Sustainable Mission: A Handbook for Mainline Churches Moving From Decline to Mission and Sustainability

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SUSTAINABLE MISSION: A HANDBOOK FOR MAINLINE CHURCHES MOVING FROM DECLINE TO MISSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JOHNNY LEWIS
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ABSTRACT

**Sustainable Mission:**
*A Handbook For Churches Moving From Decline To Mission And Sustainability*

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2020

The purpose of this doctoral project is to help mainline pastors and declining congregations in the United States understand practices that will move them from decline focused ministry to a model of shared gospel mission and sustainable ministry.

In 2011 I was the pastor of a declining mainline church that had lost connection to the missional needs of their neighborhood while distracted by an overwhelming building debt and accompanying years of conflict. I searched frantically for books, practitioners, and conferences that might help. What I found was limited writing from a more fundamentalist or evangelical perspective that I had to work to translate to my theological setting and often did not sync up. Slowly I discovered a disconnected network of pastors doing similar work with fascinating and unheard stories of transformation. These brave pastors and congregations were a breath of fresh air from God’s Spirit amidst the constant barrage of bad news about mainline congregations. They helped carry me and my church forward and served as a constant resource.

This project provides a handbook for pastors to lead congregations in conversations that address institutional health, defining resources and partners, the work of evangelism, and mimicking the mission of Jesus’ disciples described in Matthew 25. This project tells stories of transformation in which a U.S. mainline church moved from a time of decline to a renewed understanding of *missio dei* in its own context and a model of ministry that is sustainable and financially responsible. Major commonalities of these turnaround churches are highlighted so they may be a running thread throughout this tapestry of transformation.

Content Reader: Dr. Tony Jones  
Words: 264
To my wife, Monica, and my two amazing kids, Ellis and Johnny, for their support and encouragement.

To the amazing people at Shawnee Community Christian Church who taught me the power of people trying to do the gospel together. All my love.
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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE MAINLINE CHURCH
INTRODUCTION

In June of 2011 I needed help. In fact, I needed more help than I knew at the time. I was about to embark on a pastoral journey at Shawnee Park Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the suburbs of Kansas City. This would be a call that would challenge my leadership, faith, education, and commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. Soon I would be fumbling, Googling, and emailing on a hunt for mentors, books, or doctoral programs that might be a light to come alongside me on the call of church transformation in a small suburban mainline church that was a picture of decline.

In a matter of months, we were re-planting. This is a phrase sometimes used to describe a situation in which a church is not a brand-new church plant, but is an older congregation looking for new life in new surroundings. No one knew in the beginning that this was where things were headed, but eventually the journey of healing from conflict and moving forward in mission would result in selling a beloved building to climb out of debt and restart with a new name in a new neighborhood. The resources I needed as a leader for this journey seemed scarce. There were books for restarting or replanting a fundamentalist or evangelical church which I attempted to translate to my context. Most of these were focused on conversions about baptisms and cultural assimilation in worship style. They also seemed to promise fool proof plans that lacked flexibility and nuance. There was little writing from my own tribe of progressive pastors whose situations and theological tools were unique as inclusive communities with a different understanding of the mission of God for the church.

This workbook is the one I wish someone could have handed me back then. Much of our situation was rare for which no cookie-cutter model, mainline or evangelical,
would work. However, a resource for guiding the conversation and inviting congregational voices to be part of the solution would have been so helpful.

My initial courtship with Shawnee Park church had been a season of anxiety. I was leaving a career in public education, having completed the ordination process with the Disciples of Christ (DOC, Disciples), and had been in the search and call process of our denomination looking for a full-time pastorate when they expressed interest in interviewing me. For some context of their dysfunction, when I shared this news with a colleague from the area, she gasped aloud and encouraged me not to consider a call to Shawnee Park. She warned me, “They will chew you up and spit you out and you will be out of ministry in five years. That’s just what they do. They don’t know how to do anything else.”

She had a point. The congregation had fired or encouraged the resignation of every pastor since the founding pastors, a clergy couple team, had left them as a young church start-up in the mid-1980s. There had been lots of conflict. There was conflict about staff firings and, relatedly, about the church’s financial situation. The worship attendance was at an average of eighty people that first summer in 2011 when I arrived, and had an 8,000 dollar monthly mortgage payment fit for a much larger church. Nearly 60 percent of the annual budget was being spent on an aging building with nearly two million dollars left on a mortgage they had made mostly interest-only payments on for years.

I was extremely skeptical about moving forward with Shawnee Park having heard their story and having seen that all-important data that all clergy use to discern the Spirit’s call—worship attendance and financial giving. Still, each time I nearly closed the
door on pastoring this church, some stirring from the Spirit drew me back to them and we continued to talk.

There were things I found inspiring about them. Here they were in the stereotypical moment of decline as a mainline congregation, yet in my interviews I could tell they were a church of dreamers who believed God was not done with them. They owned their mistakes in a way that few churches, and few pastors for that matter, would. As one blunt and Spirit-filled woman said to me during those conversations, “We know we are a hot mess. What we need is a pastor who believes enough in the resurrection to come and lead us. The question is, are you that pastor?” I wrestled with my answer for several days after this exchange.

These were some of the positives. They were only thirty years old, so they still felt like a newish church with few sacred cows and an openness to change. They were not old enough for anyone to get mad about changing the seating arrangement that had been there when their grandmother got married. Though there were only a handful of children in the church at the time, they understood and were committed to resourcing and serving those ministries. The brightest and proudest part of their history were adult pastors who had been raised up and called through their student ministry over the years.

Their history of spirit and fight in hard moments were unique among mainliners. They were a mainline church founded in 1978, right around the tipping point of the great decline, that had worked hard to make it to sustainability when few others had. Even if that felt like a lifetime ago, many of the same founding members who had led that charge were still part of the core of the church. They believed they had a future together and were willing to seek it.
When I arrived in 2011 the church was mostly empty-nester Baby Boomers and a handful of their young adult children who attended out of a sense of denominational loyalty. Several of these folks now drove a longer distance to worship in what had become a mostly commercial neighborhood. Just a few years prior the church had been part of a small residential suburban neighborhood that these families had chosen for child-rearing. The plots of land that housed softball fields for their children became a growing strip mall with a movie theater, restaurants, and hotels. The houses and farmland that remained around the perimeter of the church property were almost all for sale to be rezoned as commercial real estate.

Sunday worship was symbolic of the church’s lack of clarity. Music was considered blended—attempting to be both contemporary and traditional in their worship music stylings. Sunday mornings were a mix of dated praise and worship music sung half-heartedly because it was suggested by the denomination in a small worship handbook. It was led by well-intentioned music leaders with no background or interest in that style. It was as if classically trained orchestra musicians were invited to open for the Foo Fighters. It had great musical value, but the style was out of place. There were also traditional hymns with reworked progressive language from the hymnal that few worshipers recognized. The one thing anyone could agree on about this blended form of worship was that no one liked it.

DOC history also led to some unsuccessful practices that gave comfort to the lifelong denominational loyalists like the weekly invitation hymn and altar call they inherited from the frontier style worship of the Second Great Awakening. These seemed irrelevant to the otherwise more formal liturgical style and confirmation classes that had
taken flight among modern Disciple congregations. No one could remember the last time an altar call garnered any actual signs of personal conversions, baptism decisions, or other individual transformation as it had in a bygone era of abrupt personal decisions in worship. Instead, this was now an awkward moment in which the minister stared longingly at the congregation waiting for two verses to pass by so that she or he could signal the music minister to end the suffering.

The theological identity of the church was also clouded. DOC had split with the Independent Christian Church during the childhoods of the Boomers who founded Shawnee Park. DOC took more progressive stances on issues like the ordination of women, the interpretation of scripture, recognition of baptism from other denominations and styles, open communion, Civil Rights, interfaith relationships, and they had pushed congregations to consider the inclusion of LGBTQIA folks.

Before this split, members of DOC congregations had been in two separate camps: evangelicals primarily interested in personal conversion on one side and progressives who viewed the goal of the church as bringing the justice of God to the world on the other. While the DOC members like those at Shawnee Park agreed with the theological identity of the new singularly progressive post-split denomination, they struggled to articulate and practice their values having been raised in the theologically moderate or conservative rural churches of the denomination’s history. What emerged from Shawnee Park, born soon after this split and made up of people discipled prior to it, was a church that embraced personal progressive theology but looked unorganized and more conservative in the way they did church. They lacked the discipleship and education for learning how to express this progressive faith thoughtfully and biblically in a post-
split existence. They preferred to keep their theological preferences private and individualized.

In 2011, congregants suggested the progressive theology that reigned in the denomination and which was claimed by many of the congregants seemed a secret often discovered later by newcomers. It was not obvious in the language, website, or liturgy, of the church. Occasionally it was obvious in sermons or personal conversations with a pastor, but this made some in the church uncomfortable. It felt too progressive for the suburbs of Kansas City, making those raised in the pre-split era of theological compromise uneasy and fearful of conflict, and they feared it would scare newcomers off. When the denomination’s progressive leanings were articulated, the pastor was viewed as the problem and was often juxtaposed against the moderate preaching clergy of their childhood congregations. In multiple instances pastors were considered too progressive and were relieved of their duties. The lack of a formed and intentional new-era DOC theological identity meant the congregational leadership did not understand that clergy were merely reflecting the newly reborn denomination’s theology.

This unresolved relationship with the DOC identity and undiscovered shared local congregational values, along with the church’s ongoing conflicts, led to high membership turnover. Newcomers found themselves stumbling onto the DOC’s stances on issues like religious pluralism and LGBTQ inclusion, and then had to decide if they still wanted to be part of this passively progressive church they had already joined. It was a church with a theological culture that only insiders and longtime members could understand.

During my interview sessions, one regional judicatory staff member for our denomination conveyed both to me and to the congregational search team that this was
probably the church’s last chance to take steps toward life and health before having serious discussions about closure. Finding quality candidates was getting harder as the church developed a reputation for conflict among clergy. The mortgaged building was a few years away from needing major financial commitments to repair. The church was tired and could not afford financially, emotionally, or spiritually another round of firings and conflicts. The interview team seemed humbled by their situation and their love for a church that was in serious trouble. There was a holy desperation about them that made them a rare church capable of what we were about to try.

During my first year we hit the ground running. The church’s leaders and I worked together to try and address the unhealthy means of triangulation and conflict that had driven the church apart. With no model to speak of, we brainstormed and agreed to hold fireside chats after worship where we would convey basic church family systems theories monthly. We asked folks in our denomination organization to study our situation and make suggestions. They suggested we were running out of options due to our history, the energy drain and aging of the church, and our financial situation. The results of a denominational assessment were as follows: Option One: Stay here until you close (ten years maximum). Option Two: Try to rent your facility to other partners to help pay the bills (this was something the church had tried previously with no success). Option Three: The pipedream nuclear option. Given that we were near and already had some congregants living in a growing residential area just west of the church that was without a mainline presence, we could start over. We could re-plant. We could sell our property, relocate, and embrace the spirit of a new church.
Though it was an option, the same denominational leaders who had seen churches try this sort of thing before had little advice for us. They had not seen many re-plants work out. They did suggest, however, that we would be making a huge mistake to merely move what we were doing to a new spot. We were, at the time, an internally focused congregation simply trying to heal the wounds left by conflict and debt. Instead, we would need to relocate with a specific vision and renewed understanding of who God needed us to be in that particular place, letting go of who we had been in the past. We needed to decide if we had to energy to face our realities, to take risks, and to seek some forward motion in our shared mission together.

I am not a gambler, but I would have put a lot of money on our choosing option one or two. The people were tired, we were even more disheartened by response of the denomination, and the best option seemed like a moon shot that would require a lot of hard work. My assumption was that I would stay with the church until closure, help them to end well, and then ride off to another placement. This was not what happened, however. The congregation met in small groups, prayed, discussed texts of the gospels, and came away, somewhat miraculously, committed to trying option three even though there was no plan or model for developing a plan for actually carrying out option three.

Thus began my search for books, mentors, models, and colleagues who could help us move forward. What I soon discovered and what became my saving grace was the community of progressive mainline pastors and churches working seemingly underground to do the kind of work we were beginning in similar settings. Some were selling property. Others were leading revolutions in older congregations in small towns. I began taking notes, recording interviews, and listening for ideas. I started a doctoral
program where I knew my professors would be practitioners of such work themselves and began expanding my own understanding of the formation and ecclesiological development of church mission.

Over the last nine years we have worked together to develop a vision for ministry, a clearer understanding of our identity, and worship practices that invite us to experience and hear the call of the gospel in a way that matches who we understand ourselves to be as DOC members. Many of the tools we have used came from our conversations with other mainline churches who had given up on old models and were trying to move forward toward mission in a way that was sustainable as they existed.

We have celebrated weddings, ordinations, and baptisms of LGBTQ folks who thought they would never choose to be part of a church. We have sought to learn to listen and learn from their voices in leadership. We have welcomed families from our neighborhood whose experience with the church had seemed so incongruous with Jesus that they never imagined calling themselves Christians. The churches I have learned from share similar stories, albeit in their own contexts. We, as well as any of these other churches, are not the perfect church. We are also not large megachurches. Every church interviewed for this book worships at less than two hundred each week. What we are is alive and working to live the missio dei, the mission of God, the best way we know how for our contexts. We have been resurrected by people led by the Spirit of God to do ministry in ways they could not have imagined.

This project considers some of the stories of these mainline churches who have moved toward a sustainable and shared mission together as well as a review of literature that will aid this conversation. We will consider the development of an ecclesiology that
is consistent with the mission of Jesus conveyed in Matthew 25 and modeled by the female disciples during Holy Week, and which matches the character and theological perspective of the mainline church. The purpose is not to develop a manual for church conferences emphasizing numerical growth or easy models for ministry to guarantee megachurch status. It is to consider how to discover a shared understanding of the work of the gospel and to minister in a local context with a sustainable identity and process.

Part one discusses the unique history and makeup of the modern American mainline church. This is done by reviewing the development of the current theological perspective of these churches and the impact their unique vision of gospel has had on the state of their corner of the congregational marketplace. The project considers the decline conversation as it relates to the mainline church, what decline means when it is used in this discussion, and whether it is a valid criticism of a community of Jesus followers.

Part two reviews literature from three theological perspectives related to the ecclesiology and defined mission of a local church. These three loosely defined categories are fundamentalist evangelicalism, missional evangelicalism, and mainline Christianity.

The project then considers tools for helping a local church develop a plan for organizing to move forward in the mission of the gospel centered in a local ministry setting in a way that is sustainable. The Gospel of Matthew, particularly Matthew 25 and the response of female Jesus followers to the message of that passage is used as a guiding metaphor for considering the calling of the modern mainline church.

This includes considering the reality of institutional birth, life, and death for all congregations including one’s own. This section considers the unique resources and
identity that a local congregation, even those that others might identify as being in
decline, have to offer for the sake of the gospel. It is then imperative to evaluate and look
for opportunities to practice invitation and evangelism. Finally, in response to Jesus’
teaching in Matthew 25, the project considers and imagines how a church can learn to be
with Jesus by being with those that others have discarded.

Part three suggests the design of a handbook for mainline churches and pastors.
This seeks to aid church leaders in organizing a conversation about their institutional
health, their resources and partners, their tools for evangelism, and their presence with
those whom Jesus loves. This includes means of considering a unique ministry, a
church’s shared theological perspective, and ways that are financially and non-
exhaustively sustainable. A group of local mainline pastors will be invited to a training
for leading their congregations in a pre-assessment, a Visioning Summit, and the carrying
out of sustainable missional goals using resources from the handbook. Survey results of
participants in this training and observations of their follow-up congregational usage are
collected for consideration of the results of their progress in achieving the stated goals of
the handbook. Feedback from these results contributes to improvements to the handbook.

The final portion of this writing is the actual handbook itself. Truncated versions
of the explanations and exercises are offered to support pastors and church leaders using
the handbook in their congregations. Provided are reproducible surveys for pre-
assessment of key ministry areas, guides for leading dialogue at a Visioning Summit
based on the pre-assessment, and for carrying out stated goals for moving a congregation
forward in mission and sustainability.
The ultimate aim of this project is to provide a vehicle for local mainline congregations to assess, self-reflect, and consider their identity and the opportunities they have to be of service in the name of Jesus to their neighbors as a community together. The hope is not to create a specific plan for any particular congregation but to ask questions and create conversations which provide clarity and spark vision for the future of their ministry in a way that feels doable regardless of their status as a declining mainline church.
CHAPTER 1: 
MAINLINE CHRISTIANITY: A BRAVE PAST AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

A recent piece in the *Atlantic* describes the odd situation in which the majority of the American church currently finds itself.¹ Peter Wehner discusses the high approval numbers for Donald Trump among white evangelical Protestants twenty-five points higher than the average non-church going American supports the president. In the piece, white evangelicals interviewed see Trump as the winner of a spiritual battle to become president, protected by God like the flawed but beloved biblical figure King David. There appears to be a huge disconnect from the biblical mandates of faithfulness found in the Gospels, including one of this project’s focal passages, Matthew 25, among Trump’s supporters and their political commitments.

Within two weeks of Wehner’s piece, Trump was again embroiled in a controversy for suggesting that four congresswomen of color, three of whom were born in the United States and the fourth a Muslim refugee from Somalia, should “go back to

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where they came from.” This is, by all accounts, a common racial slur used for generations to claim white ownership of America and the appropriate American lifestyle.

Trump also frequently uses the phrase “G-d damn” in stump speeches. While this may seem small to his greatest critics, I find it odd as that is a phrase that would have received a visceral reaction from the conservative Baptist evangelicals who raised me in faith, nearly all of whom I know to be vocal and public Trump supporters. I was taught this phrase to be blasphemous and grounds for judgment and God’s wrath as a teenager.

The current administration has waged an all-out war on immigrants and asylum seekers that has included children separated from their parents at the border and long-term incarceration by denying due legal processes. A report from the administration itself as well as a group of pediatricians describes children living in small spaces among the smell of urine and feces.

Considering Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 in which he claims his church will be with those who are strangers (another term used to describe immigrants in the New Testament) one must wonder where to find the church of sheep Jesus describes. Jesus calls these disciples who are present with the poor, the immigrant, the sick, and the

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imprisoned, without thought of some eternal reward, his true sheep. Support for the policies of Trump seems unrecognizable when reading the Gospel of Matthew and the book’s ongoing call to self-denial for the sake of Jesus’ teaching.

Findings from the Pew Research Center suggests that a higher percentage of mainline Christians supported the Democratic platform (across the board of possible candidates) than Donald Trump during the 2016 election.\(^5\) This platform includes more welcoming policies for immigrants, initiatives for universal health care, LGBTQ equality, and equal pay for women commiserate with their male peers. That same research suggests that those who identify as religious “nones” who have no religious affiliation and other non-church goers also aligned themselves with Democratic policies and principles.\(^6\) Over the years, many in conservative circles of Christianity have summarized this kind of information as validation that the mainline church has become too much with the world. This argument follows that because mainline Christians have elected progressive positions on social issues (particularly gay rights and abortion), which said conservative folk view as unbiblical, it then only makes sense that mainliners would be on the same page as those with no faith commitment.

This information is not provided as an attempt to suggest that one party or religious descriptor is somehow more closely aligned with the politics of Jesus than another. Such conversations are nuanced and could surely take on several lives of their

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\(^6\) Ibid.
own. There are developed biblical and theological arguments for the support of progressive political and social issues just as there are conservative ones. Furthermore, there are many Republican affiliated Christians who are as troubled by the policies of the current administration as anyone in another political camp. The politics of Trump, despite the polls cited in the Atlantic,\(^7\) may well be an outlier that unites people in both parties in their sense of biblical justice. As well, the purposes of this project are not to fight a battle between evangelicalism and the mainline to determine who knows Jesus best.

This does suggest, however, that the theological positions and history of the mainline church as it relates to civil rights, feminism, LGBTQIA equality, and economic justice, rather than markers of worldliness subject to criticisms of heresy, may actually make the mainline uniquely gifted as local churches to do the work of evangelism and faith proclamation among those who are outside of or have left the Christian church in America. The data of the Pew Report suggests as much. No segment of Christianity has a more relevant theological and social understanding of the gospel to emerging generations who are not a part of the church in the United States than the historic mainline church. Perhaps rather than viewing these positions as a sign of weakness or the cause of decline, they may be images of hope to a world longing to hear good news.

It is wise to provide a word of caution here. Often when such cultural commonalities are discussed by mainliners, there is a certain hope that this means the renaissance of the mainline—the once-dominant combined voices of American Christianity—is just around the corner. Soon, the hope arises, the mainline church will

\(^7\) Wehner, "The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity."
become among the loudest and most culturally recognized images of Christianity in America just as it was at the turn of the twentieth century, replacing Hillsong United and Joel Osteen in the cultural zeitgeist. Instead, the author suggests the biblical calling God has for the mainline is to forego the work of fighting and handwringing about decline, at least as it is discussed in academic circles. Could it be that the future of the mainline lies in her call to deny cultural relevance, popularity, and the acclimation of properties and wealth for the sake of proclaiming a gospel that speaks deeply into the soul of America and invites this nation toward radical social justice? Could it be that this perceived weakness exists for the purpose of being of the right posture for inviting others to experience and share the loving and inclusive gospel of Jesus in a unique fashion?

To dive more deeply into this possibility, it is important to define what constitutes the mainline church. The American mainline church is typically a description of the theological sisters that were the founders of the National Council of Churches and were once the largest cluster of Protestant Christian churches in the United States. Typically, this is understood as the Episcopal Church (USA), The Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the American Baptist Churches USA. Other denominations may be added to this list, particularly those who support the National Council of Churches in current form, but for the purposes of this work these originators will be the focus.

Mainline congregations gained cultural significance during the early frontier days of the United States. The Roman Catholic Church, highly structured and without seminaries to train priests in the U.S., was slower to expand across the prairie than their
flexible Protestant siblings. Further fanned by the flames of the first and second Great Awakenings, the mainline churches grew. The Civil War in the United States began the separation of entities that would divide these churches and provide the mainline with her identity. During the war and reconstruction, white Northern mainliners opposed slavery and sought to partner with freed slaves. Their Southern siblings disagreed and tended to view the evangelism and spiritual salvation of African Americans as more important than social justice and human rights, using scripture to justify slavery.\(^8\)

However, white Northerners, for the most part, did not follow through on their good intentions.\(^9\) They failed to value and empower the cultural and religious differences in the traditions of African American Christians in the South, judging worship styles and theology paternalistically rather than standing as allies.\(^10\) They soon retreated to reconciling with Southern whites, leaving African Americans to found their own denominations or creating so-called separate but equal wings of their denominations. It was the end of the century before significant progress was made toward non-paternalistic relationships between Anglo and African American churches in the modern mainline, and there is still much work to be done.\(^11\)

Mainliners are generally perceived to have achieved their greatest size and cultural prestige in the early twentieth century at the height of the modernist progressive movement in American Christianity. The conclusion of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925

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9 Ibid., 67.

10 Ibid., 68.

11 Ibid.
marked a cultural victory for mainline thinking as evolutionary theory became accepted teaching in public schools, standing as a replacement to literalist readings of Genesis. Mainliners embraced science and historical critical methods of biblical exploration which had room to welcome Darwin and evolutionary thought to conversations around scripture. Mainline churches, the oldest organized Protestant denominations in the United States, when combined at this moment in U.S. history held more people in membership and had the most resources of any other segment of American Christianity. 

The second half of the twentieth century was a time of reckoning for these churches. Mainline congregations began a significant decline in worship attendance, membership, average age of participation, and cultural prestige in the 1960’s that continues to this day. David Hollinger, among others, suggests that this decline is the result of overtly politically active denominations and clergy who began making progressive pronouncements about Civil Rights, Vietnam, feminism, and gay rights in the 1960’s. Data of American religious history suggests that the more progressive a denomination becomes theologically the more it begins to lose membership to theologically definitive and literalist churches. The conclusion could be reached that

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13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.

16 Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 39.
this decline occurs because people feel more comfortable with a faith that has definites and distinctives than one that leaves room for conversations and questions marks.

Jesus himself suffered from such decline when he sought to move his followers away from legalism and laws created around scriptural interpretation. The church that gathered around his cross in Matthew was far smaller than the thousands who gathered to hear him preach a few months earlier. Perhaps, then, decline is not the sign of weakness that the average person concludes it to be.

Decline is most often discussed in the religious context in terms of waning weekly worship attendance and church membership numbers, as well as declining influence and power in the American political scene. Jason Lantzer, for example, after a careful examination of mainline history suggests that the seven sister denominations be stripped of the title “mainline” and that said phrase be given instead to evangelical denominations that now hold more power such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Roman Catholic Church, and the non-denominational movement.\(^\text{17}\) The lack of cultural prestige he and others argue, has made the mainline insignificant on the American religious stage. Lantzer, and others in his camp, see the progressive theological positions of the mainline church as cause for their demise. Their argument that these run off theologically conservative and moderate church goers with each stance taken on an issue of justice that mirrors the positions of the Democratic Party and alienates the affluent supporters who

valued thoughtful and educated faith but who support Republican politics for financial and cultural reasons.  

A glance at any of the membership numbers of the seven sisters confirms the basis of this interpretation of the decline. It is extremely unlikely, given the dropping number of church goers across the board in the United States, and the waning resources and human beings who call the mainline home, that it will return to a state of cultural and numerical prominence. Perhaps, as Lantzer suggests, these churches should be stripped of their important sounding title, mainline, and give it to the larger denominations who have churned out megachurches over the last four decades and which are more likely to appear on television on Sunday mornings. Evangelical churches, too, have declined, but at a far slower and less critical pace than the mainline.

However, when in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that their battle for greatness, even their battle for people, prestige, and money, was wrongheaded. Instead, Jesus argues, the gospel looks like becoming children Matthew 18:1-4. When Jesus says this, he is not talking about cuddly kids that are adored in the twenty-first century, he is speaking of powerless human beings viewed more as property than family. To be powerless is to lay down power, prestige, authority, and one’s whole self for the cause of his gospel—this sheep gospel. That is what greatness looks like in the gospel. Perhaps,

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18 Ibid., 119.

19 Lyman Stone, “The Beginning for The American Church,” Medium, April 21, 2017, accessed May 19, 2020, https://medium.com/migration-issues/the-beginning-for-the-american-church-6bb5654e91fc. Stone analyzes membership data of American Christianity for this article which can be downloaded as Excel spreadsheets. Among the summaries of his findings in the article is the subheading “Liberal Protestantism is Dying.”
then, there is hope to be found for the mainline beyond attendance numbers, possessions, and prestige. Maybe the future of the American mainline is not cultural-political cache, the possibility of numerous large congregations, or recouping lost attendance numbers.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the famous voices of mainline Protestantism in the church’s era of prestige described what made the mainline progressive image of faith differently. For Fosdick, the arrival of and willingness of progressive Christians to embrace science and evolution represented something hopeful. For the first time in human history, the coming of God’s world and the living of God’s mission for the church was not at the whim of a distant and difficult to understand deity acting in secret, but this God had empowered humanity to understand ourselves and to create the world described in Jesus’ gospel.²⁰

Perhaps the model for the future of the mainline church is as covert and undervalued as a first-century child and as hopeful as Fosdick. More to the point, as discussed in part two, the mission and makeup of the mainline community can see hope in the group of culturally powerless and mostly unnamed first-century women who responded to Jesus’ sermon on the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46. These women respond to his sermon on the sheep by choosing to go and be with him as he literally becomes the broken, imprisoned, immigrant, and sick. They were, with all of “the least of these” (Mt 25:40), thus given the opportunity to proclaim good news like no one before them had shared because of it.

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What makes the mainline church unique in its opportunity for this with-ness? Unlike the Anglo evangelical church described in the *Atlantic* article,\(^{21}\) the mainline, in her current makeup and growing diversity, connects naturally with those who are, by choice, based on considered hypocrisies, or by force, based on judgment from the religious community, the furthest away from being a part of Jesus’ church. The mainline also has less institutional currency left to protect, therefore freeing the church to go forward without fear of lost possessions or cache. In particular, the mainline is more naturally inclined and equipped for declaring and inviting partnership into the gospel of Jesus’ love to the “least of these” that others have discarded than the culturally and politically elite white evangelical church (Mt 25:40)\(^ {22}\).

Who might this list include? Certainly, there are segments of evangelical church for every ethnic group, particularly African American and immigrant communities, which the political affiliations of Anglo evangelicals may not advocate for, but for which there is a home in evangelical theology. However, the American mainline is arguably the only segment of American Christianity (at least for which there is a measurable label) which would seek to be an ally of mutuality and equality for the cause of minority groups with less political power of all kinds.

This list looks much like the “least of these” as Jesus describes them in Matthew 25. It would include LGBTQIA friends of all religious persuasions who are turned away from the church despite the reality that monogamous same-sex relationships are not a

\(^{21}\) Wehner, "The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity."

\(^{22}\) Unless otherwise noted, all Bible citations are from the Common English Bible.
violation of the Greatest Commandment.\(^\text{23}\) It would include immigrants and the families of immigrants who are viewed with suspicion by the most powerful segment of the church, and supporters of immigrant rights. It would include the African American community both in partnership and as leaders within every aspect of church life.\(^\text{24}\)

To be clear, if believers are to be with each other as they are with Jesus, there can be no room for paternalism or colonialist tendencies that do not listen, learn from, and follow the voices of these friends that others do not view as equal partners. There must be the laying down of power and the willingness to make room for more diverse voices in leadership and service.

Despite previously discussed problematic responses of the mainline following the Civil War, mainline clergy and denominations have sought growth in their understanding and work to be allies in in the fight for civil rights and racial justice. The support of the civil rights movement by mainline clergy is often listed as a cause for decline. Mainline

\(^{23}\) Clearly the conversation around a biblical and theological ethic for supporting LGBTQIA inclusion in matters of marriage, ordination, and church leadership divides American Christianity. The purpose of this paper is not to convince the reader, but assumes that the majority of mainline readers for whom this book is written will have already embraced this position based on numerous scholarly arguments generally accepted by mainline denominations. Every member of the seven sisters has made denominational proclamation of support for open and affirming ministries or has, at minimum, a significant number of Open and Affirming churches which are in good standing and without controversy within said denominations. For a more detailed discussion of each denomination’s position visit Human Rights Campaign, "Faith Positions," accessed July 30, 2019, https://www.hrc.org/resources/faith-positions.

\(^{24}\) While significant work remains regarding racial reconciliation in the mainline churches, it is arguable that the mainline has worked as hard as any segment of American Christianity to work toward reconciliation and partnership among Anglo and African American segments of the church. As an example, consider that the two first female denominational bishops of color, Teresa Hord Owens (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ) and Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows of the Episcopal Church, Indianapolis, in the United States hail from the mainline. "Teresa Hord Owens, First Black Woman to Lead Disciples of Christ, Isn't Here to Be Your Token," NBCNews.com, accessed July 30, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/teresa-hord-owens-first-black-woman-lead-disciples-christ-church-n782981. For further reading about the work of reconciliation and unification of racially divided mainline denominations see Lantzer, \textit{Mainline Christianity}, 56.
denominations have a history of proclamation and work to argue against the high and arguably unfair percentage of incarcerated African Americans and ongoing examples of racial bias and police brutality. The list of would-be partners for the mainline would include those who are impoverished and see no political alliance from the culturally elite church on issues of poverty elimination. For an example of this intersection see the work of mainline pastor Reverend Dr. William J. Barber and the Poor People’s Campaign as described in his book *The Third Reconstruction.*

Finally, as discussed, and in consideration of the *Atlantic* article, those whom the mainline is uniquely equipped to join at the table of Jesus are those who identify as religious nones or non-affiliates. These non-affiliates who choose not to identify with any particular religion may come from any of the people groups already discussed or others. They are those whose personal sense of morality aligns with the mainline understanding of “the least of these,” but for whom there is currently no intentional practice of faith or faith community for a variety of reasons (Mt 25:40). These reasons may and often do include their disillusionment with the culturally elite Anglo evangelical church.

The American mainline has a history of progressive stances as allies and participants among those with less power in the United States. It would seem that Mainline Christians have not embraced their positions on these social issues as matters of convenience or for cultural assimilation, as argued by some, but because they believe it to honestly match their understanding of the New Testament witness of Jesus. It has certainly not been for the sake of cultural dominance.

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The history of the mainline is fraught with failure and half-hearted attempts to live into their understanding of the gospel. Yet, of all of the segments of church in the United States, it is difficult to argue that any other group of churches has made a more intentional effort or progress toward valuing the issues that matter most to religious nones. There is such opportunity to engage and partner with these friends in doing the work of Matthew 25.

Why, then, are progressive churches not known for their dramatic ability to engage individuals who are outside of the church in partnership, transformation, and discipleship of Jesus in the faith community? Why are nones, and others who embrace the justice of this collection of issues, not finding a more accessible welcome in the mainline? It could be argued that chief among the problems of the mainline is not progressive theology, but the church’s inability to develop a locally relevant an intentional identity that includes a call to justice and to evangelism, similar to the work of the disciples as found in Matthew’s Gospel. David Fitch describes progressive theology without centering in theology and practice around Jesus’ whole ministry, including evangelism, as a form of programmatic exhaustion which is ultimately paternalistic and unhelpful.26

Progressive Christianity has become so engaged in the work and identity of justice programming as well as institutional survival tactics that they missed opportunities to use their unique identity for good. Leery of the practices of evangelicals that disavowed them during schisms of the twentieth century and fearful of anything

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related to evangelical Christianity, they have denied themselves and their neighbors the opportunity and calling they have to share the gospel of Jesus’ welcome in the unique way that they understand it—all while there is a world that might embrace this good work and join them in it. Without proclamation of hope and the invitation of evangelism to become a part of the beloved community, the work of the gospel becomes an exhaustive programmatic and institutional work performed by a closed group. This is unsustainable. The exhaustive work of justice, void of invitation and evangelism, accompanied by the quick change of being hurtled into decline has distracted mainline Christianity from the work of local presence and the development of congregational identity.

Shawnee Park Church is an example of this exhaustion. The church, distracted by the trappings of the decline in worship attendance and financial support as well as the upkeep of a declining building, found themselves too busy with the work of survival to consider their unique local mission, theology, and opportunity for ministry. One could argue they were huddled together, hiding out to survive and mourn the heyday of their ministry while fearful that forward motion would mean disaster. This is not unlike the disciples who were missing from the cross of Jesus while others chose to stay with him. This resulted in missed opportunities that would have come with bravely gathering around the cross, the empty tomb, and journeying to proclaim what they had seen despite the uncertainty of it all. Luckily, the gospel was being accomplished and proclaimed by the brave women who dared to live as sheep in their absence. The following section considers literature related to telling the stories and engaging congregations in re-assessing their unique mission and resources for living the call of Jesus together.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW: MODELS OF CHURCH MISSION

While reviewing literature related to the mission of the church, it is helpful to consider the value in mainline congregations developing a sturdy ecclesiology of mission. Ecclesiology is the doctrine or theology of being church. Mission or missio dei is the mission that God has in the world. To develop an ecclesiology of missio dei is to consider what it is that God has called the church to do in the world.

Western Protestantism has embraced individualism and made prominent the role of an individual’s salvation by way of Christ. Roman Catholicism emphasizes the concept of salvation as relationship with God, but this salvation is expressed and understood via relationship with the church in community. Protestant discipleship and participation in the church has placed greater focus on each participant’s understanding of the work of God in the world and made lesser the focus on the relationship individuals are called to have with one another on mission as the beloved community. The bestselling book Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren proposed to help an individual find their God-intended purpose in a few simple steps. This book was devoured both inside and outside the church as individualistic self-help reading with little consideration as to how gospel purpose should be formed in the beloved community of God.
In mainline Protestantism, this individualist influence can be seen in the prominence and emphasis of activist clergy and the consistent proclamations related to social and political issues from denominational leadership. Such proclamations, while they appear to be largely consistent with the views of congregations, often go undiscussed and theoretically undeveloped in the local church. A relationship develops in which clergy are viewed as professionally responsible for forming denominational proclamations related to social issues, protesting and organizing resistance rallies which intend to support the oppressed, and preaching vaguely challenging sermons related to social justice. For good measure, clergy throw in some administrative and pastoral care responsibilities. This model frees the congregation from considering their personal and communal responsibility in standing up for the oppressed or considering the mission that the local body has to work together to re-enact the ministry of Jesus.

Further, as it relates to evangelism being part of God’s mission for the church, the history of mainline congregations and their separation from evangelical influences often means that the very word is looked on with some skepticism. Mainline denominations have, by far, the fewest number of Christians who believe in a literal hell of fire and brimstone unlike their evangelical siblings who view hell as a place reserved for those who do not accept Christ as savior.¹ The modern mainline can often be found engaged in pluralist interfaith conversations of mutuality. If believers are not convinced their neighbors are going to burn in hell, perhaps the motivation for proclamation of the good

news of Jesus becomes less pressing? Perhaps mainline Christians fear association with that sort of theology.

While many mainliners do not believe in the literal hell of the afterlife as punishment for failure to convert, there must be a reckoning with this terminology and the consistent call to preach the good news in the Gospels. Many mainline pastors or theologians suggest that Jesus’ use of the word Gehenna, which is often understood as hell, is a metaphorical phrase using physical location of the trash heap of Jerusalem.² This location was often associated with death and sacrifice as a description of life apart from the gospel. If this is so, there is still reason to proclaim good news of God’s love for all and the way of Jesus to those who are living in the Gehenna of abuse, addiction, racism, homophobia, greed, and other anti-gospel forms of life which the mainline claims to speak against. These questions highlight unique differences and opportunities for the mainline. To engage this mission of salvation from these cultural hells and to proclaim this gospel as only mainliners are equipped to uniquely share it, there must be a missional renewal in many local mainline congregations and their leadership. Local congregations and pastors must consider, in light of their locale and the unique progressive perspective of mainline theology, what their congregational mission is to be together as a community.

There is a plethora of literature which intends to support churches in the process of developing or renewing an ecclesiological missio dei. Herein literature is reviewed from the fundamentalism evangelical, evangelical missional, and progressive mainline wings of American Protestantism. Though there is room for discussion about such

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categories, these groups are defined as follows. Fundamentalist evangelicalism emphasizes primarily conversion to save souls from a literal hell and a commitment to biblical inerrancy. Missional evangelicalism places an emphasis on orthodoxy consistent with the likes of the Apostle’s Creed and church mission that includes conversion and a newer, but growing interest, in racial and economic justice. Mainline Christianity has a more fluid theological perspective which centers itself specifically on the ministry and teachings of Jesus in the gospels and has a history of public witness in justice that includes racial reconciliation and equality for LGBTQIA Christians. These differences significantly impact a church’s understanding of their calling. Each review considers what wisdom the authors might speak to a mainline American congregation seeking missional renewal.

*Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson

Southern Baptist missiologists Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson review the commonalities of churches in their study of established congregations that have come back from decline to health. A study across eleven evangelical denominations yielded over 300 churches that reported to have increased overall attendance and conversion ratios. Their suggestion is that by following the methodology used by these churches, a local congregation will grow numerically and spiritually. They define healthy ecclesiology as churches that identify Jesus as Messiah, biblical leadership as defined as

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using elders, deacons, and other biblical titles, biblical preaching and teaching, the ordinances of communion and baptism, a covenant community, and a sense of mission.⁴

Stetzer and Dodson define mission as evangelism to the lost who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus. Beyond a short subsection suggesting that good works of service (servant evangelism) can lead to conversion, there is no note of the call of the church to participate in the work of justice or the dismantling of anti-gospel systems in the world.⁵ The authors describe basic practical emphases of the churches in their study which may be helpful to mainline congregations in considering how they may be more welcoming to newcomers for Sunday morning worship. While some mainliners may scoff at any brush with attractional church, given that, as the authors note, Sunday morning worship is still the primary time that people choose to consider whether to participate in the beloved community of Jesus, it seems an important conversation for a church in the renewal process to consider.

The authors note the following emphases of comeback churches. Churches are described as incarnational and present in their communities through activities and organizations like biker clubs which offer opportunities for evangelism. Worship music and style is considered indigenous to the cultural musical preferences with over 90 percent of studied churches using praise choruses in some fashion and with the style being described as celebratory.

⁴ Ibid., 3-5.
⁵ Ibid., 112.
Churches studied demographics and particular needs of the community surrounding their gathering place when considering worship practices and programming like children and student ministry. Churches in the study noted there was a renewed emphasis in personal piety and belief in Jesus as Messiah (including the suggestion that churches who do not grow as a response to these choices are mired in sin). Churches took marketing seriously. Comeback churches considered their own gifts and strengths, considered the importance of having sizable facilities for growth, engaged small groups, and expected growth as a result of their transitions.

There is much for churches of any theological perspective to learn from as it relates to practical considerations for a neighborhood focused ministry—particularly as it relates to the study of the community, the need to consider community in a church’s planning, and knowing the congregation’s strengths. Some of these are used in the handbook for churches in the following chapters, encouraging churches to consider these things as they make decisions about their future.

_RePlant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again_ by Mark Devine and Darrin Patrick

Similarly, in _RePlant: How A Dying Church Can Grow Again_, the understanding of _missio dei_ as it connects to the ministry life of Jesus seems shallow. In _RePlant_, Mark Devine and Darrin Patrick, also from Southern Baptist backgrounds, embrace a similar methodology for describing a turnaround church which they pastored together. Devine and Patrick discuss the practical ways of addressing the unhealthy ecclesiology that

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existed in Calvary First Baptist Church in Kansas City upon Devine’s arrival and suggest these changes led to numerical growth.

These authors describe the purpose of church replanting, and thus church mission, as reigniting God’s mission of evangelism, declaring that the saving gospel of Christ is and should be the driving force of every Christian and the engine of church growth and church renewal.7 Devine describes the way in which he imagines for months how a declining church he visits in a neighborhood of Kansas City to be an amazing opportunity for “kingdom growth and the advancement of [his] denomination,”8 should renewal occur.

Devine describes the following broken places in the church’s ecclesiology and thus provides fodder for a pastor leader to consider when leading a church in such a process. Devine notes the warning sign of the number of pastorates in short tenures or histories of firings as a preceding sign of church dysfunction, lay-leaders who do not value the authority of the pastor as a leader, and structures that provide openings for unhealthy power bases like committee positions, significant giving, and open ended congregational business meetings. Devine describes leading deacons to practice church discipline of these unhealthy leaders and begins seeking a large church out of town to
merge with and take over the ministries of First Calvary. This ultimately results in numerical growth post-merger and is viewed as a turnaround.

For the purposes of this project, Devine’s cautionary tales of broken ecclesiology are helpful for leaders, but the definition and understanding of church mission is lacking. Little to no time is spent discussing the needs and makeup of the neighborhood. If, as Stetzer suggests, indigenous ministry to a neighborhood is valuable, it leaves readers with questions about this way of ministry. The solution to broken ecclesiology appears to be finding a large church from another city that is nearly three hundred miles away and ask them to implement a cookie-cutter ecclesiology of mission.

A more developed conversation about church mission occurs in David Fitch’s book Faithful Presence. Fitch, a Canadian evangelical from the Christian Missionary Alliance and a professor and church planter in Chicago, writes from the evangelical missional wing of the American Protestant church. Fitch understands the work of the church as follows: “God is present in the world and uses a people (the church) to make his presence real and concrete among the world’s struggles and pain. When the church engages in this call God’s presence becomes visible and the world is invited to join in.”

Fitch uses the image of three circular lines to describe the missional presence of the church at the close table of communion, the table of fellowship, and the table of the neighborhood to describe the church’s movement as God’s presence in the world. Any loss of balance in these circles (mission with no worship, worship with no mission, etc.)

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10 Ibid., 9.
results in a lack of spiritual health. Fitch suggests that seven disciples, cultivated from the historic practices of the church and the teachings of Jesus, form a church for this movable mission. It is here, neither in political power or cultural achievements nor in an individualistic piety, but in the day to day activities of an alive church community that Christ becomes known in the world.

Fitch identifies these practices as the eucharist, reconciliation, proclamation of the good news of Christ (in both worship and in daily living), being with “the least of these” (Mt 25:40), being with children, the fivefold gifts, and kingdom prayer. For Fitch, Kingdom Prayer invites believers into God’s world and makes the other forms of presence possible. In each of the practices, Christians submit to God and one another, without hierarchy or domination, and trust Christ’s presence to reign among us.

Key for this discussion is Fitch’s understanding being with “the least of these” (Mt 25:40). Fitch suggests that much of the church’s understanding of mission results in paternalist programming. For example, suburban Anglo churches drive to another part of town to deliver food or clothes to people assumed to live in poverty but with no relationship to those whom they seek to serve. This is not enough to qualify as the with-ness described in Matthew 25. Fitch’s response to this failure is to encourage churches to plan nothing at all as mission. Instead, a church should practice the seven principles and wait for mission to appear naturally by way of presence and relationship with neighbor.

Fitch uses the tale of his opportunities to purchase dental help for a friend he eats with regularly at McDonalds as an example of intentional practice of with-ness. Fitch’s writing is far more holistic and biblical in its understanding of the mission of the church. He considers the totality of the works of Jesus and the expectations of the body as it
relates to the New Testament. While the first two works suggest the sole purpose of the church is saving of souls, Fitch understands evangelism to come from a natural and holistically communal connection to the Christ. As Christ’s presence and work break into the world through his church, the opportunity to proclaim his saving work unfolds naturally.

Fitch, Stetzer, and perhaps to a lesser extent, Devine, carry an understanding of mission that is neighborhood focused. For Stetzer, service to the neighborhood is primarily a pathway to evangelism. For Fitch, service is an act of submission to Christ and neighbor, a more biblical perspective according to this author. Yet this and other neighborhood focused literature leaves some question as to believers’ responsibility to those who do not exist in their immediate neighborhood.

For example, in my neighborhood, an eighty-five percent Anglo suburban neighborhood, if we are only with our immediate neighbors with no intentional effort to leave the neighborhood we will experience little or no relationship with the African American or immigrant siblings in God’s family. These philosophies might have been used during the Civil Rights movements as perfect arguments for Anglo clergy and churches to forego responsibility for the empowerment of oppressed people because they were not, in many cases, immediate neighbors.

To his credit, however, Fitch calls for an understanding of mission that is relational and partnership-based, is not paternalistic, and which makes room to further consider questions like this about relationships beyond the neighborhood. He makes mention of the care that should be taken to avoid toxic charity behavior. This project encourages congregations to seek relational mission while also asking questions about
missional responsibilities to those beyond the neighborhood, particularly to minorities or those siblings in God’s family struggling in other places that may not live in one’s immediate world. One would hope there is a way to be the presence of Christ without doing so in a toxic fashion.

_The Next Evangelicalism by Dr. Soong Chan-Rah_

In _The Next Evangelicalism_, Chan-Rah writes to characterize unhealthy images of American missional ecclesiology. In particular, Rah suggests that the American Evangelical church is captive to white Western culture.  

Rah suggests that despite conversation of decline among western Christians, what they may actually be experiencing grief over is the movement closer to having a non-white, majority multiethnic American Christianity. Rah writes the individualism of evangelicalism paired with the church growth movement has led to an American church that is captive to models that value size, wealth, and possessions above justice, that fail to see the collective value of faith as a communal event, and which fails to value diverse voices as partners and mentors in the faith.

For example, Chan-Rah suggests that the focus on individual sin allows racism to be defended by people responding that they as individuals are not guilty of any identifiable act of racism. Yet, when sin and faithfulness are viewed collectively, similar to Fitch’s communal understanding of church, the believers are forced to face the systemic racism that any who are privileged need to repent of.

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Chan-Rah closes by suggesting that a future American church, if she is to live the mission of God, must be a church that is actively repentant for systemic racism and other forms of colonialist oppression, is humble and submissive to mentors and guides from diverse communities, and seeks to unleash the shalom of true reconciled unity of the kingdom of God to the world. This must include the willingness to learn from immigrant and minority faith communities rather than to approach them paternalistically or colonialistically. Chan-Rah’s criticisms offer an important critique and footnote for each of the previously discussed authors.

Moreover, for the purpose of our conversation related to the mainline, none of these authors dares tackle the church’s response to LGBTQIA Christians and seekers. A lens similar to the one Rah uses to discuss race would suggest that the practices of modern American Protestantism have been heteronormative and male dominated to the point that believers struggle to imagine a church that submits to one another and values the voice of female and LGBTQ mentors. This is a bright spot for the mainline church which, though it is not perfect, has long been working toward living into this justice by making racial and orientation reconciliation a priority.

_A Mainliner’s Guide to a Post-Denominational World_ by Derek Penwell

Derek Penwell, in his book _A Mainliner’s Guide to a Post-Denominational World_, suggests that the opportunity to highlight leaders and voices of diversity, including those in the LGBTQ community, present the mainline with a moment to reconsider her position in the story of the church. Penwell writes to compare the current situation in Western culture to that surrounding the American Revolution and, eventually,
following a lull in faith practice, spawned the birth of the American mainline church. Penwell suggests it important to recall that when people speak of mainline decline, they are not speaking of the decline of God or even of the decline of the church, but the decline of institutional church and denominational identity.13

Among the similarities Penwell notes in these two historical seasons are changes to communication that opened the door for smaller movements to speak to broader audiences with modern social media and with historic printing press access. Penwell notes the lack of structure of the institutional church in pioneer days as ordained European clergy and Roman Catholic institutions struggled to find a place in the pioneer world where worship happened on wagon trains and ramshackle churches thrown up in new towns for basic usage purposes. He notes a lack of trust in the church given the clergy’s connection to European nations similar to the charges of hypocrisy leveled at the church today.

Penwell suggests this is a time ripe for the church to stop measuring herself by the modern tools of decline in attendance and financial support, and instead to celebrate a season to embrace the new world creatively. This is an opportunity to engage the new world in ways that are unique to mainline identity including ecology as faith practice, inclusion and empowerment of LGBTQ Christians, and the moment to gather in coffee shops, rented spaces, and bars to be church. He speaks of mainliners being the rare witness in the American church toward pluralism and embrace of friends from other faiths without judgment.

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Penwell addresses unique opportunities for mainliners that have been avoided by the other literature to this point. As has been discussed, and even moreso in light of Chan-Rah’s perspective, this is a moment for mainliners to let go of the worry and data mining related to decline. It is a moment to embrace the call of Jesus to sacrifice comforts and consider anew the mission of God. Penwell, however, seems completely uninterested in evangelism. At points he describes his evangelical roots and speaks of hoping to avoid talking about faith in such a way going forward.\textsuperscript{14}

Again, it appears the mainline fear of appearing like the first models that have been considered in which caring for the world comes across as merely a tool for conversion, leaves believers without a thorough discussion of what it means to invite someone to follow Jesus in a mainline congregation. Throughout his work Penwell hints at the cultural hells God may be calling the church to save God’s children from, but he does not address the ways to offer such saving hope in Jesus. This project attempts to lead churches in a more thorough conversation about evangelism in the mainline setting, including what it means for mainliners to proclaim the good news of Jesus as they understand the work of the kingdom in the world.

\textit{A New Vision of Community and Mission for the Mainline Church by Boyung Lee}

In her book \textit{A New Vision of Community and Mission for the Mainline Church} Boyung Lee proposes a method of cultivating a missional ecclesiology through communal faith formation and bible study from an educator’s perspective. Much like Rah, Lee suggests that Western mainline Christianity has been captive to individualism in

\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., Section 2, Chapter 4.}
such a way that it hinders the biblical call to be and determine how to be church together on mission. Lee suggests that often when Americans attempt community in education or dialogue essentially what happens is collectivism, in which a group of individuals get together, but offer no real commitment, sharing, or support of each other. This requires nothing of an individual and does little to form a community.

Lee reviews the biblical model of Christ’s body as metaphor for the church. Here, each person is an individual piece with a unique gift and identity, but equally dependent and connected to the other. This is reminiscent of Chan-Rah’s call for mutual submission to diverse voices and Fitch’s call to the five-fold gifts. Lee suggests a movement toward true community involves an assessment of a congregation. This includes a review from an educational perspective of what develops a church’s ecclesiology—the language of liturgy and worship as it connects to a congregational identity, creating communal opportunities to dialogue and learn together in practice (developing creative works together that define the group, such as communion bread), and hosting biblical conversations in structured and unstructured formats. Together, these provide opportunities for a vulnerability that allows true communal identity to form.

Lee suggests a communal gathering to consider the church’s mission by developing a vision together rather than to use preconceived literature or pastoral authority to define mission. This mission should be sustainable and developed, valuing all of the voices of a body together. Finally, Lee suggests true community is a movement toward interculturality rather than multiculturality. Interculturality exists when the goal is

to bring the liberation of all of those who are on the margins in and around the community of faith. Multiculturality tends to be different cultures hovering near, or bumping into each other, without reconciling. Here Lee describes conflicts among LGBTQ students and African American students related to hymn language when she was a professor. Rather than allowing unaddressed conflict to stand between two cultures, intercultural dialogue, and an attempt to lift up the voices of all of the margins, became the goal for reconciliation.

Lee’s methodology is helpful in considering how different groups from the margins, whether it be because of ethnicity or sexual orientation among other factors, which are part of the mainline may become one in their understanding of mission as a community and not a collective. That said, Lee avoids conversation about practical mission beyond the people who make up a church. Even in a chapter on neighboring, the focus is on different neighbors within the church community and there is no mention of *missio dei* or proclamation of good news outside of the local church. This project attempts to lead churches in considering communal mission both inside of and beyond the local congregation and into all of God’s kingdom.

**Conclusion**

Important concepts regarding the different theological angles within the church emerge when considering the literature above. A missional ecclesiology for the North American church should include practical ways of considering how to welcome and engage the community on Sunday morning as a means of proclamation of the gospel. This is still where a majority of persons choose to affirm their embrace of the beloved
community. A missional ecclesiology should include both the evangelistic/proclamation call of the church and the call to be with the oppressed whom Jesus loves. A church attempting to renew their understanding of mission and ecclesiology should consider both who their neighbors are and what their unique gifts are as a congregation—working together to understand their unique mission as a community and not merely as individuals in the world. A congregation should take seriously the call to consider the privilege and cultures within and outside of the faith community, seeking a posture of submission and interculturality.

Finally, as Penwell reminds readers, this is a season for mainline churches to let go of the desire for power, prestige, people, and possessions. To do otherwise is to become preoccupied with anti-gospel goals. Instead, this is a moment for mainline Christians to be with the oppressed whom Jesus loves, to gather in the odd places around the neighborhood, and to proclaim the good news of God’s inclusive love as only mainliners understand it. The good news of God’s love will stand when the institutions of familiarity have crumbled.
CHAPTER 3:
A SUSTAINABLE MODEL OF MISSION FOR THE DECLINING MAINLINE CHURCH

Author Sandhya Jah describes the post-Civil War ecclesiological development of the largely Anglo DOC denomination as it attempted to do ministry with African American Christians during the reconstruction. Disciples were, at the time, a young rural entity—the first denomination founded in the United States and born on the farm in Kentucky during the Second Great Awakening. These Anglo Disciples, sensing a call to extend Christian fellowship to freed persons, offered financial support for the foundation of African American churches in the South.¹

Jah reminds readers that while African Americans had reason to lack trust in their Anglo Christian siblings and desire their own spaces, these supposed separate but equal new congregations were offered seed money in large part because existing Disciple churches were unwilling to consider extending membership to African Americans or merging to create partner churches.² They feared the changing of any of their worship and organizational practices in ways that would have invited true interdependence would

¹ Sandhya R. Jha, *Room at the Table: The Struggle for Unity and Equality in Disciples History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 18.

² Jha, *Room at the Table*, 20.
also lead to white flight from established churches. White members viewed their way of
doing church as theologically correct. Instead, white churches kept their comfortable
practices and helped fund separate structures of mission and education organized by their
African American counterparts for the Black wing of the denomination. Racism,
thetical correctness, kept local Jesus followers from coming together in the church
where there is to be no difference between Jew, Gentile, male, or female (Gal 3:28).
More to the point, fear of sharing power and losing institutional controls stopped what
might otherwise have been the beginnings of true shared interdependence. The white
churches chose to send money rather than to truly be with those who were closest to the
 crucified Jesus.

A contemporary example of this is an Anglo mainline congregation that is known
well in their denomination as is considered to be thriving and high functioning. Bustled
with a large endowment and budget, they have a history of attracting strong staff
leadership who often wind up transitioning to positions of denominational leadership.
Their building is ornate, with stained glass, stone, a massive pipe organ, and architecture
designed to reflect a sense of worshiping in a European cathedral. The denominational
liturgical guide for worship planning was edited by a staff member, books on how to
grow a church have been authored by a longstanding pastor, and denominationally
heralded theologians call it their church home. They are considered the cream of the crop
in their tradition with pastors around the country looking to them for how to be the
church.

Those who live in the city might instead identify this church as an insular place of
privilege. Seated on the edge of the border between a historically wealthy neighborhood
founded by racist real estate laws to their north and a more socio-economically and racially diverse neighborhood to the south, the church has never intentionally considered altering any of their practices that might limit their relationship with their neighbors to the south. Worship is planned only in the style of Anglo-European protestant high church because it is considered historically and theologically accurate by members and denominational leaders (which includes those leaders who came from or still worship in this congregation). It is as if Jesus himself demands the hymns of Wesley and pipe organ overtures. There is no consideration that many of these hymns come from a problematic Anglo-centric worldview and were born in traditions that justified slavery. Events hosted by the congregation target classical music lovers from the wealthy neighborhood who can purchase tickets as fundraisers, while the church has rejected multiple requests to use their space for school events from the neighborhood to the south.

The mission work of this church is primarily understood as delivering goods from the excessive lifestyle of the northern folk to the service organizations that cater to the southern folks in their moments of need, even as these projects often result in no or very minimal contact with the people who are receiving their charity. These practices are celebrated by the congregation with no assessment of their effectiveness in helping the community or in achieving the mission of Jesus.

Young pastors in new congregations located in rural, suburban, and urban, small and medium-sized, Midwestern and Southern churches in the United States all use the writings and direction produced by this congregation as the rule of thumb for doing healthy and theologically-sound ministry. Worship, administration, and mission are all measured by the advice of this approved model for ministry. The working assumption is
that, because this church has more people in attendance weekly and more money (even if both of those numbers have decreased over time and even if they were born in an exclusively white wealthy neighborhood association) that their way of ministry is best.

Yet, both in their context and in the context of the pastors who look to them for guidance, there is nuance and a need for assessing their way of ministry to consider if it is reflective of the inclusive and compassionate teachings of Jesus in their neighborhood. *Missio dei* is reflected, after all, in more ways than by looking at the number of cars in the parking lot on Sunday mornings. Could it be that theological correctness and intellectualism is a cloak for the fear of a loss of power and institutional success?

In both of these instances, positions of power and assumptions of authority go unquestioned in the mainline church. This leads to overlooking opportunities for ministry that is deeper and more reflective of the work of Jesus. A budding denomination with enough financial support to offer money to African American partners avoids any change or sacrifice that would have come to them had they dared to attempt an interdependent relationship of mutuality. A large wealthy congregation offers charity to their neighbors but avoids intentional relationship, even as status leads others to assume they are successful in accomplishing the mission of Jesus.

Unlike these two examples, the more likely identity of most mainline churches in 2020, as suggested in research considered in earlier parts of this project, is likely to be less reflective of institutional power and more reflective of perceived decline. Most mainline churches or denominations are no longer in positions of power as it relates to
size, prestige, or wealth. This news has come painfully and slowly for many in the church. For generations, the heyday of the mainline and the financial contributions that resulted from it had lasted long enough to allow unsustainable practices of structure, spending, and assumptions about future growth to carry on without question. As those resources dry up it has become clear that the practices and assumptions that led to success one hundred years ago are not reliable for the future. Further, the practices of evangelicals which have led to growth in those circles seem not to translate and often do not fit the theology or culture of the mainline. Progressive churches find themselves looking for models of ministry in this new and often discouraging season of the life cycle. As obvious as it sounds, the answers to their questions can be found in the gospel of Jesus.

The purpose of the forthcoming handbook is to assist self-identified declining mainline congregations in developing their unique local ecclesiology of missio dei. For the purposes of this project, this is defined as the way members of a local church understand and organize themselves for the purpose of acting on and sharing the teachings of Jesus as they understand them in their locale. It is not to suggest that using this guide will bring about increased worship attendance, financial growth, or keep the mainline denominations afloat. The hope, instead, is to come alongside congregations and pastors who, rather than asking how to get bigger have begun to say, “Come what may with the numbers, how do we follow Jesus as we are?”

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3 Lyman Stone, “The Beginning for the American Church,” *Medium*, April 21, 2017, accessed May 19, 2020, https://medium.com/migration-issues/the-beginning-for-the-american-church-6bb5654a91fe. Stone analyzes membership data of American Christianity for this article which can be downloaded as Excel spreadsheets. Among the summaries of his findings in the article is the subheading “Liberal Protestantism is Dying.”
An answer for such churches comes from one of the images of discipleship and missio dei from Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew 25:31-46, a bit after his Sermon on The Mount, Jesus offers a parable consistent with the values of the sermon but in a more concrete image of the behaviors such a mindset would bring about. As he describes the way in which one can determine who his followers are, Jesus paints a scene in which all people from every nation are to be judged.

In this passage, Jesus followers are not identified by some of the modern metrics that make megachurches successful and leave mainline churches feeling inferior. Jesus’ disciples are not identified by the frequency of their worship attendance at an institution, the amount of money they have given, their baptism style, or their theological fundamentals. Perhaps these will become by-products of their behavior, but this is not a point of interest for judgment in Jesus’ view.

Instead, Jesus describes his sheep as those who feed the hungry, care for the immigrant, the poor who are without clothes, the sick, and the imprisoned (Mt 25:31-46). To drive the point home, Jesus tells hearers that in caring for these who are oppressed and discarded, “the least of these,” they are actually caring for him (Mt 25:40). On the other hand, to avoid such compassion to these neighbors is as drastic as intentionally avoiding to offer care and love directly to Jesus himself.

In this story there are sheep, Jesus followers, who have been practicing the missio dei and yet appear unaware of their affiliation with Jesus. It was their actions of compassion that identified them with Jesus, not their institutional affiliations or creedal affirmations. “When did we care for you?” they ask (Mt 25:39). On the other hand, there are goats, those who are not engaging in his mission, who are shocked, perhaps because
they have locked up all of the religious practices that they and other religious leaders had deemed necessary, only to learn that, because they have not been caring for these friends they have ignored Jesus and are not considered participants in the *missio dei*.

This story comes shortly before Jesus’ crucifixion in Matthew and serves to foreshadow the responses that those who have claimed him until this moment will offer in the coming crisis. The crucifixion, the ultimate test of Jesus’ identity and the faithfulness of his disciples, is a story of extreme failure and of successful practice of the call of Matthew 25. Even more, Matthew paints a picture in which the sheep, the faithful in the crisis, are not the obvious players. Instead, Jesus is supported and ignored by some surprising characters to those who would have been guessing the plot of the story from a first century perspective. In the remainder of Matthew, it is the big names in the early church—the men who are part of the original twelve disciples, who consistently fail to achieve the expectations of Matthew 25. It is they who need forgiveness and a new chance to carry out these actions after the resurrection, because they failed so desperately during Jesus’ last days with them.

Meanwhile, women, some unnamed, who are also the most powerless characters in the drama,⁴ spent the final chapters of the gospel doing exactly what Jesus has described for his sheep. He became all of the struggles which he described. His body became physically broken and naked. He became hungry and unfed. He died a death that the Roman government typically reserved for immigrants on the cross. He was

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⁴ Ben Witherington, “Women (NT),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 957-960. The powerlessness of women both legally and in the context of the Jewish religious community is presented here along with a detailed description of Jesus as one who undermined the patriarchal system and empowered women as leaders.
incarcerated. In each instance, it is the unnamed women who were with him, as he called them to be, while the men, the characters with the most privilege and power in the first century Judeo-Roman world, hid in fear. These women were the sheep of Jesus to whom all who know the story of the gospel owe a great debt.

The first example of this powerless discipleship is the woman who anoints Jesus in Matthew 26:6-13. Jesus has just told his male disciples that he is to be crucified but it seems that this unnamed woman is far more in tune with Jesus’ teachings and what God is doing. Gathered with his twelve male disciples at the house of Simon, the room’s conversation is interrupted by a woman who anoints Jesus for burial. She takes on the posture of a Hebrew prophet as she anoints his head. The men whose names are recorded and whose titles adorn basilicas around the world are angry with her and not tuned in to what God is doing in this moment. They are focused on charity, but they appear not to be with the one who has needs right in front of them, failing to see through the lens of Jesus and his recent proclamations of death.

Next, Judas betrays Jesus just before gathering at the final Passover meal. Here again, surely with the best of intentions, the male disciples promise not to deny him. Perhaps the most adamant is Peter, who will, of course, deny Jesus most profusely. Jesus’ meal in this instance is more reflective of his redemptive meals with sinners and goats throughout the gospels than it is with the sheep described in Matthew 25. Their lack of understanding and inability to listen keeps them from understanding Jesus’ mission.

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6 Ibid., 295-296.
Next, the twelve struggle to stay awake with Jesus for prayer at Gethsemane, leading him to rebuke them. In just a few hours, perhaps as these same disciples are sleeping, it is the women who will rise before the sun to be at the tomb with Jesus even after his death.

During Jesus’ trial one of the more interesting characters to intercede on his behalf is the wife of Pontius Pilate. She messages her husband to tell him Jesus is innocent and she has suffered in a dream at the thought of his crucifixion. Rather than listening to his wife, the political realities of the situation lead Pilate to allow the crowd to decide. Again, Jesus’ only defender in this scene is a woman whose name is not given, who would not clearly be identified as a traditional disciple, and who has the least power in the scenario. Yet, she shows signs of being a sheep while Pilate protects his power. She speaks of the need for justice.

As Matthew describes Jesus’ crucifixion, there is no mention of the presence of the twelve after Peter’s denial in the courtyard. Two previously unheard-of men, Simon and Joseph, make quick appearances to assist in the carrying of the cross and Jesus’ burial. Judging by Matthew 25, there is no evidence that the most well-known disciples, the twelve, are with Jesus in the ways he has called them to be.

On the other hand, “many women” were there, Matthew reports, having followed Jesus from Galilee to “care for his needs” (Mt 27:55). Of the many, only three of them are named and familiar to readers of Matthew. The women stay around his cross and the tomb despite the numerous reasons they had to be fearful. They faced the intimidation and threat of Roman guards and the risk of frustrating temple leaders who were pivotal in the distribution of women’s rights and protection in the male dominated society they inhabited. It is the women who, even after his death, when Christ had no more teaching
or shared power to offer them, chose to go to the tomb to continue acts of compassion and worship toward Jesus.

The reward these women receive for their compassion is not fame or name recognition. They remain mostly nameless to readers two thousand years later or known on a secondarily level in comparison to the likes of Peter and John. The men who lagged behind these women stand in statues and stained glass around the world. The acts of courage and mission instead allow these women to experience the spiritual and transformational power of resurrection in a way that is more personal than any other disciple could ever claim beyond them. They are the first to know that Jesus is risen because they cared for him without fear or concern of their own reward.

Seeing an angel at the tomb, they receive the invitation to tell the male disciples what they have seen, and later they encounter and are able to worship Jesus in the flesh on their journey of proclamation to his “brothers” (Mt 28:10). Through their faithfulness, selflessness, and sheep-like behavior they are given the gift of intimacy with the resurrection, of Jesus’ real presence, and the joy of sharing the story of this event with others who have not taken the risks to discover the good news.

This is not to suggest there is no hope for the male disciples. Matthew makes clear that it is the remaining eleven male disciples who are commissioned to go and tell the good news at the end of Matthew 28. Yet, even as this passage is remembered as “The Great Commission” and often quoted as the ultimate call to evangelism, it is necessary to remember that this is only the second commission. It is only made possible by the first, in which the angel and then Jesus, commissioned the women to go and tell the good news. The women receive the first commission by way of their courage to stand up against the
oppressive voice of Rome when others hid, with their physical and relational with-ness and compassion to Jesus, and with their proclamation of his resurrection. All of these are necessary components—or this story ends with them. The second commission is necessary for the male disciples in a way that the women do not appear to need. The eleven disciples, clearly forgiven by Jesus for their absence and slow reaction to injustice, may never have arrived in Galilee to begin their redemptive journey without the women’s faithfulness. It is these women of color, minorities in the Roman world, with few to no legal rights, who know what it means to be oppressed, that carry the missio dei forward. They are the first, and perhaps greatest, examples of the sheep of Jesus in Matthew.

The good news for those believers who are slow to act on the gospel is that the male disciples were not doomed—their reaction to the women’s announcement, their efforts to tell the good news after the ascension, and the reconciling effort that Jesus makes with them after the resurrection suggest otherwise. However, the male disciples look to be on the slow end of discipleship while the women take the lead.

The men appear more fearful and more comfortable with the status quo even if it is in a world without Jesus. It is not surprising to note that these men, even if not Roman citizens or having any obvious wealth, are people of privilege as men in their world. They do not seem as interested in dying to themselves for the sake of the gospel as the women. They lack the holy desperation that seems present in the female disciples from the first description of sheep behavior. They have more to lose by risking arrest from Rome or showing up to confront the guards at the tomb.

In these two models of discipleship there are images and opportunities for the mainline church. In one image there is the cultural cache and power that the twelve men
have received both as men in their world and in their relationship with Jesus, at least as it is described in the Gospels, which appear to be written exclusively by men. It is no surprise that in weaker moments the twelve do things like wonder aloud who the most powerful in the kingdom of heaven is (Mt 18:1-4). Jesus follows their question by telling them that the greatest in his world are like children. Children, much like women in the first century, were not the bundles of priority and joy that they are in the twenty-first century West. Instead, much like women, they were powerless compared to the men whom Jesus was addressing. This is followed by a parable about a foolish servant who has social power over others and refused to consider them his equals as employees of the master.

These scriptures hint that the comfort the twelve men have with Jesus and their station in life may play a role when they do not take as seriously his discussion of crucifixion, his prayers in the garden, or his speaking of denial at the table. Such a loss of power and safety seems unfathomable to them. Then, when Jesus’ prophecies come true, they react in fear. Matthew does not describe them as being at the cross or the empty tomb of Jesus.

The women, however, with far less power in their world, seem more aware of what Jesus is doing in this week of crucifixion and resurrection. They anoint him for burial, stand up for him when he is on trial, stand with him at the cross, and camp out at the tomb regardless of the presence of Roman guards. It is almost as if each of these women realize how little they have to lose in their world. They continue to put their hope in the gospel through their intentional powerlessness because it is all they have. They are
willing to answer the call of discipleship with less evidence, more risk, and to do so far more quickly than their male counterparts.

Many of the mainline church pastors that were interviewed as part of this project found themselves or their congregations in places of institutional powerlessness. A pastor in the rural South shared her story. Sarah was leading two nearly identical United Methodist congregations in neighboring Appalachian villages. In each church she used the same methods of rallying partners to consider their mission, of attempting risk-taking ways of becoming the guests and partners of people in the neighborhood, and of re-imagining their use of resources. The only significant difference she could identify between her two congregations was their financial situation. Their average age, neighborhood demographics, facilities, and average attendance were all similar.

One of the siblings, Main Street Church, had a large endowment and funds to sustain them without change for some time, even as their methods for doing church left them just as frustrated with themselves and their staff, and kept them just as disconnected from their neighbors as their sister church. The sister congregation, Broadway Church, had very little in the way of finances with most of their offering paying the small salary that Sarah was offered. Sarah confessed that doing new things was often easier at Main Street because of the seemingly unlimited funds, yet the church continually struggled to take the risks that Broadway Church embraced.

When Sarah encouraged both churches to consider becoming the only two white churches in neighboring counties willing to host a dialogue about racial inequity in their communities, partnering with the local alliance of African American pastors, Broadway viewed this as a moment to own their unique mission of welcome and accepted this
possibility with joy. Main Street had fears about how what they perceived as a political conversation would affect their giving from more conservative members and their status in the community. When Sarah encouraged each church to begin volunteering in local schools as a way of building Christlike relationships of service and mutuality with their neighbors, Broadway volunteers accepted the call excitedly. Main Street church suggested it was too burdensome and unnecessary, suggesting they could perhaps purchase some books to donate instead.

Sarah shared that within five years of her service there, Broadway church had thrived to a place of sustainable mission. Their numbers did not necessarily increase, but they felt vibrant and excited about the direction of their church. People were finding faith there. They believed themselves to be equal and necessary partners to a variety of friends in the community. They no longer felt the need to spend beyond their means to do effective ministry. Main Street Church had closed their doors for good in the same timeframe. Dwindling attendance, conflict related to the use of their resources, and what the church perceived as pastoral failure had brought them to a place of seeking to close and donate their remaining funds to denominational partners. In this instance, also reflected during interviews several others, the church with the highest level of desperation and the least to lose in failure seemed far more willing to take risks and re-imagine the missio dei of their faith community than those with more people or money.

In this scenario, Main Street Church looks much more like the twelve—well intentioned and caring about Jesus, but so distracted by habits and some sense of control that they missed an opportunity to see the gospel experienced in as profound a way as their less powerful siblings like the women of Matthew and the church at Broadway. In
fact, in all of the interviews conducted for this project, this powerlessness and desperation to seek Jesus together and a willingness to take greater risks than the average church, seemed to set healthy and vibrant congregations apart.

It seems that some mainline churches, when faced with decline in attendance, giving, or both, attempt to protect their waning perceived institutional power at all costs. These churches see signs of decline and become insular and live with a scarcity perspective. This leads to a lack of clarity in their congregational mission. Such congregations sometimes seem to carry a blind confidence that the mainline, or at least their well-financed corner of it, will maintain enough power to carry on. Others fear that any radical change is tempting fate to bring the last straw to collapse their struggling congregation.

Whether out of fear or arrogance, such churches often blindly continue historic behaviors and structures without considering the unique work that Jesus could be doing with them if they embraced a moment of powerlessness. These churches are not evil or lacking in the love of God, but they, like the twelve, may be missing out on something precious. Perhaps they need to hear the good news of the risk-taking women to reconsider their position.

Other churches in such moments seemed to sense a lack of power and chose to let this moment set them free. Letting go of seemingly insurmountable institutional pressures, they begin to consider and attempt to live the mission of Jesus’ gospel with reckless abandon. This choice to acknowledge defeat and relinquish power seems to invite new life and resurrection in many unique forms.
The Practices of the Women of the Empty Tomb

There are a number of concrete practices the women of the empty tomb put in place that churches, facing the realities of their own time of institutional weakness, could follow. Women in Matthew’s Holy Week narrative showed four key signs of discipleship. The women were comfortable with their powerlessness even in the reality of death. The women pursued the ministry of Jesus with the passion and energy that their resources allowed and trusted other partners along the way. The women embraced their call to invite others into their gospel journey. The women were vulnerable enough to be present with Jesus, the others who were crucified, and the assembled neighbors on Good Friday while others were insular and hidden away.

Powerlessness and the Reality of Death

These women would have had the least political and cultural power of the disciples mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel. Yet it is they who stand at the cross and go to the tomb. Unlike other Gospel writers, Matthew does not explain their purpose in going to the tomb. Perhaps even they do not know why they were there, but there seems to be a trust among them that God has something for them to do even in the bleakest moment, even as the stench of death would have lingered. Whether they arrived in accordance with burial rights or if it was as simple as the desire to be close to Jesus after he had died, they were there. Somehow, they expect to be part of the work of God even as they stand at the place of Jesus burial.
Pursuance of the Ministry of Jesus with the Resources and Partners at their Disposal

The women are not the only followers of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel worth emulating. Joseph of Arimathea also does what he can for Jesus after his death (Mt 27:57-61). Joseph, a wealthy man, goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ body to give him a proper burial in Joseph’s own tomb. He wraps the body and sees that Jesus is buried. This was likely not an option for the aforementioned women. They would likely not have had the wealth or legal recognition to approach Pilate as first century Jewish women. They were there, partnering with Joseph at the burial, doing what they could, as best they could, with the resources they had—so was Joseph.

Understanding the Call of Jesus was to Invite Others into their Gospel Journey

The women in the Gospel of Matthew proclaimed new life and resurrection by telling the good news to the twelve. As crazy as their story may have seemed, as many fears may have come with proclaiming resurrection, they tell the story and invite others to be part of what must seem like the strange journey they are on. They do this despite the fact that women were not expected to instruct men in any way in their world. Jesus commanded that they go and tell his brothers what happened and told them where to go to continue following him. They tell the story so that it grows beyond their little community, even if they may not see where or how it grows, making its way to those who claim Jesus centuries later.

Maintaining a Matthew 25 Ministry of With-ness

The female followers of Jesus were vulnerable enough to be present with Jesus, the others who were crucified, and the assembled neighbors on Good Friday while others
were insular and hidden away. Just as Jesus commanded in Matthew 25, these female disciples appear to be the only disciples who were with Jesus in the entirety of his moment of brokenness and crucifixion. There they were with the sick, the naked, the hungry, and the immigrant as they were with him. They were there with the community of neighbors, those they disagreed with, those with more or less power, rather than isolated like the male disciples who are not a part of this scene.

In all of these instances, the women practiced these steps of discipleship with much to lose and much to fear, yet they were consistently willing to take risks. Even as they gathered at the tomb in the presence of the Roman guards, they embraced the hope of the gospel that God was still inviting them to be with Jesus. This faith, despite crucifixion, oppression, and even the fear of death, was enough to carry them forward.

God is still inviting the many faithful disciples who gather in mainline churches around the United States, despite declining attendance, lack of cultural power, lowered budgets, and aging buildings, to be with Jesus in his mission. If believers can learn from these brave women of the New Testament, let that same wind of the Spirit carry today’s Church forward—there may be some new life for the mainline too. It likely will not look like the heyday of the twentieth century. It will likely not result in statues, basilicas, or stained-glass windows. Instead, perhaps it will look more like the powerless children that Jesus held up as being the greatest in his world or the faithful women who got to share the good news first because they trusted the gospel was not finished yet.
PART THREE

DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE MISSION
### The Four Step Assessment Process

| Facing Reality: Where are we in the lifespan of our church and this particular area of ministry? | Gospel Dreaming: Where might the courage of the faithful women lead us? | Taking the Risks: How will we take the risk of working toward one or two of these dreams? | Staying Fresh: Quarterly checking in to assess and risking again. |

The purpose of this handbook is to invite congregations to be inspired by the risk-taking women of the gospel to live out Matthew 25 in new ways. Participants consider four areas of congregational ministry modeled by the women. They process each area of ministry through each lens found above—facing current institutional realities, dreaming of potential ways to live the gospel anew together, choosing and taking intentional risks, and revisiting these processes periodically to continue asking questions of mission and
ministry. Each lens for processing ministry areas is described below. The intention is for this process to be self-guided by church leaders in a context.

Facing Reality

Imagine the conversations of the aforementioned women as word spread of Jesus’ arrest and impending crucifixion. Perhaps news traveled among them that some of the twelve men had denied Jesus in various ways or that they appear to be in hiding. Perhaps they looked for the male disciples to get a greater sense of the situation and found that they were responding in their own best way in that moment. While it is impossible know exactly what was happening among the twelve, the evidence of their response looks like avoidance and fear. There was, after all, much for them to avoid and be fearful of.

The women, however, appear to decide together to respond differently. Surely, they know that what they will see is going to be heartbreaking and traumatic—especially for Mary, the mother of Jesus, who has been with him his entire existence in this world. Perhaps some of them fear going alone and decide there is strength in numbers. Somehow they decided that being at the cross and seeing its reality was better than not knowing what was happening to Jesus or, perhaps even more so, not being present for Jesus to see their loving presence as he suffered.

Even after his crucifixion and death, when it seemed all hope of continuing his ministry was over, they showed up and, to the best of their ability and resources, continued to follow his teaching about who disciples are and what they do. As he had told them, his sheep will be with him as they are with the “least of these” (Mt 25:40). He had become one of the least himself now. There is no reason to believe the women at the
tomb expected resurrection. Most likely, they merely hoped to make sure his body was honored and not harmed to keep Jewish burial customs in place. Perhaps they were not even sure why they were there, but just felt an urge from the Spirit to continue showing up. Whatever it was that brought them there, their courage in taking that risk was rewarded with resurrection and hope for the world which they would get to deliver.

As considered in the examples in the previous chapter, helping declining mainline churches to face painful realities can be some of the most difficult work for a pastor or church leadership team. In the example of Main Street and Broadway Church, money in the bank was just enough to keep Main Street church from really seeing the realities of their congregation’s situation and how close they were to institutional death. The fear of losing that money kept them from taking the risks that could have led to an outcome that more closely resembled Jesus’ gospel teachings of justice and compassion.

The first step in the process of assisting such churches is to ask them to acknowledge their current institutional health and to consider the reality of every church’s impending return to dust. This is not to suggest that bad news means throwing in the towel on their congregation. The women of the gospel teach that bad news can become beauty in a matter of hours. However, it does seem true that they never would have arrived on Sunday morning if they had not shown up to see the darkness of Friday. Further, considering the examples of discipleship in Matthew 25, each of them forces the sheep to see and be in the presence of difficult things. There is no caring for a prisoner without going to the prison. There is no offering clothes to the naked without seeing a shivering body in the cold.
To begin the process of developing a church’s understanding of *missio dei*, a pastor or lay leadership team invites key leaders to begin collecting data related to their congregation’s current health. This data, dependent on category as found in the handbook, includes, among other things, five years of trends related to finances, trends in worship attendance and church program participation, demographics and address mapping of church participants, and demographics of the neighborhood surrounding the church’s meeting location. Guides for gathering this data are found in the workbook. This data is be crunched to create a formulaic response to a church’s unique situation, but it is gathered so that participants in the visioning process can see the reality of their institutional health as it currently exists. All involved work to see hope and hard things at once, as emulated by the women in the Gospels.

**Gospel Dreaming**

One of the realities of the comparison of male and female disciples in Matthew is that what each of them had to lose was quite different. Jewish men like the twelve in a first century world had their own struggles under the Roman government, but their gender offered them privileges within the Jewish community that were completely unknown to women. They had greater opportunities to earn a living, to seek legal help, and were valued by the religious system. As heartbroken as these men may have been by Jesus’ death, they could likely imagine lives, families, and careers they could develop if they kept out of trouble and moved forward.

Female disciples of Jesus, however, were not gifted by their culture with the same options. Jesus had shared his privilege with and highlighted the wisdom and gifts of
women in a way that was rare for his world. Losing Jesus meant losing the rare person who had lifted them up and invited them to be equal voices in theological and cultural conversations typically reserved for men. There were no careers or positions of religious leadership around the corner for them without Jesus. There was no status to protect. There was nothing to lose.

It seems that this freedom in realizing there was nothing to lose gave the women a strength to take risks that their male counterparts lacked on the weekend of resurrection. Herein lies a potential strength of the declining mainline church. Unlike the megachurches with institutional attachments, large facilities, and multi-person staffs to protect, the declining mainline church has the strength and freedom to take risks because they have less to lose. A look at the numbers of the mainline in general and the realities gathered in the first step of this process for particular churches offer participants the opportunity to be free. Perhaps if mainline churches shake off the unlikely idea that if the right circumstance and pastors come along the church will return to cultural power, and instead see the strength in the freedom to be inspired to dream again.

In the second phase of this process for churches, gathered participants are invited to dream together without fearing the risk of failure. They consider the ways that women of Matthew practiced Matthew 25 together and imagine how they might attempt to do the same. They consider these gospel dreams together within the framework of four different examples of the women’s discipleship—their willingness to face the truth, their use of personal gifts and partnerships, their willingness to invite others into the gospel journey, and their willingness to be with the “least of these” (Mt 25:40).
The purpose of this portion of the exercise is not for participants to design an airtight plan for rebirthing an institution or return to prominence. Instead, the goal is to dream together to find creative ways to live the gospel as they are in this phase of their journey without worrying about the likelihood or parameters of success or failure. They can begin dreaming of what they can do rather than fear what they cannot. This is a moment for brainstorming ideas for living the gospel fearlessly together, not for winnowing them.

Taking the Risks

For many declining mainline congregations, risk taking is a particularly scary venture. Often such churches have a long history of attempting the next big fad that promised institutional renewal—worship style changes, marketing packages, and the like all came and went with each pastoral transition and made none of the promised impact. Perhaps instead these changes even created additional conflict. This common congregational history along with the ongoing reminder of mainline decline across the country leaves such congregations with a collective feeling of failure and shame.

The women of Matthew were risk takers. They surely did not know that resurrection was coming, but they knew they were called to act as Jesus’ sheep. So, with no guarantees of results, in fact with likely no expectation of positive results, they went to the tomb to live the gospel together. This is how resurrection occurs.

Having considered reality and dreaming of a response, now participants consider the risks they might take as a church. What is this church’s unique version of journeying to the tomb of Jesus together, uncertain and hopeful, to see what might happen? Within
each category of the women’s actions, participants are invited to narrow down to one first risk to attempt together. There is no promise of perfection or a guaranteed outcome—this is not the point. Rather, the intention is to invite a church to take risks together again for the sake of the gospel with the understanding that, much like a scientific lab, failure is an acceptable outcome. The objective is the willingness to show up and try.

Consistently, across interviews with pastors for this project, it was not particular methods or outcomes that defined the renewed mission of a church, but the willingness to take risks beyond a congregation’s previously accepted norms. For some of these churches this meant selling property and renting a movie theater for worship, for another it was letting a pastor become part-time so the church was more sustainable and connected to a local school. For another it was offering a wine tasting to a religiously conservative community as a fundraiser to support clean water wells in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Churches that tried new, risky endeavors started finding more risks to take and a new life that re-engaged them in the mission of the gospel.

Staying Fresh

Early after our church’s relocation we started noticing that something changed. For months we had been driven by a call to relocate and start over in a new place. This had been our first mission. Now we were planted and unsure of who we were. Our first mission, selling a building to give more resources away for acts of compassion, had been achieved. Other ministries that we thought would be important once we had moved now seemed irrelevant before they had even started. It was a season for us to go back to the
drawing board and relearn who we were, who our neighbors were, and dream of the next steps.

The women of Matthew saw the stone rolled away. They spoke with the resurrected Jesus and received his instructions. They delivered his news to the male disciples and encourages them to meet him in Jerusalem. What could they possibly do now? While the women are not mentioned again in Matthew, the story of Pentecost in Acts relates that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and “some women” are in the room praying with the other disciples before the Spirit comes and the church is born (Acts 1:14). Here they are again seeking the next steps of the mission that Jesus has for them. The missio dei of the church appears not to be an exclusive one-time philosophy that churches arrive at when they develop a trendy mission statement. Instead, it appears that the mission changes in seasons of the life of Jesus followers.

In this step participants covenant to continue periodic check-ins with one another to consider if it is time to try a new mission goal they have developed or to review the process again as a church. Some churches may find it helpful to use this process once a year to consider the ways they may seek to follow Jesus together. Churches who use this process may find their conversation leads them to further study or to seek the help of a denominational process or outside consultant. The purpose here is to invite congregations to begin the journey of discussing their opportunities to engage in a mission like that of the women. This is to be a beginning, not a destination.
### Institutional Health:

**FR:** What are our institutional trends in finance, member participation, and relational health? Are there sustainability targets that need to be met?

**GD:** What’s a reasonable expectation and description of your next five years look like as an institution?

**TR:** What are 1-2 goals toward institutional health you can attempt?

**SF:** Quarterly check-in.

### Resources & Partners:

**FR:** What is the cultural and demographic makeup of your congregation and what strengths do they offer?

**GD:** What makes your church spiritually and practically unique in the community?

**TR:** What are 1-2 risky gifts you can sustainably offer to the neighborhood, alone or with partners, with no expected returns?

**SF:** Quarterly check-in.

### Invitational Culture:

**FR:** What evidence or lack of evidence is there in our recent history of inviting others to follow Jesus? What obstacles do we see?

**GD:** What might it look like for us to be more invitational in our relationships and institutional practice?

**TR:** What are 1-2 risks could we take to be more invitational?

**SF:** Quarterly check-in.

### With-ness Challenge:

**FR:** What are the demographics of our immediate neighborhood and their spiritual/physical needs?

**GD:** What natural relationships exist between our church and our neighborhood?

**TR:** What opportunities do we have to gather with our neighbors?

**SF:** Quarterly check-in.

### Four Ministry Areas to be Assessed

The women of Matthew did not set out to accomplish a well-rounded consultation plan for keeping the gospel moving forward despite the crucifixion of Jesus. It is likely that they were not trained orators, nor did they have the right to be educated in the
Scriptures the way that a man might have in their world. Their gospel choices that reflect the behavior of the sheep are organic and developed out of an awareness of needs for Jesus, the willingness to listen to him, and the innate sense of gospel compassion that is driving them. Their natural choices reflect a well-rounded image of the missio dei of the faith community that existed among them. In this portion of the self assessment that local churches will make, they are invited to consider the model of the women and to make their own organic plan for risk taking and gospel living. This is done by inviting them to consider the following four areas of their missional life through the four lenses described above. Sheets for gathering information and leading conversations are provided in the workbook.

Institutional Health

My colleague Tom was a new pastor at a small active congregation that was paying significant expenses to keep an aging building in operation. The building was beautiful, and a part of the medium-sized city’s architectural landscape, but the expense of painting the unique space, repairing the roof, and aging heating and cooling systems had exhausted the congregation’s time and finances. The congregation loved their facility and there was no interest in selling their property to risk the loss of a space whose beauty seemed to contribute to the spiritual aesthetic of the neighborhood. Still, as members came and went, it became clear that the building issues were administratively exhausting and there were secret dreams among the people of doing a different kind of work together to share the love of the gospel.
A new pastor in just his first few months of service, Tom heard multiple hushed conversations that iterated all of these feelings about the building, but no one in the congregation dared raise the issue for fear it might lead to a movement to sell the property. Tom saw a bubbling movement of the spirit at work among the people in these conversations. He took a chance and invited some creative and philanthropic folks from the church to his home for dinner and said, “Is there a way that we can dream together of continuing to worship in our current space but eliminate the burden of caring for this building?”¹

Participants in the dinner agreed to pray, consider their resources, and come back together at Tom’s table one month later. Together they arrived with different possibilities. Eventually, this informal gathering led to the church selling the building to the county to house a museum with the agreement that the church would still use the space for meetings and for Sunday worship. The county had access to grants and resources to care for the facility well beyond the means of the congregation. Tom’s church was now free to dream of missio dei beyond the four walls of the space they gathered in on Sundays.

Mainline congregations are institutions linked with other institutions. They hire workers, pay employee taxes, meet city zoning codes, and maintain, in one form or another, spaces to gather in. They also support larger denominational entities that serve to meet the needs of mission in places around the globe. As discussed above, it is a reality of congregational life that these institutions are born, grow, change, experience hardship,

¹ Personal communication, May 22, 2020.
and eventually die. They, as is typically remembered on Ash Wednesday, are born of the dust of human beings and to dust they return.

Many mainline congregations like Tom’s fear the consequences of serious conversations about institutional health. Such conversations can awaken or bring light to conflicts, can lower morale, or lead to unwanted dialogue about the endings of ministry. Yet, the women of the gospel understood that hiding from reality did not make it any less real. It only meant they would not know how to carry the gospel forward in light of the situation.

Participants in the conversations that are sparked by the following handbook begin their dialogue by making an honest assessment of institutional health. This should include at least five years of financial and attendance records, an honest description of their church’s perceived level of conflict, and an assessment of any facilities that the church is responsible for.

Upon facing this reality, participants are asked to dream together by writing a brief and fair description of what they imagine the next five years will be like institutionally using this information as their source. This keeps participants from pretending an attendance or giving boom is just around the corner to bail them out, but instead looks at things as they are.

Having considered these scenarios, group members then consider one or two key areas of risk-taking priorities that can put the institution in a healthier spot for ministry. This could include an honest conversation about the percentage of resources committed to staffing, reviewing the church’s budget process, or something larger like the consideration of selling some property. Having committed to one or two initial risks,
roles are assigned for seeing them through or initiating their completing with an agreement to check in together in three months for a progress report.

Resources and Partners

Even the smallest and oldest congregations have great resources to offer their communities. In addition, churches in the mainline often maintain a sense of partnering with their denominational institutions and sister institutions from other likeminded mainline institutions. To know what a church has to offer to the community, a resource assessment is key in considering the gifts that can be offered.

One of the mainline pastors that was interviewed for this project shared the story of her church in a small midwestern city. Like many towns their size, the community that Laura’s church served had experienced severe economic changes as factories shuttered in the early 2000s. The economics of the community changed so drastically that the local Wal-Mart closed—a rare occurrence even in the most struggling of small towns. The school district strained to meet the needs of students as tax funds lowered. Meanwhile, the rate of people in need of addiction support grew.

Laura’s church happened to be flush with financial resources from funds the church had put in an endowment years ago. In a board meeting as one church member shared about the needs of the community, another brave elder member, staring at the financial review for this well-resourced congregation, interrupted to suggest the congregation buy the closed Wal-Mart facility and gave it to the community. At first, this suggestion was met with skepticism and fear—what if we give away what we have, and it does not come back to us? Laura’s church eventually chose to use their resources, to find
partners, and create a new community center to meet her city’s needs. The closed Wal-Mart now offers space to addiction counselors, houses indoor batting cages for the local girls’ softball team, and recently hosted a prom for adults with disabilities.

Some churches have seniors who can volunteer for the community during the workday. Others have younger strong bodies that can do construction or repairs on community homes. Some are home to classical musicians who can lead worship while others are home to band leaders. Some may be the only LGBTQ affirming church within one hundred miles. Some have empty basements that could house community gatherings.

In this portion of the conversation gathered participants consider an assessment of resources gathered by a team of folks prior to the visioning summit weekend. They are given a space to dream of ways these resources can be shared with neighbors for the sake of the gospel. They propose one or two key ways the church can take a risk in sharing these resources with neighbors.

Invitational Culture

The women who met Jesus on Easter morning had stood up against tools of the empire to seek justice for one who had been crucified. They were present when it was risky. They did real hands-on acts of compassion. Yet, neither this, nor the story of Easter would be known today had they not felt the need to share the story and invite others into the work of the gospel. Many mainline congregations do well in seeking hands-on acts of compassion and speaking up for social justice. Those who are passionate about these parts of the gospel are often folks who find a home in progressive churches. It is in the invitation to others that mainliners seem to struggle.
Clearly, a review of previously discussed data verifies that the mainline is not growing in numerically significant ways as far as those who participate in congregational activities or worship. Many mainline churches are skeptical of commercialized forms of evangelism programs that were borrowed or repackaged from evangelical churches and attempted by pastors in previous decades in previous decades. Yet, a summary of the interviews for this project suggests that mainline churches with a developed since of missio dei are invitational. While none of them were megachurches they were churches that became a home for people who were new to following Jesus and who had found a safe place to explore faith with their congregations.

When asked why their churches were able to welcome such guests a few suggestions were offered. Despite the ongoing conversation in recent years that worship attendance is less important as a datapoint for discipleship, pastors shared that this was still where they were most often to experience newcomers to faith. Multiple church leaders suggested that they welcomed newcomers, in part, because church members were able to articulate who they were and why they mattered as a local church. There was a sense of mission and identity beyond denominational polity or logos that was understood, and which folks felt encouraged to share. These kinds of identities included: kid-friendly, progressive, service-oriented, casual, thoughtful, or some combination of these terms.

Other pastors shared about their churches’ attempts to do things well and with the expectation that newcomers would join them for mission, worship, and community events. There were directions and statements of welcome for new folks offered for elements like communion in worship. One church realized that, though they had long done traditional worship with an organ and choir these were not the best gifts of their
church and they found it difficult to do it well. On the other hand, they were gifted with a guitarist and violinist who could arrange hymns for the church to sing creatively each week. This made for a worship experience that was well done, inviting, and more sustainable than their previous attempts to pay for expensive music staff and worship with a very inconsistent volunteer choir.

Most people can think of some churches in their denomination or community whose values are similar to their own who show signs of doing evangelism well. This does not always mean mega-numbers. Often churches stay big because they are big—not necessarily because they are inviting those outside of the church to participate in the mission of Jesus. Invitational culture is often more visible in a congregation’s ability to relate to people outside of the church. It is important for those in struggling congregations to ask how their church can learn from these relational congregations. It is wise to ask denominational leaders who work in areas like church planting or renewal to help identify those churches to interview leaders or do site visits to help assess a particular church’s invitational culture. Further, honest data like visits, retention of visitors, and baptisms are real pictures of invitational culture succeeding. Churches consider this data as part of their visioning summit and create goals for risk-taking related to evangelism and invitational culture in a way that is reflective of the values of the congregation.

With-ness Challenge

The women of Matthew, on what was surely one of the hardest days of their lives, gathered with their neighbors at the cross of Jesus. Likely there were others there who were broken hearted and some who disagreed with the movement of Jesus. Also, there
was Jesus, the symbol of every rejected community he had described in Matthew 25 and asked his sheep to be present with.

There are many simple ways for churches to be with their neighbors, both those who live in proximity to the church and those described in Matthew 25, some potentially falling into both categories. To be with these friends, it helps to know who they are and what their needs are. Prior to the visioning summit, participants gather demographic information of their neighborhood and interview local leaders to consider community needs. They look for justice issues affecting oppressed citizens who need a voice. They look for opportunities to be present for community gatherings like parades and firework displays. Together, participants dream of risks to take and set goals for taking them in the immediate future.

**The Three-Step Process for Beginning a Sustainable Mission Journey**

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**Team Building and Data Gathering**

Having read *A Handbook for Missional Sustainability*, a congregational leader or leadership begins the journey of developing leaders to carry out the visioning process with them. Four team members with a balance in institutional knowledge and outside-the-box thinking should be selected for each area of ministry to be assessed—institutional health, partners and resources, invitational culture, and with-ness. A total of sixteen
Visioneers should be selected. A balance in age, gender, and all forms of diversity available ensures a more positive process. Each of these teams are encouraged to read the handbook and use guides from the handbook to gather pre-assessment data from their area of ministry. They submit a summary of their findings related to their area to other team members prior to gathering for a Vision Summit.

Hosting the Visioning Summit(s)

Having collected, summarized, and shared all four areas of pre-assessment data with other team members, all sixteen Visioneers are then invited to a Visioning Summit. The project’s trial group hosted their summits in one weekend. One church found this cumbersome. Amendments have been made to the handbook to allow congregations to choose one of two models for the visioning summit. One option is for churches to host one summit for all areas of ministry. This takes approximately one full Saturday. Another option is for churches to host four summits for each area of ministry over a selected time period. This would allow the summits to occur on a weeknight or Sunday after church, for example. Churches may determine which schedule works for them. Guides for hosting a summit in both formats appear in the handbook. The objective is to create a flexible process that is useful for churches in a variety of situations. Smaller churches may find it helpful to tackle each of area of ministry one at a time to use fewer resources of time and people.

A Visioning Summit Retreat is hosted and led by the pastor, key congregational leader, or denominational leadership using the guide provided. Together, teams walk through the steps of the assessment and dreaming process of each category. Upon
completion, teams assigned to each ministry area will summarize the experience and write a future story describing a way to carry out the risks to be taken together.

Some of these risk-taking goals may be related to more work that needs to be done to assess needs or gifts to offer. Some may be related to institutional health and sustainability, while others may be quick, simple tasks that can be accomplished in a weekend. The goal is not to prescribe a perfect future for the church, but to engage the church in forward motion toward the gospel mission of Jesus in a way that invites risk.

Congregational Sharing and Commitment

One key component of interviewed congregations that were successfully moving toward mission was a buy-in from the church. Dependent on the process for completing the visioning summit or summits, Visioneers host a self-made presentation of their summary of pre-assessment and the risks they agreed to take together. These are opportunities to invite questions, to share knowledge, and to hear from friends who might have gifts for accomplishing the risk-taking tasks. Having sought feedback and shared information, Visioneers work with the pastor to create a commitment ceremony that is appropriate for the congregation’s polity in which congregants are invited to pledge a commitment to beginning this journey together.

Dependent on the model used, this may all happen in one weekend in which the summit occurs on Saturday and the Sharing and Commitment Ceremony happens on Sunday. For other churches this may be done over time as Visioneers carry out the various processes of assessment and summit. Key leaders and partners in following through on this, as well as the Staying Fresh task should be recruited at this time.
Delivery and Assessment

Having developed a process for inviting churches to consider their *missio dei*, a group of three self-identified pastors of declining mainline congregations were invited to attend a two-hour training event at my church. Pastors were recruited through online posting in a Facebook group for mainline clergy. Pastors gathered on Saturday, January 4, 2020 at Shawnee Community Christian Church. Using the attached handbook, pastors attended a two-hour training session for implementing these resources in their churches. Prior to coming to the event, these pastors agreed to host a visioning summit weekend at Shawnee Community Christian Church for the final weekend of January 24-26, 2020 with a congregational commitment ceremony, which I attended, at their respective places of worship on Sunday.

Following the presentation, pastors were provided written surveys (See Appendix B) related to their sense of preparedness for leading a church through the visioning process. One pastor expressed some confusion related to the categories as they were described. These have been amended to clarify the differences. Pastors and congregations responded well to the goal of simply inviting forward movement in missional risk-taking rather than the promise of a fool-proof method of church growth and vitality. As pastors shared this with groups on the Saturday Visioning Summit, multiple participants expressed their approval of this method after experiencing processes with big promises in the past.

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2 This is the location of the suburban church where the author serves in Shawnee, Kansas. It is located in the metro area of Kansas City, Missouri.
Each pastor expressed confidence in their ability to lead their churches through this process and carried out their scheduled visioning summit weekends with few hiccups. Amendments were made to the handbook to include time expectations for each part of the process. Each church celebrated and shared about their experience in potluck dinners after worship the following Sunday, January 26. Two of three pastors expressed a desire to see a flexible model of the process that might allow smaller churches in particular to engage the Vision Summit process over extended amounts of time as they see fit. Each pastor has now volunteered with their particular regional or metro denomination to lead a Visioning Summit training for fellow clergy.
CHAPTER 5:
SUSTAINABLE CHURCH: A TRAINING MANUAL FOR MAINLINE CHURCHES
MOVING FROM DECLINE TO MISSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of a small church in the middle of turmoil and decline which stood up to the Roman Empire and proclaimed the good news of resurrection to the first hearers. Matthew may not label this group of brave women as a church, but they meet the criteria of being a community of disciples following Jesus together. In Matthew 25 Jesus describes his sheep. They are people who will be with him by being with the imprisoned, the sick, the poor, and the discarded. In just a few pages becomes every one of these examples of suffering during the saga of the crucifixion.

The familiar twelve disciples, whose names adorn basilicas and cities around the world, appear to be missing in action in this moment—reacting in fear and denial. Matthew describes a different group, a small church, of female disciples who live up to the sheeply standards that Jesus has set for them. An unnamed woman anoints him for burial while the male disciples question her judgement (Mt 26:6-13). Matthew relates that many women who were Jesus’ followers were present with him at the crucifixion to care for him and remained caring for him at the tomb even after his death (Mt 27:55-28:10). They are present when Joseph brings Jesus’ body for burial. They are sitting at the tomb
in the face of Roman guards. They return again after the sabbath to discover the empty tomb. In their courage and commitment to the gospel they experience resurrection in a way no one in history had. Then they tell the story and invite others to be part of what God has done.

Most of their names may be unknown to people today, but without these women the story of resurrection would have ended without proclamation. They receive the first Great Commission to tell the story to the others. They are the sheep Jesus describes—a small circle of nameless, culturally powerless, yet spiritually powerful women driven by a love for Jesus. They are a church, seeking step by step, to live the mission of his gospel.

In recent years mainline congregations have made notoriety for their numerical decline and waning cultural influence. They suffer constant comparison to megachurches, Joel Osteen, and the slick worship stylings of Hillsong United, all of which find them lacking. This has led to a low self-esteem among smaller declining mainline congregations which, as the research suggests, are most of them.

As mainline congregations assess their futures together, perhaps the church they should be comparing themselves to is not the megachurch down the road, but the tiny and powerful church of women who made great use of their resources, stood with their neighbors, lived the gospel, and told the good news even when it appeared that hope was lost. Powerless as they may have appeared to their contemporaries, these women are the sheep of Matthew 25 and they know the road to resurrection.

This handbook is a labor of love from a pastor who came to a church nine years ago which was in the throes of institutional death. Looking for insight into our situation I searched for books, mentors, and even started a doctoral program to find some help. The
resources I found were focused on evangelical or fundamental congregations. I did my best to translate them into my unique situation as the pastor of a progressive church, but they failed to address the unique needs and nuances of smaller inclusive churches seeking to move forward in mission.

My saving grace turned out to be the underground group of mainline pastors I discovered through social media, references, and blogs who were also looking for life in the rubble of decline. This handbook includes some of their stories and provides resources for pastors and congregations to honestly assess their congregation’s health, to dream, and take risks together.

Now, here’s the bad news. Sort of. This is a book for churches who cannot afford large consulting contracts, multiple full-time staff people, and a new building project to impress their neighbors. There is no promise here of perfection, doubling attendance and giving, or that it will keep your church alive for the next one hundred years. Just as we say each year on Ash Wednesday, “From dust we were born and to dust we will return.” Not only is this true of people, but it is true of every church and ministry. There is a life cycle for churches, and all of them, even the ones we read about in the New Testament, end someday.

The goal of this book is to spark conversation, dreaming, and risk taking in those congregations who want to stop handwringing about and being defined by the great mainline decline. My hope is to help churches of all kinds and circumstances get to work living the gospel while there is still breath in their lungs for as long as they can. Together you and other leaders from your church will begin seeking to develop a missional identity
that celebrates your congregation’s identity, strengths, and community in a way that is sustainable regardless of your size or congregational wealth.

**My Story**

In June 2011 I needed help. In fact, I needed more help than I knew at the time. I was about to embark on a pastoral journey with a Disciples of Christ church in the suburbs of Kansas City. This would be a call that would challenge my leadership, my faith, my education, and my commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. Soon I would be fumbling, Googling, and emailing on a hunt for mentors, books, or doctoral programs that might be a light to come alongside me on the call of church transformation in a small suburban mainline church that was a picture of decline. There had been multiple conflicts, significant building debt, and numerous cycles of staff firings.

By 2015 we were re-planted in a new neighborhood with a new identity and understanding of who we were. None of us knew in the beginning that this is where things were headed, but eventually the journey of healing from conflict and moving forward in mission would result in our selling a beloved building to climb out of debt and begin sharing more resources with our neighbors.

Before you close the book in fear of what you might get yourselves into, know that this is not the right option for every church. It was just the right option for us. In fact, swapping locations was the smallest hump in our transformation. The real work was in church members who left in grief, breaking the institutional habits of triangulation and trauma, and trying a lot of new ways to really be with our neighbors. Some of these
techniques worked. Many of them did not. We just kept trying. We did that both before and after our move.

For some context of our church’s dysfunction, when I shared the news of my interview with a colleague from the area, she gasped aloud and encouraged me not to consider the call. She warned me, “They will chew you up and spit you out and you will be out of ministry in five years. That’s just what they do. They don’t know how to do anything else.”

She had a point. There had been lots of conflict. There was conflict about staff firings and, relatedly, about the church’s financial situation. The church’s worship attendance was at an average of eighty people my first summer in 2011 and had an 8,000 dollar per month mortgage payment. Most months only half of that could be paid. I had been extremely skeptical about moving forward with them having heard their story and having seen that all-important data that all clergy use to discern the Spirit’s call—worship attendance and financial giving. Still, each time I nearly closed the door on pastoring this church, some stirring from the Spirit drew me back to them and we continued to talk.

There were things I found inspiring about them. Here they were in the stereotypical moment of decline as a mainline congregation, yet in my interviews I could tell they were a church of dreamers who believed God was not done with them. As one blunt and Spirit-filled woman said to me during those conversations, “We know we are a hot mess. What we need is a pastor who believes enough in the resurrection to come and lead us. The questions is, are you that pastor?” I wrestled with my answer for several days after this exchange.
In 2011 the church was mostly empty-nester Baby Boomers and a handful of their young adult children who attended out of a sense of denominational loyalty. Several of these folks now drove a longer distance to worship in what had become a mostly commercial neighborhood. Just a few years prior, the church had been part of a small residential suburban neighborhood these families had chosen for child-rearing. The places that had housed softball fields for their children had now become a growing strip mall with a movie theater, restaurants, and hotels. The houses that remained around the perimeter of the church property were almost all for sale to be rezoned as commercial real estate.

Sunday worship was symbolic of the church’s lack of clarity. Music was a mishmash of dated praise and worship music sung half-heartedly because it was suggested by the denomination in a small worship handbook. It was led by well-intentioned music offered by leaders with no background or interest in that style because it is what they thought they had to do. It sounded like what I would imagine would happen if your classically trained choir friends and organist were invited to open for a Foo Fighters concert. It just all felt out of place and awkward.

Disciple history also led to some unsuccessful practices that gave comfort to the lifelong denominational loyalists’ likings. Chief among these was a weekly invitation hymn and altar call they inherited from the frontier style worship of the Second Great Awakening. These seemed irrelevant to the otherwise more formal liturgical style and confirmation classes that had taken flight among modern Disciple congregations. No one could remember the last time an altar call garnered any actual signs of personal
conversions, baptism decisions, or other individual transformation as it had in a bygone era of abrupt personal decisions in worship.

The theological identity of the church was also clouded. Disciples had split with the Independent Christian Church during the childhoods of the Boomers who founded this congregation. Disciples took more progressive stances on issues like the ordination of women, the interpretation of Scripture, recognition of baptism from other denominations and styles, open communion, civil rights, and interfaith relationships, and they had pushed congregations to consider the inclusion of LGBTQIA folks. While most members of the church agreed with the theological identity of the new singularly mainline post-split denomination, they struggled to practice their values having been raised in the theologically moderate or conservative rural churches of the denomination’s history.

What emerged as this church, born soon after this split and made up of people discipled prior to it, was a church who embraced personal progressive theology but struggled to articulate who that made them as a faith community. Interviews in 2011 suggested that the progressive theology that reigned in the denomination and which was claimed by many of the congregants seemed a secret often discovered later by newcomers. It was not obvious in the language, website, or liturgy, of the church.

Occasionally, Disciples theology was obvious in sermons or personal conversations with a pastor, but this made some in the church uncomfortable. It felt too progressive for the suburbs of Kansas City and they feared it would scare others off. The pastor was viewed as the problem in these scenarios and was juxtaposed against the moderate preaching clergy of their childhood congregations. In multiple instances pastors
were relieved of their duties for lacking the charisma to grow the declining church, for being too liberal, or both. The lack of a formed and intentional new-era Disciples theological identity meant the congregational leadership did not understand that clergy were merely reflecting the newly reborn denomination’s theology.

During my interview sessions, one regional judicatory staff member for our denomination conveyed both to me and to the congregational search team that this was probably the church’s last chance to take steps toward life and health before having serious discussions about closure. Finding quality candidates was getting harder as the church developed a reputation for conflict among clergy. The mortgaged building was a few years away from needing major financial commitments to repair. The church could not afford financially, emotionally, or spiritually another round of firings and conflicts. They could also not afford to ignore their reality and avoid the hard conversations that had gone unspoken for years.

During my first year we hit the ground running. There was no manual or checklist for addressing all of our issues. Instead, we haphazardly tried to deal with them as they popped up. Initially the church’s leaders and I worked together to try and address the unhealthy means of triangulation and conflict that had driven the church apart. We held fireside chats and explained basic church systems theories monthly. We tried to explain the experiments we were undertaking as we tried new worship practices, used more welcoming language in worship, and addressed our finances. Some things worked. Some things failed. Eventually our own trial and error conversations led us to realize we needed some outside voices to help with our finances. We asked a denominational organization to study our financial situation and make suggestions. They too suggested we were
running out of options due to our history, the energy drain and aging of the church, and our financial situation.

They gave us different suggestions—most of which we had already tried and failed. There was one thing we had not considered. Given that we were close to, and already had some congregants living in a growing residential area just west of the church that was without a mainline presence, we could start over. We could re-plant. We could sell our property, relocate, and embrace the spirit of a new church. Still, these denominational leaders who had seen churches try this sort of thing before had little advice for us and were careful not to get our hopes up.

They did suggest, however, that we would be making a huge mistake to merely move what we were doing to a new spot. We were, at the time, an internally focused congregation simply trying to heal from the wounds of conflict and debt. Instead, we would need to relocate with a much greater awareness of who we were, who our neighbors were, and what we were doing. We would need to develop a specific vision and renewed understanding of who God needed us to be in that new community we were being called to.

I am not a gambler, but I would have put a lot of money on the congregation not making this move. My assumption was that I would stay with them until closure, help them to end well, and then ride off to another church. This was not what God had in mind for us, however. The congregation met in small groups, prayed, discussed the gospel, and came away, somewhat miraculously, committed to trying the move. We had no idea how we would do it or if it would work, but we were tired of assuming failure. Our philosophy became that if we were going to go down, we were going to go down swinging.
As we waited on the slow-moving real estate market to catch up with the Holy Spirit, we studied the gospel together and learned about our new neighbors. We continued taking risks and trying new things. Eventually things fell into place and we got to try our ideas out in our new context. Over the last eight years we have worked together to develop a vision for ministry, a clearer understanding of our identity, and worship practices that invite us to experience and hear the call of the gospel in a way that matches who we understand ourselves to be as Disciples.

We have celebrated baptisms, weddings, and ordinations and learned the gospel with new insights shared with us by our LGBTQ friends who thought they would never choose to be part of a church until they found one who said that Jesus took pride in them just as they were. We welcomed families from our neighborhood whose experience with the church had seemed so incongruous with Jesus that they never imagined calling themselves Christian.

My saving grace on my leadership journey in this season was not a book or conference. Instead, I began to discover an unconnected network of rebellious pastors and churches who had abandoned the decline identity and decided to live with the freedom of trying to live the gospel together as long as there was breath in their lungs. I began interviewing and asking to learn from these leaders for the purpose of sharing some of their stories with others.

The churches I have learned from and whose stories I will share each do ministry in unique contexts and in ways that cannot always be replicated. These are not megachurches—in fact every church highlighted here worships at less than two hundred people most weeks. What they are is alive and trying their best to live the gospel together,
resurrected by God through people who were led by the Spirit to do ministry in ways they could not have imagined. They also appear to no longer worry about becoming the next megachurch or about how long they will last. They are too busy swinging for the gospel until their last breath.

One of the things we have found and that my interview with other pastors have confirmed is that there is no catch-all model for leading mainline churches into this kind of missional laboratory. Every church has a unique history, resources and facilities, theological identity, and exists in a context. In fact, what I heard repeatedly in my own experience and from colleagues during my information gathering is that the catch-all models handed down by megachurches and guaranteed to work in all scenarios had been tried multiple times and failed. The number of mainline churches with closets full of light and sound systems that a conference, book, or well-meaning pastor had promised would increase attendance are legion. There are also a plethora of financially struggling congregations going broke by paying classically trained musical talent to lead worship for folks who play guitar, drums, and bass and have natural skills for other styles.

Instead, it seems in reviewing the literature of missional church and the practices of thriving mainline churches that moving toward mission and sustainability is an ongoing process in which churches have a method for evaluating the call of the gospel, who they are, and who they serve. The stories of these congregations involved failures, restarts, and lucky circumstances that occurred as they looked, often for the first time, at what they had to offer instead of identifying what they were not capable of. Most of the stories shared with me by pastors and church leaders could not be replicated in another
community, but the quest behind their mission and the intentionality of their considering the gospel in new ways seems consistent.

A Gospel Framework

The ultimate aim of this project is to provide a vehicle for local mainline congregations to begin a conversation about the gospel and to seek their unique gospel mission together. With the tools provided a church can assess health, self-reflect, and consider their identity and the opportunities they have to be of service to their neighbors as a community together. We will use the inspirational church of female disciples from Matthew as our guide. These female disciples offer us the following framework for assessing the various ministries of the church: facing reality, gospel dreaming, taking the risks, and staying fresh.

Facing Reality

While other disciples hid in fear, the women described in Matthew faced the awful reality of the cross and the tomb. In so doing they acknowledged the reality of death and pain for Jesus yet continued to minister to him as he had commanded in Matthew 25 in those moments. This is how they first experienced the good news of the resurrection. For each area of ministry we assess together we will consider where this particular ministry is in its health and life journey. All of us, every church, and every ministry moves from dust to dust just as we describe it on Ash Wednesday. Only when we truly acknowledge that reality can we begin the journey of considering the legacy that we leave for the sake of the gospel of Jesus and embrace the promise of resurrection.
Gospel Dreaming

One of the realities of the comparison of male and female disciples in Matthew is that what each of them had to lose was different. Jewish men, like the twelve, in a first century world had their own struggles under the Roman government, but their gender offered them privileges within the Jewish community that were completely unknown to women. Female disciples of Jesus, however, were not gifted by their culture with the same options. Jesus had shared his privilege with and highlighted the wisdom and gifts of women in a way that was rare for his world. Losing Jesus meant losing the one who had included their voices in theological conversations and been willing to learn from the women. There was no status for them to protect in the face of Good Friday. There was nothing to lose.

These women turned powerlessness into strength, allowing themselves to take risks that their male counterparts feared. Here we see a potential strength of the declining mainline church. Unlike the megachurches with institutional attachments to protect, the declining mainline church has the strength and freedom to take risks because they have little to lose. Perhaps if we shake off the unlikely idea that if the right circumstance and pastor comes along our church will return to cultural power and instead see the strength and freedom in our powerlessness, we can be inspired to dream again.

In this second phase of this process for churches, gathered participants will be invited to dream together without fearing the risk of failure. They will consider the ways that women of Matthew practiced Matthew 25 together and imagine how they might attempt to do the same.
Taking the Risks

For many declining mainline congregations risk-taking is a particularly scary venture. Often such churches have a long history of attempting the next big fad that promised institutional renewal—worship style changes, marketing packages, and the like all came and went with each pastoral transition and made none of the promised impact. Perhaps these changes even created additional conflict. This common congregational history along with the ongoing reminder of mainline decline across the country leaves such congregations with a collective feeling of failure and shame.

The women of Matthew were risk takers. They surely did not know that resurrection was coming, but they knew they were called to act as like Jesus’ sheep. So, with no guarantees of results, in fact with likely no expectation of positive results, they went to the tomb to live the gospel together.

Having considered reality and dreaming of a response, now our participants will consider the specific risks they might take first as a church. What is this church’s unique version of journeying to the tomb of Jesus together, uncertain and hopeful, to see what might happen? Within each category, considered participants will agree on a first risk to attempt together. There will be no promise of perfection or a guaranteed outcome—this is not be the point. Rather, it will be to invite a church to take risks together again for the sake of the gospel with the understanding that, much like a scientific lab, failure is an acceptable outcome. The point is the willingness to go down swinging for the gospel, regardless of outcome. Consistently, across interviews with pastors for this project, it was not particular methods or outcomes that defined the renewed mission of a church, but the willingness to take risks beyond a congregation’s previously accepted norms.
Staying Fresh

Imagine the women of Matthew. They have seen the stone rolled away. They have spoken with the resurrected Jesus and received his instructions. They have gone to give his news to the twelve and encourage them to meet him in Jerusalem. What could they possibly do now? While the women are not mentioned again in Matthew, when we read the story of Pentecost in Acts we are told that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and “some women” are in the room praying with the other disciples before the Spirit comes and the church is born (Acts 1:14). Here they are again seeking the next steps of the mission that Jesus has for them. The missio dei of the church appears not to be an exclusive one-time philosophy that churches arrive at when they develop a trendy mission statement. Instead it appears that the mission changes in the seasons of the lives of Jesus followers.

In this step participants will covenant to continue periodic check-ins with one another to consider if it is time to try a new mission goal they have developed or to review the process again as a church. Some churches may find it helpful to use this process once a month, once a year, or once a quarter to consider the ways they will seek to follow Jesus together.

Now, let us begin our journey of considering the ways a church might examine their life together and seek the mission of the gospel. We will hear stories of the friends I met along the way. ¹ We will look to the women of Matthew for guidance. We will dream together.

¹ For the purposes of maintaining the privacy of interviewees and their congregations and to avoid any unhelpful criticism of their ministries, some details and names of particular leaders and congregations are changed.
Assessing Institutional Health

Two yoked mainline churches in the same county where Reverend Sally Thomas was the pastor were each experiencing significant signs of decline. Each church, through a judicatory denominational partnership, engaged in intentional seasons of assessing their potential for future ministry. Each assessment brought tough news about the prospect of each church for continuing in typical institutional ministry. Each responded in different ways.

Grace Church responded to the reality that their institutional life was no longer sustainable with grief, acceptance, and even some hope. They spent a final year together celebrating their legacy. Sally invited guest preachers from their past and encouraged storytelling in worship. A team made of most of the remaining members met with potential partners with whom they could share the funds of their property sale with upon closure. On the last day of their formal gatherings they split the funds they were to receive with a ministry to the homeless in their city and a denominational camp for children.

Five years after the sale of their property, Sally, along with members of that church, gather monthly to serve at the homeless ministry they supported followed by a shared meal at a local restaurant. They volunteer to support fundraisers that help pay for children in their old neighborhood to go to camp to learn how loved they are by God. This church may be dead institutionally, but the mission of Jesus is perhaps more alive in them than it had been during the years when they were gathering every week.
Mercy Church, the other congregation, reacted to the news of their internal assessment with anger. Determined to prove the data wrong, they fired Reverend Sally, the pastor who had encouraged them to consider their future in the first place. A group of congregants soon left angrily in response to her firing. They hired a younger male pastor who they believed would be more attractive to the neighbors and invested in a new website. Church members soon tired of his preaching style and evangelical theology and fired him as well. After months of ongoing conflict and spending what they had left in the bank, Mercy Church closed too. However, members of the church experienced pain and unresolved grief at the way things ended. Sally shared that a number of congregants from Mercy Church still express anger and blame toward her or denominational leadership for their closure. Many of them appear to have stopped attending church in general.

Each year on Ash Wednesday I, along with every mainline pastor I know, marks the heads of congregants and reminds them that “From dust you were born and to dust you will return.” We do this so that during Lent we pause to consider what it is we are doing for the gospel in this brief and precious time we are given. We remember that this is time that will end.

Churches, just like people, will all die at some point. It would seem that the courage to acknowledge the reality of a church’s potential death or fragile existence and admitting we are mostly powerlessness in all of this can free people to be better disciples of Jesus. The women of Matthew, no doubt in great grief, gathered around the foul stench of death to see new life. The folks from Grace Church were willing to walk through death’s door together and for this they experienced the beauty of resurrection.
Unfortunately, some declining mainline congregations may find that, to avoid the pain of institutional death or maybe just the death of particular church ministries that can no longer be sustained, they have been working exhaustively to defeat an enemy that always wins. As Sally and Grace Church discovered, the death of institutional power and identity is not the same as the end of the mission of the gospel. In this chapter and portion of your internal assessment you will consider the health of your church institutionally.

First, here’s an important note. Assessing your institutional health is not the same as assessing your value, your potential for changing lives, or your love of Jesus. The women of Matthew had zero institutional value. They had no by-laws, property, staff, or budget reports, but being close enough to see and share the reality of Jesus’ pain was power enough. What they did have together changed the world. Our goal in this section is to see if there are ways that institutional health has become such a burden that it limits your church’s ability to do the beautiful resurrection work of mission in a sustainable way. Our hope is to help you make room for more of the fun and transformational stuff of the gospel.

As I shared about my church in the introduction, our debt and history of internal conflict kept us from living the gospel mission of Jesus together. There were too many other distractions. Through a series of haphazard efforts and honest conversations, we moved to a spiritual position that allowed us to remove those institutional distractions and start having fun again. We also found that we relieved a tension through direct conversations that allowed us to love each other better again.

A pastor, Tom, I interviewed for this project shared about his small active congregation that was paying significant expenses to keep an aging building in operation.
The building was beautiful and a part of their medium-sized city’s architectural landscape. The expense of painting the uniquely designed space and repairing the roof and aging heating and cooling systems had exhausted the finances and the physical energy of the congregation.

They loved their facility and there was no interest in selling their property. They would not risk the loss of a space whose beauty seemed to contribute to the spiritual aesthetic of the neighborhood, and which felt deeply connected to their communal spirituality. Still, as members came and went, it became clear to Tom that the building issues were even exhausting to newcomers who were quickly put to work making repairs or painting. He also discovered that there were secret dreams among the people of doing a different kind of volunteer work to meet the needs of others together instead of constant building and lawn work.

A new pastor in just his first few months of service, Tom heard multiple hushed conversations that iterated all of these feelings about the building, but no one in the congregation dared raised the issue for fear it might lead to a movement to sell the property. Tom saw a bubbling movement of the Spirit at work among the people in these conversations. He took a chance and invited some creative and philanthropic folks from the church to his home for dinner and asked, “Is there a way that we can dream together of continuing to worship in our current space but eliminate the burden of caring for this building?”

Participants in the dinner agreed to pray, consider their resources, and come back together at Tom’s table one month later. Together they arrived with different possibilities. Eventually, this informal gathering led to the church selling the building to the county to
house a museum with the agreement that the church could still use the space for offices, meetings, and Sunday worship. The county had access to grants and resources to care for the historic facility well beyond the means and time of the congregation. Tom’s church was now free to dream of God’s mission beyond the four walls of the space they gathered in on Sundays.

Mainline congregations are institutions linked with other institutions. They hire workers, pay employee taxes, meet city zoning codes, and maintain, in one form or another, spaces to gather in. They also support larger denominational entities that serve to meet the needs of mission in places around the globe. As we have already discussed, it is a reality of congregational life that these institutions are born, grow, change, experience hardship, and, eventually, die. They, as we remember on Ash Wednesday, are born of the dust of human beings and to dust they return.

Many mainline congregations, like Tom’s church, fear the consequences of serious conversations about institutional health. Such conversations can awaken or bring light to conflicts, can lower morale, or lead to unwanted dialogue about the endings of ministries within the church. Yet, the women of the gospel understood that hiding from reality did not make it any less real. It only meant they would not know how to carry the gospel forward in light of the situation.

Institutional Health Team

If your church is using this resource to complete a Visioning Summit as suggested in the assessment guide, you may be one of four people who are part of the Institutional Health Team. Using the guide sheets provided at the end of this section, teams charged
with assessing institutional health will begin collecting data prior to your gathering for a Vision Summit to be held with other Visioneers (that’s our fancy word for participants of the summit) from your church. Having collected this data, your Institutional Health Team will rate your current institutional health together and summarize why they rated this area of ministry as they did. This summary will be provided to all participants at least seven days prior to your Vision Summit.

During your summit you, along with all of the other participants, will dream of ways to address issues you have identified as needing growth. If you perceive Institutional Health to be a strength of this ministry you might instead consider how it can aid in meeting other objectives.

Finally, at the end of your summit, you and other participants will agree on one to two areas for your congregation to step forward and take risks to address any issues related to your institutional health. Together you will share these risky next steps with your congregation and hold each other accountable for attempting them. These may be wildly successful, beyond all you have ever imagined, or that may fall flat. The point is to get in the game and start attempting some risks that might invite you to live the mission of Jesus together more fully. The graphs below describe the work you will be doing.
## Four Step Processing for Assessing Institutional Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>YOU ARE HERE</em></th>
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<th>Taking the Risks (Vision Summit(s))</th>
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## Assessment Areas of Ministry

### **Institutional Health:**

**Facing Reality:** What are our institutional trends in finance, member participation, and relational health? Are there sustainability targets that need to be met?

**Gospel Dreaming:** What’s a sustainable and mission-focused expectation and description of your next five years look like as an institution?

**Taking Risks:** What are 1-2 important issues or goals to move your church toward institutional health you can attempt together?

**Staying Fresh:** Quarterly progress check-in.
Institutional Health: Facing Reality Pre-Assessment

Instructions
Complete this pre-assessment with the Institutional Health Team: four people capable of collecting data and assessing institutional health. Upon completion, share your results with all participants from each team who will participate in the Visioning Summit.

Emotional Health Survey
Which of these best describes your church’s emotional health and the presence of conflict in your congregational relationships? Why did you answer as you did?

RED: Conflict has been present in the last five years and seems largely unresolved

YELLOW: Conflict has been present in the last five years and has intentionally been addressed and appears to be improving.

GREEN: Our church is, for all and intents and purposes, free of significant conflict.

Why did you answer as you did?

Financial Health Survey
Compile five years of financial records for your church including your congregation’s annual income, annual spending, and planned budget for each year. Having reviewed these records which of these best describes your church’s financial health?

RED: Giving has declined and we have not made sustainable changes to our financial targets.

YELLOW: Giving has declined and we have attempted to address it but there are lingering, unaddressed issues which complicate our financial health.
GREEN: Our church is in a financially sustainable and healthy position.

Why did you answer as you did?

INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH PRE-ASSESSMENT: FACING REALITY

Administrative Health Survey

Compile one year’s worth of average adult church participation. For many churches this will mean worship attendance, but it can include others. To the best of your ability determine the percentage of your participating adults serving in church volunteering positions that exist within or for the institution. This would include volunteer greeters, musicians, and treasurers. It would not include those who serve at soup kitchens or clothing pantries. Compile and count a list of all institutional volunteer positions. Having done so, which of the following best describes your church’s administrative health?

RED: More than sixty-five percent of participants are engaged in institutionally-focused volunteering. Multiple volunteer positions go unfilled or are held by the same persons for long terms. We have little time to serve outside our institutional life.

YELLOW: A high percentage of participants are engaged in institutionally-focused volunteering. We have considered or attempted to restructure the number of volunteer roles, but we still are not there yet.

GREEN: Less than forty percent of participants are engaged in institutionally-focused volunteering with rotating roles and a broad representation of our congregation
serving. This leaves most of us with time to serve our neighbors beyond institutional responsibilities.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Facing Reality: Pre-Assessment Summary**

Meet with your Institutional Health Team to discuss the results of your survey. Together write a one-half page (typed) summary of your findings to share with other Vision Summit participants. Share your survey results, any important issues you discussed, and the summary with other Visioneers a minimum of one week prior to your Vision Summit.

**INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH: GOSPEL DREAMING**

Vision Summit Session 1

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Approximate Session Length: 45 minutes.
Session Instructions

Tape four large sheets of paper at different spots around the room. Provide markers for each participant. Label each area with the categories “Emotional Health,” “Financial Health,” and “Administrative Health” in the appropriate color (red, yellow, or green) as summarized in your pre-assessment. Ask one Visioneer from your Institutional Health Team to stand at each sheet to be available for explanations or questions from other participants. Place a table with paper, pens, and markers at each area.

Pre-Assessment Review (10 Minutes):

1. Upon gathering your participants for completing this portion of your Visioning Summit invite participants from this team to present a five-minute summary of their overall findings including data, team surveys, and summary.

2. Invite all participants to ask questions about issues identified by the team in their pre-assessment as it relates to each area.

Gospel Dreaming Together (15 Minutes):

1. Break Visioneers into new groups of four including one person from each team per group. Include members of each team type in these groups to encourage a diversity of perspectives.

2. Provide these directions to the groups:

   a. When the music begins you will have five minutes at each station to problem solve.

   b. The goal of this process is a greater quantity of solutions and strategies. Not in-depth deliberation or elimination of possibilities.
c. RED CATEGORIES: For red areas, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward yellow and green.

d. YELLOW CATEGORIES: For yellow areas, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward green.

e. GREEN CATEGORIES: For green areas, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin positively capitalizing on this strength to fulfill the gospel mission of your church.

3. Ask if there are any questions about the process.

4. Begin music and set timer to rotate groups through each station at five-minute increments.

5. At the end of the rotation provide participants with a two-minute break for restrooms and water.

INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH: TAKING THE RISKS

Vision Summit Session 2

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Approximate Session Length: 40 minutes.
Taking the Risks

1. Invite participants to gather back at different tables in the room with the same team they completed the last rotation with.

2. Explain that each group will now consider the Gospel Dreaming options written on the sheets of paper posted on the walls. Groups will have fifteen minutes to complete this portion of the exercise.

3. Ask one group member per table to record all suggestions on a sheet of paper. This will be important for future check-ins.

4. During the fifteen-minute discussion, having considered the list of potential options from the Gospel Dreaming exercise, groups will choose two options from the listed suggestions offered on the sheets as possible first risks for their congregation to take. These should not be ranked. Groups may combine or rearrange solutions into one option as they deem necessary.

   a. Groups should consider the following questions, among others, when choosing their two potential risks to take.

      i. Is this potential solution sustainable?

      ii. Does this solution address the presenting problem or strength to be considered?

      iii. Does this solution focus us more toward living the gospel mission together?

      iv. Does this solution create unnecessary institutional tasks to be completed?
v. Have we given weight to addressing significant red or yellow areas that are a priority for allowing us to move forward?

5. Having developed the list of two options, the group should take down the other sheets of paper on the wall at their table and replace them with their two solutions, making sure they have copied down a list of the other options that were not included in the final two.

6. Upon completion of the fifteen minutes, invite each team to make a one-minute presentation of their top two risks to the whole room, allowing one to two minutes for questions. As each group shares their two options ask a recorder to make a list of the eight solutions presented for the Institutional Health area of ministry on a sheet in the center of the room.

7. Once all groups have shared, begin playing music again. Invite all group participants to use notepads at tables to write and rank the eight solutions on a scale of one to eight with one being the first and most necessary step the congregation should take in this area of ministry. Explain that members have ten minutes to complete the exercise and may also use this as a moment to take a drink or go to the restroom.

8. Ask a volunteer to collect and tabulate rankings, identifying the two solutions with the lowest score as the potential risks for the congregation to take.

9. Reassemble the groups at their tables. Ask the group to discuss together the two tasks they have identified. Are they progressive tasks? Should they be completed in a specific order? Will they require additional help, partners, or resources to
achieve? Can the church tackle both tasks at once or should they be done consecutively?

10. After five or less minutes of conversation, ask the original Institutional Health Team to craft together a one-half page typed future story describing the risk the congregation will take together to address the issues raised in the pre-assessment. This work will be done at the end of the Vision Summit once all other areas have been discussed.

Assessing Resources and Partners

It would have been easy for the women of Matthew to skip out on the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. They would have had little money, no power with the Roman government to advocate for Jesus, or even a place to bury him. What could a small group of minority women do for Jesus in their patriarchal world?

The women of Matthew did a lot, in fact. One woman found the resources for anointing Jesus when others appeared clueless as to what was about to happen to him. We are told that the women are present at the tomb when Joseph of Arimathea arranges for and places Jesus’ body in the tomb (Mt 27:61). They may not have had political power, but the resources they do have are time, compassionate presence, and the courage to stand up to the Roman guards. These are the gifts that match the description of those offered by Jesus’ sheep in Matthew 25. Somehow, they appear to have been resourceful enough to be with others like Joseph who had different gifts as a wealthy male disciple to bring to the situation.
Janet’s Story

My colleague, Reverend Janet, shepherds a church very similar to mine. Our buildings were built in the same timeframe by mainline denominations hopeful that growing suburbs would lead to large gatherings on Sunday mornings. Instead, for whatever reason, my colleague Janet’s church had attracted primarily senior adults from their inception despite existing in the middle of a neighborhood full of young families with children.

Throughout their history, the congregation was financially generous to various service organizations and did several community events over the years to connect with neighbors. At one point they tried modern worship music, but it was not their style. They did not have the gifts in the congregation to do it well and it showed. They loved it when these attempts to connect with others helped them make new friends from the neighborhood, but unlike what the church growth books promised, none of this ever led to substantial numerical growth.

As the congregation continued to age, they struggled to make payments on their building’s mortgage and finally had to sell their property. Their situation, to this point, mirrors the story of my congregation which I shared earlier. However, this congregation’s resources were different. They did not have the younger membership capable of renovating a rented space as volunteers. They did not have a pastor who had been a planter before. For them to have made the same choice as our church, given their resources, would have been a huge mistake.
Instead, this church had Janet, a pastor who was also a gifted hospital chaplain and whose gifts were in elder pastoral care. Their property sold for significantly more than ours did, giving them resources to pave a new road for their future. Some members already lived in the same assisted living and nursing home facility in the neighborhood and others had considered moving there. They considered these resources, after much time and prayer, and this church approached the assisted living facility about the possibility of using the congregation’s money to pay for a part-time chaplain to serve their residents.

An endowment fund was to provide an ordained part-time chaplain, currently Janet, for the senior center for as long as the funds last. More incredibly, residents and their families who were not part of the church before were now being ministered to by Janet. They were so excited about their new chaplain that they began contributing to the endowment as well. This is a church who, like the women of Matthew, knew their own resources and found the right partner. They chose to go out into the scary world around them and to serve their neighbors. Had I been their pastor, as cuddly and pastoral as a porcupine, this choice would have been a disaster. They knew who they were, what they had to offer, and what their limits and strengths were. They decided to use their unique identity and go down swinging.

No matter what the statistics about decline tell us, the smallest and oldest congregations have great resources to offer their communities. In addition, churches in the mainline often maintain a sense of partnering with their denominational and missional institutions in a way that makes a much larger global impact than one would expect from a small church. Many large independent churches spend all or nearly all of their financial
resources funding buildings and multiple staff. A small mainline church committed to using their resources well can change the world. A resource assessment is key to know what gifts your church has to offer.

Laura’s Story

Like many towns their size, the community that Laura Smith’s church served had experienced severe economic changes as factories shuttered in the early 2000s. Empty strip malls lined the main drag of the city. The number of people struggling with addiction in her city skyrocketed.

Laura’s church was small and aging, but they happened to be flush with financial resources from funds that the church had put in an endowment years ago. In a board meeting as a church member shared about the mission work and needs of the community, reviewing the financial statement in front of her, this prophetic church member suggested that the congregation buy the closed Wal-Mart acility and give it to the community. After all, they were getting older, had nice facilities, and were not going to spend that money on themselves.

At first, this suggestion was met with skepticism and fear—what if we give away what we have and it does not come back to us? Laura’s church eventually chose to use their resources, to find partners, and create a new community center to meet her city’s needs. The closed Wal-Mart now offers space to addiction counselors, houses indoor batting cages for the local girls’ softball team, and recently hosted a prom for adults with disabilities.
Some churches have seniors who can volunteer to answer phones at a cancer center during the workday. Others have younger bodies that can do construction or repairs on community homes. Some are home to classical musicians who can lead worship while others are home to band leaders. Some may be the only LGBTQ affirming church within one hundred miles. Some have empty basements that could house community gatherings.

Resource and Partner Team

If your church is using this resource to complete a Visioning Summit as suggested in the assessment guide, you may be one of four people who are part of the Resource and Partner Team. Using the guide sheets provided at the end of this section, teams charged with assessing your church’s resources and partners will begin collecting data prior to your gathering for a Vision Summit to be held with other Visioneers (that’s our fancy word for participants of the summit) from your church. Having collected this data, your team will summarize their findings and why they rated this area of ministry as they did. This summary will be provided to all participants at least seven days prior to your Vision Summit.

During your summit, you, along with all of the other participants, will dream of ways to address issues you have identified as being in need of growth. If you perceive Resources and Partners to be a strength of this ministry you might instead consider how it can aid in meeting other objectives.

Finally, at the end of your summit, you and other participants will agree on one to two areas for your congregation to step forward and take risks to address any issues
related to your resources and strengths. Together you will share these risky next steps with your congregation and hold each other accountable for attempting them. These may be wildly successful, beyond all you have ever imagined, or that may fall flat. The point is to get in the game and start attempting some risks that might invite you to live the mission of Jesus together more fully. The graphs below describe the work you will be doing.

**Four Step Process for Assessing Resources and Partners**

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**Assessment Areas of Ministry**

**Resources & Partners:**

**Facing Reality:** What is the cultural and demographic makeup of your congregation and what strengths do they offer?

**Gospel Dreaming:** What makes your church spiritually and practically unique in the community?

**Taking Risks:** What are 1-2 risky gifts you can sustainably offer to the neighborhood, alone or with partners, with no expected returns?

**Staying Fresh:** Quarterly check-in.
### Resources and Partners: Facing Reality Pre-Assessment

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### Instructions

Complete this pre-assessment with the Resources and Partners Team, made up of four people capable of collecting data and assessing institutional health. Upon completion, share your results with all participants from each team who will participate in the visioning summit.

### Key Partnership Survey

A key to churches seeking to capitalize on partnerships for doing better ministry is to be intentional about who their partners are. As one pastor told me in an interview, a small church that supports twenty missions really supports no mission. To put it another way, imagine the difference in impact when a church chooses to support two mission partners at $10,000 annually and ten weekly volunteer hours verses twenty partners at $1,000 each and a few annual hours. Smaller churches are able to magnify their financial and volunteer impact by eliminating clutter and choosing intentional and specific mission...
partners to support together. These may be denominational partners, local shelters or schools, or organizations like Habitat for Humanity. Rate your church’s intentionality in partnership below.

**RED:** Our church does not significantly support any mission partners of note either financially or in volunteering hours.

**YELLOW:** Our church supports many partners and volunteers with them all sporadically.

**GREEN:** Our church has intentionally identified 2-3 mission partners who we support in volunteering and finances in ways that have impact and create longstanding relationships.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Relationships and Partners Pre-Assessment: Facing Reality**

**Community Relationship Survey:**

Compile data related to your congregation members’ home addresses and drive time to worship. Churches whose regular attendees do not live in the neighborhood of their worship facility often struggle to develop true partnering relationships in the community surrounding their church.

**RED:** A significant portion of our worshiping community lives in neighborhoods that are five or more miles from our worship location. We do not have strong relationships with people in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding our facility or other partners located there.
**YELLOW:** While many of us still live in the neighborhood, the average drive and distance to our facility is increasing as more of us move to new neighborhoods and/or the neighborhood surrounding us changes.

**GREEN:** Our church is comfortably rooted in the neighborhood surrounding our facility. Families live in those communities, attend close-by schools, and know the issues facing our neighbors.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Facility Usage Survey:**

One way to assess a church’s connection to their neighbors is to consider how their facilities are used to offer time and space to the community. Every hour spent by brownie troops, homeowners associations, programs for meals, overnight stays for those with no home, or twelve step groups is an opportunity to build relationships. Further, churches trying to live like Matthew 25 do more than offer space. They seek creative ways to develop relationships of compassion with no strings attached. They greet scouts with surprise donuts and high fives, order pizza for the evening A.A. group, or make sure volunteers for overnight programs are staffed by people from their congregation and community. How would you rate your church’s facility usage?

**RED:** Our space is reserved primarily for institutional church functions first and foremost.

**YELLOW:** We welcome a few community groups by providing them a key and showing them where the light switch is, but have not been intentional about building relationships.
GREEN: Our space belongs to the community, no strings attached, and we seek to know and develop relationships with them when they are in our midst.

Why did you answer as you did?

Facing Reality: Pre-Assessment Summary

Meet with your Resources and Partners Team to discuss the results of your survey. Together write a one-half page (typed) summary of your findings to share with other Vision Summit Participants. Share your survey results, any important issues you discussed, and the summary with other Visioneers a minimum of one week prior to your Vision Summit.

RESOURCES AND PARTNERS: GOSPEL DREAMING

Vision Summit Session 1

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Approximate Session Length: 45 minutes.
Instructions

Tape four large sheets of paper at different spots around the room. Provide markers for every participant. Label each area with the categories you pre-assessed in the Facing Reality stage. Write them in the appropriate color (red, yellow, or green) as summarized in your pre-assessment. Ask one Visioneer from this team to stand at each sheet to be available for explanations or questions from other participants. Place a table with paper, pens, and markers at each area.

Pre-Assessment Review (10 Minutes):

1. Upon gathering your participants for completing this portion of your Visioning Summit invite participants from this team to present a five-minute summary of their overall findings including data, team surveys, and summary.

2. Invite all participants to ask questions about issues identified by the team in their pre-assessment as it relates to each area.

Gospel Dreaming Together (15 Minutes):

3. Break Visioneers into new groups of four including one person from each team per group. Include members of each team type in these groups to encourage a diversity of perspectives.

4. Provide these directions to the groups:

   a. When music begins you will have five minutes at each station to problem solve.
b. The goal of this process is to obtain a greater quantity of solutions and strategies—not in-depth deliberation or elimination of possibilities.

c. RED CATEGORIES: For areas which are red, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward yellow and green.

d. YELLOW CATEGORIES: For areas which are yellow, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward green.

e. GREEN CATEGORIES: For areas which are green offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin positively capitalizing on this strength to fulfill the gospel mission of your church.

5. Ask if there are any questions about the process.

6. Begin music and set timer to rotate groups through each station at five-minute increments.

7. At the end of the rotation provide participants with a two-minute break for restrooms and water.
RESOURCES AND PARTNERS:

Vision Summit Session 2

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Approximate Session Length: 40 minutes

**Taking Risks:**

1. Invite participants to gather back at different tables in the room with the same team they completed the last rotation with.

2. Explain that each group will now consider the Gospel Dreaming options written on the sheets of paper provided on the wall. Groups will have fifteen minutes to complete this portion of the exercise.

3. Ask one group member per table to record all suggestions on a sheet of paper. This will be important for future check-ins.

4. During the fifteen-minute discussion, having considered the list of potential options from the Gospel Dreaming exercise, groups will choose two options from the listed suggestions offered on the sheets as possible first risks for their congregation to take. These should not be ranked. Groups may combine or rearrange solutions into one option as they deem necessary.
5. Groups should consider the following questions, among others, when choosing their two potential risks to take.
   a. Is this potential solution sustainable?
   b. Does this solution address the presenting problem or strength to be considered?
   c. Does this solution focus us more toward living the gospel mission together?
   d. Does this solution create unnecessary institutional tasks to be completed?
   e. Have we given weight to addressing significant red or yellow areas that are a priority for allowing us to move forward?

6. Having developed the list of two options, the group should take down the other sheets of paper on the wall at their table and replace them with their two solutions making sure they have copied down a list of the other options that were not included in the final two.

7. Upon completion of the fifteen minutes invite each team to make a one-minute presentation of their top two to the whole room, allowing one to two minutes for questions. As each group shares their two options ask a recorder to make a list of the eight solutions presented for the Institutional Health area of ministry on a sheet in the center of the room.

8. Once all groups have shared, begin playing music again. Invite all group participants to use notepads at tables to write and rank the eight solutions on a scale of one to eight with one being the first and most necessary step the congregation should take in this area of ministry. Explain that members have ten
minutes to complete the exercise and may also use this as a moment to get a
drink or go to the restroom.

9. Ask a volunteer to collect and tabulate rankings, identifying the two solutions
with the lowest score as the potential risks for the congregation to take.

10. Reassemble the groups at their tables. Ask the group to discuss together the two
tasks they have identified. Are they progressive tasks? Should they be
completed in a specific order? Will they require additional help, partners, or
resources to achieve? Can the church tackle both tasks at once or should they be
done consecutively?

11. After five or less minutes of conversation, ask the team to craft together a one-
half page typed summarized future story describing the risk the congregation
will take together to address the issues raised in the pre-assessment. This work
will be done at the end of the Vision Summit once all other areas have been
discussed.

Assessing Invitational Culture

Monica, the pastor of a rural mainline church, shared with me a way that her
church told the good news in a risky way. After the Supreme Court ruled that gay
marriage was legal, the justice of the peace in the small southern town where she served
stopped performing any marriage ceremonies for couples, gay or straight, as an act of
protest. For straight couples in the community this was not much of an issue. There was a
church on every corner willing to host their wedding. For gay couples in the community,
particularly those who were not internet savvy enough to get a friend ordained online, this meant traveling long distances to find a judge willing to perform their ceremony.

This pastor and her church had been ideologically progressive for years but had never made the full inclusion of LGBTQ folks an official policy. The families who had called the church home for years did not know many out gay people in their community and did not previously understand the need for such an act. In this moment, however, an elderly lady from the church approached Monica and suggested that they become the church in the community known for doing gay weddings. Soon, with board approval, a sign hung on the front lawn of the church, which was across the street from the courthouse, which read “Free weddings for all. LGBTQ+ Friends Welcome Here.”

This was risky in the conservative community where Confederate Flag bumper stickers far outnumber the occasional gay pride sticker on the highway. The local paper did a story in which they interviewed local pastors, all of whom said the church’s actions were unbiblical. The church sign was vandalized, and it was stolen more than once. Soon, however, word spread among the LGBTQ folks in this town and surrounding cities that this church was a safe place where their marriages and families would be celebrated. For each couple, Monica offered free premarital counseling in which she got to affirm their love and share why she believed God loved them and blessed their relationship just as they were. Multiple couples and singles who were LGBTQ, allies, friends, and family made this church their place of worship—the only church they had experienced in their part of the world where two men could stand proudly at their son’s baptism and proclaim their commitment to make their home a place of love and service. With their risky sign
they also created conversations about inclusion in other local churches whose members started asking why their congregations were not inclusive.

While Monica did not set out to make her church a megachurch when she hung the sign that day, she did decide it was important to do more than just offer weddings. She wanted every couple and family she met with to know that her church was a place where they could nurture their family’s spiritual life and follow Jesus in community as equal partners in the gospel. It mattered to her that they knew the church was offering a long-term invitation to be loved and known just as they were, not merely providing a free service and going away. Soon Monica’s church became the largest worshiping congregation in this small rural county seat town, known for welcoming and celebrating all who have felt pushed away from the table of Jesus.

Churches that transcend the bad news of mainline decline are places that take holy risks and are not afraid to be evangelistic. We mean this in the sense that they truly believe what is happening in Jesus’ name; their congregation is spiritually transformative and want others to experience it. This is not the same as inviting others on the journey for the sake of institutional survival or because you have been obligated.

The women who met Jesus on Easter morning were present when it was risky. They did real hands-on acts of compassion. Yet, we would know none of this or the story of Easter had they not felt the need to share the story and invite others to join them in the work of the gospel. Many mainline congregations do well in seeking hands-on acts of compassion and speaking up for social justice. Those who are passionate about these parts of the gospel are often folks who find a home in progressive churches. We seem to struggle, however, with our invitation to others.
A summary of the interviews for this project suggests that mainline churches with a developed sense of mission become naturally invitational. While none of them were megachurches, they were churches that hosted people who were new to following Jesus and who had found a safe place to explore faith in these congregations.

When asked why their churches were able to welcome such guests, a few suggestions were offered. Despite the ongoing conversation in recent years that worship attendance is less important as a datapoint for discipleship, pastors shared that this was still where they were most often to experience newcomers to faith. Multiple church leaders suggested that they welcomed newcomers, in part, because church members were able to articulate who they were and why they mattered as a local church. There was a sense of mission and identity beyond denominational polity or logos that made people feel safe to invite. These kinds of identities included: kid-friendly, progressive, service-oriented, casual, thoughtful, or some combination of these terms.

Other pastors shared about their churches’ attempts to do things well and with the expectation that newcomers would join them for mission, worship, and community events. There were directions and statements of welcome for new folks offered for elements like communion in worship. One church realized that, though they had long done traditional worship with an organ and choir these were not the best gifts of their church and they found it difficult to do it well. On the other hand, they were gifted with a guitarist and violinist who could arrange hymns for the church to sing creatively each week. This made for a worship experience that was well done, inviting, and more sustainable than their previous attempts to pay for expensive music staff and worship with a very inconsistent volunteer choir. All of these practical suggestions seem simple,
but easy to forget when churches find themselves in the insular rut of institutional survival.

Invitational Culture Team

If your church is using this resource to complete a Visioning Summit as suggested in the assessment guide you may be one of four people who are part of the Invitational Culture Team. Using the guide sheets provided at the end of this section teams charged with assessing your church’s invitational culture will begin collecting data prior to your gathering for a Vision Summit to be held with other Visioneers (that’s our fancy word for participants of the summit) from your church. Having collected this data, your team will summarize their findings and why they rated this area of ministry as they did. This summary will be provided to all participants at least seven days prior to your Vision Summit.

During your summit you, along with all of the other participants, will dream of ways to address issues you have identified as needing growth. If you perceive invitational culture to be a strength of this ministry you might instead consider how it can aid in meeting other objectives.

Finally, at the end of your summit, you and other participants will agree on one to two areas for your congregation to step forward and take risks to address any issues related to your invitational culture. Together you will share these risky next steps with your congregation and hold each other accountable for attempting them. These may be wildly successful, beyond all you have ever imagined, or that may fall flat. The point is to
get in the game and start attempting some risks that might invite you to live the mission of Jesus together more fully. The graphs below describe the work you will be doing.

**Four Step Process For Assessing Resources and Partners**

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**Assessment Areas Of Ministry**

**Invitational Culture:**

**Facing Reality:** What evidence or lack of evidence is there in our recent history of inviting others to follow Jesus? What obstacles do we see?

**Gospel Dreaming:** What might it look like for us to be more invitational in our relationships and institutional practice?

**Taking Risks:** What are 1-2 risks could we take to be more invitational?

**Staying Fresh:** Quarterly check-in.
Invitational Culture: Facing Reality Pre-Assessment

*YOU ARE HERE
Facing Reality
(Pre-assessment)
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(Vision Summit(s))
Where might the courage of the faithful women lead us?

Taking The Risks
(Vision Summit(s))
How will we take the risk of working toward 1-2 of these dreams?

Staying Fresh
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Quarterly checking in to assess and risking again.

Instructions

Complete this pre-assessment with your assigned team, made up of four people capable of collecting data and assessing invitational culture. Upon completion, share your results with all participants from each team who will participate in the visioning summit.

Evangelism Evidence Survey

While church worship and event attendance is not the only measure of discipleship, interviewed pastors consistently remarked that this was still the first stop for most newcomers who chose to follow Jesus in their congregations. Depending on your theological perspective this may look differently. It could be measured in baptisms, newcomer retention, or increased discipleship among newcomers. Gather data and respond to the survey below related to evidence of your church’s connecting for purposes of evangelism.
**RED:** Our church does not seem to embrace a spirit of invitation. There is little emphasis or conversation related to inviting others to join events, service, mission, or worship.

**YELLOW:** Our church welcomes annually a number of newcomers that is less than fifty percent of the size of our average weekly worshiping congregation. Few of those stay with us or engage and participate in new ways.

**GREEN:** Our church welcomes annually a number of newcomers that is more than fifty percent of the size of our average weekly worshiping congregation. Among those it is not uncommon for us to experience new members, professions of faith, baptisms, or other signs of increased discipleship as pertinent to your tradition.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Invitational Culture Survey: Facing Reality**

Sunday Morning Experience Survey:

One of the strengths of smaller mainline churches is that they don’t feel like cold commercial megachurches. They meet the needs of those looking for something different in the way of meeting their spiritual needs. That said, it is important that even smaller churches maintain good practices of welcome that make a first time experience a welcoming one for new friends. This may include clear signage, announcements in worship that explain child check-in procedures, the specific openness or policy around receiving communion, worship that is purposeful and done with intention, and one or multiple clear statements of welcome for all. Attempt to worship at your church from the perspective of a first timer or, better yet, invite a non-churchy friend to join you for
worship for the purpose of being a secret guest. Ask them to help you complete the survey afterward. Note, this is not the same as measuring kindness. These are practical methods of welcome.

**RED:** Our church was not as welcoming as I had hoped. Instructions related to worship practices (standing, communion, offering, attendance, child check-in, etc.) were not explained well. No obvious person was available to welcome me or answer any questions upon my arrival. Diaper changing stations were not available in each restroom. Signage was missing or unclear.

**YELLOW:** While I had hoped we would be more prepared for guests, our church did a good job of meeting more than half of the missing pieces that were listed in the red section.

**GREEN:** Our church is well prepared for guests. Greeters are well trained. Verbiage for explanation necessary for newcomers is used in worship regularly. There are places for parents of each gender to change a diaper. Bathroom policies for transgender friends were welcoming and clearly labeled. Child check-in policies were clear.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Theological Identity Survey**

Churches interviewed who experienced frequent guest worshipers and showed signs of invitational culture were those who had a clear understanding of their theological identity. When people can describe who their church is and what its values are in a way that is welcoming and clear it makes invitation less intimidating. Further, it seems that
when congregants are excited about their church’s theological identity, members are more likely to invite. Note: this is not the same as denominational affiliation. It is a description of who your church is locally. Complete the survey below related to your church’s theological identity.

**RED:** Our church’s primary identifier is denominational jargon and logos, but it seems to rarely be explained in a way that captures who we are as a congregation.

**YELLOW:** Many people in our church could name pieces of our theological identity, but it feels confusing and I would rather let the pastor do that.

**GREEN:** Our church frequently identifies our unique theological identity in worship and communication. It would be easy for me to succinctly explain to a friend why who we are theologically is what they might find helpful in their spiritual journey.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Facing Reality: Pre-Assessment Summary**

Meet with your Resources and Partners Team to discuss the results of your survey. Together write a one-half page (typed) summary of your findings to share with other Vision Summit participants. Share your survey results, any important issues you discussed, and the summary with other Visioneers a minimum of one week prior to your Vision Summit.
RESOURCES AND PARTNERS: GOSPEL DREAMING

Vision Summit Session 1

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Approximate Session Length: 45 minutes.

**Instructions**

Tape four large sheets of paper at different spots around the room. Provide markers for every participant. Label each area with the categories you pre-assessed in Facing Reality. Write them in the appropriate color (red, yellow, or green) as summarized in your pre-assessment. Ask one Visioneer from this team to stand at each sheet to be available for explanations or questions from other participants. Place a table with paper, pens, and markers at each area.

**Pre-Assessment Review (10 Minutes):**

1. Upon gathering your participants for completing this portion of your Visioning Summit invite participants from this team to present a five-minute summary of their overall findings including data, team surveys, and summary.

140
2. Invite all participants to ask questions about issues identified by the team in their pre-assessment as it relates to each area.

Gospel Dreaming Together (15 Minutes):

3. Break Visioneers into new groups of four including one person from each team per group. Include members of each team type in these groups to encourage a diversity of perspectives.

4. Provide these directions to the groups:
   a. When music begins you will have five minutes at each station to problem solve.
   b. The goal of this process is to obtain a greater quantity of solutions and strategies—not in-depth deliberation or elimination of possibilities.
   c. RED CATEGORIES: For areas which are red, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward yellow and green.
   d. YELLOW CATEGORIES: For areas which are yellow, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward green.
   e. GREEN CATEGORIES: For areas which are green offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin positively capitalizing on this strength to fulfill the gospel mission of your church.

5. Ask if there are any questions about the process.
6. Begin music and set timer to rotate groups through each station at five-minute increments.

7. At the end of the rotation provide participants with a two-minute break for restrooms and water.

INVITATIONAL CULTURE:

Vision Summit Session 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Approximate Session Length: 40 minutes

**Taking Risks:**

1. Invite participants to gather back at different tables in the room with the same team they completed the last rotation with.

2. Explain that each group will now consider the Gospel Dreaming options written on the sheets of paper provided on the wall. Groups will have fifteen minutes to complete this portion of the exercise.
3. Ask one group member per table to record all suggestions on a sheet of paper. This will be important for future check-ins.

4. During the fifteen-minute discussion, having considered the list of potential options from the Gospel Dreaming exercise, groups will choose two options from the listed suggestions offered on the sheets as possible first risks for their congregation to take. These should not be ranked. Groups may combine or rearrange solutions into one option as they deem necessary.
   a. Groups should consider the following questions, among others, when choosing their two potential risks to take.
      i. Is this potential solution sustainable?
      ii. Does this solution address the presenting problem or strength to be considered?
      iii. Does this solution focus us more toward living the gospel mission together?
      iv. Does this solution create unnecessary institutional tasks to be completed?
      v. Have we given weight to addressing significant red or yellow areas that are a priority for allowing us to move forward?

5. Having developed the list of two options, the group should take down the other sheets of paper on the wall at their table and replace them with their two solutions making sure they have copied down a list of the other options that were not included in the final two.
6. Upon completion of the fifteen minutes invite each team to make a one-minute presentation of their top two to the whole room, allowing one to two minutes for questions. As each group shares their two options ask a recorder to make a list of the eight solutions presented for the Institutional Health area of ministry on a sheet in the center of the room.

7. Once all groups have shared begin playing music again. Invite all group participants to use notepads at tables to write and rank the eight solutions on a scale of one to eight with one being the first and most necessary step the congregation should take in this area of ministry. Explain that members have ten minutes to complete the exercise and may also use this as a moment to take a drink or go to the restroom.

8. Ask a volunteer to collect and tabulate rankings, identifying the two solutions with the lowest score as the potential risks for the congregation to take.

9. Reassemble the groups at their tables. Ask the groups to discuss together the two tasks they have identified. Are they progressive tasks? Should they be completed in a specific order? Will they require additional help, partners, or resources to achieve? Can the church tackle both tasks at once or should they be done consecutively?

10. After five or less minutes of conversation, ask the team to craft together a one-half page typed summarized future story describing the risk the congregation will take together to address the issues raised in the pre-assessment. This work will be done at the end of the Vision Summit once all other areas have been discussed.
Assessing Your With-ness

The women of Matthew, on what was surely one of the hardest days of their lives, gathered with their neighbors at the cross of Jesus. Likely there were others there who were brokenhearted and some who disagreed with the movement of Jesus. Also, there was Jesus, the physical embodiment of every rejected person that he had described in Matthew 25:31-46 who he asked his sheep to be present with.

A local Methodist church in our community values the inclusion and celebration of LGBTQ+ friends from the neighborhood. For years, pastors in this church have preached sermons arguing for inclusion and the church shared a welcome statement on their website. Yet, as good a start as these were, the pastor shared with me that there were not any meaningful relationships between his congregation and LGBTQ+ folks in the community. This changed when the suburban city they were in considered an ordinance to prohibit discrimination on the basis of orientation. Soon, a large and powerful faith-based political action committee was bombarding neighborhood mailboxes with flyers threatening parents with the ramifications this would have on their children. Members of this welcoming church decided that their tasteful rainbow flag and welcome statement were not enough presence to offer their neighbors. Soon they were packing brown bag dinners and iPads to entertain their children to fill up the city council chambers two hours in advance of debate about the ordinance. There, gathered with other allies and LGBTQ+ friends, they sat side by side with their neighbors on the first Monday of the month for nearly a year, sharing brown bag dinners and friendship as they waited to speak for justice. The impact their presence had on these proceedings and the relationships of peace
that began there could have not come from letter-writing or email campaigns. They could only come by getting out of the building and being with their neighbors.

There are many simple ways for churches to be with their neighbors, those who live in proximity to the church and those described in Matthew 25, which may be the same or different. To be with these friends it helps to know who they are and what their needs are. Prior to the Visioning Summit, participants will gather demographic information of their neighborhood and interview local leaders to consider community needs. They will look for justice issues on which they can speak out. They will look for opportunities to be present for community gatherings like parades and firework displays. Together participants will dream of risks to take and set goals for taking them in the immediate future.

When our church was beginning our journey of transformation, a denominational representative leading a dialogue asked a large group of us what the community would miss if we were no longer in existence there. Several times members bravely held up a hand and rattled off the virtues of the church’s historic youth group without realizing they were speaking of a ministry that was for their families, not the neighborhood. Others spoke of support groups and home owners associations that met in our building though none of us had ever made a meaningful relational connection with any of these friends. Finally, after five minutes of stumbling through this question we realized we had no idea who our neighbors were, and they had no idea what we were doing right next door. This was in part because we had become an insular church whose mission had become mostly focused on meeting our own needs and fighting off the grim reaper of decline.
Upon our relocation, our goal was to become a part of the fabric of our neighborhood. A first step for us was to study the demographics of our neighborhood. We ordered such a report and considered the needs and lifestyle of families around us. A team of folks interviewed police officers, schoolteachers, and others to learn about community values and needs. Just as we needed to know our identity and resources, we needed to know the same of the community we were called to be with.

However, none of this data collection matters unless we choose to leave our hiding places and be among our neighbors as they gather. Mainline churches are often great at transactional charity collections where we drop off products at a building that houses organizations. How many meaningful relationships do people in your church have with people outside of your church who live in the vicinity of the neighborhood? Do they coach little league teams? Visit nursing homes and jails? Are they volunteering in schools?

With-ness Team

If your church is using this resource to complete a Visioning Summit as suggested in the assessment guide you may be one of four people who are part of the With-ness Team. Using the guide sheets provided at the end of this section, teams charged with assessing your church’s Matthew 25 with-ness will begin collecting data prior to your gathering for a Vision Summit to be held with other Visioneers (that’s our fancy word for participants of the summit) from your church. Having collected this data, your team will summarize their findings and why they rated this area of ministry as they did. This
summary will be provided to all participants at least seven days prior to your Vision Summit.

During your summit you, along with all of the other participants, will dream of ways to address issues you have identified as needing growth. If you perceive with-ness to be a strength of this ministry you might instead consider how it can aid in meeting other objectives.

Finally, at the end of your summit, you and other participants will agree on one to two areas for your congregation to step forward and take risks to address any issues related to your With-ness in the spirit of Matthew 25. Together you will share these risky next steps with your congregation and hold each other accountable for attempting them. These may be wildly successful, beyond all you have ever imagined, or they may fall flat. The point is to get in the game and start attempting some risks that might invite you to live the mission of Jesus together more fully. The graphs below describe the work you will be doing.

**Four Step Process for Assessing Resources and Partners**

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Assessment Areas of Ministry

**With-ness Challenge:**

**Facing Reality:** What are the demographics of our immediate neighborhood and their spiritual/physical needs?

**Gospel Dreaming:** What natural relationships exist between our church and our neighborhood?

**Taking Risks:** What opportunities do we have to gather with our neighbors?

**Staying Fresh:** Quarterly check-in.

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**Witness: Facing Reality Pre-Assessment**

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**Instructions**

Complete this pre-assessment with your assigned team, made up of four people capable of collecting data and assessing invitational culture. Upon completion, share your results with all participants from each team who will participate in the Visioning Summit.
Who are the People in Your Neighborhood Survey:

A church who is deeply rooted and present with its community must first know who their community is. Obtain a copy of a demographic report for a five-mile radius surrounding the location of your worship facility. Brainstorm together what the lifestyle, spiritual, and physical needs of these friends may be. Interview a local social worker or police officer and ask them to share with you their vision of the greatest needs and those communities who have need. Having obtained this information, consider your church’s missional awareness of their community, and respond to the survey as follows.

**RED**: Our church’s missional focus does not seem rooted in our neighborhood. There is little conversation about the lifestyle and spiritual needs of our neighbors and rarely any opportunity to help meet these needs or stand in presence with our neighbors.

**YELLOW**: Our church knows some of the basic needs of our community and is engaged in transactional charity—collecting cans, clothes, or other items to be donated to a center, but we rarely seek opportunities to gather in solidarity and relationships with our neighbors.

**GREEN**: Our church is a good partner and friend to the neighborhood. We are aware of issues of justice, connected to voices and people in our community who are speaking up, and seeking to stand with every neighbor.

Why did you answer as you did?
Facing Reality

Matthew 25 Survey:

In considering the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 many in the church find it easy to view them as symbolic and skip past them. Many American churches focus on institutional and evangelistic needs and ignore their responsibility to be with those that others have ignored. If we are to be sheep in the example of the women, we must be with those that Jesus embodies. Consider Jesus’ specific list of with-ness from Matthew 25. Can you identify ways in which your church is in relationship and care for these friends of Jesus? Think about the hungry, the naked, the immigrant, the sick, and the imprisoned.

**RED:** Our church is largely distracted by institutional survival issues and has not made a priority of ministry and relationship to those Jesus describes in Matthew 25.

**YELLOW:** Our church offers financial support and occasional volunteering to a ministry that meets the needs of one or more of these.

**GREEN:** Many in our church have first-name basis relationships with individuals who have been oppressed and mistreated by others and seek to empower and learn from them while offering support.

Why did you answer as you did?

Community Connection Survey:

The women of Matthew were present with Jesus throughout holy week in moments of joy, solitude, and sorrow. They celebrated resurrection, they stood by him on the cross, and they faithfully anointed him for burial. Being with your neighbors is not
only about being present in moments of darkness. Consider moments of connection and joy in your community. Is your church present? Call a local city representative or do online research to identify five of the biggest events in the life of your city. These may be parades, carnivals, athletic events, or more. Is your church present and identifiable at such events?

**RED:** Our church is primarily for people to gather and worship and occasionally serve. We are not engaged in activities like this in the community.

**YELLOW:** Periodically we have been involved community events, but often with little intentionality or preparation.

**GREEN:** Our church looks for ways to be present and engaged in these moments through acts like parade sponsorship or walking in the parade, hosting tailgates, handing out water at sporting events, etc.

Why did you answer as you did?

**Facing Reality: Pre-Assessment Summary**

Meet with your Resources and Partners Team to discuss the results of your survey. Together write a one-half page (typed) summary of your findings to share with other Vision Summit Participants. Share your survey results, any important issues you discussed, and the summary with other Visioneers a minimum of one week prior to your Vision Summit.
WITH-NESS: GOSPEL DREAMING

Vision Summit Session 1

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Approximate Session Length: 45 minutes.

Instructions

Tape four large sheets of paper at different spots around the room. Provide markers for every participant. Label each area with the categories you pre-assessed in Facing Reality. Write them in the appropriate color (red, yellow, or green) as summarized in your pre-assessment. Ask one Visioneer from this team to stand at each sheet to be available for explanations or questions from other participants. Place a table with paper, pens, and markers at each area.

Pre-Assessment Review (10 Minutes):

1. Upon gathering your participants for completing this portion of your Visioning Summit invite participants from this team to present a five-minute summary of their overall findings including data, team surveys, and summary.
2. Invite all participants to ask questions about issues identified by the team in their pre-assessment as it relates to each area.

**Gospel Dreaming Together (15 Minutes):**

3. Break Visioneers into new groups of four including one person from each team per group. Include members of each team type in these groups to encourage a diversity of perspectives.

4. Provide these directions to the groups:
   a. When music begins you will have five minutes at each station to problem solve.
   b. The goal of this process is to obtain a greater quantity of solutions and strategies—not in-depth deliberation or elimination of possibilities.
   c. RED CATEGORIES: For areas which are red, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward yellow and green.
   d. YELLOW CATEGORIES: For areas which are yellow, offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin moving your congregation toward green.
   e. GREEN CATEGORIES: For areas which are green offer phrases or broad strategies which could begin positively capitalizing on this strength to fulfill the gospel mission of your church.

5. Ask if there are any questions about the process.
6. Begin music and set timer to rotate groups through each station at five-minute increments.

7. At the end of the rotation provide participants with a two-minute break for restrooms and water.

WITH-NESS

Vision Summit Session 2

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Approximate Session Length: 40 minutes

**Taking Risks:**

1. Invite participants to gather back at different tables in the room with the same team they completed the last rotation with.

2. Explain that each group will now consider the Gospel Dreaming options written on the sheets of paper provided on the wall. Groups will have fifteen minutes to complete this portion of the exercise.
3. Ask one group member per table to record all suggestions on a sheet of paper. This will be important for future check-ins.

4. During the fifteen-minute discussion, having considered the list of potential options from the Gospel Dreaming exercise, groups will choose two options from the listed suggestions offered on the sheets as possible first risks for their congregation to take. These should not be ranked. Groups may combine or rearrange solutions into one option as they deem necessary.
   a. Groups should consider the following questions, among others, when choosing their two potential risks to take.
      i. Is this potential solution sustainable?
      ii. Does this solution address the presenting problem or strength to be considered?
      iii. Does this solution focus us more toward living the gospel mission together?
      iv. Does this solution create unnecessary institutional tasks to be completed?
      v. Have we given weight to addressing significant red or yellow areas that are a priority for allowing us to move forward?

5. Having developed the list of two options, the group should take down the other sheets of paper on the wall at their table and replace them with their two solutions making sure they have copied down a list of the other options that were not included in the final two.
6. Upon completion of the fifteen minutes invite each team to make a one-minute presentation of their top two to the whole room, allowing one to two minutes for questions. As each group shares their two options ask a recorder to make a list of the eight solutions presented for the Institutional Health area of ministry on a sheet in the center of the room.

7. Once all groups have shared begin playing music again. Invite all group participants to use notepads at tables to write and rank the eight solutions on a scale of one to eight with one being the first and most necessary step the congregation should take in this area of ministry. Explain that members have ten minutes to complete the exercise and may also use this as a moment to get a drink or go to the restroom.

8. Ask a volunteer to collect and tabulate rankings, identifying the two solutions with the lowest score as the potential risks for the congregation to take.

9. Reassemble the groups at their tables. Ask the group to discuss together the two tasks they have identified. Are they progressive tasks? Should they be completed in a specific order? Will they require additional help, partners, or resources to achieve? Can the church tackle both tasks at once or should they be done consecutively?

10. After five or less minutes of conversation, ask the team to craft together a one-half page typed summarized future story describing the risk the congregation will take together to address the issues raised in the pre-assessment. This work will be done at the end of the Vision Summit once all other areas have been discussed.
Schedule and Organization of Your Vision Summit(S)

The Three Step Process for Beginning Your Sustainable Mission Journey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1:</th>
<th>Step 2:</th>
<th>Step 3:</th>
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<td>Team Building And Data Gathering</td>
<td>Hosting Your Visioning Summit(s)</td>
<td>Congregational Sharing and Commitment</td>
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This handbook is intended to be used by church leaders to partner with congregational Visioneers for taking steps toward sustainable mission. Using the three-step model above, a Vision Summit may be hosted and acted upon in one weekend or over several weeks. This is dependent on the needs and size of your congregation. Suggested schedules follow.

One Weekend Visioning Summit Plan

- Invite sixteen Visioneers, four for each area of ministry, to be part of your pre-assessment teams. They will begin collecting data as recommended in this handbook and dispersing data summaries to the larger group at least one week prior to the Vision Summit.
- Saturday, 8:00am-3:00pm Visioning Summit for each ministry area, steps 1 and 2 as described in the handbook.
- Saturday, 3:00pm-4:00pm Ministry Teams write future story to describe risks to be attempted as suggested in handbook guide.
- Sunday, 11:00-12:00pm (After Worship) Ministry Teams present their written pre-assessment summaries and developed future stories to gathered congregants, inviting questions.
Sunday, 11:00-12:00pm Following team presentations the congregation commits to live into the described forward mission through prayer and participation.

Three months later: First Staying Fresh check-in to consider progress toward goals and potential for beginning new goals.

**Multi-Week Visioning Summit Plan**

- Invite sixteen Visioneers, four for each area of ministry, to be part of your pre-assessment teams. They will begin collecting data as recommended in this handbook and dispersing data summaries to the larger group at least one week prior to their respective Vision Summit.
- Meeting 1- Visioning Summit for one specific ministry area, steps 1 and 2 as described in the handbook.
- Meeting 2- Ministry Team writes future story to describe risks to be attempted as suggested in handbook guide.
- Congregational Commitment- Ministry Team presents their written pre-assessment summaries and developed future stories to gathered congregants inviting questions in a fireside chat after worship.
- Ministry Team begins engaging volunteers and potential leaders in completing taskwork.
- Meeting 3- Three months later: First Staying Fresh check-in to consider progress toward goals and potential for beginning new goals.
- Cycle begins again for next ministry area using guides
The Multi-Step Process

Team Building and Data Gathering

Having read *A Handbook for Missional Sustainability*, a congregational leader or leadership will begin the journey of developing leaders to carry out the visioning process with them. Four team members with a balance of institutional knowledge and outside the box thinking should be selected for each area of ministry to be assessed—institutional health, partners and resources, invitational culture, and with-ness. A total of sixteen Visioneers should be selected. A balance in age, gender, and all forms of diversity available will make the process more positive. Each of these teams will be encouraged to read the handbook and use guides from the handbook to gather pre-assessment data from their area of ministry. They will submit a summary of their findings related to their area to other team members prior to gathering for a Vision Summit.

Hosting Your Visioning Summit(s)

Having collected, summarized, and shared all four areas of pre-assessment data with other team members, all sixteen Visioneers will be invited to a Visioning Summit. Congregations may choose one of two models for the Visioning Summit. Churches may host one summit for all areas of ministry. This will take approximately one full Saturday. Another option for churches is to host four summits for each area of ministry over a selected time period. This would allow the summits to occur on a weeknight or Sunday after church, for example. Churches may determine which schedule works for them. Guides for hosting a summit in both formats appear in the handbook. Our hope is to create a flexible process that is useful for churches in a variety of situations. Smaller
churches may find it helpful to tackle each of area of ministry one at a time to use fewer resources of time and people.

A Visioning Summit Retreat will be hosted and led by the pastor, key congregational leader, or denominational leadership using the guide provided. Together teams will walk through the steps of the assessment and dreaming process of each category. Upon completion teams assigned to each ministry area will summarize the experience and write a future story describing a way to carry out the risks to be taken together.

Some of these risk-taking goals may be related to more work that needs to be done to assess needs or gifts to offer, some may be related to institutional health and sustainability, others may be quick simple tasks that can be accomplished in a weekend. The goal is not to prescribe a perfect future for the church, but to engage the church in forward motion toward the gospel mission of Jesus in a way that invites risk.

Congregational Sharing and Commitment

One key component of interviewed congregations that were successfully moving toward mission was buy-in from the church. Dependent on the process for completing the visioning summit or summits, Visioneers will host a self-made presentation of their summary of pre-assessment and the risks they agreed to take together. These will be opportunities to invite questions, to share knowledge, and to hear from friends who might have gifts for accomplishing the risk-taking tasks. Having sought feedback and shared information, Visioneers will work with the pastor to create a commitment ceremony that
is appropriate for the congregation’s polity in which congregants are invited to pledge a commitment to beginning this journey together.

Dependent on the model used, this may all happen in one weekend in which the summit occurs on Saturday and the sharing and commitment ceremony happens on Sunday. For other churches this may be done over time as Visioneers carry out the various processes of assessment and summit. Key leaders and partners in following through on this task and Staying Fresh should begin being recruited at this time.
APPENDIX A

SURVEY TO ASSESS THE EXPERIENCE OF VISIONEERS

1. Pre-Assessment surveys brought forth summaries and information needed to complete Visioning Summit. Y / N
   Comment?

2. Directions and process for completing Visioning Summit exercises were easy to understand and allowed for solid problem solving. Y / N
   Comment?

3. Solutions and risks we agreed to take seem relevant, sustainable, and capable of completion? Y / N
   Comment?

4. The schedule for completion was doable and allowed us enough time to accomplish our goals? Y / N
   Comment?
APPENDIX B

SURVEY TO ASSESS THE EXPERIENCE OF VISION SUMMIT LEADERS

1. Handbook materials and training left me confident and prepared for leading a
group in a Visioning Summit? Y / N

Comment?

2. Directions and process for leading Visioning Summit exercises were easy to
understand and allowed for solid problem solving. Y / N

Comment?

3. The schedule for completion was doable and allowed us enough time to
accomplish our goals. Y / N

Comment?

4. Handbook exercises and descriptions were easy to follow and explain to the
group. Y/ N

Comment?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


