

Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

LIFE IN COMMUNITY: PREPARING STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS FOR THE
RELATIONAL ROAD AHEAD

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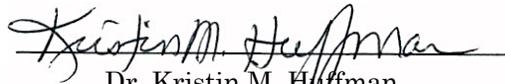
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LIFE IN COMMUNITY: PREPARING STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS FOR
THE RELATIONAL ROAD AHEAD

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

BY
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ABSTRACT

Life in Community: Preparing Students and Young Adults for the Relational Road Ahead

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The goal of this project was to develop a curriculum that helped students and young adults navigate the complex road of relationships and life in community. Culture in the nation and in much of the world is in a state of rapid change, and these changes impact the nature of relationships and how individuals interact with one another. Many factors such as social media, the breakdown of community, and political polarization have contributed to isolation, lack of social connections and loneliness. This paper addresses the current challenges, while also providing a theological framework for living in healthy community with one another. This paper uses the work and life of Jesus as a reference point for a theology of community, and as a model of relational wholeness. Based upon this study, a six-week curriculum is provided. This curriculum is to be used in a small group setting with students and young adults. The curriculum addresses six areas: dealing with conflict, leadership development, understanding one's family of origin, boundaries and healthy relationships, and recognizing when one needs further help and support.

Content Reader: Reverend Dr. Kristin M. Huffman

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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ, community has been important. Jesus surrounded himself with a community that consisted of his friends, his family, and the disciples. The Christian life was never meant to be lived in isolation. But while the desire is present for Christians to live in community with one another, the reality is that their sinful, human nature often gets in the way. The current culture of the United States rewards individualism, downplays community responsibility, and accepts hostility as an appropriate means of interaction with one another. Families live apart, and children are no longer raised by multiple generations. Children are overprogrammed, and their schedules leave little time for bonding as a family, building friendships, and serving their families and others. There is a state of relational crisis. The collective cultural consciousness of society has forgotten what it means to live in community with one another. While there are still pockets in the country where tight-knit communities exist, this is becoming the exception rather than the norm. Societies have become fractured and fragmented. This fragmentation will have an impact on children for many generations to come.

The purpose of this doctoral project is to create a small group curriculum for high school students and young adults to be initially used at Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church (MDPC). It is designed to prepare them to live in community and in relationship with others. This curriculum is based upon the life, influence, and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Christian community must be intentional in teaching their children, youth and

young adults what it means to live in Christian community as modeled and taught by Jesus Christ.

The idea for this project was conceptualized based upon personal ministry practice and experience. In my observations, children have become less connected, less adept at navigating the social landscape around them, and less aware of what it means to live in Christian community with one another. This project was also influenced by my personal experience in college. I learned during college and shortly after college that many of my closest friends struggled throughout their college years and beyond with eating disorders, substance abuse, sexual identity, and mental health issues. I was, for the most part, oblivious to their struggles. I found it troubling that I did not identify the personal and relational challenges my friends were experiencing. I believe it was because I did not have on a “relational lens.” I did not understand what it meant to live in community with others, and to have a relational awareness of the needs around me.

Community is not merely a nice addition to life; it is a core essential component of life. In her book *Biblical Justice*, Jessica Nicholas writes, “I thought that righteous people were the types that liked rules for the sake of rules. But really, righteous people love things like people, relationship, happiness, connection, holistic prosperity, and community.”¹ Part of the sanctification process for believers and followers of Jesus is learning how to live as part of the body of Christ together. It is not an add-on to personal discipleship; it is essential to discipleship. American Christianity, especially in the

¹Jessica Nicholas, *God Loves Justice: A User-Friendly Guide to Biblical Justice and Righteousness* (Los Angeles: S&E Educational Press, 2017), Chapter 4, Section 4.

evangelical context, often focuses on an individual's relationship between themselves and God. Corporate worship often is focused on an individual's need for God under the guise of a communal context. When one observes worship today, the message is often to pursue this individualistic quest for a relationship with God that is devoid of discussion of community and interdependence.

Discipleship is seen less as a corporate exercise, but rather focuses solely on growth in isolation and individual piety. In his article, "Dismembered: The Church and Individualism," Greg Boyd discusses the idea that individuals see themselves as able to join and remove themselves as they please from different groups, including the church. There is a distinct separation between an individual and the community to which they belong.²

This is a compartmentalized view of one's relationship with others and with one's community. It is also not congruent with the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded in the following manner: Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).³

² Greg Boyd. "Dismembered: The Church and Individualism," *Reknew* (blog), February 2, 2016, reknew.org/2016/02/dismembered-the-church-and-individualism/

³All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

While the first commandment is about loving God, the second is loving one's neighbor as yourself. Brian McLaren argues that "unless disciples are following the Great Commandment, it is fruitless to engage in the Great Commission."⁴ He writes that those who seek to carry out the Great Commission without practicing the Great Commandment are only producing "a Great Commotion."⁵ Community is critical to the journey of faith. It is part of one's discipleship and emotional and mental health, and it is a scriptural mandate from Jesus Christ.

The goal of this project is to move high school students and young adults to a greater understanding of what it means to live in community with one another. The first part of this project looks at the culture of high school youth, then a description of the specific ministry context follows. The final part of the project addresses how the church can give the youth the tools they need to be part of and help create healthy communities and relationships. Part of this project also includes a review of sources relevant to this subject and a discussion of the example of Jesus as the basis for the study and curriculum. Lastly, a curriculum is provided. This curriculum has been developed to be used in a six-week study with high school students or young adults.

⁴ Brian McLaren, "A Radical Rethinking of Our Evangelistic Strategy," *Theology News and Notes* 5 (2004), pp. 4-6, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING GENERATION Z

There is a new generation of individuals coming of age who are vastly different from their millennial predecessors. They have been labeled Gen Z, the Homeland Generation, and the iGeneration. They are between the ages of four and twenty-four and are parented by the often-forgotten Generation X. This generation has not known a world without technology and media.¹ They have been financially shaped by their parents' experience in the Great Recession and the student loan debt of their parents. They are more individualistic and self-sufficient than their millennial counterparts and social justice issues matter to them.² They also are more likely to avoid risky behaviors and are more aware of their digital footprint than the millennials who went before them.³ Generation Zs are forging new frontiers relationally. Much of their socialization is digital through social media apps, playing with friends on gaming systems, and texting.

¹ Aaron Earls, "10 Traits of Generation Z," [factsandtrends.net](https://factsandtrends.net/2017/09/29/10-traits-of-generation-z/), September 29, 2017.

² Dave Clark "10 Defining Characteristics of Generation Z," *TTI* (blog), January 16, 2019, blog.ttisuccessinsights.com/10-defining-characteristics-of-generation-z

³ Laura Shear, "With Eyes Wide Open, Generation Z Looks to Serve, Share, and Impact," *Relate*, Zendesk, accessed March 2019, relate.zendesk.com/articles/eyes-wide-open-generation-z-looks-serve-share-impact/.

Common Sense Media reports that one in two teens feel addicted to their smart phones.⁴ Many are consumed by their desire to be successful, so that friendships take a backseat to other interests. They have also grown up in the culture of intense youth sports and high academic standards. Unlike the experience of their Generation X parents, their socialization has been primarily structured and engineered by their parents through play dates, youth sports, and a multitude of after school activities. They are overscheduled and spend their downtime on their phones, laptops, and gaming systems. Even recess, where many social skills are learned, is not available to them in the same way.⁵ In the past two decades, schools have cut recess to have more time for academics.

There is a great void for the members of this generation in terms of unstructured social time with their peers. When they are with their peers, they are often all connected to digital devices, so their attention is divided. I recently volunteered during lunch at my daughter's junior high. I watched as a group of "friends" sat down at a table together to eat lunch. The four of them pulled out their phones and proceeded to stare at their phones throughout the entire lunch period without interacting with one another at all. Cigna Healthcare did a study on loneliness and found that Generation Z ranked as the loneliest generation as compared to the four generations before them.⁶ Many individuals in this

⁴ "New Report Finds Teens Feel Addicted to Their Phones Causing Tension at Home," *Common Sense Media*, May 3, 2018. www.common sense media.org/about-us/news/press-releases/new-report-finds-teens-feel-addicted-to-their-phones-causing-tension-at.

⁵ "Recess Rules," Fenton Communications, September 1, 2007. www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2007/09/recess-rules.html.

⁶ Ellie Polack, "New Cigna Study Reveals Loneliness at Epic Levels in America," May 1, 2018, www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america.

younger generation have missed these opportunities for social interaction, and it has stunted their relational growth. Invariably, they will find new ways to interact in this new digital world, but at this time there is a relational vacuum in this cultural transition.

The Parenting Crisis

Currently children and teenagers are products of childrearing in a cultural frontier that no one knows how to navigate. There is an expression in medicine called “cowboy medicine,” meaning that doctors or other professionals are operating outside of their area of expertise, often as they face new medical challenges for which they were not prepared. Many parents in the present new age have been practicing “cowboy parenting” by default. They have been making up the rules for parenting in a technological world in which they did not grow up. Parents often learn how to parent by watching and observing their own parents and the parents around them. The problem for this generation of parents is that as they were watching their parents and the parents around them, but their parents were not dealing with the issues that these parents have to deal with today. There was no parenting blueprint for keeping one’s children safe online, navigating the challenging academic expectations of the day, and dealing with relationally disconnected children. Teens and young adults are struggling to navigate this new landscape, and parents are struggling alongside them.

One learns how to be in community by being in community. This generation may struggle relationally their entire lives because they have missed acquiring some critical skills and life lessons due to the factors mentioned above. Thus, the motivation for this

project is to develop a program that can be used to help this present generation explore and examine how to live relationally healthy lives that are connected to others.

This generation experiences constant connection and deep isolation. The Centers for Disease Control found that between the years 2007 and 2017, the suicide rate for children and teens aged ten to twenty-four went up 56 percent.⁷ Many factors contribute to issues related to suicide, one of which is disconnection. When individuals are disconnected from a community, they are more prone to attempt suicide when other factors such as depression and drug abuse are in play. Some of these other factors are often connected to the fact that these young people are not in a supportive and healthy community.

In 2014 Harvard conducted a survey, “Making Caring Common,” based on interviews with ten thousand middle school and high school students from all over the country. The survey highlighted the shift in priorities for the younger generation. In the Harvard study, most youth across a wide spectrum of races, cultures, and classes reported that they value aspects of personal success—achievement and happiness—over caring for others. Even more youth reported that peers valued achievement and happiness over caring for others.⁸ For those who believe that community and shared responsibility for

⁷ “Suicide Rising Across the US,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 7, 2014, www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide/index.html.

⁸ “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values,” Making Caring Common Study, Harvard Graduate School of Education, July 2014, mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise.

one another is an important part of the collective culture, this is an unwelcome and alarming shift.

I became interested in this topic because I have served in the area of children's and youth ministries for the past twenty years. All my post-seminary time has been devoted to ministering to children and youth. A critical component of ministry to this next generation is this development of their understanding of themselves in relation to the Christian community (and broader community) in which they live. The goal of training them with a community mindset is that it will benefit the individual as well as the church for many generations to come.

The next section addresses Generation Z and their patterns of connection. There are new and distinct patterns of connection to be seen in Generation Z, and these patterns are still developing as Generation Z comes of age. They display patterns of disconnection, while also being extremely connected through social media and other technological venues.

The Generation of Disconnection

The state of connection and disconnection in Generation Z is complex. Those who are part of Generation Z prefer to talk through social media platforms, texting, and gaming devices. For previous generations, there was a common culture created by media consumption. Baby boomers grew up with limited media sources (i.e. three television stations), so they had a common language around media consumption. While members of Generation X had more media available, many still had common connecting points. For

example, a common media connecting point for many of that generation was watching MTV as teenagers or watching the TV show *Friends* in college on Thursday nights.

The media available to the members of Generation Z is different and it is vast. Generation Z gets their media from many different sources such as YouTube, Netflix, Amazon. There is not that same common connector seen in previous generations. But conversely, Generation Z is far more connected globally than any generation in the history of the world. Because of social media, they can be connected to other teens and adults around the world. The media they consume is created all over the world. This creates a new and dynamic relational system that spans the globe. Generation Z members have also become keepers of their own brand, and they decide how they will portray themselves on social media. They live their lives in multiple social spaces. They have become smarter about privacy than their millennial predecessors. Because of this many in Generation Z favor media that disappears such as Snapchat or similar platforms.⁹

Also, there is a vast discrepancy in media exposure. Some students have been allowed to consume media without supervision, while others have parents who restricted all or most social media platforms. This is such a new way of interacting that one cannot even make assumptions about what impact these media discrepancies will have on the social development of teens. This will be an area of rich research in the years to come. One possible impact of this discrepancy may be differences in the social, emotional, and

⁹ Laura Shear, "With Eyes Wide Open, Generation Z Looks to Serve, Share, and Impact," Zen Desk Relate, 2018. //relate.zendesk.com/articles/eyes-wide-open-generation-z-looks-serve-share-impact

relational health of each group. Parents of Generation Z are also shaping how this generation interacts with others. “Gen X is raising Gen Z to look like them: autonomous, cynical, with looser reins,” argues Corey Seemiller, a professor at Ohio’s Wright State University, who has conducted research and written several books on Generation Z. “They figure things out themselves.”¹⁰ This may contribute to the individuality and disconnected nature of Generation Z.

Overscheduled and Academically Motivated

Forty-one percent of Generation Z claims that getting a college degree is important as compared to only 32 percent of millennials.¹¹ This means that they are more focused on academics, and as schools have increased in their academic rigor, these Generation Z members are spending more time outside of school doing homework. Their social life suffers due to the academic pressure. They also have been in intense, organized sports which has taken away free time to make connections in relationships. They are often too busy to make those important connections with others.

Because this generation can stay connected to their friends via social media, they often remain at home while connecting with friends. Generation Z members are hanging out more with their parents than previous generations. Millennials have spent time with

¹⁰ Matthew Boyle and Matthew Townsend, “Reality Bites Back: To Really Get Gen Z, Look at the Parents,” *Bloomberg*, July 29, 2019. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-29/how-gen-x-parents-raised-gen-z-kids-different-than-millennials.

¹¹ Ibid.

their parents because their parents created families that were very child-centered, but Generation Z teens hang out with their parents in a different way. "We found that iGen teens spend significantly less time with their friends face-to-face compared to Boomers and Gen-X teens," Twenge reports. "Hanging out with friends, going to movies with friends, riding around in a car—all of those declined."¹²

Arguably, today's students and young adults have missed some critical social skills because they spend less time with their friends. Social skill development occurs in that free space of interaction. This deficit of interaction will likely prove detrimental as these teens move into their young adult years.

¹² Tom Jacobs, "Are Gen Zers That Different from Gen Xers?" *Pacific Standard*, April 22, 2019, psmag.com/ideas/how-much-should-we-trust-generational-analysis.

CHAPTER 2: MINISTRY CONEXT

I use the curriculum created for this project in my ministry context, Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, in Houston, Texas, where I have served for over fourteen years. The audience is the students in the church. However, I hope this curriculum may be used more widely.

The church was founded in the early 1950s in the suburbs of Houston. This area is no longer considered the suburbs. It is now an area considered to be the geographical center of Houston. Houston is the country's fourth largest city and one of its most diverse. The church is in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Houston, and while the neighborhood is changing, it is predominantly Caucasian. While there is some diversity within the student ministry at MDPC, the vast majority of those who attend come from upper middle class to extremely wealthy households. The students are high achieving, arguably overprogrammed, and have access to many opportunities and experiences. Most of them have been given smart phones by sixth grade, and their free time is often used consuming digital media. They are more tech-savvy than their parents, and parents are often left to struggle to know how to raise them in the new digital landscape. Their parents, who grew up when many technological developments were just emerging, struggle to keep up with and monitor the worlds of their teens. The teens and young

adults are digital natives, while their parents are not. The parents are very anxious as they try to engage and monitor this foreign world of constant engagement and digital multitasking.

Another part of the ministry context of MDPC is a Spanish-speaking congregation and a Portuguese congregation. Both congregations are thriving ministries with many young children and students. MDPC is beginning to address the reality that these three congregations worship, minister and meet side-by-side, but not together. This is the difficult journey of diversity. The goal is to move the congregation to new places where diversity is celebrated, and the congregations can connect in new and meaningful ways. Part of my curriculum will address the issue of diversity and, at the very least, generate awareness that this is important for our congregation and our future.

Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the United States, and as such, our churches must reflect more of our community in terms of diversity if we want to reach and minister to all in the city.¹ Memorial Drive is located in an affluent neighborhood that has been traditionally primarily upper-class Caucasian, but as previously mentioned, this is changing. The racial, socio-economic diversity within a five-mile radius of the church is immense. Because of the growth of the city in all directions, MDPC is now located in the center of the city. In other words, downtown is not the center of the city anymore. If our church is indeed at the center of the city, its ministry-focus and influence have the capacity to be great. But we as church leaders and members of the congregation must

¹A. J. Mistretta, "Houston Still Most Diverse City in the Nation Report Finds." Greater Houston Partnership. April 12, 2019. www.houston.org/news/houston-still-most-diverse-city-nation-report-finds

address the issue of diversity as much as we can and as quickly as we can. We must work to reflect the diversity of the city in our congregation. If our church is not focused on this goal, we are not serving our city well, and not embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ that commands the church to bring the good news to all nations.

Because the curriculum designed for this project is about developing a kingdom-minded orientation within the life of the individual and the community, diversity and loving our neighbors well must be a topic that is addressed. The goal is to move past tolerance and occupying the same space at the church, and instead learn how to dwell together in Christian unity. For this generation, and particularly this generation growing up in Houston, diversity will not be a new issue. These young adults and teens are used to living in a diverse area; however, there is still much to be done in terms of truly connecting with others and learning to dialogue in healthy ways about issues of race and culture.

Another characteristic of the congregation at MDPC is their commitment to outreach and missions. The church was founded on two principals: members praying for every member of the church every day, and dollar-for-dollar giving. Dollar-for-dollar giving meant that the church operated on the principal that for every dollar that was spent internally for church operations and programming, another dollar was to be spent on a community missions partner or a global missions ministry. While some of the specifics of this dollar- for-dollar program have changed over the years, it is still very much a part of the DNA of MDPC. The church practices radical generosity and is well known in the city of Houston for the many community partners that it supports. The church is currently in

partnership with over 150 ministry partners, has a local food pantry onsite, houses a couple of non-profits in its building, and supports other ministries through volunteering. It is estimated that at least ten non-profits in the city of Houston that serve the people of Houston were begun by members of MDPC. Many members are active on the boards of non-profits in the city, offering financial support and giving their time and expertise to the organization.

In relation to the culture of serving, as part of my job description at MDPC, I am responsible for organizing a day called Church in the City. One Sunday a year for the last three years, we have taken our congregation into the city to serve on a Sunday. All worship services and programming are cancelled for that day. I am responsible for gathering a team and organizing projects for one thousand people to go out into the city of Houston to serve. Our church is committed to doing this every year as part of its outreach goals. Many of our young adults and youth participate in this day with their families. Those going through the Confirmation program are required to participate in Church in the City as part of their Confirmation experience.

During Hurricane Harvey in August of 2017, our church immediately was opened as an emergency shelter when the flooding began. The city did not ask for this, it simply happened because emergency personnel began bringing people to the church. They knew that they could bring people to MDPC and the church would shelter them. Within a matter of hours of its opening, the shelter had over two hundred people staying there. Due to the flood waters, none of the pastors were able to get to the church for several days. During that time, the shelter was run entirely by members of the church and a few

key staff. Within a day they had set up meals, medical assistance, laundry service, and help with housing and mental health services for the evacuees. It was an important moment in the history of our congregation because our DNA to be an outreach church had prepared us for that moment. The members were equipped to run the shelter even in the absence of senior leadership. MDPC was at its best in that moment, because the culture of the church to be of service to others.

Globally, MDPC supports several individual mission partners and is invested in larger movements of the church such as supporting a seminary in Egypt and biblical education for those working in predominantly Muslim countries. The church is committed to missions that are taking the gospel to unreached people groups and those that are part of underground church movements. These local and global connections and partnerships are an important part of the life and ministry of the church.

The reason that this commitment to outreach and service is important to consider is that it is a significant part of the ministry context for this project. The families that attend MDPC are committed to serving others and radical generosity. It is one of the main reasons new members mentioned when asked why they became a part of the MDPC community.

Many of the teens and young adults who are part of the church and part of this small group experience have grown up in this culture of serving. It is also part of their individual DNA. The goal is to build upon this in the curriculum. Most of the teens and young adults have a context for serving others in their communities and around the

world. This curriculum is intended to help them translate that culture to their immediate community of family and friends.

It is important for teens and young adults to examine what it means to live a life of service in the context of their families and with their friends. While the teen years and young adult years are characterized by differentiation and separation from families, they still should retain their emotional and relational ties to their family members. One of the primary objectives of this curriculum is to give teens and adults a greater awareness of their relationships and their responsibility to others that they are in community with on a regular basis.

For the past two years, MDPC has had two special initiatives that are a continuation of the outreach culture: fighting childhood hunger and addressing the problem of human trafficking in Houston. MDPC helped to bring to Houston a mission partner that works with human trafficking. The organization wanted to open an office in Houston, so MDPC brought churches together to fund the organization's addition of a Houston site. When it arrived in Houston, it opened its offices in our building. MDPC has worked with this organization and several others to address this prolific problem in Houston.

As part of this initiative, MDPC held a community event that brought in speakers to share stories of the human trafficking problem in Houston and to share their own personal stories of being trafficked. Many teens and young adults attended that gathering. A couple of the victims that spoke had been groomed through manipulative relationships that ultimately led to them being trafficked.

Part of the curriculum that was developed for this project will address the issue of identifying toxic and unhealthy relationships. It is imperative that teens and young adults develop the tools to identify these relationships for their own mental health, but also for some it may protect them from physical and emotional harm in the future. The long-term goal is to take this curriculum to some of MDPC's ministry partners that work with foster teens, as they are a vulnerable population for human trafficking. The objective would be to aid the teens in gaining greater awareness of healthy relationships so that they can protect themselves and develop positive and healthy attachments with others.

At the church, there is a growing young adult ministry. I have been part of mentoring this group of staff. Over the past year I developed a small group cohort based upon the same design that I use for the curriculum I created for the current project. This curriculum is based upon leadership development and addressed the topics of conflict, multiplying one's ministry, understanding one's family of origin, and understanding oneself as a leader. I have completed three of these small group cohorts, and it has had good results. My desire is to help develop the young adults in our ministry areas as leaders and as healthy adults who live well in community together.

When I began developing the topic of this project, I consulted with my youth and young adult staff at the church to ask them if the issues the curriculum would address were pertinent to the population they worked with in their ministry area. They all agreed that this type of resource would help meet a need of participants in the high school and young adult ministry at MDPC. My goal for this project is not only to contribute

individually to the students and young adults at MDPC, but also to contribute to the greater culture of the church, and the community at large.

In developing the curriculum for MDPC, considerations were given to the specific ministry context outlined above. The culture of the church and of the surrounding area informed the objectives for the curriculum and addressed some specific needs of the community based upon the culture and specific nuances of the community. The development of the curriculum also included considering the topics of leadership, diversity, service to family and friends, self-awareness, and helping to develop a thriving church community for decades to come.

CHAPTER 3:
THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

In this age of individualism and fractured society, churches must redefine who they are to be in the world. MDPC must acknowledge the culture of isolation, promote healthy models of community, and create an open door for all generations to connect now and in the future as their lives progress. The church must be reactive, as well as proactive in helping current and future generations live well in community with one another.

The Culture of Isolation

The modern world promotes a culture of isolation. Henri Nouwen writes, “Our society encourages individualism. We are constantly made to believe that everything we think, say, or do, is our personal accomplishment, deserving individual attention. But as people who belong to the communion of saints, we know that anything of spiritual value is not the result of individual accomplishment but the fruit of a communal life.”¹ Henri Nouwen speaks of community as the “quality of the heart.”² For the Christian community, individualism and isolation are rarely the goal. The caveat is that there are

¹ Henri Nouwen, “The Fruit of Our Communal Life,” Henri Nouwen Society, November 4, 2019, henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-fruit-of-our-communal-life/.

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 23.

times in the Christian life when one must seek isolation for reflection and prayer. But, for most, the Christian life is meant to be lived in community with one another. Isolation can have many detrimental effects for an individual. Isolation contributes to our lack of personal growth and are ability to take the perspective of another.

The kingdom of God is a communal culture, not an individualistic one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes “The brother is a burden to the Christian, precisely because he is a Christian. For the pagan the other person never becomes a burden at all. He simply sidesteps every burden that others may impose upon him.”³ For too long the church has catered to this individualistic culture and stopped requiring those in the Christian community to take responsibility for one another. Instead of Christians reminding each other that they belong together and have responsibility for one another, many have touted individual responsibility and choice. George Barna noted from his research that ninety-five percent of Americans see themselves as independent thinkers.⁴ Jake Meador in his book *In Search of the Common Good*, emphasizes this reality of individualism that the American church faces today. He argues that in American Christianity the emphasis is on gaining wealth and power and not of the sacrificial life embodied by Jesus Christ.⁵

Our students and young adults have not been getting the consistent message that they indeed are responsible for each other and belong to a community. The Christian

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1949), Kindle, 1176.

⁴ George Barna, “American Individualism Shines Through in People’s Self Image.” July 23,2007.

⁵ Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019

community has a responsibility to engage students and young adults in a conversation to help them have a healthy understanding of community and their place in that community. This must be done on a macro level, as well as on a micro one. On a macro level, the church must raise awareness about the tendency toward individualism and lack of community responsibility. On a micro level, adults must invest in the lives of students and young adults to help them understand the importance of community in their lives. The church may need to identify those in their communities that can be relational leaders and move the congregation towards more expressions of community and unity together.

Healthy Models of Community

As a church we need to promote healthy models of community for our students and young adults. The goal of this curriculum is to help students and young adults understand what healthy community looks like in practice. Healthy community involves responsibility to each other, compassion, the ability to work through conflict, understanding one's place in leadership in the community, and healthy boundaries within the system. It is important for any congregation to assess where they have healthy models of community and where they do not. MDPC has several good examples of healthy models of community: There is a growing culture of mentoring, a men's ministry that is a discipleship program for the men but also promotes presence and service to the entire congregation and numerous small groups that care for one another well and show healthy signs of community.

The starting place for the church to grow new generations to know how to be part of a healthy community, is to first be a model of a healthy community itself. The church must begin by defining what it means to be a healthy community. There are a few Scripture passages that are helpful. Paul throughout his letters wrote extensively about the Christian community as he responded to issues in the local churches. In Galatians 5:14 Paul reminds the church members in Galatia to live out the command to love their neighbors as themselves. In verses 22-23, he notes that living in the Spirit produces these fruits: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In 1 Corinthians 13, he also highlights the importance of love and what it looks like to love others well. In Colossians 3:12, he reminds the church to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” These are all good examples of the behaviors and attitudes that are found in communities with healthy relationships.

Churches also model healthy communities when they have ways of dealing well with conflict. Conflict can often be productive if it involves trust and a commitment to truth. Churches also model healthy communities when they provide a safe and supportive environment for new leaders to grow and emerge. They model community by caring for each other well and showing responsibility for one another. They also model community by mirroring the example of the relational ministry of Christ.

There are some specific characteristics that can be seen in a healthy church community. A healthy community acknowledges when conflict exists, and approaches it in ways that creates compromise and collaboration. A healthy church community

acknowledges the pain of addiction, and cares for members of its congregation who are struggling to recover. A healthy church community supports its leaders and helps promote good boundaries across its leadership. A healthy church community operates in a spirit of transparency and truth. When teens and young adults observe healthy relationships and systems within their church, they create connections to the church and its people that can last throughout their entire lives.

Creating an Open Door for Future Connections

The other goal in this project is to create the beginning of a conversation and a safe space for these students and young adults at MDPC. Many will move away from Houston, and they may or may not come back after college and holding other jobs. It is my hope that if they do, they will have made some significant connections with the community at MDPC and will want to be part of it when they return, or that they will be able to connect in a meaningful way to another community wherever their lives may take them.

The first part of this conversation-building process is to make the gospel known to them and invite them into a saving faith in Jesus Christ. It is important to acknowledge that the end all for any student or young adult is not community itself—it is a relationship with Jesus Christ. That relationship should spur them on to community. Above all, the primary goal of the church should be to invite, welcome, encourage, and help lead individuals into a relationship with Jesus Christ. The first imperative from Scripture is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” The second imperative is

to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37). This is the intent of this project—to help students and young adults learn how to love their neighbors well. Yet while some of our students and young adults at MDPC are believers and followers of Christ, many connected to our churches are still seeking faith and growing in their understanding of a life surrendered to Christ. We must as a church meet them where they are and continue to offer community in ways that reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ, compelling them to enter deeper relationships with him and others. My hope is that through this project’s curriculum, young adults will feel valued and connected to the community of the church and that this connection will be maintained the rest of their lives.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wealth of literature on the topics addressed in the curriculum. As mentioned previously, these topics include the following: understanding what it means to be in community with others; dealing with conflict; leadership development; understanding one's family of origin, boundaries, and healthy relationships; and recognizing when one needs further help and support. In order to create a curriculum with these topics, the literature review included exploring the following topics: theology of relationships, conflict, family systems, mentoring and leadership, and emotional intelligence and spiritual formation. This research forms the necessary background for the creation of the curriculum.

Theology of Relationships

In the book *Never Alone Church*, David Ferguson makes a clear distinction between the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The Great Commission is from Matthew 28:19-20: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The Great Commandment is found in Matthew 22:37-40: "Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Ferguson argues that while the Great Commission discusses what we do as believers, the Great Commandment is who we are.¹ Students and young adults must be told who they are as a body of believers and as individuals who follow Jesus Christ. Central to the discussion must be the idea that one lives in relationships not just because it fulfills one’s personal needs, but also because it fulfills the commandment set forth by Jesus Christ. By the very nature of Jesus describing the church as the body of Christ, those in the church are called to be in community with one another. In addition, each person brings a particular nuance to each relationship as they engage in community with one another.

Unfortunately, there is currently a breakdown of this life in community. It is a fractured world, and this may have long-term effects on the students and young adults growing up in this current environment. Jake Meador, in his book *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World*, makes reference to the “unwinding of common life in America.”² His assertion is that American Christians no longer share a sense of commonality and community. They do not rely on each other and support one another. They have become strangers to neighbors and the ever-present technology and connection has furthered this isolation. He goes on to assert that the church must find a way to live the values of community on earth that are based upon the

¹ David Ferguson, *The Never Alone Church* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998),9.

² Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), Kindle, 495.

values of the kingdom living. Christians must bring the values of heaven to earth.

Community must be lived out in a way that reflects kingdom come.³

The Creator has designed his people for attachment. Genesis 2:18 reveals that God intended for humans to be in community with one another when he says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him.” Also, when Christ came to earth, he became Immanuel, “God with us.”⁴ In order for humanity to be fully reconciled with God and in eternal connection with him, Jesus came to earth in the flesh. The image of God becoming flesh and connecting to his creation is a powerful reminder that humanity’s need for connection and relationship is so strong that the king of the universe would leave his heavenly throne to walk with in the mire of their lives.

Curt Thompson in his book *The Anatomy of the Soul* writes that humans are designed by God to be in relationship with one another. He argues of this need in the context of neuroscience, contending that neurons cannot function alone—they will die. In the same way, “Without input from other minds, a single mind becomes anxious, then depressed, then hopeless and then dies, either by intentional means or more passive forms of poor self-care.”⁵ Thompson writes that humans are made from the beginning of their creation to experience connection and attachment. He highlights that even from birth, a baby is attached to their mother inside the womb and then outside of the womb.

³ Ibid.,157.

⁴ Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul* (Carrollton, TX: Tyndale Publishers, 2010), Kindle, 111.

⁵ Ibid.

Attachment and connection to others is part of one's primal need.⁶ The implications for this are enormous and emphasize the need for this project. Students and young adults need attachment and connection to others. It is a basic need that is connected to the core of their biological design. Thompson also writes that even if individuals did not have healthy attachment in childhood, they still have the opportunity to establish healthy human attachment in adulthood.⁷ He continues by asserting that one of the ways in which adults can feel this attachment is through finding safe spaces where they can share their experiences and tell their stories.⁸ The curriculum designed for this project offers multiple opportunities for students and young adults to tell their stories. It also offers them examples of healthy and positive attachments with others. Based upon Thompson's assertions, it will be important in the curriculum to emphasize the core need that individuals have to be connected to others.

Even within the trinity, the connectional and communal nature of God is evident through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A theology of relationships should focus on the intentions of God for humanity to be in relationship with one another. Humans are made for relationships and made to be connected to one another. Unfortunately, relationships are corrupted because of humanity's depravity and tendency towards sin and disobedience. This depravity makes perfect relationships impossible. Sin and disobedience cause major obstacles that prevent individuals from having whole and

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid. 136.

⁸ Ibid.

healthy relationships with one another. It is important to understand that while the need to be in community is part of human life and existence, the intrinsic brokenness that everyone brings to their relationships is also who they are.

In the Garden of Eden there is a beautiful relationship between God and humanity. But because of selfishness, mistrust and pride, the relationship is broken. In the movement towards relational health and wholeness, one must first acknowledge personal failures because of this depravity, the resulting shame that is experienced, and the God who is able to reconcile all things and makes all things new.

Conflict

In his book, *Getting Together: Building Relationships as We Negotiate*, Roger Brown emphasizes that when one refuses to deal with a conflict, the problem will most likely not get solved and this failure will further impair one's ability to deal with future problems in a healthy and constructive way.⁹ Furthermore, the way one deals with conflict is part of his or her discipleship. Conflict is a normal part of relationships, and conflict can be productive and helpful if done well. The second point is the issue of reconciliation. Reconciliation should be a goal for many conflict situations where a relationship is fractured. While reconciliation may not always be the goal, within the Christian context, it should be considered. Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation, not just in their own social circles, but in the world. As Fitch puts it,

⁹ Roger Fisher Brown, and Scott Brown, *Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 312, Kindle.

“Every neighborhood, social gathering, and meeting place is a flowing stream of broken antagonistic relationships.”¹⁰ Christians are called to be agents of the reconciliation of Christ in those spaces. In the curriculum, an emphasis will be put on conflict as a means to reconciliation. Often reconciliation can occur when both parties agree to deal with the conflict together and work towards common goals and outcomes that honor one another. Part of the emphasis will be to assert that individuals can be in conflict while also still offering honor and respect to the other person. The goal will be to help the participants see conflict as means to unity and reconciliation.

In her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, Carol Tarvis argues that anger has the capacity for both good and evil. She writes that anger is a moral emotion and at times is used to do great things.¹¹ Tarvis explains throughout her book that anger can be harnessed and used productively when the person who has the anger is in control of it. Anger should not be used as permission to do what one wants, but rather anger should help one be mindful of conflicts and the need to address them in a productive way.¹² The goal is to let individuals grow in maturity and learn how to manage their anger. Maturity is learning how to be angry at behaviors and situations, but still loving toward persons at the same time.¹³ The goal in the curriculum will be to assist the participants in developing

¹⁰ David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 81.

¹¹ Carol Tarvis, *Anger: the Misunderstood Emotion* (New York: Touchtone Books: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Augsburg, *Caring Enough to Confront* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 53.

an awareness that conflict can be productive. Many students and young adults have not learned healthy ways to deal with their anger and conflict. They bring their ideas of conflict and anger from their families or origin. Based upon Tarvis' assertions, these participants can learn how to deal with their anger productively and use it as a means to solve conflicts in ways that invite deeper relationships instead of divisive ones. Anger can lead to mindful interactions with others if it is understood as a tool and not a weapon. When anger is used as a tool, healthy conflict can occur.

In *Caring Enough to Confront*, David Augsburger provides a new paradigm for conflict and confrontation. Sometimes confrontation is a form of pastoral care and connection with others. He argues that caring and confronting in combination are necessary to provide love and truth so that effective human relationships can occur.¹⁴ He refers to it as "care-fronting."¹⁵ Care-fronting is loving yet truthful conversation with another so that concern is provided and mutual and individual goals in the relationship can be reached.¹⁶ Augsburger goes on to write that "care-fronting has a unique view of conflict. It sees conflict as natural, normal, neutral and sometimes even delightful. It recognizes that conflict can turn into painful or disastrous ends, but it doesn't need to. Conflict itself is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. Conflict simply is."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

This is a beautiful and helpful understanding of conflict. Conflict can lead to deeper relationships and deeper understanding if it is done well and in love. For the students and young adults at MDPC, this will be a new way to think of conflict. It is hard at that stage of life to not fear conflict, handle it poorly, or just avoid it. The goal of this curriculum is to open the door to a new way to view conflict that will be helpful to them as they grow and mature. Conflict is resolution and repair of the relationship. For example, in a marriage relationship, if one spouse “wins” the argument, then no one really wins. The other feels defeated and devalued. But if both feel heard and validated and a common goal is achieved, then the relationship is strengthened.

Ultimately the goal in dealing with conflicts is to realize that everyone is a child of God and part of his creation. As part of God’s creation, he or she deserves honor and respect. Augsburg speaks of this in language of tri-polar spirituality. He says that in mono-polar spirituality, the focus is on the self and the enrichment that comes through personal breakthroughs, but bi-polar spirituality seeks to know God—that he is the path to true self-knowledge. Tri-polar spirituality sees that the love of God cannot be split from the love of neighbor.¹⁸ In other words, central to Christian spirituality is the believer’s love of God and neighbor. When believers are in conflict, they must understand that they are followers of Christ, and he should guide how one deals with that conflict.

¹⁸ Ibid., 154.

Family Systems

It is in family units that one first learns how to be in relationships with others. If these relationships are healthy, they can be beneficial throughout one's entire life; if these relationships are unhealthy, they can cause pain and trauma that is also lifelong. It is important within the context of this project and the curriculum that will follow to acknowledge the part that family of origin plays in the relational work and health of an individual. Ferguson claims that healthy relationships are not possible and achievable without first dealing with family of origin issues with parents and siblings.¹⁹ Students and young adults are still very much connected to their families of origin and often are still living in that environment. This will make the trek into their families of origin something that must be done carefully. But building awareness about how one's family of origin shapes one's current and future relationships is a critical piece of the puzzle. It is also critical for students and young adults to realize that in navigating relationships, they must take into consideration the other person's family of origin. Helping students and young adults learn this self-awareness and skill will be a helpful tool for all their future relationships.

In his book *Families Where Grace is in Place*, Jeff VanVonderen argues that the primary channel for learning one's identity, for understanding who God is and for

¹⁹ Ferguson, *The Never Alone Church*, 165.

developing relationships is in the family unit.²⁰ It is important to understand that what a child learns about relationships is in a family. VanVonderen creates a picture of a family based upon grace, love and acceptance. It is not a family without respect or boundaries, but rather a family that is affirming and is oriented toward people rather than performance. Family members have clear expectations and honest and open communication. Such a family values being responsible to other members of the family. It is a place where feelings are validated, and members are free from shame.²¹ These are important building blocks for a family as well as for other relationships outside of the family unit. While no family is perfect, the goal for the students and young adults will be to see places where they can contribute to making their family mirror some of these characteristics. It is also a space for them to begin to see where their families may need to grow. The intention is that through these discussions, high school students and young adults will begin thinking about the type of family environment they want to create when they have families on their own. The goal is that they develop an understanding of their present context, but also use the information in preparation for their future context of family that they will create.

Self-differentiation is an important developmental goal for teens and young adults. It can be argued that it is the primary work of the teen and young adult years. The

²⁰ Jeff VanVonderen, *Families Where Grace Is In Place* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 140.

²¹ Ibid.

teen and young adult are in the process of self-differentiating from their parents.²² In addition, many of them will have friend groups in college and beyond, that will function as ad-hoc families. It is the intention that the insight they develop will be used for the many family and community situations that they are currently a part of and will be a part of in the future.

Emotional Intelligence and Spiritual Formation

In *Dissident Discipleship*, David Augsburger paints a holistic picture of life in community. He emphasizes that in community everyone should be radically attached to Christ and to each other because of their attachment to Christ. He also speaks of practicing stubborn loyalty to one's community through solidarity with one another. He emphasizes the importance of being a faithful presence in the life of another.²³ Presence is an important and often ignored element that is so important to being in community with one another.

Students and young adults are in some ways very present with their friends on social media, but they can also be quite narcissistic in those interactions. Social media is set up so that participants get rewarded for likes. They are rewarded by seeing how many people like what they post. There is a certain narcissistic tendency that is a normal part of adolescent development. The difficulty is that students and young adults' current method

²² Carl E. Pickhardt, "Surviving Your Child's Adolescence," *Psychology Today*, September 13, 2011. www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/surviving-your-childs-adolescence/201109/five-psychological-engines-drive-adolescent-growth.

²³ David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 61.

of interacting with the world plays even more into these tendencies. They must be reminded of what presence looks like with their peers, with their families. Relationship happens through presence. Relational mindfulness invites the person to be present in the moment and to ask the greater questions about how to be a faithful presence of Christ to the other. Keith Anderson and Randy Reese in their book, “Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction,” discuss that relationships create safe spaces for discovery.²⁴ Anderson and Reese write that establishing trust and intimacy is critical for a mentoring relationship to move forward. When the mentor establishes this trustworthy presence then the individual being mentored can grow.²⁵ Presence and the establishment of trust are key to encourage and develop relational mindfulness in the lives of teens and young adults.

Attachment is an important factor in a child or teen’s ability to be in relationship with others. Their experience of attachment in their family of origin must be considered. Children who have had healthy childhood attachments to adults are emotionally connected are more secure and able to connect with others easier.²⁶ Attachment and an awareness of attachment will be helpful topics of discussion in the curriculum. Another topic to be discussed is trauma and its impact on attachment for children. Karyn Purvis discusses in her book, *The Connected Child* the long-term implications of trauma on

²⁴ Keith R. Anderson and Randy D. Reese *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1999), 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Raising Great Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 9.

attachment.²⁷ Trauma can play a key role in attachment, but it is often not considered. Teens and young adults need to be made aware that their past trauma may be affecting their current attachments to others and may influence their future relationships as well.

Spiritual formation is also an important consideration in the development of students and young adults. In *The Critical Journey*, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich outline the stages of a life of faith²⁸ They outline six stages of faith. The first stage is when the individual is recognizing God and seeking understanding about who God is. The second stage involves a deeper exploration of who God is and understanding what it means to follow Christ. During this stage the individual is seeking information and they are experiencing personal growth. The third phase occurs when the individual identifies as a disciple of Christ and seeks to live that relationship and calling in the world. The fourth stage involves the individual realizing that their core discipleship journey must be centering on God. The inward journey becomes as important as the outward journey. It is often after this point when some get stuck on their journey in a place called the Wall. Individuals can be at the wall for a long time or for a short time. On the other side of the wall the person realizes that their life is to be one completely surrendered to God and they trust in God for the plan of their life without reservation. The final stage is looking back in gratitude for all that God has done and seeking to share that in all aspects of their life.

²⁷ Karyn Purvis, *The Connected Child* (New York, McGraw Hill, 2007).

²⁸ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Press, 1973), 31-160.

The students and young adults at MDPC will be at different stages of faith development. During the six weeks of training, it is important to help them individually assess where they are in the journey and to meet them there. The goal is that during this small group experience they will grow in their faith development as they understand more about who they are individually and within the context of community.

Leadership

As a church and community, MDPC must address the importance of mentoring and leadership of its students and young adults. This is a critical part of creating healthy communities. This section is included in the curriculum because leadership development is critical for the individuals who will be part of the sessions, but even more for the future of the church. While some are called to be leaders more than others, on some level God is calling each person to be a leader in their area of strength. As God uniquely created each person, each should contribute to life together out of his or her giftedness. Also, for the church and the Christian community to thrive in future generations, the younger generations must be taught and empowered to lead.

In their book *Growing Young*, Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin discuss “keychain leadership.”²⁹ The idea of keychain leadership is giving power away to younger leaders while still walking beside them.³⁰ It is similar to an educational concept

²⁹ Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 50-55.

³⁰ Ibid.

called backward chaining where one teaches another by first doing a task with them and showing them, then doing most of it but giving them a little ownership, then continuing the process until the learner is doing it entirely on their own.

The point of these concepts is that the leader who is influencing, teaching, and mentoring does not leave the learner alone through the process. It is a “warm” handoff when teaching and mentoring through the process.³¹ In many ways, this curriculum in implementation is meant to help develop persons as leaders and create a space where they get a warm hand-off to go and try some of the skills and methods that they have learned. Consequently, a three-month follow-up was set for this project to assess if they were able to implement some of the skills and information that they learned.

The road from follower to leader is a natural development process for most students and young adults. Some are natural born leaders and just need resources and mentoring to encourage that gift, others need far more influence and coaching to lead in places and spaces that feel comfortable for them. I hope these students and young adults will leave this experience with an understanding that they need to seek out others to lead and mentor them in various aspects of their lives. Ultimately developing leaders is more about relational connections than simply a training manual.³² As Logan and Miller point out, leadership development is not about one skill—it is developing the entire person who is a “social, emotional, and spiritual being.”³³

³¹ Ibid., 62.

³² Robert Logan and Tara Miller, *From Followers to Leaders* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart, 2007), 19.

³³ Ibid.

While this project may appear to focus on one aspect of the life of the individual, living in community with others, the reality is that at its core the goal is spiritual formation. Logan and Miller describe spiritual formation as “a whole life and community context for engagement with God.”³⁴ Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, and to follow him based upon the context that he had provided. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Jesus provided an example for wholistic life in community, and this is what the students and young adults will be invited to explore and engage with on their relational journey.³⁵

By examining this literature on theology of relationships, conflict, family systems, mentoring and leadership, and emotional intelligence and spiritual formation some important themes emerge. There is a theme of presence and connection, of awareness of self and others, and ultimately connection to God who is the author of all relationships. These resources highlight that humanity is made for relationships, but that humanity also has a tendency toward relational brokenness. Just as Christians are called to be reconciled to Christ, they are also called to be reconciled to one another. This literature provides a framework for the curriculum that offers the participants a better understanding of how they can be relationally healthy in their families, with their friends, in their workplace, and in their churches. For the Christian, community begins with an understanding of God’s work in the world. God intends for Christians to seek relational health and

³⁴ Ibid., 101.

³⁵ Ibid.

wholeness as part of their sanctification. This literature provides a guide for how to do that sanctifying work in community with others.

CHAPTER 5: JESUS IN COMMUNITY

The purpose of this project is ultimately to help students and young adults understand the importance of experiencing community in a healthy context and also to understand community within the context of the kingdom of God. Although Jesus' time on earth was short, much of his teaching was spent explaining what relationships should look like in the kingdom of God. There are many examples where he taught overtly on relational wholeness, but it was also an underlying theme of his entire ministry. This section will explore how Jesus lived in his own community relationally speaking, and his teachings on community. Last is a discussion of the early church and examples of community found there.

Jesus and His Community

Jesus had four primary groups of people that he interacted with during his earthly ministry—his family, his disciples, his friends, and the greater public. While the disciples could also be considered his friends, Jesus had a very purposeful relationship with them that went beyond friendship. His relationship with the disciples included mentoring, leadership development, and transfer. This section looks at each group Jesus interacted with and the relational lessons found in those relationships.

Jesus with His Family

Jesus interacted with his family first. While there are not many biblical references about Jesus' interactions with his family, the ones mentioned are significant. These interactions include Jesus' discussion with teachers at the temple, his interaction with Mary before his first miracle, and his interaction with John at the cross when Jesus asked him to take care of his mother

Luke 2:41-52 tells the story of Jesus and his family traveling for the Festival of Passover. As they were returning home, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was not with them. They spent three days looking for him and then found him in the temple with the teachers. Jesus replied that he was in his father's house. This is usually where one stops reading, but the next couple of verses are significant: "Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2:51-52).

The Scripture says that Jesus was obedient to them. He respected his parents and honored them. The sixth commandment in Exodus 20:12 is "Honor your father and mother." Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that he came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Part of fulfilling the law was honoring his parents. This is an important part of community together. Honoring elders and learning from them is an important part of life together in community.

The second interaction to be highlighted is at the wedding in Cana. It is the first documented miracle of Jesus. In the story Mary, his mother, was encouraging him to do something about the shortage of wine at the wedding. One interpretation of Mary's action is that she understood the power that Jesus had even though he had not shown it yet to anyone. She knew he had a greater capacity than what he had shown so far, and she was encouraging him to use it. At first Jesus responded to her, "Women, why does this concern you? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). She then responded to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do" (Jn 2:5). Then Jesus gave instructions. While scholars have spent countless hours dissecting this conversation, one position that can be taken is that Jesus was honoring his mother when he performs the miracle. He was listening to her and acting based upon her wisdom and guidance.

In John 19 Jesus was on the cross. Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and her sister, as well as Mary, the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. John 19:26-27 says, "When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then He said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' So from that hour, this disciple took her into his home." Jesus in the last moments of his life honored his mother. He ensured that she was going to be cared for even after his death. This is the ongoing theme of honor and responsibility. Jesus took responsibility for his family and sought to honor them even as he neared death.

Many high school students and young adults have lost a sense of responsibility to the family. They are so occupied with sports and academics, and so little is required of them in terms of responsibility to the family. The family has become so child-centered

that many households no longer require children to participate in helping to meet the demands of family life. Being part of the routine work of running a household helps children develop an awareness of the needs of others, while at the same time contributing to their emotional well-being. Children who consider themselves necessary to the family are less likely to feel adrift in a world in which everyone wants to feel needed.¹

Wendy Mogel, in her book *The Blessing of the Skinned Knee*, asserts that raising children who respect and honor their parents and family is not just about the family. It is more about creating a legacy concerning how children (or teens) will treat all the inhabitants of the world they encounter. It is about teaching honor and reminding them that honor is the beginning and end of any relationship.²

Jesus with the Disciples

The fact that Jesus called twelve disciples around him shows that he valued community. He knew that for his ministry to continue, he had to lead and mentor others who would remain after he had left the earth. He called the disciples to walk with him, and he spent much of his time investing in them so that they could continue his kingdom work. Three ways Jesus was in community with the disciples were through investment, serving, and compassion.

¹ KJ Dell'Antonia, "Happy Children Do Chores," *New York Times*, August 18, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/opinion/sunday/children-chores-parenting.html

² Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of the Skinned Knee* (Penguin: New York: 2001), 88.

Jesus invested in the disciples by spending time with them and instructing them. He brought them wherever he travelled so that they could see and hear what he was doing and how he was living and preaching the gospel to the world. He was deliberate in the ways he modeled and showed them what it meant to be part of the kingdom of God. A couple of examples of this investment can be seen in Matthew 17:1-8 and in Luke 9:1-2 (giving the disciples the authority to heal). Jesus gave them a shared vision in the Great Commission. In the transfiguration, Jesus gave his disciples insight into who he was and a better understanding of his overall mission on earth. He did not take all the disciples with him, but he chose a few who were ready to hear the message. In Luke 9, he sent his disciples out into the community, giving them authority to heal and remove demons. He gave them specific instructions about what they should take and how they should act. He knew that they represented him as they went out to heal in his name.

Jesus also gave the disciples a clear vision: The Great Commission. In reality, they had already been carrying out the Great Commission with him during his ministry.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:16-20).

In this Great Commission, Jesus gave his disciples facts and instructions, and he reminded them to not forget everything he had taught them. He also reminded them that he would be with them forever. He promised that his investment continued. A

relationship had begun, and he was committed to them even as he was leaving them.

This was a long-term investment in them as his disciples and followers.

Jesus' example exhibits that investment matters as the next generations are being trained and led to continue the work of the church. This supports the argument that students and young adults must be trained to live in community so that they continue the community in the future. They need to see the church's investment in them so that they in turn can invest in future generations.

Through Serving

Jesus offered many examples of serving during his short time with the disciples. Most notably, he served them at the Last Supper by washing their feet, and his final act of service took place through his death on the cross. His words often echoed his actions of service. For example, he said in Matthew 20:28 that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and be a ransom for many." Jesus said this in response to a request from the mother of Zebedee's sons that her children sit on his right and left in his kingdom. He wanted her to understand that he was not looking to elevate himself or anyone else; on the contrary, the more important thing was that they embrace their lower status as servants of God.

Early in the chapter, Jesus also says that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mt 20:16). Jesus emphasized that in the upside-down world of his kingdom, one's status will be inverted. The goal is not to make oneself important, but rather to serve others. Jesus modeled this when he washed the disciples' feet. At that meal, he told the

disciples, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (Mt 13:15-17). He clearly stated that he was setting out an example of service and that they were to lead from that example. Leading was serving for Jesus. This is an important part of community living. It is important for those who are in leadership to understand that leading well means serving well.

Modeling Compassion

Jesus had great compassion for others and modeled it well for the disciples. In Matthew 15:32, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.” This was the night before the miracle of feeding the four thousand. Jesus had been teaching and taking care of their spiritual needs, but he recognized that their physical needs also had to be met. This is often seen in the acts of Jesus—he addressed the physical and spiritual needs of individuals. Jesus’ compassion often drove him to heal someone. It is important to understand the compassion of Jesus as it relates to life in community.

In an age of rampant online and offline bullying, students and young adults must understand compassion. Most of the students taking this course will probably not be the ones instigating bullying, but it is likely that many of them will have seen it and done nothing. Compassion in the age of Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram is difficult.

It is easy for teens to simply ignore what they see and move on to the next screen. Jesus often stopped what he was doing because he let his compassion lead him. Matthew 9 tells three healing stories of Jesus that exhibited his compassion. He sent the demons out of a man, he healed a woman who touched his coat, and he healed Jairus's daughter. In each of these instances, he took the time to see the person as an individual and to care for their individual needs. He led with his compassion. This is the goal for one serving as a follower of Jesus Christ in their community—to lead with compassion and to be open, available, and aware to the needs of others.

While Jesus showed compassion to strangers, he also showed compassion to those whom he loved. Peter denied him three times and yet Jesus showed him compassion and gave him another opportunity. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he encountered Jesus on the beach, and Jesus asked him three times if he loved him, and then he commanded Peter to “feed his sheep” (Jn 21:17). Jesus was exhibiting to Peter that he still valued him, that he wanted him to continue to lead what Jesus had started. Even though Peter had made some major missteps and betrayed Jesus, Jesus had compassion and offered him the opportunity at a second chance. As evidenced by the life of Peter through the book of Acts, he did indeed become a pillar of the Christian movement in the early church. Because Jesus offered him compassion and forgiveness, Peter was able to go on and do powerful kingdom work. That is the story of God and his reconciling work: he takes broken, sinful people and still uses them to accomplish many things for his glory. From beginning to end, the biblical text shows how God used flawed humans to carry out his redemptive work in the world. Peter is part of that story. For students and

young adults struggling with past choices, it is important for them to hear the message that God grants them compassion, forgiveness and a second chance to do his work in his community and the world. It is a call for them to have compassion for others as well and to realize that no one is outside of receiving the compassion of God.

Jesus and His Teachings

Jesus used the parables to describe what the kingdom of God was like and to help his listeners grow in their understanding of that kingdom reality that was present and to come. While many of the parables focused on the means to be part of the kingdom of God and were salvific in theme, there were several that focused specifically on relationships. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was not about an exclusive relationship between an individual and God, it was much more communal. From the perspective of a Western, individualistic culture, it is hard to embrace the understanding of communal identity and to see oneself not as an individual, but as part of the whole. The very idea of covenant is that one belongs to another through being in a community together. Through an analysis of several of Jesus parables, one can gather a greater sense of his intentions for community and life together as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

The Unmerciful Servant

In Matthew 18, Jesus was specifically dealing with conflict, forgiveness and grace. In chapter 15 he began by outlining how one should approach someone who is dealing with

a sin or issue. First go alone, then bring two others, then take it to the church community. In this way, Jesus outlined a process to confrontation that was thoughtful and deliberate. It was done in a way that was respectful of the other person yet held them accountable for their actions. He went on in that chapter to address a question by Peter. Peter asked if individuals should forgive someone who sins against them “up to seven times” (Mt 18:21). Jesus answered, “I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22). Jesus then went on to tell the parable of the unmerciful servant. The servant was in debt and his debt was forgiven by his master. The servant then left and was asked by a man to forgive his debts, but he refused and had the man thrown in prison. The master got word of this and called back the man and had him thrown in prison and tortured. The parable ends at verse 35 with Jesus saying, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Mt 18:35).

This parable highlights the value that Jesus places on forgiveness. To live in community with others, one must offer forgiveness and mercy extravagantly. Furthermore, offering forgiveness to others is a response to the forgiveness that one has received from God. This is an important part of life together, particularly when there is conflict in a relationship.

David Augsburger claims that this passage indicates that forgiveness should be unlimited, but not unconditional.³ Jesus is calling for a process leading to forgiveness and

³ Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of the Biblical Ideal*. Chapter by David Augsburger, “Repentance and Repair, or ‘Ethical Bungee Jumping’?” Forgiveness in the “Seventy-Times-Seven” Instructions and Victim-Offender Mediation, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 47-96.

reconciliation. Repentance is an important part of the forgiveness process.⁴ Forgiveness can be passive and one-sided. Reconciliation is active and requires investment from both parties. The goal in a relationship is not just passive forgiveness, but reconciliation. The whole life and death work of Jesus is reconciliation, and when one is in community with others, the work of reconciliation is important to live out the kingdom work of Jesus Christ.

The Good Samaritan

In this parable in Luke 10:30-37 Jesus was responding to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Through the parable, Jesus answered by saying that within the ethics of the kingdom of God, one’s responsibility to others is broad in scope. The implication for this paper is that it means that corporate responsibility is an important part of life in relationship and community. It is an awareness of the other and a call to empathy. The Good Samaritan parable serves as a reminder that there is no place for narcissism in the kingdom of God.

A crucial element in the story is that the Samaritan did not just help the injured man, but the Samaritan helped at a cost to himself. He had to expend time, money and energy to help the injured man by taking him to the inn and paying for his stay. Often individuals are inclined to help if the help does not come at a great cost to them. Jesus used the Good Samaritan to illustrate that helping others and being part of the community

⁴ Ibid.

of humanity may come at a cost. The greater good often requires a loss or inconvenience on the part of an individual. For the scope of this project, the Good Samaritan serves as a reminder to students and young adults that they are responsible for the welfare of others. Living in community means that one must be self-aware of their own selfishness and also be aware of the needs of others, even if it comes at a personal cost.

Healing on the Sabbath

Jesus told this parable found in Luke 14:1-14 when he was eating at the house of a Pharisee. At the dinner, he healed a man even though it was the Sabbath. He responded to the accusing eyes of the Pharisees in a direct and confrontational manner by saying, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” (Lk 14:5). Jesus also noticed at that meal that the guests were vying for a place of honor at the table. He told them that when they went to a wedding feast they should sit at the lowest place and wait for the host to move them. He said that if they sat at a high place and then a person of higher honor came, they would be humiliated when they were asked to move. Jesus said, “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Lk 14:11). Jesus went on to address the host and told him to not invite the rich, his neighbors, and those he knew, but rather he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Jesus said that the host would not be repaid immediately, but at the day of righteousness. This passage illustrates that compassion often trumps procedure and rules. It shifts social norms and causes one to examine who God considers important in his

kingdom. This is a different picture from the Instagram world of teens and young adults where beauty and followers are lauded above all else.

Through the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon the Mount is instructional for life in community. Jesus used this teaching time to give insight to the community of believers. The Sermon on the Mount expresses what life should look like in relationship to one another. It goes beyond the laws of the Ten Commandments and describes in even more detail and with more instruction on how the followers of Jesus should live in relationship to the gospel. For example, in Exodus the ten commandments are presented and one of the commandments was “Do not commit adultery.”(Ex 20:14) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took this even further by saying do not even look lustfully at another. The Sermon on the Mount calls believers to an even higher standard of living and being. This new way of being is one that calls for living in right relationship with others. Jesus implored his followers to care for the needy, to not judge, to not seek revenge, to honor their spouses, to not be filled with anxiety. All of these are relevant to the Christians community today. Jesus gave us the blueprint for life in community—where character matters and kingdom living is important.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-16 describe what it looks like to be a follower of Christ. It is a different way of being and acting in the world. In this passage Jesus was asking those who followed him, those who chose to live in his kingdom, to embrace the following characteristics: to pursue righteousness, to be peacemakers, to be merciful, and

to be humble. He also exhorted them to live as citizens of heaven boldly by being salt and light in the world.

Jesus encouraged his followers to go above and beyond what the law mandated in their interactions with others. He wanted them to pursue holiness even more than the law required. This was a pursuit of greater obedience not for the sake of obedience, but rather as an expression of gratitude for what God had done. The law reflected the heart of God and what he desired for believers. The Sermon on the Mount further defines how Jesus desired for one to live their life in relationships with others and with him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus spoke of conflict, he advised his listeners to settle their disagreements quickly. He encouraged them to seek reconciliation as a first step. He also spoke about temptation, encouraging the listeners to be wary of those things that are tempting and to remove the temptation from them. He reminded the listeners to love their enemies, acknowledge that their responsibility to others extended beyond those that they called friends. The Sermon on the Mount provided description of the greater calling and responsibility his followers have in kingdom living. Some of these teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount will provide examples in the curriculum for the students and young adults.

Through His Interactions/ The Power of Presence

While Jesus' teachings were significant, his power of presence was also a means through which one can understand life in community with others. Jesus was present by asking questions of people and entering their inner dialogue. He also sought to

understand a person's deeper need and to communicate based upon that understanding. He also moved towards people in a way to dialogue with them further, and he shared meals with them. These are the actions of Jesus that will be explored further below.

He Asked Questions

Jesus asked far more questions than he answered. Jesus asked over three hundred questions in the Gospels.⁵ The questions that Jesus asked were often ones that the person already knew the answer to—for example he asked the man who was paralyzed in John 5:6, “Do you want to get well?” Questions are a powerful way to exhibit presence and interest in another, and they are an important part of being in community. Questions indicate that one is invested in the person and wants to learn and know more about who they are and what concerns them. This is a critical component to being in relationship with one another.

Developmentally, students and young adults are still focused on their needs, so taking the perspective of another can still prove to be a challenge. When students and young adults are given the example of Jesus and his ability to ask questions well, they can learn that the skill of asking questions is important for any relationship. Jesus asked questions to grow in relationship with others but also to help others understand themselves better. Within this curriculum the students and young adults will be taught the

⁵ Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Answered and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2014).

value of asking questions, but also this skill will be modeled throughout the curriculum as they will be asked questions themselves.

Jesus Addressed the Presenting Need and the Deeper Need

To consider again the story of the paralyzed man in John 5, when Jesus asked him, “Do you want to get well?” the man probably interpreted that to mean a physical healing. The man needed physical healing, but he had a greater need of spiritual healing. For Jesus, the physical healing was often a way to lead to a person’s spiritual healing. Followers of Jesus recognize that their deepest need is a spiritual one. Jesus often addressed the physical need of a person in order to gain an audience with them to explain their deeper need of spiritual healing. This has implications for followers of Jesus today. Serving another person by assisting with their needs can often cause the relationship between those two persons to grow deeper. The church community has long recognized the need to address a person’s physical and emotional needs first. As individuals in relationship with others, church community members must also be aware of the importance of serving one another in love just as Jesus did.

He Moved toward People

Jesus did not wait to be approached. He approached people. This is exemplified in his interaction with Zacchaeus, in the calling of the disciples, and in his conversation with the woman at the well. He practiced presence by being open and available to others. This is significant for community connections. Being proactive in relationships is a skill that is

important in relational health. It is easy to be in a reactive position in relationships, but to be proactive increases connection and moves a relationship forward. Because Jesus approached Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, and the disciples, a transformation took place in their lives. Part of the curriculum will address finding mentors and being mentors. This is a proactive process in which reaching out to others is required for the relationship to begin or move forward.

He Shared Meals

There is documentation of at least ten meals that Jesus shared with others in the Bible. He ate with his disciples, Pharisees, tax collectors, lepers, and his close friends. Meals were important places of connection for Jesus. Of course, the most significant meal was the Last Supper. Before Jesus left earth after his resurrection, he ate on the beach with his disciples. He chose a meal (the Last Supper) to symbolize and remind the disciples and the future church what his death on the cross meant. Meals were a critical component of the ministry of Jesus and a critical component of his power of presence.

In the current state of the fractured American society, the power of a meal has lost significance. Because of sports schedules, homework, and crazy work schedules, families often do not share a daily meal together. This is a critical time of connection that has been lost. Meals were not peripheral for Jesus; they were times when instruction, service, and sometimes controversy occurred. He accomplished many things during meals with others. It was full of physical nourishment, but spiritual and relational nourishment as well. A meal is a place where connections are made, things are shared, information is passed

down. Jesus understood that this place was a point of connection that would have rippling effects.

In conclusion, it was through Jesus' interactions with his family, friends, and disciples and through his teaching and interaction with others, one can glean much information about what it means to live in Christian community and in connection with others. Jesus as the one who reconciled believers to God through his death and resurrection serves as the point of connection and reconciliation for all relationships and interactions.

Jesus is the Word become flesh that dwelt among humanity. Because of Jesus' very action of coming to earth in the form of a baby and living and dwelling among his people in community, it is clear that connection and belonging are a significant part of life in Christ. He desired relationship with his people so much that he came to earth to dwell in their midst. Relationships mattered to him, and so they must matter to his children, who seek to be in community with him and with the people he created.

The Early Church Community

In his book, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting*, Robert Banks discusses the role of community in the early church. The church is a community of believers that cares for one another in profound ways. The early church was an intimate gathering of believers that formed a loving family.⁶ This

⁶ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 43

picture of community is important. Jesus taught through his parables, reminding believers' that they are responsible for one another. The early church lived this principle out as they cared for one another in their community of faith.

The early Christians were living according to a new set of rules and a new way of life as set out by Jesus Christ. There is a description of the early Christians in the early church written by an anonymous author in year 130 AD in a "Letter to Diognetus." In this letter the author writes about how Christians are distinguished from other people, not by the customs, but by their behavior. He claims that "they marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all."⁷ The letter goes on to say that the even in their poverty they still lift others up. The letter concludes "To sum it all up in one word—what the soul is to the body, that is what Christians are in the world."⁸

This letter tells its audience is that from the very beginning, Christians were to have a different purpose and way of being in the world. They were called to a different life that was very countercultural. O. M. Bakke, in his book, *When Children Became*

⁷ Doru Costache, "Letter to Diognetus: How Second Century Insights Are Relevant to Twenty First Century Mission," Academia.edu, March 9, 2017, www.academia.edu/31781647/Letter_to_Diognetus_How_Second_Century_Insights_Are_Relevant_to_Twenty_First_Century_Mission.

⁸ Ibid.

People, discusses the fact that before Christianity, children were considered non-persons in many ways. They had high infant mortality rates which inevitably contributed to lack of attachment on the part of the parents. Up to 50 percent of children at that time died before their tenth birthday.⁹ Also, children were beaten, often made slaves, and sexually exploited by adults. Bakke goes on to write that “there can therefore be no doubt that the early Christian moral tradition condemned all forms of sexual activity between children and adults. The Christian sexual ethic in which patristic theologians present was a clear break with the view of sexual relations between adults and children in the Greco-Roman tradition. On this point, Christian theology and ethics are crystal clear.”¹⁰

Not only did the early church condemn this horrific treatment of children, churches also took in children and gave them homes. There was a practice in Greco-Roman times called exposure, or *exposito*. If a child was born and not wanted, they would be abandoned, exposed in the elements, and left to die. Christianity taught, just as Judaism had been teaching, that this practice was wrong. The difference became that Christians acted upon their teaching, and they began to take in these abandoned babies. This was due to the belief that every person is created in the image of God. These babies were the very image of God, and for that reason alone, they had worth.¹¹ The Christians

⁹ O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans, Brian McNeil (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005, Kindle, 790.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Aaron Earls, “Adoption Movement Recaptures Early Church Distinctive,” *The Wardrobe Door*, February 7, 2014. thewardrobedoor.com/2012/02/adoption-movement-recaptures-early-church-distinctive.html.

would go out to the sites where these babies were abandoned and rescue them from their plight of death. The point of this illustration of how the early Christians treated children is to highlight that they had a different way of being and living in the world. Their actions were dictated not by the standards of the culture at that moment, but rather by what Christ had taught them about how they were to live and be in the world. This mindset is still found in the church today. Many foster and adoption organizations are Christian-based, as well as many non-profits that serve at-risk children. These organizations are often founded on Christian principles that call believers to protect and provide for children. While not every Christian promotes the welfare of children, it still is a value for many Christians that has roots in the very beginning of the Christian faith.

It must be noted that the influence of Christianity in America is changing. Americans are moving into a post-Christian world where Christians are a smaller percentage of the population. “In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65 percent of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade.”¹² There is an additional consideration to this decline. The rise of the cultural evangelical Christian has helped to create cultural and political divides that one can argue further dilutes the voice of the Gospel in the world. Meador, in his book *In Search of the Common Good* goes further to say that part of the reason for the decline of the American church is that

¹² “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019. www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

the “American church has chosen to chase power, prestige and mainstream status.”¹³

While the evangelical movement has gained power, prestige and mainstream status on some level, it has also has lost some of its rootedness in the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In other words, Christians have lost their influence in part due to their own actions that are divorced from the pure expression of the gospel. What this may mean for American Christians is that as we move towards being the minority, like the Christians of the early church, it will be even more imperative that we live according to the way the early Christian church lived—counter-cultural with an emphasis on the compassion, example and teachings of Christ.

How The Early Church Dealt with Conflict

James 4:1-12 directly addresses the issues of conflict in the early church. In verses 7-10 he says, “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” In this passage James encourages the believers to first look at their own hearts and note where the sin in their lives has brought them to a place of conflict; secondly, he asks them to enter into the conflict situation with humility. In the passage, James is asking the believers to change their hearts to seek after the Lord and not their own selfish desires.

¹³ Meador, Jake *In Search for the Common Good*, 188-487

¹⁴ Ibid.

This is the core of what it means to be in community—to live with the lens of God’s desires and in relationship with others to get rid of selfish desires and motives. It does not mean to live without boundaries with one another, but to live with mutual respect and with an understanding that one’s own selfishness can contribute to conflict and a breakdown of relationships.

Paul was no stranger to conflict, and therefore, his relationships with others in the early church provide a great deal of insight into how they dealt with conflict. Paul managed conflict in the early church by agreeing to disagree, being discerning about false and destructive teaching, fostering unity in the midst of difference, and teaching that love and grace are more important than power.¹⁵ These are key concepts that are transferable to life in community today.

Agreeing to Disagree

Paul and Barnabas are a perfect example of agreeing to disagree. When Paul became a Christian, Barnabas supported him and encouraged the disciples to be in community with him despite their reservations (Acts 9:26). Then when Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey, Barnabas’s cousin John Mark accompanied them. For unknown reasons, John Mark abandoned the trip and returned to his home in Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). When Paul and Barnabas were setting out for their

¹⁵ Scot McKnight and Greg Mamula, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 57.

second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark. Paul resisted the idea, and so Barnabas and Paul decided to go their separate ways (Acts 15:36-41). In the end, the kingdom was multiplied by their efforts, and despite the conflict, Paul spoke fondly of Barnabas and his ministry in 1 Corinthians 9. While the conflict was surely messy, and there was wrongdoing on both sides, what is displayed is that conflict does not have to end in a broken relationship, and sometimes it serves both parties well.

Many churches do not handle conflict well. The conflict is either divisive and explosive, or ignored. In some respects, the second mode of operating can be even more detrimental to the church. Many families and churches believe that conflict is a sin, and they pass that belief onto their children. Churches must normalize conflict as a part of life and help our students and young adults find a way to navigate it both inside and outside of the church. From the beginning of the early church, conflict was present and had to be addressed; likewise, it is still present and should be addressed in our congregations and in our shared life together.

One other example of conflict in the early church is when Paul confronted Peter in Galatians 2:11-21. Paul says in verse 11, “When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.” *The Message* writes that Peter was “clearly out of line.” Peter had been eating and spending time with the Gentiles, but when the Jewish leaders came to town, he became a coward and pulled back from associating with the Gentiles. The Jewish Christian leaders wanted the Gentiles to become circumcised. Peter was bowing to peer pressure and distanced himself from the Gentiles. This was not the first time Peter ran from conflict. Paul confronted him on his

mistake and reminded him that faith was through Christ and that he was wrong to be dismissive of the Gentiles.

This example is important because it is a reminder that sometimes in the church and community, conflict must happen for the good of others. Avoiding conflict can be destructive. There are times and places for healthy conflict. Paul was exhibiting that at that moment; for the gospel movement to move forward, he had to confront Peter on his actions. This story will be incorporated into the curriculum because it is relevant to the types of confrontation and necessary conflict that the students and young adults will encounter.

How the Early Christians Cared for One Another

While handling conflict was inevitably a large issue of the early church as Christians navigated this new religion and way of being in community with one another, it is also notable how they cared for one another. Tertullian, one of the earliest Christian writers wrote in c.200AD to describe the generosity and kindness of Christians.

Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are . . . not spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.¹⁶

¹⁶Tertullian, *The Sacred Writings of Tertullian*, trans. Peter Holmes and Sydney Thelwall (North Charleston, SC: Createspace, 1922) 1:22.

He writes that non-Christians report that Christians “take care of one another.” In other words, the Christians had a reputation for taking care of each other and individuals outside of the church.

It is important to note that while members of the early church did take responsibility for one another, they also valued spending time with one another and in fellowship together. In an article on *Reading Acts*, Philip Long discusses four of the main functions of the church in the Book of Acts—the believers devoted themselves to teaching, to praying, to fellowship and to eating together.¹⁷ It was important that they existed in community together. This is not dissimilar to Jesus and the power of presence described above. Presence together is critical for Christian community. In our disconnected age, we believers must reclaim what it means to be present with people. This is also true of our students and young adults.

From the time Jesus was on earth and the beginnings of the early church, community was critical. Jesus set up a new way of being in community with one another that had significant implications for how the early church treated one another. Jesus preached compassion, humility, service and presence. These were all marks of the early Christian community and continue to be what the church community of today should aspire to be in their relationships with one another and the world.

¹⁷ Philip Long, “Acts 2:42-47—The Early Community of Believers,” *Reading Acts* (blog), January 25, 2011, readingacts.com/2011/01/25/acts-242-47-the-early-community-of-believers/.

PART THREE
MINISTRY IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER 6: CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS AND DESIGN

This curriculum is designed to help high school students and young adults navigate the relational road ahead of them as they enter adulthood. The curriculum addresses topics such as conflict, family of origin, boundaries, leadership development and resources for seeking further help. Each session is framed within the Christian context. The goal is for the participants to gain a greater awareness of themselves and others during their participation in these sessions. The goal is that this course can help them contribute positively to all the communities they are part of now and in the future. The goal is for them to understand how to live out the gospel in community and in ways that are healthy and support God's kingdom work in the world.

Curriculum Design

This project was designed to have an initial phase in which the curriculum was tested and refined. I have conducted three separate cohort groups in the initial phase. The second phase will be finished in the future (initially planned for the spring of 2020 but moved to the fall of 2020). The first phase was conducted with the young adult staff at MDPC, and the second phase will be conducted with other small groups of young adults at MDPC or high school small groups at MDPC. I refer throughout this section to Phase 1

and Phase 2. Phase 1 refers to the initial three groups, and Phase 2 refers to the groups that will be conducted later in 2020.

Phase 1

Phase 1 involved testing out several topics with the group. Five class sessions were designed, each lasting an hour and a half. While each of the three cohorts looked different, the primary topics included leadership development, understanding and handling conflict, exploring one's family of origin, the goal of mentoring and roadblocks in leading. With each session new topics and discussion were introduced to understand what gained traction and was helpful to the participants.

Phase 2

The curriculum for Phase 2 is designed for six sessions, each approximately one and a half hours in length. Each session will involve teaching, interaction, reflection on Scripture, and personal reflection. The sessions will be designed to move in order with each building upon the other. However, it will be easy enough for participants to join in at any session or to miss a session if they must. Based upon feedback and testing from the first phase, the sessions of Phase 2 will be as follows:

Session #1: Introduction—What Does Community Look Like and How Do I Live in It?

Session #2: Understanding and Walking Through Conflict

Session # 3: The Family I Grew Up in and the Community and Family I Want to Create

Session #4: Who Am I and What Are My Strengths?

Session #5: Boundaries and Barriers to Healthy Relationships

Session #6: When Do I Need to Seek Help?

Length of Sessions

For Phase 1 the sessions at first lasted an hour and then were lengthened to an hour and a half. It was found that the extra half hour was necessary to have time for discussion. Also, if there was a topic from the week before that the participants could not fully complete, the hour and a half gave time to go back and cover missed or incomplete material. The extra time was also used to bring up a topic/issue that arose from our discussions. Every group would bring different interests and needs to the discussion, and the extra time allowed for those topics to be brought into the teaching when possible and relevant.

For Phase 2, the session length will also be an hour and a half. Primarily these groups will be comprised of individuals that have already been meeting together in small groups. Some of these groups will already be formed and will have been together for months and may be more open in their interactions because they have been in community for a significant length of time. The other group that may be established is a young adult group formed just for the purpose of going through this curriculum.

Included in the high school groups will be the group leaders who will remain throughout the session. The reason for including these adult leaders is that they will already have built relationships with the students. In addition, this experience will give

them some community and relational language to use as their group continues through the months and years ahead.

Group Size

In Phase 1 the groups were limited to four members. This number was found to be too small for conversation and group participation. In addition, if someone had to miss, the group size was reduced to three members. Based on this experience, a slightly higher number of members is considered more beneficial to conversation and learning from one another. For Phase 2, the number limit will have to be more flexible because many will be in already established groups. The newly-formed groups will consist of five to eight participants.

Primary and Secondary Goals for the Sessions

The primary goals for these sessions is that the students and young adults participating in these sessions will gain tools that will help them in relationship with others, they will gain self-awareness of who they are and their place in a community, and they will develop healthy paradigms for future relationships. These sessions also have secondary goals. Because this curriculum is designed for a church context, a secondary goal is to contribute to the overall relational health of the church.

Also, there is the goal that these groups form a small supportive community together through this experience. The members' shared experience will give them a common language and way to support each other. It was discovered in Phase 1 of this project that some of the young adult staff that had not spent significant time together

developed strong friendships from the experience. It was also discovered that some of the young adult staff that were in conflict with one another developed better relationships through being in the sessions with those they had been in conflict with previously. These are secondary goals that proved to be positive outcomes in Phase 1.

Another goal is that this experience will elevate the relational health of the entire system. In particular, the high school ministry has undergone some significant staff transitions in the last year which has impacted the ministry profoundly. It is the goal that having a significant number of students participate in these sessions will bring about further connection and emotional and relational health for the group.

Implementation and Assessment

As previously mentioned, there are two phases of this project. The first phase has been completed. Three test cohorts were conducted with the young adult staff at MDPC. It was during those test cohorts that the curriculum design was refined. The second phase will be done in the Fall of 2020 with high school students and young adults. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on reporting on Phase 1, and future implementation of Phase 2.

Target a Population to Recruit Participants

In Phase 1, the target population was young adult staff members. All of the young adults on staff at MDPC were invited to sign up to participate in the cohorts. Approximately sixteen staff indicated that they were interested in participating. They

were divided into cohorts of four each. To date, three separate sessions with three separate cohorts have been conducted. When the young adult staff was invited to participate, it was advertised as leadership development groups. While much of what was included was leadership development, the groups were also a testing ground for the curriculum I created. It was explained in an initial email to the participants and at the first session that testing the curriculum was part of the purpose of the group. They were aware that this was part of a Doctor of Ministry project and that their experience would be reported, but that they would not be mentioned by name or referred to in any other identifiable ways at any point in the project.

In the first Phase I, the following topics were included: knowing myself, conflict, how my family of origin shapes me, mentoring, and investing in others. For this first phase, while leadership was a primary topic, in reality the goals were the same: to help the groups grow in their understanding of being in relationship with others, know themselves, and know how they relate to the people they are in community with and to the communities where they are leaders.

As mentioned earlier, in Phase 2 of the project, the curriculum will be taught to high school life groups that are gender- and grade-specific. These groups meet on a weekly basis and have two leaders. The curriculum will be the teaching component of the life group for six weeks. The other group will consist of young adults that sign-up to participate in a group that is newly formed for that purpose.

Develop a Timeline

There is a timeline for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Project. Phase 1 began in Fall of 2018. During that phase the goal was to develop an initial outline and curriculum for a leadership cohort for young adult staff to test the model and some of the curriculum to be used in the project. In 2019 the Phase 1 groups began. One group ran for five weeks in the winter of 2019, a second group ran in the spring of 2019 and a third group in the summer and fall of 2019. Phase 2 groups were to begin in Spring of 2020, but due to COVID-19, these groups have been moved to Fall of 2020.

The current plan is to continue using it with groups for several years and to provide it to other students and young adults outside of MDPC. The intention is to have a group in session for most of the year. The goal is to use the curriculum created to have the desired transformative impact on the larger church community, many participants must be involved over a multi-year period. For the purpose of this project, the initial groups serve as the proof of concept and development. The secondary groups will continue by using the curriculum that came out of those initial groups. In 2019 the curriculum was refined based upon the feedback from the Phase 1 groups. In the Winter and Spring of 2020 the final design of the curriculum was created. In the Spring of 2020 the Final Project was submitted.

Assessment

Appendix H contains a survey that will be provided to the participants at the end of the six weeks when they have participated in all of the sessions. This survey was developed after doing an oral survey with the initial groups. While it will not be included

in the initial project, follow-up resources will be provided to initial participants based upon the feedback they provide in person. One lesson learned from the initial groups was that each group had different discussions and concerns. For that reason, resources will also be based upon the needs of the second groups just as they were for the initial groups.

At the beginning of the session, the participants will be asked to sign a group covenant that will help guide the conversation and address issues of confidentiality and group participation and relations. The covenant provided in the appendix was designed based upon the covenant used in Phase 1. Also, for the high school students that are under 18, a letter will be sent to the parents ahead of time letting them know what will be discussed in each session so that they can make an informed decision about allowing their child to attend the sessions.

Each group will also have a three-month follow-up check in meeting. The purpose is simply to see if they have been practicing what they have learned and if they have follow-up questions or concerns. There was a three month follow-up with one of the initial groups. The participants were able to provide some perspective on what they had learned, how it had helped, and places where they still needed to grow and develop.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Henri Nouwen writes that community is a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that people are alive not for themselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of the human capacity to make the interests of others more important than one's own.¹ Cultivating a sense of community requires raising the awareness of the importance of community, and giving students and young adults the knowledge and tools to be in community with one another and others.

Generation Zers bring unique challenges as they grow, develop, and define what it means to be in community with one another. They are creating community in spaces that were unknown twenty years ago. They are digital natives and are comfortable forging relationships online as much as or even more than in person. Younger generations are often connected around the world but disconnected from their neighbor across the street.

As I complete this project, a new way of being in the world has developed that was not present at the beginning of this project. The world is currently in the pandemic crisis of COVID-19. It is unknown how this crisis will impact Generation Z members and their view of their world and their communities. It is also unknown whether the family connections made while families were at home during the pandemic, and the time away from all of the normal pressures of daily schedules, will impact family dynamics in the months and years to come. My observation is that older generations have had to adopt new ways of connecting digitally during this time that mirror how Generation Z has been

¹ Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 23.

connecting their entire lives. The way the world now connects has shifted, and everyone has forged new ways of connecting and being in community together.

I have spent the last six weeks moving my entire ministry to Generation Zers online in order to maintain contact with them during the pandemic. It has caused me to rethink and broaden my understanding of how community and ministry can happen in the digital age. It may also be true that this time of physical disconnection will create a sense of gratitude for in-person connection and a desire to be more in community with one another. The implications and impact of this global experience will not be known fully for many months or years. However, it will influence and impact the discussions that will happen in future small groups using the curriculum outlined below. It will serve as a new dimension to the conversation regarding what being in community looks like and how one creates community in many different spaces.

While the impact the current crisis has on shaping the lives of relationships of Generation Z is still unknown, what is known is that there are still unchanging fundamentals of community and life together that Christ has exemplified through his life and teachings. There will always be a need for believers to be in community with one another, to serve one another, and to grow together as they grow in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Throughout the story of the Bible, the image of the table is a place of gathering and connecting. The image of the table is an important metaphor for the Christian's life in community with others. Around the table there is community, examples of broken

relationships, times of reconciliation and truth telling, and ultimately the realization of the entire Body of Christ coming together as one.

In the story of Jacob and Esau, Jacob manipulated Esau with a cup of stew. Esau in his weakness gave up his birthright in order to meet his immediate need to satisfy his hunger. Through this exchange (and other events) a relationship was broken. At the Last Supper, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him. This is also an example of a relationship broken. In community, relationships can be broken by selfishness, greed and manipulation.

The image of the table is also used to illustrate forgiveness and restoration. Jesus asked Zacchaeus to come down and eat with him. It was at this table that forgiveness was received. In the story of Esther, the meal shared by Esther, Ahasuerus and Haman was about truth-telling and accountability. Friendship happened around the table with Mary and Martha. Bonds were created, wisdom was shared. When Jesus fed the five thousand and in the Lord's supper, the table was about serving.

In Revelation 19:7-9, Christians are given the invitation to the marriage supper of the lamb, when God will come to make all things new. Christians live in the tension of the brokenness of the world and the hope of the day when Christ will reconcile all things. Christians are to live the values of kingdom living now, as exemplified by Christ and also look forward to the day when all will sit in unity from every tribe and nation around the throne of God and share in the banquet table of the lamb. Even as they live in this world, Christians look with hopeful expectation to the glory within the Body of Christ that is to come. And as a people of this hope, Christians are called to live in relationship with one

another in a way that honors and looks toward a time when all will be reconciled. For this reason, Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation, mercy, and love in their relationships on earth so that they can reflect the future hope of what God has planned for his people. In Matthew 26:29, Jesus promised that he would drink again with his disciples when he drank it new with them in his Father's kingdom. For Christians, every relationship is anchored in this promise of Christ made at that table.

One of the goals of this project is to strengthen the bond around the table of MDPC for generations to come by investing in the relational health of younger generations that are already part of the community. But it is also important to equip the younger generations to be relational healthy at whatever table (community) with which they find themselves. The command of Christians is to go and be salt and light into the world (Mt 5:13-15). To be salt and light, one must represent the life of Christ well to others.

According to the curriculum, participants will spend a significant amount of time on examining the life of Christ in community with others. This is the starting point for all relationships when one is in Christ. Galatians 2:20 says "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life that I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." It is this image that Paul uses to remind Christians that they are no longer their own. The Christian life is to mirror the words, deeds and actions of Christ. For these young adults to understand what it means to live in community, they must first understand who Christ was in community.

As mentioned above in the curriculum design and implementation section, the curriculum and model for the curriculum has already been conducted through three separate cohorts of young adult members of the staff of MDPC. It was during these meetings that the model was tested and revised and the curriculum was used and developed. I refined the curriculum with each cohort, based upon feedback that I received from each group. I also led the first lesson with a small group of middle school and high school students that I teach, even though the curriculum is intended for high school students and older. Based upon that experience, the curriculum was revised to include sections designed specifically for high school students and others for college and young adults. It became evident from the experience with the younger students that developmental differences needed to be taken into consideration in the curriculum.

The intention is also to set up for further groups of students and young adults in the fall. The original plan was to lead these groups in the spring and summer of 2020, but due to the pandemic, I will shift these groups to a later date. The goal is also to extend these groups to high school students and young adults in foster care and other at-risk communities that MDPC is connected to through partnerships.

For the purpose of the project, the first groups allowed me to test the proof of concept and to receive feedback and work on the design. There were also follow-up meetings with some of the groups in order to get feedback regarding how their experience shaped their relationships and leadership abilities. The groups provided positive feedback and most expressed that the experience had been beneficial to each of them. That meeting also involved discussing how they are continuing to move forward in their relational

goals and growth. Following these concluding remarks on the project are the curriculum and outlines for each lesson, as well as resources needed for the curriculum.

The intention of this project is to guide high school students and young adults towards relational health and to develop the tools needed to have future success with their relationships and the communities that they find themselves in throughout their lives. It also provides them with the example of Jesus Christ as they navigate their relationships, looking to his example as the one who is the author of love and reconciliation. The goal is that through this curriculum the high school students and young adults at MDPC and beyond will be better equipped for the relational road ahead as they seek out community and connection with others.

The goal of this project is to aid students and young adults to sit at the table better. They will be part of many communities and relationships throughout their lives, and the goal is for them to sit at the table well. The desire is for them to face their brokenness; to seek forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation; to tell the truth; to serve one another. It is at the table where individuals are forced to face each other, to engage, to share a moment of their time together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the only thing that is vital between us.”² This is the goal: to help students and young adults establish deep, healthy and genuine relationships so that they can focus on living out the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 151.

APPENDIX A
SMALL GROUP CURRICULUM
FOR PREPARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS FOR THE
RELATIONAL ROAD AHEAD

**Session #1: Introduction—What Does Community Look Like
and How Do I Live It?**

A note for the leader: Instructions for the leader will be in *italics*. Teaching Elements for the participants will be normal type.

Objectives:

- To provide introductions and overview of sessions
- To help participants to understand importance of Jesus' commandment to love your neighbor as yourself
- To help participants understand relational mindfulness
- To help participants understand their personal strengths and personality traits

Session Outline

- I. Introductions
- II. The Greatest Commandment
- III. Overview of the Course
- IV. Group Covenant
- V. Challenges in Relationships
- VI. Who Am I?
- VII. Relational Mindfulness

VIII. Homework—Taking the Enneagram Test

I. Introduction of the Leader and Group

The leader introduces themselves to the group and then asks each person to introduce themselves. When they introduce themselves, ask them to say in five words or less how their friends would describe them.

II. The Greatest Commandment

It is important to begin the very first session with the why of the entire curriculum. Begin by reading Mt 22:34-40.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

It is believed that the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by asking to tell them the greatest commandment. But Jesus went above their question to speak of an even greater calling than the Ten Commandments: To Love God and To Love Neighbor.

For these next six weeks the focus will be on the second part of the commandment—loving neighbor.

In Lk 10:25-37, right after Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” a lawyer asked Jesus, “But who is my neighbor?” That is when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. *Read the passage together.*

According to this passage, even enemies are considered neighbors. What does this mean for one's relationships with other people? Who are we responsible for in our social circles? Who is Jesus asking us to be in relationship with the world?

III. Overview of Course

This course is designed to help in relationships with family, friends and acquaintances. The goal is to learn how to love your neighbor well and know how to relate to them in the best ways possible. Over these six sessions the topics that will be addressed are the following: dealing with conflict, relating to family members, recognizing hurtful relationships as well as ones that are helpful, learning how to be a leader, and finding mentors. These are some of the topics that will be explored over the next six weeks.

Discuss these questions with the group:

1. For High School Students:

Think about the person you get along best with out of everyone you know. Who is it and why do you get along with them?

2. For Young Adults:

Think about your relationships. What relationship feels like it is the healthiest to you? What relationship feels easy and you just don't have to work at it? Why do you think it is an easy relationship for you?

3. For Both Groups:

Throughout the sessions there will be a lot of discussion about different relationships in life—ones that are current and ones that will be in the future. One of the goals of these

sessions is to develop relational mindfulness to understand and navigate each of these relationships well.

IV. Group Covenant

Share with the group that for the next six sessions there will be conversations that some in the group may not want to be shared outside of this room. Also, it is important to give some boundaries and rules around how the conversations will occur. For this reason, the group will create a group covenant (see Appendix B).

Realize that this is not just a housekeeping item. Creating the group covenant is part of the session. The goal is to help the group take ownership of the process through the group covenant. This covenant will provide a guide and structure for future interactions.

Included in the Group Covenant is a reference to the Giant Swing. There is an accessible camp near Houston for individuals with disabilities. The campers at the camp are challenged to stretch themselves to try new and sometimes difficult things. One of the challenges is called the Giant Swing. The campers are pulled up high on a rope and are attached to a pulley. The goal is to bring them as high as they are comfortable, but to stretch them also. Before they go up in the swing, they give the team below a word. When they say that word, the team below knows they have gone as high as they want to go, and it is time for the pulley team to stop lifting them higher. In the Group Covenant the group will create a “Giant Swing word.” This is a word that a group member can use when they feel they have reached a limit on their discussion. They might be sharing about their family or a conflict, and they have shared all they want to share. The word serves

two purposes: it lets others know they have reached their level of comfort, and it also helps them to learn that they can make some decisions in relationships when they reach a place of discomfort. This illustration will also be used during the discussion on boundaries in a later session.

V. Challenges in Relationships

Invite the group to discuss things that they find challenging in their relationships. Explain that this includes relationships with friends, family, romantic relationships, and so on.

Write the responses on a large piece of paper. This exercise helps to give the instructor an idea of the needs of the group and makes the members aware of the challenges they face in relationships. After the list is finished, keep it and bring it to every session.

VI. Who Am I?

This section provides a chance to get to know the students and to help them think about the way they interact with one another. The goal of this exercise is to think about how they behave in a relational setting. Lay out four pieces of colored paper labeled a,b,c, and d respectively and give each person a board game piece. Explain that a series of statements will be read and that the students should put their game pieces on the answer that seems most like them. There are no right answers. The goal is to learn about others and share about themselves, using the following statements:

1. When I go to a party ...
 - a. I can't wait to talk to everyone there! It is going to be so much fun!
 - b. I text my best friend to see if we can ride together so I know I have someone to hang out with the whole time.

- c. Parties are the worst—give me Netflix in my room and a pint of Ben and Jerry’s.
 - d. I want to go, but it is too stressful for me, so I just end up hanging out with my parents instead.
2. When my friend has a problem....
- a. They always come and tell me. I really like helping them with it.
 - b. I have no idea what to say so I laugh it off or change the subject.
 - c. I don’t usually talk about problems with my friends.
 - d. My friends have problems?
3. I have a project due, and I am very stressed about it.
- a. I get very organized—with a lot of planning I can do this!
 - b. I get overwhelmed, so I ignore the project and just hope it will go away.
 - c. I get it done but don’t care if it is good—I just want it finished.
 - d. I know before I start I am going to ask for an extension and convince my teacher not to cut my grade.
4. I would describe my relationship with my family like this:
- a. We are close—maybe we spend too much time together.
 - b. I try to spend as little time as possible with my family.
 - c. We are close, but I am also close with my friends.
 - d. It is sometimes hard to be part of my family.
5. When my friends and I are trying to figure out our plans for the evening,
- a. I am always the leader. I take charge and make things happen.

- b. I just follow what other people do—I do not like to make decisions.
 - c. I will give ideas and sometimes help lead, but I can follow too.
 - d. I just go with the group. Whatever happens is fine with me.
6. Most of my relationships are like this:
- a. They are positive and I feel really good about them.
 - b. They cause me a lot of anxiety.
 - c. Some are good, some are difficult.
 - d. I don't know.
7. I am drawn to friends who are
- a. Exactly like me—we like all the same things.
 - b. Very different from me.
 - c. Both similar and different
 - d. I don't pick friends; I just hang out with whoever is around at the moment.

Debrief: Did anyone's answers surprise you? What did you notice about others? About yourself? Everyone is different and comes to relational experiences differently. God created each person unique. This uniqueness can make relationships great, but it also makes them challenging.

VII. Relational Mindfulness

Explain that part of that exercise was intended to practice being relationally mindful. Relational mindfulness is understanding who one is in a relationship, how that person interacts others, and how others interact with them. Over the next few weeks, part of the sessions will focus on understanding what it means to be relationally mindful. The

goal is that the group members be able to be present with others, to show compassion towards them and their needs, and to seek to improve relationships with everyone they interact with on a daily basis. It takes work to be in healthy relationships. It is important to learn how to understand another and be present with them.

VIII. Homework—Taking the Enneagram Test

One way to be relationally mindful is to understand oneself better. *Invite the group to take the Enneagram test during the week before they return for the next session.*

There are free Enneagram tests online. Two links for the test are the following:

<https://www.truity.com>

the.wepss.com

Session #2: Understanding and Walking Through Conflict

Objectives

- To help the students understand how Jesus handled conflict
- To help the students know the difference between good conflict and bad conflict
- To help understand that confrontation can lead to connection

Session Outline:

- I. Follow-Up From Last Week/Remind about Group Covenant
- II. Go over Enneagram
- III. Jesus in Conflict/Reconciliation
- IV. What does It Mean to Have Good Conflict?
- V. What Is Bad Conflict?

VI. Conflict Test

VII. Confrontation as Connection

VIII. Homework—Write Down Your Conflicts This Week

I. Follow-Up from Last Week/Remind about Group Covenant

Begin the session by following up from last week. Go back over group covenant.

II. Go over Enneagram

Ask participants if they took the Enneagram test. Ask those that did the homework and took the test which number they received. Briefly go over the different Enneagram numbers and invite them to explore this more. Connection to this week: In studying conflict, the goal is to remember that everyone comes to relationships differently as the Enneagram shows. Different personalities and preferences that influence how one interacts with others. This is especially true when there is conflict be. *Use the guide “The Road Back to You” to gain some brief insights into each personality type.*³

III. Jesus in Conflict/Reconciliation

Begin the session by talking through some specific examples of Jesus in conflict.

1. In the Temple (Jn 2:13-16)

Read this passage. In this passage, Jesus enters the temple, becomes angry and turns over the tables. Why was he angry? A common thought is that he was angry that things were being sold in the temple, but it was a deeper injustice that was happening.⁴

³ Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey of Self Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016).

⁴ Matthew Henry, “Matthew Henry Biblical Commentary,” Christianity.com, 2020, <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=mh&b=43&c=2>.

Jesus was angry because those who were poor were being charged more than they should have. They were not being treated fairly.

Does anyone here get angry because of injustice? This examples shows that Christians are called to fight injustice. This is a conflict that cannot and should not always be avoided. Christians are often called to stand up for the oppressed and fight injustice. This requires a level of conflict. Micah 6:8 reflects this idea: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” How does this relate to issues of racial reconciliation? How does this relate to other current issues in our world?

2. With the Pharisees

Ask the students to name some examples of times Jesus experienced conflict with the Pharisees. Read Mt 23:1-15 together. What can be observed from this passage? Was Jesus passive? What tone did he take? He was quite confrontational with the Pharisees. Is confrontation always a bad thing? What is to be learned from Jesus about confrontation, specifically in this passage?

3. With Peter

Read these passages:

Mt 16:15-23

Mt 26:34

Jn 21:15-19

Ask the participants: What did you observe about Jesus and Peter’s relationship? How did they handle conflict? Where did you see forgiveness? Where did you see truth telling?

Ask the participants: what did you observe about Jesus in these situations? Would you have handled them the same or differently? Was Jesus comfortable with conflict? Did this conflict encounter change the relationships?

IV. What Does It Mean to Have Good Conflict?

Many are under the impression that all conflict is bad, but this is not accurate. Conflict can also be good. What are some good things that can happen when two people disagree? Conflict can lead to positive outcomes and deeper relational connections. Conflict that is good must have the following attributes:

1. Respect between the parties involved
2. An openness to listen to the other person
3. A desire to resolve the conflict with the goal of a solution that all can accept. The goal of conflict should rarely be to “win” but rather to find a solution that everyone involved can tolerate and respect.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 here. How does this relate to good conflict?

V. What Is Bad Conflict?

Conflict can also be destructive and harmful. Conflict can bring further division and can cause damage to relationships with others. Conflict that is harmful can include some of the following:

1. Conflict that seeks to bring destruction to another

2. Conflict that demeans another and does not respect their personhood.
3. Conflict that is not solution-focused
4. Conflict that is not concerned about the welfare of the other
5. Conflict that does not see the other person's intentions as good
6. Conflict with a person that is not trusted

VI. Conflict Test

See attached test.⁵ After each person has taken the test debrief their results. Is it what they expected? Why or why not? Ask them to assess their level of comfort with conflict.

Common Conflict Styles:⁶

Avoiding—I Lose, You Lose

Competing—I Win, You Lose

Accommodating—You Win, I Lose

Compromising—I Win Some, I Lose Some, You Win Some, You Lose Some

Collaborating—I Win, You Win

While occasionally some other conflict styles are necessary, usually the best style is collaborating. In collaboration, both parties are working toward a solution that is not a compromise but rather is a solution that is better than either could have come up with alone. In compromise, the solution is better and honors the perspectives of both parties.

⁵ Orlando Blake, PhD, CPT, "Conflict Management Styles Assessment" *The Blake Group*
http://www.blakegroup.com/sites/default/files/assessments/Conflict_Management_Styles_Assessment.pdf

⁶ Calum Coburn, "Negotiation Conflict Styles,"
<https://hms.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/assets/Sites/Ombuds/files/NegotiationConflictStyles.pdf>

But in a conflict situation, both parties should agree that collaboration is the best way to approach the conflict. That is when the situation becomes difficult—if one person defaults to another type of conflict behavior. For example, if one person is practicing avoidance, then compromising is difficult.

However, often if one person has the intention of compromise and does not retreat from the conflict, they have the potential to influence the conflict in a positive way.

VII. Confrontation as Connection

Confrontation can spark a deeper intimacy and connection with another person because it is truth-telling. Conflict can offer authentic feelings in a situation and invite the other to respond. *Read the story attached in Appendix C.* The story attached is a great example of someone go towards a conflict and finding deep relationship and meaning by working through the conflict.

VIII. Homework—Write Down Your Conflicts This Week

The homework this week is to write down any conflicts that occur during the week. Who were they with, what were the issues, how did they end?

Session # 3: The Family I Grew Up in and the Community and Family I Want to Create

Objectives:

- To help the participants understand their family interactions better
- To help the participants think about the values they want in their families

- To help the participants understand the example of honor that Jesus brought his family

Session Outline:

- I. Follow Up from Last Week
 - II. Drawing Family Trees/Genograms
 - III. The Outline of a Family
 - IV. Jesus and His Family
 - V. Future Family
-
- I. Follow-Up from Last Week/ What Were the Conflicts That Occurred?
Ask the group to share conflicts from the previous week. Talk through what happened and ask if they were resolved. Look at the different conflict styles and ask the groups to respond to this question: In the conflict, where do you see avoiding, competing, collaborating, accommodating, compromising? How did you feel in the conflict? How did it end? Any follow-up with that person?

Today the topic is families. A family is often a place where conflicts occur. But today the topic is broader. It is a look at the family in a more wholistic way. Today the goal is to look at how families interact together and notice what the broad patterns of interaction in a family are.

- II. Drawing a Family Tree

Begin by drawing a family tree and noting some things in that family. Use some of the language of a genogram as the family is discussed. While this is not a true genogram,

it is meant to help participants see patterns in families. There are many examples of genograms online. Also show them the genogram key that they can use to identify relational significance.⁷ See sample genograms in link.⁸

1. Draw Your Tree

Invite all participants to take about ten minutes to draw their family tree, using the example given. Invite them to note significant life events, relationships, and so on. Explain that this is called their family of origin. If they get married and have children in the future, they will create a new family system, but they will always have the same family of origin.

2. Share

Allow each person several minutes to share their tree. Ask questions of each: What stands out to you? Do you see any patterns? What surprises are there? What makes you sad? What makes you happy or proud?

III. The Outline of a Family

Have each person share three values/experiences/relationships from their family of origin that they want to keep in the future if they decide to have a family. Is there anything they do not want to replicate in the future? Why does looking at our families matter? What can we learn from our families of origin and how can it impact our future families?

⁷ Lindsey Brahman, “The Genogram Symbol Key” Lindsey Brahman.com, 2020, <https://lindsaybraman.com/downloads/genogram-symbol-key/>

⁸ “Genogram Examples,” GenoPro.com, <https://www.genopro.com/genogram/examples/>.

How does our family of origin affect other relationships in our lives?

IV. Jesus and His Family

Close by sharing a few stories of Jesus with his family where he showed honor to them.

Lk 2:41-52: When he obeyed his parents at the Temple.

Jn 2:4-5: When he performed a miracle at his mother's request

Jn 19:25-27: When he asked John to take care of his mother.

Where do you see Jesus honoring his family in these stories? What does honor look like to you in a family?

V. Future Family

If there is time, revisit conflict session from last week and any connections to this family session regarding conflicts. Ask them to explore conflicts in their family of origin.

It is never too early to start thinking about the family you will create one day. What do you want that family to look like? How can you be a healthy part of that family? What are three values you want in a future family?

Give them a sheet of paper. On this sheet of paper list the top five priorities desired in your future family. Why did you choose those? It is not too early to start thinking about your future family and to determine what will be important in that family. Thinking and preparing for a healthy future family is a valuable exercise.

Session #4: Mentoring

Objectives:

- To help students and young adults understand what mentoring is
- To help students and young adult recognize mentors in their lives
- To help students and young adults understand the role of mentoring in their lives

Session Outline:

- I. Follow-Up from Last Week
 - II. Jesus as Mentor
 - III. Naming Mentors
 - IV. The Purpose of Mentoring
- I. Follow-Up from Last Week

Begin the session by reflecting on the last week. After looking at their families, is there anything they noticed this week about their families and how the members related to one another? Were there any new insights that emerged?

- II. Jesus as Mentor

Jesus was a mentor. He deliberately chose twelve disciples to mentor. For three years they went everywhere with him. He was preparing them for the time when he would leave the earth and they would need to continue his mission. Read some key passages about Jesus mentoring his disciples:

Mt 10:1: Jesus specifically chose the disciples. He also gave them authority. He gave them responsibility and trusted them to continue his work.

Mt 15:32: He expressed his thoughts and emotions with his disciples. He showed led by example as he showed compassion to the crowds.

Mt16:23: He confronted Peter when he was in the wrong.

Mk 8:34: He set expectations for the disciples.

Mt 28:19-20: He sent them out to do his work. He promised his continual presence.

What stands out to you in these verses? How did Jesus prepare his disciples to do his work after he left the earth? How did he teach them? How did he lead by example?

III. Naming Mentors

1. *For High School Students*

Name an adult other than your parents that have helped you and you look up to. Why?

What is the best advice/help they have given to you?

2. *For Young Adults*

Who is someone that has mentored you or had a significant impact on your life?

What was the best thing they taught you?

Are you mentoring anyone? Are they younger? Are they older?

3. For Both:

Why is it important to have someone mentor you?

It is important to identify those people in one's life who are playing the role of mentor. Sometimes the relationship is a formal mentoring relationship when both parties agree to that. But often mentors are persons whom one naturally goes to for guidance and advice. While it is not a formal mentoring relationship, both parties see that dynamic in their relationship.

IV. The Purpose of Mentoring

Mentoring can have many purposes. One can mentor someone in a specific area—sports, academics, finances, or leadership. Mentoring also can have broader scope that involves guiding someone in many aspects of their life. Spiritual mentoring is the focus of the discussion today. All Christians should be part of a spiritual mentoring relationship. *Read this quote by Thomas Merton.*

The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of a man's life, to get behind the façade of conventional gestures and attitudes which he presents to the world, and to bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul.⁹

The purpose of spiritual mentoring is to explore the inner spiritual life of an individual and to help that individual move towards a deeper relationship with Christ and a deeper understanding of who Christ calls them to be in the world. Mentoring in the Christian context is often called discipleship. While they can be interchangeable, one can argue that while discipleship is focused on just the spiritual growth of an individual, mentoring looks at a more wholistic view of the person. It is concerned with their life of faith and growth in their relationship with God, but it also is concerned with looking at their life from several different vantage points.

1. Mentoring Is Presence

Mentoring is presence in the life of an individual and it is also helping that individual practice being in the presence of God. In a mentoring relationship the mentor is more focused on the mentee, than on sharing their own lives. While a mentor will share

⁹ Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict Press, 1960), 16.

some personal things, the primary reason for the relationship is for the mentor to be present with the mentee. This is one of the most powerful parts of the mentor/mentee relationship—simply being present and actively listening to the mentee.

2. Mentoring Is Listening

Mentoring specifically uses the practice of active listening. It is not just hearing sounds and the mentee's voice, but actively taking in the information and reacting to it in a way that the person feels heard. (*See handout in Appendix D.*) Active Listening involves many components: paraphrasing what has been said, attentiveness, summarizing and attention to the person's feelings. *Spend time going over the handout together.*

3. Mentoring Is Asking Good Questions

Questions help us think further about a problem or situation. Often in mentoring the goal is not for someone to provide direct answers, but rather to lead the mentee to discover those on their own. Jesus asked many questions in his life on earth. (*Give them the handout with questions Jesus asked in Appendix E.*) Which question of Jesus is powerful for you? Why do you think it is so important to ask questions in a mentoring relationship? What did Jesus accomplish with his questions?

4. The Character of a Christian Mentor

St. Bonaventure who lived in the 13th century, wrote about the characteristics of a Christian leader in his book, *The Character of a Christian Leader*. While his book is centuries old, it still contains great truth about the qualities of a Christian who leads other. Bonaventure says that a Christian leader should have a zeal for righteousness,

brotherly love, patience, set a good example and have good judgement.”¹⁰ It is important to look for a mentor that has these qualities. What are some other qualities that one should look for in a mentor?

Often mentors are chosen for the characteristics above and more specific reasons. The mentor may possess a particular expertise in a skill or field of study. The mentor may have had some life experiences that are similar to the mentee. The mentor may have great Spiritual depth, have led by example at an important time, or they may be known for helping new leaders to grow.

When one chooses a mentor, they must consider the character of the mentor and decide if it is a person they are comfortable following their lead and guidance. Mentors are not meant to be perfect, but they should possess a depth of character and a desire to guide one into further growth and development.

Session #5: Boundaries and Barriers to Healthy Relationships

Objectives:

- To help teens and young adults understand the concept of relational boundaries
- To help teens and adults identify healthy boundaries vs. unhealthy ones
- To help teens and adults advocate for themselves in creating healthy boundaries

Session Outline

I. Follow-Up from Last Week

¹⁰ Bonaventure. *The Character of a Christian Leader*, trans. Philip O’ Mara. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1979) 1-71.

II. Jesus and Boundaries

III. Understanding Boundaries

IV. Why People Have Unhealthy Boundaries

V. Boundaries and Intimacy

VI. Boundaries Online

I. Follow-Up from Last Week

Ask the participants if they had any questions regarding last week's session. Last week the discussion was about mentoring relationships. It is important to remember that healthy boundaries are important for mentoring relationships as well as any other relationships. What does it mean when the word boundaries is discussed in the context of relationships? Boundaries in a relationship refers to the limits that one places on another person's actions, words, and attitudes towards them. Individuals can put up boundaries that are physical, emotional, or relational.

II. Jesus and Boundaries

When one thinks of Jesus, the word boundaries is probably not the first description that comes to mind. The image of Jesus often makes one think of words like loving, kind, compassionate. Jesus was all those things. But he also had healthy boundaries. Sometimes healthy boundaries are perceived as off-putting to another, but in reality, healthy boundaries are necessary in relationships. They set up structures for people to relate well to each other and allow each person to feel safe, heard and respected in the relationship. Begin by reading some of the situations that reveal Jesus and his boundaries.

Lk 5:15-16: He withdrew when he needed time alone.

Mt 21:23-27; 16:23; 5:37: In his conversations

Mt 21:12-1; Jn 8:1-11: He stood up for the rights of others.

What Are Boundaries? *(Use the guide in Appendix F.)*¹¹

1. Boundaries- the limits and rules we set up for ourselves in relationships.
2. One Creates Boundaries Based Upon what is important to them, Ask yourself what is important to you? What are your values? What makes you uncomfortable?

Ask if anyone has a boundary that they would like to share. Share one of your own.

Boundaries allow you to say no when you feel that something makes you uncomfortable or infringes on your values.

3. When Communicating Your Boundaries:

Be Confident-Recognize that you have be confident in your right to have boundaries.

Be Respectful-Treat others with a respect for their personhood and boundaries.

There is an exercise in the book, Boundaries Where You End and I Begin entitled Picture your Boundary, Exercise 1:1.

Equipment: twine of string at least 25 feet long.

1, In the middles of a room with lots of space, put the twine on the floor so that it makes a circle. Stand in the middle of the circle. Imagine that everything outside of the circle is not you. Imagine that everything within the circle is you.

¹¹ Guide in Appendix F is found in this link: <https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/setting-boundaries.pdf>.

2. Think about what fills up your circle. What do you care about? What do you believe? What do you hate? What do you love? Who are you? What is attractive to you? What repels you? What do you value? What do you think about? What are you really like?

3. A mission things make you distinct from everyone else. The more you know about these things, the firmer your self- concept.

Discuss these questions and their answers with the group.¹²

II. Why People Have Unhealthy Boundaries

There are many reasons why individuals may have unhealthy boundaries. It is impossible to have an exhaustive list. Unhealthy boundaries in an individual can occur for many reasons. Listed below are some reasons why an individual may have unhealthy boundaries. This is not an exhaustive list and they can be co-morbid with others on the list or others not listed.

1. Codependency: This is the need to be needed, In this situation a person derives worth from being needed by another. This creates weak boundaries.

2.Low Self-Esteem- An individual that has low self-esteem does not have a high sense of self-worth. Individuals may take advantage of this and push boundaries because they can.

¹² Katherine, Anne. M.A. *Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin: How to Recognize and Set Healthy Boundaries*. (Minnesota: Hazelden Publishing, 1991), 22-25.

3. Mental Health Issues- Individuals who have mental health issues or personality disorders may have unhealthy boundaries with others. It is important to ask this question if this could be a factor in a relationship with someone where boundaries are poor.

4. Trauma- Many individuals have experienced trauma in their lives. This can contribute to their behavior and cause them to have unhealthy boundaries and relationships in response to that trauma.

The University of Washington outlined some signs of a relationship with unhealthy boundaries. They are listed below:¹³

- Put one person before the other by neglecting yourself or your partner
- Feel pressure to change who you are for the other person
- Feel worried when you disagree with the other person
- Feel pressure to quit activities you usually/used to enjoy
- Pressure the other person into agreeing with you or changing to suit you better
- Notice one of you has to justify your actions (e.g., where you go, who you see)
- Notice one partner feels obligated to have sex or has been forced
- Have a lack of privacy, and may be forced to share everything with the other person
- You or your partner refuse to use safer sex methods
- Notice arguments are not settled fairly
- Experience yelling or physical violence during an argument
- Attempt to control or manipulate each other
- Notice your partner attempts to control how you dress and criticizes your behaviors
- Do not make time to spend with one another
- Have no common friends, or have a lack of respect for each others' friends and family
- Notice an unequal control of resources (e.g., food, money, home, car, etc.)
- Experience a lack of fairness and equality

¹³ University of Washington, Hall Health Center. *Healthy Versus Unhealthy Relationships*, January 2014
<http://depts.washington.edu/hhpcweb/health-resource/healthy-vs-unhealthy-relationships/>

These are important signs to look for in a relationship that is suspected to have unhealthy boundaries. Identifying is an important step to moving towards a healthier relationship, or ending a relationship if it is not able to move in a direction of greater health.

III. Healthy Boundaries in Intimacy

It is especially important to understand one's boundaries when one is in a romantic relationship. When one thinks of a romantic relationship, the word boundaries can sound out of place because in a romantic relationship one wants to grow in intimacy with the other person. But it is especially important in a romantic relationship to know your personal boundaries. Next week there will be a discussion of toxic relationships, which will further the conversation of unhealthy boundaries. But for now, the discussion is about knowing what boundaries one can and should be maintained in a romantic relationship. What boundaries come to mind? Physical and emotional boundaries are important in a romantic relationship. Some of those were discussed in the section before. While unhealthy boundaries can be present in any relationship, they can be even more toxic and destructive in a romantic relationship.

IV. Healthy Boundaries Online

It is important to have these boundaries in in-person relationships, but they also must be kept in online relationships—with people you know personally and with people you know only online. What are some practices for healthy boundaries online? Below is a partial list to consider.

1. Leave a conversation if it makes you uncomfortable.

2. Relationships that make you uncomfortable and push your boundaries can be red flags.
3. Recognize that intimacy online is not a multi-level information exchange.¹⁴
4. Respect others online and expect respect.
5. Shaming is not acceptable.
6. You can leave private conversations that are harmful to others.
7. Practice time boundaries for yourself.
8. Make boundaries concerning what content you will watch.

What would you add to this list about online boundaries? Where have you seen boundaries violated online?

Close the session by asking participants to think about the boundaries that are important to them during this week. Ask them to bring a list back next week.

Session #6: What to Look Out For: Toxic Relationships and Destructive Behaviors

- I. Follow-Up from Last Week
 - II. Who Are Your Friends?
 - III. Unhealthy Versus Healthy Relationships
 - IV. Destructive Behaviors and Where to Get Help
 - V. Wrap-Up Questions
- I. Follow-Up from Last Week

¹⁴ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 231, Kindle.

Last week the discussion was about boundaries. Did anyone make a list of some of their boundaries? This week's discussion is related to last week's discussion on boundaries. When one realizes one is in a relationship that is unhealthy, one will need to employ boundaries to change that relationship. Likewise, having poor boundaries is sometimes a reason for entering into an unhealthy relationship. Today's discussion will involve identifying those relationships that are healthy and unhealthy. It will also examine destructive behaviors that can contribute to unhealthy relationships. At the end of the session the discussion will concern resources when help is needed, and will be followed by some concluding activities.

II. Who Are Your Friends?

Henri Nouwen, a writer and thinker was interviewed by Alicia Von Stamwitz. He talked about being in community as a spiritual discipline. He said that one should ask oneself

“Whom do you choose as your companions? Whom do you choose to be friends with? To live with? Are they people who love you, and care for you and nurture you?”
What makes you feel connected in a relationship and happy?”¹⁵

Invite each person to talk about one relationship where they feel safe, secure, and usually happy. What is it about that person and that relationship that makes them feel that way?

III. Unhealthy versus Healthy Relationships—Comparison Chart

¹⁵ Alicia Von Stamwitz, “An Interview With Father Henri Nouwen,” *Liguorian*, updated December 9, 2016, <https://www.liguorian.org/interview-father-henri-nouwen/>.

Begin by setting up a chart and asking the group to list characteristics of healthy versus unhealthy relationships. Add to the list.¹⁶

Unhealthy relationships can be intense, manipulative, belittling, isolating, possessive,, dismissive, jealous, shaming betrayal, deflecting responsibility and volatile.

Healthy Relationships can be fun, kind, responsibility taking, equal, respectful, safe, independence honoring, honest, and with healthy conflict.

It is important to realize that not all relationships are healthy. It is also important to evaluate one's relationships so that one is choosing to be in relationships that are not destructive and harmful. Every relationship will have some difficulty, but unhealthy relationships have consistent difficulties that can be emotionally, spiritually and sometimes even physically draining.

Paul reminded the Colossians in Col 3:12, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Where do you see traits of a healthy relationship in this verse?

IV. Destructive Behaviors and Where to Get Help

It is important to note that destructive behaviors can be extremely detrimental to relationships, and often they are products of deeper psychological issues. While this course is not designed to go into great depth regarding destructive behaviors, it is important to know what some of them are so that they can be identified in one's relationships.

¹⁶ The lists above are adapted from One Love Foundation Ten Signs of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships and Ten Signs of Healthy Relationships." (One Love Foundation, Bronxville, NY, 2020), <https://www.joinonelove.org/>.

1. What are some behaviors that could be destructive?

Alcohol Abuse or Drug Use

Eating Disorders

Extreme Isolation

Self-Harm

Sexual Promiscuity

Extreme Codependent Relationships

Sometimes these behaviors are triggered by anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues and challenges.

2. Where to Get Help

Sometimes it is necessary to get outside help with some of these behaviors and relationships that are not healthy. Psychologists, therapists and pastors can often be important resources if needed. Local resources will be made available if needed.

V. Wrap- Up Questions

Today is the last day of this series of sessions together. As the session wraps-up, take time for some debrief questions.

What was the most helpful session for you and why?

What is one thing you will take from these sessions?

Was there a topic you wanted covered that wasn't?

Was there a topic that caused you stress?

What is one thing you will change or do differently because of our time together?

How do you think your relationships will improve from your time in the course?

What questions do you have that did not get answered?

Close the session in prayer and invite the participants to also send feedback individually after the session is over.

APPENDIX B

Dear Parents,

Your teen is invited to participate in a small group experience that will help them to navigate the relational road ahead as they move towards independent adult living. We believe that God has called us to be in community, but being part of a community takes work! It is our goal that when your high school student leaves this experience, they will be more self-aware and others-aware as they navigate their many relationships. The curriculum will be divided into the following six topics:

Understanding What It Means to Be in Community

Understanding Conflict

Family Relationships

Having Mentors

Understanding Boundaries On and Offline

Identifying Toxic Relationships and Destructive Behaviors

Each session will involve a time of teaching, group reflection, self-reflection and interactive activities. I will also provide resources that are beneficial to them based upon the needs of the group.

I will be the facilitator for the session, but will have at least one other adult present to co-facilitate. I will meet with the facilitator ahead of time to go over all of the subject matter.

If the schedule allows, we will also do a follow-up session three months later to debrief the participants' experience and to follow-up with any questions that they may have in the months after.

Please contact me should you have any concerns or questions. I look forward to working with your child as we navigate relational roads together!

Rachel Poysky

Associate Pastor

APPENDIX C

Sample Group Covenant

Below is a sample group covenant. When forming a group covenant, begin by asking what the group feels should be included in a group covenant. Two options for forming a covenant are (1) allowing them to create one entirely on their own (informed by the covenant below), or (2) show them the following covenant and let them react to it and make changes based upon the sample.

Our Goal: To be together to complete a six-week study about relationships and living in community with other people.

Our Purpose: To get to know others in the group better
To experience individual growth
To study God's Word
To have fun

Our Values: Confidentiality unless someone is in danger—consider leaving out names and specific details that are not needed.

Everyone has a voice.
We will pray and care for one another.
Commitment to be engaged in entire process.

Our Practice: Limit sharing to 3 minutes at a time so everyone has a chance to speak.
Do homework assigned so that you can be a full participant in the session.
What is our Giant Swing Word?

Group members sign below:

APPENDIX D

The Story of Michael Weisser and a Member of the KKK

In 1991, Michael Weisser, along with his wife Julie and three of their five children, moved from New York City to Lincoln, Nebraska, for Weisser's new position: cantor and spiritual leader of South Street Temple.

As they were moving in and unpacking, the phone rang. When they answered, the caller said, "You're going to be sorry you moved in, Jew boy" and then hung up.

A few days later, the Weissers received a package in the mail containing hateful and racist materials along with a business card from the Ku Klux Klan (a white supremacy hate group) that read "The KKK is watching you scum."

The police suggested that the caller and antagonist was very likely Larry Trapp, the local Grand Dragon of the KKK chapter in Nebraska. Trapp, as it happens, was also a double amputee, having lost his legs to advanced diabetes at a young age.

Weisser was worried for his family but decided to take a different approach. He got Trapp's phone number from a friend and began leaving messages on his answering machine, such as:

"Larry, there's a lot of love out there. You're not getting any of it. Don't you want some?"

"Larry, you'd better think about all this hatred that you are involved in because you're going to have to deal with God one day."

"Larry, the very first laws that the Nazis passed were against people like yourself, who have physical disabilities, and you would have been among those to die under the Nazis. Why do you love the Nazis so much?"

This turned into a regular monthly routine, with Weisser calling and leaving a message for Trapp at 3:00 pm every Thursday. One Thursday, Trapp answered the call by screaming profanities and asking Weisser what he wanted. Weisser replied that he knew Trapp was disabled and offered to give him a ride to the grocery store, to which Trapp responded that he was all set and told him not to call anymore.

But Weisser kept calling and leaving messages of love. Then, one day, Weisser's phone rang. It was Trapp, who asked, "Is this the Rabbi?" When Weisser affirmed that it was, Trapp responded by saying, "I want to get out of what I am doing, and I don't know how."

Despite warnings from his family, Weisser decided to visit Trapp at his house that night to “break bread,” but not before calling a friend and telling him to call the police if he did not hear from him by midnight.

Weisser thought he had made a grave mistake when Trapp answered the door in his wheelchair with three guns in his lap. Then, Trapp reached out his hand, introduced himself and burst into tears.

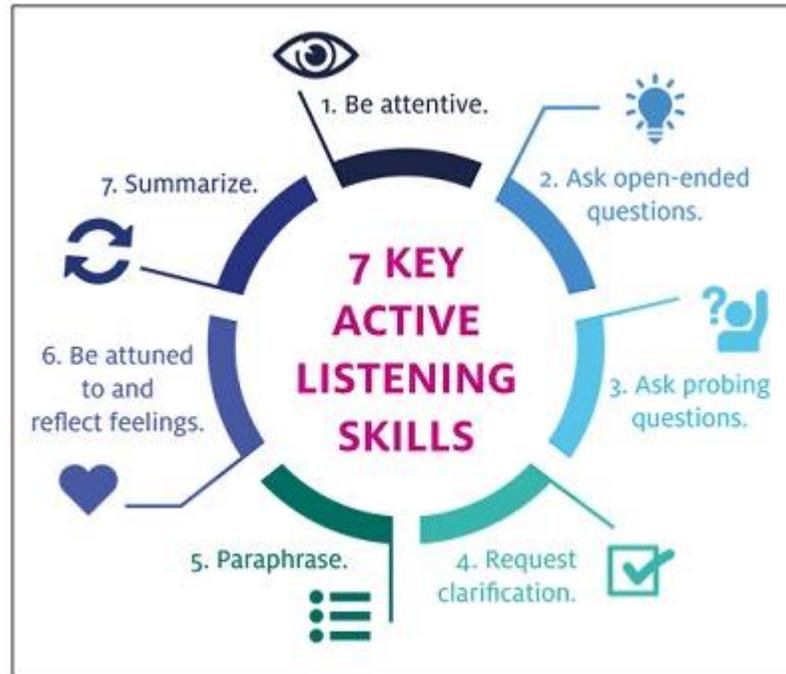
After talking for hours, Weisser learned of the severe emotional and physical abuse Trapp had suffered at the hands of his father. As a child, he would often hide for hours to avoid a beating. It became clear to Weisser that Trapp’s hateful actions were a manifestation of having never felt loved.

Over the next year, Trapp became a fixture in the community, making amends and talking to groups about the perils of hatred. Around this time, his health also began to deteriorate. Surprising everyone, the Weissers invited Trapp to come live with them, an offer he accepted. Trapp stayed with them until his death a year later. During this time, he also converted to Judaism. The day of his funeral, the synagogue was packed with people who would have never expected to be there just a few years before.⁹²

⁹² Robert Glazer, “Friday Forward: Love and Hate,” The Elevate Podcast, February 24, 2019, <https://www.robertglazer.com/friday-forward/love-hate/>.

APPENDIX E

Active Listening Guide



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⁹³ Marcus Wermuth, "A People's Guide to Active Listening," Buffer, July 1, 2019, <https://open.buffer.com/active-listening/>.

APPENDIX F

Questions from Jesus⁹⁴

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life (Matthew 6:27; cf. Luke 12:25)?

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye (Matthew 7:3; cf. Luke 6:41)?

Why are you afraid, you of little faith (Matthew 8:26; cf. Mark 4:40)?

Why do you think evil in your hearts (Matthew 9:4)?

Do you believe that I am able to do this (Matthew 9:28)?

You of little faith, why did you doubt (Matthew 14:31)?

Who do you say that I am (Matthew 16:15; cf. Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20)?

Do you not understand this parable (Mark 4:13)?

What is your name (Mark 5:9; cf. Luke 8:30)?

Are your hearts hardened (Mark 8:17)?

Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear (Mark 8:18)?

Can you see anything (Mark 8:23)?

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with baptism that I am baptized with (Mark 10:38)?

What do you want me to do for you (Mark 10:51; cf. Luke 18:41)?

Why are you putting me to the test (Mark 12:15)?

⁹⁴ Collected by Tom Schwanda from the NRSV. The was given as a handout in the class Spiritual Leadership through Mentoring: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Practices, Fuller Theological Seminary, Spring 2019.

Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God (Mark 12:24)?

Could you not keep awake one hour (Mark 14:37)?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15:34)?

Why were you searching for me (Luke 2:49)?

Why do you raise such questions in your heart (Luke 5:22)?

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord” and do not do what I tell you (Luke 6:46)?

What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves (Luke 9:25)?

Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right (Luke 12:57)?

What is the Kingdom of God like (Luke 13:18)?

Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not (Luke 14:3)?

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth (Luke 18:8)?

Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts (Luke 24:38)?

What are you looking for (John 1:38)?

Do you want to be made well (John 5:6)?

Does this offend you (John 6:61)?

Where are they? Has no one condemned you (John 8:10)?

If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me (John 8:46)?

Do you believe in the Son of Man (John 9:35)?

Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God (John 11:40)?

Do you know what I have done to you (John 13:12)?

Do you love me more than these (John 21:15)?

APPENDIX G

Setting Boundaries⁹⁵

Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can say “no” to others when they want to, but they are also comfortable opening themselves up to intimacy and close relationships.

Know Your Boundaries

What to Say

You always have the right to say “no.” When doing so, express yourself clearly and without ambiguity so there is no doubt about what you want.

“I’m not comfortable with this.” “Please don’t do that.” “Not at this time.”

“I can’t do that for you.” “This doesn’t work for me.” “I’ve decided not to.”

“This is not acceptable.” “I’m drawing the line at ____.” “I don’t want to do that.”

What to Do

Use confident body language: Face the other person, make eye contact, and use a steady tone of voice at an appropriate volume (not too quiet and not too loud).

Be respectful: Avoid yelling, using put-downs, or giving

Setting Boundaries

Instructions

Respond to the following practice questions as if you were really in each situation. Think about the language you would use to firmly state your boundary.

Examples

Situation: You notice your roommate has been eating your food in the fridge. You never discussed plans to share food, and don’t want them eating what you bought.

Response: “I’d like to keep our food separate. If there’s something of mine that you want, please ask me before taking it.”

Situation: Your friend calls you at 11 pm to discuss issues she is having with her boyfriend. You need to wake up at 6 am.

⁹⁵ © 2019 Therapist Aid LLC Provided by TherapistAid.com

Response: "I can tell you're upset. I want to talk to you, but I need to go to bed. Maybe we can talk tomorrow afternoon."

Practice

Situation: You invited a friend over for the evening, but now it's getting late. You would like to get ready for bed, but your friend seems unaware of how late it is.

Response:

Situation: A good friend asks you out on a date. You are not interested in being more than friends. You would like to let them down clearly, but gently.

Response:

APPENDIX H

Evaluation Survey

Take a few moments to evaluate the course content and experience. Your answers will be only viewed by the instructors of the course.

1. What session did you find most helpful and why?
2. How has this helped you to understand yourself or your relationships with others?
3. Is there other topics you would like to see addressed?
4. How comfortable did you feel sharing with the instructor and the group?
5. What is your biggest take-away from the experience?
6. Do you have any suggestions for improvement or other sessions?

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