the image of God is at the core of the violation and sin, believing that the full expression of the image of God belongs to one race over another. This motif is presented in the holy scriptures in Genesis 9:20-28, where a drunk and naked Noah discovers that Ham, the father of Canaan, told his brothers about how he found his father, curses Canaan and blesses Shem saying, “May the LORD, the God of Shem, be blessed, and may Canaan be his servant! (Gn 9:26).”

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 98.
Although there is no mention of skin color in associated to any group, the misreading of this bible passage was used by white evangelicals as an affirmation of their whiteness over above blackness. Moreover, white evangelicals used this scripture to assume that Canaan represent black skin bodies and Shem represented white skin bodies. Therefore, theology offered another source of oppression rather than offering freedom from racist tendencies. Furthermore, similar misreading’s of scripture and distorted theological beliefs assisted with the rationale for white supremacy. Willie Jennings explains it this way:

> Whiteness was being held up as an aspect of creation with embedded facilitating powers. Whiteness from the moment of discovery and consumption was a social and theological way of imagining, an imaginary that evolved into a method of understanding the world. It was a social imaginary in that it posited the existence of difference and collectivity for those in the Old World faced with the not easily explainable peoples and phenomena of the New World. It was a theological imaginary because whiteness suggested that one may enter a true moment of creation gestalt. Whiteness transcended all peoples because it was a means of seeing all people at the very moment it realized itself. Whiteness was a global vision of Europeans and Africans but, more than that, a way of organizing bodies by proximity to and approximation of white bodies.³⁹

As Cannon, Harper, Jackson and Rah present this theological account as whiteness or white skinned bodies as the normative of the creation story, supplanting

God. Again, this notion lifts whiteness above blackness and contributed to the theological imagination of human interpretation as white.

Still today we see how superiority of whiteness continues as the works and minds of European descent individuals are highlighted and study above other voices. In fact, the English language dominates over other languages and is not taught as a secondary language. One must come to America to study in English speaking institutions to find validation and recognition. The reason one points out these dominant trends is because the American Christian church is not only guilty of perpetuating slavery, but it has created a whole theological framework to support its reasoning of white supremacy. It is no different for the next group of people.

Women have for centuries been treated unfairly and unequal through political propaganda. Although studies demonstrate improvement in women’s rights and equal opportunity, young millennial women and their older counterparts still view this as a man’s world. Consider the words of Pat Robertson, the televangelist and face of the Evangelical show known as The 700 Club. Robertson, wrote a fund raiser letter through the Christian Coalition against women seeking equal rights in Iowa in the 1990s claiming the amendment was “about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism,


and become lesbians.”

Due to the women’s suffrage movement in 1920 women were finally added as the 19th amendment. One points out these terrible stories in order to offer an image of the pain and harm caused by the American church and its leaders.

Even during the 19th century other Christian leaders including pastors, theologians and scholars offered conservative interpretations and political affirmation of Saint Paul’s teachings about women to the church of Corinth. Saint Paul writes, “Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings, (1 Co 14:34-35).” One must consider the historical and cultural context with which this scripture is read and the hairball that the church of Corinth was.

Nonetheless, these biblical interpretations were used to continue to oppress the voice of women in the public arena even after the 19th amendment. Not until 1971, when the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) passed giving women equal rights in education, pay and opportunity did one see positive progress. However, the American Church and other religious groups were the main opposition to women’s progress towards equality including a woman’s right to have an abortion. In fact, a study revealed that an incredible 98 percent of those working to oppose the ERA identified themselves as church members, while less than 50 percent of those working for ratification of the ERA claimed

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church membership.\textsuperscript{43} Once again, the American church finds themselves in opposition of another group of people seeking freedom and civility.

Today, Seth Dowland suggests that evangelical beliefs and theology are no longer the identity of white evangelicals, instead what distinguishes them from other religious groups is their politics. Since the 1920s, evangelical preachers railed against liberated women and loosening sexual mores, and they attacked socialists and labor activists as agents of a worldwide communist revolution.\textsuperscript{44} Dowland offers a historical account on evangelicalism’s identity forged in the contexts Jim Crow segregation, a struggle against second-wave feminism, and fears of a tyrannical federal government.\textsuperscript{45} A call to confession and repentance is needed for the white evangelical church.

Another community of people seeking freedom and acceptance from the white Evangelical church is the LGBTQ community. Those who identify as part of this community, whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer is not the point here, but the forefront is the response from white evangelicals. Yet, another attempt to dehumanize people from their human sexual preference and gender identity. The evangelical church has rallied behind the protection of biblical marriage, being of one man and one woman.


Furthermore, rejecting same-sex marriage and labeling it as an attempt to change the traditional meaning of marriage. Some believe homosexuality is the greatest issue currently at hand and consider it the driving force of division for the church and Christians for years to come. The subject of homosexuality has already created much division within the American church. Several denominations have already split over disagreements on this issue. One must consider that the LGBTQ community is not a liberal agenda nor a progressive democratic movement, instead the conversation is about regular people, human beings that are created in the image of God. The 1980s brought the arrival of HIV/AIDS and many homosexuals were affected and killed by this disease. For many Christians, this disease symbolized a holy judgment upon the LGBTQ community and instead of responding with grace and support, most of the evangelical church responded with hate and indifference.

The authors of *Forgive Us*, suggest that Christians missed a great opportunity to share their love for neighbor as Christ commanded and moved by fear and religious motives they sinned against their brothers and sisters. In fact, even after the 9/11 terrorist events, evangelical leaders such as Pat Robertson, who has been already identified and Jerry Falwell another televangelist blamed the LGBTQ community for the death of thousands of innocent Americans, while suggesting that feminists also played a role. Thoughts of hate and discrimination such as these from prominent evangelical leaders supports only further dehumanize the LGBTQ community.

While white evangelicals strongly preach about sin, Cannon, Harper, Jackson and Rah point out that white evangelicals rank sins differently. Social sins take a back seat to sexual sins. In other words, social sins like racism, discrimination, violence and economic
equality are not as important to white evangelicals like sexual immorality. However, these sins are all sins in the eyes of God and therefore, categorizing sins is a sin in itself.

Nonetheless, white evangelicals have continued to engage politics with union around defeating issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, and while engaging politics is encouraged, one must consider to what effect. If the purpose of supporting politics is to gain more comfort and privilege for those who already have the power and privilege, then one has missed the point. Seth Dowland asserts that by the final decades of the 20th century, right-wing political movements and white racial identity offered the most distinctive marks of evangelicalism. Simply put, evangelicalism had claimed a new identity around their political affiliation and the color of their skin. Although some evangelicals would dispute this new identity because of the influx of racially diverse evangelicals from other parts of the world. Nonetheless, this new evangelical identity certainly excludes those who are not white or republican.

White evangelicalism seeks to use their moral beliefs and faith to further their power over others and by doing so are neglecting the poor and marginalized people of God. The writers of Forgive Us, say it best, “The evangelical community’s venom and vitriol directed against the LGBTQ community is in violation of God’s commands to love your neighbor as yourself. By substituting human gradations of sin over God’s standards, evangelicals reveal an animosity toward homosexuals that is not appropriate for the Christian community. Our sins of excessive vilification, grading sin, and absence of

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concern for others for the sake of our own comfort reminds us that we have all sinned and continue to fall short of the glory of God.”

Another group of people that have received their share of pain and suffering from the evangelical church is the immigrant community. Although one can acknowledge the many historical waves of immigration both voluntarily in reference to (Irish, German, Southern and Eastern European) newcomers and involuntarily referring to the black slaves, one cannot ignore the lack of reception and welcome from the white American church. Additionally, the White church has been in opposition of immigrants regardless of their background, whether German or Italian, Chinese or Mexican. The writers of Forgive us, identify fear, unfamiliarity and hate as key attributes to this issue, highlighting groups like the Ku Klux Klan, a strong supporter of anti-immigrant. In fact, to belong to the Klan one had to be white, Gentile, born in the United States, not a Catholic, and ready to defend Protestant Christianity.”

Apparently religious opposition was present as Catholicism seem to grow exponentially from about 600,000 to over 12 million during that 1850s and therefore, laws were passed to limit people from certain parts of Europe that brought Catholic roots.

Additionally, by the 1920s after several acts limiting immigration for specific global regions proved to be just the beginning. However, one area of contention was the Western side of the United States, where Mexicans and Central Americans were free to come and go. Although checkpoints were in place, the process of passing through was

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48 Ibid., 161.
dehumanizing for many immigrants. Such things as high-pressure showers, naked inspections and other such occurrences forced Mexicans and Central Americans to avoid the checkpoints. Due to fear of Asians immigrating through Mexico, new language emerged from the categorization of immigrants including undocumented and illegal as ways to identify immigrants. Although in 1986 President Ronald Reagan signed immigration legislation in support of citizenship for those immigrants who already live in the United States, attacks on this community have continued to grow especially over the last five years.

Given the opportunity for the white evangelical church to reply, they have once again responded with hate and discrimination. All one has to do is observe the many comments of hate and discrimination by the current President of the United States. When confronted in a closed Oval office meeting, the President asked, “Why do we want all these people from shithole countries coming here?”49 One can attempt to twist the meaning of these words, however one cannot argue that this president won the recent election using the slogan “Make America Great Again” suggesting to most of the GOP as divisive and backward-looking slogan. Making no connection to diversity and civility or progress.50 The current President offered his thoughts on why he chose that slogan for his campaign and he points out the border and security as major reasons.


Additionally, some Christian and Catholic leaders joined efforts in 2013 to form new legislation to assist with keeping families together and creating a road to citizenship for millions of immigrants. However, an evangelical group calling itself “Evangelicals for Biblical Immigration” emerged and strongly opposed this immigration bill, suggesting that the bill was not in line with the bible and that a pathway to citizenship was not biblical.\textsuperscript{51} Unfortunately, the white American church has offered hate and discrimination for the immigrant community until this day and the sin of the church cannot be ignored.

Consider how the white evangelical church has distorted the doctrine of the image of God, forming an individualistic view based on physical likeness to that of God. Namely, placing one people group above another is the core of the church’s sin and attempting to take on God’s judgement as one’s own judgement over another group of people based on the color of their skin is sinful.

The president has elevated nativism, those who were in America above immigrants is another form of racism as suggested by the writers of \textit{Forgive us}. Does the white evangelical church even realize that the holy scriptures favor the immigrant or foreigner over and over again? From Abraham to Moses, and from Ruth to Paul. Men and women leaving their lands and their people is a common scriptural trend, to be sent by God into foreign lands and regions is how the gospel traveled and expanded. When was the last time you heard a sermon on immigration? One cannot ignore the spirituality

within the immigrant narrative in scripture, but many do. Perhaps the inability to embrace those who are not like us has perpetuated segregation among worshiping communities.

The Christian Churches Together (CCT) is a diverse group of many traditions including Protestant, Pentecostal, Black Churches, Orthodox and Catholics who gathered to form a statement in support of immigrants, “While immigration is often viewed as an economic, social, or legal issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian and spiritual issue that directly impacts millions of unauthorized immigrants and the entire fabric of our society.”52 This statement sounds like something the white evangelical church should hear, considering that 81% of evangelicals voted for the current president in 2016 who favored radical views on immigrants.53

Moreover, Christianity Today recently reported that the reasoning behind the 81% evangelical vote for the current president was not truly based on the candidate, rather it voted more along Republican values than traditional social conservative values.

However, according to their research and survey, 49% of respondents voted for the current president based on their concern for immigration.54 Immigration was more important to evangelicals than abortion or the choosing of a new Supreme Court judge.

There is a racial problem in America that continues to foster indifference and neglecting the down and out, those of the underbelly. Repentance is calling, and racial


reconciliation is warranted. Will the American evangelical church respond differently than expected? The white evangelical church is already viewed as outdated, irrelevant, judgmental, unforgiving and lacking in grace and acceptance. Evangelicals already carry the label of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Can the white evangelical church make things right? Can they fix the problem? Can they embrace racial unity? Or will they continue down the same path of separation and indifference for the next five hundred years?

Walter Brueggemann, a theologian, scholar and ordained pastor with the United Church of Christ presents an image of the here and now, but yet to come. In the face of a racial problem in America, emerges the possibility of a racial solution, or the reconciling of the matter at hand. Brueggemann explains it this way;

“The lack of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us… The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness… On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.”55

In her book, Roadmap to Reconciliation, Brenda Salter McNeil offers a definition of the process of reconciliation, “Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to

55 Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 11.
reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish." She broadens the definition of reconciliation by offering not just an individual perspective, but a systemic justice point of view as well.

Moreover, she centers her definition of the biblical understanding of God’s intention for humanity. McNeil presents a convincing theological argument through the doctrine of the image of God and God’s intentionality for humanity discovered in Genesis 11, where God comes to break down the human towers built to create homogeneity and sameness. She advocates that God’s original intent is for humanity to spread out and share the glory of God, however humanity reverts to comfort and dependence on oneself. God intentionally confused humanity by changing their language of communication and therefore, demonstrated their human limitations and their need for one another, their need for reconciliation with one another.

Put another way, God’s intention for humanity is to embody the differences one carries and reflects in order to fill the earth with the glory of God. One can see God’s glory and image in the full expression of all humanity.

Furthermore, McNeil suggests that for racial reconciliation to occur one must understand that it is an ongoing process based on Contact Theory, which was defined earlier. Contact Theory simply suggests that relationships among conflicting groups will develop, grow and improve through intentional connection with one another over time. In other words, the more two conflicting groups spend with one another, the better results one will see.

\[56\text{ Ibid., 22.}\]
McNeil provides a roadmap to reconciliation that includes 1) Catalytic events, which are life changing events that create an interruption or disturbance of how things have always been done. McNeil says, “if we endure the shakeup we can experience true community with a new level of honesty and transparency that leads to personal transformation and social change. Catalytic events can be painful and disruptive, but they can also be harnessed for good to move us forward into reconciliation.  

2) Realization, which is built on self-awareness that moves one to respond, because it changes everything one once believed, accepted and practiced. McNeil puts it this way, “Realization is a state of awareness that requires a response. It creates a readiness for reconciliation because it causes us to realize on a profound level that things must change; we cannot stand still. It’s the questioning of the partial suspension of the way we previously understood things to be.”  

It is the realization that there are several ways to view the same thing. The understanding that although we all are seeing the same baseball game; the views and perspectives change based on where one sits in the stadium. 

3) Identification, according to McNeil, “is where we begin to identify with people who are experiencing the same thing. It’s where we begin a journey of seeing ourselves as kingdom people and potential reconcilers.” Essentially, this part of the process is the beginning steps towards gaining and creating a new collective identity. It is where one

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58 Ibid., 63.

59 Ibid., 66-67.
begins to participate in the formation of a new cultural identity that holds diversity of thoughts, concerns, ideals, hopes and dreams within it mists.

4) Preparation, is perhaps the most challenging step of the process according to McNeil’s experience in assisting groups and individuals through this the reconciliation process. She mentions that the preparation stage truly makes one decide if one is all in. Meaning that although some racial diversity is evident in the group and positive response has already occurred, conformity and complacency kicks in. Therefore, for sustainability purposes, the group or individual must consider structural changes and include the diverse group members in the formation of the new ways and new structure. Fear may arise from change, however McNeil advocates that is well worth the risk and connects to the activation phase.

5) Activation, is the last phase in the roadmap to reconciliation and the most important. It is the phase where one gets actively involved and joins in to the solutions of bringing about wholeness and forgiveness among conflicting groups. Moreover, McNeil says, “Reconciliation is not just for us. It is God’s movement to transform the world so that all people on earth can flourish. Reconciliation cannot be done in isolation. Instead, it must be done in solidarity with people whose concerns, problems, and issues have become our own.”

Furthermore, McNeil offers an acronym C.A.R.E., which stands for communicate, advocate, relate and educate as approaches to activating racial reconciliation. It’s the ability to use all of one’s abilities and skills to reach racial reconciliation and although

\[60\] Ibid., 96.
this notion does not guarantee answers or solutions, it does however prove the willingness to try and get in the game, shall we say.

There is no doubt that McNeil offers great insight into the process of racial reconciliation, however one cannot ignore the arduous labor and work this process will take. McNeil doesn’t sugarcoat it either, instead she plainly delivers the requirements needed to accomplish racial reconciliation. Moreover, one must consider that change and confrontation to something new and different can lead to spiritual transformation. In other words, change and transformation will not occur without experiencing something new that forces the individual or group to consider a new way of doing things. God moved like this in the Genesis narrative, God did it again through Jesus Christ, and God’s Spirit is still moving today through the many churches seeking racial unity. Perhaps intentional transformation is the answer to a more racially united Sunday worship experience.

The movement of the triune God in the stories shared in the book, *Living Without Enemies*. Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, the authors of this book tell the story of a suffering community seeking direction in the midst of gun violence. They advocate for the participation of the Christian community in social issues and offer engagement with practices of racial reconciliation. The call of this book is to engage uncertainty and fear of issues such as gun violence and death that one may not fully understand.

However, at the center of getting involved it may require the ability to engage the people who are affected by this violence and that can be difficult for some. Wells and Owen say it this way, “It’s about learning to love the stranger and making first steps in
forming relationships across social boundaries.” Especially when one considers reconciliation is required to engage togetherness, solidarity and unity.

Wells and Owen offer four models of engagement for those seeking to get involved, he labels them as 1) working for 2) working with 3) being with and 4) being for. Working for, is the engagement road where one takes it upon oneself to do something for someone directly without the assistance or participation of the other. Working with, is engagement through a shared experienced of doing something with the assistance of the other person. Being with, is the form of engaging the other by providing presence and companionship, while allowing the other to dictate the amount of assistance wanted and needed. Lastly, Being for, is the type of engagement that may not be prepared to do something for the other, however wants to reject the notion of standing by and not doing anything. In other words, Being for, is for those who are afraid and ill prepared to engage their neighbor but are seeking to not be indifferent.

Additionally, these four models of engagement with those who are not like us send different messages. Consider the approach of Working for, it is entirely centered on individualistic usefulness and fulfillment, however ignores what the other person feels. One does all the work and feels the satisfaction and the other who did not participate is left feeling useless.

Working with, according to Wells is, “not so much about giving people better material conditions and facilities; it about making new people, inspired and empowered and finding new skills and confident through being given responsibility and access to

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conversations that have wider influence.”\textsuperscript{62} It is a partnership that emerges from this form of engagement, however it is more about the other than oneself. \textit{Being with}, is the ability to engage the voiceless and oppressed by experiencing firsthand the pain and suffering those people go through each day.

Moreover, it is not about offering solutions without actually experiencing the problem. One cannot offer answers to the questions from afar, instead one must come and be with the disenfranchised. \textit{Being for}, is the most analytical engagement of the four, because it requires awareness, education, well thought out articulation of the issues at hand. Although one may acquire of the knowledge needed to engage people, Wells and Owen asserts, “the fundamental problem with \textit{being for} arises if it becomes clear that all these sophisticated judgements are yet to issue in any kind of significant interpersonal relationship.”\textsuperscript{63}

Specific to this conversation is the important of building relationship with the other and it cannot fully happen until one moves from the outside into the inside. From afar to nearby. Wells and Owen affirms this notion by describing God’s presence with the people of Israel offered in the Hebrew scriptures. God worked for the people of Israel and God worked with the various human leaders and voices of the Judaic narrative.

Moreover, God through the forms of the temple and the ark of the covenant already demonstrated being with the people of Israel asserts Wells. However, it was not

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 40.
until the arrival of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ that we see God’s presence in a whole new light, moving from being for to being with.

Wells and Owen offer practical ways to embody the engagement approach of being with suggesting that sharing a meal with one another is the best way to embody being with someone. Wells and Owen provide this belief from personal experience saying, “Both of us have found that eating together is the single simplest and most enjoyable way of embodying what it means to move from being for to working for to working with to being with.” Although this practical way of engagement can be successful, Wells and Owen suggest that silence and presence are powerful ways to demonstrate solidarity.

In fact, silence and presence without offering solutions or acting on assumptions about ways to fix the problem are methods of engagement with the other. Wells offers Marcia A. Owen’s personal experiences around vigil encounters and reflects on practices of ministry, silence, touch, and words to enhance the understanding of how one can be of support for those in the midst of pain and distress.

Wells and Owen affirm that God never leaves us or withdraws from us in any moment and any reason, therefore we should do the same for others in time of pain and need. Wells and Owen insist that in the silence one discovers God’s voice and truth.

In fact, they provide three dimensions of silence, 1) Solidarity, which provides ministry of presence without words and actions. 2) Listening, is the ability to actively listen to the thought, feelings and concerns of the other person, allowing them to self-

\[64\] Ibid., 46.
discover meaning. 3) Prayer, is the dimension of silence that listens to God’s movements in the midst of pain and suffering.

Wells and Owen describe these dimensions in the following manner, “The first dimension says, “This is about us, together. We’re with you in this.” The second dimension says, “I realize this is really about you. I’m here to listen to your experience and the wisdom you have found in that.” The third dimension says, “This whole experience was and is always about God.”65 The revealing part of Owen’s experiences elevate the meaning of ministry of presence, ministry of silence, ministry of touch and ministry of words that assist with support of another that is attempting to comprehend the tragedy of losing a loved one.

Furthermore, it is the healing process in which one can assist one’s neighbor with process, grief and acceptance of whatever comes next. There lies the ability to walk with someone, however Wells and Owenses describe the best method to reconciliation is firsthand experience. The process of tragedy, pain and suffering cannot be fully understood unless one truly experiences it. Losing a loved one because of gun violence is vastly different than seeing it on television or reading about it online.

In fact, Wells shares Marcia Owen’s true moment of transformation and reconciliation was when she lived gun violence firsthand, for God dwells in the middle of pain. Therefore, reconciliation firstly initiates with God, then and only then can one reconcile with others. Wells puts it this way, “Marcia began by trying to bring about

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65 Ibid., 83.
peace without requiring reconciliation. That was what the technology of legislation offered: making a better world without us needing to become better people.”

Thus, true reconciliation leads one back to making things right with one’s God, which will most certainly change one’s worldview and perspective on others. Although Wells offers Owen’s life journey as an example of true reconciliation, Owens offers her own perspective. One gleaning from her experience with loved ones of homicide victims, coalition friends, and former prisoners is as follows, “Receiving God’s love is like breathing in. Responding to the suffering of others is like breathing out. If I do the first without doing the second, I will pass out.”

There is a robust correlation between McNeil’s reconciling work and that of Wells and Owen, it is the constant reality of fighting against one’s own sinfulness. Whether it is seeking comfort and conformity by fostering racial homogeneity and sameness or seeking after one’s interests above others and becoming indifferent to those who are in pain and hurting is not the point, instead it all reverts to selfishness and self-centeredness, also known as sin. Reconciliation with God is of great prominence for the people of God and for those who are seeking racial and ethnic reconciliation.

Therefore, Mark Labberton, the President of Fuller Theological Seminary offers the following thought in foreword of the book *The Next Worship*, “A full vision of worship encompasses every dimension of life: our family, our jobs, our friendships, our questions, our suffering, our sin, our recreation, our imagination, our play, and our dying

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66 Ibid., 132.

67 Ibid., 134.
and death. Worship actively places us before the true and living God and calls us to respond with every dimension of who we are. Labberton identifies corporate worship as a time that should dismantle our human selfish ways and turn us towards God’s way, which in short, leads us back to loving neighbor. Effectively worship should embody our changing neighborhoods, and a full expression of God in worship is demanded in response to this reality.

This notion is developed by Sandra Maria Van Opstal in her work from *The Next Worship*. She insists, “it is no longer a question of whether we like or want diversity. The church is diverse. And congregational worship should reflect the diversity of God’s people, even if a local congregation itself is not diverse.” It is important for every congregation to reflect all of God’s people in worship and the primary reasons to pursue multicultural worship are not based on marketable or profitable goals, instead the intention is both biblical and missional. She offers theological support from the book of Acts, chapter 10, verses 34-36.

Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

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69 Ibid., 14.
Van Opstal presents the table of Lord as a central theme to why one participates in cross-cultural worship. She claims that at the table one fosters reconciliation, inviting and including each other, sharing leadership and allowing all God’s people to worship together regardless of background. She claims the table of Jesus redefines the meaning of who is accepted and embraced. Van Opstal says it this way, “Outsiders are in, the down is up, and the least are great. This is often called the great reversal.”\(^{70}\)

Thus, the table of Christ is central to any worship gathering in the eyes of the author, for all people regardless of their identity, gender, immigration status, racial or ethnic background are welcome. She believes that reconciliation take place at the table of the Lord, as God calls all people to himself and God calls his people to one another.\(^{71}\) That is to say, reconciliation centers around one’s relationship with God and consequently, God directs one towards relationship with neighbor. Furthermore, Van Opstal believes that reconciliation is central to a gathering of worship and not an added feature instead a commandment to celebrate that God is reconciling the world through Jesus Christ.

Moreover, she insists that reconciliation and worship are deeply connected, because true worship is demonstrated through one’s way of living for the sake of the world and through loving of one’s neighbor as oneself. Van Opstal shares Justo Gonzalez’s definition of worship, “Christian worship is, among other things, the place where we catch a glimpse of the future Reign from which and toward which God calls

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 60.
us’- a glimpse that both supports us in our pilgrimage and judges us in our attempts to be too settled.”72 This is a consistent theme throughout Van Opstal’s work; the ability to live in the reality of the kingdom and witness of what is to come. She offers a passage from the book of Revelation.

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, “Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb! (Rev 7:9-10).”

This scripture affirms that the heavenly church consists of people from every race, ethnicity, language and culture. Should worship not reflect this heavenly image? Should Sunday worship not reflect the diversity of our neighbors? Van Opstal asserts that one of the greatest challenges for the American church is to understand that worship in community is more about us than about me. Put another way, worship in a communal setting should focus more on others than one’s own personal preference or comfort.

In view of this understanding worship could potentially influence three specific groups of people. Firstly, the unchurched, who two-thirds claim to be spiritual or to believe in God, but are suspicious of organized religion, because they do not reflect their cultural realities. Secondly, the millennials, who consist mostly of people of color and

only 25% of them are considered white Christians. Thirdly, *people of color*, for the white community is becoming less and less religious, while the people of color are not.\(^{73}\)

Therefore, developing worship communities hospitable to people of every ethnicity and culture is primary. However, Van Opstal points out the greatest barrier for Christians is one’s ignorance about one’s culture. She believes that self-awareness is a foundational growth area for all leaders, especially for those in cross-cultural worship ministry. There is a great need for all Christians to gain cultural self-awareness in order to grow in the awareness of other cultural groups. This notion will assist in making strides towards racial reconciliation.

Van Opstal asserts that racial reconciliation is expressed best in hospitality (we welcome you), solidarity (we stand with you) and mutuality (we need you).\(^{74}\) Perhaps the essence of the Van Opstal’s work lies within this understanding of racial reconciliation. She offers great insight into the meaning of what the next worship should embody saying, “the next worship is an inclusive and diverse table that embodies reconciliation and points to the future celebration of God’s people from every tribe, tongue, people and language.”\(^{75}\)

Van Opstal believes the next worship should express and celebrate the diversity of all of God’s people. Removing the idea that something is either normal or not, good or not, or even ethnic or not. We are all ethnic in the eyes of God and self-awareness is a critical objective to this understanding.

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\(^{73}\) Ibid., 28-29.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 52.
Additionally, diverse and multiethnic worship is no easy task as Van Opstal lays out in her book. Multiethnic worship can look and sound differently, however it will certainly present some benefits and some gaps. One must consider Van Opstal’s work as a roadmap towards liturgical reconciliation, for the labor of creating inclusive Sunday worshiping communities is an attempt to reconcile American’s worship hour and all the people of God. For America’s weekly hour of worship should reflect the diversity of America’s people and so should the leadership.

Nevertheless, Van Opstal suggests diverse leadership on the platform or stage is highly important to diverse worship. It sends a message to those in the pews that are people are equal in the eyes of God.

Moreover, the motive for multi-cultural worship should not be centered on church growth goals, marketing plans or financial profitability, instead the focus should be on hospitality, solidarity and mutuality in reconciliation with one another. Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson offer these words on reconciliation, “It takes the Holy Spirit to melt down the inner barriers we have erected and to create in us a desire for God and for other people…Worship is the power that opens us up to the possibility of reconciliation. It fosters an atmosphere of openness, vulnerability and humility that awakens us to what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the “prophetic imagination.” In worship we develop a vision of how God intends the world to be.”

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This cannot be any truer of worship. Thomas Schattauer’s work in, *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, asserts, “The liturgical assembly of God’s people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world.” The liturgical assembly is the visible focus of God’s reconciling mission toward the world.”

Namely, what happens inside Sunday mornings during worship matters and affects what occurs outside of Sunday mornings, during the other six days of the week. We the people of God are the image of God’s reconciliation work in the world and Sunday is considered the day of worship for those in the Lutheran tradition, because it is the day Christ rose from the dead.

Furthermore, Martin Luther’s understanding of worship is God coming down to us and God is the primary actor in liturgy. Although some may define liturgy as the work of the people, Lutheran liturgy at heart is the initiation work of God, and therefore, God comes down towards to us, the believers and send us out into the world. In fact, liturgy also means service or public service as presented in the scriptures through the book of Acts, chapter 13.

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.” So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their

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hands on them and sent them on their way. So Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus. There, in the town of Salamis, they went to the Jewish synagogues and preached the word of God. John Mark went with them as their assistant, (Acts 13:1-5).”

This passage begins with a description of the leaders of the church of Antioch of Syria both prophets and teachers. Perhaps a diverse group of individuals with distinct spiritual gifts, of different ethnic backgrounds and upbringings, evident in Manaen a childhood friend of the king. Despite their diversity they demonstrated unity in spiritual practices such as prayer, worship and fasting. This suggests that these leaders of the church were truly seeking God, therefore, the Holy Spirit spoke to them asking to appoint Barnabas and Saul for special work of service or public service. It is possible that one of the prophets prophesied and after more prayer and fasting the men laid their hands-on Saul and Barnabas sending them on their way. Sent out by the Holy Spirit they went down into different towns to preach the word of God and even John Mark followed to assist.

From a Lutheran theological lens this passage embodies liturgy. In the midst of the gathering of the believers, God comes, speaks and calls us through Word and Sacrament, and sends us into the world to demonstrate neighbor love. This theological understanding of word and sacrament in liturgy is at the core of Crave Life’s Sunday liturgy. One scripture of reference for the sacrament of bread and wine comes from the gospel of Luke, “As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, (Lk
24:30-32a).” This passage offers at least a couple interesting insights. I turn to the work of Bishop R. Guy Erwin to gain some depth of the meaning of this sacrament. His work in *By Heart, Conversations with Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, he asserts the following, “In a way that Christians have long struggled to describe and understand, we believe Jesus to be with us in this sacrament in a unique way, giving himself, his very body and blood, to us in the bread and wine, to be taken into our own bodies through this eating and drinking.” That is to say, at the partaking of the true body and blood of Jesus one finds forgiveness, assurance and acceptance. For at the table of Christ is where one can meet face to face with one’s Lord and Savior.

Secondly, when examining Luke’s gospel, one must acknowledge the moment of transformation. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and then gives it to his disciples who were on their way to Emmaus, and suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus. The moment the disciples received the bread, their eyes were opened, which is so subtle for Jesus who is simply passing the bread. However, this very moment becomes the holy transaction from the Christ to the disciple, from God to his people. This is to say that something powerful and supernatural occurs at the moment of receiving the bread and wine. It’s as if one’s eyes are opened to the true Christ upon receiving the bread and wine. Through these ordinary elements of bread and wine, extraordinary happenings occur within our hearts.

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At Crave Life we believe deeply in the table of Christ as a place where we see Jesus in a better light. Martin Luther called holy communion, “the Sacrament of the Altar,” in his catechisms. For Luther considered holy communion as central to Lutheran worship and therefore, there are profound roots tracing all the way back to Jesus words and to this ancient practice and ritual. Lutheran theology would define the sacrament of the altar in the following manner; “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.” Christ is present in the meal, the concern is not so much on the how, but on the reality that Christ is present.

Crave Life believes that at the table of Christ one responds to the words of Jesus, one finds forgiveness and assurance that we belong and are claimed by Christ. This may be the reason why the two disciples on the road to Emmaus said to another, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us? (Lk 24:32).” Our hearts burn as we hear the words of Christ spoken to us through the proclamation of the scriptures, through word and sacrament.

Another essential Lutheran sacrament for Crave Life is baptism, which is highly visible and of initiatory nature. For at the waters of baptism we are reminded of God’s covenant with humanity. It’s about God’s grace for all humanity and therefore, it’s about God’s initiation and God’s work rather than our work. Samuel Wells and Marcia Owen’s work in *Living Without Enemies* and being present in the midst of violence presents a

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79 Ibid., 149.

80 Ibid., 150.
motif based on silence as solidarity. They insist, “the silence of solidarity is a stance against withdrawal.”

Put differently, the natural response to unexplained violence is withdrawal and here lies the root of the deep theological conviction for ELCA Lutherans. It is all about God’s love, God’s grace and God’s work and not so much about our work. Wells and Owen ask similar questions, “Does God ever withdraw? Does God ever not affirm us or love us? The answer is never. They affirm this Lutheran theological stance saying, “Hence presence is a witness of solidarity with those who suffer, but most of all, it is a visible statement that God does not withdraw from us.” God is there before us, in the midst of us and after us.

Moreover, baptism represents the beginning of a new spiritual life, leaving behind the old self and entering into a new reality. For Martin Luther, he would like to keep in mind the understanding of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone.

Furthermore, baptism in Lutheran theology is a gift that grants both forgiveness and the indwelling of Christ, for Christ is in me. While also recognizing that baptism is a daily journey, although a one-time act, a daily remembrance from spiritual death to spiritual resurrection is necessary. Additionally, we are living in a duality of being both saints and sinners. It’s a reminder from where one comes from and as a result one should value knowing the exact date of baptism, moving into spiritual life.

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82 Ibid., 77.
In sum, the water is an ordinary element, however holy by the work of God and therefore, water becomes extraordinary holy water. Also, one realizes that baptism is an essential part of Jesus’ teachings and directly commissioned by him. There are few directly connected commissions by Christ, baptism is one of them. Jesus speaking, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, (Mt 28:19).”

For Crave Life this matters, because it reminds us that God has been at work in our church and congregation before our arrival, through the current season of ministry and will be here after whatever comes next. It’s a reminder that we have God’s favor, God’s grace and God’s love already before we even do one thing. This is evident in our weekly Sunday worship and liturgy experience.

Lutheran worship begins with God calling us to worship. ELCA worship and liturgy consists of four main components: 1) Gathering 2) Word 3) Meal and 4) Sending. In the gathering component the Holy Spirit calls us the church to come together. In the word component, God speaks to us through the scriptures. In the meal component, God feeds us through bread and wine and in the sending component, God sends us into the world to be witnesses of love and grace. This last component is essential for worship should point away from itself and directs us towards the world. However, when done poorly, worship points to itself and the focus is on oneself, rather than on the world. In its broadest definition liturgy is that which believers do when they gather together, pointing us towards our lands, communities, cities, and neighbors, to our world. Worship and liturgy are not about us, it should be about our neighbors.
Still, one must understand that without people of diverse backgrounds one cannot truly accomplish diverse worship. It requires an invitation to others who are not like us to join the journey and assist in planning and preparing intentional diverse worship gatherings. In the end, Van Opstal cautiously reminds the reader that patience is important for long lasting change. Everything takes time and process, but Van Opstal challenges us to consider new forms and styles of liturgy and worship that will authentically create the next worship of racial reconciliation.

Another potential road towards reconciliation with our neighbors begins with community organizing. Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel offer their perspectives in their book, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*, asserting, “Community development strategies reach beyond mere charity to engage people in solving the problems in their neighborhoods.” Salvatierra and Heltzel share the core responsibility of creating systemic change in the local and global world should be shaped and guided by faith. The great Martin Luther King Jr. presented it this way, “the goal of the civil rights movement was beloved community, the place where everyone is recognized as being equally and infinitely precious, where everyone is welcomed, valued, and respected.” They insist on providing faith leaders and pastors a guide to organizing and continuing the charge that Christians have been historically leading.

Salvatierra and Heltzel point towards justice movements in Central America led by faith leaders such as Miguez Bonino, Medardo Gomez and Gustavo Gutierrez. Also,

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84 Ibid., 17-18.
they highlighted Cesar Chavez spiritual practice of fasting from Catholic faith tradition as another leader leading from their faith perspective. Faith leaders have always been moved by their deep faith and called to do justice. Their charge is to call the people of the church outside the church walls, to go out into the community and share the love of God with people in tangible ways.

Although community organizing in its secular form has a number of faith-based elements, faith-based organizing is rooted in spirituality. Even though advocacy in secular form creates change and engages problematic dynamics within communities, faith-rooted organizing is a whole other thing, primarily because it is based on spiritual convictions. Salvatierra and Heltzel define it the following way, “Faith-rooted organizing is based on the belief that many aspects of spirituality, faith traditions, faith practices, and faith communities can contribute in unique and powerful ways to the creation of just communities and societies.”

Faith-rooted organizing offers a broader and more robust way of organizing and advocacy because of its centeredness on Jesus, and other spiritual practices and theological perspectives.

Moreover, its connection to various faith traditions offers an open door to those faith communities seeking to get involved in creating justice focused neighborhoods. Furthermore, inviting the faith and clergy discipline further enhances the methods of serving the community. Students approach the issue from one angle, while workers from another and faith leaders from still another angle. The point is that the participation of various groups encourages commitment, increases productivity and therefore, change can

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85 Ibid., 9.
occur. Heltzel and Salvatierra are not reinventing the wheel, in fact they have research, studied and analyzed other justice movements such as the Central American, the Philippines, and of course here in the United States.

Although the work of justice is challenging Heltzel and Salvatierra offer a theological understanding that well suits the cause. They write, “Our task of building beloved community is inspired by Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of God, at once both a present and future reality. While Jesus inaugurated a new social identity, a new humanity, and a new heaven and earth, it is still not fully present. Thus, all of our attempts to build beloved community are corrupted with a human lust for power and apathy toward change.”

In other words, trusting in Jesus’ promise of a place where all will be made right is held in connection to the current struggles and realities of human sinfulness that is consistently working against the truth of Jesus’ promises.

When considering community development, organizing and advocacy Heltzel and Salvatierra suggest one must include the voices of poor in the formation of the issues. In addition, the relationship between the poor and the faithful can effectively create change, however programming and discerning the next steps are also a critical part of community development. Teamwork makes the dream work and the faith community, and its leaders have the unique ability to offer hope through their faith practices. Namely, when the faith community embodies who they are meant to be for the greater good of their community, it can positively affect change and encouragement for those in need.

86 Ibid., 40.
However, individual skills are also resourceful for community development. Specifically, the ministry of chaplains, who offer various spiritual intervention such as active listening, ministry of presence, discernment, pastoral words of comfort and care, and other presence-based methods and practices to engage faith, meaning of life and encouragement. Heltzel and Salvatierra suggest, chaplaincy to the poor and the powerless can definitely be a point of connection with the community.

Moreover, engaging people in a personal way, “I-Thou” as Martin Buber describes can lead to be a voice of justice for the community. Peter and Alexia affirm chaplaincy with the following words, “Chaplains bridge the gap between the love of God as a Thou and the acknowledgement of the thou-ness of the poor and powerful alike. In faith-rooted organizing our opponents are not targets but fellow human beings made in the image of God, acted on by the Spirit of a loving God, called to do their part in the battle for justice and human dignity.” 87 Understanding these words assist in forming a strategy towards being the body of Christ when it comes to organizing, developing and advocacy. In other words, the ability to offer one’s gifts allows for more diversity, which enhances the power of the leadership. Just like chaplains offer their expertise, so can readers, musicians, teachers and chefs assist by using their unique abilities and gifts.

Still, Alexia and Peter believe spirituality is the key factor to leadership in community development. In fact, the authors offer the life of Martin Luther, the pioneer reformer and the original community organizer for the Protestant movement embodies the spiritual life of a leader. It is said that Martin Luther would pray an extra hour in the

87 Ibid., 122.
morning on days when he had a lot to do.\textsuperscript{88} The purpose of prayer, rest and meditation are to engage with God’s presence. Simply put, a spiritual leader must be advocating for self-care and feeding the mind, body, and soul in order to offer their best. For faith-based organizing unlike other forms of organizing seeks to sustain leaders for years to come. It is deeply important to be well cared for in order to care well for others. Reconciling work demands well rested leaders that demonstrate a spirit of wellness to assist with the work of creating bridges among God’s people and God’s mission towards the world. Faith-based organizing at its core is seeking community reconciliation and there is no question that racial reconciliation is at work. Even within the white evangelical church.

So far, we have explored the shortcomings of the white evangelical church, however Soong-Chan Rah and Gary Vanderpol in their book, \textit{Return to Justice}, offer an alternative perspective on the evangelical church that is not so well known today. Although their book is not an attempt to retell the narrative of justice work in evangelicalism, they do offer a more balanced perception to justice work within evangelicalism than the one previously offered in this project. Moreover, Rah and Vanderpol do suggest that justice ministry is at the core of the evangelical historical narrative. Historically evangelicalism has consisted of people from various denominations and traditions, and from century to century morphing from group to group, eventually becoming what we know today as evangelicals. For evangelicals, social engagement has not always been at the forefront. Social engagement focused on building up reputation, respect and validity in the eyes of the secular world. Consider the pastors,

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 172.
scholars and religious leaders that established the world renowned *Fuller Theological Seminary*. They opened the door to a new evangelicalism centered on scholarship and academia. Vanderpol suggest that early evangelicals form of social engagement centered on vastly different issues than justice work.\(^8^9\)

Nonetheless, Rah shares about the ministry and person of John Perkins, who as an evangelical leader demonstrated and embodied the work of justice. In fact, Perkins’ ability to remain humble in the midst of justice work and his centeredness on evangelical tradition provided him a unique platform.

Moreover, Rah insists that Perkins continues to offer support and mentorship to the next generation of justice leaders. Rah says this about Perkins, “The narrative of John Perkins and the CCDA presages the possibility and the hope of a more fully formed ecclesiology for twenty-first century Evangelicals.”\(^9^0\) The life of John Perkins and the ministry of CCDA (Christian Community Development Association) offer an optimistic future for the evangelical church. Together they continue to contribute to the next generation of Evangelicals who more fully integrate racial and social justice with the story of personal evangelism.”\(^9^1\) In other words, through the life of John Perkins one can observe that justice work among evangelicals has not been completely dormant. Moreover, evident in the ministry of CCDA one can point to the more recent justice work among evangelicals.


\(^9^0\) Ibid., 38.

\(^9^1\) Ibid., 38.
Additionally, Vanderpol presents a compelling argument on behalf of the evangelical church’s involvement and support of justice work. Well known organizations such as Samaritan’s Purse, Operation Christmas Child and World Vision, offer insight into the work of justice within white evangelical circles. However, Vanderpol suggests the once personal ministry support and connection of these organizations has evolved into something different. He puts it this way, “By providing a one-time dose of Western consumerism, suburban evangelicals may feel satisfied that they have now helped the disadvantaged and may believe that they have indeed done what justice requires.”

Justice work has been reduced to a one-time financial gift distribution to the poor and impoverished without requiring personal time or connection.

Still, Vanderpol is the first to admit that justice ministry is complicated. There are far greater issues at hand than just demanding personal involvement. There are deeper forces that perpetuate injustice and they derive from within political and cultural authority. That is to say, sponsoring a child from a foreign country is only the initial step towards justice work. There are other systemic issues like education and disease that play a more prominent role. Therefore, justice work is complicated and goes far beyond a small monetary gesture, it involves advocacy in other arenas.

Vanderpol believes that justice work is complicated because it requires a change in us, the American evangelical church. He writes, “But doing justice always involves repentance, an acknowledgement that we too need deliverance from the injustice that we

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92 Ibid., 65.
perpetuate. Along the same lines, repentance involves turning away from the unjust ways in which, we see the poor.”

Additionally, Vanderpol insists that part of the repentant respond should be to stand up and speak out against injustice when one sees it or discovers it. Yet, Vanderpol does not believe all justice work is challenging. He claims that justice work is joyful and should be celebrated, because one gets the opportunity to make a difference in this world. Justice work is a blessing for the evangelical church and should be pursued.

Rah affirms this notion through his personal story of coming from a place of Christian complacency and status quo into an intentional engagement with justice work. He offers great credit to the ministry of Sojourners and the leadership of Jim Wallis for his connection to justice work. Rah believes that progressive evangelicalism offered a place of belonging and engagement that was not found in the traditional evangelical demographic. A group that bent towards white republicanism and the maintenance of power and privilege.

Nonetheless, Rah highlights Sojourners as an evangelical ministry engaging justice work and equally important, inviting people into participation and leadership that did not represent the dominant culture. For the dominant culture and the evangelical movement has always been characterized by white people. Vanderpol says, “At the close of the twentieth century, American Evangelicalism identified overwhelmingly with white Christians, and North American church history focused the Evangelical story on those of European, particularly Anglo, descent. Evangelicalism can be identified as an educated,

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93 Ibid., 96.
upper middle-class, fifty-year-old white male living near a seminary in an exurb community.” Many evangelicals do not fit this demographic suggested by Vanderpol.

One particular group that has not identified with white evangelicalism but carries many of same beliefs and practices in the black evangelical church. It has formed groups like the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) to create a bridge to relationship with white evangelicalism. In fact, this multiracial evangelical connection is evident when black evangelicals participate in white evangelical ministries such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Youth for Christ, and Campus Crusade for Christ.

However, when the rubber meets the road, black evangelical leaders and churches were never truly nor fully embraced or accepted within white evangelicalism. Vanderpol points to racism, racial injustice and cultural differences as factors limiting the unity of black and white evangelicals. He states the following, “In the emerging Evangelicalism of the twenty-first century, these questions continue to haunt churches attempting to move beyond the status quo of segregated fellowships. The difficulty of dealing with racial, ethnic, and culture differences should not be downplayed or underestimated if we are to move toward an authentically reconciled and integrated Christian community.” It is evident that our racial, ethnic and cultural differences will impede integration and reconciliation of the Christian church. When considering racial unity in Sunday morning worship, one cannot dismiss racial differences as a primary force behind segregation.

94 Ibid., 132.
95 Ibid., 137.
96 Ibid., 158.
Nonetheless, the evangelical narrative must not end in segregation. Instead through Rah and Vanderpol one discovers the many faces of evangelicalism and parachurch ministries that have united to engage justice work. Moreover, they would like to move the conversation away from white evangelicals and point us towards the justice work at hand, embodied in multi-ethnic evangelicals of the twenty-first century. Rah and Vanderpol suggest personal experience with the poor, oppressed and those in the margins will change the experience from abstract to personal. They say, “A personal connection to injustice helps make justice real.” Many multi-ethnic evangelicals already carry that connection.

Additionally, they call evangelicals to relinquish allegiance to the dominant culture for it benefits the majority and neglects the stories of injustice both locally and globally. In other words, if one continues to live in the midst of American exceptionalism, then one chooses to ignore God’s work among the oppressed and marginalized. This as an opportunity and blessing for the evangelical church, a “racial blessing.” For a new evangelicalism can emerge from the depths of the old evangelicalism and hence, activate or mobilize the future blessing of the next evangelicalism. However, the next evangelicalism must include diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, culture, social status and tradition. This kind of diversity will truly and fully present an image of unity for the next wave of evangelicals seeking to join God’s reconciling mission. Moreover, this image of racial unity among the next evangelicals may cause an overflow into weekly Sunday liturgy and worship.

\[97\] Ibid., 187.
Let us consider America’s Evangelical weekly Sunday hour of worship. Should it not mirror all of God’s people and the heavenly church? Should it not reflect the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? At this time, one cannot honestly affirm the unity of all of God’s people during weekly Sunday worship.

In fact, the majority of America’s weekly hour of Evangelical worship remains divided among racial lines and ethnic boundaries. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.”98 This statement remains unchanged 50 years later for these words were preached in 1968 just days before his assassination. Dr. King realized the uphill battle that the church would face.

Additionally, a Pew Research Center study on racially diverse U.S. religious groups presents the lack of racial unity in America. Supported by the facts from Hartford Institute for religion research, trends confirm that Eleven o’clock Sunday morning continues to be the most segregated hour in America.99 Each religious group received a diversity score based on their percentage of diversity among five racial and ethnic groups including Black, White, Asian, Latino and Mix/Other. Seventh-day Adventist scored the highest with an index of 9.1, which translates to 37 percent white, 32 percent Black, 15 percent Latino, 8 percent Asian and 8 percent Mixed/Other. However, the majority of

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Christian groups such as the Pentecostal, Evangelical and Mainline denominations index score ranged between 1.0 to 6.6, which means that at least 66 percent of the denominations are made up of people of European descent. Moreover, some denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are at least 90 percent white.\(^{100}\) These statistics can be problematic when considering racial unity in worship. Also, there is a lack of racial diversity in leadership among America’s major Christian denominations, which contribute to the problem.

Nonetheless, the country’s demographics continue to point towards a more racially diverse America and several multiethnic churches are demonstrating that racial unity is not only possible but should be seriously pursued. A study in 2010, which included 11,000 congregations in the study, discovered that multiracial churches have doubled with 14% of churches being multiracial, with at least 20 percent of parishioners identifying from other races different to the dominant race of the church.\(^ {101}\)

These statistics demonstrate that 14% of churches are somewhat diverse, but still remain predominately of one race or at the very least 80% of one dominant racial group. Moreover, the study revealed that only 4% qualified as part of a distinct congregation that


has no major racial group. Crave Life falls under the 4% that has no major racial group. Perhaps Crave Life’s unique racial demographic offers insight into racial unity during weekly Sunday worship.

Rah’s work in *Many Colors*, affirms this thought on racial unity in worship, “The state of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s oft-quoted statement that 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America is now being challenged by more and more communities attempting to integrate churches and break down racial, ethnic and cultural divisions.” Rah is proposing that racial and ethnic unity in worship is already at work and others should join the cause.

Moreover, Rah views this moment in history as an opportunity for the American church. He suggests that the American Church finds itself in the middle of a changing community that desperately needs more multiethnic churches. However, before exploring this notion, one must gain cultural understanding. Rah says, “Culture is a “acquired knowledge,” lived experience, that helps you navigate the society you live in and provides guidelines for your interpretation with others.” Simply put, culture is one’s attempt to understand the world. Although culture has proven to be distorted and shameful, Rah argues for God’s hope in the midst of things that seem hopeless. Specifically, Rah claims that God can turn around the bad and use it for good, all through his power and grace.

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Moreover, Rah offers a solution for those seeking multiethnic ministry asserting, “Cultural intelligence requires knowledge about our own cultural framework and the immediacy of our cultural environment. But it also requires a willingness to go to another place and to reflect upon your own culture and to see the culture of others from a new angle.”

Personality tests and assessments like Myers-Briggs are useful tools to gain cultural-awareness of oneself and of other cultures. Furthermore, with the growth of cultural awareness and expression one is better prepared to understand the response of other cultures. Rah believes true cultural awareness can overcome selfish ambition and assist with relinquishing one’s power, influence and rightness.

The Epistle of Ephesians says, “For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word, (Eph 5:25-26).” Rah suggests this Ephesians passage is calling for the leaders of the church to give up their power to be right and to have it done their way. This cultural awareness to relinquish power and control is fundamentally important for those who seek to participate in multi-ethnic ministry. If the church is to reflect true diversity and unity then power must be shared among all.

Nonetheless, Rah offers story-telling as a method to creating more cultural awareness. He believes the art of story-telling has been lost in the church, however most Christians seem to respond favorably to story-telling. Therefore, he offers four components of story-telling, including setting, character, conflict and resolution. Still, he

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104 Ibid., 84.
believes story telling is a learning process developed over time that fosters honesty, vulnerability of one’s pain and true identity.

For Crave Life story-telling is at the core of the church’s narrative. It has transformed the hearts of many, witnessing the love and grace of God through the words, tears and experiences of others. Story-telling has enhanced the cultural awareness and contributed to the unifying experience at Crave Life.

Additionally, Rah suggests that journeying in cultural awareness is a life-long process centered on the attitude of listening. Moreover, Rah believes, “Journeying experiences should provide a snapshot of the ongoing goal toward racial reconciliation and cultural intelligence.” In other words, cultural intelligence and racial reconciliation is an ongoing and ever-evolving journey. Thus, the road towards cultural intelligence and racial reconciliation demands effort, struggle and trial. Racial unity in Sunday worship will call for hard work and anyone seeking out multi-ethnic ministry must be aware of this reality.

Nonetheless, Rah offers various expressions of hospitality that assist with cultural unity. Firstly, he suggests hospitality through sharing a meal. Rah describes the meal after worship as the most connecting experience of his multiethnic worship community. He asserts, “The power of table fellowship is the power of hospitality.” Therefore, a multiethnic church must eat together, and the practice of holy communion offers similar understandings. Rah, described the meal of the table of Christ as more than a meal, for

\[\text{105} \text{ Ibid., 163.}\]
\[\text{106} \text{ Ibid., 168.}\]
the story of Jesus lies behind the meal. I agree wholeheartedly with Rah’s sacred meal theology, for Crave Life’s table-fellowship after Sunday worship have provided a place for all to belong and participate.

Another expression of hospitality is language. Rah suggests that American Christians should consider learning other culture’s languages, even if it’s at least a greeting or how to say thank you in another language. As the pastor of multilingual faith community, I have learned to display this kind of hospitality and I believe it assists in creating more unity. Rah believes that different hospitality expressions are the driving force towards unity among different cultures. It is about embracing the foods, language and diverse worship styles as one’s own, but at some point, one must move beyond acts of hospitality. Rah puts it this way, “Ultimately, the church must move from acts of hospitality to family. A family does not merely tolerate differences, but it embraces them.”

Here is where one discovers that multiethnic churches are essentially reclaiming the image of solidarity, mutuality and the relationship between one culture and another. Here is where healing and reconciliation occurs when one congregation no longer views the other congregation as outsiders, but as part of the family.

Crave Life has viewed other diverse congregations as part of their family. They assisted in planting a church in 2014 with the (ECC) Evangelical Covenant Church denomination in the city of Santa Monica, California. Part of Crave Life’s goal was to financially support the planting of other churches and although finances were limited, Crave Life invested and supported this new church. In 2017 Crave Life assisted with

107 Ibid., 181.
another similar venture by offering spiritual and financial resources to the building of walls for a reformed church in Eldoret, Kenya, east Africa. Crave Life views other congregations as part of the family even if they are not part of the same denomination. We are all part of the family of God. These ministry efforts birthed from within our faith community and manifested itself through locally and globally.

God’s call us to make the outsiders, insiders of the American Christian church. The blessing of racial diversity is at the footsteps of the American Christian church. It is a gift from God for the American church, to participate in the ongoing reconciliation of the world through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.
CHAPTER 4
BASIC SYSTEMS OF CHRISTIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

While the last few chapters have centered on the race problem in America and painted a gloomy image of hope for reconciliation in areas such as race, liturgy and community, the Christian church may still have some potential avenues to reclaim their faith and practices. However, before we explore those concepts, let us begin by analyzing basic systems of the Christian church already at work. For one must engage the unhealthy systems of the church in order to transform worship practices on Sunday mornings.

When studying American history, one discovers that the heart of narrative is the elevation of individual perspective. In fact, some historians point out that America’s celebration of individualism would hinder and create tension to America’s democratic style of governing. Therefore, embedded in this American ethos is the American church, which continues to uplift the individual over the collective. Soong-Chan Rah’s work in *The Next Evangelicalism*, asserts, “The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of individual.”

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That is to say, the American Christian church has taken on the individualistic understanding of faith and watering it down to a personal and private faith and religious experience, rather than ascribing to the biblical narrative, which will be discussed here shortly. However, there is an important distinction made by Rah, between individualism and the presented term ‘individuation,’ which is a healthy response to independence and the ability to make personal choices. Namely, an appropriate way to individualism exists that does not put down the collective and tribal sense of living. Rah argues the American Church has not adopted healthy individuation, instead has subscribed to a severe form of individualism and privatism, which elevates personalism over gospel community as presented in scripture. In fact, Rah suggests that much of the American Church has focused on teaching the scriptures for individual gain. However, one must recognize that most of scripture has been written and directed towards people groups and whole communities. Although some bible books are specifically about one individual, America’s Christian church has made Sunday preaching too personalized and individualistically centered.

Furthermore, the application of Sunday sermons represents the unhealthy individualistic notion at the expense of the communal blessing that many scriptures call for. Thus, the hermeneutic misreading of certain scriptures has perpetuated individualistic step by step instruction to biblical passages that are directed towards a corporate response. Here Rah points out an important distinction in sermon preparation and delivery. Rather than offering a personal response to the scriptures, Rah advocates for a corporate response.
Thus, as the primary preacher and sermonizer, I have intentionally crafted my sermons towards the collective people of God. Seeking to bring about unity and equality among the diversity of my faith community. Put differently, God’s holy and sacred words are for all people and should demand a corporate response. This approach to the delivery of sermons has created more unity among our people and moved us away from personal step by step solutions to life. The sermon time intentionally calls the people of God to contend with scriptures that point us towards living for more than self, instead towards God, neighbor and earth.

In addition, Rah presents another form of individualism in the preparation and expectation of Sunday liturgy and worship. He asserts that extreme individualism within the American church has created a worship experience that is all about the individual’s preference and need. In other words, the selection of songs and the musical style with which they are sung caves to the individual and self-absorbed necessity.

Furthermore, through this worship lens, the sermon topic and application become a personal search to satisfy the personal. Rah suggests an individualistic response to worship and liturgy is executed at the expense of the corporate people of God. He puts it this way, “This excessive emphasis on individualism is crippling to American society, but even more so to the body of Christ. Is there a possibility of restoring a sense of community to our approach to church life?”

Rah, points out that extreme individualism has not only created unhealthy responses to Sunday worship, but has removed communal relationship from the church

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2 Ibid., 38.
community. It is truly a point of discussion, for corporate worship must mirror the image of God in all people. Therefore, Crave Life is intentionally seeking unity in Sunday worship rather than forming individualistic worship styles and experiences. It is not an easy task when it comes to musical song selections, however the heart of the congregation is to remain together in worship and reestablish a sense of community and togetherness among all of God’s people.

Additionally, individualism has distorted the understanding of corporate sin and made it an individual response while overlooking the need for corporate confession on social issues like racism, poverty and justice. Additionally, the American Church’s obsession with personal evangelism is placed above such issues as racial reconciliation and social justice. In fact, Emerson and Smith make this distinction in their book *Divided by Faith*, “Individualism is very American, but the type of individualism and the ferocity with which it is held distinguishes white evangelicals from others… Contemporary white American evangelicalism is perhaps the strongest carrier of this freewill-individual tradition. The roots of the individualist tradition run deep, dating back to much of the Free Church tradition, flowering in America’s frontier awakenings and revivals, and maturing in spiritual pietism and anti-Social Gospel fundamentalism.³

For Rah, individualistic view on sin removes the reality of the race problem in America and further, the notion of corporate sin against racism is non-existent. Without corporate sin, the gospel of Jesus Christ in worship and daily life is limited and not fully

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present. Therefore, Crave Life has adopted ELCA liturgy that intentionally calls for corporate confession and repentance. There is a great need for the people of God to confess the realities of racism, hate and evil that exist within the church and its members. Every Sunday Crave Life confesses the church’s captivity to sin and division, while interceding for the church, the world, and all those in need. Corporate sin is confessed and united as one body in Christ intercession is raised.

Another major systemic system at play since the beginning of American culture is labeled by Rah as consumerism and materialism. This force is evident in America’s daily cultural living and expectations. In fact, consumerism has even entered the spirituality arena, for many Christians view church as a place to consume the programs and ministries offered.

Moreover, American Christians are scrolling through churches like one scrolls through the Amazon purchasing app, looking for a church that pleases their music style, preaching style and kind of people presented on the church website. Rah, says it this way, “We’re purchasing a product rather than committing to the body of Christ. We are captive to the western, white captivity of the church in our materialistic and consumeristic bent, more accurately reflecting American culture and society than Scripture.”

Again, this kind of view of Christianity and spirituality reduces everything to commodities, and therefore, people are viewed in the same manner. This distorted perspective found in the American Christian church fosters materialism, which satisfies

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4 Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 47.
the immediate and impulsive desire to accumulate the material things of this world and one is left feeling empty and not fulfilled. Consider the many churches that has erected massive new construction of church facilities that rival sport arenas and other commercial buildings. Consumerism and materialism are the center of the American Christian church.

Furthermore, Rah offers personal stories and experiences from white American Christians seeking comfort and to not be challenged. Some Christians will threaten to leave church or withdraw financial support if the pastor and leaders challenge them particularly in the area of racial reconciliation. Metzger says it this way, “Many evangelical church leaders believe that the best way to multiply churches quickly is to make the members feel comfortable rather than comfort them with the cross that breaks down the divisions between God, us, and others.”

Therefore, Rah suggests that consumerism and materialism has created a comfortable church that does not recognize their sinfulness in the area of racial injustice. Moreover, a comfortable church does not embody the scriptures by which the American Christian claims to follow. The sinfulness of comfort, laziness and convenience is spread throughout the Christian church. Crave Life seeks to confront that sin with the mobilization of God’s people towards spiritual renewal. This means that true spiritual renewal is the primary antidote that confronts comfortableness. It moves the people of God to a deeper connection with the Lord and it invites the presence, fire and power of the Holy Spirit to transform the reason of living.

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5 Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 9-10.
Nonetheless, individualism and consumerism, racist tendencies and insensitive responses to racial issues continue within the white Christian church. Rah explains the lack of sinful awareness from white evangelical organizations and denominations is the driving force behind western cultural captivity. America’s churches and organizations seek to ignore rather than confront their sinful nature towards race. Simply put, racism is that core of the white American church and yet, the leaders of the church choose not to deal with it or they are ill-prepared to deal with the reality of racism. Either way, Rah points out that racism is constructed in America’s original sin of creating racial categories and placing one race over another.

Additionally, Rah suggests that racism is not a personal sin, it is a corporate sin and requires corporate repentance and confession, for all who have benefited because of racism are implicitly and explicitly at fault. Rah puts it this way, “Our corporate sin of racism and our corporate life as beneficiaries of a racist system require corporate confession. This corporate confession must be led by those with a spiritual understanding and a biblical conviction, namely, the body of Christ in America.”6

It is particularly important for the white body of Christ to speak up. Rah, asserts that white privilege equates to power over the norm and acceptance and therefore, the dominant culture remains white even if other racial groups are acknowledged. Virgilio Elizondo offers his thoughts in Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise saying, “It is the dominant society that sets the norms and projects the image of success,

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achievement, acceptability, normalcy, and status. It is the dominant group that sets up the educational process that passes on the traditions and values of the dominant society.”

Elizondo speaks with a Mexican-American lens that somewhat reflects the perspective of Crave Life, mostly second-generation Latinos. Furthermore, Crave Life’s arrival into the ELCA, the whitest denomination in America, presents a dominant society already at work. However, the local congregation, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran has been gracious in embracing Crave Life’s style of music. At times, the dominant culture of white Lutheranism projects itself even in the local expression and other racial groups are left without any choice but to adapt.

Nonetheless, the dominant culture and people group remains with the European-descent American church and only they have the power to change the ecclesiological narrative. Rah points out far too many instances where the white American church continues to flex its privilege and power over other racial groups. He says, “Privilege for the white Christian means the assumption that his or her value system, norms, cultural expressions will be the acceptable norm, while “other” cultures will remain on the fringes of American society.”

Rah’s assertion has proven to be true at Crave Life, as some of the Latino, Black and Asian congregants’ style of worship, music and prayer seem not normative within Lutheran circles.

Although one discovers various forms of racism within the basic systems of Christian ecclesiology, Rah points to the understanding of the image of God as a better

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8 Soong-Chan Rah, The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 76.
way of understanding racism. When discussing human creation, one must begin with the premise that humans were created in the likeness of God. When Adam received the breath of God, the fullness of God’s spiritual image was given to all humanity. Therefore, all humanity bears the spiritual image of God and sin derives from the attempt to replace it with the elevation of the physical image. Racism is as Rah says, “the elevation of one race as the standard to which other races should seek to attain and makes one race the ultimate standard of reference.”\(^9\) Furthermore, the pursuit of placing one’s dominant culture and race as God’s favor can only be viewed as racism.

In short, Rah advocates for change through shedding off white privilege and captivity. He offers hope in giving way to multiethnic churches and leaders. For Crave Life, this is the process towards racial unity in Sunday worship. Rah’s hopeful suggestion to give way to multiethnic churches and leaders is currently being modeled in our context. Crave Life’s arrival to Whittier is because of Shepherd of the Hills’ attempt to make way. My synod call to pastor both Crave Life and Shepherd of the Hills is yet another sign of the leaders of Shepherd of the Hills shedding off their white privilege and captivity. Thus, Rah’s hope embodying in his writings are potentially already happening and creating a new future for a new American evangelicalism.

\(^9\) Ibid., 80.
CHAPTER 5
THE RECLAIMING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND WORSHIP

One must consider a starting point when discussing the reclaiming of God’s original intent for all of God’s people. One cannot ignore the spiritual sickness of the American church embodied through individualism, consumerism and racism. However, these basic ecclesiological dynamics within America’s white evangelicalism should provide some light and direction when attempting to reclaim weekly Sunday worship.

Consider holy communion, one of the essential weekly practices in worship and liturgy as a key contributor towards racial transformation and reconciliation. Sandra Van Opstal claims, “Getting people to gather at the table is symbolic of communion…This act, also known as Communion, the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, is the centerpiece of worship.”

Furthermore, Bishop Guy Irwin of the Southwest Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states in his writings By Heart, “What Martin Luther called

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“the Sacrament of the Altar” in his catechisms has always been at the very center of Christian worship.”\(^2\)

Specifically, the eucharist is not only an ancient practice instituted by Christ himself, but it is already embedded in the core practices of the American Christian church. Therefore, it can be used to bring about racial unity. At Crave Life the gathering around the sacrament of the altar is the most meaningful portion of liturgy, because it reminds the people of God of their equality before the eyes of God. Furthermore, as Crave Life would attest, the table of Lord shakes off all the human labels that define identity and offers a new common identity in Christ Jesus.

Consider the parable of the great feast presented in Luke’s gospel. Jesus shares about a man’s great feast where many were invited and only a few attended. In an odd response, the master requests his servant to invite all people, even the ones with no social status. After the servant returns from inviting people, the dinner party still was not full. The master again extends a second invitation to anyone so that the feast would be full. This biblical parable is used as a foundational passage by Van Opstal when discussing the sacrament of the altar as Luther would say. She claims that God calls people towards himself and that God calls his people to one another. So, if you’re at the table, you’re one family.”\(^3\) Essentially, Van Opstal’s view of the table is a symbol of moving from

\(^2\) R. Guy Erwin, Mary Jane Haemig, Ken Sundet Jones, Martin J. Lohrmann, Derek R. Nelson, Kirsi I. Stjerna, Timothy J. Wengert and Hans Wiersma, *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 149.

\(^3\) Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 60.
separation to unity. It is a call to communion with God, neighbor and all creation. Crave Life embodies this calling through the weekly offering the eucharist.

For Van Opstal gathering together at the table is a sign of togetherness and oneness, of familial significance shall we say. Still, Bishop Irwin asserts, “It is not accident that the deepest church-to-church relationships we Lutherans have with other denominations are called “full communion” agreements, since the sharing of holy communion is the most important unifying point within them. To recognize another church’s sacramental worship and reaching as being as valid as our own is a powerful form of acceptance; when we are able to welcome one another to the table and there is full equality in our sharing, our Christian fellowship is close and strong.” The centrality of the Lord’s Supper in worship and liturgy runs deep and speaks volumes towards the unity of all the people of God. The practice of the eucharist offers a viable hope for unity in Sunday worship. It is an invitation to all of God’s people who are seeking grace, forgiveness and acceptance.

The practice of gathering at the sacrament of the altar presents the means of grace. The bread, the wine and the water of baptism embody the means of grace. The believer experiences forgiveness of sin and the promise of salvation through the means of grace. Bishop Irwin puts it this way, “Luther roots the whole purpose of the sacrament in the reconciliation of sinful humans with their loving God.” Simply put, God confronts one’s sinfulness at the table of Christ, but also offers forgiveness. Within the diverse context of

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4 R. Guy Erwin, Mary Jane Haemig, Ken Sundet Jones, Martin J. Lohrmann, Derek R. Nelson, Kirsi I. Stjerna, Timothy J. Wengert and Hans Wiersma, By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther’s Small Catechism (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 152.

5 Ibid., 162.
Crave Life, sin must be confronted and the sacrament offers reconciliation with one another.

Bishop Irwin suggests there is an aftermath effect from partaking bread and wine. He believes the believer returns to the world from the holy meal with the empowerment to love one’s neighbor, act in a Christ-like love, stand for justice and advocate for those who are being oppressed and marginalized. Furthermore, Bishop Irwin says, “Luther understands this too: the eucharist is a symbol of strength and unity of Christians in the wider world.” Namely, partaking of the memorial meal of unity is one way of standing up against the segregation of the people of God. Even more, eating from the same bread and drinking from the same cup is a protest against the sinfulness of the world and the workings of the devil against the church. The unhealthy systemic ways of viewing worship and liturgy are no longer at work for a moment in bread and wine, and one can get a glimpse of the spiritual union with God, neighbor and earth. Is this not the commandment that Jesus calls for?

John Mark’s gospel depicts this same commandment after the scribe asked, which commandment is the first of all? Jesus gives the following answer, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these, (Mk 12:29-31).”

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6 Ibid., 167.
Jesus’ answer is radical in nature, taking two separate Hebrew scriptures in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 and combining them into one. On one hand Jesus honors Judaism while on the other hand he is moving the conversation beyond Judaism and into Christianity as we know it today. Jesus links both Hebrew scriptures and commandments into one using the word love or the Hebrew word v’ahavta, as the central theme. To love God and to love neighbor is a confession of the Christian faith and should remind believers of their identity in Christ. For one cannot love and hate their neighbor. This would be a contradiction and violation of the identity of a Christian. An identity centered around radical love for one’s neighbor that can only be possible by the power of God and through the work of Christ. This understanding is critical to the development of unity in Sunday worship, because loving like Christ makes us more like Christ. It is foundational to the people of Crave Life to recognize that the common identity that binds us together is discovered in Jesus Christ.

Van Opstal moves this image along saying, “Reconciliation in worship is expressed in three ways: hospitality, solidarity and mutuality. This biblical reconciliation therefore calls us to welcome one another, stand with one another and depend on one another.”7 Here in these three expressions can the white American church discover ways to bridge healthy unification among racial lines. Sandra centers on creating hospitality in worship and liturgy through music, songs and other elements that invite the

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underrepresented to take a place in worship. She claims, “Reconciliation occurs when we get rid of all favoritism in our communities.”

This means that the white evangelical church must begin to make worship not just about their own preferences, they should consider other racial groups as well when planning worship. For this intentionality sends the clear message of Christian hospitality. At Crave Life a monthly meeting has been established to plan worship and liturgy. It is a meeting to select songs, hymns and other liturgical elements, however it also reminds us to put the needs of the others first.

Likewise, Van Opstal suggests that solidarity is another way to reclaim Christian worship and liturgy. She asserts, “Solidarity means we identify with another’s community in the practices of lament and joy; we join in empathetic grieving and rejoicing.” The ability to stand in solidarity with another racial and ethnic group is the key contributor to racial reconciliation and unity. Van Opstal shares personal stories from churches that have taken prayer time to lament the tragedies and injustices of the world. This is to say, the essential liturgical practice of prayer can be reclaimed for repentance, forgiveness and lament.

Worship and liturgy should assist with connection to those who are suffering and mourning. Jesus’ sermon on the mount said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, (Mt 5:4).” Through these words one can see Jesus’ heart for those who mourn. Jesus stands in solidarity with those who carry pain and grief. Moreover, Van

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8 Ibid., 64.
9 Ibid., 66.
Opstal believes that solidarity can be more than just words or prayers, it can be in action as well. She believes that white Christians can build up racial reconciliation by engaging social justice issues. Although engagement with social justice can be helpful, at Crave Life the experience of sharing one’s pain and grief has further moved along the notion of standing in solidarity with one another.

Yet, mutuality is another approach to racial reconciliation. Van Opstal suggests that worshiping across racial lines and experiencing diverse cultural styles. This act of mutuality creates dependence on one another. Van Opstal says, “We need one another to expose our ignorance and racism. We also need each other for the various gifts our communities offer. When we honor the other, we display both the unity and the diversity of the church.”

Mutuality assists in creating dependence of one another, but it also exposes our racism towards one another. It can be both a gift and shadow for the Christian church, but in doing so we give way to our preference and comfort, realizing that submission to another culture’s leadership in liturgy fosters racial unity and reconciliation in worship. At Crave Life liturgy includes prayers, songs and scripture readings in different languages. This experience moves us towards more dependence and mutuality, respecting the language and culture of one another.

Van Opstal believes that reconciliation should be introduced, created and represented in liturgy and worship in ways that white evangelicalism has failed to do so throughout their historical narrative. Nonetheless, reclaiming worship fully lies on the ability to create an inclusive community. Van Opstal offers three components for a

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10 Ibid., 72.
church seeking to more inclusive: 1) diverse music 2) diverse platform and 3) diverse leadership.\textsuperscript{11} Simply put, inclusive worship celebrates diversity. When describing diverse music, Van Opstal insists that diverse worship must include diverse music styles, lyrics and instruments. Furthermore, diverse platform should not just be about representation, instead it should be about giving influence in worship to the diverse people. For Crave Life, songs, prayers and readings organically include people of different ethnicities, races and traditions. Further exposing the platform to people of different backgrounds and offer a different face of Christ to the whole community.

Finally, having leadership diverse in culture, ethnicity, race and socioeconomic status offers a more complete perspective when planning worship. Van Opstal urges creativity in planning worship that fosters inclusivity of all of God’s people. Therefore, inclusive worship must remember to invite those individuals who are often times rejected and excluded such as the LGBTQ community, the immigrant community, the non-Christian community, and several other similar excluded people groups. Crave Life has learned to include all people in worship, because it offers a more complete image of God. Furthermore, it offers a clear image of unity in worship, that centers on participation rather than perfection.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 112-114.
CHAPTER 6

THE GOAL OF TRANSFORMING SUNDAY MORNINGS

It is important to mention the three goals in transforming Sunday morning worship towards embodying racial unity. 1) Christian identity 2) Christian equality and 3) Christian witness. Firstly, the book of Galatians in response to the law being fulfilled by Christ says, “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew and Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus, (Gal 3:25-28).” Perhaps Saint Paul is mentioning the primary categories of his time in relation to justification and identity. There are at least two ethnicities, two social statuses and two genders mentioned in this passage that may define the major identities of Paul’s world perspective. Nevertheless, Paul is more concerned with claiming unity and oneness in Christ Jesus. Therefore, Paul’s words are moving away from the labels of his time and culture, claiming that one’s identity is no longer based on one’s ethnicity, social status or gender. Instead, one’s identity is the common unity and equality discovered in belonging to Christ.
Additionally, Colossians passage offers more thoughts on identity, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col 3:9-11).” Here again, Paul and Timothy offer thoughts about one’s identity in Christ. It is found and renewed through the new self and in relationship to the image of God.

Therefore, Paul is hinting at the creation story in Genesis as the foundational piece to the puzzle shall we say. Even more he offers additional identities and people groups in contrast to his Galatians passage including two other groups circumcised and uncircumcised, and barbarian and Scythian. There is much debate about the meaning of this pairing, barbarian could suggest civilized, free, or white skinned person and Scythian could represent uncivilized, slave or black skinned individual.

Nonetheless, the point is that Paul provides another two categories of people groups in his time and yet, he insists that as God’s people our identity is being renewed through one’s new life in Christ. Furthermore, in the Colossians passage Paul insists that as God’s people we should carry goodness, kindness, humility and compassion, but he claims that above all one should embody love, “for love binds everything together in perfect harmony, (Col 3:10).” Once again, Paul’s concern is more about unity and togetherness as the center of the Christian narrative and thus, trading in the categories and labels of antiquity for that of Christ’s identity.

Matthew Henry’s commentary on this passage is helpful. He writes, “Light is the first thing in new creation, as it was in the first: after the image of him who created him.
It was the honour of man in innocence that he was made after the image of God; but that image was defaced and lost by sin, and is renewed by sanctifying grace: so that a renewed soul is something like what Adam was in the day he was created.”¹ It is helpful to know that through the grace of God one is renewed and becoming more like who God created one to be.

Both of these biblical passages from Saint Paul in the New Testament assist with the goal of transforming the identity of the people of God. Through clothing oneself with true identity in Christ, one can get rid of the labels and categories unjustly given or taken on. That is to say, returning to one’s true identity can only assist in the journey towards becoming united as God’s people. The idea of leaving any label at the door prior to entering Sunday worship and liturgy is primal to embracing oneness in Christ Jesus. Without the reminder to walk in the light of spiritual identity, one will only revert to physical and outer identity. The believer must be clothed with the new self in Christ Jesus, seeking the heavenly things over the earthly things. The sense of a common identity in Christ, can move along the transformation of Sunday worship of all of God’s people. For the need to project importance and privilege based on one’s physical and outer appearance will no longer be desired. Instead that emptiness will be replaced with the human understanding that spiritual and inner assurance comes from being like everyone else, one in Christ, equally accepted and equally loved by God.

Secondly, in the book of Acts Chapter 10, Saint Peter and Cornelius have an unlikely encounter, especially when considering the gender and ethnicity. The first person is a Jewish man and the other an Italian gentile man. Nonetheless, Peter being a good Jewish man rejects the unclean and continues to follow the Jewish customs and laws, however the Lord is changing the rules. Namely, as Peter says, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean, (Acts 10:28).”

Furthermore, Peter declares, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, (Acts 10:34-35).” In other words, Peter’s epiphany of God’s acceptance of all people outside the people of Israel as his people elevates the meaning of racial equality. God moves the conversation along through Peter and Cornelius, for the kingdom of God is for every nation and racial favoritism no longer is the norm. Instead, all people, Jews and Gentiles are now standing on the same ground, level and equal for the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Gentiles and they were all baptized in water.

God shows no partiality and therefore, the American Christian church must consider this scriptural understanding when viewing someone of a different race. Matthew Henry offers these thoughts, “Peter though it necessary to let them know how he came to change his mind in this matter, and that it was by a divine revelation, lest he should be upbraided with it as having used lightness.”

that alerted Peter of the change of view and certainly this kind of divine intervention will be needed for those who consider themselves the favorites.

Thirdly, the gospel of John presents a Christian witness to the world. Jesus provides a new commandment, “that you love one another. Just as I have love you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another, (Jn 13:34-35).” Jesus repeats the same words three times ‘love one another’ and apparently he is trying to make a point. Love one another! Jesus believed that love for one’s neighbor just like Christ’s love was so radical that it would witness to everyone the difference between a disciple of Jesus and a disciple of the world. Love is the proof that one is a true disciple of Jesus.

In Matthew’s gospel it says it this way, “He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ (Mt 22:37-39).” Either passage offers a similar message and it remains the same, love one another for it is the single greatest method of witness to the world around us.

Christian identity, equality and witness are the core of what it means to live for Christ and to be in Christ. Simply put, racial reconciliation of Sunday worship and liturgy is evident in the believer’s understanding of oneself, neighbor and God. Let us now reflect on some ministry practices of racial unity on Sunday mornings.
PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY
CHAPTER 7
THEOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS FOR RACIAL UNITY

A few months ago, my daughter celebrated her sweet sixteen birthday party. She authorized the invitation of our neighbors, extended family and our faith community. She personally invited many of her high school friends to a hot July evening in the backyard of our house. We all gathered together to celebrate her great accomplishment towards young adulthood. This sweet sixteen party seems fairly normal, however one of the most beautiful images of that night was the racial and ethnic diversity. Our neighbors to the left, to the right and across the street are from China, Japan, Morocco and of European descent.

My daughter’s friends embodied racial and ethnic diversity even more, deriving from countries such as Korea, Jordan, India, Vietnam and the Philippines. Some of her friends were Catholic, others Muslim and still others Hindu. We had a similar experience about a year-and-a-half ago at my son’s birthday party. His closest friends are from Jordan and Vietnam. Without much effort or intentionality racial unity is clearly present even in common events such as birthday parties.
Philip Jenkins, from his work in *The Next Christendom*, presents the numbers and trends of a growing Christian community outside the US. Growth is towards the South of the globe, however he provides this thought, “Yet in the United States too, the coming decade should witness a wholly new phase of religious synthesis and hybridization, as immigrant communities Americanize. To take only one ethnic force, a United States with 100 million Latinos is very likely to have a far more Southern religious complexion than anything we can imagine in person.”¹ Jenkins is pointing towards a new kind of Christianity even within the US. A Christianity that carries a new form, different in ethnicity, race, culture and religious affiliations. Jenkins’ work focused on 2007 and more than ten years later, the evidence is in the proof or racial and religious diversity.

David Olson’s work in *The American Church in Crisis* asserts, “The American church must engage with these three critical transitions: Our world used to be Christian, but it is now becoming post-Christian. Our world used to be modern, but it is now becoming postmodern. Our world used to be monoethnic, but it is now becoming multiethnic.”² These three forces are already at work throughout American neighborhoods, schools, malls, restaurants and local community events and activities. Diversity in religious form, worldview, race and ethnicity is already here. One may say that corporately people have previously for years embodied racial unity in various forums. The research suggests that racial unity is deeply rooted in many areas of community living. Jesus’ prayer in John’s Gospel of unity among his people is truly of

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² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 162.
great significance for the Father as well. Jesus does say to the Father, “I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity, (Jn 17:23).” The Father and the Son embody the unity that will spill over into the disciples and eventually to all those new people who believe the message of love for one another. This is to say, if racial unity is already at work, around us all day, why has it not penetrated the church walls on Sunday mornings?

This notion of racial unity in America’s hour of worship should not be ignored or placed at the end of the things to do list of a church. Seems like the American Christian church is more concerned with facility renovation and budget development rather than seeking racial unity in Sunday worship. If our American Christian church would embody the surrounding communities and neighbors of where their erected church buildings stand, then all this discussion about racial unity would be futile. However, the reality is the opposite. Although America’s neighborhoods, cities and communities have previously been changing, the white American church has failed to offer an inclusive and welcoming environment.

In the Galatians and Colossians passages previously discussed, Christ offers himself as the source of identity for all his people. When coupled with the Genesis creation narrative of being made in the image of God, the believer must understand that true identity is in the triune God. God has claimed one as his own as evident in the Acts and Romans passages discussed earlier and no separation exists between one and any other person of any race or ethnicity before the eyes of the triune God.

Therefore, freedom exists to live in unity with our neighbor, and unity of this kind will lead towards the neighborly love that God demonstrated to one since the beginning
of time. To live with this kind of theological and spiritual understanding is one of the keys to a future of racial unity. Olson suggests a three-legged stool model for healthy church growth, however in this case I would like to use it for the development of racial unity in the church. Olson points out, “the first leg of the stool represents spirituality, which is the spiritual formation and reliance in the Holy Spirit.\(^3\) This leg is vital to a church seeking racial unity in worship for only the power of God can change the hearts, minds and souls of humanity.

Secondly, Olson offers the chemistry leg, which is the relational atmosphere projected by the members of the church and within minutes a visitor will sense the systems and values at play within the congregation.\(^4\) Without this leg, a church may claim to seek racial unity in worship, however if it is not honestly embodied within the hearts, faces and words of the membership, the visitor will perceive it easily.

Lastly, is the strategic leg, which is the leg that centers around process, actions and goals to reach the vision and mission of the church.\(^5\) Without strategy and practicality one cannot achieve the goals of racial unity in Sunday worship. There is a patient process at hand with any major transition and development. Also, actions must be planned and prepared in order to mark the intentional moments of significance, while moving towards the final goal.

Therefore, the spiritual leg of racial unity in Sunday worship finds its footing in God’s image, Christ’s identity and the Holy Spirit’s call to unity of all people. Paul said

\(^3\) Olson, David T. *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 137.

\(^4\) Ibid., 138.

\(^5\) Ibid., 138.
in the book of Philippians, “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind, (Phi 2:1-2).” The Chemistry leg centers around true authenticity shared by the faith community towards visitors. Put differently, the capacity to offer true community to the outsider and opening the door towards becoming an insider is critical to the development of racial unity.

Brandon J. O’Brien shares in his work from *The Strategically Small Church*, “Because authenticity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, different people find it in different places. This means that when it comes to churches, no one tradition or congregation will appeal to everyone.” Authenticity will be discovered in different faith communities. However, O’Brien points out more of the younger generations are moving away from evangelical churches to more ancient liturgical forms of worship found in Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism and Orthodoxy traditions. Additionally, O’Brien suggests that authenticity for small congregations is a tool of effectiveness and to celebrated as a unique gift to the small church. The point is that true Christian authenticity and organic neighbor love are important subscribers to racial unity in the local American Christian church.

In regard to the strategic leg, I offer a ministry initiative that is not at all new nor innovative, however serves as key contributor to racial unity in worship and correlates with Brenda Salter-McNeil’s motif on contact theory, it is the creation of missional

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ventures. Similar to the idea that relationships among people will develop and grow through intentional connection with one another over time, the creation of missional ventures within a congregation provides a pathway towards racial unity in worship. Put another way, strategic actions such as the planning of missional gatherings are part of the process towards racial unity in worship. The people of God serving together as one body in Christ is the key towards unity. However, one must consider the strategic goals of racial unity in worship as a process and ongoing journey rather than a one-time attempt. We now turn our attention to the specifics of this ministry strategy.
CHAPTER 8

STRATEGIC GOALS TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

When planning and programming action plans one must consider this question, will this assist in creating more racial unity within my congregation and context? About a year and half ago when the process of racial unity initiated at Crave Life Church the decision to serve together was a no brainer as they say. While sharing worship facilities created some direct contact and connection with the neighboring congregations, it was not until Crave Life intentionally participated in an annually planned Lutheran day of service and volunteerism known as *God’s Work. Our Hands*.

This event occurred on Sunday, September 10, 2017 at 12:30pm. All three congregations participated, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran, Thai Shepherd and Crave Life, offering their unique gifts and skills. The Thai congregation, although small in numbers and ill-equipped to give a hand, offered their cooking skills and graciously cooked a delicious Thai meal for all to enjoy lunch. Shepherd of the Hills members, although mostly in their 70s and 80s gave a limited hand, however they provided the materials and supplies to paint, repair and restore assisting with what they were able to do. While Crave Life young in age and capable of supplying muscle and labor, assisted with completing the projects from start to finish. This initial missional venture for all
three congregations provided a wonderful first step towards developing and growing relationships with one another across language, racial and ethnic lines.

About a month later all three congregations were invited to participate in two separate Thanksgiving meals and gatherings. One led by Thai Shepherd on Sunday, November 5, 2017 at 4pm and the other led by Crave Life at 12:30pm. These two Thanksgiving gatherings offered Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran, a European-descent congregation with the dominant culture and privilege to participated without leading. Shepherd of the Hills was invited to come, participate and experience worship and a meal led by a racial group other than their own. Opportunities such as these are critical to the dominant group for it moves people as Owen and Wells suggested, towards being with the other.

This is to say, meals are highly spiritual in nature when seeking racial unity as Owen and Wells presented earlier. Also, Rah’s thoughts about the story behind the meal is in fact true for it definitely creates cultural awareness among the different races and ethnicities. Still, Van Opstal’s thoughts on racial reconciliation is best expressed through hospitality, solidarity and mutuality.

Therefore, these initial meals have affirmed the call to acceptance, unification and dependence among the Lutheran people of God in East Whittier, California. While the initial gatherings focused on corporate response, other important behind the scenes efforts of inclusion simultaneously occurred. Shepherd of the Hills Church Council invited Pastor Golf as he is known, his Thai name is Pongtep Chutimapongrat, pastor of Thai Shepherd and myself, Pastor of Crave Life to participate in monthly church council meetings.
In the ELCA, church council meetings are executed once a month to review all functions of the ministry including finances, facilities, staffing, worship, events and many other related administrative items. These meetings offered individual inclusion of not only the two pastors of the other communities, but also for leaders from both congregations as well. In fact, as a direct result of all these corporate and individual initial steps of action, the idea birthed of worshipping together as one people. The decision for all three ELCA congregations to worship together on the first Sunday of each month derived from creating space to get to know one another and serving missionally as one people. It is highly important for those seeking to develop racial unity in worship to begin the process with relationship building and fostering togetherness outside of Sunday worship. For this process allows for the walls of division to come down and other stereotypes to fade away.

Often times when seeking racial unity in worship, congregational and denominational leadership decide to move right into combined Sunday worship as a method of solving or reconciling unity in worship. Although adequate time may be allocated for prayer, discernment and transition into combined worship between two different racial congregations, the process of togetherness, awareness and relationship building cannot be forgotten or assumed it will happen through singing, praying and having coffee after worship.

In addition, to achieve the vision of racial unity initially through missional ventures and contact theory approaches one must recognize the power behind the process. In other words, through the process of relationship building in racial unity several key images become clearer in the eyes of the people.
Firstly, people get to experience the image of God in every person by seeing and hearing God through different individuals. Furthermore, the identity of the believer in Christ Jesus becomes evident and unmistakable.

Secondly, the image of the heavenly church at work on earth is clear-cut for God moves through different people of different racial backgrounds. The church in heaven will embody all people regardless of their racial, ethnic, gender or faith tradition background. Scripture says this way, “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands, (Rev 7:9).”

Therefore, the image of racial unity and the heavenly church is obvious through the process of growing aware of one another. Additionally, the book of Acts says in response to life among the believers, “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people, (Acts 2:46-47).” Hence, the image of worship and practice becomes straightforward, for the believers spent much time together in the temple, and apparently outside of the temple, in each other’s homes, in meals and in sharing with one another. Through the process of missional ventures and relational building among the people of God, the believer unequivocally sees the image of reclaiming the earthly church to reflect the foretaste of the kingdom to come.

Through some of this preliminary work, churches and denominations seeking racial unity may become witnesses of what is here and yet to come. Therefore, the fight for racial unity in Sunday worship is worth the time, the effort and the struggle. For the
call to bring more of heaven into earth can only enhance our Christian journey while on earth.
CHAPTER 9
CONTENT STRATEGY

Part of the process of creating missional ventures and relationship building efforts begins with gaining awareness of the goals of racial unity in worship. Consider the process of gathering a smaller group of individuals and leaders with similar minds and hearts about initiating unity among the different racial groups. Preferably leaders of the various groups to offer formal preparation of the purposes of bringing people together. Provide a time of conversation, listening and asking questions that will enhance the understanding of God’s work among the different people of God. Part of the discussion should be about the strategies needed to move towards unity among the different groups of people. Therefore, the creation of a committee that embodies the goal of racial unity is highly important. It will be made up of no more than 6 individuals, who will brainstorm missional ways, events, ideas, ventures and methods to engage corporate relationship building.

Although one may seek to move quickly into projects and ventures, one must appreciate the process of formal preparation for both the individual leaders, but also for corporate formation. Consider the formation a monthly calendar for the next 6 months and inserting 3 monthly gatherings of missional projects geared towards the community
outside the church walls and another 3 monthly gatherings of missional relationship building directed to the community inside the church walls. These six specific missional gatherings for those inside and outside the church will provide measurable goals.

One important measurable goal is communal participation and buy in. People who participate in these events demonstrate their willingness to learn, stretch and grow towards unity with one another. Additionally, the invitation to participate in intentional activities that increase knowledge about one another assists in the development of the group. Simply put, the formation of the corporate people of God is also essential to the process, because the racial unity must not only be embodied in the leaders, but also in the congregants. Racial unity must be present in the entire life of the community, including the proclamation of the gospel.

Offering weekly sermons is another approach to providing formation and education for the entire community of faith. The weekly sermon contains perspectives on scripture reading and interpretation that assist with understanding the call of God towards racial unity among the people of God. Let us consider the covenant of Abraham in the scriptures. God says to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you, (Gen 17:7).” Perhaps God’s covenant with Abraham among other meanings is also a divine pact to unity with humanity.

God’s covenant with Abraham may also point to the friendship between the Lord and his people. God’s promise to be with his people, to stand with his people and watch over this people. God’s covenant with Abraham reminds us of the unity between humanity and the divine. In Jesus, we see another version of unity present previously in
this paper through the gospel of John. Jesus prays for the same kind of unity that he had with the Father for his disciples and others who would believe. The unity within the incarnate son of God and the Father in heaven is requested for humanity through the last prayer of Jesus. Unification among God’s people through the embodiment of Jesus’ love is yet another call to oneness with one’s God.

Furthermore, one must appreciate the disciple known as Peter and his visions about unification. As previously discussed, in the New Testament God is calling Peter to a grander vision of unification beyond his own cultural group. God recategorizes people and leads Peter to the acceptance of the gentiles as the people of God. Once again, we see God moving Peter, the leader of church at that time and his cultural following to cross the racial and ethnic boundaries for the sake of unity among the people of God.

Lastly, Saint Paul seems to continuously approach the subject of unity in many of his letters saying to the church of Corinth, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose, (1 Co 1:10).” Apparently, there was already segregation and division among the Christians of the church of Corinth. Then to the church of Ephesus Paul says, “beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humanity and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all, (Eph 4:1-5).”
Therefore, one must appreciate the multiple attempts by Paul to usher unity and to remind church people of the spirit of oneness. From Abraham all the way to Paul one can see that contextually the scriptures are offering an image of what the people of God should embody and represent. Any strategy to create unity among the people God must contain a holy and sacred understanding. It is evident within Scripture, and the Lord’s heart seeks unity of all people. What follows is a description of those individuals and groups that will assist with the examining of the process of missional living and contact theory prior to worshiping together.
CHAPTER 10

TARGET GROUP AND LEADERSHIP

The believer must awaken from the slumber and gain awareness of the race problem in America. For the American Christian church is well rooted in the issue and therefore, racial reconciliation and racial unity is at hand for those who seek to make things right. In the words of Jesus, “I pray that they will be one, just as you and I are one, as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me, (Jn 17:21).” Jesus’ heart sought after the togetherness of his disciples.

For too long the church has been hijacked by theological differences, disagreements on biblical interpretation, racial lines and ethnic boundaries. The believer must reclaim the union of the church here on earth like it is in heaven along with its spiritual practices, rituals and traditions in order to make difference in this world. Like most movements in history change begins with those who are willing to embody the change. While engaging the lack of racial unity in Sunday worship, one is to consider the formation of a team that can provide leadership, clarification and communication of the mission and goal to others.
Therefore, a group of six individuals that represent the broader community will compromise the initial remnant that will live out this kind of community. The group will be made up members from each congregation. These individuals are invited to participate because of their desire to support the cause and development of the togetherness in worship. Moreover, the six individuals offer diversity in gender, age, race, identity and ethnicity, which assists with a well-rounded representation of the entire faith community.

Furthermore, one must understand that these individuals are already influencers in their perspective communities and offer much credibility to the process and to the overall team. In other words, the initial target group already works together in overall church leadership and this newly formed group will only be enhanced by the collaboration of the individuals. Not only will they offer leadership to the planning and programming of missional events and gatherings but will also provide training for those others who are acquire the fire to participate in the ongoing development of racial unity in worship.

Additionally, this group will be reminded that racial reconciliation requires hard work as McNeil suggested and as presented earlier in this paper. It will also demand solidarity, mutuality and hospitality towards other racial groups as Van Opstal insisted.

In fact, the next step for this initial group of leaders is to brainstorm events and gatherings that will move the theory of racial unity towards actual concrete results. Creating opportunities to practice solidarity, mutuality and hospitality with one another. The creation and implementation of gathering events that foster relationship building and getting to know one another within the church are a great starting point for initial meetings. Brainstorming will be a large part of the initial meetings and such events like the following: Easter Breakfast, All-Church BBQ, Potluck After Church, Summer Park
Picnic, Fall Picnic, Movie Night on the Lawn, Thanksgiving Lunch, Christmas Party, White Elephant Gift Exchange and several other events.

Additionally, the development and research of missional ventures and projects outside the church will be needed. However, it is important to point out that planning for events such as these will take more time to develop because it will involve the participation of several individuals. Nevertheless, missional projects such as serving meals to the homeless, singing songs for the local assisted living community, donating food to the local food bank, and providing thank you cards for the Police and Fire departments can assist in the development of this ministry initiative.

Furthermore, one must consider the process of becoming familiar with one another through missional ventures and contact theory as a new ministry initiative toward racial unity in worship. McNeil suggested that relationships among conflicting groups will improve through more connection with one another. Therefore, missional ventures will offer both more contact with people from other racial groups and improve the connection among all who participate.

This approach can also be helpful in fostering racial unity in worship. However, one must be aware to avoid Rah’s basic systems of Christianity already at work in the evangelical church including individualism, consumerism and racism. Seeking to transform these unhealthy ecclesiological practices into healthy pathways that Christians already embody within them. Simply put, white Christians have the answer to aid in the problem of racial segregation as Emerson and Smith suggested earlier. They simply need to grow in awareness and alter their reaction to the systems at play as the writers from *Forgive Us* presented.
Nonetheless, the outcomes of these various mission ventures will result in goals that allow the initial target audience to evaluate the next event. Meaning that the formal process of evaluation will be critical to the tweaking and improving of each missional venture.

However, goals must be developed firstly, before one begins the process of evaluation. There are at least three important outcomes and goals that must be communicated here. 1) number of people that participated from all three communities in the gatherings and events 2) the level of participation and engagement during these gatherings and events 3) the comments and responses whether in support or against from the people from all three communities. Some of these goals are certainly measurable through specific numbers and others are more quantitatively measured through direct engagement and responses from individuals at these events and gatherings. Either way, people from all three communities will be have the option to offer affirmation or negation of these and future events.

Furthermore, the initial target group will carry the burden of inviting and fostering a hospitable environment for others to attend. Thus, the initial group of leaders will be the ones who will challenge people from all three congregations to participate and support. As Wells and Owen suggested earlier, genuine reconciliation starts firstly with reconciling with God, which then leads to reconciliation with neighbor. Therefore, the leaders must have an intentional connection with Christ on a daily basis in order to better serve others.

Moreover, this group of leaders must remember that it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to melt away division and a craving for God and neighbor as McNeil and
Richardson insisted in previous pages. In other words, it will take the supernatural moving of the triune God in worship that will open us up to racial reconciliation. Therefore, these leaders will have a major task ahead of them. It is essential to broaden the understanding of what kind of community is being created by God and through the lives of these leaders. The three communities reflect a multi-generational grouping of kids, youth, young adults, married adults, singles, retirees, and seniors. Therefore, the inviting of all these generations into a deeper call that brings self-awareness and self-reflection is not an easy task.

Lastly, the initial target group will need to be out on the lookout for additional leaders to continue the initial steps taken by the initial group. Namely, part of the goals in this first round of activities and gatherings is to be listening to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and direction about others. In some ways this portion of the journey will require strategy and organizing.

As Salvatierra and Heltzel mentioned earlier, it is the ability to engage people in the solving of their communal issues and dynamics. It will take the engagement of many more early adopters to cause racial unity among the people of God. However, one must not downplay the many cultural, racial and ethnic differences that continue to plague the American church as Rah insisted. Therefore, the individuals of this initial group will need the gift of adaptability as Gibbons suggested to be successful in organizing others to join the cause of racial unity in worship. Nonetheless, the organization and communication of missional ventures will offer a viable hope towards racial reconciliation and unity.
CHAPTER 11
IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

After six months of intentional planning by the initial target group the believer can see the progress of the new ministry initiative. Therefore, the first phase of implementation begins with the monthly meetings of the initial target group of leaders presented in the previous pages. These leaders engaged an intentional time of planning, discernment and prayer through each monthly meeting. From those meetings several key understandings arose such as 1) God is in the midst of the movement towards unity of all three congregations evident through God’s placement of three congregations in the same location 2) People are interested and willing to participate in unity gatherings and events, which is not the normal response when considering stories of other congregations and previous narratives of similar dynamics 3) To pray and allow God’s work to continue to unfold to whatever this will become in the future.

Therefore, from these gleanings, all three church councils received updates about the happenings and engaged their leadership teams in the process, allowing space to discuss upcoming events and create awareness of God’s deeper collective movement in the entire body of Christ at our Whittier location. Thus, more people and leaders gradually became aware of God’s call for unity of all involved. Which in turn emerged
new conversations about unity among the different people of God. What follows is the timeline of gatherings and events of racial unity and a roadmap towards racial unity in Sunday worship.

The starting point of the calendar centered on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018 at 10:00am which included a breakfast brunch, Easter egg hunt and a combined worship experience. Firstly, one must identify this event as a missional gathering geared towards those who are inside of the community and therefore, a relationship building gathering. Worship service was well attended with more than 125 people, which is a key indicator and goal of the new ministry initiative.

Secondly, most of the attenders stayed after worship and participated in a breakfast brunch, which was a combination of three congregations offering breakfast dishes from different cultures in potluck style for all to enjoy. Many stayed for the meal and cheered on the children as they hunted for Easter eggs and candy, which again validated the participation and engagement of the people. Although some folks left after the breakfast, the majority remained to the end. Many of the comments from the parishioners were excitement and energy from a church full of people and how beautiful it was to gather together in unity. One unexpected challenge arose from the format of worship and liturgy. Due to the amount of people in attendance certain liturgy expressions needed to be evaluated, discussed and improved by the initial leadership team.

Therefore, communion time and traffic flow needed to be modified in order to move people along faster. The original way to facilitate communion involved the usher inviting a group of 10 individuals to come to the alter rail of the church and kneel to
receive the bread and wine. However, for 125 people this traditional process would not suffice, and therefore the leadership group suggested new ways to approach future worship gatherings. Therefore, from this initial gathering and relational event the leadership team assessed, discussed and improved. The second gathering occurred on Sunday, May 6th at 10:00am, followed by a free BBQ that was again attended well. More than 85 people attended, and about half participated in the “getting to know you” activities. We learned that not all people are interested in participating in relational activities either because the message of intentional activities was not properly communicated, or simply because some people are just not open to it. Either way, it was unexpected challenge and again discussed, analyzed and improved on by the leadership team. It was decided for the next gathering that the meal portion would occur at the very end of the event instead at the beginning.

On June 3rd at 12:00pm an ice cream social was planned for all three congregations to participate in. All people were invited to have ice cream together and enjoy a time of conversation and getting to know one another. Although efforts were made to invite people it was not attended as well as anticipated. Again, this was our third straight gathering event centered on building relational interaction and praying for new relationships to grow from all three congregations. About half of the people stayed and participated and others were off to do something else. The challenge of this event was the timing of the event. First week of June consists of many school graduations and end of school year activities in California so other competing gatherings may have taken precedence.
As the summer began a missional venture was planned by the leadership team to visit Posada Whittier Senior Living, a community of shut-ins. We were to offer songs of hope and encouragement. The missional gathering took place on July 15, 2018 at 12:00pm about 30 minutes after worship. Everyone was invited to share a smile, a handshake and a conversation with the residents of Posada to enhance their sense of meaning and belonging. All three congregations were invited to attend after Sunday worship and about half of those in attendance made the ride down the street to offer encouragement to this community. Again about 40 individuals participated in sharing love with others and still, others waited for the group to arrive to the park for all-church picnic. The food was provided by the three churches and it was a great meal of joy and hope. There were some unexpected challenges with this event as well, some people were not able to drive because of lack of transportation, and others were not interested in going because they were not singers. Either way, the leadership gained more awareness of future events and the likelihood of having our seniors attend due to their age limitations and mobility.

On August 5th at 12:00pm after worship all three congregations were invited to sing happy birthday and have a piece of cake for all the August birthdays of the three congregations. This event offered an opportunity to celebrate each person’s birthday as part of our own family. Certainly, this event provided many smiles and laughter generating awareness of the other. Moreover, it provided a pause to the hectic rhythms of summer living in Southern California. Although it was again not well attended as previous events, the summer schedule is to blame for this, because for Southern
California the summer season creates different rhythms of life for each family and individual.

Nonetheless, as the season changes and stability and normalcy arise again, another event of service emerged on September 9, 2018 at 12:30pm after worship known as God’s work. Our hands. This is an intentional Sunday of the ELCA where all congregations across the United States participate in unity to serve their community. All three ELCA congregations in Whittier, California were invited to volunteer their time and talent. The projects included the restoration of the community preschool with the addition of new wood chips for the playground and other smaller preschool projects. Additionally, many others participated in the renovation of the church’s nursery room again available not only for church members, but for the many community groups that use the space on regular basis. Our church facility is used by many city groups and organizations such as the Boys Scouts of America and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Therefore, the renovation of our church space is truly geared towards those groups to use it routinely for minimal donations. Moreover, the three congregations participated in the painting of several other church spaces for the beautification of the community and others as well. By now 6 months of intentional planning of missional ventures towards unity among the people of God has been executed, analyzed and evaluated. Our findings are shared in the following paragraphs.

Naturally when discussing new findings and final results one wants to begin with the most successful outcomes. Therefore, the most successful efforts are evident in the participation of the people of all three congregations. The majority and certainly the core people of all three congregations participated in each event and gathering. The majority
of the communities engage times of relationship building and communal growth. Still, the responses from those who attended and participated were positive and in approval of future events.

Additionally, the sense of friendship among the diverse groups of people was evident through newly formed relationships and conversations. Even those who do not speak each other’s languages fully, responded to one another through a Christian smile, handshake, hug and saintly kiss at each gathering event. Body language is yet another way to speak and offer a response of unity. Sometimes words are not the best way to express Christian love, one can offer an act of kindness and humility that embodies a deeper sense of brotherhood and sisterhood than any word in the English language.

However, we also learned some limitations to our new ministry initiative such as lack of mobility for our seniors, being strategic about food related events and intentionally placing moments of activities and considering the natural rhythms of life within our Southern California culture. While lastly, rearranging traditional worship experiences to fit the context and size of our communities. The process of creating relational gathering and missional ventures provided much learning. Each experience offered a new insight into things that are meaningful and yet, each experience exposed an area of growth and change. Nevertheless, the outcome of all the events and gatherings planned throughout this season have contributed to the awareness of one another and the familiarity of one another. However, this borders on the subject of assessment and that is covered in the next paragraphs.

When considering the key to implementation, one must begin with the effectiveness of one’s project and new ministry initiative in addressing the challenge.
Therefore, the challenge of lack of racial unity in Sunday worship in the American church was effectively address through the following ways.

Firstly, the desire to bring all of God’s people together was evident by those who attended the various gatherings. People from diverse identities, cultures, languages, races, ethnicities, ages and traditions attended each gathering. There are photos and documentation of this to prove the point that people from diverse backgrounds gathered as one. This means that the assumption that people from different backgrounds do not want to be together is false. Instead, it was encouraging to see people come together and these gatherings offered additional opportunities for new people to join the community. In other words, the planned missional gatherings resulted in inviting and including new participants to the community.

In fact, those who attended some of these gatherings were visiting the church for the first time. An estimated 30 new souls have been integrated in the community over the course of 12 months. New people were added to the community through these missional ventures while also creating unity among the existing congregants of the three communities.

Secondly, newly formed relationships and friendships resulted from these missional gatherings. We saw members from the three different congregations connect in ways we had not seen before. Although not all people created friendships through this process, the cultural and racial awareness of those who are not alike increased greatly. For example, some food items from cultural groups that were not dominant to the community were labeled to assist with cultural awareness. These meals created opportunities to learn from another culture.
Moreover, the ability to sit around people who are not like alike provided learning opportunities including language and words from other less dominant languages. The point is that each missional venture fostered cultural learning and awareness of the less dominant cultures. Therefore, the result of growing in awareness of one another assists with the notion of knowing one another better and therefore, it removes the fears and misunderstandings, challenging some of the false stereotypes given to certain cultural groups.

Thirdly, the participation in missional ventures puts an emphasis on something greater than oneself. The results of gathering together were not so much about self-gratification, instead the events were geared towards serving and loving the other. Unity among God’s people is discovered when together they serve other humans in need. Therefore, success is no longer based on the lack of complaints and self-centeredness. Instead, success in the eyes of the leadership team is when people are requesting more.

Sometimes effectiveness begins with what is working and what feels right for the entirety of the group. Although one may be seeking numbers and percentages as bench markers of positive growth and development, one must consider keeping it simple. If the people of God are happy and not complaining, then perhaps something is working and moving in the right direction, in God’s direction. There is something to be said about God’s spirit affirming a collective unity that cannot be denied.

Nonetheless, gathered data is needed in view of a proper assessment. Therefore, personal one on one conversations were performed and encouraged along the way with different members of all three congregations. These conversations were performed to get answers and thoughts from different individuals surrounding three major areas in
question: 1) How does it feel to be together with people from all three congregations? 2) What is your most favorite thing about being together? And your least favorite thing? 3) Would you be interested in doing more events like this in the future? And why? These questions offered many answers and thoughts, also serving as data to assess the process of this new ministry initiative.

Although the conversations were not in a form of interview or questionnaire, they were performed with the intention of receiving feedback. The results to these questions were overwhelmingly positive. The answers to the first question were about the feelings one has in gathering together, people mentioned that it felt exciting to see the church full, others loved to see the children running around church, which was sorely missed. Still, others answered by saying the energy in the building was evident and the beauty of the diversity is encouraging, but mostly everyone answered with a good and positive feeling to the idea of gathering together.

The results to the second question about the most favorite thing about gathering together, which the responses centered around the fact that one gets to meet new people, one gets to see God through the eyes of others and a broader perspective of the larger church. Some enjoyed the music offered by other cultural groups and others enjoyed the collective and collaborative spirit of coming together as the people of God regardless of one’s background. The sense of unity was also mentioned several times. In regards to least favorite, it was mostly answered as nothing. Some folks pointed to the length of worship and the time of the gatherings as something challenging. Others mentioned the ability to participate and engage in music styles other than their own was challenging as
well. However, these challenges were mostly focused on worship settings. In regards, to the events, the challenges were almost non-existent.

The last question of the interview focused on the approval of future gatherings, which was unanimously approved. Everyone wanted more similar gatherings and the reason behind it was similar to the initial answers for the first question. People enjoyed seeing the church full of people, but also full in Spirit and energy. Still, others enjoyed the diversity of ages, cultures and languages that contributed to the reasoning for more of the same. The point is that the data although more orally delivered than concretely collected offered great insight into the collective response from all three congregations of diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages and ethnicities.

However, one cannot say that all is perfect, because there are many areas that need continued development and focus. For one, we learned the reality, that not all people thrive in relational settings. Not every person enjoys sharing about themselves or learning about others. Some people are socially awkward and feel uncomfortable in creating conversation. Therefore, the process of participating in missional gatherings are not for everyone. Some people work better alone or are more introverted, therefore, optional ways to respond and participate are strongly suggested. An email or social media platform would benefit those who are less talkative.

Additionally, we learned that age matters especially for an aging congregation. The ability to change rhythms, times, locations and schedules can be challenging for those who are more comfortable with a routine. Especially when missional gatherings require driving to a new place or remembering to return at a certain time for a certain event. In other words, doing ministry among an aging congregation requires the
awareness that some will not attend due to their lack of energy, ability to mobilize like younger generations and limitations exist rightly so.

Moreover, we discovered the challenging dynamics of gathering larger groups. For one, communication sometimes gets lost in translation literally and times, locations and event details are misunderstood especially when working with different languages and cultures.

Therefore, when gathering large groups of people, it is important to communicate and over communicate. Also, one must be open to changing the way things have always been done for the sake of time and efficiency. For example, the form of communion liturgy needed to be changed in order to accommodate larger groups.

Another challenge is understanding one’s cultural and geographical context. At times some of our missional gathering events were in competition with other happenings in our part of the country. Graduations, summer schedules, family gatherings, kids’ sports leagues, beach season and the many options offered in Southern California can be challenging in intentional unification work. Part of the challenge for missional gatherings it that they happen outside of the regular Sunday worship schedule. This challenged people to address their own view of faith community and Christian neighborly love. Meaning for some people Sunday worship is just about rituals and practices that occur within 1 hour and 15 minutes. However, getting to know one’s neighbor takes more than that allotted time. Love for neighbor requires extra time and intentionality that challenges the status quo of most Christians. More so, growing in awareness of your neighbor that is not like one takes effort and modifies one’s view of worship including birthday cakes, ice cream socials, meals and service projects outside the schedule times.
Even more, participating in missional gatherings redirects the attention to others and stands against the idea of individualism, consumerism and racism as noted earlier Rah. When analyzing the results of these missional gatherings one cannot ignore the constant call by God to his people to turn away from individualism. Every gathering is a call to uplift the corporate and collective rather than the individual.

Moreover, to intentionally participate in missional gatherings requires a commitment to the body of Christ, to the faith community. It is not about feeding into the consumeristic view of the American society, but to fully give oneself to the church of Christ. It is the work of God revealing through his law and commandments one’s racism and discrimination towards another group and replacing it with the gospel. However, this theme is to be developed more fully in the last section of this paper.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The point of arrival is not too different than the beginning paragraphs of this paper. Over the span of several months the research and material gathered to form a positive direction and response to racial unity in America remains inadequate. However, I would like to share my beliefs, feelings and thoughts about the possibility of reclaiming Sunday worship to include the diverse people of God.

In the recent weeks America’s striving for racial unity continues on the down fall. Eleven innocent Jewish brothers and sisters lost their lives at a Pittsburg synagogue after a man gunned them down. According to law enforcement the suspect said while receiving medical care, “that he wanted all Jews to die.”\(^1\) A clear comment about one’s hate cannot be any more blatant.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Akiva Gerstein who recently passed away, told me that the Jewish community is in mourning. He reminded me that in Judaism, the loss of one Jew is a loss to the whole community for they are part of the same people and tribe. This tragic crime upon those who were simply worshiping is a reminder that the problem of racism and hate is alive and well.

Only 13 days later another horrific mass shooting hit home in Southern California with the Thousand Oaks shooting and killing of 12 individuals. Our ELCA community and California Lutheran University was close enough to feel the ramifications. A recent Cal Lutheran graduate loss his life in the shooting and the entire ELCA community

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mourns. The most puzzling thing about this shooting is that the gunman posted on social media during the shooting saying, “It’s too bad I won’t get to see all the illogical and pathetic reasons people will put in my mouth as to why I did it. Fact is I had no reason to do it, and I just thought…. (expletive), life is boring so why not?”² One can see that gun violence is alive and well. We live in some extraordinary times and once again the American Christian Church stands at the door with an opportunity to respond. Or will the church respond with silence and indifference?

At the core of this ongoing theme of racial unity is the church’s inability to see their spiritual illness. As Martin Luther would describe sinfulness, one becomes curved in. The truth is that America’s weekly hour of evangelical worship remains divided among racial and ethnic boundaries and the trend continues even after all the attention that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provided. However, the demographics and statistics point to a different reality. Racial diversity is already here, and several multiethnic churches are demonstrating that racial unity is not only possible, but should seriously be pursued.

Therefore, this project’s focus to create missional ventures that prepare the people of God for the purpose of moving towards racial reconciliation and unity in worship is worth the fight. The white evangelical American church must awaken to the reality of the race problem plaguing our society and our churches, doing something in response to this dynamic. Even though the evangelical church is deeply rooted in the issue, the church also carries that response and opportunity to remedy the situation.

The reclaiming of the true church and its spiritual practices is available for the taking. Confronting the lack of racial unity in the American Christian church is possible and evident through multiethnic congregations. It is present in faith communities like Crave Life, Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd in Whittier, California. Even more, the intersection of mission and community assists with the enhancement of cultural awareness and self-awareness as the people of God. Missional ventures and projects elevate God, neighbor and earth over the one’s own interests, which moves the bar higher than expected. Different voices across America from various traditions, ethnicities, cultures and genders are claiming the same trends. There is a race problem in America through many of the same repetitive reasons imposed by the white evangelical church and culture.

However, the people of God also have the option to participate in the renewal of racial, liturgical and communal reconciliation. The entire church regardless of race and ethnicity can offer redemptive relationships that foster hope for racial unity. We are all called to unity as the body of Christ. Yet, pursuing racial unity directs one to combat the unhealthy systems of individualism, consumerism and racism presently dwelling in Christian ecclesiology. Replacing the sinfulness of these systemic traits with theological authenticity of spiritual identity in the image of God, racial equality in Christ Jesus and living out neighborly love can certainly transform America’s future on race unity in Sunday worship.

Furthermore, the strategy of creating missional opportunities for the people of God to grow in awareness and relationship with one another certainly improves the future outlook of multiethnic churches and racial unity ministry. Something spiritual occurs
when the people of God choose to live in unity. The psalm says, “How good it is when God’s people live in unity. It’s like costly anointing oil flowing down head and beard, flowing down Aaron’s beard, flowing down the collar of his priestly robes. It’s like the dew on Mount Hermon flowing down the slopes of Zion. Yes, that’s where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life, (Ps 133:1-3).” While studying this psalm one realizes that deeper things are happening when God’s people live in unity.

Firstly, unity among the people of God is like the inundation of the anointing oil presented in the consecration and ordination of Aaron and his sons. The Leviticus passage presents it this way, “Then Moses took the anointing oil and anointed The Dwelling and everything that was in it, consecrating them. He sprinkled some of the oil on the Altar seven times, anointing the Altar and all its utensils, the Washbasin and its stand, consecrating them. He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head, anointing him and thus consecrating him, (Lev 8:10-12).”

Namely, the anointing oil described in Psalms 133, flowing down the head and beard onto the robes of Aaron and his sons is plentiful and overflowing covering everything that God is calling to be holy and sacred. The ritual of anointing with oil has a direct connection to consecration, ordination and calling.

Therefore, unity among the people can be understood as spiritual act of consecration and calling that overflows with precious anointing oil or the Holy Spirit shall we say. The people of God are set aside for a spiritual calling that overflows with the Spirit of God’s presence.

Even more, the dew from Mount Hermon, a snowy mountain in a land where water is scarce, provides an image of God’s heavenly blessing. Water flowing down to a
dry land in abundance is a foretaste of what is to come. In other words, the dew from Mount Hermon and the oil of Aaron’s priestly ordination are signs of God’s spiritual blessings upon those brothers and sisters that live in unity. Here lies the deepest meaning of racial unity for the people of God.

The American Christian church cannot fully see the power and blessing of God’s people living in unity until they try it. If truly as the psalm says, “Yes, that’s where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life, (Ps 133:3b).” Then God’s blessing rests upon the unity of the body of Christ. God’s love will not be a one-time occurrence, rather, God’s love would remain consistently active and at work.

Charles Spurgeon the Baptist preacher and pastor says it best, “Never shall we know the full power of the anointing till we are of one heart and of one spirit; never will the sacred dew of the Spirit descend in all its fulness till we are perfectly joined together in the same mind; never will the covenanted and commanded blessing come forth from the Lord our God till once again we shall have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

The American Christian church has not fully experienced the power behind true racial unity in Sunday worship. Simply put, when the people of God live in unity, it brings heaven to earth and one knows that despite the extraordinary times of our country, there is a greater hope alive. There is more to come and a fullness of the expression of unity can be the answer so desperately needed. Surely generations and generations ahead of us have experienced the same lack of unity, however this generation carries the next

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great renewal of the church. It is already here, evident in our country, in our neighborhoods and in our churches.

However, the body of Christ must awaken to this reality and begin making strides towards embracing Christianity as more than a cultural and racial homogeneity. Instead, the believer must seek a Jesus tribe that is centered on spiritual growth, committed to prayer, focused on loving neighbor and responding to God’s voice of racial reconciliation. This understanding allows reflection on more than one’s preference and comfortableness, and fosters unity with those who are different than one.

Moreover, the idea that love has no labels presented through Crave Life’s philosophy of ministry chooses to live in unity with others despite our country’s leadership fostering separation and hate. The point is that together as one people and making room for two other racial groups in Shepherd of the Hills and Thai Shepherd only creates a distinct congregation that elevates no one group but lifts up the name of the triune God instead. A level ground like that will invite racial reconciliation into the room manifesting as Van Opstal suggested, hospitality, solidarity and mutuality.

In other words, when God is the center one’s identity, one will sense the calling to biblical reconciliation. God calling us to welcome the rejected, to speak up for the oppressed and count on those who are of a different race and ethnicity. Moreover, the doorway towards racial reconciliation begins when one chooses to participate in ministry together towards neighbors outside of the church or towards neighbors inside the church. This is critical to racial unity, to choose to be together. Here, I offer some words of exhortation for those who choose the opposite of racial unity.
For my white brothers and sisters who may have become closed off to racial unity or simply turn the blind eye to the realities of racial injustice and discrimination, please consider choosing to live your Christian life in a new way. Try the opposite of what feels comfortable and easy, seek to live a life of uncomfortableness and challenge. After all McNeil did present a roadmap to reconciliation that included ongoing repentance and forgiveness. One must be reminded that God speaks to us through commandments or the law, which clearly convicts and accuses.

Simply put, the law is needed in order to help one to live a life of justice and righteousness. The law reminds us that one has not been following the commandments of loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and loving your neighbor like yourself. It reveals the believer’s sin and provides a reminder that one cannot save oneself.

Furthermore, the believer cannot say it is too difficult nor give up on the call towards racial unity because it’s unattainable. Instead, the believer should be reminded that if the keeping of the law is the reason for salvation, then no one would be saved. This is Christ’s response, “You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other, (Jn 15:16).” Jesus also knowing that he had completed his mission and fulfillment of scripture said, “It is finished!, (Jn 19:30).”

Additionally, the writer of the book of Romans says this about the people of Israel, “For they don’t understand God’s way of making people right with himself. Refusing to accept God’s way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law. For Christ had already accomplished the purpose for which the
law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God, (Rom 10:3-4).” The point is that Christ is the end of the law. The one who came to fulfill the law. Jesus went to the cross in obedience and in dying for us he consumed our breaking of the law, our sins, failures and transgressions.

Therefore, in this Christ removes our failures and gives us his successes. Christ erases our transgressions and rewrites it with his forgiveness, takes away our sins and gives us his righteousness. The believer is not saved by works, but by grace and in the deadness of sin the gospel arrives. Here is this space is where the restoration of broken relationships and systemic church issues can return to the original intent that God prepared for all creation to flourish. Here is where one can return to one’s identity in the image of God. Here is where one can find God’s motive for unity among diversity as presented in the Genesis 11 passage. Here is where one discovers as Labberton suggests, that corporate worship should reveal one’s selfishness and sinfulness, pointing one back towards God’s loving God and loving neighbor.

Also, Justo Gonzalez affirms, Christian worship provides an insight into of the future kingdom and still a judgment on the one’s status quo. The point is that in the midst of our racism, individualism and consumerism comes the fullness of the gospel through Christ Jesus. We no longer trust in the law to make things right, instead we look to Christ to make us right. To forgive us. For the law reveals our sin but the gospel affirms our forgiveness.

Similarly, the table of the Lord provides a place of repentance and forgiveness. Affirming the greatest commandments as Van Opstal presented, reconciliation takes place around the table of Christ as God reveals himself to us and to others. Furthermore,
the sacrament of the altar as Martin Luther described it is central to our corporate gatherings of worship and reconciliation occurs when we eradicate our favoritism and invite other cultures to be lifted up. Simply put, there are some positives in the road towards racial reconciliation demonstrated in the table of the Lord and in reflection of an alternate historical narrative given by Rah and Vanderpol.

Meaning a new and next evangelicalism can emerge if my white brothers and sisters tap into their past evangelical movements such as Samaritan’s Purse, Promise Keepers, World Vision and through the testimony of evangelical leaders such as John Perkins and others.

Racial reconciliation can happen if my white brothers and sisters lay down their allegiance to their current white privilege, white beneficiary and white captivity. Releasing the power of being the dominant culture and offering leadership and power to those of multiethnic communities. This is to say that multiethnic leaders should be offered the opportunity to create change and build upon those who came before to construct and shape a new way of living and being Christian in America. Conceiving a new American evangelicalism that reflects diversity and inclusion of all of God’s people.

While attending my ECC church planting assessment in Colorado, I was told that if a white person plants a church, it will most certainly be an all-white congregation. However, if a person of color plants a church, it will most certainly be a multiethnic congregation.

Whether this is true or not remains to be studied and researched, however when looking out into the faces of my faith communities, all three congregations, I see people of all walks, traditions, colors, ages, identities and ethnicities. Meaning that I get the
wonderful privilege and calling to shepherd people of all walks. I wonder if my recent 23andme DNA test results assist with this calling, here are the results; 50% Native American 40% Southern European, 2.8% Sub-Saharan African and 2.2% Eastern Asian and 5% unknown. I always laugh at the 5% unknown, however now knowing my ancestral composition gives me further insight into who God created me to be.

Multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual. Couple that with my affiliation with America’s largest Christian traditions and denominations, and my life experience with chaplaincy of different people of different religious groups and I can see why God has called me to engage racial unity in Sunday worship.

Still, I had to decide to say yes and participate, which is the same decision we all have to make each day. It is the same decision that the evangelical church is faced with today. Racial unity is already here in many arenas of community living, however yet to truly penetrate the walls of the church on Sunday morning. The charge is to change the narrative of the church by seeking missional living and choosing unity with all of the people of God regardless of their background. Participating in the ongoing process of togetherness among racial lines and ethnic groups. For we are all the people, made in the image of God, identified by our faith in Christ, and called to witness and share our love for God, neighbor and all creation.

In conclusion, we go into our current world with all the ambiguity and aftermath of systemic sinfulness knowing that the fight and struggle is real. We will clash against a world that does not understand us nor want to live like us. A world that thrives on racial separation and despises the idea of racial unity.
We will grapple with devil’s tactics of lies, deception and temptation. Realizing that the enemy has blinded the minds and hearts of those who claim to be the church of Jesus Christ, hiding the truth from their eyes. Aware that the adversary will hinder any and all progress towards racial reconciliation. We will battle with our sinfulness and the inability to stop doing what we don’t want to do. Deceiving ourselves as good, pure and righteous. Believing that we are doing enough works and giving enough monies to justify ourselves. Ignoring our need for reconciliation and forgiveness with our neighbor. However, take heart in knowing that Christ has suffered all things for us and still claims us as his own. Take heart in knowing that Christ takes away all our fears and wipes away all the tears from our eyes. Take heart in trusting in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of people. May we one day, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out decades ago, change his quote to say, “Sunday morning at 11:00am is the most racially united time in America.”
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