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ABSTRACT

DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT IN PERSONS WHO CONSIDERED LEAVING THE VESTAL CENTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND DECIDED TO STAY: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

by

Roger L. Frederick

This project used classic grounded theory research methods to interview fifteen members of the Vestal Center United Methodist Church (VCUMC) who considered leaving but decided to stay. The purpose was to understand discipleship growth processes experienced by the participants throughout their years in the VCUMC. Open-ended interviews collected stories about the event(s) that caused participants to consider leaving the VCUMC. The interviews continued with conversations about how those events might have affected the discipleship of the participants. Most participants also completed a personal faith-life timeline of important spiritual experiences. Using constant comparative analysis, four principles emerged. I presented the findings to the lay leadership of the congregation with four recommendations derived from the four principles. The VCUMC may strengthen its discipling ministry by encouraging and planning opportunities for members to (1) tell stories of their life and faith experiences, (2) remember life experiences and reflect on how those experiences may lead to more mature Christian faith, (3) become aware of developmental processes and how they relate to faith development, and (4) act upon the lessons they learn as their relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ matures.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled
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DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT IN PERSONS WHO CONSIDERED LEAVING
THE VESTAL CENTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND DECIDED TO
STAY: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

Roger Lawrence Frederick

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Todd and Janine

Todd and Janine's story resonates with many people's experience and introduces the problem. Janine¹ admitted that she held grudges longer than Todd. For that reason, she says, she still remembers the pain of an early experience in the church. After having lived away from the area where Todd grew up, they had the opportunity to return to Todd's family home. Because Todd attended the church as a child, the family immediately began to worship and establish a network of friends and support at the Vestal Center United Methodist Church (VCUMC) in Vestal, New York.

Soon after they returned, they learned about a supper to raise money for the church. They wanted to show their support, but the transition back to this community made managing the family's finances difficult. Todd and Janine decided they could not afford dinner at the church. Instead, they expected to stay home and prepare the usual inexpensive meal. Janine knew eating at home was best for the family, but she wished they could join others at the church for two reasons. She wanted to help the church, and she knew the children would enjoy eating out.

One day Alan, a church member friend, asked Janine if they planned to come to the dinner. When Janine explained, "No," Alan suggested that it might be affordable because the church capped the cost for families. With this new information, Todd and Janine decided they would find a way to participate. Now, Janine looked forward to helping the church and providing a good meal out, with friends from the church, for the children. The family scrounged together just enough cash, which meant robbing a few

¹ Names of all participants in this study have been fictionalized to protect anonymity.

coins from the change jar. With money in hand, they arrived at the church eager to enjoy their evening.

When they went to the table to purchase their tickets, the bill totaled more money than they brought. Janine hesitated before asking, "I thought the church had a maximum price for families." The person at the table said, "We do, but that does not apply to your family." Over the years, Janine has forgotten the specific reason why they did not qualify, but her disappointment lived on.

Embarrassed, confused, and hurt, the family went home. They returned to worship the next day, but several times Janine's eyes filled with tears. She announced to Todd on the way home, "I'm not going back there." The family stopped coming and that seemed to end their relationship with this church.

Some months later, Janine stopped to pick up an item at the home of a neighbor who also happened to be a member of the church. The neighbor mentioned that she noticed the family no longer attended worship. In Janine's words, "She begged us to give our church a second chance." For some reason Janine and Todd did, and they have never left. More than twenty-five years later, Janine and Todd have grown to be strong members of their church. They fulfill their membership vows in many ways. They attend church every Sunday they are in town. Their faith shines through their participation in numerous church activities, committees, and programs. My conversations with them signify personal expressions of faith in Jesus Christ. If I were to list the many ways they live out their faith, I would surely expose Todd and Janine's identity, but they have asked me not to do that. Their faith guides them to help the church accomplish its mission and make faithful decisions to expand our mission to a changing community. They desire that

others experience the benefits they have found in the church: close friendship, a sense of community, and life-changing connection with God through the church's ministries. They share disappointment that American culture diminishes the role of Christian faith. Over the years since they felt the pain and disappointment at that fund-raising dinner, they say they have grown stronger in their faith.

Janine initially told her story at a church meeting of about ten people. I had invited any interested persons to talk about "needs of the families in our community." For most of the meeting, Janine quietly listened. Then she bravely revealed her painful story. Everyone at the table felt Janine's conflict between her desire to tell honestly her family's experience in the church and her desire to return no harm to the people she has come to love. Everyone around the table wanted to rebuke the person who must have watched Janine, confused and disappointed, take her family back home. The church failed to be gracious.

Hearing Todd and Janine's story troubled me, but I saw signs of a greater and far more hopeful issue: Janine and Todd chose to live their Christian life in the midst of the same community to which Janine vowed never to return. As I mulled over this story, I wanted to understand the dynamics that inspired Todd and Janine to give VCUMC a second chance. I wanted to understand why Janine and Todd decided to stay in the church and how that decision influenced their discipleship development as followers of Jesus Christ. Confident that others had experienced similar hurdles in the church, I wondered if identifying principles about these kinds of experiences might provide insight to the church as it works to fulfill its stated mission: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" (House). Finally, I wondered if exploring these experiences

of people in the church would help the church and me identify how, in part, the church accomplishes its mission to “make disciples.”

As I began my research phase, especially as I looked at other researchers’ work with discipleship development, I remembered a personal experience similar to Todd and Janine’s story. The memory of my personal experience may provide some insight as to why I have chosen this topic.

I enrolled in seminary in February 1993. My wife and I had no children, and we struggled to make the transition to the new community where I would earn my degree. We began attending a local United Methodist church to build our own support system. We sang in the choir, volunteered with the youth program, and attended the weekly fellowship covered-dish supper on Wednesday nights (often little more than a mutual sharing of twelve to fifteen versions of baked beans). We enjoyed our new friends and felt confident in our work to develop mutually meaningful relationships.

Almost a year later, we learned that my wife, Carolyn, was pregnant with our son. We also discovered that pregnancy for Carolyn brought serious health concerns. Because of her health, we suddenly dropped out of church activity. We stopped volunteering with the youth, singing in the choir, and attending the dinners. I admit we did not miss the bean buffet. We planned to return to the church after Carolyn’s health improved. However, the recovery took much longer and extracted much more emotional energy than we anticipated. Sparing the details, Carolyn was unable to work many days and felt exhausted even when she rested. The physical and emotional toll drained our spirits. During that difficult time, no church member, nor the pastor, reached out to see how we were doing. They kept informed about our situation because another student, with whom

I worked painting for the seminary, knew what was going on, but no one phoned or sent cards to encourage us and say, “We’re praying for you. How can we help you?” We felt alone.

When my wife recovered enough to return to church, we decided to attend a church where we might establish mutually supportive friendships with couples close to our own age. We began attending another church. Several weeks later, the friend who painted with me asked, “Why aren’t you two coming back to our church?” I told him how we felt when we realized people did not support us as we hoped they might. I remember feeling peaceful about our decision to go to another church, so I talked to him without anger or defensiveness (at least that is my memory).

My colleague defensively replied, “Well, you do realize we were praying for you, don’t you?” I remember putting my paintbrush in the bucket, feeling frustrated, and answering, “I guess I’ve just learned something about prayer. Perhaps an important part of prayer is that the people for whom others pray need a personal connection with those who are praying.” Prayers were important, but Carolyn and I also needed personal contact throughout our lonely illness.

As I remembered that personal story, fifteen years later, I realized that my experience turned out very differently than Todd and Janine’s experience. They stayed in the church. My wife and I left. We started again to build relationships with people in another church where we connected with several more couples who were also starting families. I continued to reflect on my own experiences as I completed research throughout this project. I made a connection with Janine’s pain as she told the story

because I had experienced similar pain. Now we have the opportunity to explore how our faith changed through the experiences.

In this project, I explored influences on discipleship development by studying experiences of people in VCUMC. The research questions framed the study. The experiences of considering leaving the church and deciding to stay acted as lenses to focus on influences that shaped a participant's growth as a disciple. I believe this study is valuable because grounded theory methods lead to grounded action (Stillman 501). A set of principles or concepts explaining how VCUMC affects discipleship development will empower the people in the church to improve their ability to accomplish their mission.

Purpose

This research project set out to identify how VCUMC has encouraged and/or discouraged discipleship development. The strategy used grounded theory methods to explore the experiences of persons who considered leaving but decided to stay with VCUMC. From the data gathered, I intended to develop a set of principles about the participants' experiences and present those ideas to the church to help guide the leaders in planning ministries for greater discipleship growth among its members and participants.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this project:

1. What precipitating experiences influenced people to consider leaving VCUMC and then to decide to stay?
2. What changes in their relationship with God and with others in the congregation do participants identify because they stayed in the congregation?

3. What principles emerged from the data that might guide the church to reflect on and adjust, if needed, its mission to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ?

Define Terms

As I researched grounded theory methodology, I wished other authors had included a glossary for important terms in their writing. This section provides key terms and definitions unique to this research project.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Developed in the 1960s by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss for research in sociology, grounded theory method inductively gathers data and analyzes it directly from the field. Grounded theory method constantly compares data as it is gathered, observes relationships among the data, codes data into categories, defines characteristics and properties of the categories, and integrates the categories into a set of findings under a common category, also called a variable, that helps explain the phenomena being studied.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling identifies the method of selecting data that provides relevant information to the emerging findings. “The basic question in theoretical sampling is to what groups or subgroups does one turn to next in data collection—and for what theoretical purpose?” (Glaser and Holton par. 51). For example, the discovery that many participants regularly mentioned prayer in their narrative revealed that my data needed to explore the idea of prayer. The need to explore prayer led me to ask participants open-ended statements. For example, I asked, “Please describe your prayers or your prayer life as you experienced this situation.” Theoretical sampling is not random selection, nor is it

selecting participants based on the researcher's biases or assumptions. Theoretical sampling gets its set of criteria from the emerging data.

Constant Comparative Method

In grounded theory methodology, constant comparative method is the engine that generates the findings grounded in the data. Three levels of comparison generate the results. First, researchers gather the data (e.g., interview notes) to compare to other incidents. Then they code the data, identifying concepts and categories from it. Second, researchers compare the codes and categories with previous and new information that enters the process as concepts form. Third, researchers compare concepts with other concepts. Each comparison offers researchers new opportunities to observe and gather insights rising from the information collected (Glaser and Holton par. 53).

Discipleship Development

In this study, discipleship development referred to the growth process of persons learning to be followers of Jesus Christ after they have already acknowledged belief in Jesus Christ. Membership in the United Methodist Church, according to the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, means members profess faith in “God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ his only Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, they make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ” (Olson par. 217). The term disciple has ancient meanings in Greek and Jewish culture and religion. During Jesus' time, people understood that disciples “not only ... were to listen to what [Jesus] said, but they were also to adopt His teaching as their way of life” (Tenney 130). This study assumes the participants are disciples of Jesus Christ evidenced, at the least, by their membership in VCUMC.

For the purposes of this study, I held open the possibility that the participants may reveal that their experience in VCUMC taught them to follow and be loyal to something, or someone, other than Jesus Christ. I also refrained from defining *discipleship development* for the participants in preference for hearing their own description, definition, and processes involved in discipleship development. Therefore, I leave open the possibility to discover of whom or of what the person is becoming a disciple. The following terms used throughout the project function as synonyms to discipleship development: disciple formation, nurture discipleship, and discipleship growth.

Even though I refrained from defining *discipleship development* to the participants in this project, as I progressed, I clarified what I was looking for in terms of discipleship development. Instead of looking for standards of beliefs and behaviors in each participant, I looked for movement from lesser maturity to greater maturity. I looked for movement from pain to healing, or from conflict to resolution, or from the sense of anxiety about matters in the congregation to a sense of peace and calm. For example, a participant may not have directly resolved a conflict with another church member, but he or she may have arrived at a point where he or she no longer experienced anxiety to deal with the person at the center of the conflict. The circumstances surrounding the reduced anxiety suggest movement, and I may interpret that movement as growth. My interpretation is consistent with an understanding of human development from the work of developmentalists such as Robert Kegan and James W. Fowler. I speak about this movement more in Chapter 2.

Ministry Intervention

The objective of this study reached beyond description of experiences (Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity* 93). The ministry intervention used my pastoral role to access participants' experiences in VCUMC so that the church may better understand how people grow, or fail to grow, as disciples. The intervening research intended to identify, by constantly comparing one person's story to the next, principles and concepts related to discipleship development as experienced by the participants. I used theoretical sampling to recruit participants who decided to stay in the church after they considered leaving. Analysis of the data involved comparing incidents, identifying (coding) concepts and characteristics found in the experiences, and seeing how these concepts related to one another.

Context

Four subheadings categorize the various aspects of the context for this ministry intervention and research project: personality of the local church, present ministries of VCUMC, demographics of the local church, and community context. Each subheading describes attributes of the research setting.

Personality of the Local Church

The people who worship at VCUMC amaze me. Having been their pastor for only two years, I have just begun to get to know them. A community rich with life experience and spiritual wisdom gathers each Sunday. As my imagination scans the congregation from the pulpit, I see people who choose to live together building their faith. Parents who have raised their children proudly watch their children raise their own children. Retirees invest themselves in community endeavors. A few families choose to raise their children

in this small church even though its resources for children and youth ministry programming are extremely limited.

I see parents caught by grief's grip after a child's death. I see people who politely avoid each other because past conflict pushed them apart, and I see people who suffer long hard battles with depression. I see grandparents confused by their adult children's choices and the consequences forced upon the grandchildren. I see many people bravely face their aging with hope instead of despair. I listened to the story of a teenage girl who felt excluded from youth activities but still made meaningful relationships with older women in the church, and the young girl's faith grew. These life experiences, in part, represent the people who gather every Sunday morning. God meets the people in midst of these life experiences. As the people respond to and interact with God, somehow they appear to grow in their understanding of being disciples of Jesus Christ. In private conversations and from the pulpit, I have said that this church's greatest asset is the wisdom that rests like a crown jewel in the hearts and lives of each person. Then I say, "Somehow we must discover a way to share that grace-filled wisdom with the rest of the world, especially those in our own community."

One more story illuminates the personality of VCUMC: One family in this church has provided foster care for more than one hundred young persons. The family lives more than eighteen miles from church and passes by many churches to get to VCUMC. The father has felt stigmatized walking into other churches with his clan of foster children, adopted children, and birth children. He has felt the eyes of church members judging him and the children for whom he cares. He explained to me why they choose to travel nearly eighteen miles through Pennsylvania's rural community and cross the border into New

York state to go to church: “The very first time we entered these doors, not one head turned to gawk at the motley crew that just walked in! Every one of my kids has always felt accepted in this church.”

Every week numerous people find encouragement and enrichment through planned and unplanned ministries. Worship provides the community’s central activity. Ushers stand ready to greet all people. The choir director and members diligently rehearse and provide inspiring music fit to the worship theme. A fellowship hour, including refreshments, allows people to share life’s joys and concerns together. Volunteers assist me in following up with first-time guests. Every weekday, laypersons cast their network of care and prayer for many throughout the community.

By telling these experiences and observations, I hope to show some of the personality of the people at VCUMC that shines its light on the results that emerged through this research.

Present Ministries of Vestal Center United Methodist Church

Members of VCUMC describe the church as traditional. Prevailing values embrace a traditional worship style. In worship, I work to create a warm and comfortable atmosphere where people can experience and worship God. Within a traditional format, I still adjust the order of worship spontaneously as situations require and when the Holy Spirit inspires me. When I first arrived, a few members teased me when I would lose my place in the order or forget something and then fit it in somewhere else. A few months after moving here, one man commented, “Pastor, I’m not sure why you print a bulletin. You rarely follow it!” As we laughed together, I heard his covert desire that I stick to the script. He may be revealing a belief that structure helps people participate and cope with

life, but more simply, his desire exemplifies the congregation's value of traditional worship styles.

During the time of this research project, the educational ministries of the church included children's Sunday school for one hour each Sunday morning after worship. Youth group met periodically after Sunday worship when adult leaders (the church's lay leader and I) and youth happened to come to church on the same Sunday. For one week in August 2007 and again in July 2008, the youth ministered in Bluefield, West Virginia, and New York City, respectively. These mission trips greatly challenged the group to serve others in Jesus' name. The church rallied enthusiastically to support the youth.

One adult Sunday school class met after the weekly worship service. Two Wednesday Bible study and prayer groups met weekly. United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women groups met monthly for fellowship, food, and programs of various themes throughout the year.

The church's outreach coordinators provided regular opportunities for the church to help others through giving funds to various parachurch ministries and/or giving food and other items to assist persons. Outreach coordinators recently planned for bulk mailings to announce church services during the Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter seasons. New participants have joined since these mailings began.

The church fulfilled its financial needs both within the local church and by paying its apportioned share to denominational ministries. Members from more than forty households give to the church. To my awareness, several people have strong commitments to tithe. Although other supporters may not tithe, they give generously to

the ministries of the church. When the church makes financial needs known, people meet the need.

Demographics of Vestal Center United Methodist Church

Church historical documents report that a Methodist Society ministered in the community as early as 1845, and the church incorporated in 1875 (Chafee 529). While not a complete review of membership, in 1970, the church had 430 members with an average weekly worship attendance of 175 (Pitkin 138). By 1990, twenty years later, membership rose to 516 while average worship attendance declined to 107 (Kramer 129). Since 1990, membership and worship attendance declined. In 2005, membership was 395 and worship attendance averaged seventy-seven persons (Brauer, *Journal* 2005 278).

Whatever these statistics may imply, when I arrived as pastor in June 2006, I saw signs of strong faith in the people who had been members of this church through the same period previously referenced. As I visited with them, worshiped with them, prayed with them, and shoveled out flooded homes with them, I discovered deep, inspiring faith that endures life's struggles. In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s, the congregation nurtured three persons who now are United Methodist pastors in the Wyoming Conference of which the VCUMC is a part. Parents of these pastors remain active in the church. The greatest asset of this congregation is the people's wisdom and rich understanding of life and faith.

Community Context

Primarily, Vestal serves as a bedroom community for a region in upstate New York known as Greater Binghamton, which includes a cluster of smaller municipalities around the city of Binghamton. Over the past thirty years, several major industry

employers relocated to other regions or went out of business altogether. For example, IBM, founded in the area, built its original headquarters and factories five miles from VCUMC. However, very few IBM employees now remain in the area. Many members of the congregation retired from IBM and several similar companies in the area that produced high-tech equipment for various applications.

Using the resources of Percept Group, Inc., an agency that provides demographic information to United Methodist churches, I tailored a search to include an area covering portions of New York and Pennsylvania where members of VCUMC live. Demographers expect 2 percent population growth in the next five years. Racially, the population is 94 percent Anglo compared to 66 percent across the nation. Asians are the largest racial subgroup at 3 percent, but the Hispanic/Latino population, now less than 1 percent, is expected to increase the most, by 23 percent, before 2013. The largest generational group are those aged 48-65, Boomers, who compose 28 percent of the population. This average exceeds the national average of 21 percent. Economically, 49 percent of the households fit in the “Middle American Families” lifestyle, generally known as middle-class households. People surveyed show concern for the following life issues: developing a satisfying marriage, finding time for recreational and leisure activities, dealing with retirement issues, managing care for aging parents, and finding job, career, and financial security. Regarding matters of faith, nearly one-third of the population is not involved in church, another third is somewhat involved, and the last third is strongly involved. When asked what kinds of church programs they might respond to if they did respond to an invitation, 42 percent said, “Recreation” program (“First View” 6). These demographic

statistics partially characterize the neighborhood within reach of VCUMC and hint at potential strategies for the church to influence people's discipleship development.

Methodology

This section describes the broad parameters in which I conducted this study based on the grounded theory method guidelines and identifies several general concepts of grounded theory method. Grounded theory method generates hypotheses instead of proving a prior hypothesis (Glaser, *Basics 2*). Because no one lives in a vacuum void of preconceived ideas, I entered this research with an idea, or hunch, about what I might find: Somehow, in the context of the ministries of the church, the people grew as disciples. The purpose of this study was to gather empirical evidence toward a deeper understanding of what happens to discipleship development in the context of this congregation.

A grounded theory methodology seeks to uncover hypotheses rather than to begin with a preconceived hypothesis; therefore, doing a literature review before completing the research holds little value because the researcher does not know what specific topics to review in the literature (Glaser and Holton par. 46). Only after completing the research, when the data has revealed its results (i.e., a hypothesis) does the researcher know what topics to review in the literature. Barney G. Glaser instructs researchers to begin gathering data and start analyzing it toward generating hypotheses. "When the theory seems sufficiently grounded and developed, *then* [original emphasis] we review the literature in the field and relate the theory to it through integration of ideas" (*Theoretical Sensitivity* 31). Kathleen Duffy, Colette Ferguson, and Hazel Watson admit that a postponed literature review makes writing the research proposal difficult (74).

Dissertation committees may depend on the literature review to show the candidate's preparedness to do the research. In order to reserve part of the literature review until after data analysis, I have completed a two-phase literature review. Phase one preceded the data collection and describes and explains the literature relevant to grounded theory methodology. Phase two of the literature review followed data collection, analysis, and integration of the findings that emerged. Those findings then provided a list of topics that needed reviewing in phase two. Clear headings in Chapter 2 identify the two parts of the literature review for the reader.

Participants

According to the project's purpose and the concept of theoretical sampling, I looked for participants who could tell me how their discipleship had changed in the years following an experience that caused them to consider leaving the church yet they decided to stay. Through pastoral conversations and church meetings, I identified potential participants within VCUMC. I set no limit on the amount of time that passed from a participant's decision to stay in the church and the time of joining the study, but I preferred participants who had a longer rather than shorter tenure in the church. I approached them and described the study, its purpose, and methodology. I presented each with the Research Participant Consent Form (see Appendix B). Once they signed the form indicating their agreement to participate, they received a copy of it.

Instrumentation

Grounded theory methodology established the primary instrument for achieving the results of this study. I interviewed participants to converse about their experiences in the VCUMC. After the interview, I invited participants to fill out a timeline of faith and

life experiences. Appendix A shows the questions I used to begin interviews, and Appendix C shows the timeline. Constant-comparative method generated concepts about the experience of the participants. My reflection after the interviews and emerging concepts allowed insights regarding the relationships among the participant experiences to emerge. Time spent reflecting over the interviews also guided collection of new data as needed. A cycle of interviewing participants, making comparisons, reflecting on the data, and reading about the topics indicated from the interviews continued until a cohesive set of principles about the experiences and discipleship development emerged. These processes worked together as the main instrument in this study.

Data Collection

I identified persons who could tell me how their faith changed since they experienced a time when they considered leaving VCUMC and decided to stay. Pastoral conversations indicated experiences such as conflict between church members that might cause people to consider leaving. I did not limit my search for potential participants to conflict in relationships. I also considered people who experienced other reasons to leave. For example, if a person's expectations of the preacher went unmet, he or she might have considered leaving. Personal changes unrelated to the church, such as divorce, work schedules, and age of children, may also cause people to consider leaving. I welcomed any participant who considered leaving the church and decided to stay.

I scheduled an appointment for the initial interview to gather the raw data. During the interview, a digital audio recorder captured the conversation. I kept a notepad to write relevant descriptive observations the audio recorder could not retrieve. Immediately following each interview, I noted any other data that I thought might be valuable for later

reflection. The audio record was transcribed soon after the interview, and the analysis began. I filed transcript and field notes together as I began to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

Comparative analysis describes the central process for analyzing data. Analysis began immediately following each interview (Bruce 9). While an assistant transcribed the audio record, I reflected on my field notes and wrote observations about the data and what I had experienced in the interview (Glaser and Strauss 108). Field notes provided an additional source for reflection. I compared the transcript to the original audio record for accuracy (Duffy, Ferguson, and Watson 76). Three types of coding processes helped comb through the data. *Open coding* examined the data for initial ideas and emerging concepts. Memos noted on the transcript and field notes identified emerging concepts. The practice of writing memos in grounded theory research is called “memoing” (Glaser and Holton par. 61). *Axial coding* focused on certain themes and categories that began to emerge. *Selective coding* examined the data for the emergence of a core variable that held together other emerging categories (Draucker et al. 1138).

The process of gathering data, coding, memoing, and integrating the categories and properties into the emerging core concepts created a cyclical system as I continued to interview new participants and incorporate new data into the system. Second and third (if needed) level interviews supplied additional data.

Delimitations and Generalizability

Two clear limits defined this research project: the selection of people who have participated in the ministries of the VCUMC for a long time and the probing of experiences in which the participants considered leaving the church but decided to stay.

The concept of theoretical sampling further limited analysis to pieces of data that most likely contributed to the budding hypothesis as it emerged. Theoretical sampling contributed to the triangulation of data by bringing in data from various sources and perspectives in order to understand further the processes at work in the lives of the participants.

Because grounded theory method values all kinds of data, multiple sources often contribute to the discovery of new insights about the subject: “It is important to bear in mind when embarking on a grounded theory study that emerging analysis will influence subsequent data collection” (Duffy, Ferguson, and Watson 73). While Appendix A shows the primary researcher-designed interview questions, they were not the only questions asked during the interviews. As concepts emerged and I needed new information to explore the emerging concepts, I generated new questions to ask during subsequent interviews.

Theological Foundation

This study peered into processes of discipleship development in VCUMC. The probe began with the observation of a puzzling problem: I noticed that Todd and Janine had reason to leave the church, but they chose to stay with this community. Years later, they remain and find that their faith has expanded and deepened and they have grown as disciples. The study examined the phenomena surrounding their experience of disappointment with others in the church and their response to stay rather than to leave. Further, I invited others in VCUMC to tell their stories of a time when they considered leaving the church and chose to stay. Finally, the methodology intended to churn up principles that both describe and show relationships among the data. From those

principles, I discuss implications about the growth of disciples in VCUMC and offer the implications to the church for reflection and planning to strengthen the church's ministries of discipleship. In this section, I reveal biblical and theological concepts that support this study.

Disciple Growth

God became human in Jesus Christ, born to his mother Mary, and he *grew* up in the household of Joseph. Christians profess their faith that Jesus learned, grew, matured, died, and rose again to live. Scripture shows glimpses of Jesus growing up. Mary's and Joseph's faith compelled them to present Jesus in the Temple early in his infancy where Simeon and Anna spoke powerful blessings over him (Luke 2:21-39). Later, Jesus and his family made annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate festivals. Jesus continued to grow and learn through these formative years. Finally, Luke simply says, "So Jesus grew both in height and wisdom, and he was loved by God and by all who knew him" (Luke 2:52, NLT). Jesus experienced human growth in all ways.

Jesus taught with parables that suggest growth. For example, he powerfully used growth imagery when he taught that he is the vine and his followers are the branches (John 15:1-11). Jesus' audience, even contemporary disciples, easily imagine the flow of the Holy Spirit nurturing their lives to produce fruit according to God's purposes for them. Jesus even threatens unproductive disciples by instructing that those "branches" that do not produce fruit (John 15:6) will be like those branches on the vine that the farmer prunes off and throws into the fire. Branches that produce no fruit are dying, useless, and discarded. The theological idea of growth, discipleship development or

formation, establishes a foundation on which I base this research project as it searched for a set of principles to explain growth in the people of VCUMC.

Paul's use of "body" language supports Jesus' teaching and provides a symbol of unity and growth (Rom. 7:4), abilities and gifts (Rom. 12:4-10), and value and purpose (1 Cor. 12). Paul's metaphorical language implies that disciples grow, change, and mature. All these Scriptures support discipleship development as a growth process.

A study of the book of James reveals that the desirable outcome of a believer's "trials of any kind" (1:2) is maturity and growth. "Let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing" (Jas. 1:4). James connects maturity to completeness and a fullness of life—wholeness. This is the only verse in the Ancient Greek New Testament and the Septuagint that combines these two words translated "mature" and "complete." By using both words, James emphasizes the goal of maturity, and he indicates the extent, or a measurable outcome, of the maturation process: completeness. The remaining text of James lays out specific ways a person becomes mature and complete in Jesus Christ. Those who follow Jesus Christ follow a pathway of maturity until they attain completeness in Christ Jesus. The particular shape of a mature Christian is not necessarily the purpose of this part of the discussion. I only intend to show a biblical foundation for the concept of growth in the Christian life. On that foundation, I assume that spiritual growth occurs. Adrian van Kaam, and his substantial writings to develop the Science of Foundational Human Formation theory (SFHF), also makes a similar foundational assumption:

The science of formative spirituality assumes that there is a mystery of formation at the root of all formation in the universe, world, and history, including all forms of human formation and preformation. The ground of consonance between preformation and formation is to be found in this all-

encompassing mystery of formation. It is the root of all life in and around us. (*Fundamental Formation 6*)

The “mystery” to which van Kaam refers is God and he supports my assumption of growth. Van Kaam also leads to a second theological foundation: Growth is God’s idea and work.

Jesus’ mother and father took him to the temple year after year as part of their devotion to and worship of God, and Jesus stepped into this world and into a Jewish system that included synagogues and rabbis who taught followers their ways. The Old Testament provides a precedent for discipleship. Because God created humans to grow, discipleship development is God’s idea; therefore, followers of Jesus can rely on God to provide the means for such development. Although the Old Testament does not speak directly about discipleship development, several clues suggest discipleship development.

A search for the term *disciple* in the Old Testament revealed only one result: “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him” (Isa. 8:16-17, NRSV). Isaiah, at least, seems to have others following his ways, and he was certainly part of a larger community (Tucker). This reference may also suggest that these disciples helped the prophet secure and maintain the message from God as it passed from one generation to the next (Kaiser; Seitz).

The term *disciple* is not common in the Old Testament text; however, several other concepts related to discipleship do show up in the Old Testament. For example, disciples learn and grow, and other Old Testament personalities show learning and growth as they relate to God. Adam and Eve, after sinning, hid from the Lord and heard him calling out to find them as he walked in the garden’s evening breeze. The

relationship had been broken, and they needed to learn not only the consequences of sin but also of the love, grace, and providence of God (Gen. 3). I imagine Adam and Eve experienced a sharp learning curve as they moved outside the garden and began to scratch their own living from out of the earth. They undoubtedly developed. As the story of God's redemptive work in humanity unfolds, Abraham follows God to an unknown land where God would give him a "great nation" to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12). Hundreds of years later, Moses led that family out of slavery in Egypt toward the land God promised their ancestral father. God called his people to follow him through the wilderness. God's presence in the cloud by day and the fire by night physically guided them. Then God provided laws to obey, and they began to follow God's ways in their behavior and life together. The concepts of God disciplining, humans following, and humans learning are all part of being a disciple. These concepts can be identified in many Old Testament Scriptures, but I list three from Deuteronomy as a sample:

1. "From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire" (Deut. 4:3).

2. "You must follow exactly the path that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess" (Deut. 5:33).

3. "Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law" (Deut. 31:12).

The Old Testament plants seeds of discipleship that Jesus certainly watered in the New Testament. God disciplining, humans learning, and humans following God's laws and ways is part of life in the community of God's people.

Jesus did not invent discipleship. Growth is God's idea; therefore, it is also God's work, begun from Adam and Eve, through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Jesus carries on the call to discipleship that others may grow and mature in their understanding and experience of God's justice and grace. God's work continues today.

A somewhat humorous experience of my own caused me to ask the question, "What makes me grow and mature?" I had been working on my doctoral proposal and thought I was following protocol. My mentor, Dr. Donald Joy, urged me several times to adhere to the dissertation format required by Asbury Theological Seminary. I thought I was already following it, but his persistent urges made me think that either I had not received the necessary information or that he had an outdated format. Finally, in frustration, I returned to a notebook on my shelf and discovered, in the very front, the exact format I was supposed to be following. Embarrassed that I had not looked there much sooner, I confessed my error and quickly adjusted my work. The experience wasted my time and Dr. Joy's. I reflected, "What took me so long to follow what I had already received?" I asked myself, "Why didn't I mature sooner and avoid the embarrassment?" I began to write more on the question, "What makes me grow?"

I imagined a seed with unrealized potential waiting inside. Looking for the right words to explain my thoughts, I opened a thesaurus to find an alternate word for *potential* in a seed. One word impressed me: *unproclaimed*. Like a clap of thunder, I heard the phrase in my mind: "And God said [proclaimed], 'Let there be light'" (Gen. 1:3). Life

came into being when God proclaimed it. Like a seed, “[i]n the beginning ... the earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness” (Gen. 1:1-2), until God proclaimed life to exist. Life and growth come from God.

Gardeners may consider seeds as dead but having potential, so if I use the synonym for *potential*, seeds become *unproclaimed life*, awaiting God’s life-giving words as in Genesis 1:1-3. Jesus continues the life-giving power of God in the New Testament when he proclaims “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). God spoke to me a fresh understanding of his powerful work that brings growth through his Word. Even death, which I had deemed so powerful, withered at God’s voice of life and growth. Even death, then, is nothing more than unproclaimed life. Persons who trust Jesus Christ follow him through death into life at the call of God. This powerful insight reinforced for me that God is the source for all life and growth. Any discovered moments of growth in the lives of the research participants, just as in the lives of Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah, reveal the work of God in their lives.

Instructed to Disciple

Jesus reminded his disciples that he received all authority; therefore, he instructed his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). The Gospel of Luke repeated Jesus’ words to the church (24:47; see also Acts 1:8; 2:38). The English translation of the Greek text fails to communicate the clear meaning of *make disciples*. The English phrase comes from one Greek word, the verb *matheteuo*. Translating *disciple* as a verb rather than a noun supplied with the verb *make*, releases Christians from connotations that humans force, manipulate, or even convince others to become disciples. Discipling is an

action that God does through members of the body of Christ as they live their lives under his authority and reign. Disciples follow the command of Jesus to go disciple all nations.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church takes up Jesus' command and clearly defines the mission of every United Methodist congregation (Olson par. 120). Christie R. House reports that the denomination's General Conference in 2008 revised the mission by adding a final phrase: "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." However, in the years that I have been a pastor, I have noticed confusion among laypersons and clergy about the mission of the church.

Church programs such as *Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study* (Wilke and Wilke), *Faith Quest* (Dick), and *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Scazzero and Bird) attempt to help laypersons understand what a disciple is and how the church can fulfill its mission. Still, just recently in a meeting of pastors during which they discussed the disciple-making processes of churches in the Wyoming Annual Conference, one asked the question, "What is a disciple and how do we make one?" The ecclesiastically established mission of the church calls the church to the same mission that Jesus declared in Matthew 28:19, yet leadership and laity fail to understand how to accomplish that task.

Carl C. Green writes about the discrepancy between a church's stated mission and a church's actual mission. Focusing on the issue of church size, he documents churches that set a mission to become a large church but fail to achieve large church status because of various substantive reasons within the congregation. Without awareness of those reasons and without a strategy to change them, a congregation fails to actualize its

mission to increase church size (“Church Size”). I believe the same principle can be applied to development of disciples. Churches state, “We are making disciples of Jesus Christ,” but without an awareness of strategies to grow disciples and the barriers that prevent their growth, the congregations fail. This study probed VCUMC to become aware of some of the barriers or difficulties to discipleship development, to discuss the phenomena, and then to choose strategic changes that are grounded in empirical data rather than personal opinion and whim (Stillman).

An Agent of Growth: The Body of Christ

While growth is God’s idea and work, the church participates with God to bring growth to God’s people. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). In this study, research questions two and three stand on the idea that God has created within the body of Christ a matrix of dynamic relationships that sufficiently nurture the growth God desires. Modeled by the interdependent relationships of the Trinity, the Church relates to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Members of the body of Christ, created in the image of God, reflect the interdependent nature of the Trinity. Paul teaches that just as a body is made up of many mutually dependent parts, so the body of Christ is made up of many people, not all doing the same function but all working together to make the body healthy and whole (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-31; Eph. 4:11-12). Dan R. Dick and Barbara Miller provide tools for churches to discover already present and God-given spiritual, personal, relational, and leadership qualities of each person in the church. The process combs through a congregation to make the people aware of whom and what gifts God has placed within the congregation. When church members become aware of their God-given

resources, they can match the gifts and abilities of church members with needs of people outside the church community who do not have a relationship with God.

To suggest that every church has God-given means to function healthily and wholly does not deny sin or dysfunction in the church. Rather, the church that becomes aware of its giftedness also can recognize that God has equipped it to look honestly within its heart and soul. A church can then face its own dysfunction and sin with hope that the church may be purified and made whole. Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to godly living as a community of believers and not to stray from the life they have in Christ. Paul exemplified trusting God's grace that is made perfect in Paul's human weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). The church will also find sufficiency in God's grace given through the gifts of the Spirit to the church. The Psalmist also knows that God is present and working even through experiences that humans think prevent God's power: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me" (Ps. 23:4). Dark, fearful moments in life challenge believers to grow. Thomas à Kempis also reveals how dark and fearful moments in life challenge believers to grow:

I am now taken with anguishes and troubles on every side. Save me in this hour. Yet I trust that I am come into this hour that Thou mightest be lauded and praised when I am made perfectly meek before Thee, and clearly delivered by Thee. (168)

Christians live on the foundation that God is present with and has placed within the community the resources for that community to be healthy and functional in order to fulfill God's purposes. Therefore, the body of Christ is the proper location for studying discipleship development. Marjorie J. Thompson writes of spiritual formation while I focus on the related terms of discipleship development, but we agree on the importance of the church in the processes: "Theologically speaking, the church is the primary place

for our spiritual formation” (137). Fowler speaks of the work between humans and God as a dance. He calls it the “cocreation between unequals” (*Becoming Adult* 112). The body of Christ participates with God for the growth of mature disciples.

Growth is God’s idea and work. God provides the source of all life and growth. Jesus equipped his followers, the Church, to fulfill their mission to the world in Jesus’ name. Jesus commanded his followers to go into the world and make disciples. As he called men and women to follow him, they matured as disciples so they could nurture others as disciples. God still works within the church to accomplish God’s will.

Pain, Suffering, and Growth

Authors and researchers have documented the importance of pain, suffering, difficulty, and loss of homeostatic living on human growth and spiritual formation. Donald M. Joy simply and clearly connects the idea to ancient Greek philosophers. Through a brief but sufficient review of historical writers, he concludes, “The path to Christian holiness lies necessarily across the valley of deep human suffering. It is not suffering itself that produces radical ethical sanctity, but the response to suffering” (“Pain” 26). Carol Blanken Saenger researched movement from distrust of God to trust in God. Her foundation also noted the importance of painful experiences: “One finds that the cycle of life, with all its vicissitudes, is a growth process and often a hair-raising adventure that requires risk taking in order to grow. That development only continues as the risks life offers are taken” (5). David Browning, founding pastor of Christ the King Community Church, reminds his members, “There is no growth without change, no change without loss, and no loss without pain” (12). From a different discipline, van Kaam says, “Often what makes us reflect is some crisis that interrupts the spontaneous

flow of life or a conflict that disrupts our daily routine” (*Fundamental Formation* 5). The language from one discipline to another may change, but the principle remains: Painful experiences destroy the balance a person finds in life, and the experience offers a rich opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. This project depends on God interacting with humanity within the context of pain, suffering, and crises.

Storytelling

The human capacity to tell a story signals the very image of God within humanity. Ancient Scriptures do not use just one specific word that easily translates into the English as *story*. Instead, writers of the ancient texts imply an understanding of *story* by using various words and phrases. First, a search for the word *story* in English translations of the Bible reveals only a handful of results. I limited my search to the New Testament, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the Ancient Greek New Testament (AGNT). The word *story* is used only four times in the NRSV.

First, Matthew 8:33 tells the story of Jesus casting demons from two men in the country of the Gadarenes. The demons requested Jesus to send them into a herd of swine. As Jesus allowed it, the demon-possessed swine rushed into the sea and died. The witnesses ran back to town, telling “the whole story about what happened to the demoniacs.” The Greek word translated *story* is *apagge/lw*, a verb referring the action of bringing a report back or announcing, proclaiming, declaring, confessing, or commanding something to be done (“*apagge/lw*”). Instead of using *story* as a noun, the ancient text assumes the concept of telling a message without specifically naming the concept.

Second, two of the New Testament uses of *story* (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37) refer to “the Book of Moses” and “the story about the bush” respectively. To translate these passages, translators supplied the word *story* because the concept of story was implied without using an actual word to mean *story*. These passages suggest that the ancient writers conceptualized *story* without having a noun to express the concept.

Finally, appearing in the last verses of Matthew, *story* is a translation from the Greek *logoj*, which means, literally, *word*. This passage tells about the plot of the Jewish leaders to deny the resurrection of Jesus and instead explain that Jesus’ disciples had stolen the body while the guards slept. The Jewish leaders bribed the guards to keep quiet about the truth that Jesus had raised from the dead. The guards took the bribe, “And this story is still told among the Jews to this day” (Matt. 28:15). The word *logoj* is commonly used in the AGNT and, according to Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is related to the Greek *le/gw*: literally “to arrange in order” (“*legw*”). The word *legw* is translated, *I speak*. The third person, aorist, active, indicative form of *legw* is *eipon* and means, *said* as in, “And God *said* [emphasis mine], ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3). I connect the concepts of speaking stories with making meaning of life that is often chaotic. When humans speak and make sense of life experiences, the image of God shines through the limitations of humanity.

I remember my childhood excitement at Christmas when I opened boxes of small plastic blocks that I could fit together to create limitless numbers of buildings and creatures for hours of fun and creativity. The name of the Danish toy maker, *Lego*, alludes to both human creativity and the reality of human messes. Although the company’s name sounds like the Greek word *legw*, the company’s history shows that

they named the company without realizing its Greek roots (Christiansen). Surely millions of children have poured out similar boxes of blocks and found great pleasure making order out of the chaos. Many parents have undoubtedly found pleasure hearing the child tell a story about the creation he or she made. Similarly, to tell a story is to use God-given creativity to organize the mess of life experiences so that they can be meaningfully expressed to others. The act of telling a story reflects the divine activity: “In the beginning ... the earth was a formless void ... while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God *said* [emphasis mine], ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:2-3). To speak or to tell a story is to put experiences in order so that they may be expressed with meaning, and telling a story reflects the very image of God in humanity. Telling stories helps give order to personal experiences. God’s word gave order to the creation. God’s word and individuals’ words can create order and meaning from their lives.

Anamnesis—Remembrance

Jesus commanded his disciples in the upper room to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Disciples are not to forget their Lord, whom they follow, and what he did. Paul repeats Christ’s command to the second-generation followers in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25. The writer of Hebrews (10:3) also says that the repetition of the sacrificial system *reminded* the people of their sinfulness and of God’s mercy. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers that if while they were offering a sacrifice and remembered, “that your brother has something against you” (Matt. 5:23), then they were to go, offer forgiveness to the brother, and then offer their sacrifice to God. Along with

pain and suffering, remembrance functions as a catalyst toward holiness within the body of believers.

Remembrance functioned within Peter's life as a catalyst for change after he denied Jesus the third time and heard the cock crow that long night when Jesus was betrayed (Matt. 26:75). The memory of Peter's upper room confession, "I will never desert you," followed by the memory of Jesus' prediction of Peter's threefold denial (Matt. 26:33-34), heaped an overwhelming reality upon Peter, "[a]nd he went out and wept bitterly" (Matt. 26:75). Finally, John's memory of the scene brings resolution on another morning when Jesus, in his resurrected body, prepares a fresh catch of fish for the disciples' breakfast. Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" I reasonably imagine that Peter remembered all these things as he repeated, "You know I love you!" three times (John 20). Peter's memory helps form his life of following Jesus Christ.

Earlier during his ministry, Jesus accused the disciples of failing to remember their lessons and experiences with Jesus. Immediately following the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10), Jesus and the disciples entered another town. After an argument with the Pharisees, the disciples and Jesus left that town by boat and set out for yet another village. Realizing they had forgotten to bring any bread, they worried about what they would eat. In apparent frustration, Jesus harshly questioned them, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" (Mark 8:17-18). God wants his followers to remember.

God also remembers. Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-56) proclaims that God not only remembers Mary (1:48) but also remembers God's own promise to treat humanity

with mercy (1:55). A few verses later, Elizabeth rejoices that God has shown “the mercy promised to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant” (Luke 1:72). The writer of Hebrews rejoices in God’s memory when God declares, “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12). The language pierces me. God does not simply forget sins. God deliberately chooses to remember them no more.

Scripture also shows that even people who do not believe in Jesus have memory capable of associating them to God: Jesus told the story of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus. During his life on earth, Lazarus sat at the rich man’s door begging for scraps of food. Later, after both the rich man and Lazarus had died, the rich man’s soul went to the place of the dead where he was tormented, but Lazarus’ soul was carried to Father Abraham. From his place of torment, the rich man could see Lazarus in the eternal care of God. The rich man becomes the beggar and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his agony, but Abraham said to the rich man, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony” (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man’s memory caused him to call out to Lazarus for mercy, and part of his eternal separation from God is the eternal memory that during his lifetime, he had already received his good things.

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the disciples’ memories of Jesus burst with new meaning after his death. Their memory opened new doors of understanding God’s love, mercy, forgiveness, and power in their lives, and they experienced spurts of growth in their own lives and in the young church. On the day of Jesus’ resurrection, two women approached his tomb intending to anoint his rotting body.

However, they met an open grave and two men in dazzling clothes. One man asked why they were looking for Jesus among the dead: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Luke continues, “Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:1-9). Three times, John speaks of the disciples “remembering” Jesus’ words and sayings as an aftereffect that strengthens and guides their faith (John 2:17, 22; 12:16).

The most powerful ancient Greek word for remembrance is also an English word: anamnesis. Although anamnesis is not most frequently translated *remember* in the New Testament, scholars have noted that the word suggests more than simple recollection. The text at the center of the discussion is 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: Paul’s reference to the Last Supper of Jesus when he commanded his followers to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Even though this paper does not have room for a full exploration of the discussion among scholars, I conclude that growth of faith in God depends on a person’s ability to remember.

To faith, remembrance is much more than casual recollection. Remembrance contributes to personal identity and the meaning individuals make of faith and life. These theological and biblical foundations support this project.

Overview

Chapter 2, which reviews the literature, is divided into two phases, each completed at separate times in the project. Phase one reviews pertinent literature for using grounded theory method and was completed *before* I interviewed the participants. Phase two of the literature review *followed* the completion of the interviews. Placing a second

literature review after participant interviews allows the participants to determine the topics I should explore in the second literature review (Glaser and Holton par. 46). In a personal e-mail message to me, Green recommends a dual literature review for the same reasons (“GT in the Church”).

Chapter 3 explains in detail the research method. Chapter 4 presents the data and the findings about discipleship development that emerged. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and implications for ministry.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

I began Chapter 1 telling the story of Todd and Janine who experienced a disappointing event early in their years as members of VCUMC. The couple walked away from the church for a few months and then returned. Nearly thirty years later, they are still active in the church, living and loving the people as they seek to fulfill God's purposes in their lives and church. I puzzled over several issues rising from my observation that although Todd and Janine had reason to leave, they stayed. I wondered what happened in the ensuing years that influenced them to grow, apparently, as disciples. I held open the possibility that they, and other participants, have not grown. These questions initiated this project.

Purpose

The purpose of this research project was to identify how VCUMC has encouraged and/or discouraged discipleship development. The strategy used grounded theory methods to explore the experiences of persons who considered leaving but decided to stay with VCUMC. By comparing the participants' experiences, I intended to develop and present a set of principles to the church's leaders to help guide them in planning ministries for greater discipleship growth among its members and participants.

Glaser instructs grounded theory researchers clearly that they have no need "to review any of the literature in the substantive area" (*Basics* 31) *until* "the theory seems sufficiently grounded in a core variable and in an emerging integration of categories and properties" (32). Following this grounded theory guideline, I completed the literature review in two phases. Phase one, completed prior to data collection and analysis,

reviewed literature relative to grounded theory methodology. The pre-research review ensured appropriate methods to find principles and characteristics that might explain discipleship development in persons who considered leaving VCUMC and then decided to stay. Phase one of the literature review intends to establish an authoritative basis for the methods used in the research project. Phase two of the literature review accomplished two purposes. First, after I identified the emerging topics and potential principles, I reviewed literature relative to those topics. Timing the literature review this way allowed me to add data from the literature and further develop the topic and the ensuing principles. Secondly, phase two literature review allowed me to compare my results with the findings of others.

Because the grounded theory method approaches data with an attitude of discovery, an extensive literature review of other authors prior to data collection would give me opinions and expectations about the data I would collect and analyze. “To undertake an extensive review of literature before the emergence of a core category violates the basic premise of GT [grounded theory]—that being, the theory emerges from the data not from extant theory” (Glaser and Holton par. 46). Additionally, my educational background and prior doctoral work, has already exposed me to theories of discipleship development. These factors influenced my decision to complete the review in two phases.

While reading a grounded theory report about outcomes of faith-based social service organizations (Ferguson et al.), I realized several issues that I hoped to address in my project. People in the United Methodist Church hear pastors and denominational leaders repeat the mission statement: “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the

transformation of the world” (House). I have wondered if the repetition causes laypersons to question what they have *been* doing if not *making disciples* all these years.

Additionally, laypersons, as the body of Christ and therefore participants in the process of nurturing disciples, appear at times not to know how to nurture disciples nor what is involved in disciple-nurturing work. Instead, laypersons rely too heavily on experts.

American culture expertly grooms people to think that only specially trained persons may perform certain tasks, and laypersons should stay away from those activities. Indeed some situations require a specialist’s work, but the work of growing disciples belongs to the whole body of Christ in which every believer plays an indispensable role. The task requires all the parts, lay and clergy, to function responsibly and well. Schools that prepare church workers, whether a college, Bible college, or seminary, emphasize large church leadership and programming strategies at the expense of preparing practitioners to lead small churches. In the Wyoming Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, of which my congregation is a part, 85 percent of the three hundred churches in the conference have a worship attendance under one hundred (Brauer, *Journal* 2007).

Megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Church get attention because of their programs to nurture the development of disciples, but less attention is given to understanding how small church relationships actually nurture discipleship in the people meeting there. This study intended to address these issues by looking at some of the processes of forming disciples in a small church.

Grounded theory method provided a disciplined and systematic strategy (Linden 492) for gathering, organizing, and interpreting research findings without naming a prior hypothetical outcome as in other qualitative or quantitative research methods. Susan

Stillman concisely defines grounded theory process as “a system for discovering a theory that explains the core variable, or primary process, that participants in a substantive area go through as they resolve their main concern” (499). The main concern of the church, according to Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19, is to “make disciples of all the nations.” My denomination’s mission statement, and therefore the mission of every church in the denomination, follows Jesus’ command closely. As I proposed this research, I stated that it addressed the main concern of the church; however, I did not state the main concern of the research participants. Instead, I allowed them to state their experiences surrounding situations that caused them to consider leaving the church and to decide to stay and the effect those experiences had on their discipleship development. Once clear findings emerged, I applied them to the main concern of the church. I risked discovering that the church failed to nurture people to become disciples of *Jesus Christ*. Grounded theory method, used well, promised simply to reveal what church members “go through as they resolve their main concern” (499) in their church experiences. Glaser reminds readers that grounded theory methodology discovers the problem as well as the solution as people seek to resolve their main concern (*Basics* 21). I chose to narrow my focus by looking at experiences of people who considered leaving the church. I narrowed the probe further by looking more specifically at the experience of those who decided to stay in the church. As I analyzed participant experiences, I looked for the main concern of each person, compared it with others, and noted whether or not and how their experiences related to discipleship development, the church’s main concern.

Theoretical Framework Phase One: Grounded Theory Methodology

This section relates primarily to research question three, reviews salient literature on historical and philosophical foundations and central components of grounded theory methodology, and ends by discussing the value of grounded theory research in the church. I show how grounded theory methods can generate a set of principles explaining the experiences of people in my study.

My research project did not intend to generate a brand new or comprehensive theory about discipleship development, nor did it seek to generate a theory that would replace any other theory about development of people as disciples of Jesus Christ. This study used the methods of grounded theory, and, in doing so, it looked for a set of principles, guidelines, processes, and/or characteristics to shed light on the church's much larger work and understanding of making disciples. Further, I offered those principles to the leaders of the church as instruments for improving the church's work in forming disciples. In writing about grounded theory, however, I believed I needed to use and convey the language used by the developers of the method. Glaser and Strauss speak of the goal of their research method as generating theory (6). In my study, I hoped, at best, to generate several conclusions that may provide principles relating to the much larger idea of discipleship development, and I hoped to present the findings in a way that neither neglects nor overestimates their importance.

Historical Foundations

Glaser and Strauss wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* after recognizing a need in the field of sociology to find ways to generate theories. Glaser and Strauss observed that the majority of sociological research intended to prove already existing

theories (2). They also recognized that some extant sociological theories failed to explain sufficiently the phenomena studied. Glaser and Strauss believed sociology needed new theories. Glaser and Strauss developed the methods of grounded theory purposefully to generate theory rather than to prove it.

To make the shift away from proving extant theory, Glaser and Strauss deliberately shed reliance on previously held canons of research methodology. For example, the expectation that one study could be replicated by other researchers does not apply to grounded theory. Instead of replicating a research study, grounded theory seeks to validate its results because the resulting theory fits both the data and the situation from which the data came. In classic grounded theory, the theory produced also finds relevance in the context from which it came (Glaser, *Basics* 18). Rather than being cyclical and inbred, these evaluative criteria of fit and relevance provide verification that the theory indeed emerged from the data. A well-grounded theory will be applicable, rather than replicable, in other contexts because the theory first found strong fit, relevance, and workability in the data from which it emerged.

Since Glaser and Strauss' original work, Glaser has defended the method against alterations. After years of working together, Glaser and Strauss began to drift apart in their methodologies. In the 1992 publication of *Basics of Grounded Theory*, Glaser clarifies how Strauss had deviated from the original purpose and methods of grounded theory. Glaser along with Judith Holton defend classic grounded theory methods against combining it with other qualitative data analysis methods. They say combining other qualitative methods with grounded theory degrades grounded theory into all the problems of qualitative data analysis from which grounded theory hoped to rise (par. 5). The

purpose of classic grounded theory remains the same now as it did in 1967: to generate theory.

As I wrestled with the term *theory* used by Glaser, I came to understand that his definition of theory refers to a conceptual framework about a specific life situation. Glaser first looks for theory in a substantive area. By substantive, Glaser and Strauss mean a particular area of life experience, such as patient care or race relations (32). For example, I find myself developing small, simple theories about many life experiences in my home. One of those theories relates to my family's dog, a ten-pound Shih Tzu named Buddy. My wife and I have argued, now and then, about how much to feed Buddy. When I pet Buddy and cannot feel his ribs, I will say, "We are feeding him too much. Only give him a scant half-cup of food." Carolyn usually replies, "I do not feed him too much. You have to stop feeding him under the table!" I theorize that Carolyn feeds Buddy too much food. She reminds me that my data source is too small, so she provides more information and challenges my perspective. My original theory quickly modifies, and I adjust my actions according to the modified theory that feeding Buddy table food contributes to excessive weight gain. The theory is not grand or significant; however, the small amount of substantive data leads to a concept, or a substantive theory, about Buddy's weight gain. The grounded theory also led to new actions also grounded in the data: ground action. Grounded theory works similarly.

Theories developed from grounded theory methods are not necessarily grand, conclusive, and comprehensive theories applicable to every situation in human experience. Theories generated from grounded theory methods are unique to the context from which they came. "The goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts

for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic *for those involved* [emphasis mine]” (Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity* 93). This distinction keeps the researcher’s findings in perspective and avoids overstating the impact of the results. In my study, I preferred to speak of the goal of my research as a “set of principles” in an attempt to avoid issues surrounding the term *theory*.

Philosophical Foundations

Philosophically, the term *discovery* of a grounded theory reveals Glaser’s assumption that within the data studied a theory already exists that needs only to be uncovered. Just as modernity has given rise to postmodernity, researchers and philosophers challenge the assumption of preexisting theory awaiting discovery. Joseph G. Ponterotto sorts through the varying philosophies. On one end of the spectrum, positivists (or modernists) argue that researchers can apprehend, measure, and study reality (130). The positivist objectively views the research subject without interfering and expects that findings can be duplicated by future research (131). The researcher’s values play no part in the research process except as they relate to the selection of a research topic. Positivists use objective, detached, and emotionally neutral language to write about their research (132). The methodology of positivists carefully controls variables throughout the research as they discover the meaning of the data (Greckhamer and Koro-Ljungberg 736).

Ponterotto identifies a second philosophical paradigm: post-positivists. Similar to the positivist, post-positivists assume one, measurable reality but researchers cannot comprehend, grasp, or measure it with the precision or to the degree the positivist hopes or intends (130). Semi-structured interviews, for example, may help the post-positivist

gather appropriate data. The post-positivist acknowledges that the researcher may influence the research subject.

The constructivist-interpretivist (C-I), the third philosophical category identified by Ponterotto, embraces many differences that the positivist denies. The C-I asserts that multiple, subjective realities exist in different contexts. Lived experience provides the basis for one's reality. In research, the values of the researcher cannot be separated from the research project, and the researcher acknowledges his or her values to "bracket" them but not eliminate them from the study (131). When writing their research reports, C-I researchers include details about the researcher's own experience, expectations, values, and biases (132). Constructivist-Interpretivist researchers willingly embed themselves into the daily life of the research participants (132). Maria Piantanida, Cynthia A. Tananis, and Robin E. Grubs claim that meaning is made by the researcher; therefore, they reveal their C-I bias (341). Kathy Charmaz also advocates C-I research methods in grounded theory, saying that researcher and research participant construct the emergent theory together (510).

Ponterotto identifies a final philosophical paradigm of qualitative research: Critical-Ideological (Cr-Id). Most radical from the Positivist, the Cr-Id researcher holds that culture shapes reality; therefore, like the C-I, multiple complex realities exist. One step beyond the C-I researcher's embedded presence in the research, the Cr-Id researcher expects to engage in the dialogue and participate in the creation of the meaning of the research findings (131).

I included this philosophical review because it quickly showed up in grounded theory literature. I have struggled, with difficulty, to identify my own philosophy of

grounded theory. Glaser responds sharply to Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory method and claims that her alterations weaken her resulting theory. In "Constructivist Grounded Theory?" Glaser explains again that "all is data" (par. 1) and that the constant comparative method reveals the theory rather than relying on the researcher and participant to construct meaning from the data.

In "Naturalist Inquiry and Grounded Theory," Glaser urges grounded theory researchers to avoid getting trapped in philosophical arguments. Philosophical discussions become irrelevant because grounded theory compares all data rather than one particular interpretation based on a philosophical paradigm. The data-inclusive nature of grounded theory allows the result to transcend particular paradigmatic perspectives. Glaser's correction to Charmaz guided me to limit my research methods to Glaser and Strauss's original description.

Central Components of Grounded Theory Research

The central components of grounded theory methods can fall under two subheadings: (1) theoretical sampling that intertwines data collection and data analysis, and (2) constant comparative analysis for generating theory.

Theoretical sampling that intertwines data collection and data analysis.

Glaser and Holton define theoretical sampling as selection of data based on its potential to contribute to the emergent theory (par. 51). Grounded theory uses any data because the method seeks to gather thoroughly all data relevant to the theory that emerges (Glaser and Holton par. 45; Glaser and Strauss 162). Therefore, grounded theory research needs a method to discern which data relates to the theory. Theoretical sampling functions as "a

conscientious and exhaustive quest for ‘texts’ rich with potential meanings about the phenomenon under study” (Piantanida, Tananis, and Grubs 336).

Early development of this research project illustrates the intertwining of data collection and data analysis guided by theoretical sampling. Long before I clearly defined the research questions, I invited anyone in my church to attend a meeting to talk about the experiences of families in the community. During the meeting, I listened to ten people tell stories revealing family needs. There, I heard the seminal story about Todd and Janine. Janine provided enough data for me to think. My analysis of her story led to me to ask, “Why did they stay in the church?” That simple question drew me to search for new sources of data that would help answer the question. The analysis of Janine’s story energized me to use a method to find others who might provide additional data stories for further analysis. The process I just described simply illustrates how data collection and analysis intertwine and find guidance from theoretical sampling.

Guided by theoretical sampling, gathering and analyzing data occur in alternating patterns throughout the research project (Bruce 9). Duffy, Ferguson, and Watson, for example, list numerous sources for data including interviews of varying structure and formality (68). They alternated collecting data from these sources with analyzing data before gathering more. In another example, Catherine D. Bruce developed an hourglass approach for her study of sixty participants (7). Three levels of gathering data alternated with three levels of analysis. She collected initial data from fifty participants and analyzed it. Out of the original fifty, she used theoretical sampling to choose two participants for in-depth interviews and analyzed the new data, comparing it with the previous data. Finally, she tested her findings with ten additional participants. In my

project, analysis began even as I was collecting data. While conducting the bulk of the interviews, field notes not only added data but they provided an opportunity for immediate analysis (Glaser and Strauss 108). These examples show the alternating pattern of data gathering and analysis in grounded theory methods.

Constant comparative analysis for generating theory. Gathered data moves into the machinery of constant comparative method. The process requires the researcher to work constantly, comparing pieces of data to one another. Through the comparisons, the researcher observes relationships, such as similarities, differences, and causes among the comparisons. The method systematically compares, labels (or *codes*), and organizes data into categories in order to identify a theory or hypothesis about the subject. Four core activities function in the constant comparative method: gathering data, coding data into concepts, making memos (memoing), and integrating the results into a theory.

The researcher begins collecting data as previously described. Having analyzed the data to identify and code concepts, the concepts are then compared with other concepts (Glaser and Strauss 106). Each comparison provides a new interaction among data from which ideas about the findings emerge. Eventually, grounded researchers observe and reflect on the concepts, looking for thematic trails called core variables or categories, which give structure to the emerging findings.

After initial analysis, the raw data becomes secondary to the coded concept. In my research, each interview introduced a new story to analyze and integrate into the theory. “Participant stories are moot” (Glaser and Holton par. 26). Piantanida, Tananis, and Grubs add, “[I]t is the codes we needed to explore and compare, not the people or textual artifacts from which the codes were derived” (338). The set of concepts and principles

that emerged came not from the story directly nor from the person providing it but from the concepts that emerged from the story.

Coding answers basic questions about the data and converts raw data into concepts. Glaser and Holton reveal the essence of the coding process by asking, “‘*What is this data a study of?*’ ‘*What category does this incident indicate?*’ ‘*What is actually happening in the data?*’ [original emphasis]” (par. 48). Three types of coding function throughout the alternating processes of gathering and analyzing data. *Open coding* draws initial concepts from the raw data. *Axial coding* uses the emerging themes as guides, similar to theoretical sampling, to look for new emerging themes in other data sources. *Selective coding* relates all concepts, categories, and their properties around a central “core” category and looks for gaps, or missing information, in the emergent theory (Glaser, *Basics* 75).

Writing memos assists the transition from gathering and coding data toward recognizing the emerging theory. “Pieces of emerging theory are recorded in memos, which then also become the object of constant comparison against new data” (Walker and Koroloff 445). Memoing reveals the internal processing as the researcher reflects on the data and codes that have been identified and makes meaning of the findings (Piantanida, Tananis, and Grubs 340). Writing memos begins in the field and provides an identifiable link from raw data to conceptualized data to an emergent theory. Memos also bring immediate illustrations that carry through to writing the final draft of the research report (Glaser and Strauss 108; Glaser and Holton par. 63). Written memos help the researcher synthesize data.

The timing and pace of grounded theory research requires diligence and patience. Sometimes concepts emerge quickly, but sometimes they slowly rise to awareness. “Surviving the apparent confusion is important. This requires that the analyst takes whatever amount of quality time that is required to do the discovery process ... in a manner consistent with his/her own temporal nature as an analyst—personal pacing” (Glaser and Holton par. 60). The processing that allows data to percolate in grounded theory requires patience and healthy pacing. Integrated theory will rise if the researcher waits for it. The grounded theorist must patiently trust the process.

Integration of a theory grounded in concepts derived from empirical data needs time to develop. “Integration is simply the emergent connections between categories and properties based on theoretical codes, and it just happens” (Glaser, *Basics* 76). As data runs through the constant comparative method, each new concept compares with other concepts, incidents, categories, and properties of categories. The goal of grounded theory is not thorough description of a phenomenon. The goal is discovery of a theory about the phenomenon being studied. Integration looks for the relational unity among the data. Similarities, differences, and other relationships among data must be considered and incorporated into the theory.

To summarize the comparative analysis process, the researcher constantly compares data, looking for relationships, similarities, and disparities among the data. Each comparison generates concepts, which are labeled with codes. Memos may include codes, comments, and insights about the relationships observed. Memos may also identify questions that guide future data selection in order to saturate the emerging theory with sufficient data to generate a fully developed theory.

Evaluating Grounded Theory

Quantitative and qualitative research begins with clearly defined hypotheses that the researcher seeks to prove. Because grounded theory creates hypotheses about very limited and specific situations in life, it requires different evaluative methods. Evaluation looks at the process of comparison, integration, solidification of the theory (or delimitation), and writing the theory (Glaser and Strauss 105). Simply, four criteria constantly work to evaluate the methods in grounded theory: fit, workability, relevance, and modifiability (Glaser, *Basics* 15). Codes identified from data must fit the data. They must also work in the theory and be relevant to the context from which they came. Finally, a theory will be modifiable as new data adds new concepts. An inflexible theory suggests the researcher forced the data toward preconceived ideas.

Adherence to the constant comparative method produces good results. Integration that incorporates all the data into a cohesive whole shows good method. As the theory emerges, it will be delimited as it solidifies, and the original number of categories reduces to an essential ecology of categories to explain the phenomenon being studied (Glaser and Strauss 111). Finally, good grounded theory results will be understandable and tend “to engender a readiness to use it” (240) in the field from which it came. Grounded theory that passes the test will provide people, in the church for example, with an understanding of the system in which they live and an image of how they can make things better (Linden 493).

Grounded Theory Research in the Church

A search for doctoral dissertations specifically using grounded theory methodology in the church revealed a handful of resources. One search I completed

looked at dissertation titles for the words *grounded theory* and abstract text for *church*. I did not have access to the full dissertations, but their abstracts summarized their findings. One study investigated the function of finance committees of Southern Baptist churches in Hawaii (Oliveira). Another dissertation by Green inquired into the relationship between pastoral leadership, congregational size, life cycle stage, and church culture (*Pastoral Leadership*). Two other studies used grounded theory to explore sexual education beliefs in the Catholic church (Selle) and church growth paradigms in the Brazilian Presbyterian church (Costa). Another study by Terence David Linhart explored teenagers' experiences on short-term mission trips as a means for spiritual growth (*Curricular Nature*). Grounded theory methods, if expanded in the church, would undoubtedly build up the church. For example, the results of grounded theory methods may provide groups with enough data to make changes, based on the data rather than speculation, in the group's organizational system (Stillman). I also hope, for example, that by asking members of my church to tell their stories, others will be inspired to learn how their experiences have shaped their understanding of discipleship.

Grounded theory methods, while not for every person, match my way of thinking and making meaning of life and the world. The researcher who uses grounded theory needs to be able to tolerate ambiguity through a maze of data. In addition, the grounded theory researcher must be able to generate and recognize theoretical insight (Glaser and Holton par. 43). Without being overconfident in my abilities, and through encouragement from many, I recognize grounded theory fits my abilities, curiosity, and interests and provides a way for me to fulfill God's call on my life.

Grounded theory method also fits the complex systems of the church. Kara Vander Linden shows the benefit of grounded theory in systems. She agrees with Glaser and Strauss that the nature of grounded theory research allows people within a system to understand the system better and to edify it (Linden 493; Glaser and Strauss 240). My experience as a pastor underscores that the inductive methods of grounded theory parallel skills I already use as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. My skills in studying Scripture, for example, inductively draw from the text. My skills as a pastoral counselor inductively draw from the life experiences of people in order to understand their questions and struggles, looking for answers from within their lives and Scripture. My skills as a theologian press me to look for insights about God, humanity, and the relationship between the two. My skills as a preacher call me to gather data from the Bible, tradition, life experience, and the theology of others so that I may clearly communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. These skills parallel the grounded theory processes of gathering, coding, memoing, and integrating the data into a coherent theory. Because I have already been practicing these skills, grounded theory is a natural fit for researching the complexity of the church.

One great challenge in grounded theory is to provide a disciplined, detailed plan for serendipitous emergence of theory. Planning for emergence may seem oxymoronic. This perceived conflict need not deter researchers from applying the method to church experiences. Rather, it provides an opportunity to trust the presence of God through the Holy Spirit to work in the process. Grounded theory allows the researcher to bring his or her spiritual life and disciplines into the process because, as Glaser repeats, “all is data” (*Grounded Theory Perspective* 145) in grounded theory. I expect the Holy Spirit to

inspire my preaching every Sunday morning, but expecting inspiration during Sunday morning preaching does not keep me from planning and studying on Tuesday, or any other day, before I preach. Instead, I invite the Holy Spirit's inspiration in my planning and in my preaching. Grounded theory research in the church opens a place for inspiration of the Holy Spirit in planning for and inspiring insight and emergence of the theory. Indeed, I hope the Holy Spirit has been with me throughout this entire process.

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin recognize the popularity of grounded theory in many fields of practice: "education, nursing, business, and social work, as well as by psychologists, architects, communications specialists, and social anthropologists" (9). Now the church can benefit from grounded theory in greater ways. People who patiently listened to me tell about my research, and those who surprised me by asking about it frequently responded with interest and curiosity about the outcomes. Laypersons and clergy quickly perceived the importance of a local congregation understanding something new about how their church works rather than reading a book about how someone outside that church thought their church should work. In the process of doing grounded theory, the people learned about themselves and how they accomplished the task Christ appointed to them. Grounded theory methods helped them discover more about how they functioned as the body of Christ in ways other qualitative methods could not teach them.

New theories about the church help the church adjust to changing culture in order to accomplish the task of growing disciples. Glaser and Strauss explain that theory has several uses. Theory helps explain and predict behavior. Theory advances present theories. Theories provide perspective to practitioners in a particular field and help guide practitioners' work (3). The theory that grew out of data from my congregation can guide

this and other congregations in their work. Most importantly, grounded theory equips a system, such as a church, to identify areas that need change and what kind of change is needed. Grounded theory provides a researched basis for grounded action to bring change (Stillman 501). Many churches need grounded theory to guide grounded action so they may adjust to the changing community around them and complete the church's mission mandated by Jesus Christ.

Summary: Phase One Literature Review

Phase one of the literature review substantiates grounded theory method as it developed in fields of social sciences and spread to other areas of research. Glaser and Strauss laid the foundation on which other researchers built and adapted grounded theory method. The literature reviews philosophical issues. The constant comparative method works to generate theory. This literature review helps solidify my own method and link it to other researchers' work. I also provide a summary of grounded theory method to encourage others to learn and apply the method to their contexts and allow theories about life in the church to emerge. Phase two of the literature review follows the gathering, comparing, analyzing, memoing, and integration of the data into the theory produced by the study. Splitting the literature review allowed me to narrow the topics that I needed to review in the literature. The post-research review identifies salient discussion by other authors about matters discovered in the research.

Theoretical Framework Phase Two: Work of Others

This portion of the literature review examines and evaluates the work of others that bears upon the emergent findings. As I began to interview the participants, transcribe the interviews, and analyze the information, certain themes began to surface. This portion

of the review looks at those themes from the perspective of other authors and researchers. Reviewing those themes provided additional perspective and comparison to the findings from the interviews.

As I began to hear the stories of participants, I first began to identify more clearly my own preconceived ideas about discipleship development. I begin this portion of the literature review by naming them. Then I continue to identify the topics indicated from my analysis of the interviews and what I learned about those topics from other authors.

First, I have realized my presumption that my own faith intertwines many life experiences including writing this report, interviewing the participants, and earlier life events. This project reminded me of some of those events. In my denomination, the bishop holds ultimate authority to determine who serves where and for how long. In 2006, I did not ask to leave the church I was serving, but I was appointed to serve a congregation about ninety miles away. My family moved to the new community willingly, but I resisted in more ways than I admitted. I grieved the loss of my previous appointment even though I could see many positive gains for my family and myself in the new community. The grief hindered my ability to bond with people in the new church, yet I could not deny my admiration of their strong faith. Their faith attracted and yet confronted me with my own unwillingness to see God's work among them. I had to surrender myself to this new ministry before I could see the possibilities in front of me. As I approached the time to select a doctoral research topic, I wrestled with my feelings related to my vocation. I wondered where God was leading my career.

My career in ministry began twenty years ago as a layperson working in a large United Methodist church in South Georgia. Even though I grew up in upstate New York,

not far from where I live now, immediately following college graduation I worked for four years in Valdosta, Georgia. My positive experience there set up strong expectations about ministry and my role in it. I left that church in order to continue my education and become a secondary school counselor. My wife and I also desired to live closer to extended family members who live in New York and Delaware. After three graduate schools rejected my applications, and no church hired me, I began listening to God in a new way. I considered that God might be leading me toward pastoral ministry. I began the process for ordination in a United Methodist conference in New York State. After seminary and ordination, the bishop appointed me to churches drastically different from the large church in Georgia, and my large-church expectations conflicted with small-church experiences.

Beginning this project, I reflected on my twelve years of pastoral ministry in contrast with my earlier large-church lay ministry. I accept that God has placed me here with a purpose, and I have the choice to participate in what God is doing here or to resist continually. I believe that even if I resist being here, God can still use me, but I would much rather cooperate with God and grab hold of the opportunities rather than grudgingly obey, like Jonah, constantly complaining that I would rather be some other place—in a large church. My new awareness turned me to the small church opportunity with a positive attitude to work with God.

With a hopeful attitude, I realized again that this church has some uniquely strong persons of faith, and they have a heritage of good ministry. I have already mentioned a number of persons who grew up in this congregation who are now pastors. In addition, I have already described some of the positive aspects of this church's ministry. Although

this church shows signs of dysfunction, the church also shows evidence of valuable Christian ministry in the community. I believe the greatest source for that ministry is the passionate and deep faith of many people here. The greatest challenge is the church's resistance to change, but many similar mainline churches across America face the same inner battle. I presume that God has not turned away from these churches. I presume that God views the people here as a valuable source for renewal and ministry in their own culture. I believe that as mainline denominations dwindle numerically, a remnant remains from which God will grow a shoot of renewal (Isa. 11) that will be a blessing to many and to God's glory. My study, then, explored the characteristics of the remnant in the VCUMC that awaits the coming growth.

Relationships

Discipleship development deals with relationships because God created humans to relate to others, to God, and to their surroundings. I became more aware of my relational bias as I recently read the novel *The Shack*. Mack, the main character, experienced a horrendous trauma. In the years following, he experienced a vision in which he encountered the Trinity as unique characters. In one conversation between Jesus and Mack, Jesus talked about the church as his bride in a way that surprised and pleased Mack. Curious about this kind of relationship with God, Mack said, "So how do I become part of *that* church?" "It's simple, Mack," Jesus replied. "It's all about relationships and simply sharing life.... My church is all about people and life is all about relationships" (Young 179). I resonated with Mack as he said, "Yes, that's right. That's it." Just as the fictitious Mack desired to have a relationship of mutual love and commitment, I believe people are searching for the same thing. My presumption set a foundation for my project.

I studied the relationships among the participants. I explored their relationships with other persons, their relationships with God, and their relationship to their circumstances.

Fowler begins his *Stages of Faith* acknowledging, “Faith is a relational enterprise, triadic or covenantal in shape” (18). William P. Young’s *The Shack* and Fowler helped bring out my strong personal interest in the relational dimension of discipleship development in my congregation. My personal way of dealing with life seems to assume everything is about relationships, so I name my bias.

Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, published the results of their own research, which surprised them. In *Reveal*, the authors named their presumed hypotheses. First, they assumed, “There is a migration path for spiritual growth based on church activities.... [T]he more involved people are in the church, the closer they grow to Christ” (Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson 31). The authors did not explain where or how they came to this presumption, but I reacted against the second part of their hypothesis. I share the first part: Spiritual growth happens along a continuum or a path. Whether using the metaphor of a journey or a vine, Christians can easily speak of spiritual growth as a process of developing ideas, experiences, commitments, and behaviors. However, the second part of their hypothesis puzzled me. I do not agree that church activity necessarily causes spiritual growth. Later on the same page, the writers also presume, “Spiritual relationships are the key drive of spiritual growth” (31). I share this presupposition with Greg Hawkins, Sally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson. In my view, church activities can provide opportunities for new church participants to build relationships with church members through which spiritual growth can happen. However, involvement does not necessarily cause the growth. Through new and growing relationships between humans,

persons may express their faith in God so that others who do not believe may respond like Mack: “How can I become part of that?” Later, the Willow Creek researchers admitted their misguided presupposition when their own research pointed them to this conclusion: “Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth” (33).

Involvement in church activities may not cause spiritual growth; however, it may provide opportunities for developing spiritual friendships that may influence spiritual growth. E. Mansell Pattison has said that healthy persons tend to have a group of twenty to thirty persons around them who form a “psychosocial kinship system” (18-19). Each person in the system provides help in times of need and celebrates with a person in good times. Involvement in a church would certainly provide part of an environment for discipleship growth because it could strengthen a person’s psychosocial kinship network. Willow Creek may have assumed too much about church activity, but they understand the need for persons to relate with other persons spiritually.

Willow Creek identified a continuum of spiritual growth in their participants. Table 2.1 shows my compilation of Willow Creek’s findings reported in *Follow Me* by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson. The spiritual continuum includes four segments: (1) exploring Christ, (2) growing in Christ, (3) close to Christ, and (4) Christ-centered. The authors also recognized four categories of motivators: spiritual beliefs and attitudes, organized church activities, personal spiritual practices, and spiritual activities with others.

Because the researchers expected church activity to cause spiritual growth, they expected to see a direct correlation between increasing church involvement and

increasing “love for God and others,” which is their definition of spiritual growth based on Matthew 22:37-39 (Hawkins and Parkinson 29). However, they discovered no direct correlation between “love of God and others” and church activity. The statistics would not support their hypothesis, so they abandoned it.

Table 2.1. Compiled Findings from Willow Creek’s Self-Study

How Four Kinds of Catalyst Motivate Persons through Four Segments of Spiritual Growth					
Segment 4: Christ-Centered					
Advanced growth	1. Giving away my life	Serve those in need through my church	Reflection on Scripture	Evangelism	Movement #3 catalysts
	2. Christ is first		Solitude	Spiritual mentors	
	3. Identity in Christ	Additional teaching or worship service	Bible reading	Serving those in need on my own	
	4. Authority of the Bible		Prayer to confess sins		
	5. Stewardship		Tithing		
		Prayer to seek guidance			
Segment 3: Close to Christ					
Intermediate growth	1. Personal God	Serve those in need through my church	Reflection on Scripture	Evangelism	Movement #2 Catalysts
	2. Salvation by Grace		Prayer to seek guidance	Spiritual friendships	
	3. Authority of the Bible	Serve the church	Tithing	Serving those in need on my own	
	4. Christ is first	Adult ed. classes spiritual topics	Solitude	Spiritual mentors	
	5. Identity in Christ	Small groups	Bible reading		
Segment 2: Growing in Christ					
Early growth	1. Salvation by grace	Serve the church	Reflection on Scripture	Spiritual friendships	Movement #1 catalysts
	2. The Trinity	Weekend service	Bible reading		
	3. Personal God	Small groups	Prayer to seek guidance		
	4. Christ is first		Prayer to confess sins		
	5. Authority of the Bible				
Segment 1: Exploring Christ					
	Spiritual beliefs & attitudes	Organized church activities	Personal spiritual practices	Spiritual activities with others	

Source: Hawkins and Parkinson 32, 37, 42, 44, 52, 54, 59, 62, 64, 67, 69, 75, 77, 79.

Relationships continued to stimulate movement from segment two to segment three. This time, however, instead of the strongest belief and attitude catalyst being salvation by grace, the strongest catalyst toward segment three was the belief that God is personal. My analysis of Willow Creek's study suggests that relationships become more influential to motivate spiritual growth as a person grows. In addition, the findings suggest that when believers practice evangelism they strengthen their love of God and neighbor. Evangelism requires relationship. From my own evangelistic work, the most effective evangelism comes through my relationships with others in which I show and tell the good news of Jesus Christ. Once again, Willow Creek provides evidence that relationships move people along the spiritual continuum (Hawkins and Parkinson 32).

Finally, Willow Creek's study reveals relationships in the transition from segment three, being close to Christ, to segment four, Christ centered. In this transition, evangelism remains the primary spiritual activity with others, but the transition is also motivated by three primary beliefs that involve relationships: (1) giving away one's life, (2) Christ being first, and (3) identity in Christ (Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson 37). These three beliefs each involve relationships with God and others. I believe a person's decision to give away her or his life comes from her or his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Through this brief review of the findings from Willow Creek's study, I have intended to show that even though the researchers were looking at church activity, they revealed the value of relationships to spiritual growth and discipleship development. Willow Creek has identified a structure for discipleship development and content related to the process of spiritual growth. Though they do not look specifically at the

relationships, relationships factored into spiritual growth. The discussion here identifies my deeply held conclusion that discipleship development is about relationships.

I now move to other topics that provided resources to understand the stories the participants told during this project. I identified these topics while I heard and transcribed the interviews. I introduce the material here, but I will incorporate the material more fully with my discussion in Chapter 5.

Human and Faith Development with Spiritual Formation

The fields of human development, faith development, and spiritual formation offer frameworks for understanding the stories told by the participants. My entrance into the field of human development comes through my prior classes in seminary. There I studied human development theories derived from Jean Piaget, Eric Erickson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Robert Kegan. Fowler's material provided resources to understand faith development. For this project, my readings in spiritual formation led me to the work of van Kaam who wrote several volumes developing the Science of Foundational Human Formation (SFHF). David L. Hall, a doctoral student in the field of SFHF, provided a helpful dissertation that connected his own storytelling experiences with his spiritual formation. Finally, the combined work of Susan Muto and Adrian van Kaam provided support for the importance of persons making commitment decisions in their discipleship experiences.

Human and faith development. Models of human and faith development presume that individuals can observe identifiable stages of human growth. Stages follow a sequence and advanced stages integrate and build upon earlier stages. Fowler in his article "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges" affirms "that faith

stages are sequential, invariant, and hierarchical” (167). After thirty years of faith developmental theory work, Fowler maintains that these claims still provide a sound framework for exploring human and faith development even in the face of the challenges of postmodernity.

In *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Fowler begins describing stage development by assuming that even within the womb, children begin to form spiritually. Fowler identifies signs of the first stage of faith development in the second year of a child’s life when “the child takes hold of a qualitatively new and powerful kind of leverage on the world of experience” (123). Parents can observe the change when their child begins using language in new ways and, in particular, by naming the persons on whom the child depends: Mama, Dada, and others. In his book, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, Fowler identifies this early period as “primal faith” (57). Primal faith precedes the first stage: intuitive-projective faith. While all the stages offer insights for talking about discipleship development, Fowler’s description of the fifth stage, conjunctive faith, relates most closely to my project because, from my perspective, all of the participants of this study have matured to at least the fifth stage. However, I observe also that the majority of participants dealt with their difficult experiences in the church when they were in an earlier stage of faith development.

Persons at the conjunctive faith stage have begun to make peace with the reality that truth is perceived from a variety of angles, and they have the mental ability to hold together opposing ideas about God without dismantling their faith in God (Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* 72). For example, a person in conjunctive faith can

understand and experience that God is transcendent and beyond human comprehension while at another time the person can experience God as an intimately present friend. A person in conjunctive faith has the ability to see God's power and majesty and yet that person can also recognize that God self-limits the use of God's power. Persons of conjunctive faith hold these opposite ideas in tension without losing their own sense of trust or relationship with God. Persons who have matured to the stage of conjunctive faith have deeply held convictions that allow them to talk with others who have variant beliefs. Therefore, Fowler explains, that persons of conjunctive faith can enter the dialogue without defensiveness (73).

Science of Foundational Human Formation. Van Kaam presents another approach to the growth of faith through the SFHF. Like human developmental assumptions, SFHF presumes that humans were created to grow and mature and that the process of maturity involves both experiences over which people have no control, yet growth also involves experiences and ways of thinking in which humans participate. Van Kaam explains how formation of the human spirit can be observed, reflected on, and integrated into a conceptual framework:

At crucial moments, we feel the need to appraise who we are and where we are going. The moment we begin to reflect on formation, we initiate the possibility of critically appraising our life direction. We may compare our reflections with similar reflections of others.... In the course of such explorations, certain principles of formation may be disclosed. These may prove to be foundational. Any attempt to give form to our spontaneous human unfolding or to receive form connotes principles that could be integrated into some theory of formation. We begin to see the possibility of the emergence of a science of formation. (*Fundamental Formation* 6)

Hall explains five basic premises of SFHF. First, humans have the free ability to give and receive form as they relate to the world around them (16). Second, the transcendence ability inherent within humans allows them to move toward a "unique ideal life form

which is never fully attained, but may be progressively more closely approximated by transcending from one current form of life to another more consonant form of life” (17). Third, humans live in formation fields, which are created by interaction between several “polarities” (17). One such polarity is called preformation and refers to an experience that offers an opportunity for formation before a person becomes aware of the opportunity. Fourth, form traditions are concrete patterns of behavior that make up “basic dispositions, attitudes, and directives” (20) of a person’s life and faith experiences. Fifth, SFHF depends on maintenance of the conviction of form potency: All humans desire to “maintain the conviction that they are effective or potent to give form to their lives and their world and to be formed by their world” (23). Van Kaam expresses a parallel view to developmental theory’s use of hierarchical integration: “We carry our whole past formation as a lived totality that makes up all the richness of our present” (*Fundamental Formation* 6). I have listed these five principles of SFHF to show that it, like human development theory, observes human formation, identifies patterns, and builds upon previous experiences and life understandings.

As persons embrace an opportunity for formation presented in a formation field, the person negotiates opposing polarities within that field until the person arrives at consonant formation. Van Kaam describes consonant formation as a “wholesome polarity between the reception and donation of form in mutual interaction” (“Chapter 1”). Formation comes through interaction, a give and take, in and with any experience. As experiences shape (or form) a person’s life, SFHF calls this form reception; and as a person contributes to the shape (or form) of an experience, SFHF calls this form donation (*Fundamental Formation* 57). A person gives shape to an experience through his or her

response to that experience. When a person experiences consonant formation, life feels harmonious because form reception and form donation balance. Van Kaam's SFHF and Fowler's faith stages each provide frameworks for exploring and reflecting on the interviews gathered during this project.

Individuation. An important developmental concept is individuation. Participants indicated that they separated themselves and their faith from some of the experiences they faced in the church. When I saw participants processing their experiences with this kind of distinction, I realized that those participants acted out a process that human development and faith development theorists call individuation or differentiation. Maturing involves a person's movement from embeddedness with an experience to individuation from that experience. Kegan illustrates the principle of individuation with two brothers standing at the top of the Empire State Building. The younger brother looks at the people on the street and says, "Look at those ants!" The older brother looks at the same scene and says, "Look at the people. They look like tiny ants!" (29). The younger brother, unable to differentiate his perspective of small people with ants contrasts with his older brother's perspective. The older brother developed the ability to know and articulate that the people had not actually become small, nor had they become ants, but they only appeared as small as ants. The younger brother had not yet developed the mental skill to articulate that distinction. Throughout life, people move back and forth through times when they identify so closely with experiences that they cannot see their own distinctiveness from that experience. The experience defines the person. Eventually, they gain some awareness and begin to individuate, reflect, and review the experience in which they were once embedded. The movement from embeddedness to individuation

tends to move people toward a next step of maturity. When “we differentiate ourselves from the ‘perception’ as the psychologic which defines us” (51), people may move to a new developmental stage. However, people can get stuck so that they may not be able to differentiate themselves from the experiences that define them. As persons find comfort in a new awareness and new growth, they eventually become embedded in that new place until something happens and they gain an individuated awareness, which may move them again toward greater maturity. Throughout life, people repeat this process many times.

Commitment decisions. From the interviews, I noted that participants made and told me about decisions and commitments related to their experience in the VCUMC. Some participants named commitments that they made long before they experienced a difficulty in the church. Those people showed that their prior commitments or decisions influenced their response to the difficult situation. Other people made immediate decisions while they responded to the difficulty, and still other participants made no decisions or commitments until after the difficult experience. The decisions that people made, whether they made the decision before, during, or after the difficulty, impacted their spiritual lives. I began looking for other authors who discussed the value and processes of decisions and commitments in discipleship growth. Muto and van Kaam’s book, naturally grabbed my attention.

Muto and van Kaam have observed, reflected, and studied more thoroughly than I have that commitment critically shapes spiritual formation. “A permanent commitment is distinct from a passing promise. It binds us to the relationships, organization, and tasks to which we pledge fidelity over a lifetime” (5). The tasks of daily living easily distract individuals from their awareness to their underlying commitments. However, a person’s

commitment to “everydayness is the way in which we respond to the invitation to grow in commitment to the tasks to which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit call us uniquely” (5).

My commitment to tithe tests my faith in God each month. When I follow my commitment to give the tithe, especially when my checkbook suggests I cannot afford that commitment, I renew my faith and write the check trusting God will provide the rest.

Mature Christian love, the kind of love that God calls followers to imitate, and the kind of love the Jesus Christ gives, loves others without asking for love in return. Mature Christian love “may have to go on loving in situations in which one finds less reciprocity than one yearns for as a normal human being” (Muto and van Kaam 100). Christ calls his students to love even when they do not receive love from others. I did not ask my participants directly if they saw themselves living out this kind of mature love, but Muto and van Kaam identify a mark for Christian love. A person’s commitment to seek meaning in life in the context of a relationship with God “enables us to keep growing in the life of the Spirit and through our everyday labors” (171). A person’s decision and commitment to surrender to God’s presence in every situation sustains that person’s growth, maturity, and holiness.

Storytelling and Narrative

The stories told by the participants provided the primary set of data for this project. Shortly after beginning the interviews, I realized that I would gather a large amount of personal stories. This observation indicated to me the power and usefulness of stories in faith formation and discipleship development. In this section I introduce some of the current discussion related to broader ideas of storytelling and narratives in spiritual growth.

People have told stories in every age of humanity, but as postmodernity challenges modernity's assumptions, storytelling, sometimes referred generally as narrative, has risen as a metaphor to understand life and life's processes. I approached the topic of narrative storytelling through the field of counseling, in general, and pastoral counseling in particular.

The observation that stories and storytelling influence spiritual growth helped identify my own assumptions. First, I assumed that the participants could and would talk easily, logically, and rationally about their faith and life experiences. As I reflect on that assumption, I now consider that stories may provide a much richer method for communicating complex ideas than just expressing faith through linear rational thought. Expressing faith only through rational thought might effectively strain and sift out its fuller meaning. Wendy Ann Jewkes Aitken asserts that stories can evoke a more powerful faith than doctrine. Aitken's assertion supports the challenge to my prior assumptions. A. K. M. Adam discusses the opportunity that Christians have in a postmodern world. He describes the postmodern world as ready and receptive to "narrative knowledge," which he contrasts with the "scientific knowledge" of modernity. A Christian postmodern perspective "might acclaim certain modes of 'narrative theology' as more promising than rival efforts at a disinterested, 'scientific' theology" (261). Adam suggests that modernity dismissed the Bible but postmodernity has cracked open the question that perhaps the world can hear, with opened ears, the story of God at work throughout humanity. The world may be ready to hear the story of Christ again.

Michael White and David Epston have shown that narrative provides a valuable metaphor for counseling. By telling a story, and therefore objectifying an experience

through a narrated story, a person can gain distance from the experience itself (65). The distance gained from the experience parallels the concept of individuation in developmental theories and helps the person find ways to cope with the problem they face. Once a person can individuate from the experience, she or he finds leverage for coping and perhaps even changing the situation or the outcome of the problem. Narrative counseling leads a person through four core processes. First, the problem story is identified and named (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston 100). Second, the counselor and counselee explore the extent of the problem and map the problem's course throughout the counselee's life (102). Third, the counselee identifies unique moments when the problem is no longer a problem. Burrell David Dinkins calls this step "the miracle question" because it asks the person to imagine and identify life without the problem (57). Fourth, gaining distance from the problem, understanding the scope of the problem, and identifying moments when the problem failed to influence the person, the counselee may face the problem story as a coauthor—one with power to change the story—and begin telling, planning, and then acting toward new desired outcomes of the problem story. Narrative counseling empowers the counselee with tools to grow through a problem (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston 20). The concepts can be applied to spiritual and discipleship growth, too.

Kevin M. Bradt applies narrative concepts to theological understandings. Storying brings knowledge of humanity and God (19). Telling and hearing stories of humans and of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit builds community among the hearers and the speakers (150). Janet Ruffing also makes a direct connection between storytelling and spiritual formation:

The entire biblical tradition expresses both a shared experience and vision of the God-human relationship, namely, that God offers a relationship to God's self that is conducted over time and that respects human freedom and growth. Narrative is the linguistic form which best communicates this kind of experience. It is no surprise that the biblical authors were among the first to develop the skills of prose fiction because their theological perspective required it. (50-51)

Stories, then, provide an essential component to growth as disciples of Jesus Christ.

“Conversations are our common means for making sense out of life” (Dinkins 17).

Narrative pastoral counseling currently focuses on solving a particular problem; however, the skills used in narrative pastoral counseling may be adapted to assist persons in their development as whole persons. As Dinkins presents “narrative conversation as the act and art of storying and restorying lives” (17), a church might strengthen its discipling ministry by preparing every member to pay attention and engage others in narrative conversations that help persons find meaning in life and faith.

Remembrance

Telling stories of life experiences depends on a person's ability to remember. In Chapter 1, I presented a theological foundation for remembrance in discipleship development. Here, I extend that discussion to include other literature. Heino Falcke says that remembrance is integral to the renewal of the covenant between God and humanity:

When we live by the remembrance, the anamnesis, of God's mighty works, we acquire a new approach and access to reality. We become aware of the ways of God which are opening up secretly within the reality of this world. We develop something of Abraham's nose for the divine possibilities within our world. We do not have to obtain by force what God does not purpose to give us now, but we dare the impossible when God's call requires it. An eye for God's promises and a sensitivity to the sufferings of the present time — these are the two forks of the divining rod with which God's covenant people divine God's lifelines leading from today to tomorrow! (260)

Falcke joins others who emphasize the implications of anamnesis. Remembrance implies that past experience impacts the present, unlike simple recollection (Huber). However, R. A. D. Clancy questions the strength of the argument that anamnesis means “actualization” or “re-presentation” of a past experience in the present time. He compares the meaning of anamnesis with ancient Hebrew and Old Testament concepts of remembrance. Clancy concludes that the ideas of actualization and representation “seem to owe more to modern concepts than to the teaching of scripture” (49). Still, New Testament authors emphasize remembrance as an act of faith in the believer who receives the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

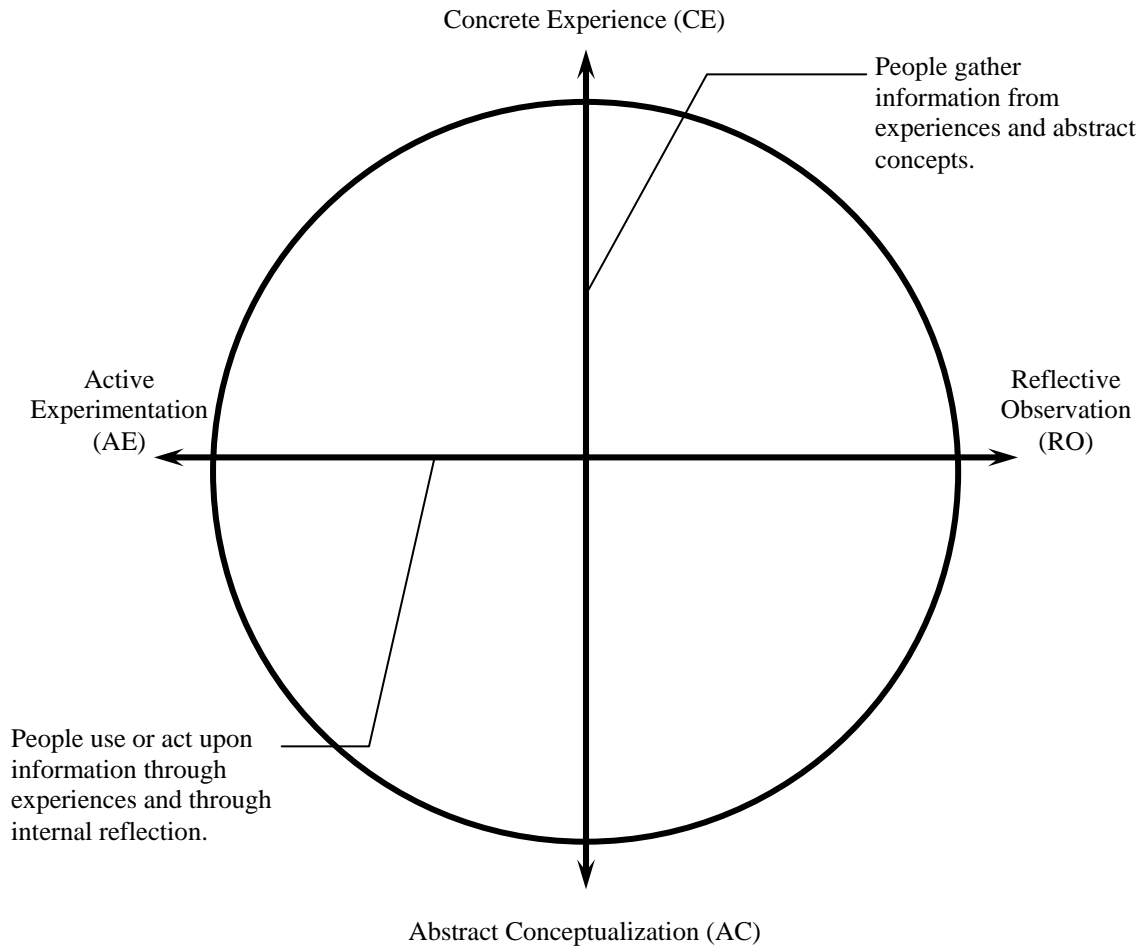
R. C. Jones combines three topics that showed up in this project: remembering, narrative, and decisions. The historical acts of God in Israel’s history produced a nation that would not exist without God’s interaction. God’s interaction with human history calls humans to decide whom they will follow. God calls people to decide to trust and obey God. The narratives that people have remembered and repeated throughout human history extend that decisive call to trust and obedience (436) to each generation.

Remembrance, as reviewed in the writings of others, is part of the faith experience. To remember is part of our activity to grow in faith and discipleship. Richard L. Morgan expresses the power of storytelling and remembering on spiritual growth: “When we remember our stories together, the acts of listening and telling help us move beyond the normal boundaries we impose on ourselves. We gain deeper insight into ways of God’s grace in other people and in ourselves” (16). Morgan provides small group curriculum to help people remember and explore the value of their stories for discipleship growth.

Experiential and Conversational Learning

Because the participants told their personal experiences to answer questions about discipleship, which involves learning, literature dealing with experiential learning theory offered a framework for understanding how the participants learned from their experiences in the VCUMC. David A. Kolb provided the primary source for my review. A second source from conversational learning theory extends Kolb's experiential learning theory principles in conversations.

Experiential learning theory says that people learn from experiences by gathering and processing information through two complementary and equally valuable axes, shown on Figure 2.1. The vertical axis illustrates how people gather (or acquire, or grasp) information. The horizontal axis illustrates how people use the information they gather. Kolb explains that people gather information on a range from concrete experiences (using the five senses as well as affective sensations) to abstract conceptualization (gathering through rational, intellectual processes) that uses words and reasoning (9). The horizontal axis involves what people do with the information they have gathered through concrete experiences and abstract concepts. People use information along a spectrum from active experimentation to reflective observation (42). Acting on information may happen on a range from an inner reflection about the information gathered, or action may be a physical act, such as braking a car because a green light has turned yellow. Drivers who act by pressing the accelerator instead of the brake may quickly learn a different lesson.



Source: Kolb, 42

Figure 2.1. Kolb's two poles of experiential learning.

Experiential learning theory proposes that learning is most effective and formative when a person processes information through each of the four areas of the spectrum (Kolb 31). According to experiential learning theory, learning is most beneficial when the student grasps the content through concrete experience *and* abstract conceptualization (the first axis), and when the student processes that content through reflective observation *and* active experimentation (the second axis). Learning, according to experiential learning, is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the

transformation of experience” (38). Since Jesus called his disciples to follow him day and night, any of their experiences may be a learning opportunity. Experiential learning theory provides a way for understanding how people learn.

Conversational learning theory applies experiential learning theory to conversations. Ann Baker, Patricia J. Jenson, and David A. Kolb explain, “Learners move through the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and acting as they construct meaning from their experiences in conversations” (52). According to conversational learning theory, learning occurs in conversation as a person resolves the tension between five sets of concepts. The first set of concepts involves knowing. A person resolves the tension between concrete knowing, defined as “an immediate, feeling oriented, tacit subjective process” (55), and abstract knowing, defined as “a linguistic, conceptual, interpretative process” (55). Resolving the tension between concrete and abstract knowing does not require the student to choose one way of knowing over the other. The best learning integrates information from both ways of knowing (55).

The second set of concepts held in tension in conversational learning theory deals with a person’s response to the information gathered through concrete and abstract knowing. Baker, Jenson, and Kolb label this set as action and reflection (56). Once a person gathers information, he or she must do something with it in order to change an experience or situation in life. As in the first set, persons who can reflect and act will increase the benefit of learning.

The third set of concepts deals with timing of learning: linear time and cyclical time. A conversation happens in linear time and reveals ideas and experiences that happened in linear time. However, on the other side of the tension, cyclical time refers to

the moment of learning when the speaker realizes an insight because he or she combined ideas, information, and experiences in a particular conversation (Baker, Jenson, and Kolb 58). Although Baker, Jenson, and Kolb make no biblical references, I compare this set of temporal tensions with the Greek words *chronos* and *kairos*. Both words can be translated as *time*, but *chronos* refers to the linear measurement of time such as a minute, hour, day, month, or year. *Kairos* refers to an opportunity of time, a season, or a time of ripeness such as the time when an apple, at full ripeness, should be picked. Conversational learning holds these concepts of time in tension, and the learner who uses both maximizes learning (58).

The fourth tension built into conversational learning theory involves individuality and relationality. In this tension, the learner “maintains a sense of self while at the same time is aware of and open to the influence of others” (Baker, Jenson, and Kolb 60). Conversation, because it involves more than one person, holds the relationship between those persons as part of the learning process. I recall a conversation I had with a college professor in which I learned an important lesson. The professor was leading a senior-level class discussion about learning theory, and he was talking about the teacher’s responsibility to convey information to the students as one of the goals of education. I raised my hand and asked, “Is the purpose of an education accomplished when the teacher presents the information? Or is the purpose of an education accomplished when the student learns?” My professor stopped dead in his tracks. He paused, indicating I had touched a nerve, and said with quiet anger, “Roger, you just wait until you’re there.” The next day, as the professor began class, he apologized for his poor treatment of my question, and he specifically asked for my forgiveness because he had reacted in anger. I

admire that professor, who by the way soon became the academic dean of that institution, because he did not fear the conversational interaction with his students. His humility to return to the subject in the following class session expanded the learning opportunity for everyone involved. He recognized both the teaching moment and the tension between individuality and relationality in the classroom conversation. As I retell that story, I feel the challenge to be open in my conversations, even my preaching, so that I may learn from those with whom I converse.

The final set of concepts held in tension during conversational learning deals with what Baker, Jenson, and Kolb call “status and solidarity.” “Status refers to one’s positioning or ranking in the group, while solidarity refers to the extent to which one is linked interpersonally with others in a network of relationships” (62). To continue conversational learning, a degree of status and solidarity must be maintained. The potential for learning diminishes when one person dominates and takes status to an extreme. The potential for learning also diminishes when the conversation loses connection with the people who participate in dialogue. The phrase *preaching to the choir* illustrates extreme solidarity with no connection with the listener. Individuals find little reason to stay in a conversation.

The interviews in this project created a conversational learning space in which the participants and I talked about their experiences in the church. The open-ended interview protocol allowed me to converse with the participants as they told their stories, according to conversational learning theory. The interview conversations contributed to the learning from the experiences. Conversational learning theory provided an additional source to

understand the learning benefit of the conversations as well as documenting the value of using conversations as part of the research design.

Browning paints word pictures of his vision that churches, at least the ones he leads, should create conversational learning spaces. He realizes that a congregation's space dramatically influences how people act in that space. He led a church at two locations. Part of the congregation met in a small church building and the other met in a converted warehouse. When they consolidated and began to meet in one large auditorium, they noticed an immediate shift that diminished the congregation's ability to connect individuals into small groups, which had greatly contributed to the church's growth (126). Browning also noticed how space affected behavior when he visited a colleague's new sanctuary. The formal worship space was beautiful, but Browning realized that he believed people needed a "family room, instead of a living room" atmosphere (112). I compare Browning's family room atmosphere to Baker, Jenson, and Kolb's conversational learning space. The family room will encourage discipleship development more than a formal living room, which is a nice place to make a good impression but keeps people from sharing the real life in the family room.

Chapter 2 provided opportunity to review the literature relevant to this project. Completed in two phases, the review first focused on literature relevant to the method used in the project. The second phase of the literature review followed the cues of the participants in the interviews. The conversations opened up the topics that I reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 gives details about the actual research process and analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2 described grounded theory methodology following, primarily, the work of Glaser. As I stated, the dual literature review created a unique problem to the planning of this research project. The greatest problem was trying to anticipate how I would gather, manage, and interpret the data without preconceiving the content of the data I hoped to collect. I remained committed to follow classic grounded theory methods. One evaluative criterion is how well a study implements the constant comparative methods of grounded theory. Chapter 3 explains how I intended to apply Glaser's method in this study.

Problem

Experiences in VCUMC such as disappointment and conflict appear to threaten the growth of discipleship; however, I recognized that some people in VCUMC have grown in their discipleship almost in spite of their disappointing experiences. I collected and analyzed data in an attempt to find principles that would shed light in the disciple-making processes happening, intentionally or serendipitously, in VCUMC. Once the findings revealed themselves, I offered them to the people of the church to guide them as they make decisions to strengthen their ministries of discipleship development.

Phase one of Chapter 2, completed prior to the interviews and analysis, reviewed literature relevant to grounded theory methods. Phase two of Chapter 2 followed the interview collection phase and reviewed literature relative to the topics about discipleship development that emerged from the interviews. Chapter 3 provides detailed information about the methods used to collect and analyze the data.

Purpose

This research project set out to identify how VCUMC has encouraged and/or discouraged discipleship development. The strategy used grounded theory methods to explore the experiences of persons who considered leaving but decided to stay at VCUMC. From the information gathered, I intended to develop a set of principles about the participants' experiences and present those principles to the church to help guide the leaders in planning ministries for greater discipleship growth among its members and participants.

Research Questions

Three research questions addressed the purpose of this project. The questions focused my project so that I might learn from the participants and assist the VCUMC leaders in their mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Research Question 1

What precipitating experiences influenced people to consider leaving VCUMC and then to decide to stay?

Research question one narrowed the project's scope to look at certain experiences through which I might learn about the discipleship development of the participants. Open-ended interviews with participants allowed them to provide answers to research question two. In their own words, participants provided information that was later compared to the experiences of other participants. Participants revealed a variety of stories in response to the interview questions and conversation. Question one did not discriminate against people because of their status or place in life. It only asked them to

tell a narrative of their experience and understanding of it. The open-ended interviews in relaxed settings generated data to answer the question.

Research Question 2

What changes in their relationship with God and with others in the congregation do participants identify because they stayed in the congregation?

The research purpose to understand the participants' experience of discipleship development motivated this question as it moved conversations and data collection toward the spiritual life of the participants. The question challenged me as an interviewer and the participants to express concepts difficult to describe with words.

Research Question 3

What principles emerged from the data that might guide the church to reflect on and adjust, if needed, its mission to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ?

The third research question flowed from the purpose of bringing together the findings in a cohesive way so that they can be communicated to the church. I hoped that the information would empower them, if they chose, to make changes in the way they function to be more effective to help people develop as disciples. Theoretical coding, comparative analysis of the interview transcripts, and reflections on the interviews provided a matrix out of which the findings emerged. After ideas began to take shape, I returned to continue the literature review with findings from other researchers. For example, if I discovered the category of prayer in participant experiences, I learned all I could about prayer from the other participants. Then I compared the data I uncovered about prayer with findings from other authors about the role of prayer in nurturing discipleship.

Participants

Fifteen participants gave interviews for comparison in this study: seven men and eight women. The known ages of the participants ranged from 66 to 81 years. The participants had been members of VCUMC within a range of twenty-six to forty-eight years.

The research questions guided criteria for selecting participants. Each participant showed evidence that he or she considered leaving the church at one time and then decided to stay in the church. Participants showed a basic ability to articulate and reflect on their experiences. They also showed willingness to share their experiences. Because I wanted to explore discipleship growth over time, I preferred participants who had been members for a longer, rather than a shorter, period. However, I did not require participants to have been members of the church for any specific duration.

Through pastoral conversations, I identified potential participants who revealed some disappointment or conflict in the church that I thought might cause them to consider leaving. I asked if they had ever considered leaving. If they said yes, I described the study and asked if they wanted to participate. If they continued to show interest, I provided a copy of the consent form to sign (see Appendix B). I returned a copy of the signed form to each participant. I did not limit recruitment to people who spoke only of their disappointment. I also asked people who seemed satisfied in the church if they ever considered leaving. If so, I invited them to join the study. Participants also recommended additional persons to participate in the study.

Participants showed a variety of reasons for considering leaving the church. According to grounded theory, a variety of reasons for considering leaving provided a

better database for establishing a theory than a study based on participants who all had the same reason for considering leaving the church (Glaser and Holton par. 45).

Instrumentation

Constant-comparative method of grounded theory provided the instrument to generate results that might answer the research questions. My intent in this study was to learn something unique to this community about the discipleship development in the people who gather at VCUMC and then to offer that information to the church's leaders so they may make adjustments in the discipling ministries of the church. Until the conclusion of the research, though, I did not know specifically what information it would indicate. In this section, I hope to provide enough detail to help others follow similar processes in their ministry. Replication is not a goal of grounded theory methodology (Corbin and Strauss 15); however, information here could direct readers to develop similar studies in different contexts. The research questions reveal the flow of the study. The first research question initiated collection of information that revealed a time when the participant considered leaving the church and decided to stay. Research question two asked the participant to explain in his or her own words how the experience influenced the participant's discipleship development. The third research question led to integration of the topics indicated from the interviews, which eventually provided the list of principles to present to the church leaders.

Researcher-Designed Grounded Theory Method

Following grounded theory guidelines as discussed in Chapter 2, I set up a process to manage and analyze data in this study. I recruited the participants, began gathering data through open-ended interviews, analyzed the data by coding it and making

memos to record my insights about topics the interviews revealed, and then I began to synthesize the findings into a cohesive unit. The cohesive unit needed to fit the data, find relevance in the context of VCUMC, work within that context, and be modifiable as new data entered the process (Glaser, *Basics* 116). This section looks at each of these steps.

Participants recruited. I presented details of the research study to prospective participants. Participants agreed to be interviewed up to three times, if needed. They understood the flexibility of the process. After participants read and signed the consent form (see Appendix B), I scheduled a first interview with each participant.

Data gathered through open-ended interviews. Interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. Informal, open-ended questions invited participants to reveal the information they desired to give rather than limiting disclosure with closed questions (Duffy, Ferguson, and Watson 68) or questions that preconceived the outcome of the study. A digital audio recorder captured dialogue. Afterward, I transcribed each interview and compared the transcription to the recording, editing it if needed, to increase accuracy (75). Field notes and comments during interviews gathered additional data (73; Glaser and Holton par. 26).

Open-ended questions invited participants to reveal sufficient data on the topic. Appendix A includes questions that started conversations. I tried simply to listen, but grounded theory also challenged me to ask open-ended questions, which led to conversations, to provide data relevant to the emerging findings. If, for example, a participant said that a friendship with another church member influenced the decision to stay, I wanted to explore more fully that experience of friendship. I might have asked, “Can you tell me more about that friendship? What about that friendship helped you

decide to stay?” Still, keeping the question open-ended, I invited the participant to expand the information about the concepts being revealed. This process, called theoretical sampling, continued throughout the study until the final writing of the project’s report (Corbin and Strauss 17-18).

Data analyzed by coding and memoing for concepts. Over a period of weeks, comparative analysis of each interview began almost immediately in the field as I recorded memos about each interview in a field notebook. Field notes provided an additional source of data. After each interview, I began coding the data to look for categories and properties that would indicate core topics of the processes of discipleship that the participants described in their stories. Interviews and data analysis proceeded alternately. A spreadsheet helped me organize data as I compared one incident with another in a systematized way. Memos were tracked through a series of documents coded to each interview. Printed memo pages allowed me to handwrite memos that I later added to new memo documents.

Findings synthesized into a cohesive unit. The alternating pattern of collecting and analyzing the interviews facilitated integration of new information into the emerging set of principles (Bruce 9), which contributed to the modifiability of the emerging principles (Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity* 5). As those principles began to emerge, I inserted new data from subsequent participants. As I continued to analyze the stories, I identified gaps, or missing information, in the developing principles. Noticing the gaps led me to recruit additional participants whose experiences might fill in the gaps (Morrow 255). Data from others sources, such as other research and writings of other authors helped fill in the gaps where I needed more information to understand a topic. If I could

find no data to fill the gap, I stopped searching and considered the gap itself as an important piece of data on which to reflect (Glaser, *Basics* 88). Memos helped to link raw information from the interviews with the topics and developing ideas about principles that might assist the church's discipling ministry. I constantly compared new interviews to previously gathered interviews, other memos, and the developing topics. As my reflection on the data, memos, and topics continued, I began to identify a common theme (a core variable) that would link all the concepts or principles to one another.

A timeline allowed participants to reflect on a greater range of life experiences and how those experiences influenced the participant's faith (see Appendix C). The timelines also confirmed the accuracy of the information I already collected at the interviews. The timelines and interviews triangulated previously gathered data with the participant and the new information from others in order to deepen understanding.

Pilot Study

Many studies use a pilot study to test that the instrument used will produce the results expected and desired. In an earlier version of this research, I considered a pilot study primarily to test my interview questions. However, in reading Glaser's multiple writings on grounded theory methods, I realized that researchers using classic grounded theory methodology enter the study not knowing what the outcome will be (only that a theory will emerge). The researcher enters it with openness to see inductively what the problems and solutions are (*Basics* 21). I realized a pilot study would waste time and energy. Glaser states, "Grounded theory looks for what is, not what might be, and therefore needs no test.... Grounded theory does not waste this time of wondering and testing if one's questions apply" (67). Grounded theory gets to the data quickly and

allows it to show what it will; therefore, I did not test my interview questions in a pilot study. The data would reveal any needed adjustments because of theoretical sampling as I proceeded through the study.

Variables, Reliability, and Validity Issues

Variables in grounded theory are the result of the research; therefore, at the beginning of my research the variables remained unnamed: “The grounded theory researcher ... moves into an area of interest with *no problem* [original emphasis]. He moves in with the abstract wonderment of what is going on that is an issue and how it is handled” (Glaser, *Basics* 22). The data revealed the variables as they emerged. I tried to identify a core variable that could tie together every other category (variable). I describe the core variable in Chapter 4.

Several criteria in grounded theory helped me know that I followed a reliable process to achieve a valid result: fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability. Glaser in *Theoretical Sensitivity* expounds the meaning of these four evaluative criteria. A theory that *fits* means the theory fit the congregation out of which the data came: “Data should not be forced or selected to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories or discarded in favor of keeping an extant theory in tact” (4). *Workability* refers to the quality of the theory to explain what happened and to predict what may happen in the future (4). A good grounded method produces a theory, or a set of principles in this research, that also allows the congregation a certain amount of control over its situation and gives them perspective to identify some actions—grounded in the data—that they hope will bring helpful change (Linden 492). The theory works in the church. The theory, therefore, is *relevant* to the area of life that is studied: “Grounded theory arrives at relevance, because

it allows core problems and processes to emerge” (Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity* 5).

Glaser continues, “Always something emerges that requires generating qualification of what came before, but also causing a need to hang on to what one had generated up to that point as precious and inviolate” (5). *Modifiability* refers to the flexibility of the emerging theory, the set of principles in this study, to adapt to the new information from the constant comparison of data with previously gathered data and concepts.

Adhering to the methods of constant comparison, documenting insights through memos, and using a three-tiered coding system, I verified the outcome of this research project. I exercised control over the outcome of this project by constantly inserting data into the developing concepts and principles that resulted. The more data that saturated those results, the better the results fit and worked in the setting. The more the results fit and worked, the more relevant and reliable they became to the context from which they rose (Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity* 142). By providing participants the opportunity, in second and third level interviews, to correct anything they previously told me, and by sharing with them the results of my coding to date, I attempted to make sure data was as accurate as possible.

Triangulation, a concept used in research to increase the reliability of the data, appears in a slightly different form in this study because the goal is to develop a set of principles rather than to prove a preconceived hypothesis. Triangulation, in grounded theory, happens because the researcher follows the guides of constant comparative method and theoretical sampling. Constant comparative method continuously adds new perspectives to previously gathered data. When a new perspective enters the database, the researcher can identify corrections needed in the budding concepts and make the

adjustments. Glaser shows how theoretical sampling provides “a way of checking on the emerging conceptual framework rather than being used for the verification of preconceived hypotheses. Comparisons are made continually between kinds of information to generate qualifying conditions, not disprove hypotheses” (Glaser *Theoretical Sensitivity* 39). Theoretical sampling helps the researcher know what kinds of new data may help triangulate previously gathered data.

Data Collection

I collected the initial information through the interviews and then invited participants to fill out a timeline of important events that affected their relationship with God. The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. Nine interview sessions allowed me to hear the stories of the fifteen participants. When spouses participated in the project, I arranged one interview for both participants. The spouses took turns telling their stories. Interview questions followed research questions one and two to provide information for understanding the participants’ discipleship growth. Appendix A shows basic interview questions. Appendix C shows the timeline instructions and chart. Data collection also included my personal observations during the interview. Again, the concept of theoretical sampling guided the interview conversation. For example, when a participant mentioned an event from his or her teenage years that influenced a personal relationship with God, I followed the revelation to ask new questions about that event. I asked questions to understand more fully how the event affected his relationship with God. Answers to these types of questions provided additional data to analyze and generate the outcome of my research.

Data Analysis

As mentioned, analysis began immediately after an interview. Before I transcribed the interview, I recorded my first impressions about the conversation in a “field notebook” (Glaser and Strauss 108). I continued my analysis by identifying the issues named by the participants. This first level of analysis corresponds to Glaser’s “open coding” (*Basics* 38). Second, I looked for information from the participants that attempted to answer research question two regarding the participants’ relationships with God and others. Again, my memos recorded a variety of topics and characteristics about relationships. The second level of analysis corresponds to Glaser’s “axial coding” (75). The third level of analysis compared each interview to every other interview and looked specifically for information as to how the interviews answered the research questions. This level corresponds to Glaser’s “selective coding” (75).

From each comparison, I recorded comments in a new document called a “transcript comparison memo” and coded it directly to the two original transcripts in the comparison so that I could easily refer back to the original transcripts for illustrations. For the fifteen participants, I made a total of thirty-six comparisons. I paid attention to the issues, relationships, beliefs, and other common topics. After completing the comparisons, I collated the findings according to the research questions and recorded the findings in documents called topical compilation of comparison memos. The memos led to identifying larger ideas about discipleship growth in the participants as I integrated the findings toward a cohesive outcome. Each new comparison created a new matrix pregnant with insights for developing the emerging principles (Glaser and Holton par. 53).

Ethics

Participant confidentiality challenged me. The consent form made prospective participants aware that I would change names, but in a small church, details of one's story may be self-identifying (see Appendix B). I asked participants to give consent for their story to be written, with names changed to protect identities, in publications related to this research. Following the completion of the project, I destroyed original recordings and transcripts.

Summary

This chapter shows how I planned this study and attempts to assist others to develop similar studies. Perhaps the greatest challenge of using grounded theory methodology, especially for seeking approval to do the research, is to approach the data clear of preconceived ideas in order to allow the data to reveal what it may. Admittedly, I have preconceptions about discipleship development, and they do appear in this paper. However, I worked to become aware of my preconceptions and to suspend judgment about their impact on discipleship development until after the participants named the issues. I hope I showed that I relied on the constant comparison method sufficiently to check that the findings emerged from the data rather than my preconceptions determining the outcome. I also hope this research gives future researchers enough information to use the method for further exploration in church settings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents the findings of my research project. Generally, the project explored the experience of persons at VCUMC while they followed Jesus Christ as his disciples. Open-ended interviews provided the research instrument in order to identify principles or concepts related to the participants' growth as disciples. Three research questions narrowed the scope of the project:

1. What precipitating experiences influenced people to consider leaving VCUMC and then to decide to stay?
2. What changes in their relationship with God and with others in the congregation do participants identify because they stayed in the congregation?
3. What principles emerged from the data that might guide the church to reflect on and adjust, if needed, its mission to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ?

After giving a brief profile of the participants, I present the research findings organized under headings related to each of the three research questions. I have purposefully limited direct quotations from interviews and omitted identifying details in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. When I have given account of one of the stories told during an interview, I have fictionalized some details in order to protect the participant's identity further.

Profile of Participants

Fifteen persons participated in the study: seven men and eight women. Table 4.1 shows the participants' ages and years of membership. Given the age of the participants, all are retired from their careers but still remain active similar to other retirees in the

community. Six sets of participants were married. Of those six couples, five have been married more than fifty years. Other participants included persons whose spouses could not or chose not to participate in the study. None of the participants were ever divorced.

An average of seventy-two persons attended worship at VCUMC at the time of the study. Because all of the participants regularly worshipped, the sample size represents 21 percent of the average worship attendance.

Table 4.1. Participant Ages and Years of Membership

	Gender	Age	Membership Years
1.	F	66	27
2.	F	67	26
3.	M	N/A	27
4.	F	N/A	48
5.	M	N/A	32
6.	M	81	48
7.	M	77	40
8.	F	75	48
9.	F	78	39
10.	M	73	44
11.	F	78	40
12.	M	78	48
13.	F	N/A	32
14.	F	72	44
15.	M	66	37
Average (known ages only)		74	
Average			39

All participants completed an interview that was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Married couples were interviewed together in one session. One partner would tell his or her story first, and then the other person related her or his story. I soon discovered that the combined interview worked well because the couples experienced

problems in the church together. They also worked together toward a solution. I observed that the listening spouse periodically interjected information or asked questions to help clarify or jog the memory of the speaking spouse. This instant correction and accountability helped keep the stories in perspective. When the couples disagreed, I observed them working out their differences toward a resolution of the story. Sometimes they clarified the story. Other times I simply noted the different perspectives of the same experience. Combining persons in the interview did not create confusion during transcription or analysis.

After the interviews, I invited participants to submit a life-faith timeline. In a letter, I instructed the participants how to complete the timeline and provided an example of my own life-faith timeline (see Appendix C). Eleven of the fifteen participants returned timelines. The timelines helped confirm my interpretation of the interview by providing a more concise yet longer ranged perspective of the participants' faith journeys.

Precipitating Experiences

Research question one asked, "What precipitating experiences influenced people to consider leaving VCUMC and then to decide to stay?" In the interview, I stated this question: "Let's begin with you telling me about a time when you considered leaving the church but decided to stay." Participants revealed four categories of experiences that precipitated their consideration to leave the church: pastoral issues, laity relationship issues, committee/administrative issues, and spiritual growth issues. Some participants revealed multiple issues that accumulated over time until finally the participants wondered if they would benefit from leaving the church.

Pastoral Issues

The largest number of respondents named issues directly related to the pastor as the reason for considering leaving the church. No one pastor was named as causing people to consider leaving the church. Kevin named at least three pastors with whom he had conflict and tried, with varying success, to work things out. The issues ranged from personality conflicts, to theological issues, to the leadership skill or direction of the pastor, and to pastoral care, teaching, and preaching. For some of the issues, the pastor's decisions or behavior caused trouble, but other issues regarding the pastor were completely out of the pastor's control, such as gender.

Monica, another example, did not think the pastor's sermons provided the spiritual nurture she hoped to receive. Elizabeth felt frustration because of the pastor's reaction to a decision Elizabeth had made. Michael believed his theology did not match that of the pastor, and Lana was disappointed with a pastor's handling of a volatile issue. Nine of the fifteen participants named an issue with the pastor as the reason for considering leaving the church.

Laity Relationship Issues

The second largest number of participants named problems relating to other laypersons. Seven participants told detailed stories about their laity relationship struggles. Diane experienced hurtful, unwelcoming behavior from a layperson. Suzanne was troubled by the way some laypersons treated the pastor. She wondered how Christians could speak about the pastor with such a mean spirit. Michael thought that some laypersons over-functioned in the church and prevented others (intentionally or not) from

providing meaningful ministries of service in the church. Elizabeth felt shunned by other laypersons. Grace simply said, “Sometimes you just get disgusted with other people.”

Committee/Administrative Issues

Four participants identified the third category of issues. Experiences in this category related to ways committees and their members worked (or failed to work) together. For example, Tom and Lana were greatly troubled when the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee failed to work satisfactorily through a problem. Each had an individual, and sometimes conflicting, perspective of the issues and problems, but they both named problems with committee functioning as the stimulus for considering leaving the church. Norm and Grace also considered leaving after an experience related to a church board decision. Grace wondered if the board deliberately scheduled a meeting when members who opposed a proposal could not attend the meeting when the board voted. For all these participants, the experiences challenged the trust they had with others in the church.

Spiritual Growth Issues

The final category includes the smallest number of participants: spiritual growth issues. Only two participants named spiritual growth as a problem that caused them to consider leaving. Monica, as mentioned earlier, did not think the pastor’s sermons provided enough spiritual nurture. Monica told about a time when she encountered Jesus Christ in which she was confronted with her own sin, but through the experience she felt God’s powerful and forgiving love. The event happened when Monica visited another congregation while she was on vacation. She remembered listening to a retired minister teach an adult class. Because of the class, she said that for the first time in her life she felt

that she “knew God” rather than just knowing about God. Returning to her home church, she craved more in her relationship with God, but her home pastor’s sermons did not provide that inspiration. She considered leaving.

Grace named a general feeling of stagnation in her spiritual life, and she also felt stagnation in the congregation: “It was just things didn’t seem to be going anywhere in my journey as well as in the church.”

Naming and identifying issues that caused people to consider, even slightly, leaving the church, came with ease. In the interviews, participants quickly told their stories and the four categories were revealed quickly. The second research question required much more time and effort to gather and interpret. In the interviews, once I heard the stories, I shifted the conversation by saying, “Let’s talk about how that experience might have affected your relationships with God and others in the church.”

Relationship Changes: Reminiscence through Storytelling

Research question two asked, “What changes in their relationship with God and with others in the congregation do participants identify because they stayed in the congregation?” This section reveals responses to research question two. As participants began answering the question, I received my biggest surprise. I had not anticipated the number of stories people would use to answer the question. I did expect people to tell stories, but I expected the stories would illustrate and support a more cognitive answer. Instead, stories poured out as the answer. I was left to interpret many stories told by the participants as they attempted to answer the question about how their experience impacted their relationship with God and their relationships with others in the church. As people told story after story to explain the impact, I realized that stories played a

prominent role in my research. Reminiscences became common as the participants reflected on the meaning of their lives and faith. I began to see two concepts, remembering and storytelling, that provided a general framework out of which the participants revealed their experiences of discipleship growth.

Out of the many reminiscences told through stories, I identified two main categories that relate to research question two. First, the stories revealed the category of developmental issues. Second, the stories showed relationship issues. My organization of the data here is simply a strategy for presenting the details of the interviews. I intend to make an orderly presentation of a fairly chaotic mass of stories gathered from the participants as they reflected on their spiritual journeys.

Developmental Issues Revealed in Interviews

As I began comparing the stories to each other, several topics arose that suggested issues related to human development. As I will illustrate, the participants revealed changes in their relationship to God simply because they matured as persons. I have organized the stories into the following topics related to developmental concepts: maturation, individuation, decisions, and boundaries.

Maturation. Participants commented that they believed relationships with God change as people mature. The maturity may come with age, and because all the participants in the study were over age 66, I could expect that outcome. The participants lived enough life to believe that they have matured and changed.

For example, Jack told stories about his younger adult years when he was less interested in his relationship with God. As he aged, he became more interested in his faith to the point that he initiated and found enjoyment in studying the Bible on his own. He

named influential other persons, within the congregation, who inspired him toward God in his older years.

Norm provided another example. He narrated that he often experienced disappointment with other persons. “Somebody will say something to hurt your feelings and tomorrow you forget it. That happens to me a lot. I don’t dwell on it.” I was surprised with the ease that Norm seemed to forget the hurts caused by people, and I questioned him further. He responded, “The older I get, the easier it is.” Near the end of Norm’s interview, I asked if he would like to say more about his spiritual growth. He said, “I think it’s an ongoing [process]—I think—with me it’s still ongoing. I can think of lots of instances as I look back where Somebody’s watching out for me—for us.” Norm shows awareness of maturing processes in his own life.

A third example came from Diane as she reflected on changes in her relationship with God. She recounted her story of being hurt by another layperson in the church and holding that hurt for many years. After telling her painful story, she realized how long she had held onto it and decided to release it. Feeling great relief, freedom, and increased intimacy with God, she explained, “I think that just human maturity has had effect.” Finally, Lana plainly said, “I think as you get older you get more settled in to just depending on God.” These illustrations show that the developmental concept of maturing has been part of the personal changes in their relationships with God.

Individuation. Fowler labels his fourth stage of faith development as individuative-reflective faith. The stage “is occasioned by a variety of experiences that make it necessary for persons to objectify, examine, and make critical choices about the defining elements of their identity and faith” (*Becoming Adult* 49). Kegan similarly

describes differentiation as one of the two great yearnings of human experience: the yearning to belong and the opposite yearning to stand out (107). Adolescents exemplify the struggle of finding their uniqueness (individuated self) and how they fit in with society (to be integrated into community) without allowing their identity to be consumed and overtaken by others. Individuation suggests crucial developmental processes at work, and through their stories, my participants revealed their struggle and movement toward Fowler's individuate-reflective faith.

Participants showed evidence that they distinguished themselves in some way from the experiences as they told their stories of remembrance. For example, Suzanne's faith grew strong out of her childhood family experiences. As an adult in the VCUMC dealing with problems with the pastor, she wondered if she should leave the church. To distinguish herself from her problem (an individuating behavior), Suzanne said, "With my growing up experience, I know that one pastor doesn't stay. I mean you're not stuck for life with one pastor. Is that a bad way to say it?" We laughed in the interview at her candor, but she had found a way to differentiate herself from her problem. Her differentiation helped her deal with the situation and stay in the church. Suzanne's childhood also forced her to rely on God, others, and her own skills very early in her life because of a traumatic shift in her family life. In some ways Suzanne was forced to grow up very quickly in order to fill in the gaps left in her family life because of the trauma. Now, Suzanne says plainly, "I really have my own faith.... I've been in enough different churches to know there are people with different beliefs in [one's] own church, and as long as I stand by my own principles, I don't try to change other people." Suzanne

reveals individuation. The evidence that shows individuation relies heavily on Suzanne's ability to remember and to tell her own life stories.

Other participants gave evidence of individuation through their language about knowing God's will for leaving the church. When Monica was disappointed with the pastor's sermons and as she considered leaving the church, she asked God directly, "Do you want me to go or stay?" As time passed while she prayed and considered the question, she began to sense that she was not to leave the church. Another friend—outside of VCUMC—confirmed, "Your church needs you more than another church." That clinched the decision for Monica. She stayed and increased her involvement at VCUMC. Monica matured enough to be able to differentiate her own desires, God's desires, and to consider what other persons have to say.

Grace shows individuation in a similar way when she said, "I feel that if the Lord wants us to leave that church, he'll tell us one way or another." These persons show that they are not waiting for someone else to tell them what God thinks or what God expects them to do. Some will call these kinds of decisions individualistic, and they may be, but they still reveal the developmental process of individuation and its contribution to the participants' spiritual lives.

While I interviewed Michael, he told me about a time when he struggled to deal with the behavior of another church member. At that time, Michael held a key leadership position and needed to lead the congregation through conflict. As a result, Michael held ill feelings against the layperson. As he described his attitudes toward that layperson, I wondered if Michael considered his attitudes and behavior toward his peer to be in line with how Jesus might deal with the situation. I pressed Michael to see if he felt any

regrets for the way he handled the situation. I knew I pressured him in the interview, but I believed that our relationship could sustain the probe. So I asked, “Do you think God is comfortable about how you handled that situation?”

Michael paused for a moment and then began to speak deliberately and calmly: “Let me explain something to you. I feel comfortable with my relationship with God. Is it perfect? No. It never will be. But I’m comfortable with it. [Pause.] Now maybe I’m ornery and independent, but that’s me.” My relationship with Michael survived the probe, and I am grateful for his willingness to reveal how his faith has become his own and that he offers himself to serve Jesus Christ through the VCUMC.

Elizabeth experienced a problem with one pastor, too. She revealed another illustration about how individuation plays a part in discipleship formation. The pastor had confronted Elizabeth because of a comment Elizabeth had made that went against the pastor’s perspective of a matter discussed at a church meeting. As a result, the pastor accused Elizabeth of conspiring to undermine the pastor. Elizabeth knew that she was not trying to undermine the pastor, and she had not conspired with anyone. She only spoke her mind. Elizabeth stayed in the church because she “did not get a message [from God] that I should leave.” Further, Elizabeth explained that she believed the pastor’s own personality and character was set and that the pastor’s ways would not change. “We had to accept that,” she said. Elizabeth shows evidence of her own individuation and she shows understanding that other persons, even the pastor, also must individuate. The result was that Elizabeth adapted, and since that time, she says her faith life is stronger for it. Elizabeth was one of the few participants who clearly stated that the difficult experience strengthened her faith:

I think it made [my relationship with God] stronger because I stayed. I figured I was tough, and I talked with [God], and I kept going. I figured it's the right thing. I didn't get a message that it was the wrong thing, so I just kept going back over there and taking it and just ignoring it and turning around and talking with somebody that was friendly.... I didn't count on [the pastor] for any help at all, religious-wise. I did it on my own. I know what I was taught and what I had heard from other ministers.

Elizabeth shows her individuation through her memories and telling the story.

Lana also remembered and told early faith experiences that gave her a foundation on which she lived out a difficult and very disappointing time in the church in which she stated her beliefs and opinions even if they conflicted with others. James and Kim also shared pertinent and almost miraculous faith stories from their childhood that led to their own individuating experiences in adulthood. Kim made statements such as, "I was in this church long before the pastor came, and I'll be here long after the pastor leaves." Harsh as that may sound, she reveals the participant's ability to individuate. These participants revealed the link between individuation, reminiscence, and maturity.

Decisions. Research question one set the parameters for selecting participants with the qualification, "and decided to stay." Other than using the term as part of selection criterion, I did not expect to see decisions as a noteworthy factor of discipleship development in this church. During my third or fourth interview, I began to realize that as the people told their stories, they included statements that disclosed decisions and/or foundational attitudes or beliefs that guided the participants as each made sense of the problem and dealt with it.

Three types of decisions surfaced. First, I noticed decisions made prior to the testing experience. Prior decisions set a foundation for the participants to respond to the negative experience in the church. For example, one participant was taught as a youngster

that people of certain ethnic backgrounds were not the right kind of people with whom she should associate. As that participant aged and began forming friendships and asking, “Where will I find a spouse?” the participant realized she lived in an area where many people of *undesirable* ethnicity surrounded her. Confronted with that reality, he decided to go against his upbringing. Much later in life, her new assumption that people of those ethnicities can make good and trustworthy friendships became foundational as she dealt with a problem in the church.

The second type of decision I identified were decisions made during the events of the difficult situation that caused the participants to consider leaving the church. The third type of decision includes decisions made after, or as a result of, the events that caused the participants to consider leaving the church.

I will offer examples showing each type of decision. Norm, Tom, Suzanne, and Lana provide examples of decisions that derived from prior assumptions or decisions made before they experienced the trouble in VCUMC. Norm, Tom, and Suzanne gave evidence that they had a habit of deciding to dwell on positive aspects rather than focusing on negative life experiences. Early in his interview, Norm admitted that even though other members might bother or hurt him with harsh words, he decided not to dwell on his disappointment. Norm also admitted that he makes these decisions more easily as he gets older. Norm made a decision a long time ago not to dwell on the negative, and he continues that pattern as he dealt with new problems.

Tom showed that his prior attitudes and decisions help him keep a positive attitude and refrain from reacting too quickly to difficult situations helped him. He

preferred to let things settle down before responding to them. His earlier decision and pattern to remain positive helped him handle situations as he faced them.

Suzanne recalled many years ago being part of a neighborhood Bible study. One woman in that group tended to focus on spiritual warfare and looking for Satan crouching under every rock. In response to that woman, Suzanne decided to focus on positive aspects of God's presence in her life and in the world rather than looking for evil. Each of these persons revealed how their prior decisions affected later functioning in the church.

Lana gave a striking example of a prior belief that also revealed a powerful expression of the consequences of sin. Lana told the story of dealing with a difficult issue in the church. Hoping to help, a friend encouraged her simply to let go of her anxiety and let God's plan work through the problem. However, Lana replied, "Yeah, but people can really mess up God's plan!" I found Lana's conviction a refreshing understanding of the consequences of sin. In rudimentary terms, sin is people messing up God's plan. Lana's prior belief colored her treatment of the problem she faced.

Several stories illustrate the second type of decision: decisions made during the events that caused the people to consider leaving. One participant simply made the decision to return to the church during the conflict. I asked if her decision came quickly or if it came gradually. "The die was cast," she said, implying that because she had made the decision, she did not care whether the transition came slowly or quickly. Once she made the decision to stay in the church, she more easily dealt with the conflict. Staying in the church, she learned new things. The conflict diminished and eventually disappeared.

As Michael struggled with how to provide leadership after another layperson created some problems, he decided not to pursue, nor "hunt down," nor reprimand the

layperson causing trouble. His decision made during the conflict set his strategy to lead the church through the conflict.

Suzanne made the decision during her situation that she could stay because “the pastor will not be here forever.” Finally, another participant described her decision to “go with the flow” rather than to resist and “make waves” in the church. One participant clearly decided that “staying away won’t help the situation.” An exasperated spouse of another participant finally blurted out, “Stop complaining and get involved!” His conviction that involvement would lead toward improved relationships influenced his wife’s decision to stay involved. These illustrations show that decisions made during the events helped guide the participants by providing a turning point as they made sense of their experiences.

As she encountered her problem, Elizabeth made several small but influential decisions that related to her experience of God and in the church: “I decided that it wasn’t going to bother me.... God was more important to me than a little misunderstanding.... [N]o matter what happens, I’m staying. You’re stuck with me.” Finally, Elizabeth plainly agreed that she made a decision to stay close to God regardless of the treatment she received from the person with whom she experienced the problem. All these illustrations show decisions as turning points in the plot line as people worked through their negative experiences.

The third category involves decisions made as a result of the experiences that caused the participants to question leaving the church. As a result of their experiences, two participants decided no longer to associate with the persons (lay and/or clergy) who became the focus of their consideration to leave the VCUMC. Instead, they decided to

associate with others persons in order to solve their problem partially. For example, Suzanne disassociated herself from a couple people with whom she had conflict and spent more time with people who shared her beliefs. She seemed aware that her decision did not completely solve the problem, but she also knew that she would eventually begin to associate with the problem persons again. The source of conflict remained in the church, but decisions to avoid the source of that conflict helped the participants stay in the church. One of these persons said clearly that his faith grew through his experience through that time.

Some participants also revealed theological changes or decisions related to their understanding of God and the church because of their experience. Grace began to question, “Do you really need the church to believe in God?” She answered her own question with another: “On the other hand, can you grow spiritually and with your neighbors without attending a group at least?... And not just attending, but getting involved. To me, getting involved is more important.” As a result of her experiences, Grace decided to be less picky about her church experiences, and she concluded, “A lot of [conflict in the church] doesn’t have anything to do about God or your beliefs.” Grace’s trouble caused her to make theological conclusions and decisions.

Lana’s experience caused her to conclude that when things go badly in the church, many people are culpable, and placing blame on one or two persons rarely helps. Another participant concisely commented on a timeline that the experience “[m]ade me see that the church is not the pastor but the people. I am a part of the church and should not leave.” In these ways, the participants showed that they made decisions as a result of their experiences in the church.

Boundaries. A subcategory of decisions indicates that participants set up boundaries to guide their behavior and understanding. For two participants, setting up boundaries provided a safe way for them to continue functioning in the church. Not only did the self-determined boundaries prevent the participants from engaging in behaviors that would harm other persons, but the boundaries protected the participants' own identity and helped them maintain that identity in the church. Michael's self-discipline and decision not to chastise another member for acting inappropriately prevented Michael from making the situation worse. Suzanne set firm boundaries around her spiritual life. She simply stayed away from some people who did not believe the way she believed. Her boundaries protected and strengthened her own faith. She knew the strategy was defensive, but she also knew a time would come when she could let down the wall and let others in again. In the meantime, she strengthened contact with others who would encourage her.

Summary. The participants reminisced personal stories to answer research question two. They revealed, in part, that their spiritual growth involves matters related to the field of human development, and I have identified these developmental categories: maturity, individuation, decisions, and boundaries. These developmental issues are not disconnected from relationship issues, which also answer research question two.

Relationship Issues Revealed in Interviews

Research question two guided me to look at the interviews for evidence showing changes in each participant's relationship with God and with other persons. The information is presented under the following headings: improved relationships with God,

improved relationships with other humans, damaged relationships with God and other humans, involvement, and healing.

Improved relationships with God. Few people admitted in clear and simple terms that they had grown in their relationship with God as a result of the experience that caused them to consider leaving the VCUMC. Two participant responses are notable: Elizabeth's and Michael's. When I asked if the experience in the church affected her relationship with God, Elizabeth said, "I think it made it stronger because I stayed. I figured I was tough, and I talked with [God] and I kept going." While Elizabeth stated clearly that her experience caused her faith to grow, Michael hesitated. At first, Michael described his relationship with God as "malnourished." Throughout our conversation, however, Michael considered the larger picture of his time in the church. He realized that his relationship with God had improved, but at a much slower rate than he had expected or desired.

Because of her years at the church, Norma now has a much deeper sense of gratitude toward God and is grateful for working through the problem that caused her to consider leaving the VCUMC. Jack agreed that his faith had grown, but he could not say precisely that working through his issue caused his faith to grow. He is glad he stayed.

Relationships with other persons affect one's relationship with God. Two participants gave particularly vivid evidence that one's relationship with God is affected by one's relationship with other persons. In one participant's timeline, Tom noted that friends showed him how he had strayed from God and that he could come back, which the participant did. Another participant said how friends strengthen a person's relationship with God: "They kind of make you feel more connected with God.... They

help you see where God is working in your life. They recount ways that they think God is working in theirs, and it kind of strengthens my faith.” This participant named opportunities such working with others at the church as times when people share stories that encourage faith. Bible study groups, prayer groups, and worship certainly influence faith development, but this participant specifically named times where spontaneous conversations inspired her to grow closer with God.

When Monica decided to stay at the church, she felt a deep sense of purpose. She asked friends to pray with her as she discerned what to do. Finally, she decided, and friends confirmed, that God had a purpose for her staying in the church. The experience made her feel more connected with God and with the church because of the purpose God had for her. Her sense of purpose also provided direction for her activity in the church.

Even though these participants showed improved relationships with God, several participants said that they experienced no change, damage, or effect in their relationship with God. James and Kim said that their relationships with God were not affected by their negative experience in the church. Tom had difficulty determining whether or not his relationship with God had changed but later implied that it had improved. While angry with God, Diane determined not to turn away from God because of the situation. Grace expressed her commitment to God but not the church: “We would have found another church.” She implied that her relationship with God did not change because of her shaken relationships with other persons in the church. Lana, Kevin, and Monica said they did not perceive noticeable changes in their relationships with God.

James believes his conflict was between individual persons and excluded a problem with God. He separated his conflict with other persons from his relationship with God.

Michael believed the event that precipitated his consideration of leaving did not threaten his relationship with God. However, he later came to believe that the experience caused his relationship with God to grow less than he desired.

Each of these participants who either separated their church experience from their relationship with God or expressed the idea that the experience did not affect their relationship with God showed other evidence that their relationship with God had already been established on a solid foundation of faith and trust long before they experienced their difficulty in the church. When I asked the participants to tell me about their relationship with God, they reached deep into their memories for experiences with God. Some told stories of childhood healings. Others told stories of growing up in the church and the lessons they learned about God.

One man told the story about a time when he was ten years old. The family got a new puppy and the participant loved that puppy. A few months later, distemper sickened the puppy. The participant prayed hard for God to heal it. As he spoke, the participant made the story sound as if while the participant was praying, his father went to get a neighborhood policeman who came, took the dog into the garage, and shot it. The participant ended the story abruptly: "But I got over it." Surprised by the participant's curtailed ending, I wondered how that story, still in his memory seventy years later, affects his trust of God even to this day. Looking at that participant's faith-life timeline, I notice that he has repeatedly wondered about God's presence, care, and love in his life.

Also noted on the timeline, the participant named how God has repeatedly answered his questions by showing the participant over and over how God is present and how God loves and cares for him.

Another participant told stories of God's providence in very lean years. From these stories, I interpret that these participants said their relationship with God did not change because they had already experienced a firm foundation in their relationship with God. Their church experience provided a minor challenge in the larger perspective of their experience of faith in God.

Improved relationships with other humans. Participants identified improved relationships with other humans as part of their experience working through the issues that caused them to question leaving the church. Participants named positive changes in their relationships with other persons with greater ease and frequency than they identified changes in their relationships with God. Generally, improved relationships with other humans and with God have a connection with healing, which is why I will briefly discuss healing.

Participants spoke directly to the issue of building and strengthening bonds with others in the church. Because of Elizabeth's issue, she made a strong commitment to "stick with" certain other laypersons even if her choice caused her to break a bond with another person. She chose to take that risk. Norma's experience helped her realize that by staying and hearing other people's stories in life and faith, she felt a bond with others in the church. She is grateful for staying and developing bonds that make her life richer now. She recognized her need for friendship. Tom clearly spoke about the importance that his relationships with other persons had on his relationship with God. For him, other

persons provided accountability and inspiration to draw closer to God. He described the church “like family.” He would have an extremely difficult time leaving the church.

Michael found, after several years of staying in the church, new respect for the person with whom he had conflict earlier. In the years that passed, he learned new information that helped him understand the pressures that the other person experienced.

Lana experienced a restoration of confidence in the ability of a committee to work through difficult issues. Diane has built strong friendships because of her involvement. Jack experienced an improved relationship with the pastor. These persons provided evidence that when people stay in the church, they can improve relationships with other persons. However, relationships can also experience damage.

Damaged relationships with God and other humans. In contrast to persons who saw improvement in their relationship with God and others, some participants revealed damage from which they have not yet healed or recovered. James was unable to restore a good relationship with the pastor with whom he had conflict. Kim showed disappointment that her relationship with the pastor was ruined. Suzanne mentioned that she does not associate with some laypersons because of the conflict she experienced. Only one person considered that his relationship with God was weaker than before, but his deepest questions about God had nothing to do with the conflict he experienced in the church. Instead, his hardest questions to and about God stem from larger life experiences, such as natural disasters and war, that challenge his faith.

Other participants named damaged relationships that moved toward healing or restoration, but I need to name the damage they experienced. Lana, as mentioned earlier, concisely summarized the problem of sin when she said, “Some people can really screw

up God's plans." She referred to the mistakes made by committee members as they tried to work through an issue. "We all made mistakes. Big mistakes." The mistakes created a great loss of trust for Lana. However, as years passed, she recognized the restoration of trust within the committee.

Tom expressed strong frustration with other church members. He felt powerless to contribute to a solution because others said, "We'll handle it," without asking for or accepting help from other members. Michael, Norm, and Suzanne each withdrew from involvement because of what they saw happening in the church, but as they stayed connected, their concerns diminished. Elizabeth, who once felt ostracized, now feels included by the persons who ostracized her, though I would not describe the restored relationship as a strong friendship.

These examples show relationships damaged and then restored or being restored. One participant named damage in her relationship with God but that is being restored, also. The damage focused on feelings of abandonment by God and anger toward God. When someone embarrassed and hurt this participant, she felt that God was not working in her favor and had turned his back. However, as she worked through the issue, she made a determination not to walk away from God, though for a time she did leave the church. Because she returned, she now realizes that God had not abandoned her.

As I have described my observations about the relationships revealed by the participants' stories, two topics arise that need mention: involvement and healing.

Involvement. My analysis of the stories people told indicated that a person's involvement affected the outcome of the problem situation. Grace provided obvious evidence supporting the importance of involvement when she instructed her husband to

stop complaining and get involved. Diane attributes much of her success in staying in the church to other people's efforts to help Diane and her husband get involved. In Diane's situation, she had felt pushed aside. Other church members encouraged her to return and then additional church members invited her to get involved. At first the involvement came by simply helping to complete a one-time task, such as preparing for a rummage sale. As people learned more of Diane's interests and talents, they asked her to provide leadership for certain ministries. Church members also helped involve Diane's husband. She says that even in the nearly thirty years of their membership, "A Sunday does not pass when [Name] does not make a point to speak to [my husband.]" Diane's husband recognizes the positive changes in his life and faith simply because he became involved.

Norma attributes involvement in the church for providing her not only with encouraged faith but also with good friendships. She has often felt pride in being a very independent, strong person. However, Norma also felt alone much of the time. She accepted that reality, but she also knew that she needed friendships. Even though every person's story is different, Norma recognized that when people share their stories, they create bonds. Getting involvement provided opportunities for Norma to bond with others and God.

One couple specifically described their involvement in the church as the center of their family's social life. The husband said, "The longer I stay here, the more friends I get. I've become more involved in the church, and that has helped tremendously.... I wouldn't consider moving now."

Monica revealed an interesting point about involvement. For some participants, such as Diane, involvement helped them decide to stay at VCUMC. However, Monica

decided to stay in the church and then her involvement increased. Through prayer and consultation with others outside the church, Monica discerned God has a purpose for her here. She decided to stay. As a result, she increased her involvement. She made new commitments to help in a number of areas where she could contribute to church life. If I listed the areas of her involvement, I would reveal her identity. Monica's sense of purpose and direction inspired her involvement in the church and energized her relationship with God, others in the church, and her own sense of self-identity.

Healing. When I refer to healing, I include healing of relationships, emotions, and spiritual concerns.

Involvement helped bring healing to Diane. Without participating in the church, she says she would not have experienced the healing she did. Remembering and especially telling her story also helped Diane heal. After Diane told her story, she remembered the sharp edge of her pain. She felt surprised by the strength of the pain even after so many years had passed. She realized that she held on to the experience too long. The night she told her story to others, Diane prayed and asked to God to take her pain. When I met with Diane to follow up with her story, before I could start my audio recorder, she began, "I have to tell you what happened after I told you my story." I immediately interrupted her and asked, "Can you hold that thought until I start the recorder? I think what you're going to say next is important for my research." She agreed, and I captured the rest of her story of letting go of the pain. She felt a great release and deeper connection with God in her healing of painful memories.

Another participant told a powerful story of healing. For him, the healing stemmed not from the specific frustrating experience in the church that caused him to

question leaving. Instead, the healing came from painful childhood and young-adult family memories. Growing up with a turbulent relationship with his father, after the father died, this participant experienced a recurring dream. The dream repeated the same images of his father that showed some of his physical ailments that resulted from his difficult life. Finally, one night when the son had the dream, he noticed a change. In the dream, the father's ailments had been healed. The son woke from his dream and knew that "everything was all right." Sensing God's healing in the father's life, the son found peace. This participant's dream powerfully communicated God's presence, love, and healing to the participant. That personal spiritual experience affected how the participant handled the difficult issue in the church. The participant, confident of God's grace, waited for God to work in the church. In some ways, the participant is still waiting for God to heal persons in the VCUMC.

Summary. Developmental issues and relationship Issues helped to answer research question two. Developmental issues can be divided into the subcategories of individuation, maturity, decisions, and boundaries. The complex relationship issues subdivide into improved relationships with God, improved relationships with other humans, damaged relationships with God and other humans, involvement, and healing. Figure 4.1 diagrams these divisions and suggests connections among them. Reminiscences and stories provided the general context in which the participants talked about their growth as followers of Jesus Christ and their experiences at the VCUMC.

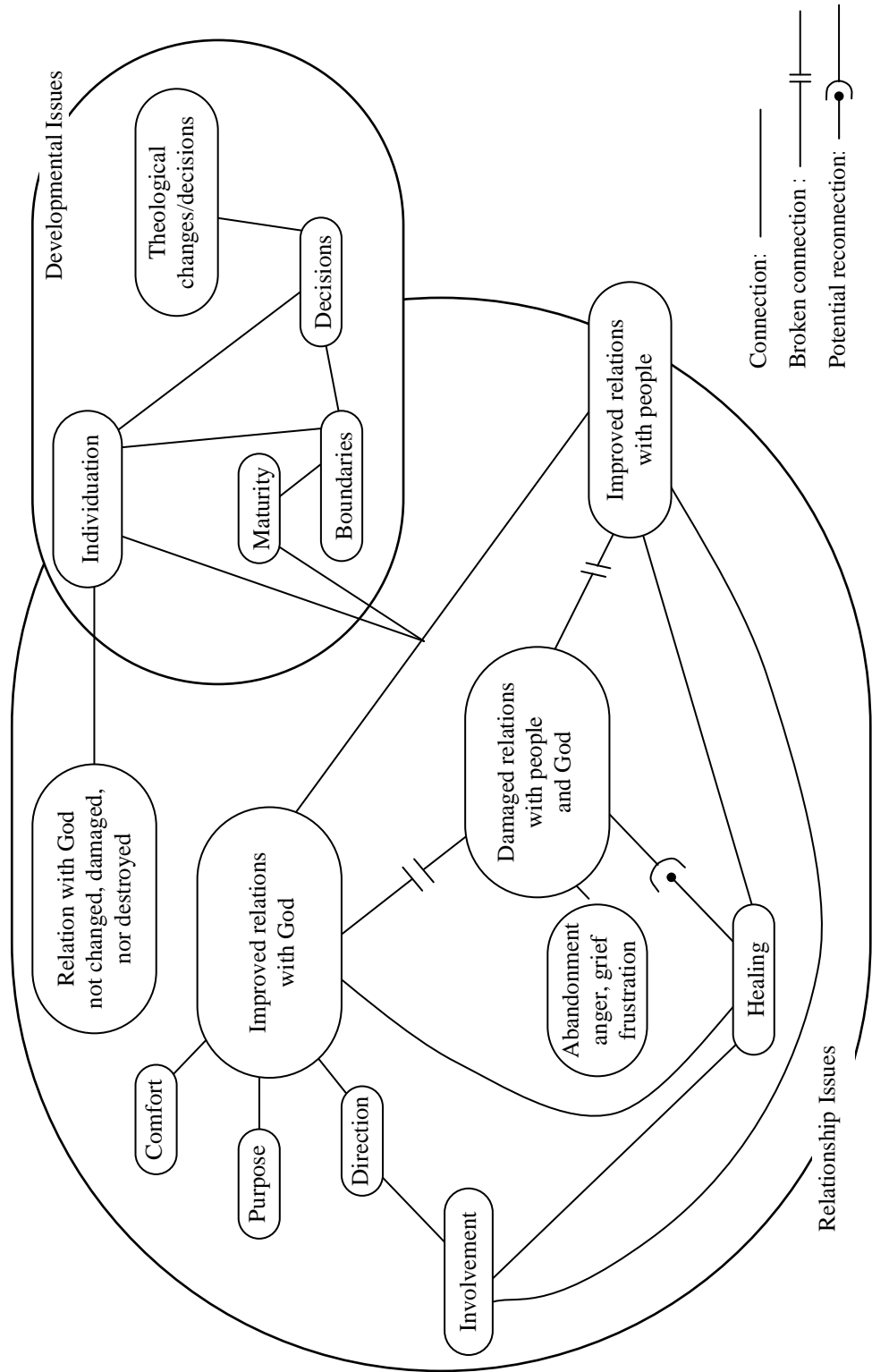


Figure 4.1. Topics revealed through remembering stories of faith and life.

Principles to Guide Discipling Ministries

Research question three asked, “What principles or concepts emerged from the data that might guide the church to reflect on and adjust, if needed, its mission to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ?” Understanding the congregation more fully was one of the goals of this project. I also wanted to provide suggestions for improvement in the discipling ministries of the congregation. Research question three assists the transition from gathering information and describing the experiences of people in the church to designing practices and programs within the congregation that might influence greater discipleship growth in the congregation. I identify four critical concepts from the interviews that may guide the church as it seeks to strengthen its ministries of discipleship: storytelling, reminiscences, developmental processes (including maturation, individuation, and decisions/attitudes/beliefs), and involvement in the church.

Within the context of remembering life experiences, all the participants told stories in order to answer the general questions that started each interview. Each participant told a story of an experience in the church that caused him or her to question leaving the church. Then I asked each person to reflect and tell how that experience and her or his decision to stay in the church affected the participant’s relationship with God. The discovery that none of the participants easily or simply answered that question surprised me. As the participants attempted to answer the question about their relationship with God, the stories they presented reached further into the participants’ life experiences. Many persons told stories from childhood in order to understand and illuminate how their relationship with God might have changed throughout their time in the VCUMC.

Storytelling

If reminiscing gave the participants a tool to dig up valuable life experiences, telling the story provided a conduit for the participants to express and share those memories. After I failed to get the kind of concise responses about discipleship growth that I anticipated, I realized that people simply kept telling me more stories. I reacted with surprise, and a lot of frustration. When I asked, “How did your negative experience in our church affect your relationship with God?” I expected to hear a simple answer such as, “I drew closer to God,” or “I prayed more,” or, “I heard a sermon that taught me how to deal with the situation, and I was grateful to God.” Instead of asking multiple-choice survey questions that would have limited responses, I asked open-ended questions that allowed the participants to determine the kind of data they returned to me. Frustrated with my disorderly data, I decided to look again. I found that one common factor among the interviews: Each participant told stories about their life experiences. I began to think that telling stories plays a role in forming disciples. Then I recalled that Jesus used many stories to teach, and so do I since I hope to follow his model. I also added storytelling as a topic to explore in the literature review to see what other authors might have to say about storytelling and discipleship growth.

I have already recounted and alluded to many of the stories told by the participants. I return to Diane’s story. Diane illustrated healing in her relationships with God and others. Her experience also illustrates that telling a story of life and faith experiences can bring a change in a person’s faith. After Diane waited for me to start the recorder, she told me of her powerful realization:

What I was going to say is when I came home that night, I said [to myself], “You know, I’ve carried this hurt,” and by that point it wasn’t

anger anymore, it was hurt. So I said, “Enough is enough. God you can have it, I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want any part of it.” [Since then my husband] and I have tried to talk about it, and I couldn’t remember details.... [God] really did take it,... the hurt and the anger that was here initially was so intense.

With gratitude, she told me how telling her story brought healing. Because of time, I did not have similar follow-up conversations with other participants to know if simply telling their stories assisted their healing and growth.

Telling their stories seemed to help Tom and Michael keep things in perspective and to continue patiently working toward hopeful changes in the church. Norma identified that being able to tell her story to others and listening to others’ stories helped create bonds with other persons. From her perspective, she realized her own need for friendships even though (perhaps because of the) many times she found herself alone in life, depending on no one but herself. Now she is grateful for the opportunities she has had in the church to hear and share simple stories of life together:

We all realize we each ... have our own lives. Each and every one of us knows we have our way of thinking about different things.... All through our lives we go through a different path, and we have stories to tell, whether they’re good or bad, but we’ve all got stories, so we’ve got this bond.

Norma uncovered the power of storytelling to build bonds and relationships, which affect discipleship growth.

Remembering

As the participants told stories and we talked about what that story meant for the participants’ faith lives and relationships with God, every participant reached back into personal history to search for understanding of their relationships with God.

One participant remembered when his faith became deeply personal in college. As a student from a small town, he remembered his feelings when he entered college with a class of three thousand other students. Away from home, he did not understand why he felt so alone when so many people surrounded him. He turned to God at that crucial time in his young life. As he continued to reminisce throughout his interview, he remembered other experiences in which he reached out to make new friends and, over the years, he returned to relationships established many years earlier. I know this man as a person who can find a friend wherever he goes. Near the end of his interview, he remembered his father saying, "A stranger is just a friend I haven't met yet." Reminiscing may provide tools for discipleship growth.

Another participant remembered early experiences with God. He remembered going to church with his grandparents. They gave him no option but to participate in the seasonal plays and recitations, which he resented. He is the participant who remembered when his family got a new puppy. The participant quickly formed a strong bond with Jumpy, so when Jumpy came down with distemper, the young boy prayed "hard that God would heal it." As the participant told the story, he talked as if while he was praying for God to heal Jumpy, his father went down the street, got the local policeman who took Jumpy into the garage and shot him. "That's what they did in those days," he explained. I recall my feeling of disappointment when he ended his story abruptly without explaining how he dealt with his feelings about his dog, his father, or God. I wanted him to tell me more about how he "got over it," but he offered nothing more at that time.

When I asked that participant to complete a timeline, he expanded his reminiscing. I noticed a pattern throughout his life. The pattern shows times of

questioning: “God, are you there? Do you care? Will you do what you say you’ll do?” The questions are followed by answers: “God, you did do it. You do love me. You are there.” At the end of this participant’s timeline, he writes, “Each of these [memories] helps ensure that God is real.” I cannot help but think that his experience with Jumpy helped set up the pattern of questioning God’s reality. As an older man, he continues to ask the question, but his skill of reminiscing helps provide the answer that brings comfort to him because of his faith.

Reminiscing empowered each participant to reach back into life’s experiences and recall memories with which the participants made meaning of life and faith. I recognize that all the participants in this research project have religious experiences and faith-forming memories. Today’s society includes many people who do not have such a wealth of memories potent for forming faith. However, I cannot conclude that people without religious memories will never have faith in Jesus Christ. Memories of religious experiences provide only part of these participants’ resources for developing trust in God. Memories of nonreligious experiences also may lead persons to reflect on God and God’s work in their lives. For example, one couple remembered a time when an accident put both husband and wife in the hospital. Their young children had to step up as the family endured the long recuperation of the mother. This nonreligious experience provided many opportunities for that couple to remember the ways God provided, encouraged, strengthened, and healed members of the family. Persons who grow up without a history of attending church may also find places in their past through which they can recognize God’s presence and work.

For the participants in this research, naming past experiences (religious and nonreligious) came far more frequently than naming a Bible study group, sermon, or even prayer as the stimulant for growth in their relationships with God. I do not diminish the role of Bible reading and study, worship, and personal prayer as means for growing in faith; however, I intend to highlight the rich resource to spiritual growth afforded by the act of reminiscing. Grace struck the reminiscing chord when she admitted late in her interview, “Our main problem, I suppose, is that we don’t stop to think in a chain, or recall of any order what’s happened to us.”

I list some of the memories named by participants:

- A participant remembers that when he was a boy, his father took him to a faith healer because of a persistent ailment. The faith healer prayed for the boy. Since then this participant has never had a problem with that illness.
- One participant remembered the years in her home where she experienced abuse. “You have to remember,” she says, “there were just so many things that happened when we were growing up. You didn’t walk away from adversity. You stood there.” In later years, she recounted experiences that healed some of her emotional wounds from her childhood pain.
- Another participant remembered, as a middle-aged man, passing a woman in a hall at work. As they exchanged a “good morning” greeting, he recalls a great feeling of beauty and awe. He thought, “This must be God’s face.” He has never had that sensation before or since, but he says, “I feel experiences throughout life where God did touch my life, and I was aware of it at the moment. It wasn’t an afterthought or something that happened before, but it was a momentary feeling, . . . a peacefulness.”

- A couple remembered two experiences in which their children were in great danger, but by God's providence, they moved to safety.
- Two participants recalled the illness and death of a parent. In each, the child's life changed dramatically.

Stories such as these illustrate the strength and value of taking time to remember past experiences. Stories can be harvested to nurture faith development.

Developmental Processes

Participants told stories and made comments that suggest the importance of human and faith developmental processes. More specifically, they revealed the ideas of maturation, individuation, and the influence of decisions, beliefs, and attitudes on a person's experience in the church and faith formation.

Maturation. Participants showed awareness that people tend to change, grow, and mature over time. As participants worked through their own awareness of maturing, they showed awareness that other persons in the church could also be placed on a growth spectrum. Becoming aware that others moved toward maturity helped the participants give themselves and others space and time to mature.

Norm recalled two experiences when he matured and was able to deal with a problem for no other reason than he simply matured. He described how he used to get irritated at the beginning of worship because people kept visiting with one another rather than sitting quietly preparing to worship. He remembers the day when he realized that the chatter before worship might be a positive activity. He eventually realized that the time before worship provided an opportunity for sharing life with others. The chatter became a positive aspect of Norm's worship experience. Norm also said that as he gets older, he

more easily ignores negative comments, which used to annoy and offend him, and he is able to focus on positive thoughts.

Similar to Norm, Jack admitted that the older he gets, the more interested he becomes in God. He could not explain it, but he remembered his busy middle years when he worked and raised his family. He did not attend church much and did not think much of God. However, as he matured through life's stages, he became more aware of God, learned to study the Bible, and grew in his relationship with God. During this time, Jack experienced the problem in the church that caused him to question leaving. As he worked through his problem in the church, he also connected with influential other persons who encouraged him to mature in his faith.

Diane noticed the important role other persons play in helping people mature. As she and her husband worked through their difficulty in the church, others spoke to them, encouraged them, invited them, and included George and Diane in the church's activities. She remembered the time when she visited a neighbor who sincerely asked Diane to reconsider leaving. Although Diane's husband said very little in their interview, he said that he was surprised that people in the church remembered him from his childhood. The people who remembered him provided strong encouragement by making him feel welcomed and comfortable in the church. Their memory of George helped him grow through the difficult time.

My analysis of the interviews suggests that to mature, people need time, space, skills and resources to do it. Persons in my study gave others in the church time and space to grow up. Comments relating to setting boundaries, which I include in developmental processes, give people space in which they can grow. When Michael set a boundary that

he would not pursue “and chastise” a person in the church for improper behavior, Michael not only set a boundary for himself, but he set a boundary for the other layperson. Michael committed himself to honor the boundary. As Michael stayed in the church, he found that both he and the other person matured over time. In their maturity, they deepened their respect for each other.

By skills and resources for maturing, I refer to the ability to reflect on one’s position or place in the maturing process. I also refer to the life experiences over which one can reflect. I remember Grace’s insightful comment that people make a mistake by not taking time to reflect on life experiences and to consider how God’s presence works into a person’s life. She acknowledges both the skill of reflecting and resources of life experiences that can bring growth.

Individuation. Still in the context of developmental topics revealed by the participants, individuation or the concept of identifying and defining one’s own identity as distinct from others relates to the issue of maturation because individuation is part of the maturation process (Fowler, *Stages of Faith*; Kegan). As participants made sense of their experiences, they revealed personal decisions, beliefs, and attitudes that affected how each one dealt with the situation. One strong statement exemplifying this kind of individuation came during one woman’s interview:

I decided that [the problem] wasn’t going to bother me. I thought my church, my religion, my God was more important to me than a little misunderstanding that was already over with. It did take a while, and I was glad [when] it was over.”

Her sense of self and faith helped this woman stay in the church, prioritize relationships, and endure to the end of the situation. She continued to explain her desires: “I wanted to

stay. I didn't want to leave. I thought, no matter what happens, I'm staying. You're stuck with me. I'm not going to leave because something like this is happening."

This participant told how she came to take responsibility for her own faith journey. She grew up in a Christian home and attended a United Methodist church. She recalled the pastors who influenced her. She also recalled how her mother lived faithfully following Jesus Christ. After the participant married and moved to another town, she tried several churches but gave up after failing to find one in which she felt comfortable. Several years later, her mother asked, "When are you going to transfer your membership to a church near you?"

The daughter replied, "I did not want to offend you by taking my membership away from our home church." The mother said, "You won't offend me. You need to get established in a church where you live now!" The daughter visited VCUMC and has been here ever since, feeling comfortable with the people. Her story portrays part of how her faith became her own, differentiated from her mother's faith.

Other participants also showed that their personal encounters with God established a spiritual and faith identity with God. Evidence from my interviews suggests that personal experiences that came during the participants' childhood, adolescence, and young adult years have greater impact in forming a spiritual relationship with God than the later experience that caused them to question leaving the church. As participants faced the challenge, they reached back to their understanding and experience with God, formed earlier, so that they might find resources to face their present challenge.

Positive or negative, participants tended to distinguish their relationship with God from their relationships with other persons in the church. Grace illustrates that idea when

she said, "I would have found another church." She indicated confidence that her relationship with other persons would not destroy her relationship with God. She separated human relationships from her divine relationship, an individuating task.

Individuation may also contribute to unity in the church. When Tom stated his opinion at a church meeting, people knew and understood Tom for what he said. However, if persons fear that others in the church will shun them if they say what they really think, people will not learn their true identity. Being able to individuate and express one's opinions helps form boundaries between people in a congregation. The boundaries contribute to the personality and identity of the congregation. Aware of the congregation's identity, individuals can appreciate the congregation's uniqueness. Participating in a church where everyone values each other's opinions, beliefs, and attitudes generates a church that can recognize each person's contribution to the whole body of Christ.

Decisions, beliefs, and attitudes. Decisions played a powerful role in the participants' experiences and how they navigated the issues that caused them to question leaving the church. I had completed four interviews before I realized that I needed to pay attention to the decisions, beliefs, and attitudes of the participants. I found that all participants reveal moments where each person made a cognitive, intellectual decision to do something about to their situation. In other words, each person learned something or applied a lesson from a previous experience to his or her current experience. For example, Kim decided simply to forget the matter with the pastor and move on with her relationships with other persons. Elizabeth decided not to let the behavior of other church members bother her or push her out of the church. Kevin's decision that pastors are not

perfect helped him understand his situation and deal with it accordingly. Monica decided that God had a greater purpose for her and staying in the church allowed her to fulfill that purpose.

First, participants showed decisions from earlier life experiences that set up their responses to the situation that caused them to question leaving the church. For example, Suzanne had made an earlier decision in life to focus on positive spirituality rather than negative. Her decision rose out of an experience in a Bible study group in which a woman in the group focused on spiritual warfare. Suzanne watched that woman hyper-focus to look for spiritual battles against Satan. As a result, Suzanne decided to focus on Jesus rather than on Satan and evil in the world.

Second, participants showed decisions made during the difficult experience that caused them to question leaving the VCUMC. For example, while he worked through his issue, Jack decided to return to the church. Norm decided to stay in the church because he decided that no matter where he attended, he would find people who would irritate him. His decision challenged him to grow to learn how to deal with the people who bothered him. This second type, beliefs that came in the midst of the experience, created a fulcrum in the action. The decision identified a shift, a turning point, in the experience. Monica's decision to stay in the church completely shifted her attitude toward the problem. After her decision to stay, her involvement in the church changed, and even though the stimulus that caused the difficulty remained, Monica found peace and purpose in the church. Kevin's decision that "the church is not the pastor but the people and [I am] part of the church" provided a turning point for him. Norma experienced a turning point when she realized the error of her opinion about the pastor. When Norm decided to stop

complaining and get involved, he turned a corner in his relationship with others in the church.

Third, participants revealed decisions made as a result of the experience in the church. Lana decided to learn something from the experience. Her decision came partially from a prior commitment to learn from every life experience, but after the event, she was determined to glean a lesson from it.

The participants revealed their prior attitudes that affected their relationships. Tom revealed his attitudes: “Over the years a couple of incidents between the pastor and parishioners have caused feelings that could drive me away, but I’ve found that no one is perfect and bad feelings go away.” Tom set an attitude to remain positive and to wait out bad feelings.

Involvement in the Church

Participants in my study repeatedly commented how involvement in the church kept them in the church and moving toward greater understanding of themselves, the church, and God. Participants’ involvement in the church affected their relationship with God.

Monica said deciding to stay in the church provided a turning point for her involvement in the church, which allowed her to fulfill the purpose she sensed God had for her staying in the VCUMC. Staying involved reduced Monica’s anxiety about the issue that caused her to question leaving and increased her ability to tolerate the problem for several more years. The problem did not go away quickly, but with her purpose and involvement, she endured it. Endurance, according to James, chapter 1, is part of maturing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Again, I admire the participant who admonished

her husband to get involved rather than sit back, fume, and complain. She showed great wisdom and love.

When people who considered leaving the church got involved, they relied on other persons to help deal with the difficult situation. Laypersons who had conflict with the pastor turned to other laypersons for help. As Norma reminded me, people began sharing their life stories with one another and built a bond. They built community within the church, a component of maturing faith. They went to other laypersons to find support, information, and to discover potential strategies to deal with the situation. Elizabeth decided she was not going to leave the church simply because of conflict with her pastor. She also determined not to leave the church because of the way a few laypersons treated her. Instead, she determined to increase her loyalty to other laypersons. Her action may have created an *us against them* conflict, but it never developed to that extent. Because of the boundaries the various groups established, people got involved in unofficial small groups (an idea affirmed in much church growth literature) where the small group members shared their experiences and supported one another. I have a hard time saying that such small groups—some people might call them factions that could cause division in the church—are a basis for discipleship development. However, Elizabeth, believes that through her experience, she grew closer to God and to the laypersons with whom her loyalty increased.

Tom's interview reminded me of every person's need for a network of people for support throughout all of life. When Tom entered college, he realized his loneliness even when a class of three thousand peers surrounded him. His involvement in the church kept him grounded not only to stave off loneliness but also to maintain a healthy and balanced

life. Lana experienced grief because people left the church after a controversy. Her anguish came because people lost their involvement in the church. For Lana and Tom, involvement in the church helped people grow through difficult situations. Isolation usually brings little good. When I compared the transcripts of George, Michael, Diane, and Suzanne, I noticed that involvement in the church where the conflict or problem exists offers the richest environment for nurturing growth. When persons leave the church, they force separation from persons who may help them grow, even if they perceive those persons to be *the enemy*. My research affirms what Joy has written about moral failures of clergy in which he lays out a plan for churches to maintain relationships with the pastor who failed morally, and his family, in order to effect healing within the pastor, his family, and the congregation (“Congregational Recovery” 14-17). My participants suggest, too, that the environment where the pain occurs may provide healing resources.

The comparison of Suzanne’s, Elizabeth’s, and Michael’s interviews revealed that staying with the church allowed them to grow in a way that they would not have experienced if either of them had left the church. They learned to respect other persons and the differences among them, but their respect for others helped them feel connected within the church.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I have presented results of my comparative analysis of the participant interviews in order to answer the three research questions. I followed my planned analysis process in order to interpret and organize the findings from the interviews. Within the context of reminiscing and storytelling, the participants revealed

their experiences of considering leaving the church (research question one). The participants remembered stories that identified pastoral conflict and laity relationship issues, committee and administrative functioning issues, and spiritual growth issues that caused them to question leaving the church. I continued my analysis to organize the findings into categories that described changes each participant experienced in her or his relationship with God and others in the church (research question two). Findings for research question two revealed a complex mixture of relationships divided into two categories. The first category dealt with the developmental issues of maturation, individuation, decisions, and boundaries. The second category dealt with the following relationship issues: improved relationship with God, improved relationships with other humans, damaged relationships with God and humans, involvement, and healing. Finally in Chapter 4, I presented findings that answer research question three by showing four critical principles that may help the church reflect on its discipling ministries: storytelling, reminiscence, developmental processes (maturation, individuation, decisions, beliefs, and attitudes) and involvement.

One desired outcome of this project was to present a list of concepts or principles that may guide the church leadership to strengthen its discipling ministries. Based on the four identified principles, I present the following statements, which summarize my findings, upon which the church leadership may reflect in order to strengthen its discipling ministries. As pastor, I commit to help the VCUMC follow through with a process of reflection on these statements so that the church can adjust its ministries in order to achieve the church's mission more fully.

The leaders of the Vestal Center United Methodist Church may improve the congregation's discipling ministries by intentionally implementing strategies based on the following four principles:

1. Storytelling—Participants showed that they had opportunities to tell their life and faith-related stories as a way for persons to make sense of their experiences and to guide spiritual growth.

2. Reminiscing—Throughout their years in the VCUMC, participants found opportunities to reminisce and remember life experiences to harvest them for spiritual growth.

3. Developmental processes—Participants experienced the time, space, and freedom within the church community to mature. They showed processes of maturation, individuation, decision making, attitude change, and expression of beliefs.

4. Involvement—The evidence showed that greater involvement increased opportunities for growth but did not guarantee it. The quality of involvement is more important than the quantity of involvement.

Chapter 5 evaluates, interprets, and attempts to integrate these four major findings in light of the interviews, literature reviewed, and theological foundations. It also presents the implications, limitations, and recommendations for application of these findings.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter 5 interprets and evaluates the findings of the study in light of observations from the interviews, literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and theological foundations identified in Chapter 1. The four major findings listed at the end of Chapter 4 set the foundation for discussion here. Each major finding corresponds to a major heading in this chapter followed by discussion that interprets, evaluates, and integrates the observations, literature, theological foundations, and implications of the finding, and suggests applications. The chapter concludes with a postscript that describes the impact this project has had on my life and ministry.

Storytelling

Based on this project, I conclude that a congregation may strengthen its discipling ministry by understanding the power and processes of storytelling. A congregation may further extend its discipling ministry by creating and implementing educational strategies based on storytelling. This section combines evidence from the observations, literature review, and theological foundations to support the conclusion. By storytelling, I do not refer necessarily to a formal gathering of children around the feet of a teacher. I use storytelling generally in reference to a person telling another person about an experience, thoughts, feelings, and/or actions in response to living daily life. The stories may be short, and simple and told in a matter of minutes; however, some stories may weave together many life experiences to show a lifelong plot.

The stories told by the participants in this project spoke about life and faith experiences. I cannot define clearly what kind of stories influence or do not influence discipleship growth. I can only observe that the stories told by the participants reflected a large range of life experiences. If I isolated those stories from this project, I may not identify them as affecting faith at all. However, because the participants told those stories to answer faith-related questions, they applied those stories to their faith growth. Stories that influence discipleship formation may come from childhood experiences, adult experiences, experiences within a family, at work, or at play. Stories that have the potential to influence discipleship development may come from unlimited sources. According to the participants, a person's willingness to reflect on life experiences in the context of faith formation seems to make a particular story useful to the nurture of a person's faith. Any story may affect faith if a person chooses to reflect on it for the purpose of finding that story's influence on faith matters.

Discussion

Part of my own faith story includes learning to play the piano as a child. My mother had one goal for my piano lessons: learning to play church hymns. I remember struggling to learn to play the old gospel tune *I Love to Tell the Story* (Fischer). During the recital at the end of the season, I played the song so poorly that I never wanted to hear or sing it again. To this day I cannot hear that song without remembering my embarrassment during the recital. I confess that as a pastor I cannot recall a time that I have used that song during a worship service. I lament my distaste for that song and the experience, yet the song still conveys the power of stories:

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.

I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. (Hankey)

I do love to tell the story, but I cannot play the tune.

Another part of my own faith story comes from my high school days. In the school yearbook, each senior class member could choose a quotation to have printed under his or her picture. I briefly considered what to put under my picture. I knew I wanted a quote from the Bible, but I could not think of an appropriate verse in the short time I was given to choose. Almost like playing roulette, my finger pointed to Romans 1:16. The verse sounded good at the time, so I submitted the quote to the yearbook staff. Years later, after I struggled to discern God's call on my life, I realized that verse had become much more meaningful and descriptive of my life than I ever imagined. I never paused to reflect how selecting that verse and publishing it beneath my high school picture might have affected me, but I realized that the verse had tattooed my life: "I am not ashamed of the gospel [the good story] of Jesus Christ for it [the good story] is the power of God for the salvation of the world" (my paraphrase). Story has become an indelible mark on my life. One may argue, therefore, that I was preconditioned to observe the importance of stories in the lives of the people who participated in this study, yet the evidence speaks loudly to me, even without my preconditioned awareness, that stories weave life and faith experiences.

As I noted in the theological foundations established in Chapter 1, the human ability to tell a story reflects the creative character of God because when people tell stories, they at least attempt to put life in order. My interview with Grace pointed to the importance and need for making sense of life experiences. Grace has recognized her

failure, and that of many persons', to see God's plot line in human experiences. Telling one's story helps persons to order their experiences. God's word gave order to the creation. God's word and human words can create order and meaning from lives. My project contributed to the participants' opportunity to grow spiritually by calling them to remember and tell their life experiences. I provided them an opportunity to see the chain of events that helped form their identity.

Hall also connects how storytelling works to make life experiences spiritually meaningful. His lengthy dissertation, following the Science of Foundational Human Formation (SFHF), combines his own experiences of telling a story during a sermon and how that experience contributes to his understanding of God's calling on his life. The SFHF, attributed to van Kaam, has the goal of "understanding what it means to be a spiritual person, that is, a distinctively human person" (Hall 463). Hall explored the impact of storytelling on his own spiritual formation. He shows that telling a story helps a person reflect on experiences. The act of reflecting on an experience creates a dialogical movement between apprehension and appreciation of the value of the story and the possible growth that might come from the reflection experience (295). The dialogical movement broadens the ability of the story to impact the formation of the person.

The field of counseling also contributes to understanding the power of storytelling in spiritual and faith formation. I refer specifically to narrative counseling and narrative pastoral counseling resources. Hall, along with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, supports my understanding that storytelling contributes to faith development and suggests that when a congregation prepares and encourages people to tell stories, people will be

encouraged to make sense and meaning of life and to strengthen their relationships with one another and with God.

My research observed that telling stories builds bonds with other persons. In her interview, Norma stated the principle clearly: “All through our lives we go through a different path, and we have stories to tell, whether they’re good or bad, but we’ve all got stories, so we’ve got this bond.” Norma appreciates the bonds she forms telling and hearing stories.

One participant clearly admitted the spiritual benefit of telling her story. She realized how harboring the story for many years had pressed the pain deeper into her life. After Diane told her story, she admitted being surprised at the strength of the emotions even after so many years. She drove home the night after telling her story to a group in the church and prayed, “God, you can have it. I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want any part of it.” A few weeks later, I sat down with her again, and she told me about the change she experienced.

Diane exemplified a sequence of events suggested by the literature: (1) a story is told, (2) realization of the untold story’s power, (3) freedom from the power of the untold story, and (4) a new realized ability to manage or deal with certain aspects of the story. Margaret Ann Crain identifies, “Story is both the content and the method of religious education” (244), and Adam discusses the possibility that one characteristic of a postmodern world is its receptiveness to the idea that story provides a metaphor for making meaning of life (261). All these pieces of evidence combine to suggest that a church may strengthen its discipling ministry by understanding and employing strategies based on storytelling.

Implications

The use of stories is already woven into the discipling work of Christianity. I suggest here, specifically, that when the VCUMC focuses on developing ways to use stories, the church may find greater effectiveness in its discipling ministries. Future research would be needed to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of specific storytelling strategies for discipling ministries.

Application

Inspired by Browning's success with Christ the King Community churches that deemphasize centralized church structure, congregations may create a movement using storytelling rather than institutionalizing those strategies programmatically. For example, the VCUMC may find simple ways to encourage people to tell their stories. The movement may begin by one person deciding to be vulnerable and tell another person a story about working through a problem that ended with a deeper trust of God. One of the participants of this project might be willing to tell his or her story of a time when they considered leaving the church but decided to stay. One by one, I can encourage people to tell their story to inspire others. As Browning values the "family room" (112) atmosphere over a formal living room atmosphere, people would be more open to tell stories and have conversations for learning if they do it in a comfortable space. The VCUMC might create storytelling space by encouraging persons to gather informally, such as having time for coffee and refreshments after worship or simply take advantage of serendipitous conversations that allow persons to tell a story to encourage faith in the listener. Baker, Jenson, and Kolb dedicate an entire chapter to creating "conversational learning space" (101-23).

A more organized approach may include planning for seminars on storytelling with an emphasis on the spiritual aspects of storytelling. Complementing storytelling, the VCUMC might offer classes that teach listening skills with the goal of helping people understand the storytelling as a means for sharing faith. The storytelling and listening opportunities are limitless, and church members may find themselves spontaneously hearing a story—perhaps only a few sentences long—in the middle of the parking lot after a church dinner or maybe even in the lot of a local grocery store. Persons who become skilled in listening will undoubtedly elicit stories from neighbors and coworkers and result in being Christ's comforting and healing presence in the world.

Storytelling may also be used during formal and informal worship times. Preaching and teaching offer convenient settings for stories. Prayer times may be enhanced when participants tell their story to God. A problem-based prayer may be guided to help the person praying imagine and narrate a desired outcome and then ask for God's help, assistance, and will to be realized. From narrative pastoral counseling, a church committee dealing with a problem, might apply the narrative counseling technique of imagining a situation with the problem suddenly gone. The committee might imagine and tell stories of how the church might change because they are free from the problem. Telling a story like that can inspire individuals and committees. Dinkins calls this tactic the miracle question, and he presents it as if speaking to a person who has come to him for help: "Suppose that while you sleep tonight, God performs a miracle and you find that [the problem] is no longer with you when you awake tomorrow: what would that be like for you?" (58). The question calls a person to envision a future with God's work and grace powerfully present. Individuals may commit to rise every morning and imagine

what the day would be like if God performed a miracle. The strategy might greatly inspire individuals and church groups to envision new things for themselves or a congregation.

Evaluation

Applying the evaluative tests appropriate for my research method, I find that this conclusion fits the evidence from both the literature review and the interviews of the participants. Even though I did not immediately notice how important the stories were to the participants' faith development, the finding came directly from the interviews. The participants told many stories related to their faith experience. The finding is also relevant to the evidence gathered from other sources. The finding works and applies to life. Diane's story has shown that telling one's story impacts discipleship. Finally, the findings from this research method must be modifiable. The idea that storytelling influences discipleship formation is modifiable as new information may be gathered or as the concept is applied to different situations within the context of discipling ministry. For example, the finding is modifiable to discipling people of any age—children, youth, or adults. Storytelling may also be modified to work in worship applications just as much as they may be modified to work in leadership development applications. Storytelling, as a finding from this research method, passes the tests of fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability.

Remembering

The second major finding stated as a recommendation to strengthen the discipling ministries of the VCUMC deals with reminiscence: Create an atmosphere with opportunities for persons to reminisce and remember life experiences to harvest them for

spiritual growth. The discussion below integrates observations from the interviews, the literature review, and theological foundations.

Discussion

As participants told stories to answer the second research question, the interviews produced a complicated mixture of memories and experiences. One participant remembered that his grandparents gave him no choice whether to attend church as a child. Others reached back in their history to recollect powerful stories about God's protection and providence in their lives. All of the participants remembered life experiences that they connected to their understanding of God and their experiences in relationship with God. For the participants, reminiscing excavated life experiences and dug up nuggets of life's hardest and most glorious times. The participants told stories about those nuggets and discovered the value of the memory. The use of the timeline provided participants with an additional tool to explore their experiences. One participant noted on his timeline that each memory "helps ensure that God is real." Grace identified a deficit when people fail to, or refuse to, take time to remember.

The literature review complemented the evidence dredged from the interviews of the importance that remembering has on faith. Interpreting Jesus' command (Luke 22:19), repeated by Paul (1 Cor. 11:24-25), that the disciples take the bread and drink the cup "in remembrance of me," Clancy reminds believers that remembrance is "an act of faith, which received the gift and promise of God when the body and blood are eaten and drunk" (50). Just as the Israelites remembered God's saving activity when they celebrated the Passover festival, the participants remembered God's love, grace, providence, protection, and forgiveness realized in their own lives. The narration caused Diane to

reflect on her experience. Her reflection led her to release the experience to God, which resulted in her feeling spiritually free from its pain.

Implications

Reminiscing and narrating inextricably intertwine. As the human mind recalls events, narrative provides a means for expression. My research suggests that discipleship growth comes when persons remember and express narratives that relate Christian faith to life experience. To neglect or refuse to remember one's stories of faith and life compares to a farmer never planting seed from which he hopes to harvest great bounty. Forgotten stories and repressed memories will not bear their fruitful potential for human and spiritual growth. At best, untold stories lie dormant. At worst, untold stories of pain and suffering threaten to decay abundant life just as, to shift metaphors, an untreated abscessed tooth threatens the health of the whole body. When a person remembers and narrates a story in relation to God, that person tells the story of God creating and recreating life. When that person tells the story of God transforming life, the person tells a story of being changed into the image of God, which all humans were created to reflect. People find strong hope and purpose when they see the Author of all stories pour God's ink into the font of an individual's life. God invites each person to participate with God to write a new narrative: a story that reflects the image of God. God's story calls humanity to remember, to narrate, and to decide to follow God with faithful actions.

Remembering and telling a story that can benefit discipleship can occur at any time and need not be limited to any particular setting in a church's ministry or even facility. Any opportunity people have to remember, tell, and reflect on a story's meaning for their relationship with God and the meaning of following Jesus Christ presents an

opportunity for spiritual growth. Times for remembrance, such as storytelling, seem to be unlimited. They show up while church members prepare and serve a funeral dinner, rake leaves in the churchyard, or sing a song during worship. A congregation that expands the people's awareness of the benefits and skills of remembering personal experiences of life and faith may be a congregation that helps people grow in faith.

When a person reminisces and narrates, the listener also reminisces and narrates—or at least is invited to do so. A negative illustration reinforces the point:

Once upon a time there was a conference of psychologists. They had invited a storyteller to take part in their conference. The storyteller got up and told a wonderful story—a story that made them laugh and cry and touched them in deep places. After the story ended, the convener came to the microphone and invited response from the audience. They immediately had many questions about the origin and structure of the story, the psychological health of the characters in the story, and whether it was fiction or non-fiction. These psychologists were very practiced in critical and analytical thinking! The story teller, however, steadfastly remained mute. Finally she said, quietly, “The point of the story is not whether it is true, not what the structure is, not even the motive of the teller. The point is: what story does this story invite you to tell?” (Crain 241)

My own experience, my observations from the interviews, and the literature suggest that when one person remembers and narrates an experience, the listeners will remember, too.

Application

Encouraging persons to reminisce their lives for stories meaningful to faith development may come through formal or informal methods. Formal methods may include programs and events that teach skills and provide persons the opportunity to remember.

People tend to reminisce when they hear others reminiscing. Stories evoke stories. Listeners find meaning from another person's story because they affectively connect with the story. Whether or not the hearer is conscious of the connection may not matter. The

affective connection reminds the listener of a similar experience that the hearer can then remember and tell. Providing opportunities for people to tell and listen to stories will encourage a rich environment for people to reflect on their own lives and grow especially when the stories help people strengthen their relationships with God and others. I am the only person who listened to the stories of the participants in this study. I recognize that if the participants disclosed their identities and told their stories, great bonds of encouragement might be formed. I promised the participants anonymity, and I will hold to that commitment. I also believe that when these participants tell their stories to their friends, children, and others in the context of expressing their faith, they will encourage faith in the listeners. The challenge now is to provide opportunities for sufficient reminiscence that stimulates reflection and spiritual growth.

A congregation may encourage reminiscing by planning for persons to tell stories in a wide variety of settings within and outside the congregation. A second resource for encouraging reminiscing that may strengthen faith may be through a formal group study such as *Remembering Your Story* by Morgan. Morgan makes clear the connection among reminiscing, narrating, and spiritual growth. He offers many activities to help persons access their memories and create their stories. Telling stories of memories at family gatherings, keeping a personal journal, reviewing family photos or videos, and scrap booking provide excellent resources to help people remember and narrate. Small groups that combine some instruction on the power of reminiscing and storytelling and that provide a comfortable trustworthy place of support may allow persons greater opportunity to interpret their memories meaningfully to strengthen their faith.

Evaluation

Applying the grounded theory method tests to this finding, I confirm that the finding is a fitting and relevant observation from the interviews. All of the participants reminisced as they reflected on how their experience in the church affected their relationship with God. Each participant remembered earlier experiences related to their relationship with God and lessons learned about God. Because the interviews provided evidence of reminiscing activity, the finding is relevant to the study. The finding is also workable to the field of discipleship development. The finding that churches may strengthen discipling ministries by encouraging reminiscing is a modifiable finding as it needs to apply to various settings of ministry.

Developmental Processes

The third finding and recommendation to the VCUMC relates to the processes of human and faith development. A church that carefully understands and pays attention to the processes of maturation and human and faith development may influence discipleship growth in its members. The discussion integrates content from the interview observations, literature review, and theological foundations.

Discussion

Of all the findings, developmental processes has been the most challenging to manage. The complex field of human and faith development can quickly turn philosophical. I struggled to understand how my observations about developmental issues affected discipleship growth, but I had to follow the indicators from the stories people told. My literature review touched on the topic from three directions: the field of human development, the complementary field of faith development, and the anthropological

perspective of spiritual growth through the work of van Kaam in the SFHF. Each field provides vast and complex resources to this discussion.

While the fields related to human development and faith formation expand to cover many concepts, my project focused on these subtopics: individuation; maturity; decisions, beliefs, and attitudes; and, relational boundaries among individuals in the church. This discussion stays limited to those topics.

Verbal cues from the interviews pointed me toward developmental processes as they relate to discipleship growth. Several participants perceived that people had matured over the years as they stayed in the VCUMC. Norm admitted that as he aged, he adjusted more easily to certain situations and he responded better to comments from other laypersons that used to bother him. He attributed his improved ability to adjust to growing more mature.

Jack commented during his interview that as he grew older, he also became more interested in his relationship with God. During his interview he said that he is grateful to have had the opportunity to get closer to God, so the idea of maturing rose out of the interviews.

James and Kim provided evidence of the concepts of individuation and differentiation in their experiences of faith and life. As James and Kim worked through their experiences in the VCUMC, they both believed that their difficulty with the pastor had no connection with their relationships with other persons in the church and with their relationship with God. They clearly perceived that their difficult relationship with the pastor did not negatively affect their relationship with God. James and Kim differentiated the one relationship from the other.

Lana provided a sophisticated example of how the developmental concept of maturing relates to establishing boundaries. As Lana matured over the years, she has loosened her dependence on others; therefore, she established a boundary, a space between herself and others, regarding her reliance on other persons. Instead, she has come to depend more on God.

Michael and Suzanne provide another illustration of how boundaries related to differentiation. Michael came to appreciate boundaries whether they were organizational boundaries created by the hierarchy of the congregation's organizational structure or theological boundaries created by different beliefs and ways of thinking. He intended to honor these and other boundaries through his leadership in the church because he saw the boundaries as useful for protecting persons and providing guidance as the congregation worked through issues. Suzanne used boundaries to strengthen relationships with certain persons and diminish relationships with people she perceived to be harmful to her faith. As her faith matured, she found courage to cross boundaries that differentiated her without losing her sense of identity. She kept true to her identity while still creating meaningful friendships with people who may not agree with her theology.

From a pastoral perspective, I think that while each person experienced a troublesome time in the VCUMC, each person eventually experienced a sense of satisfaction and peace about those experiences. Each person continues to remember disappointments. Each one faces new challenges. Some participants still have serious questions about God, God's character, and God's work in the world. I also note that the participants approach those new challenges with hope, gratitude, and confidence that God will be with them and guide them. The participants have matured to this perspective.

A person's decisions, beliefs, and attitudes can contribute to that person's maturity. I observed that decisions helped people in my study define themselves and cope with problems they faced. Each participant revealed decisions that affected the outcome of the experience they told me about. Some participants clearly stated beliefs and/or showed strong, well-defined attitudes that influenced both their experience in the church and their growth as disciples. For example, when one participant faced conflict with another church member, the participant intentionally decided to behave so that he would not "make waves" in the church and exacerbate the problem. Instead, he decided to take a long-term and calm approach to deal with the conflict. His decision, based on some of his biblical beliefs and his determination to keep a positive attitude, helped him deal with the conflict so that everyone could benefit. The participant lived out James' instruction to "let endurance have its full effect so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas. 1:4). His decision led to greater maturity in himself, in the person with whom he had conflict, and within the VCUMC as a whole.

Within the category of decisions, beliefs, and attitudes, I include the concept of commitments. To make a decision is to commit, at least cognitively, to an idea. Once a decision is made, action can follow more clearly and often more easily. Muto and van Kaam devote an entire book to the significance of commitment to spiritual maturity. Commitment, they say, is the key to Christian maturity. At the center of commitment is regular, disciplined abandonment of the self to the love of God. "No matter what happens to us in our here and now situation, we are inclined to seek the meaning of each event within the context of the Mystery [God] undergirding and embracing all persons, places, and things" (171). The participants in my study showed their commitments to certain

beliefs and behaviors. Michael, for example, as I have mentioned already, showed great commitment to avoid exacerbating problems in the VCUMC.

Christian love, described by Muto and van Kaam, means to love when love is not returned (100). The participants showed evidence that their commitments to God, to others, and to the VCUMC helped them mature to love others even when the participants perceived that they did not receive love back.

As people mature, according to Fowler's stages, they move through phases when they become aware of their decisions, beliefs, and attitudes, and that awareness contributes to their identity and ability to differentiate themselves from other persons and the experience they face. Once they differentiate, they respond better to situations.

Elizabeth's ability to differentiate helped her stay in the VCUMC after she considered leaving. She decided to stay even though she felt the pastor treated her unfairly. Elizabeth's identity with God and the congregation was not embedded in, was not identical to, her strained relationship with the pastor. Because Elizabeth differentiated her relationship with the pastor from her relationships with others, she stayed active in the congregation. Throughout her difficult experience, she continued to participate fully in the VCUMC. She even interacted with other persons whom she believed contributed to her poor relationship with the pastor, and her interaction with them did not diminish her relationship with God. Elizabeth was one of the few participants who admitted that the problem she faced caused her to draw closer to God. Her ability to differentiate helped her to gain comfort, a sense of peace, and to grow closer to God through the situation. To use language from the SFHF, Elizabeth experienced a "consonant formation" with the situation, with her feelings, and with other persons involved.

Movement through the stages, according to Fowler, is conditioned by three patterns that develop in a person's life. First is a pattern of knowing, or believing. Second is a pattern of valuing. Valuing may also be called commitment or, in the language of SFHF, valuing means appreciation. Third, it involves "patterned constructions of meaning, usually in the form of an underlying narrative or story" (*Stages of Faith* 56). Fowler confirms from his own observations and research what I observed in my interviews: faith development, storytelling, developmental processes interrelate in discipleship growth. When persons become aware of these patterns, they may find a nurturing atmosphere to grow and mature.

Fowler clearly warns that the goal of learning about faith development is not to force a person's advancement from one stage to the next. "Movement in stage development, properly understood, is the byproduct of the substance and the practices of faith" ("Faith Development at 30" 417). As a pastor, I have felt the temptation to force people to grow up. I am wrong to act on that temptation, and I also believe that I cannot force people to grow. I need to remember the theological foundations from Chapter 1. God brings growth. Individuals may choose to reflect, learn, pray, and engage in numerous activities, but those activities only nurture, rather than directly cause, spiritual growth.

Keeping Fowler's warning in mind, and confessing my temptation to force growth, leaders of discipling ministries need to understand that God invites people to participate with God's Holy Spirit to nurture disciples. My father, a farmer, would never take credit for creating the seed or even the fruit that grows from the seed, but he surely understands his role to nurture the crop toward an abundant harvest. I refer to a careful

and interactive relationship with God modeled by the interdependent relationships between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Van Kaam's SFHF work provides a complementary perspective to Fowler's developmental approach. Hall's work, following SFHF, sufficiently shows the impact that storytelling has on faith growth and provides encouragement, in addition to the stories of faith revealed from the participants in my study, that churches partially precipitate the spiritual growth of persons in church, families, and communities.

Although limited, learning about developmental issues may help persons choose to explore ways they might move toward greater maturity; therefore, teaching and using developmental understandings in Christian faith development may reward individuals with more mature faith experiences.

In my project, I recognize that at the time of my interview, the participants fit within Fowler's conjunctive faith stage, characterized by several criteria. The participants hold polar tensions together without a great amount of anxiety. They understand that life includes opposite and conflicting experiences, and they have come to a sense of peace with life's contrasts. Participants in this study exhibited a second characteristic of conjunctive faith: their understanding that truth is multiform rather than being clear teachings received during childhood. One example is the woman who was taught as a child not to associate with persons of certain national or ethnic backgrounds. She now understands that the lesson she learned as a child needs quite a bit of alteration to be practical as an adult. She realizes that not all persons may have a positive influence on her life, but not necessarily because of national or ethnic origins. A third characteristic of the participants exhibiting conjunctive faith is their ability to move from critical

interpretation to receptive engagement of that which they had been critical. The participant who wisely followed his wife's exhortation to get involved passed this test when he decided to engage the people who symbolized the problem he faced. The final characteristic of conjunctive faith is set up by the previous three. The participants in my study showed "[g]enuine openness to the truths of traditions and communities other than one's own" (Fowler, *Becoming Adult* 52). All of the participants in this study showed these characteristics of conjunctive faith. All the participants experience unity within the VCUMC and each calls it "my church family" and "home."

During a meeting with my research reflection team, a group of laypersons from the church who met to advise me throughout the project, one team member asked, "How old was each participant when he or she experienced the difficult time in the church?" I did not ask that specific question. However, from the information I collected I can estimate that most participants were less than fifty years old when they experienced the difficulty that caused them to consider leaving. The participants may have been in Fowler's fourth stage of faith development, Individuative-reflective stage, when they experienced the difficult time. Fowler sets up the transition from stage four to stage five, saying, "Stories, symbols, myths, and paradoxes from one's own or other traditions may insist on breaking in upon the neatness of the previous faith" (*Stage of Faith* 183). I cannot determine with certainty if the difficult experience stimulated movement toward stage five or if the participants' readiness for stage five contributed to the difficult experience. In either case, by the time I talked with the participants, most had made the transition into conjunctive faith.

The theological and biblical foundations named in Chapter 1 also support the observation that developmental processes can assist churches in making disciples. Throughout the book of James, the author repeatedly suggests images of growth and maturity. He sets up the theme in verse four: “And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” I believe that the growth James desires alludes to the holiness demanded in the Scriptures: “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:20; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:16). Discipling ministries that help people mature are ministries that also contribute to people becoming holy.

Implications

With caution, I make several implications of the usefulness of developmental processes on discipleship growth. First, the evidence shows that people will mature, at least to certain stages or places. From this inference, a congregation needs to do very little in relation to development. Following this implication, I might suggest a congregation simply “let go, and let God” work in the lives of people. Congregations can trust that individuals have already been equipped by God with the means to nurture spiritual growth. *Letting go* can relieve anyone who wonders, “Who am I to presume that I can *make* disciples?” Individuals can trust that God will bring the growth.

Second, although God will bring the growth, the evidence shows that God also may choose to use other persons to help nurture, stimulate, or otherwise catalyze maturity in other persons—even if that catalyst comes through negative and painful experiences. Discipling ministries that grasp this opportunity to understand developmental processes, to recognize stages or conditions in a person’s life that make that person *ripe* for growth, may responsibly nurture faith growth and formation.

One participant in the study seemed to believe that his relationship with God was diminishing over the years. As a teenager, he felt inspired to become a pastor, but after many years, he did not fulfill that inspiration. During the interview I asked why. As he tried to explain by telling his life experiences, a deep question crept up until he had to name it. Finally, he asked, “What do we make of a family that prays for God to protect it from a tornado and the tornado goes right past their home but destroys the neighbors? Do we say that God did not protect the neighbor? What kind of God does that?”

As the participant revealed more stories about his life, including his time in the Army during a war, he concluded that “life got in the way” of his desire to be a pastor. The participant confesses his trust in Jesus Christ as God’s Son. He commits to follow Jesus, yet he has not found satisfactory answers to his hard questions. He enjoys his friendships with others, and he has a positive outlook for the future. He exemplifies a man living in Fowler’s conjunctive faith stage. The participant has found contentment in balancing his understanding of God with difficult life experiences, and that balance relies on the relationships he maintains in the VCUMC. When another natural disaster or act of war knocks him off balance, the church can be a helpful context for him to stay connected with God and others while he negotiates a new place of balance. If the church understands its role alongside God and the participant’s God-given ability to mature, the VCUMC may assist this man. If persons in the congregation become aware of developmental processes, they may feel more confident in their ministry to this man and the congregation’s discipling ministry will increase.

Application

I resist the temptation to plan a church-wide developmental process retreat in which I pour all my intellectual knowledge about human development, faith development, and SFHF into any who would attend. However productive such a retreat might be for some people, I refer again to Browning's work. A simpler, less institutionalized, way of strengthening the church's discipling ministries through developmental processes may work better. As Fowler states, developmental processes can help leaders and teachers plan appropriate curriculum to teach the content of faith according to the needs and faith stages of the people.

I can apply this finding to my ministry by modeling an understanding that people will naturally mature and then begin to inform people of either Fowler's stages or the principles of SFHF (van Kaam, *Fundamental Formation*). Fowler's strong warning against the belief that any church should cause or force movement from one stage to another applies to my modeling. I can relax and let persons mature. I can encourage laypersons to hear another person's problem without getting anxious but to show compassion and empathy to that person which may be an important step for the church member's maturation.

The VCUMC has no formal small group ministry. Instead, the best opportunity for expanding a discipling ministry is to equip willing laypersons with new information, opportunities, and the inspiration to relate to anyone they meet in order to bring persons closer to God. In my congregation, teaching moments come whenever I grab them. The beginning of a church council meeting may allow time to teach the leaders about one characteristic of a faith stage. I may lead an instructional devotional to guide church

leaders to minister to one another by teaching them to recognize a characteristic of conjunctive faith, for example, and how to nurture that person. To extend the application, one member may find himself in a parking lot conversation with a friend after church. The friend may express disappointment that the doctor misdiagnosed a heart condition. The member, being aware that people in the conjunctive faith stage can hold together opposing ideas, might help the friend talk about continuing to trust his physician, seeking a second opinion, or the conversation may lead to another option. The member may also encourage the friend to pray or to ask God to give the doctor wisdom. The conversation might end with both persons feeling encouraged even though the problem of the misdiagnosis and loss of confidence in the doctor might remain. However, the persons have brought the experience, the questions, and the confusion to God and are strengthening their hope and reliance on God.

An important application idea came from the research reflection team member who asked the age of the participants when they experienced the difficult time. She concluded with conviction, “We really need to pay attention to our thirty and forty year old members in the church.” She names a great opportunity for older members to minister to younger members. The reaction from reflection team members indicates the value of learning about faith development.

Developmental processes might inform preaching. Awareness of the various stages can lead the preacher to incorporate stories and texts that identify with various stages. The preacher does not need to explain explicitly a connection between a story and the developmental stage, but the listener may hear and respond to a story in ways consistent with that particular stage or process.

For example, my pastoral ministry has led me to small rural congregations that are multigenerational but made up primarily of persons of retirement age. One of the blessings of not having large numbers of young people is that the congregation tends to view all ages as part of the whole church's ministry. I have used my pastoral experiences, I hope, to assist the older generations to interact with younger generations. In preaching, I have wanted young persons to remain in the sanctuary for the entire service because the church did not have programming staff to send the children out to a children's church time during the sermon, as is done in some congregations. I have also intentionally prepared my sermons to include a story that will communicate, at least briefly, to young persons. Fowler identifies the mythical-literal faith stage as one with which mostly children between the ages of six and eight identify. The mythical-literal stage orients children "to narrative and story as the principal means of constructing, conserving, and sharing" (*Faith Development and Pastoral Care* 61) life's meaning. Because developmental theories assume that one stage builds upon rather than replaces a previous stage, adults in more advanced stages can appreciate a story as well as younger generations. Applying developmental processes to preaching can be a way to preach meaningfully to an audience of mixed generations and faith stages. Development may also be modeled to the congregation by interviewing willing mature persons during a worship service. The pastor could prearrange and prepare to have a conversation with a mature Christian during a sermon. The experience might spread the word by show and tell that people do mature.

Another application of developmental processes deals with inviting persons to make decisions and commitments. Muto and van Kaam support my observation of the

importance of decisions and commitment in spiritual growth. Sermons and lessons should invite persons to commit to do something with what they have heard and learned.

Evaluation

The third major finding must be evaluated: A church that intentionally understands and pays attention to the processes of maturation, and human and faith development may more precisely influence discipleship growth than a church that ignores how people grow and develop. The finding must be evaluated according to the methods consistent with a grounded theory study.

The criteria, again, asks if the finding fits, is relevant, works, and is modifiable. Because this finding still has ties directly to the conversations gathered at the interviews, I can say that it fits. Participants, in their own words, made comments suggesting that “growing up and maturing helped” people grow in their faith. The finding remains relevant to the context of the VCUMC and interviews, and the finding works because it applies to the field from which it came. The finding is general enough to be modified as new information confronts it. Two fields of knowledge outside of the interviews conducted during this project complement this finding: developmental faith theory (Fowler) and the SFHF (van Kaam). These complementary fields support the value of this finding to making disciples.

Involvement

Common sense suggests that a person’s involvement in a group will impact that person’s relationships with that group. In this project, I chose only to explore the faith relationships of persons who intentionally stayed at the VCUMC. Involvement, then, may have been a prior assumption rather than a major conclusion. However, I include it here

as a factor that affects discipleship development because the participants named involvement in the congregation as important to their relationships with God and others. I define involvement as a person's participation in a network of friends within the congregation and the role those friends had on a person's involvement at the VCUMC.

Discussion

The primary cue for this major finding came from my interview with Norm. He felt discontented and frustrated in the church because of how church leaders managed a particular decision. He lost confidence in their leadership. Norm's discontentment led him to diminish his activity in the VCUMC. However, he did not stop thinking about his relationship with God or the people. While he limited his involvement, he continued to mull over his experiences, and apparently he expressed his thoughts to his wife until she had heard enough and told him to get involved.

At the interview, I noted Norm's obvious decision to get involved in the church, following his wife's advice. Tipped off by Norm's story, I began to compare his interview to the others and to look for indicators of how a person's involvement might affect one's relationship with God and others in the church. I noticed that involvement affects and is affected by a person's cognitive ability to make decisions. Confronted by his wife, Norm decided to get, or stay, involved. In another example, Monica asked God and others whether God willed that she leave the church. Confident of the answer, she decided to stay and get involved. After that decision, her involvement increased and she volunteered in a number of new areas in the church's ministry.

Involvement with others in the VCUMC allowed participants to build relationships. Some of those relationships provided a sufficient bond that kept people in

the VCUMC even when they considered leaving. The adage, “Blood is thicker than water,” may apply to the VCUMC because the people in my study considered the church their church family. Even when they felt deep pain, participants did not want to cut their ties in the church. For example, in comparing the interviews of Monica, Kevin, and Elizabeth, I commented that the difficulties these participants faced moved them to strengthen their bonds with other laypersons. When they experienced a strained relationship with the pastor, these participants turned to other members to provide the support and nurture that they did not receive from the pastor.

The comparison made me consider that pastors, even when they cause conflict, might be encouraged with the idea that people may grow in faith because of a damaged relationship with the pastor. The pastor may grow, also. In past experiences, I might have been encouraged to trust God’s work in the church more and rely less on my own abilities if someone had reminded me that the trouble I caused in a church might be used to help the people (and me) mature in my relationship with God. I think a positive and hopeful outlook can encourage many pastors and laypersons to relax and trust God.

The comparison of interviews with Kevin, Michael, Suzanne, and Monica showed a similar pattern. The people in the study strengthened their involvement with other laypersons in order to help them deal with a strained relationship with the pastor. They went to other laypersons to find support, information, and to discover possible strategies to deal with the situation. For some of the participants, going to other laypersons helped. For others, it led to more conflict.

The impact of involvement on discipleship growth became apparent in the comparison among the transcripts from interviews with Tom, Grace, and Norm. The

importance for friendship is a major theme in Tom's life. His stories showed several experiences when loneliness pushed him closer to God. At other times, his involvement with friends helped him "get back on track" with God. More recently, Tom enjoys visiting churches in neighboring towns because he often finds people he knows.

The involvement of other participants helped them stay in the church even while they diminished some of their involvement or chose not to associate with other persons. Instead, Suzanne deliberately limited her involvement to include only persons with whom she felt secure. She strengthened her involvement with persons whose theology matched, supported, and nurtured her own. In time, Suzanne expanded her involvement with other persons as she continued to grow. Now that she exhibits strong characteristics of Fowler's conjunctive faith stage, she stays involved with many people, even persons with whom she disagrees theologically.

While I did not have time to review the literature on the topic of church involvement as thoroughly as I reviewed literature for the other major findings, two connections with the work of others are notable. First, for the participants, involvement in the congregation creates part of each person's psychosocial kinship network (Pattison 18-19). Each person needs approximately twenty to thirty persons who provide friendship and support through life. I compare this network of friends and family to a parachute. Each person in the network functions like a rope holding the skydiver safely under the parachute. When a rope breaks or when a member of the network fails to function, the skydiver looks for a replacement. A parachute may be a helpful image for understanding a person's involvement in the church. People need other people to get through life's transitions. A second observation I make with other literature connects my finding with

Willow Creek Community Church. Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson report on Willow Creek's fairly recent self-study reviewing the effectiveness of their congregation. Near the beginning of their report, they reveal the core assumption about making disciples that drove every program of their congregation from its beginning. They predicted that by increasing a person's involvement in church, that person would become a Christian, grow, and mature in his or her faith. However, Willow Creek learned, "Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth" (33). Willow Creek also found that about 10 percent of the members surveyed were dissatisfied with the church. The dissatisfied persons came from the group who were Christ focused on Willow Creek's spirituality scale. The finding surprised the Willow Creek researchers (50). Willow Creek ended its study, saying that they needed more information to understand the phenomenon. "Generally speaking, the higher the level of engagement—the higher the level of commitment to Christ—the more likely it is that satisfaction in the church will be lukewarm" (51). Willow Creek's conclusion implies that increasing commitment to Christ can be detrimental to commitment to a congregation.

My project dovetails with the Willow Creek study because I chose to explore the phenomenon of persons who were committed to Christ and dissatisfied—at least at some point—with their congregation. My conclusion partially affirms Willow Creek's originating hypothesis that involvement affects spiritual growth. My research also shows, in part, that a person's dissatisfaction may stimulate growth of that person's commitment to Christ and his or her relationship with God. A person's involvement with other laypersons may also contribute to the person staying in the congregation even though that person may still be dissatisfied with the congregation.

Implications

Evidence from the interviews and the literature review suggests that a person's involvement with people in the church influences a person's discipleship growth. The theological foundation, which states that relationships are central to faith growth, also supports the idea that persons who are more involved in a congregation are more likely to develop nurturing friendships than persons who are not involved.

While the experiences narrated by the participants often tested the strength of their relationships with other persons, most of the participants were able to distinguish their diminished relationship with others from their relationship with God. The developmental concepts of establishing boundaries and differentiation seems to have protected the participants from equating a strained relationship with another person with a poor relationship with God. The participants showed awareness that their relationship with God would continue even if they lost a friendship with another person. Tom, James, Kim, and Suzanne made clear distinctions that their negative relationship with another person would not ruin their relationship with God.

Another implication of this finding is that staying within the context of the church where the problem occurred may be the best resource for growing through that problem. George and Diane credit members of the church who were not part of their painful experience for turning things around. When she considered leaving, a church member invited her to give the church a second chance. Throughout their years here, she compliments several men for showing attention to her husband. Both are stronger in their faith because of their involvement and the influence of others.

One question related to involvement remains unanswered in this study. I wonder if these participants would get involved in another congregation if they left the VCUMC. I have also wondered when people leave and start fresh in another church, if that experience stunts their relationship with God. These questions will be left for another researcher. Still, the evidence surrounding the topic of involvement suggests that staying together allows people an opportunity to grow, which they may abandon if they leave.

Application

The finding of involvement, obvious as it may be, suggests that to increase discipling ministry, church members and leaders should keep an eye on a person's involvement. Without putting too much emphasis on it, as Willow Creek learned, people cannot neglect staying involved. When people face difficult experiences in a congregation, they need encouragement. In conversations, teaching, and preaching, I can help people become aware how their involvement can affect their spiritual growth.

One idea for applying these ideas about involvement came late one night. I thought a pamphlet or article might encourage conversation among laypersons. I might title the pamphlet, "How to Stay in Your Church When You'd Like to Leave." Topics, all grounded in this project's interviews, might include

- Realizing that growth comes through pain and struggle,
- Choosing to grow,
- Learning from past situations,
- Telling someone instead of just walking away,
- Learning from the experiences of others,
- Strengthening a friendship one already has,

- Confronting, rather than running from, a problem,
- Forgiving or learning to forgive, and
- Looking for God among the mess.

Evaluation

The final major finding also flows directly out of the interviews. The finding fits and is relevant to the interviews. The finding works toward influencing discipleship and the finding is general enough to be modifiable to various settings. The development of this finding followed the prescribed plan for comparing all the interviews to one another. Based on these criteria, I believe the finding is grounded in the data.

Limitations

Grounded research methods have many limitations. First, as I began to understand the history and development of the methodology, I discovered the conflict between the two researchers who developed the grounded theory method, Glaser and Strauss. Eventually the two men split ways, but each continued to use the name grounded theory in subtly different ways. After exploring the distinctions, I settled on using the method according to Glaser. That decision kept me focused on the goal of letting the information from the interviews and the participants speak for themselves rather than guiding the conversation too much with preconceived questions. The result was a large amount of stories that flowed from each participant as a stream of consciousness rather than answers to specific questions about discipleship development. The large number of stories presented a problem with my time and caused me to limit the number of participants to a sample size that one researcher could manage. Strauss understood this limitation of grounded theory, and it is one reason he opted to develop his use of the method to use

more semi-quantitative research methods. This limitation may also be the reason that Linhart recommends mixed qualitative methods for future research projects especially in his field of youth ministry (“Grounded Theory”). While I experienced this limitation, I do not regret my decision to use Glaser’s method.

Time and resources also limited my exploration more fully into complementary fields of study. In research methods that spend more time and effort considering hypothetical outcomes, the researchers pinpoint more accurately—at least they try to—the kind of information they desire. Because the method for this study valued that each participant should determine which stories to tell, time and effort to preconceive what participants might say is of little use (Glaser, *Basics* 51). However, the result meant that I had to learn quickly about those topics as they developed from the comparisons. I spent much time looking into other fields of study during the research collection phase. I explored the fields of experiential learning, human and faith development, narrative counseling, and the SFHF. The outcome from this project may be broad but not deeply based in each of those disciplines. Future projects might explore more thoroughly the use of storytelling as understood from an experiential learning perspective. I refer mostly to the work of Baker, Jenson, and Kolb. I believe they may provide instruction for using conversations to help persons reflect on their spiritual lives and experiences. In this project, I had time only to identify and become familiar with their topic. The same can be said of van Kaam and the SFHF. Because of my prior education, I am much more knowledgeable about the field of human and faith development than conversational learning. This project was limited by the reality that I could not explore other areas more fully.

The selection of participants who considered leaving the church but decided to stay reveals an important limitation to this study and suggests useful future research. The limitation of time and resources prevented me from considering interviewing persons who decided to leave the church. As I talked about the project with people from my congregation, several showed curiosity to know how people who left the VCUMC would answer the questions. Some people named families that left who might be willing to participate in a future study.

All the participants in this project had been members of this congregation for at least twenty-six years. All of the participants were also either retired or semi-retired from their careers. Such demographics may have predetermined the outcome because participants of that age are more likely than younger participants to have worked through developmental stages that would allow them to arrive at, for example, Fowler's conjunctive faith stage. This limitation causes me to be cautious about presuming that I would find similar results if I repeated this project in another church. However, future similar projects could confirm my caution or help clarify whether these results apply to other congregations.

Future Research

Throughout this report, I have mentioned several ideas for future research projects. I pull them together here in one list:

1. A researcher may assess the value of storytelling and evaluate storytelling strategies effective to stimulate discipleship growth.

2. Researchers may use qualitative or quantitative methods to test the ideas learned from this project. For example, a researcher may study the effect of teaching human and faith development models to laypersons for personal and spiritual growth.

3. A researcher may dive into the field of SFHF, making greater application of its lessons for discipleship growth.

4. Another researcher may explore the possible phenomenon that churches, such as VCUMC, have members who live in the same communities and tend to grow up together maturing at similar rates. The researcher might explore the problems and possibilities of a congregation where the majority of people are at the same developmental place on Fowler's model. Further, the researcher might look to see what impact that phenomenon has on the church's ministries to the community and with younger generations.

5. The fields of experiential learning and conversational learning offer new opportunities for research in discipleship ministries. The application of conversational learning theory may influence ministries with children, youth, and adults, but more research is needed to see how to apply the theory for the greatest impact.

6. Finally, another researcher may engage in a grounded theory study very similar to this one except to interview persons who actually left their congregation. The project might explore discipleship growth in persons who decided to leave, and the results could be compared to the results of this project.

Recommendations

I began this project with curiosity about the process of discipleship growth that has been working in the VCUMC for many years. The congregation has been in this

community for 135 years. Even in its more recent years of decline, somebody in the VCUMC did something right to fulfill the Great Commission “to make disciples” (Matt. 28:19-20). However, I sensed a lack of awareness in myself and in the people here as to how that growth happened. Because the congregation and I could not say precisely how this congregation makes disciples, we are diminished in our ability to plan for ministries to continue making disciples of Jesus Christ. The goal of this project has been to increase our understanding of the discipling experiences of persons in this church so that we may strengthen its discipling ministries. I intended to develop a set of principles or concepts about the participants’ experiences and present those ideas to the VCUMC to help guide the leaders in planning ministries for greater discipleship growth among its members and participants.

These recommendations result from my study and reflection on the interviews, theological foundations named in Chapter 1, and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and throughout the dissertation. I humbly present these ideas in order to stimulate conversation, and I hope that the congregation and its leaders will creatively continue its work inspired by God’s Holy Spirit. I dedicate myself to work with this congregation (as long as my bishop allows) to implement these ideas for strengthening the church and bringing others to maturity (wholeness and holiness) in Christ Jesus.

I make four recommendations to leaders of the VCUMC based on the four major findings of storytelling, reminiscence, developmental processes, and involvement:

1. Story—Members of the VCUMC may enhance the church’s discipling ministries by telling and listening to stories of life and faith experiences, by increasing the use of stories to engage people in understanding their own experiences and to share

those experiences, and by working to increase the number of persons in the congregation who listen to the stories of others for the purpose of encouraging discipleship growth.

2. Remembrance—Members of the VCUMC may expand its discipling capability by increasing awareness of personal memories and creating an atmosphere in the church that values the practice of remembrance. Specifically, the congregation may create multiple times and places when people can remember life and faith experiences. The church may include times of instruction and encouragement can guide individuals to use their memories to nurture their faith.

3. Decisions—The congregation may edify its discipleship by helping persons to tell stories and remember life experiences so they may move toward decisions that are appropriate to the individual's human and faith development stage. Stories and remembrances engage affective components of life experiences. Decisions involve cognitive and developmental aspects of life.

4. Action—Finally, the VCUMC may fortify its ministries by encouraging and providing opportunities for persons to act upon their decisions, remembrances, and stories. Encouraging individuals and groups to act upon their new understandings of faith, or at least helping them see that their choices to increase or decrease involvement impacts their growth as a follower of Jesus Christ, will complete the experiential learning cycle.

I have represented each of these four recommendations with a one-word description: Story, Remembrance, Decisions, and Action. Although I did not see the connection until the end of the project, these four actions correspond with experiential learning theory (Kolb) and conversational learning theory (Baker, Jenson, and Kolb). A story involves both concrete and abstract knowledge. To tell a story, a person must recall

an experience or an event and transfer the experience into abstract words. A story tries to convey the feelings and the sensory responses, such as seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling, that the experience first triggered. To tell a story is to reengage the information gathered from all these senses, including emotions. The first recommendation makes application of Kolb's experiential learning theory.

Because a disciple of Jesus Christ is a student of Jesus Christ, experiential learning theory and its complementary conversational learning theory offers a framework to the process of making disciples. When the participants in my study told the story of the time that caused them to consider leaving the church, they created knowledge from their experience. Participants turned their concrete experience into an abstract concept when they found words to express their experience. Some of the participants reacted to the experience and quickly acted upon their experience without conceptualizing it and reflecting on it. Others reflected first and then acted. Michael provides a good example of a participant who reflected before acting. He thought through (reflected upon) possible actions based on this experience before deciding (another abstraction) how to act next. Through conversations, participants may return to the experience and reprocess it through each part of experiential learning's framework. As participants return to stories, through conversation, they may be able to coauthor (to use a narrative pastoral counseling term) a new positive powerful story for greater personal and spiritual healing and growth.

To repeat the greatest limitation of this study, my time and energy restrained me from investigating the field of conversational learning more thoroughly. I had time only to identify it as a resource for discipling ministry development. I simply note that I will continue to mine conversational learning resources more fully and compare and integrate

them with resources from the fields of narrative counseling and human and faith development.

I can, however, explain with slightly more detail how experiential and conversational learning relate to the four major findings of this study. Baker, Jenson, and Kolb's book begins, "Conversation is at once the most ordinary and most profound of human activities" (1). As I listened to cues from my participants, reflected on, and explored those cues in the literature, and then named them in this report, I sensed that I had found nuggets worth weighing or gemstones worth holding up to the light. Since my observations of the interviews yielded general statements that could be made, and have been made, by other writers, I have wondered if the project was worth the effort. Baker, Jenson, and Kolb remind me that the simple and ordinary is often the most profound. If I had preconceived what my participants might have answered about discipleship development, I would have avoided the opportunity for conversation with them about discipleship development. I purposefully limited this study by avoiding asking my participants common qualitative data analysis questions such as, "How often do you pray, attend worship, or read the Bible?" or "On a scale of one to four, four being the greatest, how strongly did reading your Bible influence your decision to stay in the church?" Instead, I invited participants to converse with me about their discipling experiences rather than to answer my preconceived questions. The outcome led me to something more general and possibly simpler but still profound. The participants and I conversed about their relationship with God. We remembered. We told stories. We shared life and faith, and we grew as people who follow Jesus Christ. Jesus brings people to God, so the participants and I grew closer to God throughout this project.

Baker, Jenson, and Kolb illustrate their point of the profundity of conversation with a story about a colleague, Herb Shepherd, the founder of Case Western Reserve University's Organizational Behavior Department. A senior management team at Wright Patterson Air Force Base hired Herb as a consultant. During one of Herb's meetings with the team, the commanding officer (CO) asked Herb what he thought the group should do. The team had been unproductive in the meeting, and Herb replied, "I think we should take a break." The CO agreed and the team immediately broke into groups of two or three persons and began talking among themselves. After time, the CO reconvened the meeting and proceeded with the agenda. Again, after more discussion, he asked Herb, "What you do you think?" Herb replied again, "I think we need a break." Herb again noticed small groups of people conversing before the CO resumed the meeting. A third time, the CO asked Herb for his input on the topic. When Herb suggested another break, the frustrated CO asked, "Why do you suggest a break every time I ask what we should do?" Herb replied, "Because that's the only time anything is happening" (6).

By opening the interviews to conversation, I invited the participants to make meaning of their stories of discipleship. Through conversational learning, "Learners move through the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and acting as they construct meaning from their experiences in conversations" (Baker, Jenson, and Kolb 52). The interviews created a "conversational learning space" (64) because the interviews allowed the interplay of the person's experience and story, the listener's (researcher's) receptivity, the time set aside for the conversation, and the location (in the participant's home) for the conversation. Christian discipling ministries can learn more from conversational learning theory, such as how people leave and enter conversational

learning experiences and how the model might be useful for conversations of discipleship development over the Internet. Fully exploring those possibilities will have to wait for a future project. The connection I am simply establishing here is that conversations and stories assist persons in learning and making meaning out of their experiences and the VCUMC can increase its discipling ministries by implementing experiential learning theory through conversational learning.

The four major findings of this study and their corresponding recommendations fit Kolb's experiential learning theory and Baker, Jenson, and Kolb's conversational learning theory. To reminisce is to return by memory to a concrete experience. To narrate that experience is to make an abstract conceptualization of the concrete experience. To decide a course of action based on the reminisced story, one must reflect on both the concrete experience and the abstract concept of the experience. Finally, to do something with the knowledge learned from the reminiscence, narration, and decision completes Kolb's learning theory applied to conversation. For the greatest discipling, these tasks must combine and not be seen as four unrelated tasks. Instead, when all four become part of one's daily living, I believe that person will grow.

These recommendations, stemming from the four major findings, must now be presented to the VCUMC where we will continue to explore active experimental ways to do what we have learned. We trust that when we do what Jesus teaches us we will continue to fulfill the Great Commission, which is also the church's mission.

Conclusion

The project intended to identify how the VCUMC encouraged or discouraged discipleship development in its members who chose to stay. The VCUMC encouraged

discipleship development by providing an environment where the participants could live their life and faith experiences together in community, to allow each person to mature and act upon their changing life and faith. The VCUMC provided a nurturing environment for the participants to grow.

This project also intended to understand more fully the processes of discipleship development in the VCUMC. Throughout the project, participants revealed evidence that allowed me to recognize the four recommendations that correspond to experiential learning theory. Therefore, I conclude that one description of discipleship development, and the core method of discipleship development that has operated in the VCUMC within the lifespan of these participants, is a method of discipleship through experiential learning.

I extend that conclusion further in order to answer the second part of this project's purpose to suggest, therefore, that if this church desires to strengthen its discipling ministries, it should learn and work intentionally to implement strategies based on experiential learning theory with special focus on conversational learning. My future leadership in this church will focus on continuing to reflect on the implications of these four major findings as church leaders and I explore ways to actualize the implications into concrete experiences within the life of people in our church and community.

Finally, in Chapter 2, I referred to the people of the VCUMC as a remnant from which God will grow a shoot of new life. The imagery alludes to Isaiah 11. I suggested that the results of this project would describe something about that remnant. I believe the findings of this project can help them continue to learn, to grow, and to allow God to transform them into the image of Jesus Christ who always brings signs of new life.

I admit that this conclusion matches much of the content that I learned through my undergraduate and graduate studies in preparation for ministry in the church. One may quickly suggest, then, that I was preconditioned to arrive at this conclusion. The critique is fair. However, the project and my conclusions from it powerfully remind me of the work that I am to do and how I am to do it as a minister, an educator, and a perpetual student of Jesus Christ. The project has not only taught me about this congregation, but it has reinforced my own identity and call to ministry. I humbly and gratefully receive that affirmation and commit myself to follow it through at the VCUMC and anywhere God leads me in daily ministry.

Postscript

The task of the postscript is to reflect on two issues: How the doctoral program has affected me and how my ministry has changed. The answers to those issues take me back nearly six years when I began taking seminars in the doctoral program.

In preparation for my first doctoral seminar in 2004, I described the vision of my life and ministry: God has chosen my life to be part of his “mountain of hope and help” so that others may experience abundant eternal life in Jesus Christ. The phrase “mountain of hope and help” refers to an experience I had nearly twenty years ago.

I had just become engaged to marry my wife, so I was well within range of a major life change. My ministry was also nearing a major transition, but I did not know that at the time. I had been reflecting quietly in my office one day when I perceived an image in my mind, a vision about my life and ministry. My journal contains more detail, but I recount it briefly here. In the vision, God called me to a cloud-covered mountain to meet him. He gave me a large golden box that I thought would surely be heavy, but it was

not. God then gave me a small black ugly box that he said was extremely heavy and burdensome. However, when God gave it to me, God bore the weight. To me the ugly black box was lighter than the golden box. God returned to me several times each time bearing more gifts. Finally with packages literally hanging off every fingertip and even strapped over my shoulders, God said, “Now, go!”

Heading down the mountain, puzzled why God had gifted me this way, I descended below the clouds. Soon I began to see faces. Some faces I knew; others were strangers. They all were speaking, but I could not hear clearly. At first they sounded like cheers, but as I approached the people, I saw fear, sadness, and sorrow. When the people saw me with God’s gifts, they clamored for what I had received. I felt overwhelmed. I realized the gifts from God were not for me, and I began to give them away one by one. As people received God’s comfort and grace, other people stormed to get what they needed. I realized that I needed to give many packages to some of the people and let them give God’s gifts away as fast as they could. Surprisingly, I never ran out of gifts. God continued to provide all that was needed to those who would receive.

I have remembered that vision many times, and returned a few times to my original journal entry where I recorded it. The memory guides and focuses my ministry. Each time I remember it, I consider the faces that are around me presently, and I still ask, “Who needs which gifts?” and, “Who can I teach to give gifts to others?”

In the years since I had that vision, I have wondered about the ugly black box that God strained to carry but I held with ease. In retrospect, I forgot about that box perhaps because of the many other gifts that God provided for me to share with others. Today, I interpret that black box as a symbol of God’s call on my life. The shape, size, or color of

the calling does not matter. My task is not to focus on that black box but on the task of sharing God's greater and amazing gifts. The black box is not something that I possess, but it represents the calling, which I complete by dedicating my life and activities to God's glory. Days come when fulfilling that call weighs heavy upon me. Days come when I remember that God bears that weight and frees me to do the task.

Giving away God's gifts is often simple and easy, yet at times it is most profound and difficult. The imagery of my vision is biblical—from the Moses-like mountaintop to the Pauline-like metaphor of gifts. God has called many people to similar ministry. I cannot ignore the connection this vision has with my doctoral project. The project has plunged me into the lives of people with whom I am privileged to live my faith. We encourage one another with gifts as we receive new gifts from God. I constantly encourage people to share their gifts with others. I find joy watching others receive healing and comfort from God through my ministry with them. The vision and its fulfillment keep me going many days. That vision is captured in the phrase “a mountain of hope and help” that guides my life. The picture remains just as relevant today as it was nineteen years ago when I first perceived it.

The goals that I had set as I began the doctoral process have mostly been accomplished. Although a few specific goals needed to be adjusted because of moving from one church to another, I was able to fulfill my goals related to work, faith, and family. My preaching has improved (in my opinion) because of information and skills learned for preparation and delivery. I have used the material covered in classes and projects to develop ministries for strengthening faith in persons. My pastoral leadership and counseling has been strengthened because of the program. I have improved my

research and writing skills. My goals for family have been met through my commitment to strengthen my marriage and family roles. Each semester and project was met with renewed commitment and conversations about the needs of family relationships as I progressed through the program.

Several goals have not been met to my satisfaction, but they still remain goals for my future ministry. For example, I look forward to getting more involved in community settings. I plan to begin volunteering through a local agency that provides support and educational programs for families with limited incomes.

Moving to the VCUMC in the middle of my doctoral program created anxiety; however, I now realize God's blessings. This church and community is a blessing to my family in many ways. They have supported us as our family has seen many changes. While I was developing early drafts of Chapter 5, my mother was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a type of cancer found in blood plasma. A broken hip and the following surgery brought the family together to make changes so that we could help Mom and Dad care for themselves under the circumstances. The family agreed that the best option was for my parents to move into my home, a parsonage, while Mom recovered from the hip surgery and treated the cancer. As my family made the shift, I was glad to hear my children express gratitude for grandma and grandpa living with us even if it meant changes in the way we lived each day.

One day, my daughter came into a spare room where I have an office to work at home. I could tell she needed some *daddy time*, so my eleven year old daughter slid onto my lap and leaned her head on my shoulder as I wrapped her with my arms. After a few moments of silence she asked, "When will your doctorate be over?" I immediately

remembered that a few weeks earlier she had commented that she could not remember a time when I was not working on my doctorate. I would not say my doctorate work intruded into my family life, but my wife and I knew from the beginning that earning the degree while I stayed in ministry in the church would ask the whole family to make a sacrifice, so, near the end, Emily asks the child's proverbial question, "Are we there yet?"

These two stories from my recent experiences comforted me near the end of my dissertation work. One difference this project has made in my life is to help me settle and relax into my life experiences with a sense of patience and trust that both God and I will continue to work through each day while I, and the people around me, mature. My mother's cancer has forever changed our lives. I cannot give Emily a childhood without her memory of me leaving the family to read, to travel hundreds of miles for a week-long seminar, or to write my dissertation. These experiences are now part of my life, and they have contributed positively and sometimes painfully to my own growth as a person and a follower of Jesus Christ.

Recently, I entered the church to find our lay leader already there. She and I have developed an enjoyable relationship that includes poking fun at one another. Typically, she made a comment at my expense. Because my family had felt the heaviness of my mother's cancer diagnoses, in the laughter I felt powerful freedom from sorrow and the reality of joy-filled life. I decided that I needed my lay leader to keep me laughing, and I asked if she would do that for me. Of course she agreed, and at our next meeting, she came prepared to help me laugh, at my expense, and it sustains my joy. The doctoral process has given me awareness of the community of faith that surrounds me with great love and power to inspire my continued growth.

Finally, the doctoral program has changed my ministry. I will use the concepts identified from the interviews here as core components of my preaching, teaching, pastoral counseling, and administrative ministries in the church. The stories, remembrances, and developmental processes will not be complete until I ask myself and others, “What will you do with this knowledge of your experience?” This project has helped me to hone my understanding of the discipling process. Discipling is not simply cognitive awareness, nor is it simply obedience to God’s law. It is a learning process of becoming holy, as God is holy. Discipling is a process of learning through all of life’s experiences by entrusting them and ourselves to God and allowing God to write his laws on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33), so that we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Matt. 22:37).

A few years ago, I wrote a prayer in response to reading Fowler’s book *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. I repeat it here as a sign of my commitment to continue the lessons I have learned through this project and my trust in God to learn them more fully as I act upon them:

Lord, I humbly receive these gifts
 that you give to me for this day.
 In our partnership,
 I will not waste them nor flaunt them.
 I will not protect them nor hold them too tightly
 for even if I stumble and fall,
 others may pick them up and find your blessing.
 You give them to me not to use for my sake,
 though from some I will surely find
 nourishment and joy,
 but you have chosen me
 to carry them and to convey them
 so that we can accomplish that which only
 you and I can do together.
 You have called me to follow you for this.
 By your Spirit, I will be faithful

in all I have and do.

I sincerely pray.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

The interview gathered the primary information: the story of a person considering leaving the church and the circumstances surrounding his or her decision to stay. The initial interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. The following questions guided the interview conversation, although I did not use them as a script, nor did I read them verbatim.

1. Please tell me about a time you considered leaving Vestal Center United Methodist Church.
2. Please tell me about your decision to stay.
3. Please describe how your experience affected your relationship with other persons in the church.
4. Please describe how your experience affected your relationship with God.

APPENDIX B

Research Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Discipleship Development in Persons Who Considered Leaving the Vestal Center United Methodist Church and Decided to Stay: A Grounded Theory Study.

Project Director: Roger L. Frederick

The purpose of this research project is to identify principles that help explain the discipleship development in participants who considered leaving Vestal Center United Methodist Church and decided to stay.

In two-three interviews, I will tell a personal experience when I considered leaving the Vestal Center United Methodist Church and decided to stay and reflect how that experience affected my development as a disciple (second and third interview, if needed). I approve recording my interviews and typing transcripts with names changed to protect identities. I realize in a small church details may still identify me. The audio recording and transcript will be destroyed after the completion of the research project.

Participant

Date

Direct questions to Roger Frederick: 785-9655, 748-0004, rogerfrederick@earthlink.net.

APPENDIX C

Life-Faith Timeline

The following pages include the introduction letter, instructions, sample timeline, and blank page timeline mailed to each participant after the participant completed an interview.

June 2, 2009

Inside address

Dear [Name of Participant],

Thank you for taking time to tell me about your experiences in our church and with God. Before I finish my project, I ask you to do one more task. Please create a timeline of your most significant life events and briefly describe what those events mean to you and your friendship with God. In your timeline, include the event that caused you to consider, even slightly, leaving our church. I'll explain some more below, but first, I want to provide a couple examples from my own faith-timeline.

The first meaningful experience happened when I was six years old. I've spoken of this in sermons, so it may sound familiar. I remember that my brother caught me doing something that my mother had repeatedly told me not to do. Being a "good" big brother, he taunted me, "I'm going to tell Mom! I'm going to tell Mom!" I didn't want my brother to fink on me, so I decided to fink on myself! (I'm not always the brightest.) I remember feeling upset that I could not stop the behavior Mom told me to stop. I went to Mom who was doing dishes in the kitchen and asked, "What do I do when I keep doing things I know are wrong?"

Instead of asking, "What did you do now?" Mom said, "You can pray and ask God to forgive you. You can also ask Jesus to show you how to live a different way." Although I do not remember kneeling beside my bed and praying, I remember returning to my mother still at the kitchen sink, and saying, "I did it." That's all I said. There were no tears. I vaguely remember her hugging me from the side because her hands were wet with dishwater. I also remember feeling comfort at the idea that God and Mom forgave me. I was not sure that I would never disobey Mom or God again, but I felt good that I was forgiven and had a new start.

One meaning I take from that experience is that God forgives me. Another meaning I make of it is that, in a way similar to my mother's affirming hug, God affirms me when I confess to him. In other words, my mother's hug became a sign that God does love me—even after I have sinned.

I remember another time, after college, when I started my first job in the church in Georgia—a long way from home and in a culture much different from the upstate New York culture that nurtured me. Lonely, feeling out of place, and wondering what kind of mistake I had made by moving so far away, I literally slumped onto the tile floor of my small apartment's entry way. Huddled there, weeping, I searched for God, who was the only one to whom I felt I could show my pain. There, I did not sense a powerful presence of God's peace and comfort. I wondered, Where is God? When would the pain stop? When would I feel like I belonged there? What would I need to do to get to that point? God did not provide instant answers. Instead, I gradually moved through that loneliness as I learned to deal with my new situation.

I take that experience to mean that sometimes God leaves me in painful situations, and I may never fully understand why. I am to rely upon God who is with me, even though I am not fully aware of his presence. I trust he is there. This kind of walk is not always easy. I could have easily interpreted that incident negatively as evidence that God is not present, but for some reason, I did not. If I picked a scripture verse to exemplify the meaning of that experience, I might choose the twenty-third Psalm: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Your rod and your staff comfort me.*

Those two experiences exemplify how I am asking you to identify a few life events and to describe what those events mean to you and your friendship with God. I have included several other personal experiences in my timeline as examples. And I identified a time when Carolyn and I left one church for another.

Finally, our agreement of confidentiality remains. I will not show these timelines to anyone, and they will be destroyed at the completion of the project.

Instructions for making your timeline:

1. Use the chart I have provided.
2. Complete each column for each experience: Age, Event, and Meaning. The meaning you give to an event may be positive or negative. I encourage you to tell me honestly.
3. You may include as many experiences as you like, with a minimum of two, one of them being the time you considered leaving the church.
4. You may use as much space as you need and change the chart to fit your needs as long as you still report the three column items: Age, Event, and Meaning.
5. Some participants did not name a specific event that caused them to question leaving the church. Instead, they named a series of events, or a season of time. Please document your age during those smaller events, or that season of time, and complete the other two columns. You've already told me the story, so I don't need a lot of detail. Just a summarizing phrase.
6. You may take several days, up to a week, to complete the time line. I will follow up with you so that you don't forget. If you are not willing to complete this part of the project, please tell me honestly.
7. Finally, return your timeline to me in the envelope I have provided or you may hand it to me when you come to church.

If you have any questions, please ask. Growing in God's love and grace together,

Roger

CC: Enclosures: timeline of Roger; blank timeline for each participant

My Timeline of Significant Life Events and What They Mean to My Friendship with God

Name: Roger Frederick

Age	Event (Brief description)	Meaning (Brief Summary) <i>What meaning does that event have on your friendship with God?</i>
Birth	January 1996	
6	Mom teaches me about God's forgiveness by forgiving me and suggesting that I ask forgiveness from God.	God forgives me, loves me. Mom loves me is a sign of God's love.
10	Family moves to Whitney Point where Dad finally has work.	God will care for us, even if it's not a lot. Home is where the family is, not a building. God will go with us wherever we go.
13	Simpson Park Camp experiences from 5 th grade through high school. An annual week-long Christian camp in Michigan.	Learn about living for Christ through preaching/studying and friendships. Christian life is dynamic, not cyclical or static. Move toward holiness is not a repetitive "crawling back to God for forgiveness" but a dynamic journey with God.
15	"Call of God" experience, Simpson Park camp	I sense and commit myself to follow God's call to work in ministry.
18	Begin college. Cutting <i>apron strings</i> with family.	Confident that God is with me and I can face new risky situations.
19-22	Summer tour music/teaching ministries. Traveled for 10 weeks during sophomore & jr. years.	God has given me talents, gifts, and a call with which to serve God and others. I have a purpose.
23	Graduate from college and move to GA where I begin working with teens in a UMC.	God goes with me through many new circumstances. God affirms my call through people and experiences in GA.
24	Vision of ministry experience: Give gifts to others	God has chosen me to help others receive gifts from God in order to serve, heal, help, restore others. This sets a foundation for my ministry
25	Carolyn and I get married.	God helps me find, establish loving marriage. God is part of our marriage.
28	During Carolyn's pregnancy, we dropped out of church because of health problems. We did not return because of a lack of support from the people at that church.	While we felt God was with us, we learned that the church community is important to help us along our way. We decided to get involved in another church where we could build friendships with couples more our own age. We also learned about prayer.
29	Ryan is born.	God stayed with us through difficult pregnancies even when the church was not present. We did not question God's presence or love for us.

Age	Event (Brief description)	Meaning (Brief Summary) <i>What meaning does that event have on your friendship with God?</i>
33	Emily is born. Another difficult pregnancy and Emily born blind in one eye.	“Valley of death” that we endure with God, feeling comfort from many but pain from others. We are aware of God’s presence, protection, and providence, but it seems meager at times. We still trust God to be there. It’s a roller coaster.
36	Move to Newton, PA. Matchless Grace begins. “Something to sing about”	Our trust in God has brought to a point to sing and tell others how God has been with us through the previous years. We feel much gratitude for God’s healing of Emily and sustaining us.
38	Begin doctoral work: family issues	It feels good to be challenged by learning again. God provides and affirms me in this program.
40	Move to VCUMC	I’m unsure of God’s purpose in the move and I spend a couple years searching to find it. As I get to know people, I begin to see ways God’s call on me might be useful here.

Timeline of My Significant Life Events and What They Mean to My Friendship with God

Name: _____

Your Age at the event	Event (Brief description)	Meaning (Brief Summary): <i>What meaning does that event have on your friendship with God?</i>
--------------------------------------	----------------------------------	--

Use more pages if necessary

→ Did you include the time when you considered leaving the church but decided to stay?

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