

PRACTICING RECEPTIVITY:
GRASSROOTS ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE FOR BUILDING RELATIONALITY
AND INSPIRING MISSIONAL IMAGINATION AMONG CHURCHES IN GASTONIA, NC

by

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ABSTRACT

ROBERT CHRIS MURPHY

PRACTICING RECEPTIVITY: GRASSROOTS ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE FOR BUILDING RELATIONALITY AND INSPIRING MISSIONAL IMAGINATION AMONG CHURCHES IN GASTONIA, NC

Under the direction of Robert N. Nash, Jr., Ph.D.

Though engaged in various missional and social outreach endeavors, churches continue to struggle to commit themselves to deep relationality with their Christian and non-Christian neighbors. The reasons for this are varied, often stemming from theological, socio-cultural, and psychological sources. I implemented this project to understand better how building relationality between individuals of diverse theological traditions could inspire a commitment to increasing relationality, particularly joint ecumenical witness and mission. Individual members from three churches serving the Brookwood and York-Chester neighborhoods in West Gastonia participated. Participants were interviewed before and after a series of five group sessions. In the pre-session interviews, participants introduced themselves, discussed the role they play within their faith communities, and described their respective church bodies' relationship with the neighborhood and neighboring faith communities. The post-session interviews asked many of the same questions, allowing the researcher to compare any shifts that occurred because of the five group sessions.

In session one, participants introduced themselves and their faith communities to the group. In session two, they participated in a bible study on Acts 10-11:18. In the third session, participants looked at the varying dimensions of common life present in the local neighborhood and how each respective congregation participates in it. The fourth session focused on the doubts members have in the pursuit of deep relationships with Christian and non-Christian neighbors. In

the final session, participants reflected on future possibilities for joint missional witness. The project found that the act of coming together and committing to mutual respect increased the hopefulness of the participants in helping to build relational capacity. Further, fear was often reported as the most significant barrier to doing this kind of work. This effort requires intentionality as well as a commitment to grace, welcome, and forgiveness if it is to be effective.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Each November (pandemic years notwithstanding), Christian churches in Gastonia, North Carolina, gather to participate in an annual service of Thanksgiving. Members of "historic downtown" congregations come together to pray, sing, read Scripture, and partake in all the good things Christians do in worship. One of the traditions of this service is a recitation of a joint litany, in which pastors or representatives from each faith community thank God for the gifts each denomination brings to the table. The Baptists bring a firm commitment to religious liberty, while the Lutherans emphasize salvation by grace through faith. Quakers beckon us to sit still and listen while the Roman Catholic church preserves the beauty of the liturgy.

I first heard this litany in 2014 as a seminarian and new Holy Trinity Lutheran Church staff member. As someone interested in differing Christian theological traditions, I was excited to see a body of Christians embrace each other's differences as gifts, even if the list was overly generic at points. However, my day-to-day experience working in the parish spoke of a different situation. Congregational interaction was minimal outside of this Thanksgiving service and annual Lenten lunches, both of which have seen a decline in engagement in recent years. I encountered congregational members, pastoral and lay, who would speak of neighboring congregations enviously or suspiciously. Responses to suggestions for increased ecumenical engagement were often met with apprehension. Soon, I saw how this disconnection extended to the relationship between church and neighborhood. The churches struggled not only with genuinely accepting each other's gifts but also offering and accepting those gifts from the neighbors directly across the street. The litany began to feel less like a prayerful affirmation of the truth and more like a wishful dramatization of a reality that does not exist.

Ministerial Context

The western part of Gastonia, North Carolina is home to the city's nationally and locally registered historic districts, which include York-Chester, Brookwood, Loray Mill, Downtown, and the Municipal Service District. These small neighborhoods border each other, making a combined total area of approximately two miles. Once the city's economic center, the western part of Gastonia has experienced a steady decrease in population size and an increase in crime and poverty rates over several decades. Since the 1960s, important civic and economic organizations – churches included - have steadily moved away from west Gastonia to the city's increasingly affluent eastern and southeastern areas.¹ While many believe it is poised for economic growth,² West Gastonia continues to carry a stigma while residents feel overlooked by a city government out of touch with their needs.³

I serve as Director of Music Ministries at Holy Trinity Lutheran, a faith community of approximately 120 people sitting on the border of the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods. One Roman Catholic parish and one synagogue also serve these areas, along with various mainline Protestant and charismatic congregations. Faith communities serving this

¹ Michael Barret, “Study: One part of Gastonia could see explosive growth,” *Gaston Gazette*. December 20, 2014. <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/news/2014/12/20/study-one-part-gastonia-could/34352132007/> (accessed September 12, 2023).

² Todd Piercell, “There’s more to the West Gastonia story,” *Gaston Gazette*. September 9, 2017. <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/opinion/columns/2017/09/09/councilman-theres-more-to-west-gastonia-story/18847460007/> (accessed September 12, 2023)

³ Nick Dumont, “West Gastonia residents ask City Council for more attention and resources,” *Gaston Gazette*, September 11, 2017. <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/news/politics/government/2017/09/11/west-gastonia-residents-ask-city-council-for-more-attention-and-resources/18837741007/> (accessed September 12, 2023). Iso, Anthony Kustura “Neighbors to new Gastonia ballpark excited yet apprehensive,” *Gaston Gazette*. April 15, 2021. <https://www.wsocv.com/news/local/neighbors-new-gastonia-ballpark-excited-yet-apprehensive/J2EECFUFXNFCJF67WRC55ZDTHE/> (accessed September 12, 2023)

area, including Holy Trinity, have experienced the impact of the shifts in West Gastonia through declining membership numbers and a decreased cultural influence. Some of the “historic downtown” congregations have even chosen to move out of the area towards the eastern side of the city.

Statement of the Problem

Some congregations serving the historic district, many of which have roots extending back decades, have lost a palpable sense of presence in their communities. Considering societal shifts at the local and national level, many religious institutions find themselves unprepared to address declining membership and decreased resources. Despite this, many congregations continue participating in social ministries and outreach activities that greatly benefit Gastonia. However, a robust sense of commitment to and relationship with their immediate locations - acting as neighbors who contribute to the good of the commons in a particular place - is missing. I will address the theological, cultural, and psychological influences which help maintain this rift. For now, it is sufficient to say that recovering a deeper relationality is essential for congregations to embrace and live out their missional vocations.

This loss of relationality extends to Christian and non-Christian neighbors alike. As neighboring faith communities have become disconnected from each other, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation in promoting the common good has suffered. When contact occurs, it is often in the form of small events that ask very little of the participants. Most, if not all, joint social ministries are mediated by nonprofit entities or para-church organizations. While such partnerships are essential, they have the unintended side effect of relieving congregations of their responsibility to promote well-being within their communities and dampening congregational capacity to act as neighbors in creative, life-giving ways.

Compounding the issue, congregations erect symbolic boundaries to separate themselves. Doctrinal disagreements and fear of "sheep stealing" are often named significant contributors to the problem, though they are not the primary causes. These worries often result in communities adopting protective postures, further magnifying divisions and harming the church's witness. Fears surrounding church decline and cultural shifts seem to amplify these issues. This spirit impedes the possibilities of creative, communal discernment that extends from a robust missional imagination.

Statement of the Project Goals

While several approaches to these challenges are possible, I intend to address them from the perspective of ecumenical discernment. What does it look like to bring together lay people from theologically diverse backgrounds committed to faith communities in a particular location to jointly discern how God is calling us to a deeper relationality with each other and our communities? To that end, this project has four goals:

1. To assess the impact of intentional, dialogic encounters in helping laypeople from differing theological traditions deepen relationality and re-imagine faith communities' roles in the commons.
2. To enable participants to reflect on and practice receptivity as an intentional theological discipline.
3. To encourage participants to consider the challenges and possibilities of ecumenical cooperation, especially as it relates to contributing to the common good.
4. To promote a sense of ownership and empowerment for laypeople to generate creative ecumenical opportunities.

Terms and Assumptions

Several assumptions are operating here. This project assumes faith communities, as institutions, have a theological and civic responsibility to contribute to the common good. This responsibility includes a commitment to caring for and working with each other, regardless of the legitimate differences and concerns that often hinder ecumenical cooperation. Such cooperation involves a commitment to sustained, often challenging, dialogue with Christian and non-Christian neighbors, a rejection of tribalism, and a dedication to charitable understanding. It is assumed that the journey towards greater Christian relationality and intimacy is indispensable to the Christian life. Commitment to these practices is important as local churches are uniquely positioned to advocate for their communities, especially those in neglected areas.

Further, it is assumed that participants can rise above their church loyalties to partner in this effort and that the powerful forces working against relationality with others outside our respective "tribes" can be overcome. Such a result requires long-term, ongoing work that is simply beyond the scope of what this project was able to accomplish. Discernment, as employed in this project, is correctly understood as having an ongoing dimension; this is no one-time event in which the participants compromise and develop a project without risk for the involved parties. It is best understood as the commitment to the sustained, ongoing struggle to discern God's will together, even amidst our vast differences.

One term deserves some clarification. "Ecumenicism" or "ecumenical work" refers to the quest for Christian unity. It is often used in reference to a theological movement, particularly at a national or global level, in which professional theologians and scholars search for commonality between the diverging theological traditions they represent, hoping that the church may one day be one body. For this project, I use the term to name active engagement between individuals

from differing theological traditions, with a particular eye towards how they are organized locally and include issues unique to one's local space. It is a form of "grassroots ecumenism," as Karen Finch calls it, which "allows the Holy Spirit to heal the wounds of our division so that churches can pursue disciple-making and peace-making together, with integrity and joy."⁴ What might a cooperative discernment of joining God's work in our neighborhoods look like in full acknowledgment of significant differences?

Other terms used throughout this project are defined in the following ways:

Commons – The shared "dimensions of life" where all have "a common concern." These include political, educational, economic, environmental, and cultural institutions and spaces.⁵

Neighborliness - the willingness and capacity to act as neighbor in one's context, embracing and seeking the good of those one lives among.

Parish – Here, parish is not used to refer to individual church bodies, but "refers to all the relationships (including the land) where the local church lives out its faith together."⁶

Relational capacity - The capacity institutions (in this case, Christian congregations) have to build and maintain open and trusting relationships that allow the individuals in these institutions to cooperate in mutually beneficial ways, either for their collective good or the good of their neighbors.

⁴ Karen Peterson Finch, *Grassroots Ecumenism: The Way of Local Christian Reunion* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2022), 13.

⁵ Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23

Limitations and Delimitations

While I initially had hoped for two members from five Christian churches, most congregations supplied one. The exception was Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, where I convinced two members to participate due to my existing relationships with them. Further, three of the approached congregations were unable to participate. Despite multiple attempts, I was unable to establish contact with one congregation. Pastors at the other two expressed interest but could not secure participants before the project start date.

I delimited this project to Protestant Christian congregations with a ministry presence within the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods. Other possibilities, while worthwhile, would have changed the project's scope. For instance, Temple Emanuel, a synagogue in York-Chester, would have opened rich interfaith possibilities. The decision to delimit to Protestant congregations was due to geographical concerns – the congregations represented here are the closest to my home congregation, Holy Trinity. Further, I sought participants who were interested in the missional work of their respective congregations, defined by said congregations, but did not require that they have a certain level of active participation in those ministries. The result was the participation of various individuals with different ideas, approaches, and concerns surrounding social and missional ministries.

Rationale for the Process

Broadly, the sessions aim to create intentional space for encounters between individuals of diverse theological traditions to begin the process of re-imagining what common witness may look like in this neighborhood. The type of space and time that this project aims to create is not naturally available in our current context and must be cultivated. The intention is not to lead participants into a pre-determined set of answers but to observe how building relationality among

individuals of different theological traditions inspires transformation in commitment to ecumenical witness. Further, it looks at how such sessions contribute to building relational capacity between group members.

This project proposes that receptivity is a critical component of the Christian missional calling that needs recovery. Suggesting receptivity may be fear-inducing in closed-off communities anxious about the threat of a type of boundary-less relativism. A community's commitment to receptivity is not about holding one's convictions lightly but adopting a posture of epistemological humility. The witness of the church, according to Ryan Newson, is not about us giving to others, but a "receptive interaction through which the gospel is made manifest and changes us as well."⁷ Such receptive interaction is necessary in all types of ecumenical engagement, but particularly so among those practicing at the grassroots level. God's people are to embrace neighbors and welcome the embrace of neighbors in love, Christian and non-Christian alike.

If we accept as true that scripture testifies to a God deeply committed to relationality with the world, who then calls the people of God to share in and re-enact that relationality across deep differences, then what is at stake here is the church's self-understanding of its call to neighborliness. Further, it is about the recovery of a missional imagination that is less about bringing God to others and more about following the Spirit's call to discern and join God who is already at work in the world. Recovering this dimension of mission seems to me to be an essential task of the Church if we are to discern what faithful witness can look like in a pluralistic society enthralled with tribalism.

⁷ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 120.

This project allows a few members of faith communities in our neighborhood to practice moving across boundaries into a deeper relationship with each other, empowering them to understand themselves and their respective institutions as neighbors. Its design seeks to create space for different types of people to creatively imagine the possibilities of a joint, robust presence in our small corner of Gastonia. Individuals committed to holding a posture of receptivity serve as the driving force of greater intimacy, which, in turn, could move us towards better expressions of caring for our community's material and spiritual needs.

Luke-Acts served as the primary scriptural foundation for this project, particularly in exploring the "why" and "how" receptive interactions are necessary to the Christian life. Acts 10-11:18 is the basis for the idea that God's people are called to risk moving across boundaries they never previously imagined they would cross, exemplified in Peter's interactions with Cornelius. Willie James Jennings describes the role of listening in this encounter as "the engine that will operationalize holy joining. Listening for the word of God in others who are not imagined with God, not imagined as involved with God, but whom God has sought out and is bringing near to the divine life and to our lives."⁸ The move across deep divides and into deep relationality speaks to the trust God's people have in the one to whom they claim to bear witness. Newson points out that "a church that is willing to risk listening to one another and to others *as* the task of witness is at once deeply Christian and has given up the idol of identity protection."⁹

Further, the practice of Christian hospitality as a resource for how these receptive interactions should occur is significant, in particular, the idea that we Christians are to "follow

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 111.

⁹ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 121

after Christ, who is the journeying guest/host."¹⁰ This view is evidenced throughout Luke's narrative in such places as Christ's instructions to his followers to go out in Luke 9 and 10, Christ's visit to the Pharisee's home, and the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14. Here, particular attention is given to Luke 24:13-53, the Emmaus Road story, in which Jesus inserts himself into a conversation between two people about the Kingdom of God and "guests" in their home before becoming "their host at the meal."¹¹

Project Methods and Methodology

This project explores the influence of sustained, dialogical encounters between members of faith communities active in neighborhoods in the western part of Gastonia, North Carolina. The research measures the impact of these sessions on participants' understanding of the role faith communities play in contributing to the neighborhood commons and examines individual participants' perceptions regarding their capacity to contribute to such work. These sessions were ecumenical, as previously defined, with particular attention to deepening our capacity to explore challenges and opportunities of missional unity.

The project included four participants from three churches: Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Mark's Episcopal, and South Marietta Baptist Church. Before and after the group sessions, I conducted individual qualitative interviews with each participant. All interviews and sessions were recorded and then transcribed. Further, participants kept journals to aid processing and provide an additional dataset. The project consisted of five sixty-to-ninety-minute sessions in September and October 2023.

¹⁰ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 281

¹¹ Ibid.

Session 1 centers on introductions. I addressed the schedule and any housekeeping-type questions, explained the project's goals, and discussed the role of receptivity and empathetic listening. Following this, participants introduced themselves and the churches they represent to the group. In session 2, participants studied and discussed Acts 10-11:18, focusing on missional and ecumenical implications. The participants reflected on what this passage revealed about God and God's intention for the people of God.

Session 3 involved a discussion on the neighborhood. Participants were introduced to the concept of the commons, or the shared dimensions of public life, as defined by Friesen, Sparks, and Soeren in *The New Parish*.¹² They were then asked to identify how they see the dimensions present within the shared spaces our congregations serve. The challenge for participants was to explore the level to which they understood the shape and needs of our shared common spaces and imagine how our congregations contribute to them. Session 4 allowed participants to reflect on how we have contributed to our fragmented spaces, individually and collectively. Further, they articulated their perceived challenges and doubts in addressing the disconnection between church bodies. The fifth and final session focused solely on possibilities. Given everything discussed in the previous weeks, what are the possibilities of deeper relationality and joint witness that the participants could imagine at that moment? Finally, at the end of every session and as part of the focus on receptivity, participants reflected on and articulated the "gifts" they received from each other.

Purpose and Significance

Through the rest of this document, I will highlight some of our sources of disconnection and how we see them impacting our faith communities. I will then suggest a biblical and

¹² Sparks et. al, *The New Parish*

theological framework that will help churches navigate this reality before turning my attention toward the specific context of West Gastonia and the churches therein. Ultimately, this project helped participants take initial steps towards building relational capacity in ways that will, hopefully, benefit the churches and neighborhoods in West Gastonia in the days to come. As a minister, it challenged me to consider how our churches can work towards creating space for this kind of work and the significant challenges that lie ahead as we try to do so. I want to show that the act of moving forward with this work, trusting in the movement of the Spirit, can instill hope that such work is not only necessary but possible.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Fragmentation and its Sources

Words like “polarization,” “unraveling,” and “dismantling” are often used to describe our current moment, one often characterized by distrust and isolation. Since 2020, we have witnessed starkly polarized responses to the most significant global pandemic in nearly a century, one of the largest civil rights protests since the 1960s in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement, and tenuous public discourse around misinformation and election integrity emboldened by a violent attack on the nation’s capital. In the 2022 Midterm elections, there were over 300 candidates on the ballot who echoed former President Trump’s claims that the 2020 election was stolen and that the voting system in the United States is deeply flawed.¹³

Such events could be dismissed as the drama of national politics. However, they can just as easily point to a larger crisis of connection and social cohesion. Research shows that trust in

¹³ Elain Kamarck and Norman Eisen, “Democracy on the ballot – how many election deniers are on the ballot in November and what is their likelihood of success?” *Brookings*, October 7, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2022/10/07/democracy-on-the-ballot-how-many-election-deniers-are-on-the-ballot-in-november-and-what-is-their-likelihood-of-success/> (accessed November 5, 2022)

essential institutions,¹⁴ public servants,¹⁵ and the government and its processes,¹⁶ continues to decline. Similarly, research shows that interpersonal trust is at its lowest point since the 1970s. Vivek Murthy, the current Surgeon General, has identified loneliness and isolation as an epidemic, emphasizing a need to build systems which contribute to the types of social cohesion necessary to rebuild trust.¹⁷

Borrowing from the work of Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen in their book *The New Parish*, along with Peter Block and Alan Roxburgh, I use the word “fragmentation” to characterize the ways in which this loss of connection is impacting individuals and communities. Individuals in a fragmented society have lost a sense of deep relationality with God, neighbor, physical space, and even themselves. Our faith communities are not immune to these trends. In many cases, the loss of relationality leads us to adopt practices and postures that reinforce the problem we are attempting to counteract. Missionally, Christian communities find themselves defining their relationships with their Christian and non-Christian neighbors transactionally; they

¹⁴ Pew Research Group, Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/2022/01/05/trust-in-america-do-americans-trust-the-news-media/> (accessed January 31, 2023).

¹⁵ Jeffrey Gottfried, Mason Walker, and Amy Mitchell, “Americans See Skepticism of News Media as Healthy, Say Public Trust in the Institution Can Improve,” *Pew Research Center*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/08/31/americans-see-skepticism-of-news-media-as-healthy-say-public-trust-in-the-institution-can-improve/> (accessed January 31, 2023).

¹⁶ “Americans’ Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role,” *Pew Research Center*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/> (accessed January 31, 2023).

¹⁷ Vivek H. Murthy, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

are resources to be used rather than friends to be loved. Roxburgh similarly argues that congregations have lost themselves in this time, stating, “our congregations are now affinity groups whose places of worship and meeting have little relationship to where people live...places where people ‘do for’ rather than ‘be with.’”¹⁸

This "do for" rather than "be with" orientation is evidenced in many ways, even in how we shape our most common missional activities. In some instances, the impulse to withdraw takes the form of identity protection, in which churches erect tight boundaries to protect the "purity" of their respective theological tradition. While boundaries are not bad in and of themselves, these defenses become idols as they provide the rationale for communities to completely close themselves off, leaving no room for vulnerable, receptive engagement with different Christian and non-Christian communities.

This project assumes that the missional task of the church requires a deep capacity to listen to and be with others outside of their hyper-specific tribes. When this capacity is depleted, faith communities lose the ability to generate and sustain positive relationships with their neighbors. I will begin by broadly outlining some of the social and cultural sources of fragmentation before showing how these things manifest in the church. I will then explore how scripture, particularly Luke-Acts, challenges Christians to take on a receptive posture in their actions. Finally, I will identify the theological resources available to the church that offer formative resilience to closed-off existence. Taken together, the goal is to articulate how a commitment to relationality and fidelity in a community works to counteract this fragmentation, helping local faith communities to be places where fragmentation can be counteracted.

¹⁸Alan Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling: Where We Are and What I've Learned* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 33-34.

Living Above Place & The Myth of Individualism

While it is beyond this project's scope to completely speak to the complexities of fragmentation, we should articulate some of its causes, especially as they relate to practices of receptivity that the church may use to counteract them. Soerens, Sparks, and Friesen have identified two broad sources of fragmentation: living above place and the myth of individualism. Talking about the myth of the individual is to say that individuals are not independent of each other; whatever I do impacts my neighbor. While individuals are unique and have a certain amount of agency, “all of us are born dependent on others, and whether we recognize it or not, we rely on relationships throughout our lives.”¹⁹

A society living above place is one in which the structures and systems developed by our society “keep cause-and-effect relationships far apart in space and time where we cannot have firsthand experience of them.”²⁰ The resulting isolation has made it easier to be ignorant of the depth of our interconnectedness, making it increasingly difficult to collectively develop successful responses to societal problems. Our most popular, go-to solutions are not working, yet large segments of our population continue to support many of them. For instance, studies have repeatedly shown that relying solely on tough-on-crime policies are ineffective in reducing crime rates. Similarly, areas of the country have seen that homeless shelters serve to perpetuate homelessness rather than alleviate it.²¹ The logic of living above place reduces our capacity to

¹⁹ Sparks et. al, *The New Parish*, 24

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Peter Stroh, *Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results*, (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015), 13

see these cause-and-effect relationships, reinforcing the systems that keep us from effectively exploring alternative ways of being.

With the rapid technological advancements that have fueled globalization and increased inter-connectedness, it has become easier to develop connections with individuals worldwide. This shift has tremendous benefits, including allowing individuals to participate in globally informed online networks which include diverse perspectives.²² However, this shift has also made it easier to link up with tribes of like-minded people, fostering communities without diversity of thought and reinforcing our biases and assumptions. It also has the power to shift individual focus from local concerns towards national and international ones like those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter – places where individuals exert less influence. While attention to such issues is essential, it can have the unfortunate effect of drawing our gaze away from local spaces, where we can develop the relationships essential to persuasion and being persuaded. Herring and Elton have noted that these developments have served to change the expectations of congregants themselves.²³

In *The Abundant Community*, Peter Block and John McKnight locate specific ways these fragmenting sources impact the local, particularly in how they motivate individuals to search for satisfaction through consumption. This move has taken us from being citizens to consumers, from people who seek mutually reciprocal relationships with their neighbors to those who give up their own agency for the belief that they can buy the things that will leave them satisfied.²⁴

²² Hayim Herring and Terry Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World: Platforms, People, and Purpose* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, (Oakland, CA: Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 46

Block and McKnight paint this picture as trading in the intimacy and care found in “family life” for “system life,” which enforce the idea that “personal relationships will distort what is good for business.”²⁵

The costs of the shift from family to system life have been significant as neighbors find themselves isolated, making communities unable to care for each other competently and solve local problems themselves. Individuals and communities are left beholden to experts, people with no stake in the health or survival of their localities, to fix everything while remaining ignorant of the gifts and resources already present. Thus, a cycle of dependency and isolation develops.²⁶ This shift has significant implications for our neighborhoods: nature becomes marginalized, dissatisfaction is successfully marketed, the capacity of neighbors to give and receive care is diminished, immense amounts of debt are developed, and what is personal or unique about a person is devalued.²⁷

The healing of our faith communities and neighborhoods does not begin with experts, consultants, or the newest small group study on evangelization. It begins in the local, with reclaiming a deeper relationality. For Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, this looks like Christians renewing their commitment to be neighbors in the neighborhoods in which God has placed them. For Block and McKnight, this looks like an abundant community marked by relationality and collective accountability.²⁸ This type of community focuses on what they have, not what they do

²⁵ Ibid., 33

²⁶ Ibid.,

²⁷ Ibid., 48-49

²⁸ Ibid., 65

not. They take steps to nurture their life together and do not shy away from welcoming outsiders. This type of community “creates the re-personalization of people.”²⁹ In other words, neighbors begin to see each other’s humanity again, restoring what a culture of scarcity and fragmentation takes away.

In their individual and collective expressions, Christians inherit these fragmenting forces. Congregational members and leaders seem to be at a loss as church membership numbers decline,³⁰ and our once effective outreach strategies fail us. In their frustrations, congregations execute the plans of self-appointed “experts,” only to experience little to no impact. Instead of turning towards the wisdom present in our neighborhoods, we cut ourselves off more from the people around us and forget how deeply connected we are to each other. The resulting high levels of anxiety have often led to the search for scapegoats, coming in the form of enemies like deconstruction, post-Christian secularism, and Christian nationalism, among others. Some have even called for the Church to separate itself from the rest of the world, seeing a need to protect traditional Christianity from anything that might make it “impure.”

While boundaries are healthy for any community, the failure to self-examine and evaluate how these fragmenting forces impact us can lead the church to “miss the mark” with missions. It leads us to confuse our ideologies and desires with the will of God and impose ourselves onto those we believe “need” what we are naming as God. For local churches existing in a context where these fragmenting forces are operating, they cannot simply “think” their way out of it.

²⁹ Ibid., 69

³⁰ Yonat Shimron, “Study: Attendance hemorrhaging at small and midsize US congregations.,” *RNS*, October 14, 2021. <https://religionnews.com/2021/10/14/study-attendance-at-small-and-midsize-us-congregations-is-hemorrhaging/>

Combating such things requires awareness about how our communities shape us and how we shape them.

Our Communities Reinforce Our Biases

In 1972, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, building on the concept of heuristics, introduced the idea of cognitive bias as a way of naming the human tendency to think in systematic but flawed ways. In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman discusses Wall Street traders, attempting to understand why supposed experts were significantly inconsistent in predicting how the market would react in various situations.³¹ Put another way, why do buyers and sellers privy to the same market information, disagree so starkly on when it is the best time to buy or sell? Further, why are so many simply incorrect in their predictions regarding how the market reacts? The answer, according to Kahneman, is simply that their beliefs “are an illusion.”³² In fact, the entire industry is built on illusions that trick traders into thinking they have a firm grasp on the world when, in reality, they significantly misunderstand the nuance and complicated nature of what is in front of them.³³

According to Kahneman, humans have two “systems” operating simultaneously. System 1 is automatic, working under the surface to generate “impressions, intuitions, intentions, feelings.”³⁴ This is the experience of driving to a familiar place, only to realize that you do not remember how you got there or assuming a spouse is angry simply because they curtly

³¹ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 212-217

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 24

responded to a text. System 1 helps us conserve our limited cognitive resources by drawing on information we have already processed and categorized. System 2 is the name for our conscious, deliberate thinking. When System 1 cannot handle the incoming information, System 2 takes control. It turns information into “beliefs and impulses,” then into “voluntary actions.”³⁵ Kahneman’s example of System 2 thinking is to ask the reader to solve 17×24 ³⁶ The mental capacity needed to solve mathematical problems like this one is System 2 at work.

Both System 1 and System 2 are essential for our day-to-day lives, but System 1 controls the operation much more than most would like to admit. Humans are not the objective, rational beings we like to imagine ourselves as. Our brains function so that, to conserve mental energy, they take all sorts of mental shortcuts. While helpful in many instances, it also leaves us susceptible to several illusions and biases. Wall Street traders convince themselves that their good fortune or dumb luck was an act of skill³⁷ when genuinely skilled traders would be much more accurate than they tend to be. With its limited ability to process information, the human brain helps preserve cognitive energy by simplifying everything around it. To do this, we unconsciously participate in categorizing, a process that relies on “preconceived sets of expectations and responses”³⁸ which help us navigate interpersonal interactions. This is a good thing - it would simply be overwhelming for one person to attempt to process the nuances and intricacies of every interpersonal contact. However, also negatively affects how we interact with each other in our daily lives.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 23

³⁷ Ibid., 216

³⁸ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 36

Christena Cleveland, in *Disunity in Christ: The Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*, discusses how these cognitive processes, specifically "categorizing," reinforce our "in-group vs. out-group" behaviors and the boundaries that we impose on each other. "In our haste to conserve mental energy," she writes, "we often erect divisions out of thin air by grouping people into smaller homogenous groups."³⁹ In other words, System 1 kicks in and categorizes unique and nuanced individuals into smaller, pre-defined groups. Our senses become dim to the diversity around us, and we become fixated on our more minor, less significant differences. Our brains, attempting to help us navigate a party full of Baptists, will break that room into Southern Baptists, American Baptists, Cooperative Baptists, Fundamentalist Baptists, and Primitive Baptists, among others. As Cleveland goes on to note:

By simply categorizing, we often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ. Before we know it, whether people are pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white is more important than whether they are part of the family of God. Further, these subcategory distinctions may start out as mere *descriptive* labels (such as pro-life or pro-choice), but they often deteriorate into *value* labels (Right Christian and Wrong Christian) that afford our group higher status.⁴⁰

What begins as a process to help us quickly navigate a dinner party can become the process by which we accept and dismiss others as worthy of our time and energy. It can become the process by which we avoid those unlike us, perhaps those who challenge our beliefs, and drift towards those who validate our ideas and actions. Further, we can fall victim to a host of other fallacies, including the *outgroup homogeneity effect* in which we tend to understand those in our tribes as being distinct, nuanced individuals while viewing those in "other" tribes as homogenous and one-dimensional. We can trick ourselves into thinking that we fully understand others

³⁹ Ibid., 36

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38

outside our group, even without ever spending time with them. Others include the *Black Sheep Effect*,⁴¹ in which we are threatened and treated poorly by those in our tribes who do not ascribe to all our "doctrines." The *Gold Standard Effect*,⁴² perhaps one of the most insidious in tearing apart relationality, leads us to believe that "not only are we different from them, but we are also better than them."⁴³ If we believe that we are, in fact, "the Gold Standard," then we do not need those outside of our tribe. We can wall ourselves off and attempt to convert as desired.

Zero-Sum Biases

A recently published project can provide insight into how these cognitive biases impact individual Christians and faith communities, particularly considering our reticence to take our call to neighborliness and relationality seriously. *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* recently published "Is LGBT Progress Seen as an Attack on Christians?: Examining Christian/Sexual Orientation Zero-Sum Beliefs." The project, containing five studies, examined the role of Zero-Sum Beliefs (ZSBs) in fueling conflict between cisgender, heterosexual Christians and LGBT+ Individuals and communities. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize all five studies, there are three findings worth highlighting here.

First, cisgender, heterosexual Christians were likely to see their perceived disadvantages as equal to or worse than discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. Relatedly, these Christian participants were much more likely to understand LGBTQ+ cultural progress as correlated with their own disenfranchisement or victimization. In other words, these Christians viewed LGBTQ+

⁴¹ Ibid., 129-132

⁴² Ibid., 70-73

⁴³ Ibid., 70

progress as a threat to their group.⁴⁴ A unique piece of this involved the researcher's attempt to understand the role of symbolic threat (the conflict between values and beliefs) as opposed to tangible threats (being denied access to money, jobs, and other vital resources). Symbolic threats were a significant contributor to Christian participants perceiving a correlation between their own declining cultural influence and broader cultural acceptance of LGBT+ individuals.⁴⁵ This was especially true of self-reported fundamentalist Christians.⁴⁶

Second, when researchers asked the participants to reflect on their personal religious values and beliefs as they understood them, they tended to report higher ZSB endorsements. Researchers took this to mean that "an aspect of Christians' values *is* perceiving a conflict between the group and LGBT individuals."⁴⁷ However, in a separate study, the researchers introduced an intervention, asking participants to reflect on John 8:3-11 as it, in their words, "describes a story of how Jesus encourages those around him to refrain from judging others because no one is free from sin."⁴⁸ They found that this intervention, in which researchers helped interpret the passage, acted to reduce ZSB endorsement. Interestingly, once again, self-described fundamentalists proved to be the exception, as their views did not change.

Finally, researchers found a correlation between ecclesiastical authority and ZSB endorsement through a study conducted at the 2019 United Methodist Church Conference.

⁴⁴ Clara L. Wilkins, Joseph D. Wellman, Negin R. Toosi, Chad A. Miller, Jaclyn A. Lusnek, and Lerone A. Martin. "Is LGBT Progress Seen as an Attack on Christians?: Examining Christian/Sexual Orientation Zero-Sum Beliefs." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122 (2022), 78

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82

⁴⁸ Ibid., 88

Researchers interviewed participants before and after the vote to loosen restrictions for LGBTQ+ clergy and same-sex marriage by adopting their "One Church Plan" or maintaining regulations through the "Traditional Plan." Before the vote, participants reported a high ZSB endorsement related to LGBTQ+ discrimination. After the vote, in which the "Traditional Plan" was accepted, they found the ZSB endorsement to be even higher than before. The researchers concluded that this act of authority on behalf of the Church leadership sanctioned the participants and allowed them to express their biases more openly and directly than they had felt in the first interview.

Idols of Identity Protection

God's people have long struggled, both successfully and unsuccessfully, to embody beautiful, interconnected ways of being in and with the world. Unfortunately, the many sources of fragmentation, hidden or otherwise, make it difficult for congregations, much less individuals, to discern how best to commit themselves to place and relationality. Christian communities have long wrestled with the best ways to engage with the "outside" or "non-Christian" world, in practical and theological ways. At times, fear motivates some faith communities to cut themselves off from the outside world in an attempt to protect an identity they fear may have been compromised.

One prominent and popular example that leans heavily on the themes of withdrawal is Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*. Dreher makes the argument that Christians should withdraw from secular society as much as possible to commune with individuals of like-minded values in the face of a world where "hostile secular nihilism has won the day in our nation's government, and the culture has turned powerfully against traditional Christians"⁴⁹ Dreher does not argue that

⁴⁹ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2017), 9.

these communities should siphon themselves off altogether, eschewing any engagement with the outside world. He recognizes that hospitality plays a vital role in Christian life and that the command to welcome the stranger as Christ in Matthew 25 should be taken very seriously.⁵⁰ He even speaks against Christians letting their anxiety and fear keep them from serving others. However, the vision of Christianity posed here is a one-way street as Christians bring the Good News to “a world held captive by hatred and darkness”⁵¹ so that they might be converted to our side. Receiving the other is fine, as long as we maintain order and not allow *them* to influence *us* too much.

Envisioning a formative character un-swayed by encounters with "the world," Dreher hopes that Christian communities separate as much as possible to renew and strengthen themselves. As conceived here, missional engagement is unidirectional – Christians offer their gifts to the world while retaining no desire to accept the gifts of others. Put another way, "our tribe" has everything of value to offer, but "the other" has nothing of value to offer to us. The type of receptive, vulnerable engagement I propose for Christian mission is impossible here.

Dreher is not the first in the Christian tradition to articulate this perspective; fear and anxiety can tempt the people of God to find ways to control what they have no control over and protect what they have at all costs. Roxburgh has shown that strategic planning, better marketing, or designing newer and better "attractions" meant to draw in the "right kinds of people" are all reflections of this impulse.⁵² It could also look like withdrawal from a culture that Christians no

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71-73

⁵¹ Ibid., 72

⁵² Alan Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 13

longer understand, as Dreher himself advocates in his interpretation of a monastic tradition which has had occasional associations with closed off, anti-receptive posture.⁵³ God's people have long struggled successfully and unsuccessfully to embody beautiful, interconnected ways of being in and with the world. As Walter Brueggemann notes, "we have come to understand that we are multivocal, multilayered creatures filled with ambiguity and contradictions, capable of insatiable self-regard, deeply needy and profoundly inadequate, and yet capable of profound generosity and risk."⁵⁴

A church attempting to remove itself from the outside world risks reducing its mission to transactional relationships with outsiders while developing a distorted view of other congregations as competitors vying to woo and secure the devotion of the same population. I suggest that the church cannot fully be the church if Christians do not take the call to continuously work towards mutually receptive relationships with each other, their neighbors, and God. Such a church aims to be in the world, committed to relationality and fidelity, and legitimated by a God who is also committed to relationality and fidelity. As we have seen, these fragmenting forces are powerful, compounded by the complexities of our human nature. However, Christians have scriptural and theological resources, often in the form of powerful practices, available to help bring out the parts of us that live lives of generosity and risk.

Receptivity in The Practice of Hospitality

⁵³ These monastic communities often have a much more robust missional history than some presume. This is especially true of Dreher's source, the Benedictine monastic communities, which Bosch describes as "missionary through and through." See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 238-240.

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of the Common Good*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 22

While it is not the goal of this project to provide a complete theological account of hospitality, it is through this practice that Christians have conceived of the importance of receptive postures through the tradition. Contemporary conceptions of hospitality can be one-sided – the responsibility of the active agent who has something of value to offer another receptive agent who stands in need. Further, with the development of a "hospitality industry," hospitality becomes a resource to be bought rather than a communally shared practice. Hotels, restaurants, and performance venues are designed to provide comfortable experiences, offering consumers the service of people whose sole responsibility is to make us comfortable, offer nothing of their true selves, and act as if we, the customers, are always correct.

As Christine Pohl notes, however, hospitality throughout the Christian tradition has been a “practically necessary and theologically central” practice.⁵⁵ Much of Pohl's work was dedicated to recovering a more robust understanding of hospitality, the concept of which began to shift in the late Middle Ages. A Christian practice once connected to the rejection of cultural and social boundaries became one that “reinforced power and influence.”⁵⁶ Instead of unbridled generosity and mutuality, it became associated with the “lavish entertaining of the rich and powerful.”⁵⁷ Key institutions and services, like hospitals or social welfare programs, became distanced from their roots as a hospitality industry developed, disconnecting individuals from the needs of the suffering.⁵⁸ Instead of understanding the practice as a core part of shared life, congregations,

⁵⁵ Christine D. Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,” *Hospitality*, 2007. <https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-12/Hospitality.pdf>, 29

⁵⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 218

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Pohl, *Building a Place*, 33

form committees to manage and control hospitable action. These moves unintentionally eliminate the mutually relational dimensions of hospitality, the idea that all have gifts to be given and received.⁵⁹ Thus, receptive capacity diminishes in a context where privileged Christians and communities only conceive of themselves as the "giver."

The significance of hospitality in the Christian tradition is that it "reflects a willingness on the part of a community of people to be open to others and to their insights, needs, and contributions. Hospitable communities recognize that they are incomplete without others but also that they have a 'treasure' to share with them."⁶⁰ It is this commitment to seeing, naming, and receiving the other's "treasure" that is often missing from modern conceptions of hospitality, like the one Dreher articulates. Pohl notes that communities like the Benedictines, the Anabaptists, and African-American traditions have carried on this grander vision of welcome through practices like table fellowship.

Further, the mutuality found in shared hospitality has significant political, theological, and missiological implications. Luke Bretherton shows how the practice works to frame "relations between Christians and non-Christians"⁶¹ and thus is significant in developing a type of common life between groups that may have competing visions of what is good. While tolerance should be understood as a virtue that can prevent groups from oppressing and harming each other, it is through shared hospitality that neighbors may create "new worlds or shared meaning and action, especially in the face of unequal agency...transfigured by the love of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, hospitality directs attention to the friendless, seeking to foster

⁵⁹ Ibid., 34

⁶⁰ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 214

⁶¹ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*,

conditions where those without power may, over time, develop the means to act for themselves in relationship with others.”⁶²

Bretherton’s conception of shared hospitality as the means through which we create “new worlds” finds its roots in the work of philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Alasdair MacIntyre, both of whom view the practice as essential to maintaining and flourishing human life.⁶³ One connecting thread through them is the idea that given and received hospitality becomes the means through which differing individuals and communities develop the deep relationality needed to create a common life. MacIntyre grounds his approach to hospitality in *miserericordia*, the capacity to grieve or pity another to the extent that it is understood as one’s own sorrow.⁶⁴ This level of empathy speaks to the importance of developing ongoing, relational friendships as the context for working across difference. Bretherton uses the image of a tent to describe:

a mobile, provisional place where faithful witness is lived in conversation with other faiths and those of no faith. Such a politics is a form of tent making where hospitality is given and received between multiple traditions creates a shared place. Many issues can be heard in the tent, some of which can be collectively acted upon and some of which cannot, but the encounter with others and their stories informs the sense of what it is like to live on this mutual (not neutral) ground, to dwell together as part of a common life. The hearing of others’ interests and concerns in the context of ongoing relationship and the recognition that everyone in the tent occupies the same mutual ground foster the sense that in each other’s welfare we find our own.⁶⁵

While it is commonplace to spend a significant amount of time and resources towards developing theories and practices of engaging others, it is essential that we begin the act of giving and receiving hospitality as a practice of faithful witness in a shared space.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 286

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 274-275

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 275

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 283

Shared Hospitality in Luke-Acts

In *Divine Visitation and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts*, Joshua Jipp shows the depth to which Luke's narrative reflects a deep understanding of shared hospitality in the ancient world and presents the practice as essential to the early Jesus movement. In particular, he discusses the role of *theoxenies*, narrative accounts in which individuals unknowingly display hospitality to a god and thus develop a positive relationship with said god,⁶⁶ noting that Luke portrays particular divine interactions as theoxenies. Luke deeply understood the practice and implications of hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world and presumes a "cultural script" of hospitality easily missed by contemporary readers.

In Luke 7, for instance, hospitality is associated with accepting Jesus's message and an understanding on behalf of the one offering hospitality of their understanding of their need for forgiveness. In contrast, inhospitality expresses a lack of acceptance and a denial of the need for forgiveness. Similarly, in Luke 9 and 10, Jesus sends out his disciples as "semi-divine" agents. As a result, they are to do divine acts when they encounter hospitality and to leave when they do not.⁶⁷ Roxburgh similarly points out the importance of this instruction to depend on the hospitality of hosts and to refrain from taking resources with them on the journey.⁶⁸ His conviction is that God may be calling the church away from the "imperialism, authority, and control...behind our use of Matthew 28," and to, instead, become a "Luke 10 people."⁶⁹ That is,

⁶⁶ Joshua W. Jipps, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10*, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 24

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 186

⁶⁸ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 123

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 138

people who eat their host's food, enter their "households" or dwelling spaces, and rely entirely on the grace of others as they go to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. The church's missional witness is practiced as much in receiving as in proclaiming.

An important scene is the Emmaus Road encounter in Luke 24, in which Jesus comes as the "journeying guest/host." In this narrative, two disciples are traveling towards Emmaus, deep in conversation about Jesus's death, when they are met by a disguised Jesus who asks about their conversational topic. They tell the "stranger" about the prophetic and powerful Jesus who was handed over and sentenced to death by the chief priests and whose body is now missing. In response, the stranger offers an interpretation of the events "from the beginning with Moses and all the prophets." (Luke 24:27, NRSVue).

A critical moment occurs when the disciples arrive at their destination; Jesus (still disguised) attempts to continue his journey, and the two disciples urge him to stay as "the day is almost over." So, he does. The three sit together at a table, at which point Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and begins to share it. At this point, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." (Luke 24:31), and they realized that their hearts had been "burning" even as they were on the road listening to his interpretation of scripture.

This simple encounter has significantly impacted the imagination of biblical interpreters. Most commentators quickly highlight the eucharistic language of taking, thanking, breaking, and giving. Even if Luke himself did not add this eucharistic imagery, later editors did very early in the tradition.⁷⁰ Whether in Eucharist or simple table fellowship, Jesus reveals himself in an act of mutual hospitable action in which the two disciples encounter a stranger on the road, are

⁷⁰ Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 10-24*, Wisdom Commentary, ed. Barbara E. Reid and Amy Jill-Levine (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 643

receptive to his words, invite him into their home to be a guest, only to themselves become guests as this stranger hosts them at their table. In this string of events, the resurrected Christ is revealed as the guest/host on a pilgrimage. Bretherton highlights the profound impact this has on the two disciples, noting that “something new has emerged that ruptures their [the two disciples] beliefs and practices. In response to this event of communion, the two disciples go out, leaving their home, and journey to the very heart of the social, political, economic world – Jerusalem – to begin a new life-bearing witness with others, to the risen Christ.”⁷¹

Understanding the shared dimensions of ancient Mediterranean hospitality is essential to understanding Jesus’ mission in Luke-Acts. Luke chooses this mundane yet ineffable experience⁷² as the climax of his gospel. It is within the context of shared hospitality that the disciples come to encounter Jesus in a way that they would not have had they let him continue his journey.

Acts 10-11:18

Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, narrated in Acts 10 and 11, helps us to expand this idea further. In this narrative, we meet Cornelius, a “devout” Gentile who “fears God.” After receiving a divine vision, he sends two servants and a soldier to Joppa to find Peter. Similarly, Peter receives his divine vision as he prays on a roof, leading him to invite Cornelius’s men in as guests. The following day, Peter, his guests, and a cohort of others travel to meet Cornelius in Caesarea, where they are welcomed into Cornelius’s home as guests. Peter first hears from Cornelius about his vision and experience before offering his own words. At this point, the “Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message,” and Peter baptized all the household.

⁷¹ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 281

⁷² Jipps, *Divine Visitations*, 201

Peter underwent a type of conversion here along with Cornelius. Beverly Gaventa points out that, in the context of hospitality, “Luke demonstrates that the conversion of the first Gentile required the conversion of the church as well. Indeed, in Luke’s account, Peter and company undergo a change that is more wrenching by far than the change experienced by Cornelius.”⁷³ Peter goes through a conversion experience to overcome his prejudicial temptations towards Gentiles. Shared hospitality, one in which there is a mutual reception and no clear delineation between guest and host, becomes the framework by which such a conversion takes place.

While Luke-Acts makes it clear that the social, cultural, and ethnic boundaries between Jew and Gentile will be broken down, Jipps argues that the Peter and Cornelius narrative shows *how* the church is to include all nations, particularly in light of food restrictions and taboos. If the giving and receiving of hospitality is to be understood “as a symbol of the acceptance of [Christ] and his message,” then what does Gentile inclusion look like in a context where it is taboo to share table fellowship?⁷⁴ The reader finds that “surprising divine interventions,” remove the barriers between the two parties, allowing them to practice a “guest friendship” which binds the two “together into a kinship relationship.”⁷⁵ Any type of ritual uncleanness that could be imparted on Cornelius is rendered insignificant in light of the “angel of God,” visiting him and declaring “your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” (Acts 10:3-4 NRSVUE).

⁷³ Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986), 109

⁷⁴ Jipps, *Divine Visitations*, 205

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Peter's vision is a challenge to eat foods he considers "profane and unclean." (Acts 10:14 NRSVUE). To this, the divine voice from the vision says, "what God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15 NRSVUE). Divine initiative warrants the "eradication of the social barriers which are preventing shared hospitality between Jew (Peter) and Gentile (Cornelius)."⁷⁶ Following this, we see a mutual exchange of hospitality with Peter welcoming Cornelius's representatives and Peter following suit by going with them to Cornelius's household, thus entering Gentile space and seeing them as a people God has cleansed.⁷⁷ For Peter, the ethnic prejudice ran so deep that it required a direct revelation from God to be rooted out.⁷⁸

Theologian Willie James Jennings sees this passage as the point in which "the revolution of the intimate reaches its full force."⁷⁹ There is a sense in which this moment in Acts represents the breaking down of long-held boundaries and structures that separate the "pure" from the "impure." Peter recognizes that the calling of God here is towards a life of reconciliation, and it is through his receptivity to God's voice that he finds he can receive the witness of the "other," leading him to witness the outpouring of the Spirit on people he previously did not think the Spirit would come.

Jennings points to the place of listening and receptivity here. Of this encounter, he writes:

Peter listens and hears the word of God in new and unanticipated places. Before Peter will offer his truth he must listen. This is the key currency of the new order. This is the engine that will operationalize holy joining. Listening for the word of

⁷⁶ Ibid., 209

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Demetrius Williams, "The Acts of the Apostles," *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 231

⁷⁹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, ed. by Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 102

God in others who are not imagined with God, not imagined as involved with God, but whom God has sought out and is bringing near to the divine life and to our lives.⁸⁰

Nicholas Schaser represents an interesting departure from the standard commentary praising Peter's actions, arguing that a closer look at the text does not paint Peter in a heroic light. Instead, he argues that Peter is "resistant to Jewish-Gentile relations, slow to realize God's longstanding concern for the nations, and under the false impression that he breaks new ground in his acceptance of non-Jews."⁸¹ Schaser points to the many stories that identify God's concern for nations beyond Israel, including narrative connections to Deuteronomy and Jonah, referring to Peter as a more unreasonable recapitulation of Jonah. Luke's own writings depict positive reciprocal relations between Jew and Gentile. Luke 7, for instance, introduces the reader to a Centurion named "worthy" of Jesus' help. Before Peter meets Cornelius, Luke's readers have read about how the Spirit led Philip to cling to a non-Jew in Acts 8.

Peter is portrayed as an obstinate figure who lacks insight at crucial moments in Luke's writings. Noting the "Interruption" of the Spirit falling on Centurion's household as Peter preached, he points to two other interruptions in Luke-Acts which serve to "signify momentary lapses of the apostle's reason or loyalty."⁸² The first occurs at the Transfiguration event when Peter suggests placing tents to honor Moses and Elijah. Instead, he is interrupted by a divine voice that says, "This is my beloved son, listen to him." (9:35). Thus, Schaser notes, the reader is

⁸⁰ Jennings, *Acts*, 111

⁸¹ Nicholas J. Schaser, "Unlawful for a Jew? Acts 10:28 and the Lukan View of Jewish-Gentile Relations." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 4 (2018), 189

⁸² *Ibid.*, 196

directed *away* from listening to Peter and toward "the same Jesus who healed the Gentile centurion's servant in Luke 7." ⁸³

Further, Peter's denial of Jesus in Luke is unique among the gospels in that we read "immediately, while he was speaking, the rooster crowed" (Luke 22:60). Schaser points out that this scene is unique because "although Peter's denial appears in all four Gospels, only Luke's has the rooster interrupt him."⁸⁴ These interruptions come in moments of ignorance on Peter's part. In light of this, it is plausible that the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 10 is an interruption, directing the reader away from Peter, who "unnecessarily repeats what Jesus explicated in Luke"⁸⁵

Schaser's argument is interesting, but it does not negate the grand arc of the message: Mutual, shared hospitality is one of the practices by which God acts, leading us to deeper relationships and by which we all encounter deeper truths of the divine. Peter's lack of awareness of a truth Luke makes prominent serves as a signpost to the difficulty building relationality across boundaries for those of us struggling to be faithful to an inherited tradition and the calling of the "disruptive movement of the Spirit."⁸⁶ Thus, a deeper examination of how Christians can go about such work in faithful ways is required.

Listening as Theological, Missional Practice

Receptivity, particularly as a part of a full account of the practice of hospitality, is important for the church to be able to fully act as the church. How, then, should we attempt to go about this task? The church's capacity to practice deep listening and receptivity among their

⁸³ Ibid., 197

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Roxburgh, *The Great Unraveling*, 110

neighbors is one of the ways in which we, returning to Roxburgh's critique, can shift from a "do for" to a "be with" posture. Loosely quoting Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, Ryan Newson writes that "listening is the ultimate expression of love one can give, and if it is neglected, one will soon be unable to listen to God well."⁸⁷ Once Christians forget how to attend well to each other and their non-Christian neighbors, it is only a matter of time before they are no longer attentive to the movement of the Spirit. This is because God is a wild, untamable, intimately relational God who is already about the work of redemption, with or without the church's help. Roxburgh refers to this as the Spirit's Ferment, God's working in the ordinariness of the world, easy to miss by those churches who are in a hurry to "do" rather than looking to attend and dwell in their places.⁸⁸ Listening, then, is risky because we genuinely have no control over what we will encounter and, to an extent, what type of people we will become on the other side. It is "a church that is willing to risk listening to one another and to others *as* the task of witness," Newson says, which "is at once deeply Christian and has given up the idol of identity protection."⁸⁹

Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen provide a helpful way forward in thinking about how the church may enter this listening task through *Lectio Divina*, the aim of which is a contemplative, prayerful reading of scripture that allows "the text to read you and then giving voice to what you hear the Spirit calling forth."⁹⁰ Here, they expand the practice to include all dimensions of the narrative braid: three, interwoven strands that include the story of scripture, one's own story, and

⁸⁷ Ryan Andrew Newson. *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018), 120

⁸⁸ Roxburgh, *The Great Unraveling*, 19-20

⁸⁹ Newson, *Inhabiting*, 121

⁹⁰ Sparks et al., *The New Parish*, 121

the story of one's place.⁹¹ In their experience, faith communities that practice faithful presence know how to attend to these stories. This practice forces the practitioner away from further turning these lives and stories into resources for the self-actualization of the ones using them. While a theological and historical-critical analysis of biblical texts is important, this practice orients the practitioner away from a temptation to use the text as a resource to defend one's tribal and doctrinal positions and towards an openness to the Spirit's call. The same can be said for self and place, as this is not simply a way to bring others outside of our tribes into our beliefs but to understand them for who they are and how God speaks to and through them. Here, I want to take each of these conversations in turn to help us think through what it might look like for churches to attend to these stories and listen for the Spirit's ferment in places we could have never imagined we would find it.

Attending to the Great Story of Scripture

In *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, Alan Roxburgh names four different marks of Euro-Tribal congregation's missional practice: that they are technique-driven, ecclesiocentric, clergy centric, and tend to default to management methods that value maintaining a high level of control.⁹² Such marks, he goes on to say, reveal a "deformity," one that betrays the ways in which our churches have placed their bets on Modernity's Wager - "the practical conviction that life can be lived well without God."⁹³ Congregations, instead of placing their faith in the God revealed in scripture and throughout Christian tradition, have opted for a type of sub-deity; a god who sanctions their yearning for control and risk-aversion. The god(s) we choose to worship will

⁹¹ Ibid., 122-127

⁹² Roxburgh, *The Great Unraveling*, 12

⁹³ Ibid.

legitimate our existence and excuse us of any burden to dwell with our neighbors while allowing us to indulge in our needs to make mission self-serving.

Through scripture, however, we engage the counter-witness of the great story of God. “The gospel,” writes Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, “is about reconciliation and renewal of relationships. It is about God’s plan through Christ to bring people caught in the cycle of fragmentation back into faithful relationship again – with God, with one another and with the created world.”⁹⁴ The story presented in scripture confronts us with the ways in which we are tempted to strip God of God’s agency and usurp the control that we believe will restore our sense of calm.⁹⁵ Part of this controlling temptation has been to turn the Church’s scriptures itself into a resource to exploit as a simple guide to a better life, or “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth,” instead of the robust story that invites us to see the world through the eyes of God.

One of James McClendon’s great contributions to Christian theology is the articulation of what he calls “the baptist vision,” a hermeneutic that involves the community of God’s people collectively reading and listening for the voice of God among them, living “as if the eschatological *then* is in some sense already *now*.”⁹⁶ Newson refers to it as a “haunting, wild possibility”⁹⁷ that has been employed throughout church history. To use a musical metaphor, it is “the calling of the congregation, struggling to catch a tune resounding off a singular life lived some two thousand years ago, listening for traces of the melody in our world today, and

⁹⁴ Sparks et. al, *The New Parish*, 123

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 122

⁹⁶ Newson, *Inhabiting The World*, 156

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156

improvising alongside it, knowing that the same composer that made the tune then is playing still now, and that this tune will echo into the age to come.”⁹⁸

This is to say that the baptist vision that McClendon articulates is not a hermeneutical tool that the church is to employ when coming to the story of scripture. Instead, the claim is that the church *is itself* a hermeneutic in its listening to the narrative of scripture, always aiming to be a place that welcomes and hears a wild, adventurous, and relational God. It requires that God’s people not diminish their reading of the text passed down to them but remain open to being surprised and startled as they discern the new thing God is bringing about. Such a hermeneutic is impossible to perform in the walls of a closed-off church, disconnected and isolated from its neighbors.

Attending to Our Own Stories

The second strand of the narrative braid is the story of self, confronting and learning to be honest about the stories we tell ourselves which give us our sense of who we are. Doing this involves a type of vulnerable truth-telling that is difficult as it requires coming to terms with our biases, false assumptions, and those bits of ourselves that we are not fond of acknowledging. As the authors put it, failing to engage with our own stories will leave us “destined to operate out of the shame of the past,”⁹⁹ making us susceptible to the lies that shape our self-perception.

Focusing on the story of oneself may seem self-indulgent in the context of cross-cultural listening practices, but the stories we believe about ourselves have a bearing on the stories we believe about others. Those things that we hate about ourselves, tend to be projected onto others; we turn others into the target and bearers of our unacknowledged anger and shame. Mark

⁹⁸ Ibid., 157

⁹⁹ Sparks et. al, *The New Parish*, 124

Labberton uses the image of a broken mirror to describe self-seeing. The mirrors in which we see ourselves reflected have become cracked and weathered by the stories that have shaped us.¹⁰⁰ For some, the cracks are deeper and more pronounced, but all require honesty and vulnerability as we seek to see clearly.

This is not to say that learning to confront and tell one's story is easy. Kahneman and Cleveland's work attests to how our minds can function in ways that make honesty difficult and self-deception all too prevalent. Thus, the practice of listening to our own stories is not a solitary endeavor, but intensely relational. God and neighbor are all involved in the pursuit of truth and self-awareness, along with courage and an acknowledgment that we are always, in every place, in the process of being formed. We share our stories and receive the stories of others, sharpening each other's perceptions in the process.

McClendon uses the language of being "multi-convictional," to name the idea that humans, at any given time, have multiple (often conflicting) convictions in play, all formed through our cultural participation. Marriage, politics, the military, the free market, and competitive sports are all examples of practices that individuals participate in which form their character. These convictions are not merely abstract principles but have narrative contexts tied to the stories that the "communities and individuals who hold them tell about themselves."¹⁰¹ The clash between these stories can often be painful and difficult to reckon with, so we tend to ignore them. McClendon notes that most Americans will have internalized stories about what it means to be both American and Christian, simultaneously. He writes, "we conceal their clash from

¹⁰⁰ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 79-80

¹⁰¹ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 70

ourselves as long as we can. Sorting them out is more complicated, often more painful, than we might wish.”¹⁰² These convictions cannot be done away with, nor do we want to do away with them. They are so deeply embedded into our identities that to change one would be to change the core of who we are.¹⁰³

Eventually, one will win out, especially as our allegiance to either is tested. The task for the Christian and Christian communities, then, is to order “all other convictions by and around Jesus.”¹⁰⁴ This ordering is a life-long endeavor, but it can begin in the vulnerability of listening to the stories that we tell ourselves *about* ourselves and *to* ourselves.

Attending to the Stories of Our Place

Attending to the stories of our neighbors is, in some ways, the riskiest part of the narrative braid. As with the stories of scripture and self, to be about this task is to be vulnerable and relinquish some control. Often, when we are asked to listen to others, we do so in order to gather data to *perform* something – some technique, plan, or begin formulating strategy. Truly attending to the stories of our neighbors is more about providing them with space than it is about providing us with data. It is, as the authors of *The New Parish* say, “perhaps the greatest demonstration that you do not conceive of yourself as God and that you honor others as worth listening to.”¹⁰⁵ The act of relinquishing control and running towards the other is one of the greatest acts of love and fidelity we can perform.

¹⁰² James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Witness; Systematic Theology, Volume 3*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 363

¹⁰³ James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism Revised Edition*, (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 5

¹⁰⁴ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 71

¹⁰⁵ Sparks, et. al, *The New Parish*, 126

To risk listening well, especially to those who are not like us, is to risk being changed. It is not easy work, nor is it work that should be entered into lightly. The reality is that to listen and dialogue across boundaries is to do so from places of deep difference, from different “convictional communities.” Such a move means that we *must* do the hard work of aiming to listen for clarity and reception – not merely to respond. The witness of the church is not merely meant to be about our giving to others, but a “receptive interaction through which the gospel is made manifest and changes us as well.”¹⁰⁶ For McClendon, this is possible as Jesus Christ serves *not* as the boundary that *protects* us from the world, but as the convictional *center* which draws us out into it. A center that is itself a story, one of “God’s wild, persistent, and ongoing pursuit of humanity, and as such does not provide security for the community seeking to orient their lives around this story. Rather, one gets the chance to participate in a God who is the ground not of being, but of adventure.”¹⁰⁷

In our attempts to control outcomes and keep ourselves pure, Christians have difficulty cultivating the spaces in which these conversations can flourish. Often, we stifle the opportunities as we attempt to control the outcomes of such interactions. There is a sense in which preparation, while important, only takes us to the point of interaction, and anything beyond that is a mystery that must be uncovered in the experience itself. Learning to attend to these stories is not a linear or abstract proposition. It will take the form of ordinary Christians performing intentional and mundane acts (like sharing meals) with people they otherwise would not. In this project, I have attempted to do just that: cultivate the space so that we can glimpse the possibilities these kinds of practices might bring our churches.

¹⁰⁶ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 120

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 122-123

CHAPTER 3

MINISTRY CONTEXT

Gastonia, East and West

Gastonia, North Carolina, located approximately 20 miles west of Charlotte, is one of the largest cities in the Charlotte-Metro region. According to a demographic profile by The Retail Coach, the population as of 2023 is estimated at around 81,316.¹⁰⁸ This is nearly a 10% growth from 2010. The median household income is approximately \$53,791 and the family poverty rate is reported as approximately 9.69%. The population is predominantly white at 50% with black/African American population making up 32.23% and Hispanic population making up 14.03%. It is the largest city and the county seat of Gaston County, which is predominantly rural and white at 75% of the county.¹⁰⁹

Gastonia is a city with a chip on its shoulder. Nicknames like "Gashouse," or "Little Chicago," referencing the city's once-high crime rates, are common among long-time residents. This name caught on so well that it spawned a short film called "Little Chicago,"¹¹⁰ in which a man returns to his "dangerous" hometown of Gastonia. Mayor-elect Richard Franks, who will assume office in January 2024, won his seat by running on a platform to restore beauty, law and order, and fiscal responsibility to a city that is becoming like "San Francisco or Portland."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ The Retail Coach, "Community Demographic Profile: Gastonia, North Carolina," May 2023. https://retail360.us/dashboard/GastoniaNC/2023/GastoniaNC_Demos_2023.pdf

¹⁰⁹ "QuickFacts: Gaston County, North Carolina," *United States Census Bureau, 2020*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/gastoncountynorthcarolina/AGE775222>

¹¹⁰ Betty Jo Tucker, Ádrian Paul & Scott Miles on 'Little Chicago,'" *Reel Talk*, <http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=190>

¹¹¹ Richard Franks, "My Turn: Let me be your choice for Gastonia mayor," *The Gaston Gazette*, Oct. 22, 2023, <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/opinion/columns/2023/10/22/my-turn-let-me-be-your-choice-for-gastonia-mayor/71217697007/>

Many are worried about a homelessness crisis as the number of unhoused individuals in the county continues to grow after having doubled from 2020 to 2021.¹¹² Government officials and nonprofit leaders are finding it difficult to meet needs as the city severely lacks the infrastructure and resources. Saturday Night Live mentioned the city during a skit in which Kenan Thompson (as LaVar Ball) referred to Charlotte as "the gateway to Gastonia."¹¹³ The joke barely got a laugh from the studio audience but has become a go-to reference among Gastonia residents. In 2022, a woman went viral on TikTok after visiting Gastonia, having seen a video depicting beautiful Swiss mountains as part of the landscape of Gastonia, NC. In her own TikTok response, she juxtaposed images of what she expected with what she found – abandoned shops, rundown gas stations, and general disrepair.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, all her footage was from the Brookwood neighborhood, a west Gastonia neighborhood located directly behind Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

The western part of Gastonia, where this project took place, is often the center of stories about the city's economic disparity and lack of investment and resources. The West is the oldest and most historically significant part of Gastonia, with many of its neighborhoods registered as national and local historic districts. In the last seventy-five years, important civic,

¹¹² Kara Fohner, "County opens 'One Stop Shop' for those without homes," *The Gaston Gazette* Nov. 13, 2022, <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/news/local/2022/11/14/county-opens-resource-center-for-the-homeless-of-gaston-county/69625730007/>

¹¹³ Scott Fowler, "The inside story of the 'SNL' sketch about Charlotte and LaMelo Ball that went viral," *The Charlotte Observer*, March 01, 2021, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/article249608538.html>

¹¹⁴ Dee Dee Gatton, "Fla. Woman ventures to Gastonia, N.C., fooled by TikTok video making it look like Switzerland," *WBTV*, January 24, 2022. <https://www.wbtv.com/2022/01/24/fla-woman-ventures-gastonia-nc-fooled-by-tiktok-video-making-it-look-like-switzerland/>

economic, and religious organizations have steadily moved from West Gastonia to the city's increasingly affluent eastern and southeastern areas. Most recently, the YMCA, a significant gathering site for many West Gastonia community members, closed in favor of opening a new facility at Robinwood Lake in the eastern part of the city.

Gaston County has historically relied on textile manufacturing to prop up its economy, jobs which have steadily declined since the 1970s.¹¹⁵ West Gastonia was home to one of the area's largest textile plants, originally named the Loray Mill. Beginning in 1935, Loray operated as the Firestone Mill, a tire fabric producer, until its closure in 1993.¹¹⁶ In 1929, the mill was the site of a significant labor strike as overburdened employees struggled to keep up with demands of "stretch out" policies. During the skirmish, Governor O. Max Gardner deployed the National Guard. Workers were evicted from their homes and forced to live in "tent towns." Famously, protest ballad writer Ella Mae Wiggins was killed on her way to a Union meeting in Gastonia in 1929.¹¹⁷ Less famously, but significant in local history, Orville Aderholt, the chief of police, was killed in one violent altercation the same year.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ "Gastonia 2025 Economic & Human Development"
<https://gastonianc.gov/images/files/planning/documents/2025/4-Economic%20Development.pdf>

¹¹⁶ "The Loray Mill Project Overview,"
<https://digitalinnovation.web.unc.edu/projects/loray-mill-project/#:~:text=History,-%E2%80%9CFirestone%20Cotton%20Mills&text=Built%20in%201900%2D01%20and,largest%20mill%20in%20Gaston%20County>.

¹¹⁷ Joe Atkins, "Martyred labor minstrel Ella May Wiggins celebrated in North Carolina," *Facing South: A Voice for a Changing South*, Feb. 3, 2012,
<https://www.facingsouth.org/2012/02/martyred-labor-minstrel-ella-may-wiggins-celebrated-in-north-carolina.html>

¹¹⁸ Dashiell Coleman, "1929 strike: Gastonia police chief killed," *The Gaston Gazette*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/news/local/2019/04/12/1929-strike-gastonia-police-chief-killed/5452835007/>

Residents are frustrated that the city government has been less concerned with diverting much needed resources towards West Gastonia.¹¹⁹ Developers have converted Loray Mill into luxury apartments that stand in the impoverished area of the Loray Mill neighborhood. The apartments have spawned a wave of development in the area that includes renovating many of the older mill homes and building new houses.¹²⁰ The city is also focused on the development of the Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment (FUSE) District, relying on a recently constructed sports complex to drive interest in development in the area. Recently, it was announced that the abandoned YMCA building would be converted into a multi-use shop.

While the city has attempted to drive investment in the area, citizens with deep roots in these neighborhoods are cautiously optimistic. Conversations I have had with individuals who live and work in these neighborhoods reveal a concern that the cost of living in these areas may increase, especially as inflation continues to be high. Within the last two years, a local grocery store shut down, leaving elderly residents and those unable to drive without access to unprocessed foods. This tension continues to be an issue.

Participating Churches & My Role

This project involved lay members of three different Christian churches, all serving in parts of Western Gastonia, particularly along the outskirts of the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods of Gastonia: South Marietta Baptist, Holy Trinity Lutheran, and St. Mark's Episcopal. All churches have deep roots in the neighborhood. Holy Trinity Lutheran now sits in the York-Chester neighborhood, approximately one mile from its original downtown location.

¹¹⁹ Nick Dumont, "West Gastonia residents ask City Council for more attention and resources," *The Gaston Gazette*, Sept. 11, 2017, <https://www.gastongazette.com/story/news/politics/government/2017/09/11/west-gastonia-residents-ask-city-council-for-more-attention-and-resources/18837741007/>

Founded in 1899, the church has occupied its current space since the 1950s. South Marietta Baptist and St. Mark's Episcopal have similar deep roots within west Gastonia as South Marietta has occupied the same space on the edge of the York-Chester neighborhood for over a century. St. Mark's parish also dates to 1877.

Holy Trinity is a North American Lutheran Church (NALC) member, a more moderate to conservative synod that came into existence in 2010 out of a split with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). South Marietta Baptist is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, a conservative Baptist denomination which adheres to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. St. Mark's parish is a member of the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina and is often perceived as being theologically liberal or progressive.

I serve as the Director of Music at Holy Trinity Lutheran. Though my main ministry areas lie in worship and music, I regularly perform other tasks such as preaching, working in the area of Christian Education, and leading Bible Studies and classes for church and community members. I feel that I have had a unique opportunity as an ordained Baptist minister serving in a Lutheran congregation, which has contributed to my strong interest in helping people committed to diverse theological traditions interact in ways that are both faithful to their own tradition while at the same time elevating themselves above their allegiances.

Challenges

The catalyst for this project resulted from my observations over several years of employment at Holy Trinity and living within the Brookwood neighborhood. First, it was apparent that this church struggled with the legacy of long-held grievances. Immediately, I encountered a deeply ingrained narrative of conflict revolving around the use of different styles of music and instrumentation in worship. This was present in the way individuals described

themselves as either "8:30" or "11" people (8:30 being a band-led service and 11 o'clock being a traditional organ-led service.), and even went as far as to blame the "opposing tribe" for perceived difficulties. This began my thinking about divisions and hindered relationships among fellow Christians.

Second, after a bitter church split predating my tenure, the church focused on growing its membership numbers. A small group of leaders in the church attempted to employ techniques that emerged from a partnership with the Navigators, an Evangelical group, to enhance "Discipleship building techniques" and drive a surge in new numbers. Ultimately, the project was abandoned as the leaders could not build support for it. The church has continued to struggle to engage the local neighborhood, partly because there is little representation of the immediate neighborhood in the church. Most members reside in the eastern part of the city. This was true not only of immediate neighbors but of surrounding church communities. The church held no meaningful, ongoing relationships with surrounding churches that culminated in partnerships, missional or otherwise.

Finally, given West Gastonia's history of disinvestment and under-resourced neighborhoods, the types of support local faith communities can provide are greatly needed. Holy Trinity takes up this task by supporting various non-profit and parachurch ministries. What is often missing is the interest or capacity to develop joint partnerships between churches that merge resources and gifts, allowing for robust solutions generated by people who live in the neighborhoods served by the churches.

As I read stories of church decline in the United States and talked to members of other churches, it became clear that Holy Trinity's situation was not unique. Local churches articulated a need to build relationships with other churches but practiced something different. Further,

individuals cared deeply for their churches and their church's location but were frustrated with a perceived systemic inability to pursue missional endeavors. What would it take for members of local church bodies to begin rebuilding deeper relationality between individuals and communities of neighbors? I wanted to examine what drives this disconnection and what would cause churches that take missional calling seriously to, instead, embrace a posture of withdrawal.

Research Design

I needed to expand the project's scope beyond just Holy Trinity to understand the possibility of deeper relationality. Therefore, I invited five additional churches to participate in this project. These churches were either located within the Brookwood or York-Chester neighborhoods or served the populations of these areas in some way. The invited churches were St. Mark's Episcopal Church, First Presbyterian, Tabernacle Baptist, South Marietta Baptist, and Excel Church.

I contacted the pastors of each church to arrange a meeting to discuss the project. Out of the five churches, I secured in-person meetings with four ministers in which I described the project's goals and asked each to suggest lay members of their congregations who might be a good fit. From the four, South Marietta and St. Mark's pastors connected me with lay members who agreed to participate. I was unable to establish contact with Excel Church despite multiple attempts. Though Tabernacle Baptist and First Presbyterian pastors expressed interest and support, they could not secure participants before the project start date. In the case of Holy Trinity, I identified two individuals who agreed to participate.

For the project, we gathered for five sessions¹²¹ over four weeks beginning on September 26, 2023. Sessions were approximately ninety minutes, and each began with a meal. I conducted

¹²¹ Appendix C

a pre-session interview¹²² to understand each participant's relationship with their respective church, their relationship with neighboring churches and the neighborhood in general, and their understanding of how such relationships should function. Following the final session, each member completed a post-session interview, including questions from the pre-interview and two additional questions.¹²³ Further, the members kept a journal, reflecting on specific questions that prepared them for the upcoming session.

Each session had a particular emphasis, allowing participants to practice attending to the stories of self, place, and scripture, as detailed in Chapter 2. Peter Block's "Six Conversations," model also influenced the framework of these sessions. This is particularly true in the final two discussions surrounding doubts and possibilities.¹²⁴

The first session allowed each member to share parts of their stories, allowing space for participants to say, "This is part of who I am." In particular, questions were designed to invite participants to articulate what keeps them rooted in the faith communities. In the second session, we jointly looked at Acts 10-11:18. While I interpret this passage as central to its role in the scriptural foundations of this project, I opted against a didactic approach in favor of joint discussion. Participants were invited to discuss what they found interesting about Peter and Cornelius's interactions in the text.

The third session centered on our neighborhoods, allowing participants to reflect on the different dimensions of common life and how our churches contribute to them. I used the idea of the New Commons, as articulated in *The New Parish* as a framework for leading this discussion.

¹²² Appendix A

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Block, *Community*

The fourth session focused on individual members' doubts regarding establishing and maintaining deep relationships with Christian and non-Christian neighbors. The fifth and final session allowed participants to consider the previous sessions and reflect on the possibilities for joint missional witnesses. To emphasize the practice of receptivity, members were asked to continually reflect on the question, "What gift(s) have I received in this place?"

Data Collection and Analyzation

Tim Sensing's *Qualitative Research* and Svend Brinkmann's *Qualitative Interviewing* provide the primary sources for data collection and analysis. The primary data collected was in the form of pre-session interviews, post-session interviews, individually written journals, and the five sessions themselves. With the participants' permission, all interviews and sessions were recorded and professionally transcribed. Two questions in the interviews employed a Likert scale, allowing me to see if a shift in perspective occurred during the project's life. Because the interviews and sessions were open-ended, I used an inductive, values-based coding method to develop initial codes from participant responses. Following this, I developed an initial set of themes to analyze any shifts in perspective from the beginning to the end of the sessions.

For faith communities, attempting to examine the depth of fragmentation can be an overwhelming and exhausting task. Further, the task will take on different shapes depending on a particular group's contextual theology and convictions. To this point, I have established that such engagement must happen among individuals committed to sustained practices that help build relationality. Given the time constraints of this project, this is not an exercise in what it would look like to complete such a task, but to begin it. This project explored a way of creating space to allow participants to attend to each other's stories, acting as "guests/hosts" in each other's company.

What possibilities for reconciliation and mission might emerge from people committed to holding this type of space, even if only for a moment? What might it look like to create the space that allows individuals from neighboring faith communities, who previously had minimal contact with each other, to deepen their relationality and spark their imaginative capacity – particularly regarding mission and social ministry? This project seeks to address these questions in the hopes that, through a focus on mission, we can learn something about rebuilding relationality overall.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROJECT

As outlined in previous chapters, individuals from three Protestant Christian churches in Western Gastonia participated in five group sessions in which they attended to scripture, selves, and place. Each theme took a different level of prominence, depending on the session. Still, all appeared in some form throughout every session. This chapter communicates the results of the project. To frame this, I will first introduce each participant and attempt to highlight the unique perspective each brought to this work. Second, I will look at the results garnered from the administration of the pre & post qualitative interviews to see if there was any shift in perspective before examining significant themes. Finally, I will examine any weaknesses in the methodology and assess whether the project successfully achieved its goals.

Participants

As noted in Chapter 3, the participants from South Marietta and St. Mark's Episcopal were selected with input from the respective pastors of each church. The pastors introduced me to each participant, after which I explained the goals and parameters of the project. Later, we met to review the Informed Consent document. Once they agreed and signed the documents, I administered the pre-session qualitative interview. We then completed five sessions over the course of four weeks after which the post-session qualitative interviews were administered. To ensure some level of anonymity for project participants, I have randomly assigned pseudonyms to be used throughout this document to protect anonymity.

Ursula joined St. Mark's Episcopal in 2018. She was attracted to her current congregation because, as she says "we are not pew sitters. We are doers...serving God through serving God's

people. And God's people is everybody...no exceptions."¹²⁵ Further, she found herself called to St. Mark's following her departure from her conservative Pentecostal tradition. The impetus for this departure came after she experienced a convictional shift, coming to believe that LGBTQ individuals should be fully welcomed and affirmed in the life of the church. While she is not a resident of Western Gastonia, she is deeply involved in the life of St. Mark's parish serving as a Stephen Minister, coordinating the caring cupboard that offers food and supplies to unhoused individuals, and managing relationships with partnering episcopal churches. She is also three years into the five-year process for becoming a deacon.

Octavia is a 25-year-old female who has been a member of Holy Trinity since 2016. In her previous congregation, she experienced conflict as the church discerned whether or not they would join the NALC or remain in the ELCA. They chose Holy Trinity because of its affiliation with the NALC and pre-existing connections with individuals within the church. Though having only been a member of Holy Trinity for a relatively short time, she has developed deep relationships with many people at the church. She volunteers with the youth program, coordinates a yearly Blessing of the Animals event, and serves on the Call Committee as they search for a new senior minister after the previous minister resigned in June of 2022.

Marilynne has been a member of Holy Trinity since 1980, enticed by the many programs and activities specifically for children. She mourns that Holy Trinity has lost some of the "energy" and "youthfulness" that once attracted her to the congregation. Still, she reports having a deep connection to the church that she cannot describe. As pandemic restrictions were strongest, she and her husband visited other churches. When the time came for them to join as members, however, their strong roots and friendships at Holy Trinity led them to return. At the

¹²⁵ Ursula, Pre-Session Interview

time of the project, she served on the church council, specifically as the council person responsible for local outreach ministries.

J.R. is a 36-year-old South Marietta Baptist Church member firmly rooted in the modern Southern Baptist tradition. He is passionate about missions in Gastonia, particularly with the unhoused community. His family, including his wife and young son, are currently the congregation's youngest members. He found the congregation appealing because of its strong emphasis on mission and biblical focus. Recently, he became a deacon, providing care and contact for several church members. As one of the church's younger members, he speaks highly of the welcome and community extended to his family, even though the congregation is older and does not do many musical or stylistic things that he believes typically draw in younger crowds. Regarding his involvement, he simply likes to do "a little bit of everything," stating, "I just love serving. I love the people, the community."¹²⁶

Research Findings

The pre-interview consisted of seven open-ended questions, with occasional follow-ups to elicit clarity and deepen comprehension. Participants first introduced themselves and the role they play within their faith communities. They then described their respective church bodies' relationships with the neighborhood and neighboring faith communities. Additionally, they articulated their understanding of these types of relationships and their hopes for their faith communities in this area. The post-interview saw the participants re-answer the same neighborhood and ecumenical engagement questions. This allowed me to compare any shifts that may have occurred during the five sessions. The post-session interviews also included two

¹²⁶ J.R., Pre-Session Interview

additional questions not found on the pre-test: "What has changed for you?" and "What are you willing to commit to see our jointly discerned possibilities come to life?"¹²⁷

Church and Neighborhood

In the interviews, participants reflected on and offered accounts of how their faith communities relate to the neighborhood in which they are located. They were asked to describe the role they believe local churches are to play in participating in the neighborhood's life, describe their own church's approach to this task, and express their hopes for their churches. To begin, they were asked to respond to a Likert scale with the following instructions: "[O]n a scale from 1, which indicates low, to 7, which indicates high, rate the following statement: it is important that my church have healthy deep relationships with the neighborhood it worships in."¹²⁸ Initial responses to this question were generally high and, for most participants, either remained high or raised during the post-session interviews. The one exception to this was Marilynne, whose response we look at in more detail below. Responses were as follows:

Name	Pre-Session Interview	Post-Session Interview
Ursula	7	7
J.R.	6	6.5
Marilynne	5	4
Octavia	5	7

¹²⁷ Appendix A

¹²⁸ Appendix A

In both the pre and post-session interviews, Ursula reported the highest score of 7, indicating it to be critical to the mission of serving others. “If we’re not doing that,” she stated, “what are we doing? That’s our whole thing, go out and love people. We’re just following Jesus’ commands in doing that. So that’s the whole reason for – that, to me, is the whole reason for our existence.”¹²⁹ When asked to describe this type of relationship, she responded, “It looks like meeting needs. It looks like meeting needs as far as feeding, clothing, sheltering, helping as much as we can with any...healthcare needs, directing people for mental healthcare, all types of physical and mental needs that are out there. And, of course, spiritual needs...come with all of that.”¹³⁰

In the post-interview, Ursula's response remained largely the same. One exception was that her explanation included a greater emphasis on relationality with the neighborhood. In her eyes, being able to love and serve are impossible tasks without fostering a relationship. She said, "You have to spend time with them...I don't think anything can happen without a relationship with the neighbors, the folks that live around us."¹³¹ Throughout the sessions, Ursula placed a high emphasis on relationality with others. During the fourth session, she described the discomfort she felt learning to sit and talk to unhoused individuals she would meet. Early in her work at St. Mark's, she met a young man at the local bus stop and sat with him. At that moment, he shared some of his story with her. She described her response to him as "just meaningless. I wasn't saying anything brilliant. I just showed up and just mumbled things."¹³²

¹²⁹ Ursula, Pre-Session Interview

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ursula, Post-Session Interview

¹³² Fourth Session Transcript

To him, however, it meant a great deal. He opened his bag and handed her a plastic bracelet, saying, "I want you to take this. I gave it to my girlfriend and she broke up with me and gave it back. And I told myself I was going to give it to the first lady that was nice to me." On her way back to the church, she remembered that she had forgotten to ask him for his name. So, she ran back to the bus stop only to find he was gone. To this day, she keeps the bracelet on her alarm clock as a reminder every morning that the point is not to do things perfectly but that it is a gift to another individual to ask that person's name.

J.R. reported the next highest response in pre- and post-session interviews. Of all the participants, he was most motivated by the idea that the church is responsible for pointing individuals to Jesus Christ as the way to find salvation. His answers to these questions also revealed a firmly embedded theology of divine providence, noting that "God doesn't deal in coincidence or chance. There's a reason why a certain church is in a certain area. And I think it's vital, especially as the world continues to get darker and continues to decay, that the church serves that salt and that light in their specific community."¹³³

When asked why he did not answer this with a seven, he expressed concern for those within the community's walls. He did not want to lose sight of his belief that the church is also responsible for caring for fellow congregants. Still, J.R.'s responses revealed that he is also deeply concerned for the material well-being of those in his neighborhood. He described a strong relationship with the neighborhood as the church being a presence, particularly for material resources. The church should be present for "practical, tangible help. Immediate needs...clothes, food, whatever." It also looks like caring for souls, as J.R. ultimately "cares more about your soul than I do the hunger of your stomach that day." Ultimately, he views the church as a "conduit,"

¹³³ J.R., Pre-Session Interview

where "if you need help from the creator living in this thing called creation, we're kind of that conduit, per se, to kind of connect them to what they would really need."¹³⁴

During the post-interview, he slightly raised his response to a 6.5, indicating that the interactions with fellow Christians working in the neighborhood strengthened his belief in deepening relationality with the neighborhood. He remained uncomfortable giving it a seven, citing his original concern regarding caring for those within the Christian community. He also pointed out that the experience offered him a deeper appreciation for the impact the local church could have on its immediate location, stating that "knowing that's God-ordained setup, that needs to be your main mission field before you focus... tons of effort on any other missional opportunity."¹³⁵

Marilynne reported a 5 out of 7. She does not think Holy Trinity engages the surrounding area well and admits that she has not considered this as an aspect of the church's ministry. This partly originates from an assumption that individuals living in the neighborhood may have their own churches. She had previously been involved with certain outreach activities, like "giving out water on the street." Still, she did not see this as having "built" anything or deepened relations with neighbors. The difficulty reportedly lies in an inability to envision a way of engaging well, indicating that the score might change to 7 if something meaningful could occur.

In the pre-session interview, Marilynne's conceptualization of the role Holy Trinity plays as an active participant in the neighborhood centered on Holy Trinity's revitalization. The worthiness of participation in social ministry in the immediate vicinity primarily relied on whether this action would draw community members to the church. She assumes that individuals

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ J.R., Post-Session Interview

living near Holy Trinity are engaged in other churches, so it is not worth the time to engage them. In expressing her concern for helping the church regain a certain vitality and youthful energy that she believes has been lost, she expressed a belief that the surrounding neighborhood may be too old and that the church needed youth.

This conceptualization remained the same in the post-session interview, with her score lowering to a four. Her explanation was more pessimistic, indicating that the church does not think about the local neighborhood as much, "I also don't think the neighborhood thinks about us. And I don't know if they have churches, or they have their activities and Holy Trinity just doesn't fit, or if we're dropping the ball."¹³⁶ She expressed a sense that she believed Holy Trinity had attempted to reach out, only to be met with silence. While her words may indicate one thing, however, we will explore later that her actions indicate a different belief.

Octavia also initially reported a 5 out of 7, indicating that while the task is essential, it is challenging. She finds that what she has witnessed of so-called "outreach" attempts is problematic. Social media, for instance, is particularly bad as churches post things that are "Just cringe" and inappropriate. She expressed frustration at these individuals and their inability to understand why it is problematic. Ultimately, this frustration seemed to be over a disconnect between Christian belief and action, as she noted that building a deep relationship with the neighborhood would look like "practice[ing] what they preach and...help[ing] people in need." The frustration with Holy Trinity was palpable as she said, "I feel like we're not doing that enough. I know there's [only]so much a church can do, but I feel like...we should be doing more." In the post-session interview, Octavia raised her position to seven, indicating that she has a stronger appreciation for this task as one the church should undertake.

¹³⁶ Marilynne, Post-Session Interview

Neighboring Faith Communities

In the interviews, participants were asked questions exploring how their faith communities relate to the neighboring faith communities. They were asked to describe the role they believe local churches have in deepening relationships with neighboring faith communities, to describe their own church’s approach to this task, and to express the hopes they have for their churches in this regard. To begin, they were again asked to respond to a Likert scale question: “on a scale from 1, which indicates low, to 7, which indicates high, rate the following statement: it is important that my church have healthy deep relationships with neighboring faith communities.” Responses were as follows:

Name	Pre-Session Interview	Post-Session Interview
Ursula	7	7
J.R.	5	5.5/6
Octavia	N/A	5
Marilynne	6	5

Ursula, again, gave the highest agreement with this statement, noting that partnerships are important for St. Mark’s as a “small church with big dreams.” She pointed to one such relationship with an affluent episcopal church near Lake Wylie that shares resources with them. To the point about neighboring congregations, she acknowledged that more of an effort could be placed into it, but they have found themselves discouraged by past experiences – particularly as it relates to rejection from churches which do not share their theological views. As a theologically progressive congregation which welcomes the LGBTQ community and women to fully lead and participate in the life of the church, they do recognize that several neighboring

churches would view them as an unacceptable partner given their willingness to commune with “the wrong kind of people.”

Nevertheless, a persistent conviction that deep relationships with neighboring faith communities are important, particularly for the purposes of sharing resources, carried over into the post-session interview as she indicated “I don’t see any downside to working together with other churches.” When asked what healthy relationships or “unity” would ideally look like, Ursula indicated that it would look like respecting each other’s differences, sharing together in the work of caring for the community, and sharing in resources. Again, this view carried over into the post-session interviews as she stressed the need to support and educate each other about the needs we are respectively seeing in the community. In the post-interview alone, she also mentioned “and doing some fun things together...sometimes we could just sit down and have a barbecue.”¹³⁷

In the pre-session interview, Marilynne reported a six out of seven, indicating that she thinks this is very important. She highly valued having respect for differences as an element of this, saying, “You don’t hate somebody just because they make a statement. You try to learn, try to understand, listen...what I have is not necessarily the answer. But collectively, there may be a better answer.” Thus, building friendships is the best place to start with this. In the post-session interview, Marilynne reported a lower response of five. However, her response to the question did not indicate that she intentionally lowered her score after completing the sessions. She was particularly interested in St. Mark’s work serving the community, stating that she believed churches could accomplish much if they worked together. She also expressed a desire to see

¹³⁷ Ursula, Post-Session Interview

Holy Trinity “stop sitting on the sidelines” and do their part, even if it means aiding in what St. Mark’s is doing.

Initially, J.R. reported a 5 out of 7, and expressed a divided viewpoint. On the one hand, he believes there is an ideal, particularly in his interpretation of Acts, in which the church is filled with a lot of unity. Further, he wonders what it would look like if the church “relaxed some of the politics and knocked down some of those barriers.” This was tempered, however, by an awareness that the reality of the situation is difficult in light of immense division and “burnt bridges” between congregations. Ultimately, while he believes churches “should function together,” he doesn’t “know if we need to have this deep vibrant thing because...it’s just an opportunity for those differences to rear their heads so, so much.”¹³⁸

He also wanted to see a time when churches could be “non-denominational...Christ-following churches.” He hopes for a time when Christians can rely on a belief that this is “God’s” church rather than “our” church and expressed hope that such a view could help us rise above our theological differences and have a more unified voice. For J.R., unity will look like moving towards one vision, one language, being mindful of each other’s strengths and weaknesses as a church, and staying communicative.

Initially, Octavia had difficulty answering this question while mentioning that she felt the barriers to such action were too strong. In the past, she has been dissuaded from inviting neighboring churches to participate in events she had organized. One incident, specifically, involved her desire to invite St. Michael’s Roman Catholic parish to participate in a Blessing of the Animals event, only to be told by church leadership that “they don’t like to do stuff with Protestants.” Incidents like these instilled a belief that attempting to develop relationships with

¹³⁸ J.R., Pre-Session Interview

neighboring faith communities is simply impractical. I followed up the question by asking, “If we were to remove all of the boundaries we believe are standing in our way, how important would you rank it?” To this, she responded with a seven. In the post-session interview, she offered a more definitive answer of five. She continued to be a realist about the situation, believing that some churches do not get along. Still, she expressed that the experience had been a positive one overall.

Interpreting the Changes

In the post-session interviews, participants were asked to report what, if anything, had changed for them throughout this project. Based on answers to this question and comparing pre- and post-session interview responses, no significant changes altered the core convictions of anyone in the group. There were no drastic conversion experiences in which one participant found the theology of another so compelling that they chose to set aside the beliefs they brought into the space with them.

The changes that did occur were much more subtle in nature. In some instances, participants found themselves more hopeful and excited about the possibilities of this kind of work than when the project began. Others reported having a deepened awareness of the realities of suffering within the neighborhood. Others found themselves with a greater understanding of the work in which neighboring faith communities are participating but also found that the project increased their frustrations with the state of their current congregation. With these changes in mind, I re-examined the pre and post-session interviews alongside notes and transcripts of the sessions themselves. In doing so, I identified five themes that could help explain these subtle shifts and warrant further discussion.:

1. *The simple act of coming together in a room and committing to mutual respect, even briefly, made a significant difference in developing hope.*

As previously noted, this project would likely yield the best results through long-term, sustained commitment and engagement. Still, the brief time participants were able to spend together has improved the perception that such a task is worthwhile and can generate positive results. At the outset of the project, participants reported a sense of discomfort and unease. J.R. noted that he anticipated the possibility of hostility and micro-aggressions in the form of "sideways glares" and the like. Ursula also reported recognizing the unease in others during the first session, noting that all were "kind of keeping to themselves and [were] very cautious and careful." However, she encountered a very different dynamic at the final gathering: "We were relaxed. We were joking with each other. We were kidding each other. We were laughing together. And so that made me hopeful."¹³⁹

In early interviews and sessions, participants seemed more guarded, approaching the task of building this type of relational capacity with caution. Participants spoke of the difficulties of overcoming stark divisions and pointed toward previous failed attempts. Interestingly, participants were never concerned about their personal capacity to join others at the table and discuss differences. The concerns appeared to originate in the belief that "they" would lack the capacity to show "me" the same types of consideration. Similar to the outgroup homogeneity bias discussed in Chapter 2, participants appeared more confident about their ability to work towards relationality but found it more difficult to conceptualize the ability of others to do the same prior to the actual act of engagement in the group sessions. Thus, participants were cautious approaching the initial sessions. Having the space to engage allowed for the

¹³⁹ Ursula, Post-Session Interview

development of trust that led the participants to a more positive outlook on the possibilities of relationality by the end.

2. *The participants interpreted the experience according to their own contextuality.*

In Chapter 2, I described congregations as “convictional”¹⁴⁰ - communities with their own sets of deeply held beliefs that guide their actions. Further, these communities are made up of individuals who are, themselves, multi-convictional creatures. This is to say, as we engage others, we bring a host of allegiances into the room with us - some of which we are aware and some of which we are not aware. Additionally, we bring a host of biases into these spaces with us, many of which are unwittingly formed and reinforced through the communities or “tribes” that we are committed to. Over the course of this project, the participants' values, commitments, and dreams showed up in fascinating ways.

As I asked interview questions, I avoided defining words like “unity” or “healthy relationships,” opting instead to allow respondents to answer the question according to their understanding of these terms. As a result, respondents interpreted these questions differently, according to the issues with which they were most concerned. For instance, Marilynne responded through a lens colored by her most pressing concern, the renewal of the Holy Trinity. She strongly desires to bring back a certain level of “youthful energy,” which she believes could be successfully achieved by bringing in younger families or children. When asking questions about the church's role in acting as a participant in the immediate neighborhood, her answers were rooted in this concern, expressing a belief that engaging with the community may not be worthwhile if it did not result in a growing vibrancy within Holy Trinity. This is important to her as she understands her faith community to be a place where all can grow in the knowledge of

¹⁴⁰ McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*

God and in relationship to each other. Thus, the goal is to bring people in so that they may receive what she has.

Comparing J.R.'s and Ursula's motivations reveals how they speak out of the contextual theologies of their respective congregations. Both agree that spiritual and material care are essential tasks for churches. J.R. is strongly motivated by a soteriological view, however, that the most critical task is to help lead individuals into personal, salvific relationships with Jesus Christ. As he indicated in the pre-session interview, his ultimate concern is finding ways to communicate the gospel so that all might be saved. This belief motivates his strong interest in helping disadvantaged individuals in his community access much-needed material resources and helping South Marietta be a much-needed presence in their community. In the first session, he summed this up well, remarking "my dreams are to see lost souls snatched from the flames." In contrast, Ursula's motivations appear to be much more firmly rooted in praxis, viewing Jesus's life as a model for serving the poor and powerless. Spiritual needs remain essential, but she was far less concerned (if at all) with matters of individual salvation in the same way as J.R.

Octavia did not refer to theological concerns in the same way. It was clear that many of her answers were motivated by her past and current frustrations with churches. Much of her discouragement towards establishing deep relationships with neighboring faith communities extends back to her experience of the ELCA church split, at one point expressing the opinion that it would be "impossible" to bring local Lutheran churches together for an event because the "bad blood" is still too strong between the churches. This also extended into her current frustrations within the church, particularly as it pertained to a perceived sense that many church leaders were allowing their fear to shape their approach to community engagement, leaving the church impotent in building relationships.

3. *While the act of coming together helped to develop hope for greater relationality, it requires intentionality and community.*

Going into this project, I assumed that simply organizing the space for theologically diverse Christians to have great conversations would be enough to spark a robust re-imagining of joint missions. I discovered that, while the participants influenced each other in meaningful ways, the process of self-reflection is complicated. Some participants were more obstinate than others in examining their core beliefs and contextual theologies. For instance, I discovered that descriptions of the church's task of acting as a neighbor changed very little in the post-session interviews. While I did not expect substantial changes, I did hope to see a broader conception of this task of mission among all participants. Biases were too strong, and the space created for individuals to engage in boundary-crossing interactions must also include intentional ways of having individuals question their assumptions in a non-threatening manner. Because individuals are committed to their core convictions, often in ways they cannot articulate, simply bringing individuals into a room and believing that change will happen is not enough.

To this end, catalyzers are very important in this work. We need individuals and people who are willing to create and foster change. One participant noted in the fourth group session, “change takes a lot of intent and determination. I don’t think it happens by accident. Somebody has to be determined that it’s going to happen.”¹⁴¹ While one of the goals of this project was to empower lay members, this project made it clear that pastors play an essential role in giving laity permission to move forward with their hopes and dreams. Pastors who are unwilling to do this and seek to control, will diminish their own church's capacity for imaginative renewal. For instance, Ursula has taken on a great deal of responsibilities for managing social ministries at St.

¹⁴¹ Group Session 4 Transcript

Mark's. She described her rector, Father Shawn, as being responsible for intentionally fostering a culture that gives the laity permission to take up this work on their own.

4. *Fear is the largest barrier to relationality reported.*

In the fourth group session, I asked participants to reflect on the nature of our disconnection with Christian and non-Christian neighbors, our neighborhoods, and our environments. I asked them to reflect on how our Christian communities may perpetuate this disconnection and what some of our most significant doubts and challenges are to deepening relationality. One word kept appearing during this conversation, appearing forty-seven times and acting as a thread connecting every response posed to these questions: fear.

The concept of fear appeared in several ways during this project, from the initial reluctance of participants to engage with each other and with the neighborhood to how we unintentionally communicate it with our actions. Participants named it as the thing that drives our inward focus, keeps us risk-averse, and motivates our hoarding of wealth and resources. Our churches communicate fear in mundane or silly ways, such as Octavia's frustration with a council president worried about the liability of serving hot dogs at a community event. We communicate it when we hire police officers to stand outside of our churches, letting neighbors know that we believe their neighborhood is dangerous to those of us worshiping inside. We communicate it when we treat the struggling individual who has come to our door for food as a nuisance rather than a beloved child of God.

In several of the sessions, the group lamented the role fear plays in our churches, neighborhood, and life together. In one salient moment, J.R. reminded the group that, while some of our fear may come from a desire to protect what we have, we would do well to ask what it is costing us: "there's something to that risk, living on that edge...that's living. That's living the

Christ-type life, the joy that he talks about. So yeah, there's some costs. people don't even realize what they're paying by being fearful."¹⁴² The group recognized that fear could be overcome by coming together and committing oneself to holding certain kinds of posture in act of cross-boundary engagement. The question, then, is what kind of postures help us to overcome fear?

5. *Welcome, Respect, Grace, Patience, and Forgiveness are essential*

One of the most significant moments during this project came in a very unusual way. During the third session at South Marietta Street Baptist, the group discussed the four dimensions of the new commons as described in *The New Parish*. Towards the end of the session, we turned our attention to the educational dimension, asking what it would look like for churches to support this facet of the new commons as part of our everyday life in Western Gastonia. Participants raised interesting ideas that many of their churches have attempted, which included providing aid to fund educational opportunities and offering support to alleviate material barriers to learning. Following this, I asked, "What kind of things take away from educational opportunities that, maybe, our churches can speak into?" After a long silence, Marilynne brought up her concern over a significantly polarized topic. The following conversation is from the transcript of Group Session 3.¹⁴³

Marilynne Start changing sex of children. I don't think that's healthy for our schools. For our churches. [inaudible]. Oh, boy. I don't think that's healthy. We [used to] teach history.

Ursula Do you know a lot of transgender people?

Marilynne No. But is that the proper place of kindergarten? The children?

Ursula I'm not aware of that being a real thing.

Marilynne Okay.

¹⁴² Group Session 4 Transcript

¹⁴³ Transcript for Group Session 3

Ursula I'm not aware of any-- like I said, I know a lot of transgender people. That's why I ask you a question. And when you know people, again, once again, when you spend time with people and you learn their stories, it can be a very different outlook on it when you get to know them and hear and learn their stories. We have a lot of transgender people here in Gaston County and they're some of the best people I know.

Marilynne And I don't really have an issue with that. The issue I have is teaching that you're not really a girl and you're not really a boy. Those are the things I don't like. That's when they're so young. So yeah, when they get older and they know about all that, sure. I don't know what I can do about it. As a church or anybody else.

While it was a tense interaction, my interpretation as a witness was that it was exceedingly respectful and would have no bearing on the future. The conversation ended shortly after this, and as we left the session together, I sensed no animosity among the group members. Ultimately, I believed the exchange would be interesting data supporting the power of biases and core beliefs. However, the following week, Marilynne contacted me on the morning of the fourth session. She wondered if she should leave the project as she felt her remarks had "caused problems." In response, I told her that this level of discomfort was possible but that I did not sense other group members had any animosity toward her. I assured her that her willingness to remain in the project was her choice, and I would respect that decision. Ultimately, she did decide to come to St. Mark's that evening, where the session was hosted. Once seated at the table, Ursula apologized to Marilynne for the previous week. She told her that her daughter is an excellent schoolteacher, of whom she is very proud. Therefore, the conversation from the last week put her in a defensive position. By the end of the session, following a robust and engaging discussion, Marilynne remarked, "well, I'm glad I didn't say no."

This simple encounter highlights the fact that crossing boundaries is a messy affair. Conflict is inevitable as our competing convictions encounter each other. Holding the "guest/host" posture is a constant negotiation of power and humility. In this instance, Ursula was

hosting us in her sacred space and though I did not think she owed an apology to Marilynne, she chose to do it on her own volition. In doing so, she did not apologize for her position on the issue. Still, she acknowledged the discomfort of the previous week and chose to build a bridge with respect, patience, grace, and forgiveness. Marilynne, in her own right, was doing the same thing by showing up that evening. Fear did not win out in this interaction.

Weaknesses in Methodology

Following the completion of the project, a few areas of improvement became obvious. As I facilitated this project, it became apparent that I programmed too much content for the third session. As we discussed the different dimensions of the commons, there was too much to go through in ninety minutes, resulting in a rushed presentation of each. Further, the employment of the Likert scale proved to be less effective than initially hoped. It helped aid participants in answering questions but could have proved more helpful in comparing pre and post-session responses. For instance, Octavia and Marilynne's answers lowered in response to the importance of healthy relationships with neighboring faith communities. Their explanations, however, showed that their opinions on the importance of relationality improved from the group sessions.

Did This Project Meet Its Goals?

The first goal of this project was to assess the impact of intentional, dialogic encounters in helping laypeople from differing theological traditions deepen relationality and re-imagine faith communities' roles in the commons. Based on the data collected, these sessions are effective tools for both tasks. Participants gained a more profound respect and awareness for their neighboring congregations' work in the community. Further, it instilled a greater sense of hope that deepening relationality between congregations is possible, even amidst stark differences in theology and practice.

The second goal was to enable participants to reflect on and practice receptivity as an intentional theological discipline. This goal was a success in that participants reflected on and articulated different "gifts" they received from each other during the sessions. Many were named, several of which indicated a strong appreciation for the postures each member was willing to hold for each other. These included a welcoming presence, patience, respect, and a greater awareness of God's movement "outside of your own church walls." Another reason this goal was successful is that I intentionally asked participants to practice receptivity and listening. Before participants began the first project session, we discussed the importance of receptivity and what it might look like to hold such a posture. Further, I emphasized gifts throughout the project's life, not merely at the end. Taking steps to keep this intentional focus of receptivity at the forefront of participants' minds aided in success.

The third goal was to encourage participants to consider the challenges and possibilities of ecumenical cooperation, especially as it relates to contributing to the common good. This goal was achieved, particularly though the fourth and fifth sessions. The project allowed the participants to discuss potential challenges and practice working them out as they appeared in real-time – such as the conflict between Marilynne and Ursula. By the end, they were also able to discuss possibilities for greater ecumenical cooperation. Even more, they were able to envision how we could continue the process of discerning opportunities for collaboration.

The fourth goal was to promote a sense of ownership and empowerment for laypeople to generate creative ecumenical opportunities. Early in the development of this project, I decided to invite lay individuals rather than pastors and staff. Part of this was motivated by my work at Holy Trinity, where congregants have felt a sense of aimlessness without the direction of a senior pastor. Pastors are essential, particularly in how they sanction and empower lay members of their

congregation to go about missional work. While I believe this goal was successful in that the participants expressed a greater appreciation of themselves as leaders in their congregations, only time will tell if they step up as leaders in even more significant ways.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

I was eleven on November 7, 2000, the night of the presidential election in the United States. I had no idea what was happening, but I found it to be exciting. Even though I had to go to bed early, my dad taped the event so that I could watch it when I returned home from school the next day. I remember the drama of it. I remember the sense that "we" had a side, and that side was good and fighting for the best for all. I also remember that "they" had a side, and that their side was confused, misinformed, or outright malicious. It's my earliest memory in which I understood myself as having an enemy, a memory that I often share with others when I try to explain why I find the need for faith communities to commit themselves to greater openness and relationality when it comes to such an important task.

I want to be able to say that this was one of the rare moments in my life where I was told "the other" is the enemy, but, rather, the moment has proven to be more of the rule than the exception. I would like to say that despite our impulses to dehumanize each other, we Christians have managed to rise above it and live lives devoted to loving God and neighbor (Christian and non-Christian alike). However, the reality is that the tensions from that night pale compared to what we have seen in recent years and what history tells us we are capable of. Our communities of faith have too often chosen to perpetuate fear and fragmentation rather than offer better, alternative ways of being in the world. Even more so, without the capacity to practice receptivity within the context of deep friendships with our neighbors, we are often blissfully unaware of our complicity in the problem.

In Chapter One, I wrote that a community's commitment to receptivity is not an attempt to ask churches to practice relativism or give up deeply held values and beliefs. It is, instead,

asking all Christians to take on a posture of epistemic humility as an act of faith. It is to make good on our claims to trust in God and the movement of the present Spirit, working among us to bring us into an even deeper truth than we held before. It is an act of faith we are called to practice within the context of welcome and community. Christian hospitality is one such gift of the tradition that helps us to take this on, particularly in how it calls us to act as the "guest/hosts."

The forces of fragmentation are powerful and many. We live within institutions and systems that perpetuate them, including the church. These forces have warped our imaginations and decreased our capacities to build deep relationality with Christian and non-Christian neighbors. They lead us to create enemies out of those who, under different circumstances, would be our friends. Such a reality requires our faith communities to engage in practices that reveal the realities of fragmentation and the beautiful possibilities of deep relationality.

In this project, I asked participants to do just that. These individuals received each other's stories, thoughts, and hopes and shared their own. They ate meals together as they visited each other's sacred spaces. In some instances, they squabbled and forgave each other. These are the kinds of practices that we need to be more intentional about cultivating with all neighbors. These simple encounters led the small sampling of people who participated to walk away with more hope for a deeper connection than when they came to the table.

Five primary takeaways emerged for me as a result of the data gathered in this study. The first was that hope for a greater relationality and the possibilities of missional endeavors increased due to this work. This may have been the case even if we had chosen to spend our time discussing other topics. It is essential to remember, however, that all the participants arrive at the table with their own beliefs, desires, hopes, and formed consciousnesses. Thus, the second

takeaway is that the participants filter these experiences through the lenses they bring and adapt as such. Individuals largely kept the same concerns from beginning to end.

Therefore, the third takeaway is that deepening relationality requires intentional effort within the context of community. Because of the "baggage" we all bring, we cannot expect group sessions like these to work through osmosis. Often, our concerns act as masks guarding our more profound convictions. We must have vulnerable conversations and reflect on questions that challenge our beliefs. Further, we must be willing to listen to others as they name the things they see in us that we would rather ignore. It is through deliberate, communal struggle that we grow closer.

Fourth, fear remains the most significant barrier to this type of work. It motivates us to attempt to manage and minimize risk. Yet, this process requires individuals to do emotionally, spiritually, and even physically risky things. This brings us to the final takeaway: individuals committed to welcoming others, respectful and patient dialogue, and grace-filled forgiveness can help each other overcome these fears. It helps to create a space in which all feel safe enough to offer themselves and receive the witness of others. These takeaways are not intended to offer a straightforward path out of our fragmented state. They are intended to offer a potential starting point for Christians who desire to take on the deep practices that will aid us in overcoming fear and opening us to the work of the Spirit within our contexts. This path will likely look different for every group.

Suggested Improvements and Possibilities for Further Development

While developing this project, I encountered barriers that, while expected, proved to be more challenging to overcome than I had initially thought. The first and most important is the need for more diversity. While the project included individuals with substantial theological and

political differences, it was ultimately a group of socially heterosexual, cisgender, white individuals. In some instances, engaging each congregation's ministers slowed the process considerably. This lack of diversity, however, is not because I encountered significant pushback from potential participants. Every pastor I met with supported this project, including those unable to connect me with participants in time. Much of the problem involved mundane obstacles such as difficulty scheduling meetings and time constraints. I would have secured more diverse participants with more time. I did not have the flexibility, however, to wait due to my personal limitations and the constraints of the individuals already committed. Still, the project lacks voices from LGBTQ and BIPOC Christians, and future iterations of this work should consider ways to foster greater inclusivity.

Prospective researchers could modify the content of the sessions in several ways. For instance, this project attempted to have all participants attend to the stories, scripture, place, or self. Future projects could choose to focus on one. At the project's completion, I considered session three the weakest as it was overburdened with content. I was introducing a complicated idea that would have benefited from a minimum of two sessions. In fact, this entire project likely could have centered on the concept of 'The New Commons,' alone.

The small size of this group proved to be an advantage in that it helped individuals to develop strong bonds, which they maintain as of this writing. It allowed adequate space for each member to share his or her voice and engage with others. That said, opportunities exist to limit and expand this project's scope. Limiting it to one congregation would allow space to understand fully how a particular congregation may approach deepening relationality. Of course, this would remove the essential element of engaging in the work in its own right. It would allow for the opportunity to have a fuller picture of how the community regards this work, something we

could not accomplish with only a maximum of two representatives of each church. Further, one could take the opposite approach and bring in representatives from a broader range of faith communities. Of particular interest to the researcher is the potential this work may have for developing relationality within interfaith communities. It could also guide an even wider net of ecumenical engagement extending beyond white mainline Protestants.

Impact on Ministry

Researcher

Taking on this project stretched me in several ways. I was stretched out of my comfort zone by inviting people I did not know to join me at a table where I would have little to no control. I was nervous that nothing new would come of this, or that I would ultimately capture nothing. I was nervous that I would not be able to find participants beyond Holy Trinity, and that I would need to completely rethink how this project would unfold. I also realized that I feared this project being useless – that my intuitions and assessments are wrong. Along the way, I discovered that moving forward despite the discomfort and fear offered opportunities for great growth.

The process of reading and research made a significant impression on me. I have long been interested in the question of faithful living: what type of living is the Christian life a call to? So many of the answers handed to me have focused on strengthening boundaries, purity tests, and acting as a community that "does for" strangers they pity. The work of the theologians and scholars I have engaged here offers better ways forward beyond the need to protect ourselves from whatever instills fear within us. It has shown me that while the closed-off Christianity of my youth is part of the great tradition, so is a deep faithfulness and desire to see the other as a friend rather than a prop. It has shown me that we must reckon with the realities of Christian

missional movements that have used others for personal gain, turning them into resources we use and "do for." The tradition also includes conceptions of mission in which God's people are called to dwell, practice a deep fidelity to a particular place, and "be with."

I reckoned with many of my own biases during this process. Despite attempts to reserve judgments, I carried many (often unexamined) assumptions into this project. My initial assumption was that participants, particularly the more conservative ones, would have a much stronger reticence to deepening relationality with our neighbors and neighborhood. When they did commit, I admit I had difficulty believing participants could rise above their self-interests for a greater sense of the common good. I expected I would encounter a great deal of "do for" mentality among the participants but very little "be with." In some instances, I found my assumptions to be justified. However, I found myself constantly and pleasantly surprised by a willingness to be open to others and a desire to put aside specific motivations to join together.

I found this to be true in my interactions with J.R. As a former member of the Southern Baptist Convention who has done many internal theological renegotiations to remain a committed Baptist in my own right, I found myself initially apprehensive about interacting with him. Instead, I found him to be an example of someone who remains committed to their conscious-bound beliefs yet maintains a posture of humility and openness in the world because they trust in the living God. I also found it among Octavia and Marilynne, two people I have worshiped with for nearly a decade. I assumed I knew how they would respond to many of these questions, only to have them surprise me. Because of this project, I now hold a deeper appreciation for the minister's need to better appreciate the nuance of all people and hold judgment free space when possible. People are much more complex than we often give them credit for.

As someone involved in various forms of church leadership through preaching, teaching, and directing choirs, I now have a stronger appreciation for the possibilities that exist every time we gather these unique individuals and allow them the space to honestly hold their convictions, pains, and hopes. The experience has given me a greater sense that the Spirit is present and desires to lead us into greater fidelity. The power of coming together to attend to the myriad of stories in the room will help us discern the way forward in ways that never could have happened had we stayed apart. I would like to never take for granted the possibilities that such intentionally crafted space can offer all those who are present.

Further, I am much more confident in my belief that building this relationality is a crucial task for local churches. Developing this project over the last couple of years, I discovered that many of my colleagues and fellow church members did not share my interest in polarization and fragmentation. As I attempted to organize collaborative endeavors ranging from joint services among local NALC churches to simply combining the "contemporary" and "traditional" services active within Holy Trinity, I encountered an unexpected amount of resistance. It made me question whether the attempt to overcome our self-imposed silos is a foolish endeavor. This experience, however, has opened my eyes to the need to do such work and the layers of reasons individuals resist it. It showed me that I am surrounded by individuals with the same concerns, individuals who I will find if I just take the risky act of stepping out of my own silo.

West Gastonia Churches & Neighborhood

Since the project's conclusion, we have continued to interact and stay connected in other ways through exchanging emails, asking for assistance, sending text messages filled with encouragement, and speaking to our communities about the ministries and needs we have learned about in recent weeks. Still, speaking about the impact this project has had on our collective

ministry in West Gastonia is challenging because, ultimately, I am speaking about my hopes that a small amount of yeast might permeate all the flour. I believe we have moved the needle ever so slightly towards greater possibilities for deepening relationality and better acting as neighbors in our neighborhoods. For the connections we have made to bear more and more fruit, we must intentionally find ways to continue tending the roots.

The participants have taken intentional steps to remain connected to each other. As the coldest part of winter approached, Marilynne took it upon herself to collect coats and blankets from the congregation. Recognizing that St. Mark's had a thriving and popular clothing closet, she delivered the coats to Ursula. I was unaware this happened until I received a card from Ursula thanking the church and Marilynne for the donation. This simple act reflects the types of social action I hope will become commonplace among faith communities in our neighborhood. Marilynne could have taken the coats and attempted to distribute them independently. However, she recognized that St. Mark's has a well-established ministry and used her resources to feed into one of their programs. Further, she felt empowered to take the initiative to perform this task independently without involving me as the "convener" of the group or the pastor.

The project has given me an awareness of the depth of disconnection Holy Trinity has been experiencing. It has also opened the eyes of at least two members to the incredible work of other churches in our neighborhood. Moving forward, my hope is that we continue to tend to the connections that we have fostered over this brief amount of time. The possibilities that the participants dreamt of together just scratch the surface of what may be possible in West Gastonia if we take seriously the idea that God's mission calls us to dwell deeply with the places that we find ourselves.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

MERCER INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

APPROVED
for use

27-Jun-2023 -
26-Jun-2024



*Institutional Review Board
For Research Involving Human Subjects*

Tuesday, June 27, 2023

Mr. Robert Chris Murphy
3001 Mercer University Drive
James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: Practicing Receptivity: Grassroots Ecumenical Dialogue For Building Relationality and Inspiring Missional Imagination Among Churches in Gastonia, NC. (H2306123)

Dear Mr. Murphy:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 26-Jun-2023 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with the 2018 Federal Regulations [21 CFR 56.110\(b\)](#) and [45 CFR 46.110\(b\)](#) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) _6, _7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 27-Jun-2023. The protocol expires on 26-Jun-2024. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:

This study will look at the impact of a series of intentional dialogue sessions on growing relationality between members of diverse church communities in Gastonia, North Carolina.

NOTE: You **MUST** report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and **ALL** accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our [Satisfaction Survey](#) and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ava Chambliss-Richardson".

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D.
Director of Research Compliance
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM



James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology

Practicing Receptivity: Grassroots Ecumenical Dialogue for Building Relationality and Inspiring Missional Imagination Among Churches in Gastonia, NC.

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators:

Principal Investigator:

Robert Chris Murphy, M.Div; MBA. Mercer University, McAfee School of Theology
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341
980-613-0444

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Robert Nash, Ph.D. Mercer University, McAfee School of Theology
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341
(678) 547-6477

Purpose of the Research

This research study is designed to explore the influence of intentional encounters between members of diverse faith communities active in the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods of Gastonia, North Carolina. It will measure the impact of these sessions on how participants understand the role faith communities play in contributing to the neighborhood commons and examine the perceptions of individual participants regarding their capacity to contribute to such work. These sessions are ecumenical in nature, with particular attention placed on deepening our capacity to explore challenges and opportunities of missional unity. This study is designed to create a safe space for these conversations to occur between individuals from diverse theological traditions.

The data from this research will be used to create a model of ecumenical engagement that helps increase the capacity of churches to create and engage in joint missions and social ministries. It is also the desire of the researcher that this serves as an important first step towards deepening relationships between faith communities in the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods.

This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree by the principal investigator.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete two, individually conducted, in person interviews with the principal investigator. The first will be administered up to two weeks before

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the first group session while the second will occur up to two weeks after the final session. You will then be asked to participate in five, approximately ninety-minute group sessions to be held at various locations in the neighborhood. Each session is going to involve a series of group discussion questions, facilitated by the principal investigator. Additionally, you will be asked to keep a journal for the duration of the project to help prepare for upcoming group sessions as well as reflect on previous sessions.

Your participation will take approximately twelve to fourteen hours over the course of seven to nine weeks (accounting for scheduling of qualitative interviews). This will include ninety-minute group sessions and approximately one hour of journaling, though the amount of time you put into the journaling practice is completely up to you and will differ from person to person.

Potential Risks or Discomforts

It is anticipated that you will commit to having conversations with individuals from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and theological traditions. As such, while there is no foreseeable risk, comfort during group conversations cannot be guaranteed. At times, you may find yourself confronted by challenging viewpoints which may be difficult to accept. You may also be uncomfortable with expressing a certain amount vulnerability to individuals you do not know well. Such feelings are to be expected and are completely normal. You are encouraged to be open and honest about your opinions and feelings during this process, either with the group as a whole or confidentially with the principal investigator. Further, you are encouraged to participate to the extent that you find comfortable. You may also discontinue the process at any time, temporarily or permanently.

Potential Benefits of the Research

By participating in this study, you can expect to:

1. Work towards building relationships with Christians from neighboring communities whom you may not have opportunities interact with on a regular basis.
2. Reflect on issues important to our neighborhoods regarding how our churches, collectively and individually, can better participate in and care for the life of our neighborhoods.
3. Learn to create space in small groups which respects and allows for all people to speak. This includes the opportunity for you to share your opinion and beliefs in a safe, respectful space.

In an increasingly polarized time, it is becoming easier to retreat into comfortable spaces where diversity is met with suspicion. This research has the potential to begin the work of bridging divides between faith communities, in order that we may be able to work together to share in ministry and mission in the neighborhood where God has placed us.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

Because of the nature of this project as a community conversation, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed; your participation in this project will be known by your pastor and likely throughout your congregation. However, you will be offered the opportunity to have me use either your first name only or a pseudonym in the published research. Should you change your mind on a public connection to the study, you are free to do so by contacting me any time before the research is published. By signing this document, you give the principal investigator permission to record these sessions using both audio and video technology. Audio recordings may be transcribed by either the principal investigator or a paid transcriber. All transcribed materials and recordings will be stored in a password-protected computer and stored on a local machine accessible only by the investigator and, upon request, by the investigator's faculty advisor. Any written documents, including session notes and journals, will be scanned in to the principal investigator's computer (or saved, if sent digitally) and saved to the password-protected

machine. Any paper originals will be shredded. Per university requirements, all materials discussed above will be stored at Mercer University for three years after completion of the study. Following the fulfillment of this time period, all audio and written materials will be destroyed and/or permanently deleted.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Chris Murphy at (980) 613-0444.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Chris Murphy at (980) 613-0444 or Dr. Rob Nash at (678) 547-6477 or m_nash@mercer.edu

Audio and Video Recording

By participating in this study, you are permitting the principal investigation to record all sessions in which you are involved using audio and video technology.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair at (478) 301-4101

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Research Participant Name (Print)

Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)

Research Participant Signature

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

Date

Date

Mercer University IRB
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APPENDIX C

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT – QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX C

Research Instrument – Qualitative Interview Questions

Pre- and post-interviews are intended to last 30-45 minutes. Follow-up and re-worded questions may be used, as needed, to prompt deeper clarity.

Pre-Session Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your church and your involvement there. What do you love about it? What is important to you? What excites you and keeps you going back?
2. On a scale from 1 (complete disagreement) to 7 (complete agreement) rate the following statement: it is important that my church have a healthy, deep relationship with the neighborhood it worships in.
3. What is the role of local churches in participating in the life of the neighborhood they worship in?
4. Describe your church's approach to mission/social ministry/outreach? How are you involved (presently or in the past)? What are your dreams for your church in this area?
5. On a scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) rate the following statement: it is important that my church have healthy, deep relationships with neighboring faith communities.
6. What do healthy, deep relationships between neighboring churches look like? What does it look like for churches to be unified?
7. Describe your church's relationship with other congregations in the neighborhood. What are your dreams for your church in this area?

Post-Session Interview Questions

1. On a scale from 1 (complete disagreement) to 7 (complete agreement) rate the following statement: it is important that my church have a healthy, deep relationship with the neighborhood it worships in.
 - a. Why did you rate this statement this way?
2. On a scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) rate the following statement: it is important that my church have healthy, deep relationships with neighboring faith communities.
 - a. Why did you rate this statement this way?
3. What do healthy, deep relationships between neighboring churches look like? What does it look like for churches to be unified?
4. What roll do we Christians and our churches have to play in the life of the neighborhood we worship in?
5. What, if anything, has changed for you as you have engaged in this process? How would you compare your mindset going into this study with what it is going out?
6. What type of commitment or actions, if any, would you be willing to make to see the vision that we discerned in our sessions come true?

APPENDIX D
SESSION CONTENT & QUESTIONS

APPENDIX D

Session Content & Questions

To practice a more receptive posture of listening, the end of every session will include a few minutes to reflect on the question “what gift(s) have I received in this place?”

Session 1 – Introduction

This session will allow for some free conversation at the beginning, after which participants will be invited to introduce themselves to the group. Following the introductions, I will discuss plans for the sessions, including an overview of the schedule and answer any housekeeping type questions. I will also discuss the role of empathetic listening in these sessions, clarifying the posture we are committing to holding for each other in this space. They will learn that we are here to talk about the possibilities for connection which might allow us to imagine joint witness and mission in York-Chester and Brookwood. The main group discussion here will focus on two questions:

1. Tell us about your faith community – what do you love? What are your dreams? What are your hopes? How does it form you? How do you form *it*? What are some traditions in your church that are meaningful to you?
2. Tell me about a time you had a meaningful encounter with an individual who was different from you? What have you carried with you from that encounter?

Session 2 – Acts 10-11:18 (The Story of Scripture)

This session will center around a bible study on Acts 10-11:18. Particular attention will be given to what this passage reveals to the community about God and God’s intentions for the people of God. Questions will include, but will not be limited to:

1. What does this story tell us about God and God’s intentions for us?

2. What does this story tell us about the demands of the Spirit on God's people?
3. What does Peter risk in this story? What would you be willing to risk?
4. Can you name a time when the Spirit led you or your church to do something wild and adventurous?
5. Can you name a time when you think you might have missed the Spirit nudging you?
6. What might the Spirit be calling *us* to in York-Chester and Brookwood?

Session 3 – Our Neighborhood

To better grasp what the Spirit may be calling us to in the neighborhood, we must strive to know it. This session will begin with an introduction to the concept of the new commons (economic, civic, educational, environmental dimensions of common life), adapted from Friesen, Sparks, and Soerens.¹⁴⁴ Participants will be asked to identify how each dimension of the commons is expressed in the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods. In doing so, participants will be challenged to articulate what they understand to be the reality of our place. Questions that will shape this session will include, but will not be limited to:

1. When you think about your congregation's relationships with Christian and non-Christian neighbors in our neighborhood, what comes to mind?
2. Who do we know in this place? What kinds of institutions are here?
3. What are the stories we keep telling ourselves about this neighborhood and our place in it? What do we get by holding on to these stories?
4. What kinds of assumptions do you carry about this neighborhood? What kinds of assumptions do we make about each other?

¹⁴⁴ Friesen, Sparks, and Soerens, *The New Parish*.

Session 4– Doubts & Ownership

Taking seriously our story of disconnection, we need to be able to do two things. First, we have to have a conversation about how we came to this point and be willing to articulate our own complicity in creating the space we now inhabit. Second, neighborliness and communal well-being does not demand that our individual concerns and goals (along with those of our respective faith communities) cease to exist but that they become correctly understood as part of a chorus of voices. This creates a tension that needs to be addressed. Therefore, this session invites members to express their challenges and concerns. What are your doubts and reservations about building something together? To this end, participants will be asked to

1. How do I and my faith community contribute to this disconnection?
2. Share doubts, reservations, and challenges about
 - a. About deepening our connections with Christian and non-Christian neighbors
 - b. About sharing in a joint missional witness in this neighborhood with other Christians
 - c. About anything we have discussed in these sessions?

Session 5 - Possibilities

In our final session, participants will be asked to share what has come up for them through this process. They will be asked to engage in a discussion about the possibilities for deeper relationality and joint witness (individually and collectively) in the York-Chester and Brookwood neighborhoods. Questions will include, but will not be limited to:

1. What is it that we can best do together that we can't do apart?
2. What does the future of our congregations look like, specifically in this place? What gives you hope?

5. What are the possibilities that will transform our community, and which inspires you?
6. Where do you sense that God is calling us?
7. What kinds of actions can we take that will invite us to be more faithfully present to God, one another, and our neighborhood?
8. What kinds of actions can we take that will invite us to participate in the flourishing of all life in the place God has called us?

APPENDIX E
JOURNALING PROMPTS

APPENDIX E

Journaling Prompts

Participants will be asked to journal every week as a way of processing the previous session and preparing for the following one. There are no guidelines for this task. All are encouraged to write as much or as little as they desire, in whatever way makes them most comfortable.

After session 1

1. What gift(s) did I receive from another in our session this week? What have others done in this space that has touched you? What has been meaningful to you?
2. Read Acts 10-11:18.
 - a. Reflect on this in whatever way you'd like to. What jumped out at you? What words/images/ideas did you find yourself lingering on as you read through this passage? Feel free to write, draw, or express your thoughts in whatever way you choose.

After session 2

1. What gift(s) did I receive from another in our session this week? What have others done in this space that has touched you? What has been meaningful to you?
2. Jot down what you know about the York-Chester & Brookwood neighborhoods – your assumptions, concerns, interests, etc.

After session 3

1. What gift(s) did I receive from another in our session this week? What have others done in this space that has touched you? What has been meaningful to you?
2. What are your doubts about anything we have talked about up to this point?

After session 4

1. What gift(s) did I receive from another in our session this week? What have others done in this space that has touched you? What has been meaningful to you?
2. What kinds of actions can we take to be more present with each other, our neighbors, and with God?

After session 5

1. What gift(s) did I receive from another in our session this week? What have others done in this space that has touched you? What has been meaningful to you?
2. What, if anything, have you been grateful for during this time that you have left unsaid?
3. What, if anything, has changed for you in the past several weeks?

APPENDIX F

THE PRACTICE OF EMPATHETIC LISTENING AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

APPENDIX F

The Practice of Empathic Listening as a Spiritual Discipline

“Before Peter will offer his truth he must listen. This is the key currency of the new order. This is the engine that will operationalize holy joining. Listening for the word of God in others who are not imagined with God, not imagined as involved with God, but whom God has sought out and is bringing near to the divine life and to our lives.” – Willie James Jennings

1. Listen to understand – not reply – before anything else.
 - a. Aim for clarity in understanding. Don’t simply assume you know. Ask follow-up questions or re-phrase to see if you’re on target.
2. Listen out of a deep sense of curiosity – give others space to be themselves for you.
3. Don’t be so helpful – instead of giving advice, be curious.
 - a. “Why does that matter so much to you?” Not, “here is what you should do.”
4. Remember that God’s people are called to bear with each other in love. If you’re unsure of what that looks like, 1 Corinthians 13 is a great place to start.
5. Pay attention to others – and show that you are paying attention!
6. Pay attention to yourself – are you uncomfortable? Frustrated? Confused? Look to understand these emotions, not ignore them.
7. Pay attention to God – what if the Spirit is prompting us to face our discomfort and move towards greater intimacy?