

## ABSTRACT

### EMBRACING LEARNER EVANGELISM: BAR POKER COMMUNITY INSIGHTS FOR MINNESOTA UNITED METHODISTS

by

Frederick S. E. Vanderwerf

A recent FACT study reported that the Minnesota Annual Conference (MAC) is leading all other conferences in the U.S. in decline. This has challenged the MAC to cultivate a sense of urgency toward the evangelistic task. However, many evangelistic methods can be experienced as intrusive, judgmental, and ineffective in making disciples. Insights from the field of missiology can be beneficial in MAC's quest to respond to the evangelistic task before them. These insights were implemented in my own cross-cultural missionary journey to Ukraine and are proving useful in my current cross-micro-cultural experience in a local Mankato Bar Poker Community.

Using the incarnation of Christ as a theological framework, the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace, and Paul's own evangelistic example in Athens in Acts 17:16-34, as well as insights from missiology the literature review builds a case for a method of evangelism being coined by the author as *learner evangelism*.

The purpose of this project was to explore the impact of a learner approach to evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker Community, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in the MAC. To determine this, first, MAC clergy were invited to participate in a questionnaire seeking to ascertain their current attitudes, beliefs, and evangelistic practices. Second, informant interviews of the Bar Poker Community in Mankato were conducted to gain an understanding on their experiences, thoughts, and attitudes as they have experienced

evangelism. The data was analyzed looking for evidence that might inform evangelistic practices in the MAC.

Three major findings were discovered. First, MAC clergy have a shared understanding, and most believe themselves to be gifted and trained in evangelism and seek opportunities to equip others. However, most would suggest their church does not share this evangelistic ethos and have other priorities. In summary the clergy appear to “get it” but they believe the church does not.

Second, of the five-fold ministry roles listed in Ephesians 4:11 MAC clergy gravitate firstly to the roles of shepherd and teacher, and to a much lesser degree of apostle and evangelist thus leaving our clergy pool lopsided. The significance of such disproportion was examined further by exploring missiologist Alan Hirsh’s insights on this conundrum.

Third, a learner approach to evangelism was confirmed to more fruitful than current invitation, attractional, or transactional approaches of MAC churches. A learner approach reveals that the unchurched can quite readily articulate where their need and the gospel intersect. While the Bar Poker participants may not have the tools to articulate their belief system, most conversations led to rich, meaningful moments that could be identified as especially significant—where the Spirit of God was at work bringing conviction, hunger, or insight to both the informant and the researcher.

As this purpose of this study was to inform evangelistic practices in the MAC, three major ministry implications were discussed. First, the MAC would do well to equip MAC clergy first in the re-evangelization of the church. Second, the Board of Ordained Ministry should shape their vetting process with an eye on apostolic and evangelistic abilities. And third, *learner evangelism* training should be encouraged and supported as an effective means of evangelism.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled  
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church leads all other Annual Conferences in decline. We have not been effective evangelists. This chapter identifies why and how researching a learner approach to evangelism in the Mankato Bar Poker Community informs evangelistic practices for church leaders in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The chapter provides some autobiographical background; establishes the problem and purpose of the project; identifies, the research questions, data collection methods, rationale for the project; and previews the relevant literature.

#### **Autobiographical Introduction**

In 1995, I stood in line for class registration for my first semester at Asbury Theological Seminary having no idea of what courses to take. The young woman in front of me said, “Oh, you have to take Whiteman.” I did, and my life has never been the same. In Darrell Whiteman’s Cultural Anthropology for Christian Mission course, I learned principles which have now become foundational to how I understand ministry. Dr. Whiteman became a mentor and a friend and with his influence, my wife and I became cross-cultural missionaries to L’viv, Ukraine upon graduation. Our ministry plant started with simply learning. Of course, we began with daily intensive language acquisition courses, but weekly we gathered in our flat with Ukrainians we met in everyday encounters. With a whiteboard propped up we spent countless hours asking anything and everything about faith and culture in Ukraine. Our aim was to start with where they were,



and to do that we had to much learning to do. The methods and concepts gained from Whiteman's courses were instrumental in the fruitful planting of the first ever United Methodist University Student Ministry in the former Soviet Union and eventually the first United Methodist Church in the historic city of L'viv.

In 2008 our son, Levi, was diagnosed with autism and we knew our cross-cultural missionary journey would have to come to an end. We moved back home to Minnesota and I was appointed to pastor a local church. I never dreamed of, nor did I have much passion for being a local church pastor. How would I be able to live into my missionary zeal and put my "Whitmanized" cross-cultural training to use in ordinary central Minnesota?

I decided one thing on my first day at Hilltop United Methodist Church—I would remain a cross-cultural missionary at heart regardless of where I found myself. I am convinced that the core principles gleaned from Whiteman which provide the foundation of what I call *learner evangelism* are so central to effective ministry that every local church pastor and committed disciple of Jesus should know and practice them as lead the local church in its mission. *Learner evangelism* virtually means embracing the role and posture of a learner for the sake of reaching people for Christ. I am certainly not the first to realize this; countless pastors have gleaned from missiological insights and applied them in their local setting with much fruitfulness. So, what unique contribution to ministry can my dissertation bring?

In 2016, I was appointed to the bishop's cabinet of the Minnesota Annual Conference (MAC) of the United Methodist Church (UMC) in the position of District Superintendent. Six months into my new role, Bishop Bruce Ough invited a

denominational consulting team referred to as FACT (Financial Advisory Consulting Team) to identify challenges our MAC is facing. As their name indicates, they did much examination on the financial fundamentals, trends, and viability of the annual conference and identified four challenges facing us:

1. Lack of urgency regarding the precipitous decline in membership and attendance in the Minnesota Conference.
2. Need to reconcile Minnesota Conference's actual financial resources with asset deployment.
3. Build on current efforts to foster sustainable congregational development.
4. Ineffective leadership recruitment and development, particularly among clergy. (FACT 6)

They also provided recommendations on how to respond to each challenge. After interviewing twenty-nine conference members, staff, clergy and laity the first challenge and its subsequent recommendation in particular was of great interest to me.

FACT uncovered that the MAC leads all other conferences in decline; in fact, "in Minnesota, the approximate 33% decline in membership and attendance in the past ten years is as dramatic a decline that exists in the United States!" (FACT 7). Keying in on this finding, FACT identified one challenge as the "lack of urgency regarding the precipitous decline in membership and attendance in the Minnesota Conference" (FACT 6). From this challenge it is not surprising that it was matched with the recommendation to: "Dig deeper in the Minnesota Conference's mission and vision, which calls congregations to "reach new people" so that there might be a common understanding

across the conference as to how reaching new people connects us with the evangelistic task (emphasis added) that is part of our Wesleyan and Methodist DNA” (FACT 9).

With this challenge and recommendation, FACT verbalized the elephant in the Annual Conference—we have long since developed “attitudes of apathy (I don’t care), complacency (I won’t try), and confusion (I can’t see)” when it comes to the evangelistic task (FACT 8).

Due to my role as superintendent and my proclivity toward evangelism, I was asked to join a sub-committee specifically commissioned to offer strategies surrounding the urgent call to take up the evangelistic task. When our sub-committee reported our strategies back to the larger commission, a few of the strategies suggested had identified the need for clergy training as essential to taking up the evangelistic task. In response one person made a comment that particularly piqued my interest for this research. She exclaimed, “I’m not sure training is going to move people to embrace evangelism; we must recognize it’s not merely a lack of competency, but the reality is many of our clergy are philosophically *averse* to evangelism.”

The FACT report indicated that many of our conference leaders have a disdain for evangelism because they experience it as “invasive, judgmental, and denying the integrity of those being reached” (FACT 8). Ironically, if I examine my own life journey I would say that I shared their disdain until I stepped into Dr. Whiteman’s class. Before then I had some sense that evangelism was the responsibility of every Christian, but not until then did I find an approach to evangelism that modeled humility, emphasized relationship, respected culture, and quite frankly bore fruit.

At the same time, over the past eight years I have been engaged in the micro-culture of the Mankato Bar Poker community. As one of my recreational affinity groups I have established relationships with more than 150 persons and at any given poker event commiserate with approximately forty. Most of them represent the un-churched, under-churched, and de-churched. They have experienced the church to be judgmental or simply irrelevant to their lives. Many of them may have been on the receiving end of evangelistic approaches; and, since this micro-culture is in some ways representative of our evangelistic focus, I am especially curious to know from their point of view how the church got it right, and where we have failed in our approaches to evangelism. It is my hope that the principles of a learner approach to evangelism will be affirmed in my interviews with players in the Mankato Bar Poker community and can offer a culturally sensitive guide to Minnesota United Methodist leaders that struggle with both an ethos and method when it comes to evangelism.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Minnesota Annual Conference of the UMC is leading all other conferences in United Methodism in decline. The FACT study suggests this is because they have a disdain for evangelism, seeing it as invasive, judgmental, and denying the integrity of those being reached. Could this be because many evangelistic practices begin with the notion “I have something you need” and so evangelists assume the role of teacher and the recipients the role of learner? This was not the example of Christ who in the incarnation in a very real sense learned from us. Further, it assumes recipients have no prior notions of God and God has not been preveniently working in the life of the recipient. It embraces a role of dominance rather than humility as we see in the incarnation. At worst,

such practices can turn people off the life-giving power of the gospel, and at best, convert people to a much shallower understanding of salvation.

Alternatively embracing a learner approach to evangelism follows the example of Christ, seeks to see where God is already at work, operates out of humility, and has the potential to bring about full salvific transformation.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to explore the impact of a learner approach to evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker Community, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

### **Research Questions**

In order to fulfill the purposes of this study, three research questions were identified:

1. What are the current evangelistic values, posture, and practices, if any, being used by the church leaders of the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church?
2. What are the Mankato Bar Poker players' experiences, thoughts, and attitudes about evangelism as they have experienced it? And how have their experiences affected their notions of God and relationships with God or the church?
3. How do the experiences of the Mankato Bar Poker players inform evangelistic practices for the Minnesota Annual Conference?

### **Rationale for the Project**

The first reason this study is needed is because the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church is leading the nation in decline. The FACT study indicates that “over the past ten years, membership and attendance in the Minnesota Conference have declined twice as fast as the denomination nationally. Since 2005 the conference has averaged an annual 3.48% decline in attendance and 2.66% decline in professing membership” (FACT 2).

Keeping at this pace the conference can expect to be approximately 25% less in membership and worship attendance by 2025 (FACT 2). While Minnesota’s decline is nearly double the national average, nationally we are still losing over 100,000 members a year, and over 75,000 in average worship attendance (Smith, *Big Data Disrupts*). This downward trend is in the context of a rapidly *increasing* U.S. Population. The statistics would indicate we simply do not know how to reach new people with the gospel.

The second reason this study is needed is because we may be engaged in flawed approaches to evangelism that are more patronizing than they are loving, and more alienating than they are life giving. As Mark Teasdale identifies “using the bullhorn to present the Scripture way of salvation on a street corner might be an appropriate practice of evangelism according to our beliefs about the good news, but it could prove to be a poor practice if it comes across as coercive rather than loving to many people” (Teasdale 129). Or as William Abraham writes, “some forms of evangelism are so bad that they may de-Christianize those subjected to them, or they may inoculate people from the gospel indefinitely. . . .” (Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* 166).

The third reason this study is important is that the church may be culturally assimilating people in the wrong direction—them to us, rather than us to them. This is not

what we see in the incarnation, nor is it helpful in keeping the church relevant in an ever-changing culture. Defining discipleship as converting people to the prevailing church culture is not the model we see in Jesus, and any success takes us further away from joining God in transforming the world. Alan Hirsh laments:

I am now convinced that one of the major blockages to unleashing Apostolic Genius is our adherence to an obsolete understanding of the church. We simply have to find a way to push past the pat historical answers that so easily suggest themselves to a people whose imagination of what it means to be God's people has been taken hostage to a less than biblical imagination of church. (Hirsh, *Forgotten Ways* 56)

The fourth reason this study is significant is because there are basic anthropological and missiological concepts that we expect every cross-cultural missionary to know that are in fact helpful to every pastor and laity in their own setting. Mark Teasdale writes, "with these skills, the evangelist could make the good news less alien to a new culture and ameliorate the cultural barriers people might feel in accepting it" (Teasdale 135). Identifying and laying out missiological and anthropological concepts are a needed step towards equipping others for the work of evangelism.

The fifth reason this study is critical is because churches today are largely reaching the *churched* but are not making any real change among the *unchurched* sub-cultures of their communities. For example, a 2009 Hartford Institute study on Megachurches found that only "6% of attenders said they never attended any church before. The national data on all sizes of churches claimed 5% of attenders were formerly unchurched" (Thumma and Bird 2009).

The sixth reason this study is important is because many laity may not engage in evangelism primarily because they do not believe they know what they need to know, but if this thesis is confirmed then in some ways this makes these persons better evangelists, because they will be less likely to start as a teacher, and more likely to engage others as a learner. Teasdale describes this lever as mutuality. “Mutuality is established when both people in a relationship are recognized as having authority” (The Everyday Evangelist 104). Quite possibly the most effective evangelist is not one with all the answers, but the one most open to learning from the other.

The seventh reason this study is needed is because many of our evangelistic practices employed today are a reflection of a shrunken understanding of conversion which in turn stems from a shrunken understanding of the gospel (Clark 8). That is a “gospel of sin management,” which overly stress forgiveness and correct beliefs about God. These evangelistic practices lead to what Dallas Willard calls “vampire Christians.” That is, “people who want Jesus’ blood for forgiveness of sin, but they do not want to enlist as his students in life for the transformation of character” (Clark 8). Thus discipleship, rather than being inextricably intertwined with evangelism, is optional. Consider too then, that malformed converts—or *undisciplined* disciples—effectively hurt the witness of the church. For, among other reasons, it suggests the gospel can only go so far in transforming a person and produces a church where a community that reflects the Kingdom is not visible.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Terms used throughout the project are defined and understood by the researcher as follows.



**Evangelism**

David Bosch offers a widely accepted definition of evangelism, with which I agree. He says that evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sins, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit (*Transforming Mission* 11).

**Incarnational**

Alan Hirsch quite adequately encapsulates what I mean by incarnational: “When we talk of incarnational in relation to [evangelism] it means . . . embodying the culture and life of a target group in order to meaningfully reach that group of people from within their culture” (*Forgotten Ways* 281).

**Learner Evangelism**

While I have not heard anyone in the field of evangelism or missiology specifically use the phrase *learner evangelism*, I have introduced it in this study rather than the more general categories of relational evangelism or incarnational ministry. To be sure it falls into those categories, but it is unique in that it specifically expresses an evangelistic technique that asks the evangelist to embrace the posture of a learner in the evangelistic endeavor. The literature review in Chapter 2 will give greater expression to this concept.

**Delimitations**

The first research question of this study specifically researches the current evangelistic practices of church leaders in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the

United Methodist Church. As clergy person in this conference, and a district superintendent, I chose this demographic because I have greater access to this research pool, and because the hope of the study is to inform these church leaders on best evangelistic practices going forward. The online questionnaire will be sent to the entire clergy database of the Minnesota Annual Conference. The respondents to the questionnaire are clergy, with no delimitating factor in regards to gender, location, ethnicity, or performance.

This study also specifically researches the Bar Poker community in Mankato, MN. I chose this group because I believe it is representative of an American micro-culture and consists largely of persons not connected to church—i.e. unchurched. Other studies often look at how churched people understand, feel, and engage in evangelism, and with that in mind I was of the strong opinion that there must be a study which discovers how the unchurched understand, feel, and receive evangelism. Further, because the qualitative research will consist of interviews surrounding faith conversations which can be, for many, intimate subject matter, I chose a community in which I as the researcher already have gained a good degree of rapport and trust. It is my hope that insights gained may be expanded to other micro-cultures but I will not be able to sample those cultures.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Chapter 2 examines the biblical, theological, missiological, and social foundations for a learner approach to evangelism. The first half of the chapter takes an exegetical look at the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 to reflect on both the incarnation of Christ and the significance as it relates to an incarnational approach to evangelism. The text provides

the foundation for the remainder of the discussion. The main source for theological reflection comes from John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace which undergirds the premise that the Spirit is at work in all peoples long before an evangelist arrives, and therefore suggests the necessity of the evangelist to sleuth, and not teach, where God is already at work. This is then followed by an examination of the Apostle Paul's evangelistic approach in Athens as depicted in Acts 17:16-34.

The second half of the chapter develops missiologist Paul Heibert's work on Bounded and Centered Sets as it relates to the evangelistic task; spends time examining why persons may opt out of evangelistic engagement; the shortfalls of prevailing evangelistic methods; and the concept of cultural assimilation as a friend of the incarnational and learner evangelist. Finally, it speaks to the research methodology best suited for this study.

### **Data Collection Method**

In researching the impact of a learner approach to evangelism in the Bar Poker community in Mankato, data was collected first through sending out a general online confidential questionnaire to all appointed clergy leaders in the Minnesota conference, and then by employing ethnographic research principles, relying some on participant observation, in the Mankato Bar Poker community. In addition, informant interviews with ten persons in the Mankato Bar Poker Community provided rich, valuable narratives. Data was digitally recorded and analyzed.

### **Participants**

The general online survey was sent to all 261 clergy (deacons omitted) under appointment to a local church in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United

Methodist Church, of which 111 responded. Pastors represented various church sizes, geographic locations in Minnesota, various genders, and ethnicities (though predominately white). The ten informant interviews were selected among the more than 150 participants in the Mankato Bar Poker community, participants were all of various genders, ethnicities, and for the most part currently not active in a church community. This is a purposive sampling, chosen on account of the researcher's affinity and rapport with members of this community and on the researcher's curiosity surrounding how evangelism is perceived by outsiders.

### **Type of Research**

The research was qualitative and quantitative in nature because the research questions ask both for numerical ranking as well as for experiences, thoughts, and attitudes, which are difficult to quantify. The research was pre-intervention in that it seeks to discover current experiences, thoughts, and attitudes surrounding evangelism which might inform how pastors engage in evangelism in the future. The research took place over the course of two months in the fall of 2017, with data analysis occurring in late fall of 2017 on into January 2018.

### **Data Collection**

A mass email and web blast invitation were sent through the Minnesota Annual Conference office to the appointed clergy of the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist church on September 25, 2017 welcoming them to take part in this research project by filling out the online questionnaire (Appendix A) composed through Survey Monkey. The questionnaire included a general introduction to the project, approximate time needed to complete questionnaire, a reminder of its confidentiality, a

statement that specified that going forward with the online questionnaire indicated the participants consent, and a reminder they could leave the questionnaire at any time if they wish not to proceed. Only completed questionnaires would be collected. The online questionnaire was open for two weeks and closed on October 9, 2017. Questionnaire data was confidential, and password protected using the Survey Monkey online application.

The Bar Poker community ethnographic data was collected by participant observation field notes by the researcher, and also by informant interview data. Ten informants were identified and represented various genders, age, and ethnicities. These ten were primarily selected because the researcher suspected they would be most capable of providing rich data and willing to participate. Informants were each individually apprised of the purpose of the project in face to face conversations; a date was set to meet in a private room in a local establishment where confidentiality could be ensured. Each participant was asked to read and agree to an informed consent document (Appendix B) before the interviews began. All interviews were semi-structured in nature and conducted one on one between the dates of September 25, 2017 and October 9, 2017. They were approximately fifteen to forty-five minutes in length. Each interview was digitally recorded on the researcher's password protected smartphone, transcribed and saved on the researcher's password protected computer for further analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The clergy questionnaire utilized Survey Monkey which automatically generates a descriptive statistical analysis. Survey Monkey allows for filtering of responses so when appropriate I handedly filtered responses from a specific demographic, or filtered data based on how a group of respondents answered any one particular question. I did an

overview analysis of the raw data and percentages that are quite simply presented for each question using Survey Monkey. In addition, for the text box answers, Survey Monkey automatically generated a word cloud to highlight words most often used. Finally, to get more detail, I highlighted and coded answers according to commonalities of response.

The informant interview data was analyzed by first listening to the audio recordings and then reading through all ten informant interview manuscripts several times, making notes of major themes in the margin of each transcript. While all data was very insightful, for the purpose of limiting my findings, I narrowed my focus to major themes and highlighted responses in each transcript related to these themes.

While working with both data collection methods, notes were copiously taken at both the bird's-eye view of the data and during the more in-depth stages of analysis looking for major findings. Not all data was significantly used to establish findings, however, Chapter 4 offers major findings that were both statistically significant and of particular interest to the researcher.

### **Generalizability**

Insights gained through this research will be especially generalizable to greater mainline denominations and judicatories that struggle with their understanding, practice, and effectiveness of the evangelistic task. Further, while members of the Mankato Bar Poker Community are in some sense a very specific micro-culture in the world landscape, they are representative of a broader world outside the church, insights gained from interviews with the unchurched can inform the church's evangelistic tactics.

### **Overview of Dissertation**

The subsequent chapter is a literature review which seeks to pull in biblical, theological, and missiological concepts to hear from a wide array of fields that would support a learner evangelism approach. Chapter 3 provides the research recipe which provides the analytical framework of the project. Chapter 4 gives an analysis of the findings the materialized in the in the questionnaire and informant interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 seeks to highlight the major findings and their implications, and ultimately how they can inform evangelistic practices in the Minnesota Annual Conference.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter I set out to make the case that the most effective evangelistic practice is embracing the *role of learner*. Now, of course learning is involved in every endeavor but what I mean here is that in regards to evangelism learning is not merely the *means*, but the *ends* of effective evangelism. When our local churches commission missionaries to evangelistic endeavors in a foreign land it comes with an expectation that they will spend a great deal of time learning the local language and understanding the local culture. What we insist upon cross-culturally must also be insisted upon across micro-cultures in our own neighborhood. However, the reason we must engage in learning is not simply to prepare us for evangelism, but because such a posture *is* evangelism (Kirby 131). This chapter looks at biblical, theological, missiological, and social concepts that would suggest that more effective evangelism happens when the evangelist embraces a *learner* approach.

#### A Biblical Foundation

##### Insights from Biblical Theology: Philippians 2:5-11

To begin our discussion, it seems wise to start with the very example and posture of Christ as depicted by Paul in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. It is my contention that the primary biblical and theological construct for understanding evangelism as embracing the posture of a learner is found in the doctrine of the incarnation. And this scripture text marvelously depicts the learner posture of Christ found in the incarnation. Perhaps no other scripture unpacks the missiological movement



of the incarnation as does the Christ Hymn found in Philippians 2:5-8: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (NRSV).

In these verses we see the great extent to which the God of all Creation, in the person of Jesus, went in order to bring us salvation. This passage becomes the frame on which our own evangelistic method should hang. Before looking closer at the evangelistic implications, I would like to exegete a few critical concepts found in this text.

### *Christ’s Humiliation*

This portion of the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-8 deals with the downward movement or “humiliation” of Christ. But where is the starting point of Christ? Equal with God? Pre-existing with the Father? Or somewhere between humankind and God? To answer this, we must examine the Greek phrase “μορφῆ Θεοῦ.” Much discussion centers on the precise contextual understanding of the Greek word “μορφῆ.” The word is most commonly translated “form.” The question becomes what does it mean to be in the “μορφῆ” or of God? Does it mean a mere outward appearance, or does it also connote the reality behind the appearance? Ben Witherington holds that “‘μορφῆ’ always signifies an outward form which truly, accurately, and fully expresses the real being which underlies it” (262). Verse six, then, might read, “being in the very nature God” as some translations do (NIV). For it was not as though he looked like God but really was not God.

Here then the hymn begins with two Christological positions. First, Christ holds the very nature and essence of God. Second, Christ shared this nature prior to his humiliation which strongly suggests his pre-existence. So this hymn begins to establish, from the onset, a high Christological position of the Son. This is important as it sets the stage to show just how great the distance was his downward movement towards us.

*Ἀρπαγμου: The Act of Grasping*

The Greek word “ἄρπαγμου” often translated “something to be grasped” unfolds again the character of Christ. The object of the sentence in which it appears is “equality with God” and it is precisely this that Christ did not consider “ἄρπαγμου” that is, “something to be grasped.” This phrase suggests that Christ had equality with God and did not seize his full divine advantages. Others takes it a bit further and suggests that the text could be translated something to the effect of: “Christ did not consider equality with God to mean ‘the act of grasping’” (Dongell). To be sure, in this one phrase we see that the nature of Christ is not clutching, grasping, or striving for power, but on the contrary self-emptying. This is confirmed in the very next segment.

*Emptied Himself*

As I eluded to above, Christ “emptied himself” often translated “humbled” or “stripped himself.” In contrast with grasping toward his divine prerogatives which he had access to—“being equal with God”—he instead, “emptied himself.” This stripping of himself was done in order to become a human being. Witherington asserts, “This probably does not mean he set aside his divine nature, but it does surely indicate some sort of self-limitation, some sort of setting aside of divine rights and privileges of Glory” (264).

Just how Christ limited himself remains to be a mystery, but certainly God taking on flesh and being found to be human would negate omniscience, omni-presence, and most likely omnipotence. However, as Gordon Fee suggests, the real crux of this emptying does not lie in the “how” or the “what” but lies in the contrast itself (210-211). Fee states, “Christ did not empty himself of anything he simply ‘emptied himself,’ poured himself out.” “The real humiliation of the incarnation and the cross is that one who was himself God, could embrace such a vocation” (210). Christologically speaking we see a “divine selflessness: God is not an acquisitive being, grasping and seizing, but self-giving for the sake of others” (211).

### *Taking, Becoming, Being*

The three participles in verses 7 and 8 further illustrate the extent of his emptying: *Taking* the form of a slave, *becoming* in the likeness of human beings, *being* found in human form. Gerald Hawthorne notes the irony of this humiliation: “Paradoxically this act of self-giving was accomplished by *taking*” (71). Christ did not subtract from what he was but in fact added humanness to what he was. The passage says “he took on the form of a slave” (δοῦλος). Again, here the word “μορφή” comes into play. If we understand the first usage of the word to indicate more than just the outward appearance but the true reality of his nature, then the context would argue for the same application. He was not “merely disguised as a slave, having only the external markings of a slave. He really possessed the true character and attitude of a slave” (71). Witherington argues that the context suggests, “The function of this hymn as Paul uses it is to inculcate humble self-sacrificial service, not slavery” (263). Thus, Christ moves from a position of riches to a position of poverty as described in 2 Corinthians 8:9 (263). Again, we begin to unpack

the nature of Christ, who identifies himself with the lowest echelon of society and conceals his power and glory for our sakes. Here in this passage the three different words used to convey the nature of Christ's humanity seem to suggest a concerted effort by the hymn writer to take away any doubt of this claim: "Together they become a threefold emphatic reiteration of one fundamentally important idea—that Christ in the Incarnation fully identified himself with humanity, that he became truly human both in appearance and in thought and feeling, that he shared people's plight genuinely" (Hawthorne 72).

### *Obedient unto Death*

Christ's obedience to the point of death perhaps marks his divinity like none other. It would be ridiculous to consider death an act of obedience for a mere human, for death is a necessity (Martin 107). Christ shows the epitome of humility by choosing to be obedient to the will of God. All the while Christ had opportunity to exercise his own will but even at the point of death he did not submit to any will other than the Father's will for him, even at the cost of his own life. Fee says, "Obedience unto death, therefore points to the degree to which obedience took him, the readiness of him who, as one of us, chose the path that led to death" (216).

As if the humiliation of Christ was not enough ending in death, it ends on the cross. This marks the divine scandal that is the crux of the Gospel; the one who is equal with God, the Creator dies an insurrectionist's death at the hands of his creatures (217). Thus, the ultimate example is the one of Christ, who chooses obedience to the Father in the midst of the uttermost scorn, shame, pain and finally death.

### *Implications for Learner Evangelism*

So, what does the downward incarnational movement of Christ have to do with evangelism? Let me state it in other words. God chose to humble himself and learn from us. God could have come to us as a sort of Super-God-Man and wielded his authority and power over us, but this was not the way he chose to reach us. Think on this. In the Christmas narrative in Luke attests that he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger (Luke 2:12). In this story we see the God of the universe as a helpless babe choosing to need us. It is unfathomable really, yet this is how God engages us—not out of a position of power, but one of downright helpless humility. The scriptures go on to report that he grew up in a very specific culture, learned the trade of an artisan, took on the Jewish customs of his earthly family, and spoke Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic even to such a degree that he could be identified as having the accent of a people group from the sticks of Galilee (Mt 26:73). It is in the theology of the incarnation that we see a God who does not ask us to assimilate to God’s culture rather God assimilates to ours. God identifies with us. It seems strange to say, but the all-knowing God becomes a *learner*. In so doing at least two things happen. First, God identifies with us in our culture, and second, God gives witness to God’s very character. God always starts with where we are, embedded in our language, culture and worldview, in order to transform us into what God wants us to become.

Recall how Paul opens the Christ Hymn: “Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus.” Paul himself heralds the incarnation as our very model for living out our faith toward one another. Our modus operandi is never one of power but rather one of humility. Gerald Orthner rightly states, “Christ followers need to embed themselves in their culture because that is where God started with them” (8). Darrell Whiteman

elaborates, “In the same way that God entered Jewish culture in the person of Jesus, we must be willing to enter the culture of the people among whom we serve, to speak their language, to adjust our lifestyle to theirs, to understand their worldview and religious values, and to laugh and weep with them (1).” Steve Seamands continues: “To communicate the gospel, we can’t do it from a distance or a place of superiority or power. We have to move into the neighborhood too! When over time we truly identify with people and they identify with us, then the message of the gospel breaks through. Then they begin to understand that God understands and cares” (Kindle Locations 347-349).

We can see in the incarnation that Christ turns upside down our misconstrued notions of evangelism. God in the person of Jesus could have come to us with all the power and authority and forcibly made us embrace God’s ways. God could have been “pushy” and “all-knowing.” Or perhaps another way of stating it, God could have made us assimilate to him, rather than vice versa. However, we see God’s method for reaching us is quite the opposite. He gave up power, prestige, and position, location, and modeled humility. Christ enters into our world and lives and learns from us. Christ goes so far to even assimilate to our culture and identify with us. What if our approach to evangelism was the same? Or what if the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus? “In redeeming lost humanity and fallen creation, incarnational identification was God’s own missionary method. To break through, the Word, who was with God and was God, became flesh and dwelt among us. He cried like one of us. When we go forth in his name . . . such identification must be our method as well” (Seamands Kindle Locations 384-386).

Amazingly something else happens in the incarnation besides the awesome reality of Christ’s humiliation, that being, human elevation. When Christ took on flesh, you and

I were elevated. By God entering our culture—our shoes, our skin, and so forth—he gives renewed value to what at the beginning of all creation he called “good,” or as Orthner puts it: “The incarnation validates culture as a viable medium for communication with humanity” (6). Whiteman would go even further by saying, “culture and language are the *only* medium by which God communicates to human beings” (Personal Interview).

When Jesus took on flesh—and specific flesh at that—he did so that we might understand him. He approached us, entered our culture, learned the language, identified with us, and in so doing he shows us that in fact going in as a *learner* is the most effective means toward the communication of the gospel. The effective evangelist has the same task set before him or her—language and culture acquisition, assimilation, and identification. In short, we must have the heart of a learner.

Going in with the heart of a learner not only prepares us for the translation of the gospel message, but so much more than that, it makes us assume the position of “need” rather than the position of “have.” Remember the text, “he humbled himself.” That humility in itself opens up doors for effective communication of the gospel. Let me offer an example from my own experience:

When we moved to our first apartment in Lviv, Ukraine, on Tomoshivskoho Street, apartment five, the power went out and we were left in the dark. Three months living in this strange and quaint little flat I had never noticed an actual fuse box. I finally found it. The fuse itself, was nothing like anything I had seen in the states, it looked primitive—sort of a spool with copper wire wrapped around it. Not knowing what to do with it, now that I had found it, and not wanting to risk

220 volts surging through my veins, I had to do something I had not yet done. I had to knock on my neighbor's door in apartment six.

We had seen this family of five living in a two-room flat. We bumped into them on the stairways, but never really said anything but “good day.” I rang the doorbell. Miss Olya answered, showing no grin. As her youngest son, Ivasik curiously peered out from behind her, I spit out in my broken Ukrainian that we were in the dark and I wondered if they could tell me how to fix it. She called for her husband Vova. He stuck out his hand to shake mine, and grabbed his slippers, a candle, a couple of tools and came to our rescue.

That day changed everything. Our relationship with the Staschaks in Tomoshevskoho six thrived from that point on. They were always helping us—always taking an active involvement in our life. Why? It wasn't because they needed us, but because we needed them. It was in our need, not their need that the possibility of a relationship began. It was in our vulnerability, not in our strength, that new connections were made. Here we were the missionaries come to bring something we believe they needed, yet it was them helping us in our point of need that actually formed the relationship.

This is noteworthy for effective evangelism. We are not called to “Lord it over”

(Matt. 20:25 NRSV) but ours is the way of emptying. This should not be surprising.

Scripture attests over and over again the message of humility. Consider

2 Corinthians 12:9, “For power is made perfect in weakness” (NRSV). Or from

John 12:24, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single



grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” The Apostle Paul eludes to being incarnational in his missionary method when he states in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (NIV)

The very posture of a learner is the posture of humility, and in humility the chance for effective gospel communication occurs. Donald Larson notes, “the learner’s dependence and vulnerability convey in some small way the messages of identification and reconciliation that are explicit in the gospel” (162). He goes on to report, “History shows that vulnerability and flexibility are themselves powerful witnesses to the working of the Spirit within man” (163).

Lingenfelter and Mayers also call us to take on the role of learner in our evangelism. “We must love the people to whom we minister so much that we enter their culture as children, learn to speak as they speak, play as they play, eat what they eat, sleep where they sleep, study what they study, and thus earn their respect and admiration” (25).

Be clear that in taking on the role of learner in our evangelistic practice our goal is identification and not imitation. Christ in the incarnation identified with us. He did not imitate us. The difference is important. “Some missionaries have wrongly exaggerated its significance to the point of thinking that identification consisted primarily of an external type; . . . the identification which is required is not imitation, but full participation as a member of the society” (Nida 162). Whiteman writes, “I must admit, that in over thirty years of studying missionaries I have yet to find anyone who ‘went too far.’ We normally have the opposite problem of not going far enough in our attempts to identify with the people” (*Luzbetak Lecture 33*).

Perhaps nothing articulates the method of effective gospel communication by means of an incarnational approach to evangelism than the Chinese poem as published in Whiteman’s work:

Go to the people,  
 Live among them,  
 Learn from them,  
 Love them,  
 Start with what they know,  
 Build on what they have. (*Anthropology and Mission 410*)

This appears to be exactly what Christ did for us in the incarnation, and what he calls us to do in our evangelistic mission endeavor.

### **A Theological Foundation**

#### **John Wesley’s Concept of Prevenient Grace**

Central to this discussion on the necessity of the evangelist to embrace the heart of a learner is the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace. At the core of Wesley's understanding is the premise that no person is a clean slate void of God. God has in some way left his mark on us. As Ted Runyon puts it: "To be sure, by nature we are all dead in sin, but this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is (commonly) called 'natural conscience'" (28).

Runyon draws from John Wesley who says; "Everyone has some measure of light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later . . . enlightens every man that cometh in the world. . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath" (28). Paul's own arguments in Romans 1:18-20 confirm that all persons come with a prepackaged conscience of God:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (NIV)

If this is true about the individual is not it also true about people, groups, and cultures? All of which are comprised of individuals who look at the world through similar lenses? That is, if the Spirit of God is working in the life of a person long before they recognize him, is it not also true that the Spirit of God is working long before in the lives of whole families, whole people groups, and whole cultures and whole micro-cultures? And if no

person or culture is completely devoid of God than as we engage in evangelism is not one of our primary tasks, if not the chief task, to *learn* where God is already at work in the individual or the culture. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh capture the essence of our task: “The missionary task is not to bring God to them but to uncover the *Imago Dei* and assist people to use this knowledge for the salvation of their souls” (35). As Methodists the very theology of prevenient grace warrants a learner’s heart in our evangelistic method. It is imperative that we not go in teaching but rather adopt the heart of a learner whereby we are always asking the question, “Where is God *already* at work in this culture?”

Think about how often we get this wrong. We often engage persons and cultures as if we believed that the only culture that has been touched by God is our own. But prevenient grace would have us believe the contrary that God is already at work in both persons and cultures long before we arrive. Crucial to the evangelistic task is to learn—identify, sleuth, detect, discover—where God has left God’s mark.

Howard Snyder writing on the missiological implications of Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace states, “The first and most basic one [understanding] is that in Christ by the Holy Spirit, God has gone ahead of us” (64). And second, “that God’s Spirit is the missionary. God is already active in all persons, cultures, societies, and to a degree in many religions; . . . the work of Christian mission is to cooperate with God’s preceding grace” (65).

To put it another way, all peoples have a *notion of God*. They are not clean slates. With that in mind, William Reyburn asserts: “The missionary who will know his people will have to first know their God. How a people symbolize the supernatural, and the way they think and feel toward their God or gods is not only a clue to the stuff of which the

society is made, but also an indication of what in Christianity will be immediately relevant” (481).

To come in as teacher without doing the hard work of a learner assumes “the convert’s religious mind is an empty basin to be filled for the first time in his life” (485). But as Wesleyans we know people do have a *notion of God*. Yes, that notion may be fragmented, perverted, and dim, but an effective evangelist will go in and begin learning and affirming that which *is* God or *of* God within the culture they are trying to reach.

And here is what is crucial to understand. The learning *is* the evangelism. The medium *is* the message. The communication *is* the gospel. I can recall a task Bishop Sally Dyck assigned our Minnesota United Methodist Conference clergy. She challenged our laity to engage in conversations with the “nones” in their life (“nones” were those who may have grown up in the church but now no longer claim religious affiliation). Her instructions were that the laity were not to engage in quarrelling or to be preachy but rather simply ask these six questions:

1. How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually?
2. If you went to church when you were younger, what was the turning point?  
Why did you quit altogether or stop attending regularly?
3. If you never went to church regularly, what is your impression of it?
4. What disappoints you about the church?
5. When have you seen the church at its best?
6. What would you wish to tell the church? (Dyck 3)

In engaging in this assignment my own congregation discovered a few things. First, they discovered the *nones* in their life did consider themselves highly spiritual and had much

to say about their beliefs in God. And second, with the objective of learning at the heart of these questions, faith conversations with close friends and relatives which had previously ended in quarrels now ended with persons feeling valued. People felt listened to and even enjoyed the conversation. Why? I would postulate because our laity went in with a learner's heart. Our task was not to teach, preach, or push, but instead to listen, discover, and explore existing notions of God. At the core of that was holding the belief that their non-believing friends were not godless heathens, but in fact, God-full. Their job was to discover the notion of God already laid on their hearts, rather than identify all the ways their lives were not measuring up to God's standard. Taking on the role of learner does not only have one sided benefits for the learner, but also for the one from whom we are learning from, "for in the very process of eliciting pertinent information, the informant himself is brought face to face with many issues he may have never clearly analyzed before (Loewen 662)."

E. Stanley Jones's own concept of evangelism speaks to the *notion of God* that by prevenient grace lies deep within each person. "Real evangelism isn't cramming our beliefs down people's throat" (6). In Jesus we see that when persons "listened to him, they listened to themselves—there deepest selves. Evangelism was not forcing people to listen to something imposed from without, it was people forcing themselves to listen to something that answered to the depths of their very beings. Deep speaking to deep" (6). Evangelists who developed the art of learning assist persons to listen not to the evangelist themselves, but to the evangelist within themselves—deep speaking to deep.

### **A Biblical Example**

**Acts 17:16-34**

The Apostle Paul in his ministry in Athens in Acts 17:16-34 both embraces the learner approach to evangelism, and affirms a missional attitude that persons, in this case the Athenians, have a pre-existing notion of God well worth understanding. Let us turn to this passage and look at the missiological implications:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served

by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. (Acts 17:16-34 NIV)

### *Paul Goes in as a Learner*

Note how Paul begins not with teaching or proclamation, but with observing and learning: “For as I walked around and looked carefully.” He understands his task is to discover exactly who these peoples are and they already believe about God. In fact, we see that when he begins to speak he starts with where they are at, “People of Athens, I see



that in every way you are very religious.” Awesomely, he had engaged in learning. He also compliments them rather than degrading them for their pagan ignorance. Later when he affirmed the deep desire of Athenians to know God (or gods), he could do so in good conscience because he had done his homework. So he began where they were at noting, “for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god.” How fabulous that the Apostle understood that these persons are not an “empty basin,” they have a notion of God (Reyburn 485).

In this text Paul reminds us that a serious exegete of the culture is demanded. We must go in as learners—ever observing. We must begin with what they know and affirm the truth of what they know. We seek to know not only our scripture, but theirs too and to understand their rituals, philosophies, and worldviews. After all, this is where God starts with us and all humanity, even the Athenians two-thousand years ago.

### *Scratching Where It Itches*

Through daily discussions in the marketplace amid epicureans and stoics Paul too continues to learn about these people. So much so that, we get a sense that Paul developed an understanding of their sacred and philosophical writings when he decides not to quote the Hebrew scriptures but rather the words of Aratus, one of their own pagan philosophers: “As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Laymon 752). Paul had learned from them, understood they had a notion of God, and linked their notion of God with the Almighty God.

Paul did something else too worth noting here. He bit his tongue. Paul not only sleuthed where God’s prevenient grace was at work in the Athenians he also managed to

hold back from hurtful commentary on where suspected God was not at work. Too often we detect what we deem as sin, but the effective evangelist instead seeks to affirm what can be affirmed as being of God. We see this in Paul's approach. Paul is not intimidated to go so far as to affirm the truth of what is found in the words of a pagan poet. Paul knows that the Almighty God has left his mark on culture, in its art, and even its pagan religion. Paul Heibert affirms the apostle's ministry expressing that "all authentic communication of the gospel in missions should be patterned on biblical communication and seek to make the Good News understandable to people within their own cultures" (55). Paul knows that for Athenians to grasp the gospel he must seek to look through the world through Athenian cultural lenses. Paul holds back condemnation of apparent sin he undoubtedly sees as he traverses the city.

The problem would-be-evangelists make by focusing more on where the sinner misses the mark is that too often their own cultural conceptions of sin narrow their focus. This approach causes the evangelist to "preach to the wrong choir" so to speak. Jacob Lowen in his article relating to the effective use of questions in the communication of the gospel suggests that, "careful questioning and sympathetic listening are the tools par excellence for finding out "where it itches" (652). He postulates that to point out sin without engaging in the task of learning we will effectively scratch "where it doesn't itch" (652). As a result, of which T. Wayne Dye writes, the receptors "may have a very long struggle learning what God wants for them since the things they hear from the missionary do not match the things they hear through their own consciences" (37). Reyburn affirms that sound "missionary theology asks the question: 'At what points in this man's heart does the Holy Spirit challenge him to surrender?'" (760). Besides,

scriptures make clear that it is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict persons of sin. Our role is to present the gospel and to do so effectively.

Eugene Nida tells of a missionary to West Africa who made it a regular practice to spend good lengths of time simply questioning the local elders of their belief in God, never speaking of his own faith, unless asked to do so. “The missionary’s purpose was not, however, just to elicit curiosity. He was convinced that in order to tell the people about God he had to first learn what they knew about God, or otherwise he might fail utterly to make his message relevant” (Nida 161). The apostle understands this. He embraces the role of learner, sleuths their notion of God, and affirms what he can, while remaining silent on that which appears to be inconsistent with his own notion of God.

*Paul is Adept in the Prevailing Philosophies*

Many biblical commentators give much attention to the composition of the Greek audience of Athens. Luke notes “Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.” Epicureans “were Greeks who held a philosophy that happiness could be achieved by serenity and detachment. They had no fear of divine intervention in this life or of punishment after death or of the resurrection” (Young 487). As “atomic materialists” they “viewed reality as an endless chance combining and dispersion of atoms” (Larkin 253). A Stoic “sought virtue by aligning himself with the will of the universe, taking and accepting things as they are” (Young 487). Being “material pantheists” they “identified the divine as the principle of reason pervading all and, in the form of fate, governing all” (Larkin 253).

One might be tempted to overlook these two schools of philosophy as not entirely relevant to Paul’s evangelistic endeavor in Athens. However, as Larkin indicates, Paul’s

message is keenly directed at these philosophies. “For the first-century Epicureans . . . the fact that God is the Father of humankind is challenging good news. No longer need we settle for the reductionist explanation of humankind and its activity. And for the Stoics . . . pantheism, or the ‘God within,’ is revealed as false, but in its place is the person made in God’s image, living in conscious dependence on God” (Larkin 259). Paul knew his audience; he knew not simply tangible and observable artifacts (e.g. the altar with the inscription, “to an unknown God.”) but also the prevailing philosophies, which gave value, norms, and meaning to this culture. Because of this Paul is later able to marvelously proclaim Good News to both these schools of philosophy. The text would indicate, and many commentators note, that most Athenians on that day rejected Paul’s presentation upon the hearing of the resurrection. “The cultured Hellenistic audience dissolves at the mention of the resurrection of the dead, a concept totally unacceptable to both Stoics and Epicureans” (Crowe 136). However, Luke is quick to add that a good portion said “we will hear you again about this.”

Paul’s poignantly directed speech combined with an invitation to share again, helps us to conclude that Paul was attentive to learning the prevailing philosophies of the day and was able to identify where God was at work with them, and speak into them with great sensitivity.

#### *Paul Invited Before the Areopagus*

Of great evangelistic and missiological concern to this passage is whether Paul was taken in a hostile manner to defend himself before the Areopagus as in a trial or was he instead cordially invited to the Areopagus in order to share more deeply with the opinion makers of the city? A common English reading of the text can leave us

wondering. “They took him” as Krodel notes, “can be understood in a friendly sense meaning ‘they accompanied him,’ but it can also have a more or less hostile sense” (326).

To get at the heart of this we must discern what the Areopagus is. Commentators suggest that by the time Paul arrived the Areopagus “could refer to the hill of the god Ares, god of war . . . if so, the Areopagus would be the rocky hill of Ares, northwest of and at the foot of the acropolis, overlooking the agora. In ancient times the council of Athens conducted its trials on that hill” (Krodel 326). This physical site, however, eventually shared the name with the ancient court that resided there.

It appears at one time the Areopagus had more authority and power over the civil laws of the city. Luke may be reminding us that Socrates had also been “brought to the Areopagus many centuries before, as was well known” and which ended in his death (Keener 373). However, by the time Paul arrived most agree that it had been reduced more to the task of protecting “the reputation of the city as an intellectual center” (Jones 100) and “exercised authority in matters of religion and education” having “some control over public lecturers” (MacGorman 82). It is not necessary to conclude that Paul was literally taken by force up the steep steps of the Areopagus but Luke does want us to know he was “before” the council now known as the Areopagus, which may have at this time gathered nearby in the marketplace (Keener 373).

So, was Paul in trouble? Only Crowe alludes to this being a potentially dangerous encounter suggesting that Socrates centuries earlier had also been charged as a “proclaimer of foreign divinities,” which ended in his own demise (133, 135). Krodel notes, “Unlike Socrates, Paul was not on trial” and “his speech was not a defense speech, an apologia, but a proclamation of the Creator” (327). Maddox is convinced “this was a

single honor for Paul since only the most learned lecturers and scholars were actually invited to address this court” (102).

In addition, four other things suggest Paul was invited to the Areopagus and was not in some kind of peril. First, Paul had piqued their curiosity when he spoke of Jesus and the resurrection. As Harbour suggests, “the word for resurrection is Anastasis. Some scholars believe the Athenians considered Anastasis to be the female counterpart of Jesus” (134). Thus, the plural use of “divinities” in the verse 18 accusation. The Athenians had yet to hear of Jesus and this new consort. Second, is “the proverbial curiosity of the Athenians who spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Krodel 327). Upon hearing of new divinities, they wanted Paul to expand further. Third, “the lack of verdict and other judicial details makes it less likely that this was a trial” (Lake and Cadbury 213). Or as Stott mentions, “there seem to have been no legal charge, no prosecutor, no presiding judge, no verdict or sentence” (Stott 283). Fourth, in light of all this, add the invitational statement “may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? (17:19)” and I would conclude this was, in fact, an invitation for Paul to unpack his religious philosophy and not Paul standing on trial before a hostile court. Understanding it so begs the question what did Paul do right to win such an invitation?

#### *Paul’s Presentation Before the Areopagus*

We can learn much from Paul’s message before the Areopagus but I want to note here what commentaries draw attention to that has obvious missiological implications for our greater discussion.

First, Paul began with a compliment by calling the Athenians “extremely religious” in “every way.” Though some suggest this can be translated “superstitious” and meant as degradation, most agree with MacGorman “the council seemed to hear it as a compliment” (82). In so doing Paul begins with “where the Athenians were” which establishes a point of contact and yet in no way is an endorsement by Paul of their religious beliefs (Jones 101). It proves to be a masterful way to win one’s audience before even beginning, contrasted to modern evangelistic approaches bent on beginning with where people are missing the mark.

Second, and in the same vein, Paul brilliantly establishes a point of contact when he refers to the altar with the inscribed words: “To an unknown god.” “Here he found an appropriate place to begin his witness. He attempted to tell them about the God whose existence they acknowledged, but about whom they confessed their ignorance” (MacGorman 82). Most commentators agree, that Paul’s reference here proved to be a launching pad from which to unveil the reality of the one true God, and at the same time protect him from the challenge that he was introducing some new deity. Instead, he was simply further unveiling the deity they already worship, though in ignorance (Krodel 331, Larkin 256). It proved to be a way for Paul to lead into a bigger question: “who is God?” (Williams 1985:297).

Third, and perhaps the most striking to our evangelical sensibilities, is that, rather than quoting the Hebrew Scripture in his argument, Paul quotes Pagan prophets. MacGorman notes, “At no point did Paul quote a passage from the Bible; yet he bore witness to a thoroughly biblical understanding of God” (82). Paul displayed a deep grasp of pagan philosophies. Paul was versed no doubt in Jewish methods of persuading Greeks

of the truth of Yahweh. Keener writes, “the quote from Epimenides (17:28) appears in Jewish anthologies of proof texts useful for showing pagans the truth about God” (Keener 374). Here Paul was appealing to the notion that if, “we too are his offspring” (17:28) then God must be Father to us all, and if Father to us all, he cannot be made of gold, or silver, or anything else made by mortals. There is also some who suggest that perhaps with the statement “in him we move and have our being” that Paul is citing a Greek pantheistic assertion (Larkin 258).

Though it seems to us unusual that Paul would opt for pagan philosophers over Hebrew scripture it does show as Krodel notes, “Luke could acknowledge that truth exists outside the Bible without accepting the pantheistic content . . . in which the citation originated” (Krodel 336). Keener notes, “Greeks cited Homer and other poets as proof texts in a manner similar to how Jewish people cited Scripture” (Keener 374). So how incredible that Paul displays an amazing knowledge of Greek culture and philosophy, and again is able to work from where they are at and from what they know when building his arguments.

### *An Effective Encounter*

Obviously, I chose this text in Acts so that we might glean insights on how to engage in effective evangelism by embracing the role of learner as Paul did. But a good question to ask is, was Paul’s encounter with the Athenians in fact, effective? “The establishment of a church in Athens is not reported at this time and the implication is clear that only a few Athenians believed” (Jones 102). Maddox notes that Paul’s message to Athens has endured much examination and criticism with some scholars saying, “Paul failed to reach the Athenians for the gospel because he tried to be too rational”



(Maddox 102). And we know by the text itself, “when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed” Crowe rightly identifies Paul’s mention of the resurrection as being the main point of disagreement especially for the Stoics and Epicureans in the crowd (136). Still Crowe praises Paul’s adeptness in drawing on Greek philosophy and poetry that “served as hints of what the true God was” and in the end the stumbling block for both Jews and Greeks is the resurrection (137).

Jones goes on to note “the very mention of the names Dionysius and Damaris implies that their names were known to Christians” (102). And “tradition identifies Dionysius as the first bishop of Athens” (Jones 102). Krodel while observing the response was “divided,” confidently states “a new church was formed and placed under the leadership of a member of the Areopagus” (339). He goes on to assertively mention:

At any rate from Luke’s perspective Paul’s stay in Athens was not a failure, even if it did not result in mass conversion . . . Luke gave us an example, not on how his readers should preach, but of how the great missionary Paul spoke to representatives of Greek culture and philosophy. It was not he who failed that day; it was they who missed the chance for repentance and faith. (340)

In my mind Krodel is correct by coming back to Luke. All throughout Luke’s gospel and Acts he is bearing witness to the concentric outward spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The very fact that Paul’s message is articulated here, for me indicates that at the very least Luke thought it to be right on the mark with some important and crucial effectiveness.

*An Interpretive Summary*

In this passage Paul's missional prowess does not disappoint. The apostle exhibits the passionate heart, the keen intellect, the winsome personality, the spiritual sensitivities, and the ardent abilities of contextualization necessary to present the truth of Christ to a people who most of us would assess as very unlikely to respond graciously. Even though the results may not have been as astounding as other responses in Acts, it is clear Luke wants us to see this as part of the victorious endeavor of the Spirit-filled witness to ends of the earth. Luke no doubt includes this passage so that readers might also see the unique methodology of Paul as he confronts an entirely pagan worldview. And it is my contention that chief to Paul's success was found in his evangelistic method of embracing the role of learner.

#### *The Missiological Applications*

The missiological applications of this text are many. First, we must seriously observe the culture until we are "provoked" or stirred to act. Have we become desensitized so much that we have lost sight of a lost world? Second, evangelism is not something that only takes place among your own in the safety of a worshipping community, but also in the market, the pub, the athletic clubs, and even sometimes in the high intellectual circles of society. Do we engage the outside world with the truth of Jesus or is it confined to the Church? Third, a serious exegete of the culture is demanded, someone who will begin with what they know and affirm the truth of what they know. Know not only your scripture, but theirs too. Understand their rituals, philosophies, and worldviews and start there. Fourth, wait until you are invited in to share more, but be present often enough so that you might win the invitation. Fifth, trust that God has been working long before you arrived arranging events that people might search for him and

find him. Considering the post-Christian culture we find ourselves in, it behooves us to take seriously the learner evangelism approach of Paul in Athens.

## The Missiological Task

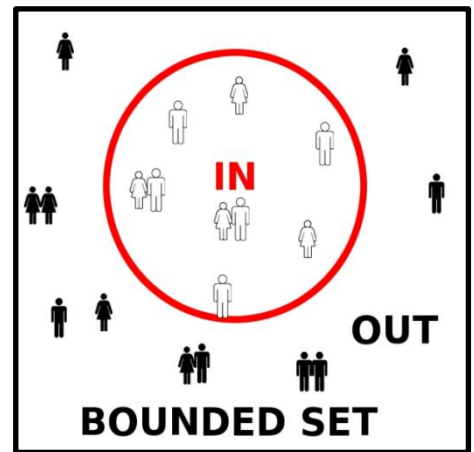
### Bounded Versus Centered Sets

I would like for a moment to change the discussion to a concept that first comes out of mathematics but has been used effectively for missiology as developed by Paul Heibert (Conversion 24-29). The concept is commonly referred to as Bounded Sets Verses Centered Sets. Let us first look at what we mean by bounded sets and then assess how it has affected the evangelistic task.

#### *Bounded Sets*

Bounded sets, as illustrated in the figure below, group items (or in this case, people) by way of boundaries. So, all those who meet a certain criterion find themselves inside the red boundary. “Bounded [sets] create walls and barriers. You are either in or you are out. You either fit or you don’t and the lines are clear. The goal is to get someone on the outside of the line to the inside” (Heibert Conversion 26).

Figure 2. 1



For too long we have incorrectly identified the missionary task as moving persons across the line, and the church today is paying the price for this mistake (more on this later). We have said that to move across the line means embracing certain theological concepts, giving mental assent to certain fundamental doctrines. The boundaries are established differently in different circles. Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, or

whomever engaging in evangelism have developed a set of parameters consistent with their own theological leanings on what one must know, confess, or profess to follow

Jesus:

A bounded set is where we create a boundary, a theological border, a doctrinal fence, and separate those who are inside the fence from those who are out. It is an “us” versus “them” mentality where everyone on the inside is accepted, loved, and welcomed, while those outside the fence are kept away until they can change their beliefs and behaviors to fit the entry requirements. (Myers)

The missionary task then becomes getting the unbeliever to *know* it and to *believe* it, but belief in this sense means giving mental assent to doctrinal truths rather than trust.

Therefore, “getting saved” means praying the sinner’s prayer, or affirming the creed(s) but has nothing to do with changing the trajectory of one’s life. Or as E. Stanley Jones states a “change of label” when our main endeavor is a “change of heart” (7).

Unfortunately, this becomes salvation by information, and not salvation by grace through faith as Paul proclaims in Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (NIV).

We can already see the implications of understanding the missionary task in this way. It means it is quite possible that one can be within the boundaries and still not look anything like Christ, and in fact, to not even be looking in the direction of Christ. The fruit of this kind of evangelistic labor are not disciples but either legalists or antinomianists. The former tightly guard the border and make sure every part of their person complies, and the latter tends to say, “I already said the sinner’s prayer (verbal assent to information) so now I can just go on living life as if nothing’s different.” In each

case we have converts for sure, but what have they converted to? While in terms of knowledge of Jesus they may be quite close to Jesus, having passed all the knowledge tests, recited the proper confessions, etc., however in terms of a life transformed through relationship with Him they are in fact heading in the wrong direction. Unfortunately, or perhaps tragically, the bounded set approach to evangelism is concerned only with saving people from hell, as long as they are “in” there is no reason or need to further their growth in Christ, so discipleship takes a back seat to conversion, if it plays any role at all in the life of the convert.

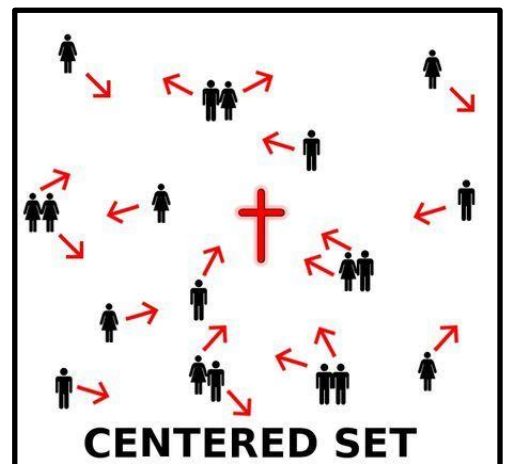
### *Centered Sets*

In a centered set, there are no boundaries. There are no walls. There is no fence. There is no dividing line between “us” and “them,” no rules or guidelines to determine who is “in” and who is “out.” Everyone is loved, welcomed, and accepted, no matter what.

Everyone automatically “belongs.” (Myers)

In the centered set (Figure 2.2) we look not at boundaries, but at trajectory or direction of a person. Persons in this illustration are being drawn to something or headed in certain directions for some it is Christ (represented by arrows pointing towards the cross). Others are heading somewhere for sure, but quite possibly in the opposite direction of the cross.

**Figure 2. 2**



The missionary task using centered sets then, as you may have already guessed, is not to drag persons across the line but rather assist in changing their direction—to meet people where they are at, to expect that God has been working in another’s life long

before they come to faith in Christ (prevenient grace), to sleuth (learn) where God is at work, affirm that notion within the person, and work alongside the Holy Spirit to gently nudge their trajectory towards the cross. You can see that this changes completely our understanding of not just evangelism but discipleship too. It means in a very real sense that one could be a disciple long before they “pray the prayer.” The converse is true as well; one may have “prayed the prayer” and still be facing away from the cross. A disciple is marked not by whom they are standing next to, but by whom they are following and/or what direction they are traveling. Darrell Whiteman adds, “that the Greek concept of *metanoia* (repentance) is instructive here, for it means changing direction and moving toward, *not* crossing a boundary to enter a different religion (Personal Interview).”

When we examine the ministry of Jesus we see that he used a centered set approach focusing on discipleship, whereas the Scribes and Pharisees were all about boundary maintenance. This is why Jesus was such a threat to their religious institutions and identity. Unfortunately, the church has not often followed Jesus’ model of centered sets but have drawn lines and created boundaries to preserve our theological and doctrinal distinctiveness and maintain and preserve our membership requirements.

### *Biblical Examples*

We see Jesus reiterating this point in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers,

evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14 NIV)

For the Pharisee we see reliance virtually on a set of boundaries. By fasting, tithing, and in general not being like others you are “in.” However, ironically, it is the Pharisee’s own operation within a given bounded set that displays a heart not centered on God. Yes, in principal, he is faithfully carrying out what is required by the cultural boundary of pharisaic Judaism of his day, but in terms of his direction he is hardly moving towards God’s heart. In contrast, the tax collector, the hero of Jesus’ story, by any religious standard would find himself out of the bounds of faithfulness, and still the parable of Jesus seems to thrust him as the example of what is required for justification. It is not location as much as it is trajectory. Labels may display boundaries but the heart displays our trajectory.

This distinction between bounded and centered set approaches to ministry is also seen in the parable found in Matthew 21:

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” (NIV)

Is there a more stunning example where we see that mere profession of faith means nothing and we find that ultimately Jesus is concerned with the way of our hearts?

Prostitutes and tax collectors certainly by any religious boundary of the day are missing the mark, but Jesus holds many of them up as our example not because of where they are on the map, but because of where they are headed, as he does countless other places in scripture including the centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1-10 NRSV), and the Widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:21-30).

### *Implications for Evangelism*

Understanding evangelism in terms of centered sets transforms the task of evangelism and its implications are many. Firstly, it shows that the dissemination of information is not the goal. That is, our task is not to get persons to embrace some certain set of information so they can have a change in label. Rather the task is to assist people to turn their trajectory towards Christ. Remember the command is to “go therefore and make disciples” (Mt 28:19a NIV). We are making followers of Christ—people of the



way—not members, or proselytes. Salvation comes not by embracing a set of standards, but rather by following, walking, moving towards Christ. Bounded set evangelists too often assume faith has been transferred simply because of change in outward behavior that satisfy the boundary requirements. Donald Larson notes a common oversight of missionaries is to “assume a permanent acceptance of new beliefs from a premature manifestation of certain outward behavior, considered by the missionary to be a sign of belief. . . . [But] beliefs don’t come and go but are tied up with every aspect of life” (Church 134).

Second, this means evangelism is not a one-time affair for either the evangelist or the convert. That is, our task and the task of the convert is not completed simply when a few core doctrinal truths (or other boundary) are embraced or professed, or certain behaviors are avoided. No, discipleship is a life-long endeavor, always moving, always adjusting our trajectory in the direction of the cross. Herein lies the problem with the American church, when discipleship is deemed as a boundary and not a movement; discipleship ends at the moment of conversion. Therefore, we have many who call on the name of Christ, but so few who emulate him. In the missiological realm, William Reburn speaks to this. He warns that missionaries build bounded sets when they “suspect that everything the local people do is bad and that therefore, in order to save them, they must pull them out and set up another kind of life opposed to the original one.” (Identification 755). In this bounded set mode of thinking, the results, if any, are “converted souls but, no converted life” (755). The missionary has simply taken “the path of least resistance” (755). Undoubtedly a proselyte can be made, but not a disciple.

A third implication is that it is entirely possible in the centered set view that discipleship can in fact happen way before any conversion. Or put another way, someone could begin to walk in the direction of Christ long before even knowing Christ.

Whiteman suggests, “Discipleship should always start *before* [Conversion] because if we wait until conversion, then it is less likely to take place” (Personal Interview). We know this to be true as Wesleyans because of our understanding of God’s prevenient grace.

Finally, we see that within a centered set understanding that the missionary task of learning becomes pivotal. If our task is not to drag them across some man-made boundary, but rather to assist in changing their trajectory, it becomes essential that we enter into their worldview and discover just what path they are on. How can we assist in the trajectory of their walk, if we have not taken the steps to discover where they are heading?

### **Evangelism Today**

In light of our discussion let us look critically at the current understandings of evangelism among American mainline Christians, because I think it speaks to the need to renew our practices.

#### *The Lost Practice*

It is my contention that evangelism is both a lost practice and lost art among mainline pastors and laity in America. Martha Grace Reese in a study known as the Mainline Evangelism Project noted: “Church members ranked evangelism as the very weakest link in a list of fifty-four things their churches do” (6). But it is not just the laity that do not engage in evangelism. Mainline pastors are increasingly queasy when it comes to evangelism and are both unmotivated and unequipped to engage in it. Only

eight of the seventy-two mainline seminaries require a course in evangelism and it seems this lack of pastoral leadership in evangelism has trickled down to the flock.

There may be a variety of reasons why the practice of evangelism has been lost, but let me address two. The first has to do with general attitudes. Persons note that evangelism to them seems “pushy,” “awkward,” “pressuring,” “uncomfortable” or “insensitive” (Reese 16). Often when most persons think of the word “evangelism” visions of aggressive Bible-thumpers flash through their minds. E. Stanley Jones, in a list he produced of twelve underlying questions persons not committed to evangelism have, includes these two; “Isn’t evangelism an unwarranted interference with other people’s private lives?” and “Why should we cram our beliefs down the throats of other people?” (3). In other words, “isn’t it pushy?” One has to wonder that if church members find evangelism to be pushy, how the recipients of such practices find them.

But a second reason persons may not engage in evangelism may have to do with feeling inadequately equipped to do so. The reality is many persons do not engage in evangelism because they do not believe they have all the necessary answers or knowledge about God, Jesus, the Bible, or the church, so how could they possibly engage in evangelism?

Notice then, that in these two reasons we see a common underlying assumption that the practice of evangelism is “top down.” That is, one must know something that the potential convert does not know and then push them to embrace it. If that is how we understand evangelism then it stands to reason that if I either do not know everything about the subject, or I do not want to come across as “pushy” than I will not engage in it.

My contention is that the kind of effective evangelism modeled for us in scripture and mandated to the disciples is neither “pushy” nor does it require “knowing everything.” In fact, E. Stanley Jones rightly notes that evangelism thought of in this way is not evangelism at all but proselytism. “Proselytizing aims at a change of label with little regard to a change of heart or life” (7). He goes on to say that, “evidently what Jesus was aiming at was distinct from proselytizing. He aimed at conversion—a change of heart and life (7). Proselytism at best makes a member, but evangelism is linked not with membership but found within the process of disciple-making. Which would Jesus have us engage in?

I assert that if we can begin to see evangelism as taking on the posture of a learner, then effective evangelism looks altogether different than the proselytism people understand it to be. When going in as learner one is neither asked to be pushy, nor required to be all-knowledgeable. And in this model evangelism is not top-down but bottom-up. Evangelism done right is not so much effectively *teaching* (i.e. disseminating information from on high), but rather effective *learning* (identifying with people within a culture). It is my contention that as we begin to understand evangelism as taking on the role of learner more Christians will be likely to engage in evangelism, be more equipped to participate with the work of the Spirit, be more sensitive in their approach, and see fruit that exhibits more authentic conversion and discipleship.

#### *Why Deductive Models Disappoint*

Embracing the role of learner in evangelism is vital because popular deductive methods of evangelism can be shallow and harmful. Arthur McPhee categorizes these approaches as either deductive, inductive, or a combination of the two. Examples of the

deductive approach are The Four Spiritual Laws, or the Kennedy Five Points. Examples of an inductive approach might be called Relational Evangelism, Friendship Evangelism, or perhaps now too we should add Learner Evangelism. Proponents of the deductive appreciate its “simplified, systematized, one-size-fits-all *kerygma*” proclamation where the gospel is proclaimed “generally” (McPhee). The inductive approach begins with where people are at “(their guilt, fear, doubts etc.) and moves to expressions of the *kerygma* meant to align with such needs” (McPhee).

McPhee, a proponent of the inductive approach, offers an excellent critique of where deductive approaches disappoint:

The strength of the [deductive] view is that it offers a simple, easily memorized way to talk about the gospel with people. But it has many weaknesses. First, the message may sound canned (rather like a salesman’s speech). Second, the “Four Spiritual Laws” and “Kennedy’s Five Points” expressions of the gospel are often truncated and wrong. Third, they usually settle for decisions not discipleship. Fourth, one size does not fit all. Fifth, there is no evidence in the Scriptures that early evangelists limited themselves to formulaic expressions of the *kerygma*. (McPhee)

I would add a sixth weakness to MCPhee’s assessment, that being that when no “decision” is made the evangelistic encounter is judged as a failure. A great example of this was shared with me by Dr. Greg Okesson. He recalled a time while serving as a church planter in Tanzania when a short-term mission team from the U.S. arrived. One of the team members came to Okesson describing an amazing day where he had met a wonderful local man in the market who had invited him to his home for dinner. He went

on to describe the exciting time they had together as he got to know this man, his family, and their customs. It was real human-to-human cross-cultural encounter. However, by the time the missionary got to the end of his story his elation turned to disappointment and he said, “But I blew it, I never led him to Christ.”

Did he blow it? By a bounded-set mentality, he most certainly did, but by a centered set philosophy he undoubtedly accomplished much for the gospel. In fact, this man did lead the Tanzania to Christ by being *as* Christ is in the incarnation—a learner. And conversion did happen that day—his own. John Kirby writes regarding the kind of culture learning that took place that day: “It is ministry primarily because it witnesses to a conversion process: the conversion of the missionaries themselves. Missioners are really responsible for only one conversion, their own! But the witness of this conversion will influence the lives of those around us” (Kirby 137).

Rebecca Pippert, in her book *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the Fire*, which aims at an inductive approach to evangelism, would condone the real human encounter made in Tanzania that day and point to the incarnation as our example as she writes:

God didn’t send a telegram or shower evangelistic books from heaven or drop a million bumper stickers from the sky saying “Smile, Jesus loves you.” He sent a man, his Son, to communicate the message. His strategy hasn’t changed. He still sends men and women-before he sends tracts and techniques-to change the world.

You may think that strategy is risky, but that is God’s problem, not yours. (30)

She goes on to write, “we must open our lives enough to let people see that we too laugh, hurt, and cry” (30). A learner approach to evangelism stands in contrast to a deductive synthesized technique. It is doing life together—identification as demonstrated by Jesus.

## Getting Assimilation Right

In my own local church often when laity speak about evangelism what they often mean is church growth. Therefore, our best evangelism method, though not expressed by our laity in this way, can be articulated as “getting people to get in with us.” Thus, the onus is on the receptor to discover who we are, learn from us, and adopt our forms, values, and worldview in order to become a part of us. The goal is to get them to be like us, to join us—i.e. assimilate to us. When assimilation is sought in this direction it may quite possibly be doing more harm than good. Below are potentials of how assimilation in this direction gets it wrong.

### *He to Us, Not We to Him*

First, it fails to match the direction of assimilation modeled by Jesus in the incarnation. Jesus entered our time, our space, our culture—Jesus learned us. He assimilated to us, and not us to him. As Whitman particularizes, he “appeared as a Jew, shaped and molded by first-century Roman-occupied Jewish culture. This meant that Jesus spoke Aramaic with the low prestige accent common to Galilee. He avoided eating pork and other foods prohibited by the Torah” (Whiteman ii article).

Not only is Christ assimilation to us modeled in the incarnation but also in the everyday ministry practice of Jesus. Leonard Sweet rightly mentions, “Jesus never invited anyone over to his house, but was often found in the homes of others” (September 2014). Throughout scripture we notice Jesus entering the space of others, rather than expecting them to enter his space. When Jesus encounters the tax-collecting Zacchaeus, rather than inviting Zacchaeus to his house, he invites himself to Zacchaeus’ home. “Hurry and come down for I must stay at your (emphasis added) house today”

(Luke 19:5 NRSV). In Mark 2:13-17 we see him “at dinner in *Levi’s* house (emphasis added)” which greatly disturbed the scribes and Pharisees (NRSV). God incarnates in Christ, and Christ incarnates into our very homes. Christ’s assimilates to others, rather than others to him.

The onus of *belonging* is shifted. In common evangelistic practices the responsibility is on the receptor to belong to us, on the contrary Christ takes on the responsibility to belong to others. Kirby in discussing cross-cultural [missionaries] writes, that successful missionaries “get involved with local people, esteem them, and learn from them. They build relationships from the outset and become ‘belongers’ in their new society. When missionaries spend time with people becoming ‘belongers,’ they are following Christ’s incarnational ministry” (136). Whiteman agrees, “In the same way that God entered Jewish culture in the person of Jesus, we must be willing to enter the culture of the people among whom we serve, speak their language, and adjust our lifestyle to theirs” (ii).

### *Confusing Culture with the Gospel*

Secondly, by getting the direction of assimilation wrong, we run the risk of confusing the message. We could obviously or inadvertently confuse the message of the gospel with adherence to our particular culture or worldview. This has been a missiological pitfall since Acts chapter 15: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (NRSV). This early church conflict was directly related to some who were suggesting that crucial to gentile conversion was the adoption of Jewish cultural law.



Misdirected assimilation has been the goal too of missionary work in the past as noted by missionary and anthropologist Edwin G. Smith when he recorded in 1934: “I think that too often missionaries have regarded themselves as agents of European civilization and have thought it part of their duty to spread the use of English language, English culture, English music—the whole gamut of our culture. They have confounded Christianity with Western Civilization” (Whiteman, *Luzbetak Lecture* 16).

When our efforts are for receptors to assimilate to us rather than us to them we are likely to be engaged in spreading our culture rather than Christ.

### *Culture Superiority*

Thirdly, seeking to have receptors assimilate to us rather than us to them, hints of underlying view that suggests our culture is the culture which is most God-like, and their culture is void of God. Miroslav Volf speaks to this:

It would contradict major Christian convictions to think that the world outside of Christian communities is bereft of God’s active presence. The God who gives “new birth” is not only the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:3) but also the Creator and sustainer of the world with all its cultural diversity. As the Word came “to what was his own” (John 1:11) when it dwelled in Jesus Christ, so also Christians live in each culture as in their own proper space. Cultures are not foreign countries for the followers of Christ but rather their own homelands, the creation of the one God. (88-89)

Whiteman continues, “the various cultures of the world are gifts of God’s grace,” suggesting that to place our own culture above another ignores the very gift of cultural diversity God has created and as Whiteman observes, is redeeming as seen in Revelation

7:9 (*Luzbetak Lecture 32*). “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” (NRSV). Whiteman adds, “So, the image we get here is one of cultural diversity, not cultural uniformity. People from every ethnolinguistic group will surround the throne of God, worshiping God, not in English, or even English as a second language, but in their own language shaped by their own worldview” (*Luzbetak Lecture 32*).

Whiteman asks us to imagine a multi-cultural redemption and to envision the 6,809 languages and their cultures represented around the throne of God (32). To take it further, not only the language groups, but the diversity of micro-cultures within those groups, and the communities within those micro-cultures. Could it be possible that a specific community like the bar poker community in Mankato might have the possibility of representation around the throne of God? Andrew Walls writes:

No one ever meets universal Christianity in itself: we only ever meet Christianity in a local form and that means historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man he became historically, culturally conditioned man in a particular time and place. What he became we need not fear to be. There is nothing wrong with having local forms of Christianity—provided we remember that they are local (235).

When Walls speaks of fear, he may be tapping into precisely what causes us to get assimilation backwards. We are afraid. Fearful of the possibility that God just might be at work in cultures and people groups that are so very different than us.

*Stifling the Flow*

Finally, our inability to understand the proper direction of assimilation can lead us to actually stifle the flow of the gospel to new cultures. For example, in my own church even when we speak of outreach ministries to the university campus, we do so with the underlying and very real hope that reached students will become a part of our church. Again, the goal is to “get them to get in with us.” Should we be successful we may be doing more harm than good to the very natural flow of the gospel because in so doing we will have removed believers from the culture that they are most naturally hard-wired to influence.

As Daniel Shaw suggests, “It stands to reason that the more distant a society is from the communicator’s, the more difficult communication becomes” (299). Instead, “It is our responsibility to assist those with the least cultural distance by equipping them with the tools they need to communicate most effectively” (301). In other words, by asking people to assimilate from their culture to ours, we are taking them out of the very cultures they are most uniquely qualified to reach.

In the case of my church’s vision to reach students on the university campus I stress that our ultimate hope should not be that they become a part of us, but rather that they are unleashed on campus to establish new expressions of the Christian faith communicating the gospel to their own culture (that we are largely removed from) with their worldview and with their forms. Success would be a fresh expression of the church, which might look nothing like our own, but have Christ at its center none-the-less.

In summary getting the direction of assimilation correct is core to embracing a learner evangelism approach. By adopting a learner’s heart, we emulate Christ, we move the expectation of assimilation to ourselves, we are forced to come to terms with what is

gospel and what is our own culture, we are poised to see where God is at work in cultures beyond our own, and we assist in the unleashing of the Gospel to new cultures with new expressions. Besides, at the core of misdirecting is assimilation is the faulty motive of self-preservation, but Christ calls us to die to self. “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24 NRSV).

### **Research Design**

This study employed a pre-intervention qualitative approach. What is somewhat unique to this study is that rather than only looking at the current practices on the side of the *evangelists* (in this case the MAC clergy using an online questionnaire), I wanted to explore the thoughts and attitudes about evangelism as experienced on the side of the *recipients*—namely individuals collectively a part of the Bar Poker community in Mankato, by which I will employ ethnography relying a bit on participant observation and heavily on informant interviews.

### **Questionnaires**

In order to get the broadest response in the limited time frame set aside for this study I decided to utilize a questionnaire as a data collecting mechanism for research question #1 which looks at current evangelistic practices of MAC clergy. The researcher used the MAC office to disseminate both a description of the study with an invitation to participate (Appendix A) along with an online link to the questionnaire. Approximately 290 part-time and full-time clergy appointed to local churches received this link directly through an email blast to their inbox, conference website postings, and e-newsletter communication to assist in a higher volume of responses. Questions included short open

ended, fixed choice, and scaling. All questions were brainstormed with Doctor of Ministry students in my cohort, and thoughtfully arranged in consultation with Professor Karla Lassonde a research expert at Minnesota State University.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography comes to us from the discipline of anthropology and is defined as “the process of discovering and describing a culture” (McCurdy, Spradely, and Shandy 9). Culture can mean many things in our day, but anthropologist E.B. Tyler first defined it in 1871 as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (5). Synthesizing this definition, McCurdy, Spradley, and Shandy define culture as “knowledge that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience” (5).

When we think of cultures we often think on the macro level, that is, Indian, Norwegian, or Middle Eastern, but even within macroculture—in America we have subcultures like Southern, New England, rural, or Texan and within these subcultures we have microcultures. “Microcultures are similar to subcultures in that they exist inside larger, complex societies . . . however: they do not define a whole way of life” (14). Examples of a microculture might be a church group, a local grain elevator operation, the Rotary club, or in the case of this study, the Bar Poker community.

When we seek to study the learned and shared knowledge of people that generates behavior and helps interpret experience on the macro level or the micro level, we employ the practice of ethnography. In reality, we are all practicing ethnography as we navigate through life—but on a subconscious level. We all learn the forms, meanings, behaviors,

and nuances of our culture and the microcultures we encounter each day. Ethnography as research brings this “into a more conscious, highly structured,” process (9).

### *The Ethnographic Task*

David Fetterman illustrates the ethnographic task as such:

[It's] much like the one taken on by an investigative reporter, who interviews relevant people, reviews records, weighs the credibility of one person's opinions against another's, looks for ties to special interests and organizations, and writes the story for a concerned public and for professional colleagues. The key difference between the investigative reporter and the ethnographer, however is that whereas the journalist seeks out the unusual, the ethnographer writes about the routine daily lives of people. (1)

Ethnography, unlike research that is aimed at *testing* a theory, instead seeks to *discover*. Ethnographers are the students and those living in the culture our teachers (McCurdy, Spradley, and Shandy 11). The tools at the hands of ethnographers are many but for this research the primary tools will be participant observation and informant interviews.

### *Participant Observation*

Key to ethnographic research is to seek to understand people in the context of their everyday life. “Participant observation is the core means by which ethnographers have tried to do this. Perhaps the best single phrase to describe participant observation is a deep hanging out” (Crang and Cook 37). Participant observation as the phrase implies “combines both participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data” (Fetterman 34).

Participant observers use all their senses as they engage in the culture often beginning with observation from 40,000 feet and coming down to ground and even microscopic level flipping over stones to see what lies beneath, and then back out again all the while immersing themselves in the culture context. In this kind of research participation is valued primarily because of access. By being a participant, you are invited deeply into the culture, conversations, sights, smells, and behaviors, simple outside observation could not take you. Still observation drives the research because all the while you are using all your senses to discover that which is happening in front of you. The dance between both participation and observation is a delicate one. For example, if you are not careful extensive recording of field notes can disrupt your efforts of full and normal participation. On the other hand, to becoming too engaged in the culture can cloud the researcher's ability to do objective research.

### *Informant Interviews*

Much of participant observation research happens through casual conversation that the researcher both listens in on and at times engages in as a part of normal social interaction. These conversations offer much data for research. Sometimes the researcher will find it necessary to probe deeper through interviews. As the researcher seeks to discover a culture through interview it is necessary to identify some informants (125 O'Reilly). Informants are those "who are willing to teach you their micro-culture" (McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy 21). The best cultural informants have the following attributes: they know the culture well; they are presently engaged in the culture; they are sufficiently "verbal and social"; and they have time available (29-30).

When it comes to interviews “the main purpose of the interview is to obtain a special kind of information” (Sensing 104). “Interviews allow people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observations” (Sensing 103). Interviews can be *structured* with “predetermined and fixed” questions; *unstructured* which is “more free flowing and formless”; or *semi-structured* with “elements of both styles” (O’Reilly 126).

For this study the semi-structured interview will be employed. In this type of interview “specified themes, issues, and questions with predetermined sequence are described in the protocol, but you are free to pursue matters as situation dictates” (Sensing 107). In other words, while the researcher has a list that guides the conversation and helps keep focused on the purpose of the interview, they may feel free to chase after some rabbit trails or probe deeper when something sparks interest an area they would like to explore deeper (107). As likely informants are identified it is imperative that the researcher identify themselves, the nature of the project, and give the informant the option of participating in the study and the ability to withdraw at any time. This happens through clear communication and consent forms (McCurdy, Spradley, and Shandy 27-28).

### **Review of the Chapter**

While using the incarnation of Christ as depicted in the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace, and Paul’s own evangelistic example in Athens in Acts 17:16-34 this chapter seeks to provide a firm biblical and theological foundation for learner evangelism. Drawing from insights in



missiology, specifically: Heibert's work on Bounded and Centered Sets, McPhee's and others' exploration of deductive versus inductive approaches to evangelism, and a thorough discussion on assimilation, the chapter further establishes a case for a learner approach to evangelism, and the pitfalls of other approaches. Finally, the chapter discusses the methodology of questionnaires and ethnography to be employed in research phase of the project.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT**

#### **Introduction**

The Minnesota Annual Conference (MAC) of the United Methodist Church (UMC) is leading all other United Methodist Conferences in the US in decline. A recent FACT study suggested that when it comes to evangelism there is either apathy, complacency, or confusion (FACT 8). The researcher contends that a learner approach to evangelism may inform MAC's evangelistic priorities, postures, practices, and effectiveness. To explore this, I questioned MAC clergy regarding the current values, attitudes, behaviors, and fruitfulness in evangelism using an online questionnaire, and I engaged in ethnographic research in the Bar Poker Community of Mankato relying on participant observation and informant interviews to get a sense of the effectiveness of a learner approach to evangelism. The data from both the clergy and the Bar Poker Community was analyzed in order to inform the evangelistic practices of the MAC.

#### **Nature and Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to explore the impact of a learner approach to evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker League, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in the MAC of the United Methodist Church. To determine this, first, MAC clergy were invited to participate in an online questionnaire seeking to ascertain their current evangelistic attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Second, participant observation and informant interviews of the Bar Poker Community in Mankato—a purposive sample—were conducted to gain an understanding on their experiences, thoughts, and

attitudes as they have experienced evangelism. The data was analyzed looking for evidence that might inform evangelistic practices in the MAC.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Question #1: What are the current evangelistic attitudes, beliefs, and practices, if any, of appointed clergy of the MAC of the United Methodist Church?**

With the heart of the project purpose to ultimately inform evangelistic practices of the MAC this question was aimed at understanding what the current values, posture and practices are. To obtain answers to this research question permission was granted by the MAC director of ministries (Appendix E) to solicit clergy participation using the email database of all clergy under appointment and using conference electronic mass communication. With both an email blast and weekly e-newsletter clergy were invited to take an online questionnaire developed by the researcher (Appendix A). The whole of the questionnaire was used to answer this research question.

Three basic response styles were used to collect data. Questions 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 19, and 20 were deliberately opened ended short answer opportunities so that the researcher could ascertain the participant's definition of evangelism, positive and negative experiences with evangelism, and current evangelistic behaviors, in a way that closed ended or Likert-type scaling questions do not allow. However, throughout the survey, Likert-type scales were also used with various response anchors as deemed appropriate to the question (Vagias, Wade 2006). In particular, questions 8, 11, 14, 20, 21, 23 used this method to ascertain attitudes, practices, barriers, and theology that could give clues to perspectives of evangelism. Further, questions 16-18 and 22 were simple closed ended or multiple-choice questions as one more means of further ascertaining

evangelistic postures and practices of Minnesota United Methodist active appointed clergy.

The researcher does have a bias that a learner's approach to evangelism as discussed in Chapter 2's literature review is the best model for evangelism and therefore questions were aimed at getting a sense of the participant's attitudes and practices that might be classified as a learner's approach.

**Research Question #2: What are the Mankato Bar Poker players' experiences, thoughts, and attitudes about evangelism as they have experienced it? And how have their experiences affected their notions of God and relationships with God or the church?**

With the researcher bias of learner evangelism, as presented in Chapter 2, being the most appropriate model for evangelism, research question two is designed to explore what is going on in the lives of those who might be considered unchurched or de-churched in order to inform the MAC's evangelistic practices to reach the unchurched and de-churched.

Insight to this research question was collected through some participant observation in the context of "deep hanging-out" in and among the Mankato bar poker community on three evening occasions. However, the primary means of researching this question came through informant interviews conducted with active participants in the Mankato Bar Poker community. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and a list of possible questions to be asked are found below (and Appendix D):

1. How are feeling about this conversation?
2. Tell me a bit about yourself, like where you have lived.

3. How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually? Tell me a bit about your faith story.
4. What persons or events have influenced your spirituality or understanding of God either negatively or positively?
5. Do you currently attend church or other religious community?
6. If you went to the church when you were younger but stopped attending, what was the reason?
7. When was the last time you had a positive and robust faith conversation?
8. Have you encountered someone seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective? Describe that encounter?
9. What do you believe about who God is? Jesus? Or the bible?
10. When was the last time you encountered the church or a representative of the church? How was that experience? How did it affect what you feel about God or Jesus?
11. Do you cultivate your faith to the degree you would like? What are the roadblocks to doing so?
12. Do you have conversations about faith with the significant people in your life? (that is, spouse, parents, girl or boyfriend, children)
13. When have you seen religion or church at its best?
14. If you could say one thing to the church or the Christian world what would it be?
15. Describe a time you have shared your faith or spirituality with someone else?
16. How are you feeling now in this conversation?

The aim was for the interviews to be as conversational in style as possible. These questions were designed by the researcher to assist the informant to speak freely as much as possible about their own faith, religious, or spiritual perceptions. Much liberty was taken to omit questions when they did not meet the natural flow of the conversation or add follow-up questions according to the “feel” of the conversation.

Reading field notes from participant observation and the transcripts of the informant interviews gave insight to attitudes of the Mankato bar poker participants towards research question two.

### **Research Question #3: How will the experiences of the Mankato Bar Poker players inform evangelistic practices for the MAC?**

Given the fact that MAC is leading all United Methodist Annual Conferences in decline, and the FACT study adamantly reports that we have neglected the evangelistic task, the purpose of this project is ultimately to inform the evangelistic practices of conference clergy, laity, churches, and leadership. To do this I looked to concepts presented in the literature review, data gleaned from the clergy questionnaire, as well as analyzed the data from field notes and informant interviews from the bar poker community. Weighing all this data I identified findings that seemed particularly informative to our work as a conference surrounding the evangelistic task.

### **Ministry Contexts for Observing the Phenomenon**

#### **Context One: MAC Appointed Clergy**

The MAC is comprised of 345 churches presided by one bishop who also serves the Dakotas Annual Conference. The MAC has five districts: two are distinctively rural; two are a rural, large city, and suburban mix; and one is a highly urban suburban mix. Churches are served by approximately 314 appointed and assigned leaders. These leaders

are primarily elders in full connection, with a steady increase of licensed local pastors. Most appointed leadership serve in full-time capacity, however, there are several less-than-full-time appointments as well. An appointment can consist of one local church or multiple local churches.

The conference is in a freefall of decline. When the UMC was formed in 1969 (at the merger of EUB and Methodists) membership in the MAC was over 140,000. By 2005 membership declined to 81,890 and ten years later in 2015 it declined to 64,215 (FACT 2). It is less than half its membership size since inception, having never seen an annual increase along the way. Likewise, annual average weekly worship attendance has steadily dropped from 40,974 in 2005, to 29,760 at the close of 2015 (FACT 2). In 2014 only seventy of the 345 churches reported growth in average weekly worship attendance over three years (FACT 3).

The average age of active clergy elders in 1993 was forty-seven, while today that number is closer to fifty-four. The same is true for our full-time licensed local pastors who in the same time frame moved from an average age of forty-nine to fifty-four. Part-time local pastors also saw an increase in age from thirty-nine to fifty-three (FACT 38).

MAC clergy are divided theologically. While the atmosphere is highly collegial and accepting the overall climate suggests we do not share a common understanding of what it means to be Wesleyan or United Methodist. We affirm the mission of the United Methodist Church “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*Book of Discipline 2016* 93) and we maintain that we live into that through three gospel imperatives: “Grow in love of God and neighbor; reach new people; and heal a broken world” ([minnestoatumc.org](http://minnestoatumc.org), Journey to Vitality). However, as the FACT study reports,

generally speaking, we have spent much attention on the third imperative and have fallen short in the first two. As one person reported “we are more confident that we can rid an entire continent of malaria, than we are in leading one person to Christ.” Evidence for this can be seen in that 75% of our churches participated in our successful campaign to raise three million dollars for Imagine No Malaria in 2010, compared to a similar amount raised for a church planting campaign but with less than 35% of our churches participating.

In 2012, the conference began to make greater strides towards cultural change. Under the leadership of newly appointed Bishop Bruce Ough, the above-mentioned conference wide fund-raising campaign called Reach Renew Rejoice raised over 3.7 million in pledges to plant new churches, partner with existing churches to launch new sites, and assist 140 churches in revitalization. In addition, we added an area director of church planting and multiplication, as well as a conference director of leadership development and recruitment to the conference staff. While the predominately progressive conference is receiving the renewed call for evangelism with mixed reviews, all can be quite certain that, at least from the bishop and conference leadership, seriousness towards that trajectory is real and not going away soon.

Finally, it should be noted that there is something true to the “Minnesota Nice” culture. Being comprised of people largely of Northern European descent and thereby stereotypically reserved, non-extravagant, modest, mainline farm democrats, it could very well be that the UMC decline in Minnesota is related to who we are as Minnesotans and less about who we are as United Methodists as our Minnesota culture bent is to keep



personal matters of the heart to ourselves. I recently heard a Norwegian-Minnesota joke that is quite telling: “Ole loved Lena so much, he almost told her.”

### **Context Two: Mankato Bar Poker Community**

Mankato is located in south central Minnesota and is the county seat of Blue Earth County. The population of Mankato itself has grown by over 25% since 2000 with the current figure being around 42,000. It is the fifth largest city outside of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. The city of North Mankato is directly adjacent across the Minnesota River. Together the two cities have a population over 92,000. The largest employees in the area are Mayo Clinic Health System, Minnesota State University, the Independent School District 77, Verizon Wireless, Blue Earth County, and MRCI industrial Operation. Residents are 89.9% white, 4% African-American, 2.9% Latino, and 2.8% Asian. The median income for a household was \$33,956 at the 2010 census, and per family it was \$47,297 (Wikipedia). In 2010 19% of the population was below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate was at 5.7%. Within this context the microculture of the Mankato Bar Poker Community was studied for observation. A more detailed description of this group is outlined in the next section.

### **Participants to Be Sampled about the Phenomenon**

Two participant pools were sampled.

#### **Criteria for Selection.**

##### *MAC Appointed Clergy*

Participants eligible for the online questionnaire were currently serving as pastors in the MAC under appointment or assignment. Persons meeting that criteria were invited to participate in the study through email invitation and through the conference mass email

weekly newsletter. I chose these appointed or assigned church leaders, because I believed them to be the most qualified to answer research question number one which refers to current attitudes, beliefs, and practices towards evangelism of MAC clergy.

#### *Mankato Bar Poker Community*

While the Mankato Bar Poker Community comprises more than one location, I narrowed my selection pool to participants who frequent the Buster's Bar Monday night poker tournament setting. I did this primarily because I have greater connections to this community, and I felt these connections would afford the best chance of informants agreeing to be interviewed for the study. I identified ten informants for semi-structured interviews in order to probe deeper into research question two. Informants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They were presently and actively engaged in the bar poker community at Buster's.
2. They were sufficiently verbal and social.
3. They had the time available.

I made deliberate efforts to ensure both genders and various ages were represented.

#### **Description of Participants**

##### *MAC Appointed Clergy*

Of the 314 conference clergy eligible for the study 141 began the online questionnaire. Only the 114 completed questionnaires were used for this study.

Of these 114, two identified themselves between the ages of twenty and thirty, twelve between the ages of thirty-one and forty, fifteen between the ages of forty-one and fifty, thirty-nine between the ages of fifty-one and sixty, and thirty-seven were sixty-one

and older. In terms of gender 48.54% of the respondents were female and 51.46% were male. Nine described their ministry context as “urban,” twenty-three as “suburban,” fourteen as “city,” fifty-eight as “town or rural,” and one as “other.”

In terms of credentials, most participants (60.19%) described themselves as ordained elders, with the second largest being licensed local pastors (25.4%) and followed by provisional members on the elder track (7.77%). No questionnaire respondents identified themselves as ordained deacons, certified lay ministers, or provisional deacons according to question five of the questionnaire, however a remaining 5.83% described their credentialing as “other.” With denominational and conference credentialing requirements for ordination we can assume that all participants have a high school diploma and bachelor’s degree, and 60% or more of participants have at least a Master’s of Divinity degree, with 25% having completed the United Methodist Course of Study or are currently either enrolled in it or a Masters of Divinity program.

Of the 105 respondents 73.33% are serving a full-time appointment, 8.57% are serving three-quarters-time, 11.43% are serving one-half-time, and 6.67% are serving one-quarter-time.

#### *Mankato Bar Poker Community*

The Mankato Bar Poker Community is comprised of mostly white men and women ranging from eighteen to seventy-five. This is a non-gambling Texas Hold‘em Tournament community where the top three placing persons receive a cash prize or gift card put up by the local pubs. In some cases, participants can earn points based on their weekly tournament placement which can qualify them for regional, state, and even national tournaments. In most cases it is just for local fun. While they gather at various

locations throughout the city at different times and evenings throughout the week, the pool for this research are those that frequent the Monday night tournament at Buster's Bar. Many of the players have been engaged regularly in this community for ten years or more, while at the same time it is not uncommon for a first-timer to drop in. The "regulars" of the bar poker community know each other fairly well, and often have cross interaction in other aspects of their life.

Generally speaking, participants are from a lower economic stratum. More than a handful reside in low income housing or trailer courts. It is not uncommon to learn someone is between jobs, or on disability. It is also not uncommon to see participants passing a marijuana joint under the table, to hear of someone's recent incarceration, or to share rides because of a recent revocation of a driver's license due to driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or to get requests for small amount of cash until next week. Still, some are college students, others are professionals. Food and alcohol is consumed at varying degrees throughout the course of an evening. Poker players are located in the back half of the pub so as not to interfere with other guests visiting the Buster's establishment.

In general, most would not be identified as active church worship attenders. They might be better understood as nones, de-churched, under-churched, or unchurched. The researcher has been a part of this community for five years and, while they know the researcher to be a pastor and representative of the church, it has not appeared to greatly influence their behaviors or conversation in my presence.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I employed several steps to ensure the protection of each person participating in the study. I secured permission from the MAC to conduct research via an online questionnaire (Appendix E). All participants responding to the questionnaire invitation were informed of the nature of the project and in what manner the data and findings would be used and shared. Questionnaire respondents' names or other identifying information were not known even to the researcher. Each respondent, after reading the informed consent, could opt in or out of the study. The exact consent letter can be found on the first page of the survey (Appendix A).

All participants in the Bar Poker Community that were identified for informant interviews reviewed a written consent form that was both read and when necessary explained further by the researcher (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted only with the signed consent of the informant. Each informant was assigned a code # from P1-P10, and their names were removed throughout this project to protect their identity. Further the proprietor of Buster's Bar reviewed and signed a written consent form which explained the research and asked for permission to carry out research on Buster's Bar premises (Appendix C). At no time was gambling, the consumption of alcohol, or the use of illegal substances supported by the researcher and this was made explicit to the Institutional Review Board prior to approval.

### **Pilot Test and Expert Review**

In order to shape the questions in the online evangelism questionnaire I had several conversations with members in my 2012 doctor of ministry cohort. In particular, I used them to help brainstorm questions that might help answer research question one. I then consulted with Karla Lassonde associate professor of cognitive psychology at

Minnesota State University for expert review. Lassonde was able to suggest an appropriate length to the survey, as well, as offer insight to the amount of open ended, closed ended, and Likert-type scale questions that would be appropriate to the study. Once my first draft was completed it was submitted for expert review to Thomas Tumblin and Ellen Marmon of Asbury Theological Seminary, and Lassonde. A second draft was completed and then piloted by five members of my doctor of ministry cohort to get an idea of length and to clean up logical or grammatical errors.

The informant semi-structured interview questions first arose around 2010 from an assignment given to me and my Minnesota United Methodist colleagues by Bishop Sally Dyck. Her assignment presented us with a short list of questions for us to use while engaging in a conversation with the *nones* in our lives (see Chapter 2). Finding fruitfulness from this assignment I presented the same assignment to members of the Hilltop UMC in Mankato, MN which I was serving at the time and again found the questions helpful at stimulating insightful and non-threatening faith conversations with *nones* in our families and community. For the purpose of this study I added a number of additional questions in order to help elicit even more response from the informants. After each semi-structured interview, I reviewed the questions and made some optional additional questions I thought might be helpful.

### **Procedure for Collecting Evidence from Participants**

On Monday, September 25, 2017 I began all data collection. The evangelism study questionnaire was prepared using Survey Monkey and the appropriate link was sent via direct email blast from my email account to all MAC Clergy under appointment or assignment to a local church on September 26, 2017. Also, the questionnaire link along

with a brief invitation was sent out by the conference director of communications via the regularly scheduled weekly email newsletter blasts. Further, each district superintendent posted the link with a brief invitation to participate on their respective district clergy Facebook pages. The online Survey Monkey questionnaire link was active for two weeks. Respondent data was collected automatically on the Survey Monkey application.

Also, on Monday September 25th I began the first of three participant observations sessions at Buster's Bar beginning at 8:45 p.m. Throughout the first evening I approached five potential informants and asked them if they would consider helping me with my research. All agreed. Two of which were interviewed directly that night. One at a private table, and the other outside the pub. The other three were interviewed the next day at their homes or a public location prearranged the previous night. The following Monday, four more informant interviews were secured, two on location and three arranged for the next day at their home or public location. Finally, on October 9th some follow-up interviews were conducted while at Buster's. All informant interviews were digitally recorded on my iPhone and later transcribed. Any field notes from participant observation during each Monday night were recorded on the notes application on my iPhone.

### **Procedure for Analyzing the Evidence Collected**

Given that this study was qualitative in nature, I relied heavily on the instructions found in Taylor Powell and Renner article *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. First data analysis began with the MAC clergy questionnaire. Since I used the Survey Monkey for data collection, the application automatically compiles results and allows you to isolate and filter responses for deeper analysis, each time giving raw and percentage data to each

question. This was especially helpful for the Likert Scale, and multiple-choice questions on the questionnaire. For the open-ended text questions, I used both Survey Monkey's auto-generated word clouds for an overview, and then for deeper excavation I demarked data using labels and highlights when commonalities were noticed.

The data for the Bar Poker community informant interviews were analyzed first by listening to the audio several times, while taking notes in my field book, then once transcribed, the transcriptions were read several times. In both cases common themes and responses were highlighted in the margins and sometimes color highlighters were used to group common data. Following instructions in *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, as I continued to familiarize myself with the data through coding, I was challenged to be mindful of how ultimately the results would be used, thus bringing focus to my analysis by identifying and asking a few key questions often (2).

After combing through the data several times and recognizing the need to limit myself to major findings that would be particularly helpful to the overall purpose of the project, much data was ultimately not strongly considered as its relevance simply did not seem pertinent. As Taylor-Powell and Renner note; "just because you have data does not mean those are quality data. Sometimes, information provided does not add meaning or value" (2). Identifying this early allowed me to give more time to the major findings and to look specifically at the data that supported or challenged these findings. As major findings began to rise from the data I consulted Ellen Marmon and Karla Lassonde as experts who could affirm that these were in fact significant findings supported by the data of the study.

### **Reliability and Validity of Project Design**



It was the intention of this study to provide research that is reliable and credible. One way to establish validity of qualitative research results is through *member checking*. Throughout the data analysis of this study member checking was often conducted with clergy participants (Sensing 221). Further, throughout the study peer debriefing, in which colleagues who are co-laborers in the field were consulted for their feedback and perspective was utilized. In this way data and findings were weighed against their own knowledge of the field (Sensing 223). In addition, with over fifteen years as a MAC clergyperson myself, three years working directly on MAC staff, and over eight years active in the Bar Poker Community my own long-term observations help bring validity to the findings. As Sensing writes; “prolonged engagement at the ministry site develops deeper understandings of the people and the context of the project” (223). Thus, the research results are supported not only by this project but also “ring true” with the long-term observations I have as being a participant in the contexts studied. Finally, while this study was qualitative and not quantitative in nature, it is still the case that relevant Survey Monkey data gleaned from closed ended questions were shown to be statistically significant and thereby valid.

### **Review of Chapter**

This chapter presented a description of the design of this research project. It looked at each research questions and what data collection method was used to address these questions. It provided a description of both ministry contexts being observed and both participant samples. An account of the different methodologies used to collect data from the two unique participant samples was outlined. Finally, an account of how the

methods were tested, the procedure for data collection and analysis, and basis for the research validity was offered.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVIDENCE OF THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

The Minnesota Annual Conference (MAC) of the United Methodist Church has been leading all other annual conferences in the U.S.A. in decline. The FACT Study suggests that this is connected to an aversion to evangelism—that there is something about Minnesota United Methodist’s that does not allow them to readily embrace the task of evangelism. Embracing a learner’s approach to evangelism may be a more sensitive approach to evangelism that could assist Minnesota United Methodists in taking up this task, as it not only more closely follows the model of Jesus in the incarnation, and the biblical witness, but also can lead to healthier evangelistic encounters that lead to a fuller journey toward discipleship.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the learner approach to evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker community, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in the MAC. The project first sought to uncover the current evangelistic priorities, practices, and postures of the MAC and, second, to gain insights into the unchurched or under-churched of the Bar Poker community on their notions of God and experience of evangelism. The desired outcome was that the informant interview evidence from the Bar Poker Community matched with current evangelistic attitudes and practices of annual conference clergy, could inform our practices going forward, with a researcher bias that a learner approach to evangelism as discussed in Chapter 2 will bubble to the surface as the most beneficial approach. The evidence of the study has been presented here.

## **Profile of Participants**

### **MAC Appointed Clergy**

This project had two participant samples. For the first sample, in order to glean answers to research question one, I determined that clergy currently serving under appointment in the MAC would be most readily accessible for survey, and most keenly aware of the evangelistic values, attitudes, and practices in our conference. Of the 314 possible respondents, 141 persons began the questionnaire, and 114 completed it (a 36.30% response rate). In accordance with the informed consent letter, only data from those completing the survey were accepted. Appendix F provides the raw demographic data for each qualified participant.

A summary of the raw demographic data shows that 50% of the respondents were male and 50% female. Note that four respondents chose not fill out all demographic categories. Most respondents were 61 or older (37.72%) or 51-60 (35.09%). The next most represented age group was 41-50 (13.16%), followed by 31-40 (10.52%), and finally those under 30 (representing 1.75%).

Clergy participants were serving the MAC under varied credentials. Ordained Elders comprised 57.27% of respondents, followed by Licensed Local Pastors at 24.55%, Provisional Members at 7.27%, with Certified Lay Ministers, and Assigned Lay Persons all comprising approximately 1% each. Eight percent of respondents selected "other."

In terms of the ministry context these clergy persons serve, 54.46% identified "town or rural," 13.39% "city," 20.54% "suburban," and 8.04% "urban." A remaining 3.57% selected "other" as their ministry context. Respondents also serve in different employment increments, while the overwhelming majority are employed full-time

(68.75%), 8.04% are employed three-quarters-time, 10.71% are half-time, and 6.25% are quarter-time. A small percentage (6.25%) selected “not currently under appointment,” nonetheless their data was included in the study.

**Table 4.1 MAC Clergy Participant Demographics**

<i>Demographics of Questionnaire Participants</i>		
Variable	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age</b>		
20-30	2	1.75
31-40	12	10.52
41-50	15	13.16
51-60	40	35.09
61+	43	37.72
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	55	50
Female	55	50
<b>Appointment Context</b>		
Urban	9	8.04
Suburban	23	20.54
City	15	13.39
Town or Rural	61	54.46
Other	4	3.57
<b>Clergy Credential</b>		
Assigned Qualified Lay Person	1	.91
Certified Lay Minister	1	.91
Licensed Local Pastor	27	24.55
Provisional Elder	8	7.27
Provisional Deacon	0	0
Ordained Elder	63	57.27
Ordained Deacon	1	.91
Other	9	8.18
<b>Appointment Increment</b>		
Quarter-Time	7	6.25
Half-Time	12	10.71
Three-Quarters-Time	9	8.04
Full-Time	77	68.75
Not Currently Under Appointment	7	6.25

### **Mankato Bar Poker Community**

The second sample for my study came from the Mankato Bar Community. For this sample I identified ten informants for semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). With permission from Buster's Bar in Mankato, I approached ten persons and asked them if they would be willing to help me with my research which would involve asking them questions about their faith perspective. Prior to each interview, informants read and signed an informed consent letter (Appendix B). Interviews were held either at Buster's Bar or an agreed upon public setting in Mankato. Nine informants agreed to be recorded and their complete transcripts are found in Appendix G. Participant P10 gave permission for the interview, but preferred the researcher take notes rather than audio recording. A written recollection of that conversation is also found in Appendix G.

These ten informants were mostly Caucasian, with the exception of P10 who is Asian. Seven were male, and three were female. The ages ranged from 25-65 from various occupations. Three were married, three were single, two were divorced, and two were in serious cohabitating relationships. They represented a variety of occupations and in the researcher's estimation most represented a mid to lower class demographic. Nine of the ten participants were not currently active in the Christian faith, with six of the ten having experienced some church in childhood but have since not been connected to a church. One more (P5) had been connected to church as an adult but has since fell inactive. Another (P9) does not have a church home but attends church occasionally throughout the year. Two have no significant church experience in childhood or adulthood, and finally one (P10) practices Taoism.

#### **Table 4.2: Bar Poker Community Participant Demographics**

#	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Children	Occupation	Church Status
P1	Male	25	Caucasian	Single	No	Teacher	De-churched childhood
P2	Male	47	Caucasian	Married	No	Unemployed	De-churched childhood
P3	Male	35	Caucasian	Co-habit	Yes	Grocer	De-churched childhood
P4	Male	35	Caucasian	Married	Yes	Assembly Line Worker	De-churched childhood
P5	Female	35	Caucasian	Co-habit	Yes	Call Center Service	De-churched adulthood
P6	Female	36	Caucasian	Divorced	Yes	Housekeeping	Unchurched
P7	Male	46	Caucasian	Married	Yes	Accountant	De-churched childhood
P8	Male	47	Caucasian	Single	No	Poker Dealer	Unchurched
P9	Female	65	Caucasian	Divorced	Yes	Retired	Very Occasional
P10	Male	27	Asian	Single	No	Grad Student	Taoist

### **Research Question #1: Description of Evidence**

In order to discover the current evangelistic values, postures, and practices, being used by the church leaders of the MAC of the United Methodist Church, I developed a questionnaire and invited all person currently under appointment to a local church in the MAC to respond.

#### **A Common Definition of Evangelism**

The respondents to question seven, which asked, “What is your definition of evangelism,” mostly held a common definition of evangelism. By far most respondents shared an outward focused action verb in their definition such as “share, invite, or reach” followed by a commonly held subject matter like “Jesus Christ, Good News, or the Gospel.” Likewise, the majority of respondents named a common target for the action:

“all, people, others.” Many recipients also included a common goal for this action:  
 “transformation, relationship, new life”

**Table 4:3 Components of Evangelism Definition**

<b>Word or Phrase</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Common Action Verbs</b>	95	87.16
Share, invite, reach, bring, proclaim, preach, spread, offer, tell, lead, take, promote.		
<b>Common Subject Matter</b>	98	89.91
Jesus Christ, Good News, Gospel, Love, Word of God, Grace, Faith.		
<b>Common Targets</b>	72	66.06
All, others, world, people, those.		
<b>Common Goal</b>	39	35.79
Salvation, transformation, relationship, change, life, disciple, connection.		

Therefore, a very typical definition held by most respondents would read something like “sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others.” Some others might add a goal to that definition like one respondent who said, “Sharing the good news of the gospel with others . . . inviting them into a relationship with Jesus Christ.” In the 109 responses, evidence suggests there is a shared understanding of evangelism, accounting for nuanced articulations. Some exceptions existed. For example, one definition was very brief and simply said “welcome,” or in another case the respondent provided a lengthy definition seemingly to break from the pack: “Sharing the good news—talking about God’s love with those around us. How we respond in a way the gospel calls us to serve the poor, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and help fight for affordable housing, love and care for all people regardless of age, ethnicity, race, culture, sexuality, gender—are all equal in the eyes of God.”



### Evangelistic Inclination of MAC Clergy

Most of the clergy participants responded generally positive to those questions seeking to understand their attitudes towards evangelism.

**Table 4.4 Evangelistic Attitudes**

How much do you agree with this statement?	Agree		Strongly Agree		Combined Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Evangelism is important.	11	9.91	99	89.19	110	100.00
I have a heart to reach new people for Jesus.	36	32.43	68	61.26	104	93.69
I seek opportunities for more evangelism training.	54	49.09	22	20.00	76	69.09
How true is this statement?	True		Very True		Combined Total	
I have the gift of evangelism.	67	60.36	22	19.82	89	80.18

Most clergy could affirm that evangelism is central to their ministry.

**Table 4.5 Evangelism's Centrality**

How much do you agree with this statement?	Agree		Strongly Agree		Combined Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Evangelism is central to my leadership in the congregation I serve.	54	48.65	47	42.34	101	90.99
I create opportunities to teach my church about evangelism.	66	60.00	25	22.73	91	82.73
How true is this statement?	True		Very True		Combined Total	
I preach on the importance of evangelism.	47	43.12	39	35.78	86	78.90

Most clergy, though to a lesser degree, feel sufficiently trained and capable of equipping their church in evangelism.

**Table 4.6 Evangelism Training**

How much do you agree with this statement?	Agree		Strongly Agree		Combined Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
I feel sufficiently trained in evangelism.	59	53.15	18	16.22	77	69.37
I believe I am capable of equipping my church members in evangelism.	65	58.56	17	15.32	82	73.88
How true is this statement?	True		Very True		Combined Total	
I can identify people in my church who have the gift of evangelism.	68	61.26	38	34.23	106	95.49

### **Clergy Perception of the Church's Evangelistic Inclination**

While most clergy rate themselves as having positive attitudes, gifts, and practices towards evangelism, they do not perceive that same inclination to be true about the church. While 99.1% (Table 4:4) of clergy indicated that evangelism was important, only 55.96% would say their church members feel that way. Perhaps a more noteworthy distinction was the strength of the evangelistic inclination. While 89.19% (Table 4:4) of clergy strongly agreed to the importance of evangelism, only 5.50% of clergy would suggest their church members agree as strongly.

**Table 4.7 The Church's Inclination toward Evangelism**

How much do you agree with this statement?	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
My church members feel	6	5.61	55	51.40	42	39.25	6	5.61

evangelism is important.								
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This difference in evangelistic inclination perception can also be seen in that 56.72% of clergy would claim to have faith conversations with unchurched persons on a weekly or daily basis, while only 7.48% claim they hear reports from their church members that they are doing the same. Inversely only 10.81% of clergy suggested they either only have such conversations yearly or never at all, but they feel 49.54% would not report the same.

**Table 4.8 Frequency of Faith Conversations**

Frequency of faith conversations with the unchurched.	Almost Daily	Almost Weekly	Almost Monthly	Almost Yearly	Almost Never
	%	%	%	%	%
Clergy	10.81	45.95	32.43	8.11	2.70
Church Members (as perceived by clergy)	3.74	3.74	42.99	21.50	28.04

Perhaps most telling was the clergy response to the statement “my church has an evangelistic ethos.” Of the 111 respondents only four (3.6%) identified this as somewhat true, and thirty-eight (34.23%) affirmed this to be somewhat true, but forty-three (38.74%) named this to be somewhat untrue, and twenty-six (23.42%) felt it was untrue altogether. To polarize this data, it suggests 37.83% of clergy would say this is true about their church at least to some degree, while 62.16% would say this is untrue to some degree.

**Table 4.9 Church’s Evangelistic Ethos**

How true is this statement?	True		Somewhat True		Somewhat Untrue		Untrue	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
My church	4	3.60	38	34.32	43	38.74	26	23.42

has an evangelistic ethos.								
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This difference in clergy perceiving their evangelistic inclination to be much stronger than that of their churches, seems to be confirmed when we asked clergy to weigh what degree eleven different factors might prove to be a barrier to them in engaging in evangelism. The two most highly weighted barriers were identified as “lack of time” (with a 2.57 weighted average), and “church has other priorities for me” (at 2.33) with “lack of technique” (2.18) to follow. Furthermore, the three lowest weighted answers were “lack of knowledge of the faith (1.15) and “my theology” (1.25) with only four people identifying this as a moderate barrier, and one as a serious barrier, and “philosophically opposed” (1.35) only six or 109 describing this as moderate barrier and one a serious barrier. In sum, according to clergy the strongest weighted barriers to evangelism are related either to the fact that the church has other priorities for them or that the clergy do not seem to have the time. Technique played some importance. Knowledge of the faith, or strong theological or philosophical aversion to evangelism (contrary to the FACT report) does not seem to be the case for most MAC clergy.

**Table 4.10 Barriers to Evangelism**

Rate how much these factors prove to be a barrier.	Moderate Barrier		Serious Barrier		Weighted Average
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Lack of time	39	35.45	20	18.18	2.57
Church has other priorities for me	28	25.69	20	18.35	2.33
Lack of technique	35	32.11	4	3.67	2.18
Apprehension/fear	21	19.81	6	5.66	2.01
Lack of training	21	19.44	6	5.56	2.00
My personality type	27	24.55	7	6.36	1.95
Lack of opportunity	17	15.45	7	6.36	1.95

Location	15	13.76	5	4.59	1.61
Philosophically opposed	6	5.50	1	.92	1.35
My theology	4	3.70	1	.93	1.25
Lack of knowledge of the faith	2	1.82	0	0	1.15

### **An Evangelistic Heart not Supported**

While evidence has been presented that most clergy understand themselves to have evangelistic inclinations, most report that this does not translate into a discipleship plan in their local church. In fact, 67.89% of 109 respondents said they their church does not have an intentional discipleship plan.

**Table 4.11 Discipleship Plan**

<b>Does your church have an intentional discipleship plan?</b>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
	Yes	35
No	74	67.89

Likewise, only 4.63% of respondents when asked “In the past year how many persons have started a new journey with Christ that weren’t otherwise connected to your church” indicated they had connected “21 or more.” Another 10.19% said “11 to 20” and 23.15% indicated “6 to 10”; but the surprising majority (46.3%) indicated “1-5,” and 15.74% answered “none” at all.

**Table 4.12 New Faith Journeys**

<b>In the past year how many persons started a new journey with Christ that weren’t otherwise connected to your church?</b>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
	21 or more	5
11 to 20	11	46.30
6 to 10	25	23.15

1 to 5	50	10.19
none	17	4.63

Finally, question 22 asked “of the five-fold ministry roles (as listed in Ephesians 4), which ministry role do you most gravitate toward?” Most MAC clergy listed “shepherd” (37.84%), then “teacher” (24.32%), then Apostle (15.32%), then Evangelist (12.61%), and finally prophet (9.91%). In other words, 72.07% of clergy gravitate toward the roles of shepherd, teacher, and prophet, with just 27.93% gravitating towards the more outward focused roles.

**Table 4.13 Five-Fold Ministry Roles**

Of the five-fold ministry roles which ministry role do you most gravitate toward?	<i>n</i>	%
	Shepherd	42
Teacher	27	24.32
Apostle	17	15.32
Evangelist	14	12.61
Prophet	11	9.91

### **Current Practices of MAC Churches**

MAC clergy responding to the question “what is your church doing when it comes to evangelism” generated varied responses. Sifting through the data the common practices were categorized as they emerged. Table 4:14 presents a synthesis of those practices that emerged most prevalently.

**Table 4.14 Current Evangelistic Practices**

<b>Current Church Evangelistic Practices.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Inviting others to church, event, or ministry.	33.64%	“they invite new people when the opportunity strikes” “one of our goals is to train the congregation to be inviting” “Inviting neighbors to fun, learning, worship,

		fellowship events in the community.”
Hosting intentional events.	25.23%	“planning new community events to engage new people” “Roast beef dinner, community dinner, Halloween party, rally Sunday” “Free monthly community breakfast, Diaper depot at the county fair, Trunk or Treat”
Engaging the community.	20.56%	“long history of engagement in social justice issues in the community” “We interface with the community through many ministries addressing needs.” “Involvement in the community.”
Nothing or virtually nothing at all.	20.56%	“little if anything” “Nothing” “Sad to say, not much”
Service projects.	17.76%	“encountering through service” “We partner with Love Inc. and supply household items for the needs of others.” “service projects and short-term mission for all ages”
A welcoming hospitable posture	14.95%	“When it comes to baptism, weddings, or funerals the answer is always YES!” “Creating a Welcoming environment” “Intentionally plan worship sot that it is tailored to what a first-time guest would want/need/expect.”
Strategic worship	12.15%	“Currently we are launching a new worship service for people who have no church connection” “different types of worship experiences” “invitation to faith in Jesus in worship services”
Learning/telling our faith stories	11.21%	“Learning to tell our stories in a variety of ways” “Sharing our faith stories in adult Sunday School” “finding language to tell our own story”
Marketing through media	9.35%	“daily radio program” “our electronic communication is a powerful evangelistic tool and less daunting for some to engage” “We broadcast on TV, rebuilt our website, stream messages, Facebook presence . . . ”
General encouragement or appeal to do it	7.48%	“talking about more openly, not just hunkering down in our corners” “I preach and talk about the importance of sharing”
Small groups	7.48%	“small house groups” “small group ministry” “Transition to a cell-driven model, each cell group will have evangelism as a core concept.”
Prayer	5.61%	“not yet any doing, but still pray” “praying” “We intentionally pray for God to lead people to us.”

Offering or receiving training	3.74%	“discipleship training on living as effective, attractive Christians who take risks to establish new relationships” “I am currently participating in an evangelistic cohort”
Deepening our discipleship	3.74%	“First of all, trying to come alive spiritually ourselves” “We are helping our members grow in discipleship.” “We’re focusing on empowering the individual through and intentional discipleship effort church-wide.”
Incarnational Intentionality	3.74%	“We are a missional church that does work where people are found.” “Working with a group of 32 young adults who are skeptical about the church . . . for a year” “Joining a dart team that meets weekly in area taverns to meet new people.”

### **Research Question #2: Description of Evidence**

In order to discover the current experiences, thoughts, and attitudes towards evangelism by the Mankato Bar Poker community and how it has affected their notions of God and relationship with God and the church, I conducted ten semi-structured informant interviews (full transcripts can be found in Appendix G). These interviews were grouped according to common themes. While much data was collected, the data evidence provided in this section speaks most significantly to major findings.

#### **Spiritually Speaking, No Informant Is a Clean Slate**

Findings indicated in that in the ten informant interviews, all were able to articulate a belief system. Some of the participants were able to do this better than others often drawing from a more complete and coherent faith upbringing. For example, P9 when speaking to a moment of trial in her life says, “They say things happen for a reason. And I thought I would turn away from God, but that brought me even closer.” Or P10 who in his teenage years he did some self-exploration of different religious beliefs—read the Koran, the bible, and other faith’s chief or sacred texts. When reading about Taoism it resonated with him so he embraced it. Others, though perhaps less informed or complete,



provided a faith statement to help make sense of events in their life. P7 reported “Ummm, like I say, we grew up believing, going to Sunday School, church, I don’t know. Certain things happen where you doubt it, but you know you are there for a reason, I don’t know how to describe it.” P1 suggested, “I try to be a good person, to be a better person every day.”

Others, such as P3, spoke to a significant moment of sensing the presence of God: “I felt literally a presence, like an experience I can’t even explain in a million years. And, as I am standing there looking at her, I feel this warmth wash over me, head to toe. The tears started to run down my face. I can’t even control it. I felt like I was in the presence of God—I genuinely did.”

Or P6 when she explained, “Yup. I say, you know, there is a God. Something made me want to quit drinking. Something helps me now not to get so anxious on not drinking. I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

Finally, although P8 suggested he was a person of no belief, he too expressed inklings of a philosophical system to make sense of events in his life.

A full reading of the interviews in Appendix G provides more detailed evidence of this, but Table 4.15 isolates specific examples from each interview.

**Table 4.15**

<b>P#</b>	<b>Examples of Evidence of Faith Systems</b>
P1	“a good person is a good person whether they are Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist.” “if you believe in Jesus, like these things are going to hit home with you because it is your faith . . . I didn’t need their approval to believe in God.” “I try to be a good person, to be a better person every day.”
P2	“I am a conservative Catholic . . . it means I attend church at home.” “God only helps those who help themselves.” “You can’t just have God come down and pass his hand over you and say, ‘okay, your problems are solved.’ He gives you the mind and body to do it.”

	<p>“you are the vessel, you know. Your soul has to get out and push the vessel so that you can get things done.”</p> <p>“You know, I have lead a clean life. I don’t do drugs, I don’t drink. I don’t deal drugs. I don’t do any of those other things that are associated with Italian-Americans who grew up in New York. I have lead a good, clean life and I just want to be absolved in my last moment on earth. Absolution.”</p> <p>“It’s not like walking into your everyday church, sad to say that. I don’t mean to make it to belittle it. But when you walk into these grand places that have murals of history and Catholicism, it takes on a . . . when you breathe in, you breathe it in and it is like you live it. It is like you feel it and you become emotional, and that’s how it is for me when I walk into places like that.”</p>
P3	<p>“And, there is something to that in my opinion, because every good decision, every bad decision in my life that I have made, it lead me to where I am right now, and, I’m content.”</p> <p>“Even if that is my part in the play, I think it is written.”</p> <p>“I felt literally a presence, like an experience I can’t even explain in a million years. And, as I am standing there looking at her, I feel this warmth wash over me, head to toe. The tears started to run down my face. I can’t even control it. I felt like I was in the presence of God—I genuinely did.”</p>
P4	<p>“For some reason, things happen to certain people for a reason.”</p>
P5	<p>“I would say I am a person of faith, but not necessarily practicing very often.”</p>
P6	<p>“Step one—we are alcoholics and not managing our own lives. Step two—is can I believe that a power that greater than us creates and restores sanity. So, it is step two, and then you got the spiritual awakening in step . . . where the meditation is . . .”</p> <p>“A god that I would want. Like, it was a tree for a while, and then it would be a bench. It was whatever I could find that I could actually talk to and just feel that there was something besides me, you know. So, and now, I don’t know, there is something out there.”</p> <p>“Yup. I say, you know, there is a God. Something made me want to quit drinking. Something helps me now not to get so anxious on not drinking. I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”</p> <p>“Yeah, and, like with me with the program, even if I don’t like talk to somebody, I think my God will speak through other people. Like, if I need help or I’m struggling, someone doesn’t know what they are saying will help me. You know, to me that’s my way of saying, well maybe that’s my God talking to me giving me my answer.”</p> <p>“You can’t just die and that’s that.”</p>
P7	<p>“Ummm, like I say, we grew up believing, going to Sunday School, church, I don’t know. Certain things happen where you doubt it, but you know you are there for a reason, I don’t know how to describe it”</p> <p>“I definitely believe in God and everything like that, we don’t put priority on church-going at this time.”</p>
P8	<p>“I really don’t believe one way or the other.” “I really have no belief”</p> <p>“I have a life, that’s about it. I mean, as far as a soul goes, I mean, I just feel when I die I’m dead, you know I’m dead. You know, it doesn’t matter.”</p>

P9	“They say things happen for a reason. And I thought I would turn away from God, but that brought me even closer” She spoke tradition concepts of forgiveness. And in general, has a Christian upbringing.
P10	In his teenage years he did some self-exploration of different religious beliefs—read the Koran, the bible, and other faith’s chief or sacred texts. When reading about Taoism it resonated with him. “Committed? That’s matters to you, to Christians and other faiths, not to Taoism? You are not more or less committed, you just are.” “Yes, I do believe in the supernatural—a spiritual realm”

### **Informants Freely, Comfortably, and Aptly Participated**

It is noteworthy to report that I approached ten persons in the Bar Poker Community for informant interviews, and after explaining the nature of the semi-structured interview all ten accepted the opportunity. Further, in most interviews I made it a point to inquire of their comfort level most often at the beginning and the end and sometimes throughout. Some expressed an excitement to help my research as P3: “I’m jacked, to be honest. You’ve been a friend of mine for a long time.” Or when P4 was asked about his comfort level he responded, “I mean, you have known me for a few years . . . still pretty good.” Others expressed a curiosity as P5 suggests “Um, I am curious as to where this is going to go, more than anything.” And while P7 and P9 initially said they were nervous by the end of the conversation they expressed ease. While P8 did suggest an awkwardness, this seemed to be more related to his concern that his lack of religious identity would not be helpful for my research and not because he was uncomfortable with the questions. Also noteworthy was that some participants felt the conversation to be especially rewarding and even fulfilling a need they had. For example, P3 reported, “Hey, to tell you the truth, I feel very liberated by this conversation. It’s good to talk to someone who enjoys talking about faith.” And P6 said, “You know, you have to look at the little small things that happen, I mean—you calling me today to do

this was really weird, because I was praying that I needed someone to talk to about issues, and blah, blah, blah, and the next thing I know you were calling.” All participants answered questions quite freely and openly, and no participant opted out of the interview. Table 4.16 reports some examples of each participants related to their interview comfort level.

**Table 4.16**

<b>P#</b>	<b>Examples of Comfort with the Conversation</b>
P1	“It’s like any conversation I have ever had”
P2	“100%!” “Yeah, trust, I have this. . . . I am just naturally open.” “I feel good about it. I can talk about anything”
P3	“I’m jacked, to be honest. You’ve been a friend of mine for a long time.” “I’m an open book! Especially for you, brother!” ““hey, to tell you the truth, I feel very liberated by this conversation. It’s good to talk to someone who enjoys talking about faith.”
P4	“I mean, you have known me for a few years. . . . Still pretty good”
P5	“Um, I am curious as to where this is going to go, more than anything.”
P6	“You know, you have to look at the little small things that happen, I mean—you calling me today to do this was really weird, because I was praying that I needed someone to talk to about issues, and blah, blah, blah, and the next thing I know you were calling.”
P7	“Nervous.” (Laughs) “It’s okay.”
P8	“I don’t know. I am not really sure what to think about it yet” I feel kind of awkward, you know what I mean. Like I said, I’m not really religious, so talking about religion is a little bit awkward for me.”
P9	“A little nervous” By the end of the conversation the iPhone stopped recording but notes indicate we were both obviously bummed, because the conversation had been enriching and we didn’t want to lose the data.
P10	Did it discourage you or encourage you, or neither? “In the middle. It just was. Why do you ask?” “I feel like I influenced you more.”

### **Informants All Identified Tension, Trouble, or Transition**

When examining the data, it became quite clear that each informant expressed some significant period of tension, trouble, or transition in their life. In most cases they expressed this quite early in the interview. Examples of tension might have been an illness, death, or victimization of the informant or someone close to them. For example,

P4 reported, “I mean, I’ve lost three body parts in three separate incidents in my life” and P9 stated, “I was molested from three to seventeen by my stepdad,” or P1 mentioned, “I don’t know if you know this, but my mom passed away two years ago . . . [from] a drug overdose.” An example of trouble was most evident in P3 as he recalled:

I beat the living heck out of a guy and ended up spending a weekend in jail. And, the weekend I spent in jail was on my current girlfriend’s birthday. Like, we were friends, but I didn’t even know it was her birthday—I will put it to you that way. That experience changed me, it humbled me, it made me realize what a big world I am living in and a small fish I am.

Examples of transition were articulated as it related to a particular life stage or significant life change. For example, though not transcribed, P10 was currently seeking to make his way as an international student, and P7 was lamenting if he had missed an opportunity with his now teenaged son. “I wish Jacob was brought up going to church, but he wasn’t. . . . Just the experience, you know. So, if he meets somebody that actually is that way—that goes every week, he won’t be like thrown into it and not being used to going.”

Table 4.17 below lists more examples of tension, trouble, or transition that were identified in each of the informant interviews.

**Table 4.17**

P#	Examples of Tension, Trouble, or Transition
P1	“I don’t know if you know this, but my mom passed away two years ago” “A drug overdose”
P2	“Just at forty-six, or because I have cancer? It hasn’t changed for me. It’s the same. . . . God’s plan is still God’s plan. . . . ” “I met my wife when I was forty-two, going on forty-three, somewhere in that neighborhood. Sometimes I ask why, you know, why so long?”
P3	“I beat the living heck out of a guy and ended up spending a weekend in jail. And, the weekend I spent in jail was on my current girlfriend’s birthday. Like, we were friends, but I didn’t even know it was her birthday—I will put it to

	you that way. That experience changed me, it humbled me, it made me realize what a big world I am living in and a small fish I am.”
P4	“I mean, I’ve lost three body parts in three separate incidents in my life.”
P5	“A lot of tribulation during that period of time, and when I left my son’s father, I kind of fell back into my faith more.”
P6	“Because I don’t want to go back and drink. I was not a very nice person.” “My kid was born with part of his brain missing.” “I am accepting this. . . . I want him to be who he thinks he is and wants to become, because I didn’t when I was a kid and younger, and I turned to drugs and alcohol. I was trying to be who everybody thought you should be. So, for him, I mean, I knew since he was a kid. Since he was just 2 or 3 years old. Everybody thought it was a phase. Once you hit 6 and 7 and you are still putting nail polish on and using all of mom’s makeup, it’s not a phase no more.”
P7	“I actually stopped attending after Jen got sick in 2002. We went for a little bit after that, but I started working two jobs and working Saturdays and Sundays.” “I wish Jacob was brought up going to church, but he wasn’t. . . . Just the experience, you know. So, if he meets somebody that actually is that way that goes every week, he won’t be like thrown into it and not being used to going.”
P8	“Wow. That’s a tough one. I mean, I guess when my sister was killed I was really pissed off, so it pushed me away even further.”
P9	“I was molested from 3 to 17 by my stepdad.” “I went through a lot of hatred towards my stepdad, and two years ago I couldn’t carry that hatred anymore, so I forgave him.” “I almost killed him when I was in 7th grade. Mom and the kids were gone, and I had a gas can full of gas, and I was going to pour it all around the house. Mom came back unexpectedly with the kids.” “When my daughter, Farrah, was killed. I didn’t understand it.”
P10	Currently in transition as an international student.

### **Informants’ Opinions or Encounters with the Church Are Inadequate**

Often within the semi-structured interviews informants were asked to relate an experience where they had encountered the church, or a representative of the church, or were asked what they might say to “the church” if they could speak to them as a group today. While responses varied, a common theme was an experience or perception of judgmental behavior by the church. As P1 described, “The kind of Hoity-toity-ness of ‘We sit in the front pew. We are better Christians than you.’” P6 reported, “There was an accident at one of the churches that I went to, and they said that I got injured because

God was punishing me for a sin. So, I pretty much didn't like that after that." P7 even more overtly stated his perception of the church as "Gossiping, judging," and P2 talked about the "Joneses effect."

Other negative impressions include its lack of significant impact or relevancy to people's lives or the world. P4 laments this change; "Well, when I was real young it was more fun . . . it was a lot more fun because it was more activities and stuff like that. It just seems very monotonous—church services do—to me as I got older." But perhaps most telling was P10, the international student from Taiwan, who when asked to offer his opinion of the church after a recent visit to a rural church in Minnesota reported:

P10: Yes, to be honest, I have no positive comment. I felt nothing, I felt that its purpose was not religious but instead was a small community held together.

Me: A social club?

P10: Exactly, especially in rural area—drink and talk shit!

Me: Does the church do any good in the world?

P10: Yes, it's hard for the church to do good for the rich people, they have everything they need—money, power, influence, support, but the church is beneficial for the poor people. They gather them, organize and start mission. They have a leader. This is why the church is successful, Muslims too. They are able to bring societal transformation to those who have no power, money, authority. The rich famer church I went to? It's nothing for them.

A few could not comment on the church, as they simply do not interact with the church in their adult lives. P2 reported, "I would call my friends before I would call the church here. They don't even know I exist. It's not that they don't care. They just know I don't

exist.” And P8 stated, “Not personally. I mean, I haven’t come across it. I mean, I am sure they do go out help those who need it, you know. They do things like food drives or whatever, I’m sure they do stuff like that, I just haven’t encountered it.”

The most positive comments toward the church were displayed by P5, and P9, ironically these two, of the ten informants are the most connected (though not actively) to the church today, and yet they too could name some disappointments with the church. For example, P9 laments the church’s intolerance of the LGBTQ community. On the contrary, P5 wishes the church would be more vocal in standing against same-sex marriage.

Table 4.18 below provides further comments of informant opinions and impactful encounters with the church. More can be found in the complete transcripts in Appendix G, these are offered to get a sense of the supporting evidence.

**Table 4.18**

P#	Examples of Opinions and Encounters with the Church
P1	<p>“A member of the church told me I was a lost soul because I wasn’t coming to church because I was going to these ‘teens encountering Christ’ events. . . . That’s kind of what turned me off to going to church there.”</p> <p>“The kind of Hoity-toity-ness of ‘We sit in the front pew, we are better Christians than you.’”</p> <p>“the people I see protesting at planned parenthood. I don’t know if that counts.”</p> <p>“I felt like I was confirmed before I even understood what all of this was about. . . .”</p> <p>“Missouri Synod congregations are just too stale. . . . [That was] one of the great things about TEC, I found it easier to listen to sermons and find the message that was in there for me.”</p> <p>“I went to Bible Study. I felt surrounded by all these religious people who knew what was going on and you know ‘I don’t belong here.’”</p>
P2	<p>“I don’t believe I have had negative (experiences).”</p> <p>“It was a security guard of the church. I was walking down the block, the main street. It was during summertime.”</p> <p>“I think it is mostly that growing up I got tired of the “Joneses effect.” You know, that is not what church is about.”</p>



	<p>“I would call my friends before I would call the church here. They don’t even know I exist. It’s not that they don’t care. They just know I don’t exist.”</p>
P3	<p>“The church at its worst—you are taking a book and translating it for people and telling them how to understand it. To me that is just nearly impossible, you know what I mean? I mean, what the meaning was 15 translations ago versus what the meaning is now—it’s got to be difficult. And that’s probably for both.”</p>
P4	<p>“Well, when I was real young it was more fun—that’s my youngest—it was a lot more fun because it was more activities and stuff like that. It just seems very monotonous—church services do—to me as I got older.”</p>
P5	<p>“A lot of people that are very lost, I think, and you are competing in such a way. I like a lot of the modern style, but I think there is something to be said about tradition and about having, like an expectation, I guess, where you do feel like Sunday morning is special, and I don’t think it should be so casual that you lose some of that.”</p> <p>“Well just lately, like in Minnesota with the right to marry—it really bothers me. It really bothers me that the church wasn’t out there more, speaking”</p>
P6	<p>“Well, I did go to church growing up and church camp, but there was an accident at one of the churches that I went to, and they said that I got injured because God was punishing me for a sin. So, I pretty much didn’t like that after that. So, I just went to drugs and drinking, and ignored every church, never went to church again.”</p> <p>“If you misbehaved you were sinning, they’d say your being . . . you know, and that you were going to go to Hell and stuff like that. You just—that’s not how you explain it to kids. I mean, you know, and I don’t go to that church no more, and I thank God for it, too.”</p> <p>“I’ve always seen them be more willing and embracing towards people. Like I said, that church down on Belgrade opened my eyes a little bit. You know, not every church is the way I seen it when I was a kid. “</p>
P7	<p>“Well, obviously with the Catholic priest situation. But, everybody would probably say that.”</p> <p>“Gossiping, judging.”</p>
P8	<p>“Not personally. I mean, I haven’t come across it. I mean, I am sure they do go out help those who need it, you know. They do things like food drives or whatever, I’m sure they do stuff like that, I just haven’t encountered it.”</p>
P9	<p>“Yes, when I was in Pathstone . . . I received communion twice a week. . . . Yes that was wonderful.”</p> <p>She particularly felt that the church should be open to all people, and she doesn’t understand homosexuality to be a sin</p>
P10	<p>“Yes, to be honest, I have no positive comment. I felt nothing, I felt that its purpose was not religious but instead was a small community held together.”</p> <p>A social club? “Exactly, especially in rural area—drink and talk shit.” Does the church do any good in the world? “Yes, it’s hard for the church to do good for the rich people, they have everything they need—money, power, influence, support, but the church is beneficial for the poor people. They gather them, organize and start mission. They have a leader. This is why the church is</p>

	successful, Muslims too. They are able to bring societal transformation to those who have no power, money, authority. The rich famer church I went to?! It's nothing for them."
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### Informants' Frequency of Regular Faith Conversations

When asking the informants the last time they have had robust conversations with someone else about faith or spirituality, most were hard pressed to identify a time. The most common answer given was something similar to "I can't even remember" as was literally expressed by P4, P7 and P8. P5 and P9, both the strongest professing Christians of the ten informants, identified important friends in their life that engaged in faith conversations with them regularly.

Table 4.19 below gives some examples of responses from the ten informants to this question. Not all were given the opportunity to answer and thus some informant lines are blank.

**Table 4.19**

P#	Examples of Responses to "Last Significant Faith Conversation."
P1	"It's hard to say. . . . I would say I have these conversations since I have been in Mankato, but once a year, maybe." "I would say you are the closest representative (of the church) that I encounter regularly"
P2	"Oh, beans, it's been a long time. I can't quite remember. I would have to sit down here and actually think about it for a while."
P3	
P4	"I can't even remember."
P5	"Um, that's a good question. I would say I attended an event at our church and I was really, really struggling with my faith at that time. I think feeling very unworthy. A guy that I had never met before just was very direct and asked me some questions and pulled out the Bible just to share some passages with me. But, it came at a really good time, a really needed time." "also, my brother and I and my best friend and I talk about it. My best friend is really involved, and she is very involved in her church, too. So, it is nice that she is just, like, a safe person for me."
P6	
P7	"I can't even remember." "Back when I was in Wells, probably." "We met with Jen's pastor before we got married . . . so probably back then in 1999."

P8	“I can’t even remember. I mean, I don’t know, probably with you once maybe. I mean, I don’t know. It’s hard, because, I mean . . .”
P9	“Like I said, she [my friend] goes to church faithfully, every Saturday, and she has been there through my whole life, through everything. We talk all the time. We get together as much as we can.”
P10	He said he is glad to talk about it if someone asks but it is not a principal of his faith to do so.

### **Informants “Persuasion” Experiences Do Not Happen or Do Not Offend**

Heading into the research I thought one of the most profound questions would be in relationship to the experiences of the unchurched on the “receiving end” of assertive evangelistic conversations. However, to my surprise many of the informants could not readily identify a time when someone had attempted to evangelize them—for example, P1, P5, P7, P8. Informant P4 had opinions of those that might try “push” their beliefs on others but could not identify a time when it has happened to him. Others confided, after being led a bit to think harder on the matter, they knew the kind of encounter I had in mind, but they did not express that it was a problem. They may have not been interested in the conversation, but they did not feel imposed upon when someone wanted to have it with them. P2 expresses this most clearly:

I said, “I’m not interested,” and I just shut my door. I didn’t slam it. I mean, a lot of people tell you that, they get it like one-hundred times a year, but they’re full of bologna. You know, if it happens to them once or twice a year that would be a lot. It’s not an inconvenience to politely turn people away. Come back during Halloween, or something, you know, knock on my door then.

P10 was open to the conversation, but simply found the conversations not very convincing, as it did not appear the persuader was convinced of their own arguments. P6 reported a negative instance when someone tried to convince her of converting to

Lutheranism, but it appears to be the persons “my way or the highway” attitude that was most off putting and not the notion of a challenging faith conversation.

The table below encapsulates some examples offered by informants regarding attitudes and experiences when others have tried to persuade them.

**Table 4.20**

P#	Examples of Responses to Experiences of Those Trying to Persuade
P1	“Not really, no, they weren’t trying to persuade you.”
P2	“I said, ‘I’m not interested,’ and I just shut my door. I didn’t slam it. I mean, a lot of people tell you that, they get it like one-hundred times a year, but they’re full of bologna. You know, if it happens to them once or twice a year that would be a lot. It’s not an inconvenience to politely turn people away. Come back during Halloween, or something, you know, knock on my door then.”
P3	“Quite often, I guess, because I’ve been strong in my views, and if people ask, then I am not afraid to answer, you know what I mean. My brother is an atheist, like a Southern Baptist atheist. He is pushy with being atheist”
P4	“I am not big on people pushing their beliefs on me. I don’t care what religion you are. You can have your own beliefs. I understand that, it is just like gay and straight. You know—that’s your thing. If whatever you want to do, you have the rights to do those things and believe whatever you want to believe in, as long as you don’t force your beliefs on me.” “Um, yeah, I don’t deny my faith, and I don’t want to push it on other people. I believe what I believe. I shy away from politics and religion. Those are things that I don’t want to talk about in public, really.”
P5	“I knew a family that was Jehovah’s Witness growing up, but they were not really pushy about it by any means. I was more curious than anything, just how it was different from the Methodist faith that I had grown up with. Other than that, not anybody—you know, you can get into debates with people that are atheist or antagonists, and maybe that, but never in a negative way. I haven’t found.”
P6	
P7	“No, nobody really”
P8	“No. No, I mean, like I said, you know, people can go to church, do what they want to do, you know, that’s fine. They can believe what they want to believe. I have no problems with that. . . . They come knock on the door, and I apologize, you know, but it’s not my cup of tea, you know, have a good day.”
P9	“Oh, years ago someone tried to convince me to go Lutheran. It was negative because he was very rude about it. I think there was about six of us. We were at a gathering at someone’s house. It was just how he was putting it—it was his way or the highway, basically. That this is the way it should be. I was getting very upset, and then uncomfortable.”
P10	He said he is okay with it but sees it as fruitless. Particularly encounters with

	<p>Christians who often present “illogical concepts.” “They themselves don’t understand so how will the convince me. They can’t detect their own logic, couldn’t possibly convince me.”</p> <p>Do you try to persuade others? “Even though I am an extrovert I try to talk less, like at poker. It’s better to say less. Like our friend P2, [He] opens his mouth and it proves he is a donkey.” Is that a Chinese proverb? “I learned it at Buster’s poker, someone said it about P2. It’s true. If you are an asshole, you will do asshole things. It’s natural. It’s who you are. Don’t fight it. An asshole speaks as an asshole, a good person does good things. Should we try to change Assholes to be good? You can’t. Why harm the order of things. Their assholeness (bad) must go somewhere. Better it stay with them.”</p>
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### **Informant Conversations Confirm Richness of Learner Approach.**

As the research bias is towards a learner evangelism approach, it is important to identify significant conversation points where the informant began to take control of its flow, or began to thinking more deeply, or felt especially validated, encouraged, or emboldened. For example, there were several significant moments where P1 began to process his own faith convictions in front of me, and even seek to persuade me: “I look around, to me everything is too perfect for there not to be a creator, right, you know. If H<sub>2</sub>O, if it is not 105 degrees there is no life on earth, or just the way things cycle on earth. . . . So, to me it’s hard to say there isn’t one [God], just because, how did it all get so perfect. There is a pattern, there almost has to be.”

When discussing more of the ultimate purpose of my research to P2 he sought to give me advice in reaching people, “I would try and start here [at Buster’s Bar]. Try and find out how many people in your local area of your parish go to Buster’s for dinner. Then you would see how many people there hang out and play poker.” In the interview with P5 she became teary eyed, and when I asked her about her emotional response to the conversation she stated; “Well, I think it is one of those things that when you talk about your faith it is an emotional thing. It is one of those few touchy things in life.” P7

pondered a bit on the reality that his son was not being raised in the church as he was—asking an important life question. And P10 felt so positive about the conversation that he suggested he had influenced me with his own Taoist faith persuasion. It is important to note that the researcher could not “sense” a significant deepening of the conversation with P4 and P8. Conversation with these two, while valuable, were a bit more impotent in nature.

These examples and others show the depth of conversation that can happen through a learner approach. Inquiring about people’s lives, values, belief systems, without judgment but with a posture towards understanding, elicits enriching non-threatening conversation, that both the learner and the participant can be blessed by. The examples in Table 4.19 note some of those significant moments. These comments show that these informants can speak confidently and think seriously about their faith, and in the safe environment that a learner approach offers, they can have an enriching faith conversation. They also provide incredible safe moments for the trusted learner to be invited in to consider these things alongside the participant—and not as the resident expert.

**Table 4.19**

<b>P#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Significant Conversation Turning Points</b>
P1		Complimented on his spirituality: “I look around, to me everything is too perfect for there not to be a creator, right, you know. If H <sub>2</sub> O, if it is not 105 degrees there’s is no life on earth, or just the way things cycle on earth. . . . So to me it’s hard to say there isn’t one (God), just because, how did it all get so perfect. There is a pattern, there almost has to be.”
P2		As I was searching for a follow up: “Just ask me—be blunt. Don’t candy-coat it” He inquires of me: “Why did you get into doing interviews? What made you want to do this? Obviously, it’s out of your own good will.” I respond and he says “See, I have that. You know what I call that? I call that good and evil. That’s how I used to feel when I used to hang out at Buster’s

	<p>and The Tav. See, back when I first got here.”</p> <p>“I met my wife when I was 42 going on 43, somewhere in that neighborhood. Sometimes I ask why, you know, why so long? . . . Yeah, why couldn’t it have been earlier? God works in mysterious ways.”</p> <p>Gives me advice “I would try and start here. Try and find out how many people in your local area of your parish go to Buster’s for dinner. Then you would see how many people there hang out and play poker. Poker used to be considered a vice.”</p>
P3	<p>Participant was testifying “And then one day, for no apparent reason at all, I was down in the dumps, walking in my room at my apartment, and I’m depressed, like physically, emotionally drained—empty. And I walk into my room where my girlfriend and my dog are sleeping, and I felt literally a presence, like an experience I can’t even explain in a million years. And, as I am standing there looking at her, I feel this warmth wash over me, head to toe. The tears started to run down my face. I can’t even control it. I felt like I was in the presence of God—I genuinely did.”</p>
P4	
P5	<p>Recalling a bit of her faith journey she began to cry “Well, I think it is one of those things that when you talk about your faith it is an emotional thing. It is one of those few touchy things in life.”</p> <p>“I am, I am, a little bit, I am, but especially when, I don’t know, we’ve talked about kind of a journey here, and captured a lot of different events, and some of it is just hard.”</p>
P6	<p>“You know, you have to look at the little small things that happen, I mean—you calling me today to do this was really weird, because I was praying that I needed someone to talk to about issues, and blah, blah, blah, and the next thing I know you were calling.”</p>
P7	<p>“I wish [my son] was brought up going to church”</p>
P8	
P9	<p>“She was testifying to me about forgiveness. “And he was very quiet and, like, lived in his shell, so the minute I forgave him he came out of his shell and became a happy man again.”</p> <p>She said she doesn’t like the way that they are not open to gay people. So, we talked about that a little bit. And she asked me for my perspective which led to deeper discussion.</p>
P10	<p>The entire conversation was exhilarating. And was closed with informant expressing, “I feel like I influenced you more.”</p>

### Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

This research question gets at the heart of the purpose of this project “The purpose of this project was to explore the impact of a learner approach to evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker League, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in

the MAC of the United Methodist Church.” The responses from the Bar Poker Community in the section above identify important thoughts, feelings, and experiences for the MAC to understand that speak into both MAC’s current evangelistic practices, and the advantages of a Learner’s Approach. Ultimately this research question will be developed in Chapter 5 as we look at both major findings and their implications.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

After analyzing the data from both the clergy questionnaire and the informant interviews the following major findings warranted further explorations.

First, by and large MAC clergy have shared definition of evangelism, believe themselves to have evangelistic gifts and a heart for evangelism. Further, they feel adequately trained in evangelism and make the effort to equip and train their church in evangelism. In spite of all of this they are largely ineffective. Ironically, most indicated they do not have an intentional discipleship plan in their ministries.

Second, MAC clergy do not believe their church shares their evangelistic ethos. They believe laity are not as engaged in conversations with the unchurched, and that it is in fact the demands of the church on the time and priority of the pastor that proves to be a barrier for carrying out evangelism. This would suggest an adaptive leadership challenge.

Third, the distribution of ministry roles as listed in Ephesians 4:19 among MAC clergy are largely lopsided, as most would identify with the role of Shepherd or Teacher and far less in the more outward focused roles of Apostle and Evangelist.



Fourth, if MAC churches engage in evangelistic practices at all, they are largely attractional, and only a small percentage express ideas related to an incarnational or learner approach.

Fifth, the Bar Poker Community, though comprised of unchurched, under-churched, or de-churched individuals are able to comfortably articulate a faith system that they use to cope with tension, trouble, and tribulation.

Sixth, the Bar Poker Community largely do not come in contact with the church, and largely have not experienced overly negative faith conversations, in fact, many of them are not engaging in faith conversations whether they be positive or negative. However, many still have thoughts about the church.

Seventh, the informant interviews, which in themselves sought to model a learner approach, elicited rich deep and meaningful conversation. In many of the conversations significant moments were evident, where the informant and/or the interviewer could identify spiritual connection, personal conviction, or enlightening truth.

## CHAPTER 5

### LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of the project was to explore the impact of a learner evangelism approach in the Bar Poker Community, in order to inform evangelistic practices in the Minnesota Annual Conference (MAC). After analyzing the data collected through a clergy questionnaire aimed at understanding postures, practices, and priorities currently held by MAC clergy, and the data collected from informant interviews in the Bar Poker Community, this chapter seeks to report major findings, and identify implications of those findings. Further, this chapter will suggest possible limitations to the study, unexpected observations that surprised the researcher along the way, and recommendations for further study. Finally, the researcher will share some postscript narrative on his experience along this research journey.

#### Major Findings

##### Clergy “Get” Evangelism, but the Church Does Not

###### *MAC Clergy Get It*

The FACT report assessed “that the primary reason for the precipitous decline in membership and worship attendance is the complacency and disconnect of both clergy and lay leaders to what we Methodists have traditionally embraced as the evangelistic task of reaching new people for Christ” (FACT 6). However, this study finds, at least in the eyes of MAC clergy, that they perceive no such disconnect when it comes to their own embrace of the evangelistic task. Somewhat surprisingly, the data indicates that MAC clergy are not confused or bifurcated in how they understand evangelism. Nearly all respondents defined evangelism as something

exactly or very similar to “sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with others” with some but few exceptions.

Not only is there a largely shared definition of evangelism, all (100%) clergy agree that evangelism is important and 90% strongly agree. Nearly all clergy (94%) agreed with the statement that they “have a heart to reach new people for Jesus.” And when asked how true they would rate the statement “I have the gift of evangelism” 61% said “true,” and 20% said “very true,” for a total of 81%. Further, 91% would agree that evangelism is central to their leadership; 73% agree to the statement “I create opportunities to teach my church about evangelism”; and 80% said they preach on the importance of evangelism. Additionally, MAC clergy did not suggest lack of training as a problem as 70% expressed that they feel sufficiently trained in evangelism, and 74% believe they are capable of equipping their church for evangelism.

In other words, in regards to the posture of MAC clergy towards evangelism, not only do they hold a shared definition of evangelism, they largely hold evangelism in high regard, feel gifted for the work of evangelism, feel sufficiently trained, and create opportunities to train their church. And nearly all clergy (96%) have a theology that compels them to share their faith to reach others.

### *The Church Does Not*

So, what is standing in the way? Why does not it appear fruitful evangelism is happening among MAC clergy? (After all, 16% of respondents indicated that in the past year no persons in their church had started a new journey with Christ that were not otherwise connected to their church. And an additional 46% said that less than five had). Interestingly, these clergy would identify that it is their local church that is standing in the way. That is, they indicated that their strongest barriers to evangelism were not theology, apprehension, or lack of training, but a strong

sense that they simply do not have time for this because the church has other priorities for them (see Table 4.10). And while they have a heart for reaching new people, most clergy (62%) would suggest their church does not share that heart at all or at least not to the same degree, as the church has little to no evangelistic ethos (see Table 4.9). The data suggests that while the clergy person may be awakened to the evangelistic task, they believe the church is largely asleep. Interestingly, not only is this felt by the pastors there is some evidence that the unchurched may also see the church to be asleep. For instance, P10, when asked to give an opinion about the church, makes the following comments regarding this sleeping giant:

P10: “Yes, to be honest, I have no positive comment. I felt nothing, I felt that its purpose was not religious but instead was a small community held together.”

Me: “A social club?”

P10: “Exactly, especially in rural area—drink and talk shit!”

Me: “Does the church do any good in the world?”

P10: “Yes, it’s hard for the church to do good for the rich people, they have everything they need—money, power, influence, support, but the church is beneficial for the poor people. They gather them, organize, and start missions. They have a leader. This is why the church is successful, Muslims too. They are able to bring societal transformation to those who have no power, money, authority. The rich famer church I went to?! It’s nothing for them.”

Others simply comment that they suspect the church may be at work in the world, they simply have not encountered it. The clergy suspect the same. While most clergy would say they have faith conversations with the unchurched almost weekly, they suspect half of their laity are either not having these same conversations or at most once a year (Table 4.8).

*Not a New Problem*

The researcher bias of this project was to focus on a technique of learner evangelism which is suspected to be more effective for the MAC, but instead this finding suggests, technique alone may not be our problem, but rather it is the sleeping giant that is named the Minnesota UMC. This is not a new problem. In fact, John the Apostle reports something similar in the vision he received regarding the church in Sardis, “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev 3:1c NRSV). Practically speaking the church cannot engage in fruitful evangelism if the church is not currently awakened to the gospel herself.

In a great encapsulated letter from our Wesleyan heritage, John Wesley, writes back to young circuit rider Zechariah Yewdall who virtually laments the same issue our MAC clergy lament today:

But you say, “Many of the people are asleep.” They are: and you are sent to awake them out of sleep. “But they are dead.” True; and you are sent to raise the dead. Good will be done at Monmouth and Neath in particular. When no good can be done, I would leave the old and try new places. But you have need to be all alive yourselves, if you would impart life to others.” (The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, Vol 7, Emory 155)

This is to say that this predicament is not a new one throughout church history. In fact, when we look at what church history calls the Great Awakenings, they necessitate a substantial state of slumber in the church just prior to the awakening. Timothy Tennent in his blog article on the Reformation alludes to this when he writes:

The real source of an awakening is found when the gospel itself is rediscovered in the life of the *church* (emphasis added). Today, the crisis in the church today is not, fundamentally, a programmatic problem (i.e., the need for better church programs); nor is

the crisis fundamentally a budget problem, or even a membership problem. Our problem is the loss of the gospel itself. When the gospel is re-discovered, then we will not be able to contain the vibrancy and life which will emerge. The re-discovery of Romans 1:17 and the centrality of Christ was the spark which led to hundreds of thousands of new Christians, as well as millions of *baptized church-going Christians* (emphasis added) who gloriously heard the gospel for the first time. (Tennent)

Let us not forget that the Holy Club at Oxford—that seed of the Methodist movement—was after all not comprised of unchurched young men, but rather entirely church-ed persons who, once awakened, launch a revival among the church that spread like wildfire. Were the unchurched reached? For sure, but the revival was incited when the “reached” were reached.

While this researcher is not ready to suggest learner evangelism is not an important, impactful technique (in fact, the third major finding confirms this), the study results would suggest that before we look at techniques to reach the unbelieving world, we should re-examine our technique for re-reaching the believing world.

As discussed in Chapter 2 it is quite possible that the “unreached-reached” that makes up the MAC is directly related to Heibert’s discoveries on exploring bounded versus centered sets. That is, the church in these past generations has focused primarily on conversion and membership (“getting people in”) rather than discipleship. The result as William Reyburn noted are “soul’s converted, but no converted life” (755). A centered set approach affirms that a life of discipleship must happen before, during, and after conversion, in contrast to a bonded set approach where discipleship takes a back seat to simply “getting people in.” J. D. Walt marvelously expresses this in his exploration of 2011 Barna Research: “people are going halfway with the Lord, but not the rest of the way. . . . [They attain] a faith high on decisions, and low on

discipleship” (70). A church comprised of great apathy toward evangelism, may indicate discipleship has been overlooked. Perhaps the idea of aiming again our efforts on reaching the “reached” was a missional strategy shared by Jesus when he instructed the twelve, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matthew 10:5b-7 NRSV).

### *Leadership in Intentional Discipleship Is Lacking*

This notion that clergy get it and the church does not, accentuates all the more the importance of reclaiming a catechism toward intentional discipleship in the local church. However, the evidence would suggest that while clergy strongly asserted their own heart, passion, and ability for evangelism, most (67%) could not answer affirmatively to the question “does your church have a discipleship plan?” This void or neglect of an intentional discipleship plan is especially puzzling as the conference mission statement is held by United Methodists worldwide “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (BOD 2016). With most churches having no clear plan in place one wonders if the clergy we are deploying are aware of the primacy of this mission or are being equipped and supported by the conference to carry it out.

This would suggest one of three things. First, rather than seeing discipleship and evangelism as two sides of the same coin, they have some sort of disconnect. Second, they may see the connection but lack the necessary adaptive leadership skills to bring the change needed to restore effective intentional discipleship systems in the local church (To be sure it is no easy task. Wesley’s own insistence on discipleship through classes and bands was not well received by the long-standing Anglican church.). Finally, it might suggest that even here a learner

approach to evangelism is a good place to start in the evangelization of the local church. For it seems that whether reaching the “unreached” or the “reached” we can benefit from the employment of learner evangelism concepts that seek to meet people—even church people—where they are at.

### **Lopsided Roles in Ministry**

The FACT study suggested that MAC clergy gravitate toward the chaplain model of ministry more than others, thus leaving them lopsided in their clergy pool since they lack clergy leadership with natural apostolic and evangelistic inclinations and instincts. This research confirmed this reality particularly when respondents were asked to self-identify with one of the five-fold ministry roles as listed in Ephesians 4:11-14: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (NRSV).

The study concludes that by and large MAC clergy identify primarily with the role of shepherd first, and then teacher, and both to a significant degree. Meanwhile apostle, evangelist, and prophet lag way behind. The significance of such disproportion, while not noted in the literature review are examined and noted here by missiologist Alan Hirsch.

First, looking at a brief summary of each of these ministry roles, Hirsch describes them accordingly:

APOSTLES extend the gospel. As the “sent ones,” they ensure that the faith is transmitted from one context to another and from one generation to the next. They are



always thinking about the future, bridging barriers, establishing the church in new contexts, developing leaders, networking trans-locally. . . .

PROPHETS know God's will. They are particularly attuned to God and his truth for today. They bring correction and challenge the dominant assumptions we inherit from the culture. They insist that the community obey what God has commanded. . . .

EVANGELISTS recruit. These infectious communicators of the gospel message recruit others to the cause. They call for a personal response to God's redemption in Christ and also draw believers to engage the wider mission, growing the church. . . .

SHEPHERDS nurture and protect. Caregivers of the community, they focus on the protection and spiritual maturity of God's flock, cultivating a loving and spiritually mature network of relationships, making and developing disciples. Shepherds can value stability to the detriment of the mission. . . .

TEACHERS understand and explain. Communicators of God's truth and wisdom, they help others remain biblically grounded to better discern God's will, guiding others toward wisdom, helping the community remain faithful to Christ's word, and constructing a transferable doctrine. . . . (Hirsch, *What is APEST?*)

What both Hirsh and the FACT study suggest is that without the sending, transmitting, bridge-building and cultural brokering found in the apostolic role, and without the "infectious" gospel communicators, and recruiters of the evangelistic role, the church can become askew in its missional focus. In fact, when the shepherding role is over-monopolized it can lead to "closed, non-missional community . . . a don't rock the boat approach to organization." Likewise, when the teacher role is over utilized at the expense of others it can lead to "theological dogmatism, Christian Gnosticism, intellectualism, and control through ideas—Pharisaism (is it lawful)"

(Hirsh *The Forgotten Ways* 171). So, with both the apostolic and evangelistic roles being suppressed, and the shepherd and teacher roles dominating, is there wonder why the MAC is leading the nation in decline?

Are all five ministry roles absolutely vital to ministry of the church, and can all be useful in the evangelistic task? For sure! Carey Nieuwhof speaks to this current dilemma:

For the most part, shepherds and chaplains have run the church. I'm not saying we don't need shepherds or that we don't need chaplains in the right place. Not at all. We do.

But what happens when all you have are shepherds and chaplains?

Here's what happens: the kind of radical change that both the church and the world need doesn't happen. Instead, leaders hold the hand of a sick church and comfort it while it dies.

I know that sounds harsh but look around you. Isn't that mostly what's happening? I also know enough good shepherds and chaplains to know that they find the hand holding of a dying church deeply frustrating and frightening. They don't want their church to die, but there aren't enough leaders around them with the gift set or mindset necessary to turn it around. (Nieuwhof)

The reality is the MAC is chockfull of shepherds and teachers among its clergy. An important and urgent move forward for the MAC if it is serious about reaching a plentiful harvest would be to insist on more intentional tactics in identifying, recruiting, and credentialing leaders who are particularly geared toward evangelistic and apostolic ministry roles. Nieuwhof agrees, "The missing gift set in the church is spiritual entrepreneurship—something the New Testament calls apostleship. It's the kind of radical determination, innovation and fierceness the Apostle Paul showed" (Nieuwhof). This is discussed further under "ministry implications of the findings.

## **Where Trunk or Treat Flops, Learner Evangelism Shines**

The study confirms that not only is a learner evangelism approach more culturally sensitive and more fruitful, it also reflects the very character of Christ in the incarnation. MAC clergy largely reported that their best evangelistic practices currently do not reflect a learner approach to evangelism. Instead their most practiced evangelistic methods could be sorted into two primary categories: attractional and transactional. While the heading for this major finding is somewhat flippant, ministries like “trunk or treat” are a valid representation of our most prominent MAC evangelistic approaches. So, as we look into this major finding we will look at how the evidence would support a learner approach verses an attractional-transactional approach like “trunk or treat.”

### *Nobody’s Asking for Trunk or Treat, but All Ask for Something*

MAC clergy were asked to name current evangelistic practices happening in their churches today (“what is your church doing when it comes to evangelism”). It is important to note that most of these churches would admit not much is happening in terms of evangelism, still when pressed to identify something, they would name attractional or transactional ministry events such as Trunk or Treat, a Hog Roast Fund Raiser, or hosting a Diaper Depot at the County Fair. They are attractional in the sense that they offer an event or program and in effort to attract people to their church. They are transactional in the sense that there is this “If I do this for you, of you, I expect you to do that for me” mentality. Only, less than 4% of MAC clergy indicated that an important evangelistic approach for them is to listen to the needs of the community with any sort of incarnational or learner intentionality.

Not only do the clergy’s own self-reported statistics indicate evangelistic practices like “Trunk or Treat” are not working particularly well in terms of reaching people for Jesus, it is

quite possible that ministries of this kind are neither succeeding at meeting the felt needs nor or real needs of the unchurched. Ironically, though these types of ministries are often publicized well in the church and around the local community, none of the ten informants interviewed named any interaction with the church with these kinds of ministries. Furthermore, when asked questions like, “what would you want to say to the church today?” not one of the informants said “more candy, please!” nor did they indicate in other way a need for these types of ministries. While MAC churches would likely suggest that the purpose of “trunk or treat” events is not to address a real need, but rather a felt need as an attractational effort to meet their unchurched neighbors, without any approach that includes “learning,” how can the church be sure it is addressing even a valid felt need?

On the other hand, the ten informant interviews, which were in themselves a model of what learner evangelism can look like, identified significant tension, trouble, and transition that these informants have had to consider both in the past and currently. By taking on a learning posture, the mission field *can* articulate to the church where their point of need is—felt and real. In these ten short interviews, by listening attentively one could get a sense of what persons are asking for (See Table 4.17). These rather brief interviews in themselves show how a learner’s approach to evangelism can free the informant to share their life and their points of need. In these cases, informants shared everything from personal struggles with addiction, desires to have their teenager exposed to the Christian faith, and the challenges of broken relationships. Underlying these issues in their life, are legitimate felt and real needs, none of which are likely met by Trunk or Treat ministries, but all of which might be met by an intentional ministry of the church.

If we do not ask how will we know? In Chapter 2 we discussed that the learner evangelism model asks us to start with where people are at, rather than starting where we are at.

The problem with speculating what felt and real needs exist among the unchurched is that we waste much energy scratching where it does not itch. In the example of Paul in Athens, we see the adeptness of the apostle in “learning” a people and cultural context to such a degree that he is able to meet them in their language, on their turf, and speak to their philosophical yearnings. In adopting a learner approach, we can see exactly where the gospel can intersect with a real need in a person’s life. As reflected by Eugene Nida in Chapter 2: “The missionary’s purpose [is] not, however, just to elicit curiosity. He [is] convinced that in order to tell the people about God he [has] to first learn what they [know] about God, or otherwise he might fail utterly to make his message relevant” (Nida 161). In Jesus’ own evangelistic encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, we see Jesus ability to sleuth the point of tension or trouble in her life and speak into it. Perhaps this states the obvious, but we do not see Jesus offering an invitation to a cookie bake. A cookie bake is neither the Samaritan’s woman’s felt nor her real need. Water? Yes. Dignity and self-worth? Yes.

### *Your Place or Mine?*

When we look closely at the evangelistic practices of MAC churches as categorized in Table 4:13, notice there is a strong focus on attractional approaches. In these approaches the congregation is encouraged to invite people to a particular event (e.g. Trunk or Treat, Turkey Dinner, worship experience, or small group), or the church advertises in the community to encourage people to come to such an event. One does not need to wonder about the fruitfulness of these ministries in reaching the unchurched, as both the research data and the FACT study remind us they are not particularly effective.

This attractional practice of evangelism runs counter to the biblical witness. Scriptures point to God as a missionary, God meeting us where we are. The very word “apostle”—

ἀπόστολος—at its root conveys the meaning “to send” or “send away” (Merriam-Webster 54).

As reasoned in Chapter 2, Christ in the incarnation is the principal example of a God who sends—sending God’s Son to meet us on our turf, in our space, and in our cultural context. When one reads the journey of the apostle Paul in Acts, we are hard pressed to see “come to us” models of evangelism. In fact, one could make the case, as in Acts 17, that Paul rather than seeking to attract people to his turf, has a deep attraction to the spaces and places of the mission field.

These attractional approaches make much sense if the motivation behind them is self-preservation of a particular local church and its unique culture. When that is the case, it would stand to reason that anything should be done to get people to and through one’s door, experience the customs, and work to assimilate them as quickly and as deeply as possible. However, this motivation does not appear to be what drives the apostles and because of that, the early apostolic witness of the church displays a reverse assimilation happening as the gospel reaches new context. With the missionary meeting people on their turf it places the evangelist in a posture of humility and vulnerability, similar to the downwardly mobile example of Jesus as described in the Christ Hymn in Chapter 2.

To draw from my own personal experience, I can recall my first visit to the Bar Poker Community. I sat down at the table and it was immediately obvious to me that these folks knew each other and had a long history together. Further they knew the game, the house rules—spoken and unspoken—and poker etiquette. Likewise, it was glaringly obvious to me and others that I did not know these things. This created much discomfort in me. So much so, that each time I had to put chips in the pot, I had to stop my hands from shaking for fear that I might be doing it wrong. I would submit that this is a very natural experience, whenever you are the new person

entering into someone else's "family reunion." Certainly, this is similar to what it feels like when an unchurched person enters any local church.

Perhaps most apparent about the informant interviews was the great ease in which the informants shared in the conversation. All conversations were held on their turf, either in the pub or at locations they preferred. The willingness of all informants to participate, the depth of sharing, and the comfort level, all point to an experience quite unlike that experienced by the outsider and placing ourselves on their turf ensures that the position of outsider is reserved for us.

To be sure MAC clergy reported other practices that embraced a sending rather than an attractional approach to evangelism. Many of these were service projects in the community or a commitment to tackle social justice issues. It would appear that the evangelistic motivation of these ministries was to "earn the right to be heard." One may wait around a long time for that privilege if the opportunity ever presents itself. However, the learner approach needs not the right to be heard, but rather positions themselves to most effectively hear. Again, to refer back to Chapter 2, Jon Kirby, reminds us that the onus of belonging must shift: "[Missionaries must] get involved with local people, esteem them, and *learn* (italics mine) from them. They build relationships from the outset and become "belongers" in their new society. When missionaries spend time with people becoming belongers, they are following Christ's incarnational ministry" (136).

In the example of Christ, we see the first conversion Jesus made, was himself to us. What if we entered the spaces of the unchurched, with a desire not to be heard or to convert, but to be converted?

*Distributing Candy or Sleuthing the Holy Spirit*

The informant interviews confirmed the unchurched are not clean slates, or in complete states of darkness, but are in fact people of faith. The learner approach to evangelism is best suited to sleuth and uncover what the Spirit has begun in them. Their faith formation may be greatly stunted, uninformed, or inconsistent, and many may not have the tools to adequately articulate it coherently, nonetheless all informants expressed a glimmer of the Spirit at work in them and a faith system that has allowed them to cope with tension, trouble, or transition in their life. Some more strongly than others. In fact, most could not only express their belief system, they could also quite handedly express the ways they would like to personally develop in their own faith.

As reported in Chapter 2, a Wesleyan understanding of the prevenient grace of God believes that God has previously acted in in all humans and continues to do so. Therefore, as Kenneth Collins speaks to prevenient grace he notes, “When Wesley looked beyond the walls of his own church and tradition, he saw not total darkness, but a measure of light, due to healing, illumination, and preparatory activity of the Spirit of Christ” (65). And as John Wesley himself stated, “there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God” (cited in Collins 66). Therefore, it would seem imperative that the most fruitful approach to evangelism would be one that asks the evangelist to engage in the attentive work of discerning how the Spirit has and is working in others already. Ted Runyan comes to this same conclusion as discussed in the Literature Review: “The missionary who will know his people will have to first know their God. How a people symbolize the supernatural, and the way they think and feel toward their God or gods is not only a clue to the stuff of which the society is made, but also an indication of what in Christianity will be immediately relevant” (481).



Frankly, events like Trunk or Treat ask us to do attractional or transactional work to those in attendance, but do not call upon us to the attending work of listening and sleuthing where the Spirit is moving. In fact, it appears most of MAC approaches to evangelism do not lend themselves to listening conversations that lead to discovery. In spite of that, not only did this study unveil that persons are not “void of the grace of God”; in several of the interviews it was quite obvious that the Spirit was working right in our midst. As depicted in Table 4.19 in nearly all conversations I was able to discern a point in which the conversation turned especially significant. A palpable feeling of openness, depth, or richness was evident to the researcher and signified that the Spirit of God was breaking in—whether bringing conviction, a deeper hunger, or a new insight to the informant or myself. This is especially important given that most informants reported it had been too long to remember the last time they had a significant faith conversation (See Table 4.17). This study would suggest that this happens when the posture of the evangelist avails itself to it.

### **Ministry Implications of the Findings**

The purpose of the project was ultimately to inform evangelistic practices in the MAC. Based on the study’s major findings, I have identified three major implications for the MAC going forward.

#### **Equipping Leadership to Reach the Reached**

While the conference seeks to shift its efforts towards the evangelistic task of reaching *new* people this study would suggest we might aim our evangelism at reaching *old* people. As discussed in the first major finding great awakenings are named such not so much because the unbelieving world was awakened, but rather the sleeping church. The MAC would do well to equip its pastors for the task of re-evangelization of the local church. A study of best practices of

apostolic or evangelistic congregations could inform this training. Further, appointed leadership must know going in that “yes” their task is to help the church reach the community, but first much work needs to be done to help the church reclaim its heart for the gospel.

### **Board of Ordained Ministry Adjustments**

With the Board of Ordained Ministry (BOM) being both the vetting and credentialing arm of the conference, it is imperative that they shape these processes with the evangelistic task in mind. Targeting recruitment at seminaries where evangelistic and apostolic leaders gravitate and where strong missiology and evangelism courses are core curriculum would be a start. Further, and perhaps more importantly, BOM candidate interviews must ask the probing questions related to the candidate’s current and past propensity for fruitfully demonstrating that they have peculiar evangelistic and apostolic abilities. Currently the MAC insists upon this in the vetting for church planters, but these abilities are needed just as much for ministry in established local church settings, taking seriously again Wesley’s Historic Questions of “Have they fruit? Have any been truly convinced of sin and converted to God, and are believers edified by their service?” seems like a good start (BOD 2016, 310). Questions like “tell me your understanding of the baptism” or “how you would explain communion to a confirmation student” are important and great theological questions, but I would suggest they are not very useful in identifying the apostles and evangelists among us. In fact, it may be that those who gravitate towards evangelistic and apostolic roles as a group would score low on that type of question while a shepherd and teacher might ace it.

Further, while many new clergy candidates will present themselves as more natural shepherds and teachers, the BOM still should insist that they are able to strongly articulate how they will use that ministry role to equip laity for the evangelistic task, raise up apostolic and

evangelistic leaders, and cultivate an evangelistic ethos in the church. Shepherds and teachers should present compelling evidence that they have been able to understand the urgency, (as many will be placed in contexts where that urgency is not embraced), and perhaps most importantly, provide evidence of a time where they have used their shepherding and teaching role to support apostolic and evangelistic endeavors.

### **Flexing the Learner Muscles**

Finally, this study confirms that strength of an incarnational approach to evangelism that I have described as learner evangelism. While many unnecessarily equate evangelism with deductive approaches, the learner evangelism approach offers a more culturally sensitive and fruitful inductive approach. With some of the barriers that MAC churches have towards evangelism, and with the overall ineffectiveness of current methods, it would seem wise to develop a training model for clergy and laity in learner evangelism. The foundation of that training might be the biblical, theological, and missiological insights found in the Literature Review of this study combined with practical experiences in the mission field centered on learning a learner's heart in evangelism. Simple listening sessions with the "nones" in our life, following the format like the one prescribed by Bishop Sally Dyck to MAC clergy and laity could help would-be evangelists tone their learner evangelism muscles.

### **Limitations of the Study**

#### *Questionnaire Shortcomings*

Not until I had received a significant number of responses to the evangelism questionnaire was I able to see some possible inadequacies of the tool. First, it could be that using a four-point Likert Scale is not always optimal. As one respondent commented, "I'm disappointed with some of the narrowly defined statements and options provided. There was no

“Neutral” or “N/A” available, and particularly the last few questions seemed set up to highlight a forgone conclusion of the researcher.” By using a four-point scale my original aim was to force the respondent to commit by eliminating a middle neutral choice. However, at least for some questions, I wonder if a non-committed response might also be helpful data. It should be noted all three reviewing experts remain confident that a four-point scale is preferable to a five-point scale, with one suggesting an added “comment section” feature might address the concern above.

Secondly, though the evangelism questionnaire was reviewed by experts and was piloted by members of my doctor of ministry cohort one respondent has me wondering how my own researcher bias might have influenced the results. The respondent writes, “The person writing the questions always has their own context and perspective from which they are writing, and it can get in the way of providing information that is balanced and accurate. Given the slant of the questions, the results will reflect that slant.”

Thirdly, for ease in data reporting I regret that the clergy questionnaire did not use that same language in each Likert Scale question. Sometimes the question asked for a four-point scale of “true/somewhat true/somewhat untrue/untrue” while other times responses could be “strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree.” Framing the questions so that all responses were used either the true or agree choices would have made data reporting less complicated.

Fourthly, for assistance in data analysis more attention might have been given to sectioning out clergy survey questions in specific sections that corresponded with each individual research question. Instead a myriad of questions was asked to get at the heart of all three research questions, thus making it challenging later in data analysis.

Fifthly, questionnaire question twenty-three was specifically designed to try to discern whether a conservative or progressive theology impacts a posture towards evangelism or

fruitfulness. While the questionnaire was expertly reviewed, after analyzing the data the results seemed to lack consistency. It seems two of the statements were lacking and thereby could have been interpreted differently. The overarching question was “to what degree do you agree or disagree with these statements?” The first of the two incomplete statements was: “many paths lead to God.” In hindsight both a theological conservative and a progressive could agree with that statement—and 70% of respondents did. The other incomplete statement was “human beings will live forever in heaven or be forever separated from God in hell.” Of the 55% who disagreed with this statement it is hard to discern how many disagreed because the statement expressed an inexact doctrinal position. So, one respondent commented that this statement might have been better stated, “God will remake heaven and earth and dwell with his people in the new heavens and new earth forever.” In other words, it did not account for the orthodox view that heaven is not the ultimate stop on the human journey.

Sixthly, if I reject these two imprecise statements discussed above, question twenty-three would suggest that most respondents to the survey fall into classically orthodox perspectives—belief in miracles, the resurrection of Christ in the body, unchanging nature of God, etc. That being said an additional limitation to the study might be that predominately more conservative and orthodox clergy in the MAC would be most likely to respond to a survey entitled “evangelism study,” and so even though the participant response was quite high, it may have been largely skewed towards those who hold classically orthodox perspectives thus making it inclusive to suggest that MAC clergy are not theologically averse to evangelism. The study certainly suggests this, but perhaps it is only the respondents that feel that way.

Seventhly, with large majority of respondents (89%) perceiving themselves as having the gift of evangelism, it may suggest a self-selection bias to the study. That is, the evangelists among the clergy completed the survey and non-evangelists did not.

Finally, while the research found that MAC clergy have a predominately shared definition of evangelism, and this was seen often in the shared use of words, one thing the study does not further excavate is whether the respondents have a shared definition of the commonly used words they used in their definition. In other words when two respondents use the phrase “offer Christ” do they have the same agreed upon definition of what that means? One respondent even alludes to this possibility when they offered this corrective, “the questions seemed to favor a particular theology of evangelism (except for those that asked our opinion about what evangelism is). Perhaps some rephrasing such as “based on your understanding of evangelism. . . .” This comment would suggest that there is not a common understanding on what the word “evangelism” even means.

### **Unexpected Observations**

There were two unanticipated findings that challenged my underlying assumptions going into this project. The first was that I assumed a general survey of MAC clergy would report that they have a theological or philosophical aversion to evangelism. This disposition was not readily identifiable; in fact, as I noted in the first major finding above, it seems that most survey respondents have no such aversion. Further MAC clergy like and mostly share a similar definition of evangelism. And given that the response rate was nearly 50% of MAC clergy, it is surprising to see that there is a large number of clergy in the MAC who have an affinity toward evangelism at least as they define it.

The second unanticipated finding was learning that, among the bar poker informants, few could identify a negative evangelistic encounter. I assumed that the unchurched would be able to provide me with much ammunition on “how not to do evangelism” because they had been hurt by some deductive evangelistic encounter—e.g. an uncomfortable street encounter, a door-to-door evangelist, a judgmental tract, a formulaic conversation, or the classic “bullhorn” guy. What was striking was to learn that for the most part the informants could not identify a positive or negative evangelistic encounter. They simply are not encountering the church or the evangelism they are encountering is so tepid they could neither feel offended nor engaged.

### **Recommendations**

At the onset of the study I suspected the informant interviews with the Bar Poker Community would be more revealing than the evangelism questionnaire to the MAC clergy; however, the questionnaire proved to be very revealing and I would recommend future studies consider honing the questionnaire to bring even more focus to responses as well as supplementing it with clergy interviews.

Further, future studies surrounding the roles of ministry—Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, and Teachers—could be very beneficial in informing best practices for the MAC when it comes to the evangelistic task.

### **Postscript**

Before setting out on doctoral research my mentor and friend Dr. Darrell Whiteman advised me to choose a topic I am deeply passionate about or I will never finish. And when I shared with him my intrigue with the Bar Poker Community, he replied “We’ve definitely got to work them in somewhere!” Looking back at all that has been tackled in this project, it has definitely been my deep passion for evangelism and my special affinity toward the unique sub-

culture that comprises the Mankato Bar Poker community that has sustained me to the end.

When sharing my study with others I have begun with a provocative sentence “The first convert Jesus ever made was not someone to him, but he to us.” This for me is the essence of learner evangelism.



## APPENDIX A

### EVANGELISM QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Evangelism Study

Your consent before we begin.

\* 1. You are invited to be in a research study being done by Doctor of Ministry student Frederick Vanderwerf through Asbury Theological Seminary. The overall purpose of this questionnaire is to explore evangelism practices in the Minnesota Annual Conference by United Methodist Clergy.

This questionnaire will ask questions related to your understanding, postures, and practices when it comes to evangelism. Some of the questions will be fill-in-the blank, some ranking, and some ask you to place your answer on a scale of 1 to 5. Please allow yourself 20 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Your answers will be confidential, and your identity hidden.

Results of the study will be shared with my Doctor of Ministry mentor, coach, colleagues, and possibly with denominational leaders, missionaries, and church planters, but again your identity will not be known. All data from this study will be under password protection. At the end of his research all data will be destroyed.

If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want.

Thank you for taking the time to help me with my research. By clicking "I'm ready to begin" below you acknowledge that you have read the information above and agree to go forward. If you wish to opt out at this time, please select that option below. If you wish to opt out at any other point in the survey simply exit your web browser. Your answers will only be included in the study if you complete the questionnaire in full.

The researcher can be contacted at:

Fred Vanderwerf

507.720.9091

frederick.vanderwerf@asburyseminary.edu

I'm ready to begin.

I'm opting out.

#### Evangelism Study

A little background info, please.

6. Which best describes your appointment in the Minnesota Annual Conference?

- 1/4 time
- 1/2 time
- 3/4 time
- full time
- I'm currently not under appointment

Evangelism Study

Now lets get into it!

7. What is your definition of evangelism?

Evangelism Study

Alright! Keep going!

2. What is your age?

- 20-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61 and older

3. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

4. To what context are you appointed in ministry?

- Urban
- Suburban
- City
- Town or Rural
- Other

5. Which best describes you?

- Assigned Qualified Lay Person
- Certified Lay Minister
- Licensed Local Pastor
- Provisional Member Elder Track
- Provisional Deacon Elder Track
- Ordained Elder
- Ordained Deacon
- Other

8. Describe how much you agree or disagree with the statements below.

	strongly disagree	disagree	agree	strongly agree
Evangelism is central to my leadership in the congregation I serve.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My church members feel evangelism is very important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel sufficiently trained in evangelism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe I am capable of equipping my church members well in evangelism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I seek opportunities for more training in evangelism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I create opportunities to teach my church about evangelism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Evangelism Study**

You are doing so well!

9. Describe the behaviors that make someone a good evangelist?

**Evangelism Study**

Don't stop now!

10. If you have had evangelism training, what was one of the things that challenged you the most?

**Evangelism Study**  
 Way to get after it!

11. In answering the following questions, describe the frequency using the rating scale below.

	Almost daily	Almost weekly	Almost monthly	Almost yearly	Almost never
How often do you have faith conversations with an unchurched person?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do your church members report having faith conversations with unchurched persons?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you discuss concepts and practices for evangelism at leadership meetings in your church?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you spend intentional time with unchurched people?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you spend intentional time in largely unchurched or dechurched circles?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you share your faith story?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you hear the faith story (Christian or otherwise) of another?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Evangelism Study**  
 You got these two, no sweat!

12. Think about a positive experience you have had with evangelism. What made it positive?

Evangelism Study

Just three easy questions on this page!

16. Does your understanding of God compel you to share your faith to reach others?

Yes

No

17. Does your church have an intentional discipleship plan?

Yes

No

18. In the past year in your church how many persons have started a new journey with Christ that weren't otherwise connected to a church?

0

1-5

6-10

11-20

21 or more.

Evangelism Study

You are so close to the finish line!

19. Think of a negative evangelism experience you have had. What made it so?

Evangelism Study

Your thoughts matter!

20. Rate how much these factors might prove to be a barrier to your engaging in evangelism using the rating scale below.

	Not at all a barrier	minor barrier	moderate barrier	Serious barrier
lack of time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of technique	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
apprehension/fear	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my personality type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my theology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of knowledge of the faith	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of opportunity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
philosophically opposed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
church has other priorities for me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the church is not in a location that affords evangelism opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. Now rate, what barriers to engaging in evangelism you think your laypeople would identify using the rating scale below.

	Not at all a barrier	minor barrier	moderate barrier	Serious barrier
lack of time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of technique	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
apprehension/fear	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my personality type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my theology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of knowledge of the faith	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lack of opportunity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
philosophically opposed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
church has other priorities for me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the church is not in a location that affords evangelism opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Evangelism Study

Rock on!

22. Of these five-fold ministry roles (as listed in Ephesians 4), which ministry role do you gravitate toward?

- Apostle
- Prophet
- Evangelist
- Shepherd
- Teacher

Evangelism Study

One more question after this page!



23. Remember this survey is confidential, and no one, not even the researcher, has access to who said what.

Rate to what degree you would agree or disagree with these statements.

	strongly disagree	disagree	agree	strongly agree
Jesus rose in his body from the grave.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Many paths lead to God.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Faith in Jesus is necessary for final salvation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Miracles (supernatural ones) happen.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture is a only a historical document and one of many revelations of God.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
God is unchanging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Human beings will live forever in heaven or be forever separated from God in hell.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Evangelism Study

Last one and then you are done!

24. What were you hoping the questionnaire would asked about, but didn't see it here?

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Frederick Vanderwerf from the Asbury Theological Seminary. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of evangelism with the Mankato Bar Poker community, in order to inform evangelistic practices for church leaders in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. This study will look at the experiences, notions, and attitudes, of persons in the Mankato area bar poker community with evangelism, God, and the church. You are invited because you are an active participant in the Mankato area bar poker community.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be interviewed in person by Frederick Vanderwerf. The interview will feel like a conversation, where you will be asked some questions and then encouraged to talk as long as you like. The interview may be digitally recorded (audio only) so as to capture the conversation. Pseudonyms will be used for this research so your identity is protected. Interview questions will be related to your spirituality (experiences with God, religions, and the church). No more than three interview sessions will be conducted ranging from thirty to ninety minutes. There will be no compensation for this study.

Results of the study will be shared with my Doctor of Ministry mentor, coach, colleagues, and possibly with denominational leaders, missionaries, and church planters, but your identity will remain confidential. All audio recordings will be accessed solely by me and be password protected. Likewise, written notes of our conversation will solely be in my care and locked in a file cabinet. At the end of my research all data from our conversation will be destroyed.

If at any point in this study you are uncomfortable please tell Frederick Vanderwerf. If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want.

You may ask questions of Frederick Vanderwerf at any time about anything in this study.

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

**Researcher's contact information:**

**Fred Vanderwerf**

**507.720.9091**

**frederick.vanderwerf@asburyseminary.edu**

## APPENDIX C

### MANAGEMENT CONSENT LETTER

I am Frederick Vanderwerf, a student at Asbury Theological Seminary, and I am engaged in a study entitled “Incarnational Evangelism.” This study looks at the experiences, notions, and attitudes that persons who are participants in the bar poker community of Mankato have towards evangelism, God, and the church.

Much of my research data collection will come through ethnographic research. Much like an anthropologist who is studying a tribe in Papua New Guinea, I will simply engage the poker community as a participant and an active observer, seeking to understand them from the inside. To keep track of my observations I will record field notes on my note pad. At times, in order to delve deeper I will ask members of the bar poker community if I might interview them.

All interviews will be conducted only at signed consent of the interviewee. I have a copy of the consent letter for your review attached to this letter. In it you will see that names will be protected, data may be audio recorded, all data will be secured, participants can drop out of the study at any time, and no compensation will be awarded participants.

With your permission I would like to conduct this research at your establishment (Buster’s Bar, Mankato, MN). This research will not interrupt the normal business of your establishment nor the normal activities of the bar poker community. Any interviews done will feel like normal conversations.

---

Signature of establishment management or owner

Date Signed

**Researcher’s Contact Info**

**Fred Vanderwerf**

**507.720.9091**

**[Frederick.vanderwerf@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:Frederick.vanderwerf@asburyseminary.edu)**

**APPENDIX D**  
**SEMI-STRUCTURED INFORMANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**  
**FOR THE BAR POKER COMMUNITY**

1. How are feeling about this conversation?
2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Where have you lived?
3. How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually? Tell me a bit about your faith story.
4. What persons or events have influenced your spirituality or understanding of God either negatively or positively?
5. Do you currently attend church or other religious community?
6. If you went to the church when you were younger but stopped attending, what was the reason?
7. When was the last time you had a positive and robust faith conversation?
8. Have you encountered someone seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective? Describe that encounter?
9. What do you believe about who God is? Jesus? Or the bible?
10. When was the last time you encountered the church or a representative of the church? How was that experience? How did it affect what you feel about God or Jesus?
11. Do you cultivate your faith to the degree you would like? What are the roadblocks to doing so?
12. Do you have conversations about faith with the significant people in your life? (e.g. spouse, parents, girl or boyfriend, children)
13. When have you seen religion or church at its best?
14. If you could say one thing to the church or the Christian world what would it be?
15. Describe a time you have shared your faith or spirituality with someone else?
16. How are you feeling now in this conversation?

**APPENDIX E**

**MAC LETTER OF PERMISSION**



**Minnesota Annual Conference** of the United Methodist Church

July 20, 2017

Fred Vanderwerf  
108 S. Manitou Drive  
Mankato, MN 56001

Dear Fred,

You have permission to conduct research among the clergy and congregations in the Minnesota Annual Conference for your Doctor of Ministry project through Asbury Seminary on the topic of evangelism.

You will receive access to our database and email lists to issue an invitation of voluntary participation.

We will appreciate receiving copies of the letter of the invitation, the survey questions and a summary of your research when completed as you know the Minnesota Conference is engaged in increasing the urgency around the evangelistic task.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cindy M. Gregorson".

Cindy M. Gregorson  
Director of Connectional Ministries

## APPENDIX F

## COMPLETE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS

Participant	Gender	Age	Context	Credential	Increment
6437515043	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6434472422	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6434244401	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Quarter-Time
6431448671	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6431081791	Female	41-50	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6431072213	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6427179679	Female	41-50	Suburban	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6427112349	Male	41-50	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Half-Time
6426374358	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6425731266	Male	51-60	City	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6424685023	Male	51-60	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6424423013		51-60	City	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6423886637	Female	31-40	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6423607857	Female	61 and older	City	Ordained Elder	Three-Quarters-Time
6423415159	Female	51-60	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6422608836	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6422208454	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6422126285	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Three-Quarters-Time
6421919731	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Quarter-Time
6421916286	Male	31-40	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Quarter-Time
6421756327	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time

6421291929	Female	31-40	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6421079942	Male	51-60	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6421047714	Female	61 and older	Other	Certified Lay Minister	None
6420857291	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6420841717	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6420792320	Male	61 and older	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6420778595	Male	61 and older	City	Other	None
6420445675	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6420322711	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Three-Quarters-Time
6420291085	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural		Full-Time
6420260065	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Other	None
6420242752	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Other	Half-Time
6420208574	Male	31-40	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6420195729	Female	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Three-Quarters-Time
6420138658	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6420098564	Male	41-50	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6420031622	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6419914819	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Quarter-Time
6419827115	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Half-Time
6419802145	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Quarter-Time
6419799786	Male	41-50	Suburban	Provisional Member	Three-Quarters-Time
6419574032	Male	31-40	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Three-Quarters-Time
6419454389	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6419378513	Male	51-60	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6419205214	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Qualified Lay Person	Quarter-Time
6418490577					

6418332871	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418299435	Female	51-60	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418256652	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418233918	Female	41-50	Suburban	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6418231270	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418214476	Female	51-60	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418209836	Female	51-60	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418190909	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6418185759	Male	41-50	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418181142	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6418064369	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417994399	Female	41-50	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417951763	Female	51-60	City	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6417951723	Female	51-60	City	Other	Full-Time
6417938936	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417932503	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Other	Full-Time
6417930932	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417923415	Female	61 and older	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417914602	Male	41-50	Suburban	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6417878634	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417868776		61 and older	Town or Rural	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6417866273	Male	61 and older	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417864668	Female	20-30	City	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6417850356	Female	31-40	Suburban	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6417847137	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417837113	Male	31-40	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417835461	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Three- Quarters- Time
6417833975	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417833124	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417832841	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417832636	Male	51-60	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417825582	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time



6417818536	Female	51-60	Urban	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6417812318					
6417811468	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Other	Half-Time
6417594776	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6417531673	Female	41-50	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6416598918	Male	61 and older	Other	Other	None
6416192215	Female	41-50	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Quarter-Time
6416175111	Female	41-50	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Half-Time
6416040080	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Three-Quarters-Time
6416031687	Female	41-50	Suburban	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6416026006	Female	31-40	City	Other	Half-Time
6416021590	Female	61 and older	Other	Ordained Elder	None
6415961035	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Half-Time
6415933963	Female	51-60	City	Other	Full-Time
6415932447	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Three-Quarters-Time
6415887514	Female	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	None
6415828587	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6415825008	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Deacon	None
6415810482	Female	31-40	Urban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415801267	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6415755554	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6415721920	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415712644	Male	41-50	Town or Rural		Full-Time
6415699879	Male	51-60	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415690620	Male	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415651833	Female	20-30	Other	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time
6415549732	Female	61 and older	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415471385	Male	51-60	City	Ordained Elder	Full-Time

6415432082	Female	41-50	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415349079	Male	31-40	Suburban	Provisional Member	Full-Time
6415240074	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415195442	Male	61 and older	Suburban	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415192412	Male	51-60	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6415094896	Male	31-40	Town or Rural	Ordained Elder	Full-Time
6414917484	Male	31-40	Suburban	Licensed Local Pastor	Full-Time

## APPENDIX G

### INFORMANT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

#### INTERVIEW #1—P1

White male who works as a schoolteacher, lives about thirty to forty-five minutes outside of Mankato, and has been a member of the Mankato bar poker community for about four years.

How are you feeling about this conversation? Before you know it, we are going to talk about—

*It's like any other conversation I have ever had.*

Tell me a little bit about yourself—where did you live, where did you come from?

*I grew up in Arlington, which is about 45 minutes north of here. Religious background, I was raised in the Missouri Synod, and then I came to college here in Mankato. I was here for five years, and now I have moved back to Arlington.*

And you are working in the school system there?

*I work at GFW—it is the next school down the road.*

Like Gaylord?

*No, it's Gibbon, Fairfax and Winthrop.*

Oh, OK. So how would you describe yourself religiously or seriously.

*I have no idea. (Laughs)*

Do you think about those things?

*I think about them. When I was in high school, I was raised Missouri Synod, but I did—have you ever heard of “Teens Encounter Christ?”*

Yeah, aha.

*Well, I did some of those events when I was in high school.*

Did you like them, or you went to them—?

*I went to them, and then I worked as a staff member.*

As a volunteer?

*Yeah, I enjoyed them a lot. You know, looking back, I do consider it a little bit of a brain washing, looking back, you know it is meant to be a little bit jarring and to really kind of hit home, you know. But it is also hitting home with something that I think you want to hit home with you, if that makes sense. Like, if you believe in Jesus, like these things are going to hit home with you because it is your faith. That's kind of when things started going downhill, because a member of my church told me I was a lost soul because I wasn't coming to church because I was going to these "Teens Encounter Christ" events. I'm like, "you know that I'm going out and working with other kids to bring God to their life, right?" "No, you're a lost soul." That's kind of what turned me off to going to church there, because to me I didn't feel like I needed that. I didn't need their approval to believe in God. And then, of course, I read "The DaVinci Code"—it's got everything all mapped out.*

How old are you?

*I'm 25.*

Oh, okay.

*So, I read "The DaVinci Code" during very formative years. I didn't read it until high school, though. I read it in high school, and I thought it raised a lot of good point of just, you know, if people are good people I think they are going to be all right. . . . A good person is a good person whether they are Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist. And there are a lot of Christians that are bad people. That's kind of how I look at it.*

So, you talked about TEC a little bit—what person or event in your life has influenced your understanding of God either negatively or positively.

*I would say a lot of that was my church upbringing, my Sunday School and my pastors that I had for confirmation. I was confirmed in eighth grade. Like I said, it was more the kind of thing that goes on at church that turned me off of it. I didn't feel like, at my particular church anyway, I didn't feel enough*

What does this thing mean (gesture), because we are not talking on video?

*You know, the kind of hoity-toity-ness of "we sit in the front pew, we are better Christians than you." I wasn't into that whole thing. I know when I was doing TEC a lot, I did come down and visit The New Creation down here on Riverfront, and they are like "Are there any first-time people here?" And I was like "I'm here." You know they take the time to make you feel welcome,*

*they are really excited to have you here. That's more what it should be like. It should be a welcoming community. It should be. I drove by the church down here on Stoltzman every day for five years because I was a school bus driver, and the sign always says stuff like "God loves all and so do we," or things like that. I think that's how it should be.*

So, when was the last time that you have had a positive or robust faith conversation with another person? Do you have conversations about faith with people?

*Not really. I think it is a subject most people don't want to talk about. So, it's hard to say.*

Playing poker and having two or three beers, faith never comes up?

*No, not really. I wouldn't say so. I can't think of any time. Obviously, I have had conversations, but who knows if you had this conversation when. I would say I have these conversations since I have been in Mankato, but once a year, maybe.*

Have you encountered someone who sought to persuade you to their religious perspective?

*Not really, no, they weren't trying to persuade you.*

When was the last time you encountered the church—whether you went to church or whatever, or encountered a representative of the church?

*I would say you are the closest to a representative that I encounter regularly. Would it count if I say the people I see protesting up at PLP6ed Parenthood? I don't know if that counts.*

Sure, why not?

*Well, when I drove school bus one of the guys that worked at the bus company, he is kind of a big deal in his church, he does a lot for his church. He is always a good guy. The other guy that drove bus with us is in the band at the church. I think they are at Christ the King up here, or whatever is the one on toward Main street.*

Have you attended a funeral at a church, or a wedding at a church in the last few years?

*Yeah.*

How would you describe the encounter—positive? Good? Where they what you expected? They are what they are, right?

*You know what they are going to be ahead of time, so. I don't know if you know this, but my mom passed away two years ago,*

No, I didn't know that.

*I thought the minister had a lot of good messages and a lot of kind words to say.*

And was that in the Missouri Synod?

*Yeah, it was. I thought the coolest part about was that he had had a lot of run-ins with her, and they had their disagreements, but he was capable of setting that aside, too, and, you know, even though we had our differences, he still tried to do that.*

What did she pass away from?

*Ah, drug overdose.*

Oh, I didn't know that. Sorry to hear that.

*I'm sure that is why they had their run-ins, too, back in the day.*

Do you cultivate your faith now, to the degree that you would like to?

*I don't really think I cultivate anything in that regard. I just try to be a good person, to be a better person every day. I don't know if I would call that cultivating faith.*

Well, I just wondered if there is anything right now that you do specifically that would help give attention to that part of your life.

*I don't think so.*

When have you seen religion or the church at its best.

*I don't feel like I am in a position to see that a lot. Because if they are doing their best, they are helping the needy. You know, something like Hurricane Irma, that's when the church can really kick it into overdrive and help out. I don't attend church regularly anymore. I wouldn't say I attend church at all anymore, and so, I am not really in a position to see that. So, what I see the most in the community is bagging food, or helping sandbag or things, like that, I don't really see it.*

And you can see anybody doing that—it doesn't have to be the church, right?

*Right.*

Has there been a time when you have shared your faith—well, you told me a little bit about TEC, that's a good example—when you have shared your faith or spirituality with someone else.

*Yeah, TEC was the time when I was really doing that. I didn't really think I was that spiritual until I attended TEC. I think that was because of the contemporariness of it, and it brought religion into an area where I really felt I understood it. You know, I felt like I was confirmed before I even understood what all of this was about and what we were talking about. TEC brought me a lot closer to getting it.*

Oh, so you were confirmed, but you really didn't know what you were confirming?

*Yeah, right. But I was very confident.*

Okay, that's pretty good. How are you feeling now about this conversation?

*I'm okay. I'm a pretty open person, I think you have realized that.*

I know, that's one of the reasons I thought you would be good for this. I actually thought you were much older than 25.

*That happens.*

So, you are doing great. That's all the questions I have. Any questions you have for me? If you are able to, I am going to interview about nine other folks for the bar poker connection, and so I would like you to not tell them about this conversation until a month from now, when I am done with them all, just so that they can come just how they are without working up their thoughts and ideas, you know what I mean?

*Without getting that play in their hand?*

Thanks a lot, I appreciate it, man.

*So, what's the whole conversation? Ten minutes?*

Eleven minutes, thirteen seconds. I'm going to knock out a bunch of these.

*OK, so let's just keep going.*

So, if Sunday morning were more convenient, are you saying you would be at church?

*Maybe, I'd think about it more.*

If football wasn't a problem?

*If football wasn't a problem I would think about it more. If being hung over from Saturday night wasn't a problem, I would think about it more.*

Yeah, so what does prevent you from attending church on Sunday?

*Well, the Missouri Synod congregations are just too stale. You know, you are singing these songs that you don't even know what you are talking about. Like I said, I really liked TEC, because when we were singing those songs you know what the message is, you know what they are saying. So, the songs are all out the window, and then you are just there for the sermon. And that was one of the great things about after TEC, I found it easier to listen to sermons and find the message that was in there for me.*

Because you have had a faith encounter, or what?

*I am not sure. I don't know why it changed, or maybe I just had an attitude change of believing that there was value in it for me so that I listened better. I don't know. I just feel like after sermons weren't just a half hour of boring talk anymore. I actually liked listening to them after that.*

So, one of my first questions was, how would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually? I guess I would like to tweak that and say, would you describe yourself as religious or spiritual?

*I think I can be. I don't think I am right now.*

Why would you say that? Because everything you are saying right now sounds very religious.

*Well, because that was in high school. I don't go to church and listen to the sermon anymore. I don't read the Bible. I don't, you know, I used to listen to a lot of like Christian music, like "I Can Only Imagine," and those popular Christian songs.*

But you are talking about practical things, but what about in here, is there a spiritual being in here?

*I don't know. I look around, to me everything is too perfect for there not to be a creator, right, you know. If H<sub>2</sub>O, if it is not at 105 degrees there is no life on earth, or just the way things cycle on earth. The cycle of life. To me that's proof that there is something out there that put all this here. Then I start to get curious—what if God is just like the dweeb that gets picked on by other gods, or something weird like that. We think he's great, but do you ever think about stuff like that?*



Yes, I do actually, not that in particular, but I—

*You know, what if God has just created us to show us off to all his friends? Things like that. I remember watching an episode of “Futurama” and they created these mini robots, and then they thought that was God. It was like a random robot—they thought he was God. So, it’s weird, that dynamic of He is almighty, great and powerful and it is just intriguing to me to think about what if he is not that guy. Or what if he is not what we think he is? What if he is not the white version of God, what if he is more the Jewish God, or the different versions. So, to me it is hard to say that there isn’t one, just because, how did it all get so perfect? There is a pattern, there almost has to be.*

Yeah, I heard someone, there was a Christian apologist, you know what that means? They talk about the law of thermodynamics which has something to do with things go from a state of order to a state of chaos, not the opposite. Things don’t go from chaos to order. If I put all the letters of the alphabet, cut them out, put them in a dryer, spin them around and pull them back out, they are not going to be in their right order. They will be more chaotic than when I put them in. And so, you just make the case for the existence of life in the world and everything, the idea that it came from chaos and now it is perfectly ordered, enough that to develop a human eye makes little sense. But the idea that there might be a god who orders things.

*I could agree with that. I don’t feel like science and religion have to be exclusive.*

Yeah, absolutely.

*But people act like they have to be exclusive. . . . [T]he earth could be 2,000 years old but appear five million years old today. God created Adam and Eve showing age. They could be two seconds old, but they were adults. Why couldn’t he have done the same thing with the earth? I don’t know. I don’t think people ask questions anymore.*

So, this is not about what I think or not think, so let me shut it off.

*I don’t know. I don’t really consider myself an atheist. But I don’t sit and worry about whether I am pleasing God, either. I try to enjoy the good moments in life. I try to be a good person, you know, do something nice for someone who is having a down day, and I think that generally if you are honest in life, things like that. I don’t fear the path I am on, I guess.*

Do you ever ask questions about the meaning of life, or is there a deeper longing of your soul that seems unfulfilled?

*I feel like if I ask to many questions about the meaning of life I will be disappointed. I almost think that just be ignorant and try to enjoy to what is good, like the feeling you get when you are at Thanksgiving dinner surrounded by your family. It gets your right here. Enjoy it.*

Do you foresee a time in your life when you might get reconnected with the church or some other religion?

*I don't know, but, you know, you get married and ease into it.*

Do you have aspirations to get married?

*Yeah.*

Okay, so if you did get married and you had children, would it be important for you that they were raised in some kind of faith tradition, or not so important.

*I don't know yet. I feel like I don't want my kids to be confirmed until they know what they are getting confirmed into.*

Absolutely.

*I feel like a lot of it is people are how they were raised, and I'd really like to give my kids the opportunity to kind of see the world for themselves and try to make their own decision, but at the same time I worry about what happens if you don't have a value base when they are young. I think there is an underestimation to the importance of that—instilling values in kids when they are young. And that is where I would worry about messing up, because if I try to be objective, try not to force anything on them, will they learn anything at all? And will they have any values and morals? And that's what I worry about. I mean, it's a really good way for doing that.*

Yeah, I've got kids right now and I'm thinking about that. I don't want their experience with church to be so rigid that they don't feel like they have freedom to explore other things, but I want their experience to be enough to understand some of the core things you have talked about—the goodness of humanity, to treat your neighbor the way you want to be treated, and, you know, some of the core—

*And is it possible to teach that without necessarily grounding it in religion? That's what I ask myself. Or is that why religion came about? Because if you don't do this you are going to Hell.*

I've got answers for those questions, but I am not going to tell you because [omitted] But, no, yeah, okay. So, I feel like people would ask questions like that, but they are scared because they don't feel like they are good enough to be here.

*Yeah, I went to Bible study. I felt like I was surrounded by all these religious people who knew what was going on, and you know, "I don't belong here," you know. And you would ask a*

*question like, “can you teach values without grounding it in religion?” “Why would you want to do that,” you know, or something like that.*

Yeah, we’re quick with answers.

*Well, yeah.*

Rather than allow people to.

*And it seems very absolute a lot of the time. The Bible study tends to be the more hardcore, faithful people, whereas I picture myself more as a casual faith person. I believe in God, but I am not on my knees praying every night before bed. But it doesn’t bother me when we say a prayer before supper, either.*

On a journey—you don’t need to have it all crystal clear.

*Not even if I wanted to sometimes. Like I say, kind of, ignorance is bliss. Maybe you don’t want to know.*

Anyway, thank you, Al. If I have any follow-up questions I will come back to you.

## INTERVIEW #2—P2

P2 is about forty-seven years old. He was incidentally just a couple of weeks ago diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and quite possibly will not live past three months. He is from Brooklyn, New York. He came out here about five to six years ago to follow a girl that he hoped to marry. That did not go well, and he has been a part of our poker community for that long and has since married someone from The Netherlands. He has gone from job to job in the Mankato area in various different things and has spent quite a bit of time on unemployment.

My first question is this: Not knowing what we are about to talk about exactly, how comfortable are you right now?

*One-hundred percent.*

OK, tell me a little bit about yourself, where you live, you know—a little bit of your life history.

*I am originally from Brooklyn, New York—Australian, Italian, American born and raised forty years. I came out to Mankato for a change of life style, met my wife, got married.*

How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually?

*Born and raised Catholic, went to Catholic school for twelve years. Spiritually I am still Catholic, but I am not a practicing Catholic. I am a conservative Catholic now.*

What does that mean?

*It means that I attend church at home. I watch Mass on TV.*

So that's what you mean by conservative?

*That's my definition of conservative.*

That means not active, but sort of—

*Right, I still believe.*

All right. What persons or events have influenced your own spirituality or understanding of God, either negatively or positively in your life.

*I don't believe I've had any negative. I've always looked at things from a real point of view. Positives—*

What do you mean, “from a real point of view”?

*Like, real. You know, there’s nothing I can do to control things, it’s just how life works, and you know, things like, I don’t get angry at God when my dad died. I don’t get angry at God when my mom got sick. It’s just life. That’s just the way things work. But, positive, would probably be my dad. My dad was a good inspiration for me. After he passed away I found myself turning more toward nothing. When I got out here, I lost a bunch of weight, you know, fell off the wagon, didn’t get my weight back, but, obviously I am on the way of getting it going again.*

How was your dad an inspiration for that?

*Just, you know, I find strength. I listen to the things he used to say, you know, and try to move forward with it. Particular things he used to say were, “God only helps those who help themselves,” “the answers for you are there, you just have to get up and do it because that’s freedom of choice—that’s what we were given.” That’s the meaning behind “God only helps those who help themselves,” you can’t just have God come down and pass his hand over you and say “okay, you are okay, your problems are solved.” He gives you the mind and the body to do it—you have to go out there and utilize it. You are the vessel, you know. Your soul has to get out and push the vessel so that you can get things done. That’s how I look at it.*

Do you have siblings?

*I have one older brother, Andrew, and I have one younger sister, Laurel.*

Are they active in their faith?

*My brother is not. My sister is; and my niece. My brother’s first marriage, his first daughter. They go to church. Samantha.*

I saw somebody in a picture with you going like this (gesture).

*That’s my niece. That one is three years ago when I was healthy. Which is ironic, because I had just come from being obese and that was my healthiest. Then I just hit the slope again and I am going through what I am going through now.*

So, when did you come out here, how many years ago?

*November 23, 2011—Thanksgiving.*

OK, so almost . . . seven years.

*The warmest winter Minnesota has seen.*

You've been playing poker way too long, man.

*Um-hmm.*

I can't believe that I was playing in it two years before that yet.

When was the last time you have had a positive or some kind of robust faith conversation with somebody else?

*Oh, beans, it's been a long time. I can't quite remember. I would have to sit down here and actually think about it for a while.*

So, you have never sat over a beer at Buster's and just started talking about spiritual things? Or not anything that was particularly memorable?

*When my friend, Frankie, died, I talked to a few people at the bar about it, but, I mean, that's about it. Nothing spiritual, they were just comforting.*

Do you ever ask questions about the meaning of life or the purpose of life, how God plays a role in it?

*No, I don't ask. Life is meant to, what's the saying I adopted? Umm, "life is not meant to be easy, life is meant to be lived." That's what I follow. Whatever God's plans are, God's plans are. I don't question God's plans. To question God's plans would be questioning God, not right.*

Did I already ask you, would you consider yourself a spiritual person?

*Yes, I would.*

How does it show itself?

*Well, I came here knowing nobody but myself, and today, to date, I know about one-hundred people in Mankato.*

So, like, you had this trust?

*Yeah, trust. . . . I am just naturally open. I am beyond extroverted. Like, I go above and beyond.*

You do. I'm an extrovert, and I remember the day you introduced yourself to me.

*Yeah? I don't remember that!*

I do.

*Do you? What day was that?*

It was at Buster's. It was in the winter, I think. You just, like, this is who I am.

*Yeah.*

Because I'm usually the one that does it first, but you beat me to the punch!

*Yeah.*

I see you do that with other people, too. Have you ever encountered someone who was seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective, you know, or, you know?

*No, no—you mean like conversion? I mean, I've lived in New York. I've had Jehovah Witnesses knock on my door, stuff like that, Mormons knock on my door. But not out here in Mankato.*

OK, in New York is fine. So how would you describe that experience?

*I said, "I'm not interested," and I just shut my door. I didn't slam it. I mean, a lot of people tell you that, they get it like one-hundred times a year, but they're full of bologna. You know, if it happens to them once or twice a year, that would be a lot. It's not an inconvenience to politely turn people away. Come back during Halloween, or something, you know, knock on my door then.*

It sounds like you are pretty accepting of it—you are okay with it—but you just tell them "It's not for me, thanks."

*Yeah, pretty much.*

When was the last time you encountered the church or a representative of the church, and how was that experience?

*Catholic church—I can be exact about that. Representative, but not a direct representative, not like a priest or a nun or a custodian. It was a security guard of the church. I was walking down the block, the main street. It was during summertime. I cut through the parking lots to shorten up my walk, and one security guard—I didn't know who it was—just in the middle of the night. I used to go clean #4, like at 3 o'clock in the morning. "Hey, you, what are you doing?" "I'm on my way to work." Back then I was losing weight dramatically, and I looked like a hood rat, like I lived under a bridge. My pants were, I was pushing 56 waist, and I was fitting in a 44 pants, so you can imagine what that must look like. I looked like Bozo the*

*clown, with my pants all baggy, my shirts all baggy, I'm wearing a hoodie that don't fit me, you know. I look like I just shoplifted at a sporting store, in the fat guy aisle. Yeah, that was an experience—I didn't expect that, but that was the one time I ever encountered anybody. It's not much, but, it's—*

So, you didn't have a faith conversation, or anything?

*No, no faith conversation. I just told the guy, I said, "Listen, I just cut through the parking lot because it shortens my walk. It's not the only parking lot I cut through. It's the third one I cut through on my way there, so, it shortens up my walk like five or seven minutes." That's a lot, you know, when you got to get up and you have to walk a mile and a quarter to work every 3 o'clock in the morning, you know.*

So, have you visited a church since you have been here?

*I have. In the last six years I visited one Catholic church, the one over here down near Main Street, and I visited your place there for the pork feed, twice.*

Have you been to a funeral or a wedding or anything at a church?

*No, but I have been part of a wedding celebration. A friend of mine got married. She had this thing at the Marriot, her reception at the Marriot. The white gown, you know, everything.*

Do you cultivate your faith in some way now? Do you give attention to your faith in some way, to some degree?

*Just at 46, or because I have cancer? It hasn't changed for me. It's the same.*

Would the answer be different if you didn't?

*No, it would be the same. Nothing changes. God's plan is still God's plan, whether I'm 36, 46, or 56. Just my view.*

*Just ask me—be blunt. Don't candy-coat it.*

When you first heard about that there might be a problem, we were playing poker and you pulled me outside and you said, hey, can you pray for me?

*Yeah,*

Or, you didn't actually say that, you said, might be bad.

*On the outside chance I might need last rites.*



Why is that important to you?

*Last Rites is a ritual by Catholics used to confess and ask for forgiveness for anything you may or may not have done since the last time you had gone to confession. It's been years since [I went]. . . . I confess every Sunday to myself, and I do things that a priest would normally tell me to do. You know, I have lead a clean life. I don't do drugs, I don't drink. I don't deal drugs. I don't do any of those other things that are associated with Italian-Americans who grew up in New York. I have lead a good clean life and I just want to be absolved in my last moment on earth. Absolution.*

So, is your plan still to move to Florida?

*The plan is to go to Florida by the end of October or November. We are definitely going. We are not going to stay the winter here. They have a facility down in Jacksonville, Florida, also—the Mayo Clinic system—so it would be identical. If there was any emergency, you know, one of my doctors can hop on a private jet and just fly there, you know, it would be no problem. The facility is pretty cookie cutter. It is the same thing. Once you've been in one Mayo Clinic you have been in them all. That's just the way that it. I can't say that about every hospital. Every hospital is different, that's for sure, but Mayo Clinic system, you've been in one, you've been in them all, guaranteed.*

What are road blocks that you might have experienced in your life towards faith, if any? Anything that has stood in the way?

*I don't know. The only one question I have, it's not really faith, it's more about, you know timing is everything. When someone says "timing is everything," it's just I usually use. I met my wife when I was 42 going on 43, somewhere in that neighborhood. Sometimes I ask why, you know, why so long?*

Why couldn't it have been when you were twenty, or so?

*Yeah, why couldn't it have been earlier? God works in mysterious ways.*

When have you seen religion, or the church, at its best, and when have you seen it at its worst?

*Let me think . . .*

Religion in general, or church.

*Um, my personal experience? Or world experience? Which one?*

Either way, whatever.

*Personal, I'll go personal experience. My personal experience was, meet at the Cathedral in Brooklyn. It's a really massive church and it is overwhelming, even when it is empty, much less when it is full. It has a real presence. I guess it would be like walking into the Sistine Chapel, would be my only other comparison.*

It was special connection with God, or a spiritual presence, or whatever?

*It's not like walking into your everyday church, sad to say that. I don't mean to make it to belittle it. But when you walk into these grand places that have murals of history and Catholicism, . . . when you breathe in, you breathe it in and it is like you live it. It is like you feel it and you become emotional, and that's how it is for me when I walk into places like that.*

Awesome. Has there been a time when you have seen the church at its worst? Either worldly or—

*The church that I went to grade school with closed down. That was a sad point. They couldn't afford it no more. . . . [N]ow it's like a public-private. It's not public, but it's public-private. It means anybody can go as long as they meet minimal financial requirements. There are no financial requirements. But not anybody in the state can get into the school. It is a very small school. It only holds about four-hundred to five-hundred kids. For New York City, I don't know what that's like out here.*

Earlier you said that you practice your faith at home, or whatever, what made you decide to change the way you practice your faith?

*I don't, I haven't gone to an actual mass in twenty-five years.*

What prevents you from going?

*Nothing. I think it is mostly that growing up I got tired of the "Joneses effect." You know, that is not what church is about.*

What does that mean?

*He comes in with a suit and tie. When I was a kid I used to like going to church with sweat pants and sweat shirts and stuff like that. Kind of ugly, you know. I grew up poor, so that's just growing up, as a teenager that's how I liked to go. Then my mother and father started telling me, you can't go dressed like that no more. Well, I just don't want to go no more. I mean, I've gone to enough church to satisfy a lifetime. I mean, grade school I was in 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and I did the 4<sup>th</sup> grade twice—six years we went to church, class, three times a week. Every week. Plus, church on Sundays.*

When your wife and you got married, was it a church wedding? Or a Christian wedding?

*It was a Christian wedding. It wasn't Catholic.*

Did you have a pastor?

*I had a representative, an ordained minister.*

Who was it? Was it someone from around here?

*No, I went to Florida and got married in Florida.*

Oh, okay, I didn't know that.

*I got married in Florida. We had it all set up with the wedding planner. We got married on the beach. So, we did something modest.*

I saw it actually on Facebook.

*Are you just testing me? Trying to see if I am lying?*

No (laughing). It could have been a Minnesota beach for all I know. I didn't look in the background.

*Minnesota don't have beaches. These aren't beaches. Give me your drink.*

Describe a time when you shared your faith or your spirituality with someone else. Has that happened?

*I tried once with an atheist, and I didn't know the person was an atheist. It's the last time I would do that. It's a lost cause. It was like trying to ask somebody the subject of somebody who had passed away and come out of it. One story, I seen it in a film, the actress, the actor was McConaughey. They used to date. She's a scientist and he is a priest, or preacher of some sort, a man of God. He has a locket that he gives her and he is still in love with her, and she is in love with him, but they do not see eye-to-eye with their professions. Their chosen paths, I shouldn't say professions. He gives her this locket with a chain on it. One picture in it is him, and one picture in it is her dad. Anyway, he presented it. . . . Oh, it was her dad's. I'm sorry, I got this all wrong. It was her dad's, he gave her a locket with a picture of her inside it, and he had it, and he gave it to her, and he says, you know, she's a scientist, and he goes, "if seeing meant believing, and you are asking me to prove there is a God, so I'm going to give you this locket and I want you to hold it, and I want you to think about your dad." And he went on talking about the memories he also knew about that he was able to share with her. . . . [S]he starts crying and*

*bawling, and her eyes are closed, and one thing he asks her is, “do you love your dad?” “Yes.” “Can you feel that love?” She goes, “yes.” And then he pushes her hand away and he goes, “prove it.” So—that’s not physical; it’s emotional. So, it starts from within side first, how you treat it on the outsides, you know, how you deal with it.*

Ok, this is good. Any questions you have of me?

*I do not. I do not. Why did you get into doing interviews? What made you want to do this? Obviously, it’s out of your own good will.*

Well, I am doing a research project for my doctor of ministry program, but I am especially interested in knowing, and these questions are just sort of help get . . . I don’t want to feed you the answers to get you talking about faith. . . . I am especially interested in knowing. . . .

I sort of have this feeling that the church I am serving isn’t exactly really good at conversations with people who aren’t in church. In fact, that—

*So, business is business when you’re at church?*

No, it’s like, maybe we’re doing great, I don’t know, but there is a big difference between the folks I hang out with at this poker league, and the church, and the two paths never cross.

*See, I have that. You know what I call that? I call that good and evil. That’s how I used to feel when I used to hang out at Buster’s and The Tav. See, back when I first got here.*

No, I wouldn’t say it’s evil. I’m just—

*I’m just up and down, left and right, whatever you want to call it.*

I’m just saying it is unfortunate to me that the two worlds can’t come

*Come together?*

I feel like these people are speaking a different language than these people, and it’s like, how can we help?

*I understand, because that’s the way I used to feel about The Tav. Let me explain. We have The Tav, when I first got here, and it will never, ever be the way it used to be, because all the people that I met at forty, and they are young adults—they were like twenty-four and twenty-five—they are all grown up now, married, they are all like thirty with a kid or two. You know, I miss them, good people, had our laughs. Once in a while I sat down and had a drink with them, had a good time, but, you know, those things eventually they end. But during that time there was*

*a transition where I would hang out at Buster's, and Buster's was a totally different atmosphere. Buster's was like, let me put it this way, it would be more like Catholic school and public school.*

Yeah (laughing).

*Got it, you understand? That's the way I'll put it. May good and evil wasn't, that was the first thing that came to mind. But it was like Catholic school and public school, you know what I am saying. You act one way at Buster's, and you act a different way when you are with the people at church. But, you enjoy being with all the people.*

Well, and I wonder if the church is going to be an instrument of good in the world and be able to learn how to speak languages of other people.

*Such as?*

Well, just not just its own language.

*Oh, you mean other than just scripture?*

Well, just not just closed off to itself. Because largely the church doesn't affect your life, right?

*No. Not even in time of need. Alls I need is my last rites. I'm not even part of the congregation here.*

It's not even something that comes to your mind, right?

*Nope.*

That's unfortunate.

*I would call my friends before I would call the church here. They don't even know I exist. It's not that they don't care. They just know I don't exist.*

Anyway, I am trying to figure out how can I help the church speak, I mean figuratively, speak new languages to reach out.

*I would try and start here. Try and find out how many people in your local area of your parish go to Buster's for dinner. Then you would see how many people there hang out and play poker. Poker used to be considered a—*

A vice.

*A vice. No pun intended, but it used to be like a cancer of society twenty to thirty years ago. It is more accepting now because it has become a sport that ESPN has glorified.*

Yeah, that's true. Well, brother, that's very good. So, did I ask you this question already? So, now that we have come to the end of the conversation, how are you feeling about it, about what we just talked about today.

*I feel good about it. I can talk about anything.*

That is very true.

*I can talk about anything. I will give an objective opinion, the best I can.*

I know that about you.

*I also exercise \_\_\_\_\_ at times, it depends who you are, whether you are Fred or Jerry.*

OK, I am going to shut this off here.

That was P2.

### INTERVIEW #3—P3

P3 is, I would guess, about 35ish. He works in Mankato at a local grocery store. He has, there was some marijuana stench in his clothes, and so it is quite likely that P3 has just recently had a smoke.

OK, so, before we even begin, how are you feeling about the discussion so far?

*I'm jacked, to be honest. You've been a friend of mine for a long time.*

All right, P3, tell me a little bit about yourself. Where have you lived, how did you get here? Are you from Mankato? You know, a little bit of history.

*I am from New Ulm. I have lived all over the place. I lived in Los Angeles right out of high school.*

Really?

*Yup, in Van Nuys, in the heart of the valley. It is not my cup of tea. It is too busy, it's too dirty. And I mean that in the literal sense, because, it's like it doesn't rain. So, when it does rain it is filth. Here it rains all the time, you know.*

So, what brought you back?

*Fate, if I had to answer that question honestly. And being that this is as it is, I'm going to be honest. Fate brought me back, without question.*

What does that mean?

*When I pulled into Minnesota, the northern lights started. And I was driving. It was the middle of the night and I had been driving for ten hours. I thought I was driving by a casino. I didn't think anything of it until I finally woke up my day, and said, "I've been driving by this casino for over an hour." And he wakes up and he says "northern lights." I had never in my life seen northern lights before. And it felt like literally like a sign of "welcome home." And virtually everything in my life has seemed to run on a timeline, if you will, like everything goes a certain way, things happen for certain reasons. I ran into some trouble when I lived in New Ulm. I did something for a friend of mine that I probably shouldn't have done. He was a marine, so he was unable to do it, but I beat the living heck out of a guy and ended up spending a weekend in jail. And, the weekend I spent in jail was on my current girlfriend's birthday. Like, we were friends, but I didn't even know it was her birthday—I will put it to you that way. That experience changed me, it humbled me, it made me realize what a big world I am living in and a small fish I am. From there I, well before that, leading up to the fact that I went to jail, I went to*

*Minneapolis, because I didn't know what kind of charges I would be facing, because we hurt him pretty bad, frankly. I'm just being honest with you.*

How's he doing today?

*I don't know. I mean, he wasn't a very good person when I did it, that I know of. I didn't know him personally whatsoever. There was actually no emotion behind it, to be real honest. It was very disconnected at the time. I don't know. . . . I did it because that's who I was, in my mind. I remember distinctly a moment where I stopped the car and there was a sign to go to Minneapolis, where our friends were, or a sign to go to Lacrosse, where this thing happened. I looked at my friend and I said, "you know, we got to make a choice right here. And this choice is going to affect us." We knew that, but it was like, that moment of like, right or left. And we went the wrong, well, I can't say we went the wrong way, because I'm here, you know what I mean? And, there is something to that in my opinion, because every good decision, every bad decision in my life that I have made, it lead me to where I am right now, and, I'm content. You know, I don't have a lot, but I'm not hurting. I am able to help those around me, and you know, I would like to think that I have a good conscience, you know, a good moral compass. Especially since that act, I mean, I have grown up a lot since then. I was young, nineteen, maybe twenty, but that weekend in jail taught me all I needed to know about NOT wanting to go back to jail, you know what I mean? It's one of those situations where reform actually happened. I mean, don't get me wrong, I've been a criminal. Probably to this day I am still a criminal, but I don't get into violent acts.*

Were you raised in the church?

*Yes, yes. I actually went to private school until the 8th grade.*

Would you consider yourself a spiritual person or religious person in some way?

*I don't, I mean, there is not a book to describe it. I mean, I know the Bible, I respect the Bible. I think it actually preaches a lot of my same beliefs as far as moral guidelines and even fate, if you will. For when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane he prays for another way, and God looks at him and says, this is it, this is the way, I can't change it, so it has been written, and such, you know what I mean? And I have noticed that in my life, so I kind of think they parallel. But as far as like actually having a belief outside of my own misguided structural, I guess not really.*

Do you ever ask questions about the meaning of life or the purpose?

*Oh yeah. But at the same time, I don't really question purpose because I feel like it's already leading somewhere, even if my purpose is as miniscule as saying hello to a stranger. Even if that is my part in the play, I think it is written. And I believe that. I do believe in God, in the sense that we are not alone. I have experienced things in my life that have proven to me that*



*good and evil is very real, and we are in the position to choose. I'm sorry, I'm really getting deep in this, but this is honesty. But like, genuinely, this is true to me. I can't speak to anybody else, but . . .*

Are there any persons in your life who have influenced you spiritually or religiously?

*Absolutely—many.*

In what ways would you say they have influenced you? Can you think of someone in your mind that might have influenced you?

*I used to question my buddies, who were Catholic, and my girlfriend was Catholic, and I went to her graduation, and I was just mind-boggled, you know, because I come from a Lutheran background where it is very black-and-white, you know, they are walking around with like "Matrix cloaks" and stuff, and I'm like "what's going on?" And they are carrying books above their head, and I'm like "what is all this? What are you guys doing?" Generally, I'm curious, I'm not trying to be rude, but I'm like, "what the heck is going on?" I would always ask, I would be like, do you believe in the book? The book has meaning outside of the fact that it is written, the words inside of it have such a meaning above and beyond it. I'm just like, I don't know, I guess I talked down to them. And then one day, for no apparent reason at all, I was down in the dumps, walking in my room at my apartment, and I'm depressed, like physically, emotionally drained—empty. And I walk into my room where my girlfriend and my dog are sleeping, and I felt literally a presence, like an experience I can't even explain in a million years. And, as I am standing there looking at her, I feel this warmth wash over me, head to toe. The tears started to run down my face. I can't even control it. I felt like I was in the presence of God—I genuinely did. I woke Molly up, I was so, like, touched. I woke her up and I shook her, "wake up." She said "what? It's 2:00 in the morning, what the hell are you doing?" And I'm like, "everything is going to be okay." That's all I can think, just everything is going to be okay. She asked me for money to buy a pregnancy test. Two weeks later she realized she was pregnant with our first child and only child. I mean, the day I got home and went to work the next morning, I walked up to P8 and Lawrence, and I said "I'll never ask another question—I'll never question your beliefs, I'll accept what you accept because it's personal." You know what I mean?*

Yup, okay. When was the last time you have had a faith conversation with a friend, or—?

*Quite often, I guess, because I've been strong in my views, and if people ask, then I am not afraid to answer, you know what I mean. My brother is an atheist, like a Southern Baptist atheist. He is pushy with being atheist. It's like, hold the science Bible in your face and scream at you awawawawa, it's like, come on, dude, like, if you are that confident then why do you have to holler from the rooftops? Why can't you just have your beliefs and go about your day, you know? Because he can't wrap his mind around the fact that, yeah, we are all biological. This is all scientific. Everything can be reasoned away. But then I ask him about dreams. "I had a dream last night. Do you believe me?" "Well yeah." I go, "How? If you can't see it, you can't hear it,*

*you can't taste it, you can't throw it, it doesn't exist to you, because you're an atheist. You don't believe in anything you can't prove. But you believe that I had a dream?" Dreams are universal. Everybody gets them, and nobody can quite fully understand or explain them, you know what I mean? Like—what is that? Why did I dream that? What is my brain going in my unconscious self, you know? There's parts of our brain that I think are used when we are sleeping that we don't even know about.*

OK, great. When was the last time you have encountered the church or a representative of the church?

*Last Monday. (laughs)*

Oh, me? Okay, that's fair. But do you interact with the church at all?

*In my work life, you know, I have priests and pastors, and everyone comes along.*

And are those positive experiences?

*Absolutely.*

If you had anything you would want to say to the church today, let me put it this way—when have you seen the church at its worst, and when have you seen it at its best?

*That's a difficult question to answer. The church at its worst—you are taking a book and translating it for people and telling them how to understand it. To me that is just nearly impossible, you know what I mean? I mean, what the meaning was 15 translations ago versus what the meaning is now—it's got to be difficult. And that's probably for both. I just think that in the Catholic church you have sex scandals, and that is ridiculous. The world is full of evil people in every profession. Of course, they are going to be drawn to certain aspects of certain professions. I don't judge the church for that.*

Okay, what has been a positive experience with the church, or when have you seen the church at its best, I guess. It doesn't have to be personal, it could be a world experience.

*Like I have always told my brother—if you believe in the church, it works. No matter what they say about what's true and what's not true, if you have a belief and it makes you feel comfortable and it makes you feel happy, that's what it's for. And that's where I think it is at its best.*

Yeah, okay, good. Excellent. Okay, almost done, man. You are doing great.

*I'm an open book! Especially for you, brother!*

We talked about this a little bit, but describe a time when you have shared about your faith. You kind of told me that a little bit with your brother, but describe a time when you have shared how you come at faith with another person.

*I just tell them what I have experienced in my life. I have always had a belief, because I grew up with the church, but then I have had things reaffirm. You know, I have questions, obviously. In fact, my dad told me one time, he said, you know, I was like: "Dad, what if there is no God?" He said, "well, I'm going to act like there is. I'm going to live my life like there is, and if I die and there isn't, what are you going to do, you know? But if you don't and you act like this is it, and you don't care about anything but now, and there is—you know what I mean?" It's not really fear, but it's like a lesson to just be a good person and treat people like you want to be treated.*

Are there things that you do right now to cultivate your own faith?

*Talk about it. Try to reason it out. It hurts—because I don't really have a lot of people that can relate, you know what I mean? I have experienced things that I haven't even talked about tonight that would curdle the skin on a lot of people's, I mean—*

You're in a relationship, so—

*15 years. Happily unmarried.*

Do you all talk about faith together?

*Yes, absolutely. My daughter is very—*

How old is your daughter?

*Nine years old. She doesn't have Bible study, but she does believe in God.*

Do you guys pray at home?

*I do. In fact, I don't pray enough. But I teach her that in the moment of need prayer is the best thing in the world. That it is therapy, no one's going to judge you for it. It's a situation where you can literally just be at one with your faith and left to no judgement.*

Well, thanks, buddy.

*Hey, no problem at all!*

I want to tell you something. This is off the record. You're one of the nicest guys I have ever met.

*Hey, thanks, man!*

You really are! You go out of your way to greet people when you come in here, when I see you at Hy-Vee or wherever, you are just a really kind guy. It's hard for me to believe that you worked in Lacrosse.

Whatever the new crossroads in your life, the new path that you have taken is obvious, so I just really appreciate that.

*I appreciate that, too. And to be honest, I think you would have said the same thing even when I was going (laughs)*

I surely would have.

*But I really, generally appreciate that. I really do. I think, you know, it's our job while we are here to actually treat other people like people.*

When I was done with that conversation with P3, I said, "hey, just to let you know I would rather you don't bring it up in the poker group, until I am done with these interviews, so that people can come with a clean slate to my interviews," and he said "hey, to tell you the truth, I feel very liberated by this conversation. It's good to talk to someone who enjoys talking about faith." I thought that was an interesting remark.

**INTERVIEW #4—P4**

This next one is a man who is about in his mid-thirties. He works in the Mankato area, and he has been a part of our poker community for at least five years. He is a white Caucasian, and his name is P4.

OK, I am here with P4. OK, so before we begin, I want to let you know that the conversation that I have with you I would like you to not share with other poker players until I am done—just so that they come to the conversation fresh. You don't know who it will be. I don't really know who it's all going to be yet, but just so they are able to come fresh. But then after that, after a couple of weeks or a month from now you can just talk about how strange it was.

How are you feeling about the conversation before we begin?

*Nothing really out of the ordinary.*

OK. All right. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where are you from, how you got to Mankato.

*I grew up on a farm outside of Manson, Iowa. After college I decided I wanted to get away from the farm to see what else is out there.*

Where did you go to school?

*I went to Iowa Central and then I went to Northeast Iowa Community College. I wanted to get away from the farm, see what else is out there. I didn't want to be too far away from home, and, growing up in a farming community, I really didn't want to move to too large of a town. So, I knew a couple kids from my class that had moved up here, so I knew people, it's three hours from home—a good distance—so I found a job up here and moved.*

Been here ever since?

*Yup.*

Found a wife up here?

*Yup. I originally met her in college, but she was originally from here and has a lot of family in the area.*

Cool. So, how would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually?

*Um, I grew up going to, in the Lutheran church, you know, confirmation, everything like that. As I got into college and stuff I got out of the habit of going to church and I don't really go very often. I haven't gone in Mankato. I still go occasionally when I go back to Iowa. When my grandma asks me to go with her I will always go with her. But, it's not very often.*

Why do you think you got out of the practice of going? What were some of the reasons you stopped attending?

*During college I was always going out and sleeping in. I don't know. I never really enjoyed going to church. I don't know—it's weird. Like, my dad never liked going to church. It was always me and my brother and my mom would go. My dad wouldn't go. So, I don't know. But my dad was the same way. That's probably where I learned it. Like when my dad would ask something, you do it. There is no negotiating. You just do it. So—*

What persons or events in your life have influenced you the most when it comes to your understanding of God, either negatively or positively?

*. . . [I]t's hard to explain that. Everything happens for a reason because I have had some strange things happen in my life. I mean, I've lost three body parts in three separate incidents in my life. So, I've always lived that you are never promised tomorrow. It's hard to see why things happen, but they do for some reason.*

Do those things make you believe stronger in God, or less so? Or that it's coincidental, or—

*It's hard to say, you know. For some reason, things happen to certain people for a reason. The reasons you may never figure out. I don't know.*

Ok, I already kind of asked you that. Ok, I kind of asked you that one, too. When was the last time you had a positive or robust faith conversation with somebody?

*I can't even remember.*

So, you and your wife don't talk much about faith?

*No. Occasionally the boys and my wife go to church with my wife's mom, because like, "we want to go to church." So, my wife is like "okay, let's go." I'm usually sleeping.*

And they attend something in town here when they go?

*Yes.*

Have you encountered someone who was seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective?

*Other than people coming to your door, not really.*

OK, what about those people coming to your door—what were your thoughts? Describe the encounter.

*I am not big on people pushing their beliefs on me. I don't care what religion you are. You can have your own beliefs. I understand that, it is just like gay and straight.*

It's like gay and straight?

*You know—that's your thing. If whatever you want to do, you have the rights to do those things and believe whatever you want to believe in, as long as you don't force your beliefs on me.*

So, have you been in an experience where you felt like it was forced? Like they were forcing?

*Oh, sometimes, you know, they might, when I am not interested, they want to keep trying to get in. No—*

When was the last time that you encountered the church, or a representative of the church? When was the last time that you participated in a worship service?

*The last time was Easter.*

And how was that experience?

*It was a normal service in my home town, you know. Most of the services I go to are holidays, or they are very small. The church that I grew up in is a third of what the people were when I was growing up there. Um . . . yeah, it's different. Now I don't know how much I will be going because we moved my grandma to a home two weekends ago. So, she is going to church there instead of at the church in my hometown.*

OK, do you cultivate your faith to the degree that you would like to?

*Um, yeah, I don't deny my faith, and I don't want to push it on other people. I believe what I believe. I shy away from politics and religion. Those are things that I don't want to talk about in public, really.*

Do you have aspirations for your children when it comes to their faith?

*Me and my wife haven't really talked about that, but, like I said, they go to church when we go back to Iowa with my grandma and myself, and like, when they ask, can we go this weekend, we always take them. My wife always makes it a point to take them. They go to some Sunday School services.*

Why do you think they are interested in going to church?

*Um, interested to know more about it.*

Do they have friends there at Sunday School, or something?

*Oh, their cousin. My wife's aunt, their youngest is a week younger than my youngest, so it's like family gatherings there. There are three of them that are within a year's age.*

When have you seen the church at its best? Or religion in general at its best?

*Well, when I was real young it was more fun—that's my youngest—it was a lot more fun because it was more activities and stuff like that. It just seems very monotonous—church services do—to me as I got older.*

If you could say anything to “the church,” big C, the Church worldwide, if you could say anything to The Church, what would you say? What would you like to tell it?

*Um, I don't know. See, when I was growing up, there were two Lutheran churches, and the other one started doing more like contemporary music and stuff like that along with the services. And I never experienced that, so I don't know exactly what to tell them.*

OK. Describe a time when you have shared your faith or spirituality with someone else.

*Well, I talk about it when the boys ask me about what I believe in and stuff, but really, I don't talk about my faith. I don't know, it was never really talked about in my family. We prayed before dinners and stuff, but other than that there was not a whole lot of religion in our household, in the household I grew up in.*

In general, would you like to see more or less religion in the world. That's kind of a strange question—I just made it up.

*Well, more wouldn't be a bad thing. It seems like there is a lot of bad publicity on Muslims and stuff like that because of the bombings and stuff like that. It is an extreme religion. You know, I would have to understand that religion a little more, but that one seems to be a little excessive at times, but the other religions, you don't hear a whole lot about anymore. So, I would think it needs to be more, more of a balance, I would say.*



Do you think you are answering these questions differently because you are talking to a pastor?

*No.*

OK, just curious.

*Why would I answer them differently?*

I don't know—I was just curious.

*I mean, you have known me for a few years.*

I was just wondering—it that influences how you talk. I don't feel that it does; I'm just asking. OK, so how are you feeling about this conversation now?

*Still pretty good.*

OK, so, I'm at the end of my prepared questions that I have. Are there any other thoughts about your own personal faith or your religious perspective that you would like to let me know that you didn't feel like you got to say?

*Oh, not particularly. I'm not that religious of a person, outspoken-wise, but, I don't know.*

OK, great, awesome. Thanks a lot.

## INTERVIEW #5—P5

P5 is probably in her mid-thirties, and we had this interview at her house. She lives in Mankato and she is a Caucasian woman.

So, before we even begin, how are you feeling about the conversation, not knowing what we are going to talk about exactly?

*Um, I am curious as to where this is going to go, more than anything.*

Me, too. OK, so tell me a bit about yourself, where are you from, how you got to Mankato—a little short life.

*Well, I grew up in Minnesota, in the Twin Cities. I moved down to Mankato almost 11 years ago. I was in college at the time, and I had met somebody down this direction and have made my home here since.*

How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually?

*Describe myself—*

Yeah.

*I would say I am a person of faith, but not necessarily practicing very often.*

Christian faith?

Yeah.

What was your—do you have a faith journey up until now, did you grow up in church or anything like that.

*I did. I grew up going to church. It was a regular Sunday morning ritual, you know, Sunday School and that in a Methodist church in the Cities. Very involved in their youth program when I was younger, so much that I considered being a youth pastor for a really long period of my life. I traveled a lot with that group doing mission trips and things like that. I remember distinctly the feeling that I was meeting the spirit of Jesus for the first time. It was really impactful. I was around fourteen at that time. After that, my faith fractured a little bit. Not anything directed necessarily toward my religion, but I think my life journey just lead me away from that for a long time. A lot of tribulation during that period of time, and when I left my son's father, I kind of fell back into my faith more. There was a really good support group for me, because I was very alone in this community when that relationship ended. It was a wonderful thing for me. I was really strong in a group, a family group and stuff, a small group in our*

*church here in town, so I am part of that \_\_\_\_\_ stuff, but, again, it has just been a few years since I have actively attended anything, so it has been a journey my entire life, very close or distant.*

Great. OK. What persons . . . or you talk about one event in your life, or any persons that have influenced your spirituality significantly, either positively or negatively? Or how you understand God either positively or negatively in your life?

*Yeah, there was one woman in particular—her name was Lisa—she wasn't a pastor, but she was like a youth director for our group. She was young, just getting married, I remember, kind of at that point in her life, but tangible enough that I could look up to her. I think just during our experiences in these small groups that we experienced, I just found that I was able to trust somebody in that adult role more than, like without shame, more than I had been able to earlier in my life. So, she was really impactful, just the way she lived her life and the way she viewed love, which was, you know, 14, 15, 16—that period of your life there are so many questions around that. And it was filling the gaps that maybe I didn't have at my house to be able to talk to somebody, so it was nice.*

Great. Um, okay, when was the last time that you have had a positive or robust kind of faith conversation with somebody?

*Um, that's a good question. I would say I attended an event at our church and I was really, really struggling with my faith at that time. I think feeling very unworthy. A guy that I had never met before just was very direct and asked me some questions and pulled out the Bible just to share some passages with me. But, it came at a really good time, a really needed time.*

And that was recently, or within a couple years ago?

*It was within three years, I would say. It has been a little bit of time, but enough so that I have considered volunteering to go pray at our local jail and things like that. I am pretty sure he was involved in something like that from what I remember, but it has been in the back of my mind for a while.*

And so, you said “at our church,” so what church is that?

*I go to Crossview Covenant, is where I kind of go.*

OK, have you encountered someone who is seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective? Have you ever encountered someone seeking to persuade you to their religious perspective? If so, describe that encounter.

*Oh, I knew a family that was Jehovah's Witness growing up, but they were not really pushy about it by any means. I was more curious than anything, just how it was different from*

*the Methodist faith that I had grown up with. Other than that, not anybody—you know, you can get into debates with people that are atheist or antagonists, and maybe that, but never in a negative way, I haven't found.*

Great. When was the last time . . . you talked a little bit about this . . . you cultivate[d] your faith to the degree that you would like to?

*No.*

OK. What are the roadblocks to doing so?

*I think some of it is fear. Some of it is laziness, too. You know, sometimes you just cherish those few Sunday mornings to enjoy coffee. It's such a terrible excuse, but I do think some of it is fear.*

What are you afraid of?

*Because I think when I am closest in my faith I really have to be very mired in the faith, like it is not too easy to hide. I don't know, I'm just afraid that—*

So, you are afraid to encounter your true self, or what do you mean?

*I think so, a little bit, or to have to make changes. Maybe that's more of it. Like, I'm not ready to make changes, I guess. I don't know how to better say that.*

You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to, but, why is this conversation emotional for you?

*Um,*

How would you describe why?

*Well, I think it is one of those things that when you talk about your faith it is an emotional thing. It is one of those few touchy things in life.*

OK, but it is because of the subject, you wouldn't—if we were talking about something else—are you a cry-y person?

*I am, I am, a little bit, I am, but especially when, I don't know, we've talked about kind of a journey here, and captured a lot of different events, and some of it is just hard.*

Yeah. Do you have conversations about faith with significant people in your life?

*I do.*

Would you tell me a little bit about that?

*I do. ShP6on and I certainly talk about faith. One thing we talk about doing more of, but we don't seem to do more of it, is just praying together really earnestly, for each other and for our future. We do pray nightly with our meal and stuff and talk with my son quite a bit about faith in that kid-like way that is so wonderful. Also, my brother and I and my best friend and I talk about it. My best friend is really involved, and she is very involved in her church, too. So, it is nice that she is just, like, a safe person for me.*

Awesome. When have you seen the church at its best?

*Well, when it is active in the community. When you are reaching out and helping. Like, the most impactful experience for me was I guess a mission trip where we were purposefully bringing just joy to people and helping in a way, but it wasn't in a, I don't know, imposing way. It was just that we were here to help and answer questions, but it wasn't in a "we are coming too" [way]. . . . I don't know, it didn't feel pushy to me.*

If you could advise the church to change something about itself, what would be a good thing for the church to consider changing about itself?

*That's a really good question. I think so many churches are going to such a modern, casual feel about them, which I think is nice, but I don't know it is drawing the numbers it should, because there is so much negativity out there. A lot of people that are very lost, I think, and you are competing in such a way. I like a lot of the modern style, but I think there is something to be said about tradition and about having, like an expectation, I guess, where you do feel like Sunday morning is special, and I don't think it should be so casual that you lose some of that. Although, at the same time, I guess I am very traditional. I like that smell of like a hymnbook, you know, this isn't just a projector, but at the same time I love the music that draws people in, and so often that is a way that people can discover faith, or it can be less intimidating, so I am torn on that. I like both sides. But, as far as getting messages out there, you know, there are so many outlets to do that in this day and age, and I find that the people that seem to have such a big audience are sometimes not always the best of character people, which can really give not only, like, any religion, but religion in general, just a bad image to the point that guy down South, you know, that didn't have his church doors open. I mean, it's just like, it's not a good story. And I don't think there are enough good stories about the church involved out there.*

So, describe a time when you have seen the church get it wrong.

*Hmmm. You know, it depends on the church, and the "get it wrong." There are some churches that are so welcoming of all orientations of people that I think we do lose a little bit of, I don't know, I don't like that attitude. But at the same time, I have known people that have*

*shunned the church because they struggled with their sexual orientation and don't feel welcome, which I think is absurd, too. It's a tough thing. I feel there needs to be a place that people feel safe and can find God in spite of their struggles, because we all have them, but at the same time I don't like enveloping this group of individuals that it's okay, either.*

OK, so just what you were talking about, if I understood you correctly, so, . . . the church should be a safe place for all people, but maybe not leave people where they are at in their life, there should be maybe an expectation for change or transformation?

*Or at least open dialogue for better understanding. I think, I don't know, I think there are a lot of questions right now in my mind. There are a lot of questions, too, that I struggle with. I don't know. Not that I am not accepting, but sometimes I feel that I am not. I don't know how others do that.*

What do you mean, "questions regarding"?

*Well just lately, like in Minnesota with the right to marry—it really bothers me. It really bothers me that the church wasn't out there more, speaking—*

For or against?

*For marriage being between a man and a woman. I really feel that that braid needs to be sacred like that, and I just wish there were more people that were willing to say that. You know, in my opinion, civil union is one thing, and maybe church not being involved in that, but then we are bringing a society of people that just eventually—there has never been a successful society that openly accepts stuff like this, and it is concerning to me. And I really wish the church would be a bigger voice out there. So, I don't know what to say. Off topic?*

Can you describe a time when you have shared your faith or your spirituality with someone else?

*Yeah, ShP6on. There was a conversation that came about probably shortly after his mom had passed, and just when we were really struggling to find ourselves—so many struggles really in the beginning. It was something that I did share with him and my story and some of my struggles. It obviously is very important to be open and honest with your partner. I think that both of us have this yearning to kind of evolve more we are sitting at today, but he is the one for me that I have shared that journey with.*

OK, great. So, how are you feeling about this conversation now?

*Fine.*

Well, I am at the end of my questions. Is there anything about your faith or spirituality or your understanding of the church that you would like to add before I walk away?

*No, I think we're good.*

You did a great job, really good! Thank you for meeting me on such short notice.

*Of course, yeah, I am glad it worked out.*

**INTERVIEW #6—P6**

So, how are you feeling about this conversation before we even begin?

*Fine.*

OK. Tell me a little bit about yourself, a little bit of life history, and especially as it relates to maybe things in your own spirit or faith.

*Well, I did go to church growing up and church camp, but there was an accident at one of the churches that I went to, and they said that I got injured because God was punishing me for a sin. So, I pretty much didn't like that after that. So, I just went to drugs and drinking, and ignored every church, never went to church again.*

You said you never went to church again?

*Nope, not after that. I ended up sobering up and my sponsor made me make up my own god, which, you know, I can understand. It helped me get back to now where I can say the word God. I couldn't say the word God—I hated it. I don't think God punishes people physically, you know, you are punished when your time has come. So, I sobered up and made my own god. I know there is something there, whether my beliefs are the same as other people's or something. And now if I would go into church, one of my AA meetings in a church, I hated it for the longest time, that it is in a church. But I got no problem with it. I still don't really go to churches because—*

Like the worship services, you mean?

*Yeah.*

So, tell me, growing up, who influenced your understanding of God, either positively or negatively, besides that story. Were there other influences that were positive at all?

*No. Nobody in my family went to church. I had a friend of mine, a neighbor.*

So how did you get to church camp?

*I ended up with a neighbor friend of mine. She went and I ended up going with them. The bus or a van would come pick us up and we would go there. Besides that, I did not go to church ever.*

So, would you describe yourself as a spiritual person in some way?

*Definitely more now than I was before.*



Are you just saying that because I am asking you to? (Laughs)

*No, it is part of the AA program.*

Yeah, okay, so that has played a big role in it, right? That's like step what, two or something? Do you remember the step?

*Step one—we are alcoholics and not managing our own lives. Step two—is can I believe that a power that greater than us creates and restores sanity. So, it is step two, and then you got the spiritual awakening . . . where the meditation is.*

So, your sponsor asked you to kind of create a God that—

*A god that I would want. Like, it was a tree for a while, and then it would be a bench. It was whatever I could find that I could actually talk to and just feel that there was something besides me, you know. So, and now, I don't know, there is something out there.*

Are you still active in AA?

*Yeah.*

Why do you say it like that?

*It gets boring after a while. They say it does get better, but it is learning how to deal with life's struggles.*

And so, why are you committed to staying active?

*Because I don't want to go back and drink. I was not a very nice person.*

So, it helps you in that regard—it helps you stay the course?

*Yup. I say, you know, there is a God. Something made me want to quit drinking. Something helps me now not to get so anxious on not drinking. I don't know. I can't explain it.*

That's fine. So, what about—when was the last time you tried to explain it to somebody? When was the last time you had like a conversation about what you believe with another person?

*The other day at work. Because I work with a couple of Muslims. She was trying to explain her God to me, and this and that, and we kind of went back and forth, because both of our Gods are different. Which, I believe there is only one God. I don't know—there is one God—I don't know.*

That's a pretty strong statement of belief.

*There has to be only one. I don't know.*

So how do you reconcile that? You said earlier that God could be a bench or a tree, but you are saying it is still the same God?

*Yeah, and, like with me with the program, even if I don't like talk to somebody, I think my God will speak through other people. Like, if I need help or I'm struggling, someone doesn't know what they are saying will help me. You know, to me that's my way of saying, well maybe that's my God talking to me giving me my answer.*

And same for them, sort of.

*I hope.*

Have you ever encountered someone who has tried to persuade you in their particular religious beliefs? Has tried to convince you to—?

*No, not really. There are just some people that will come up to me. . . . I would say that either you have faith or you don't. It is or it isn't. You can't have both. You can't say there is a God but there ain't a God. It is, or it ain't.*

And if you say there is, does that change anything? Does the fact that there is a God—does that change anything in our lives.

*No.*

So, if you say there is, then it doesn't really affect—

*I mean, it does if you, like, are spiritually into it. There are just some people who, when I first got back into it, I just pretty much faked it. You know, you have to look at the little small things that happen, I mean—you calling me today to do this was really weird, because I was praying that I needed someone to talk to about issues, and blah, blah, blah, and the next thing I know you were calling.*

Wow, that's pretty cool. So, you do pray?

*Yeah. To me that is something that, you know, it wasn't answered right away, but all of a sudden you texted, and, you know what I mean?*

Praise God!

*Things happen for a reason, you know, I can't explain some of it. And some of it I wonder why we have to go through some of the crap we go through. But it makes me a better person.*

So, you have kids—and you have people in your life that are really important to you, and so, do you try to raise them in the faith or share faith with them in some way?

*I try to, but I let them make their own choices whether they want to go to church or whether they want to get into it. They are really not.*

So, you talked about that you had been praying. Would they, are they, are you helping them understand ways that they could communicate with God if they wanted to?

*No, because my kids are into video games. Maybe if they make a video game about God then they'll play it maybe, I don't know. Like the Veggie Tales—they used to watch Veggie Tales all the time.*

Yeah, that's good, my kids did too. When was the last time, okay you said you were doing these AA meetings at a church, but when was the last time you did attend a worship service or go to a church service of some kind, even if it was a funeral or a wedding or has it been forever, since you've been at church camp? Is that how long it has been?

*No, because my grandma had her funeral, and so did my dad. So, that was probably five years ago.*

Have you encountered anybody from, a representative of the church in the last year?

*Just the pastor from whatever AA church I go to, the one on Belgrade, I don't know. He's intimidating, though.*

He's tall.

*He's big and got that deep voice.*

He's one of mine—he's a great guy, a really good guy.

Do you cultivate, okay, so the way I understand it is you sort of have a belief that works for you. Do you do things to cultivate that belief, so grow in it, do you engage in practices that help you to continue to develop that faith?

*I try the praying and meditation stuff. It's daily. Cause you know it worked for alcohol. I'll do it quick. You know, like my letting go of the past and some of the issues and the guilt. You*

*know, like I said, fear is just always in every step of the AA program. It's weird cause it's like it's almost every day I work some part spiritually, even if I don't realize it.*

I think that's true. I think I told you this before, I have often thought that AA or 12 Steps are what the church should look like.

*There are just too many churches, like if I go to a Lutheran church, I mean, they ask me what I believe, and every church seems like it's not nit-picky, but if you don't believe in their exact, you know it's like they look at you weird and funny. You know, I don't know.*

Yeah. Um, . . . when have you seen the church acting its best? Have you seen the church acting, something good?

*I mean, before the church camp stuff all happened to me, church was good. I liked it. I liked the Bible studies, but that just ruined it. I don't know.*

Yeah, or course. So, when have you seen, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a personal experience, but just what you read in the newspapers.

*I suppose Jehovah's Witnesses. I used to have Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons come to my house. My kid was born with part of his brain missing. They always told me that God was carrying me, that part in the book, or whatever that says God will cure all men and there will be no more hurt or pain, or something. Um, my kid's part of that brain started growing. So then, you know, I started thinking more spiritually then, and then the guy cause, I don't know what the heck happened. It shouldn't have grown, but it did, so, I mean, that's when I started looking at it. You know, because Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are totally different. But I still talk to them both. They didn't like some of my opinions. But, to me, I'll take some of yours and I'll take some of yours, and I'll use what works for me. And you know, it did.*

When have you seen the church get it wrong? [L]et's see—when have you seen the church not be what it should be?

*When I went to church it was just, I don't know, they didn't know how to deal with kids that misbehaved.*

Oh, yeah.

*[I]f you misbehaved you were sinning, they'd say your being . . . you know, and that you were going to go to Hell and stuff like that. You just—that's not how you explain it to kids. I mean, you know, and I don't go to that church no more, and I thank God for it, too.*

That was your experience, right?

Yeah.

If you could say something to the church like, ah, I mean, there's lots of churches, but I mean like the big Church, capital C, like all the churches—if you could say one thing to the church, what would you want them to know? What would you tell them?

*Even though we all don't believe in the exact same God, you know, we just need to get along. I mean, got to agree to disagree sometimes. I mean, if we can disagree there is a God, so be it if your God is different than mine, we are still trusting in something that we can't see and can't hear and—*

So, have you seen times when the church was very open and embracing to people? And have you seen times when the church was not?

*Lately, no. I've always seen them be more willing and embracing towards people. Like I said, that church down on Belgrade opened my eyes a little bit. You know, not every church is the way I seen it when I was a kid.*

Yeah, same with me.

*You know, and I had to go into another church to get over that and see it. You know. It took me a few years, but I did it.*

Praise God! That's awesome. We are almost done here. Have you taken what you've learned about your own spiritual life and tried to share it with somebody else? Whether it's—

*Yeah, but I usually do it at AA meetings.*

So, do you become a sponsor to another?

*If I'm asked I have been. But they have all quit. I mean, you know, nothing I can do about it.*

Yeah, so how does that work? So, when you go into AA you get a sponsor right away?

*You can, or you don't have to. They recommend it because it is easier to stay sober with help than it is on your own.*

And what's the role of the sponsor?

*To go through the big book and the steps with you to try to help you be stronger when you get into moments, like learn to pick up your phone. Teach you what the steps are, like the four steps are, though, because you have to take your inventory of yourself, and write down*

*everything you did, but then you got to add what was your part in it, and none of us like to look at what our part was in it. I mean, so it's complicated, but—*

And so, do you stay with the same sponsor? Have you stayed with the same sponsor? Do you still have a sponsor or not?

*I do not have a sponsor right now because mine went back out. So, but, otherwise I have had five or six sponsors. I mean, you got to find the one that you are comfortable talking to. I mean, like right now there are all these young kids coming in, and they all ask for your number, but they have to, they have to show for their group home or whatnot. It gets discouraging sometimes, but, you know, the seed is planted, you know. They know. It took me a while to catch on.*

So, do you have a lot of relationships? How do your friends see religion? Do they talk about God? Are they invested in any sort of faith?

*No, they just close their ears and walk away if I start bringing it up.*

Do you all talk about the meaning of life, why we're here, what does God want from us, what are we supposed to be doing in this world? Doesn't really come up, huh?

*Nope.*

Okay, that's good. So how are you feeling about this conversation?

*Fine.*

No problem, right?

*No problem.*

Awesome. You did a great job! I appreciate it. Thanks. So, you just told me that your son came out as transgender; so, how are you dealing with that?

*I'm dealing with that fine. . . . I want him to be who he thinks he is and wants to become, because I didn't when I was a kid and younger, and I turned to drugs and alcohol. I was trying to be who everybody thought you should be. So, for him, I mean, I knew since he was a kid. Since he was just 2 or 3 years old. Everybody thought it was a phase. Once you hit 6 and 7 and you are still putting nail polish on and using all of mom's makeup, it's not a phase no more. I let him do it. I mean, I wouldn't let him go to school yet in a dress or nothing, but I got him into therapy for it now, because you have to do therapy for five years before you can do anything else.*

Is that a possibility, that he might do something else?

*Yeah, he has always talked about being a girl, and like talking to this therapist about how to go about surgery. He has already looked it up himself, and he's only eleven. So, you know he's got into when he's already looking it up online.*

How has he been received at school, or from friends?

*So far, fine. So, I mean, they have a group in school for the LGBT stuff, and that's kind of nice.*

Yeah, it is nice. OK, thanks, that was good.

The reason I wanted to talk more about that is that that is often a big criticism of the church is that they haven't been that embracing of people of the LGBT community. Do you have any thoughts on that? Would you say that has been true or not true, or you just haven't been in touch with the church enough to know.

*I think with some churches it is true, but it goes individually sometimes, you know, because you could have church where half of them believe or are for it, and the other half don't.*

That's right, that's true.

*So, it depends on the person.*

That's not really been a roadblock to you for whether or not you are going to be a part of a religious community? That particular issue?

*It would be. I'd be thinking about it if I went to that church. Are they judging me? Are they doing that, you know? Are they thinking I'm committing a sin? But, I don't know—I don't know if it is a sin or not for real. I don't think any of us really know what's for real until we die.*

Yeah. What do you know—do you think anything is a sin? What would be an example of sin?

*I mean, when you are physically hurting people, I mean, like, yeah, I know some people are mentally ill and do it for reasons like that. For example, like that massacre in Vegas. That, that's just uncalled for. You know, stuff like that, that you know it's a sin, whether I believe they are going to go to Hell or not, I don't know. I don't know if I believe in a Hell. You know.*

Do you believe in any sort of life after death?

*There has to be. You can't just die and that's that.*

Why do you think that?

*I don't know.*

Well, there does seem to be something within us that would make us, uh, I don't know. There is something at least that we can believe that there's got to be more to it than this. Like, I believe in a soul, you know, that there is something that would live on in a different way in a new realm.

*There's got to be a something. You can't just die.*

Well, I . . . wish you continued success. You are a hero for staying sober.

*It's been a journey; that's for sure.*

I know it is, I know it's been up and down, there's no doubt.

*And there is life, I enjoy it, that's for sure. That's how I deal with it.*

Thank you.

*You're welcome.*

I am trying to frame my thoughts after speaking with P6. I just dropped her off at home, and so we continued a little bit of our conversation on the way, but there is something about P6 that she wants connection with people, it's evident, and she is able to connect with people. She clearly has a lot of brokenness in her past that she has to deliberately work at every day, and so there is kind of a strength, even though in a lot of ways you look at her life and see a lot of weakness. There is a lot of strength to getting through each day that she displays. A part of that is just really tending to the fact that she doesn't want to go back to a drug and alcohol addictive life. I think she is the type of person who would respond well to some sort of church that met in a bar. Or that met, not for the alcohol part, but that met in a safe place that wasn't a typical church. She did express a little bit of anxiety about even going into a church when she found out AA was going to be there. So, it has been a blessing that she has found that there are different churches than the one that she experienced growing up. But, a neutral space church that deliberately met the needs of people who are caught in addictive lives, like a recovery church or, can help shape a theology that she is trying to shape on her own, and could help. She could be a person of influence in other people's lives. Anyway, that's my thoughts.



**INTERVIEW #7—P7**

He is a middle-aged man who has been active in the bar poker community for probably the longest, maybe ten years or more. He has a son and a spouse who is disabled. He is Caucasian.

So, before we even begin, how are you feeling about the conversation?

*Nervous (laughs).*

OK, that's fine, that's fair. So, tell me a bit about yourself, like a little bit of your life story from Mankato born and raised, or—

*Born in Wells. Grew up in Wells, lived there through high school. Went to college in Mankato, moved to Mankato.*

Your whole family moved here?

*Well, most of my siblings are older than me.*

Your mom and dad moved here from Wells, too?

*They moved.*

After or before you moved here?

*I drove from Wells to Mankato for a year in college, and then they moved here.*

Did you grow up in the church—any religious upbringing?

*Yup, went to Sunday school, confirmed in Wells at Good Shepherd.*

Is that a Catholic Church, or Lutheran?

*Lutheran.*

I just assumed Catholic because you have so many siblings.

*My dad was Catholic, my mom was Lutheran.*

OK.

*Why do we need to record it?*

I want to be able to remember the conversation later. My bars go up higher from here than yours do from there.

*Okay.*

How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually today? Would you describe yourself that way?

*I definitely believe in God and everything like that, we don't put priority on church-going at this time.*

What persons or events have influenced your belief in God, either negatively or positively? Any persons or events that have had any impact on what you think about God?

*Ummm, like I say, we grew up believing, going to Sunday School, church, I don't know. Certain things happen where you doubt it, but you know you are there for a reason, I don't know how to describe it.*

Have you ever challenged those beliefs, or have had doubts or skepticism?

*Occasionally, a couple times. It's normal.*

If you went to church when you were younger, but stopped attending, what was the reason?

*I actually stopped attending after Jen got sick in 2002. We went for a little bit after that, but I started working two jobs and working Saturdays and Sundays.*

So, would you say you stopped attending because of any issue with the church, or was it more just family life change?

*Life style change, you know.*

When was the last time you had a positive or robust faith conversation?

*I can't even remember.*

Not something you have engaged in? Have you had them in your life?

*Oh, yeah, back when I was in Wells, probably.*

When you were a kid?

*We met with Jen's pastor before we got married, [omitted], so probably back then in 1999.*

Have you encountered someone who has sought to persuade you in their religious perspective?

*No.*

Like, you know, someone coming to knock on your door, or Jehovah's Witness or Mormon or Baptist, or, you know, Pentecostal?

*No, nobody really.*

OK. When was the last time you were in a church or had a conversation with someone from a church, or just been to church last?

*Last weekend for a wedding.*

How was that experience? Positive?

*It was a Catholic church. It was a little bit different.*

In what way?

*Well, Jen was with, so there was a lot of standing up and down all the time, and she wasn't too keen on that. But, it was not a bad experience.*

Does she feel comfortable to not stand?

*Well, she has issues getting up and down quickly.*

Did she still do it?

*Yeah.*

Oh, I would have just not done it.

OK. Do you cultivate your faith? Do you seek to attend to your faith to the degree that you would like to, or—?

*Ideally.*

Or do you feel good about where you are at?

*Not some days. I wish Jacob was brought up going to church, but he wasn't. I don't know.*

Why do you wish that for him?

*Just the experience, you know. So, if he meets somebody that actually is that way that goes every week, he won't be like thrown into it and not being used to going.*

OK, what are the roadblocks that stop you from doing so, to cultivate to the degree that you would like or gets in the way of that?

*Well he is working now. My working was the main reason for the six or seven years in between, but, I don't know.*

Do you have conversations about faith . . .? I kind of asked something similar to this already, but . . . do you have conversations about faith with the significant people in your life?

*Once in a while, not too often as I probably should, but—*

When have you seen religion at its best?

*Probably Jacob's baptism.*

If you could say one thing to the church or the Christian world, what would it be?

*That's a tough question. I don't know about that, I would have to think about that.*

OK, let me put it this way—describe a time when you have seen the church get it wrong.

*The church in general?*

Yeah, the church, big C.

*Well, obviously with the Catholic priest situation. But, everybody would probably say that.*

. . . I have kind of asked this question in different forms; . . . but have you ever had a time when you have shared your own faith with somebody else, seeking to persuade them?

*I have never really tried to persuade someone either way, pro or con.*

Awesome. Do you have aspirations for Jacob to be a person of faith?

*Definitely he is, I hope he continues.*

How are you feeling about this conversation now?

*It's okay.*

You are doing good. I have one more question. Okay, when you hear the word "church" what thoughts come to your mind immediately?

*Gathering with people that you see every week, and friends and socializing.*

If you hear the word "church" what negative thoughts come to your mind?

*Gossiping, judging.*

That's interesting.

All right. That's it man, you are done. You did well. Anything you want to tell me about your life that you didn't get a chance to?

*No.*

OK, good job, man.

## INTERVIEW #8—P8

OK, this next one is P8, and he is about 45. He is a Caucasian male. For a living he is actually a poker dealer who travels around the US between jobs dealing for large tournaments. Then he comes home and stays with his mom.

All right, I am with Subject “M.” Here we go. So, how are you feeling about this conversation before we even get into it?

*I don't know. I am not really sure what to think about it yet.*

OK. Tell me a bit about yourself—where have you lived, what has been your sort of faith upbringing.

*Well, growing up as a child I went to church a couple times, went to Bible school, then, I don't know, after my parents got divorced I gave up on everything. So, I really have no belief.*

You were telling me once, though, did you grow up in Mankato?

*I grew up in St. Peter.*

OK, was there a particular church denomination that you went to?

*Catholic.*

OK, now you were telling me once that you won some Bible memorization contest—

*It was like a traveling quiz show, called Bible Study. We traveled to different churches on Sundays, or whatever.*

Through what church, the Catholic church?

*No, it was, I can't even think of which church it was. It was up on top of the hill, I guess up by where the hospital is now. It was just a church, lots of kids, it wasn't really one religion, but it was Bible Study.*

So, youth group or youth ministry.

*Yeah, we traveled to different churches and had little quiz shows, we all hit the button, whatever, to get the right answer of whatever Bible verse it was.*

So, there must have been a time when you were memorizing that stuff.

*Yeah, it was probably anywhere between the ages of 8 and 12.*

So how did you know about that place—how did you get there?

*Through a friend.*

You were invited by a friend?

*Yeah.*

Like a weekly thing, or—

*It was a Wednesday night study group, you know, at the church.*

It sounds like Awana. Have you ever heard of Awana?

*No.*

So how did that form your thoughts spiritually or religiously at that time?

*It's hard to say. It was so long ago, I mean, I guess I believed in God back then, you know, whatever. It was just something I did on Wednesdays more or less, with friends. More than church things, it was just the friendship.*

How would you describe yourself today religiously or spiritually?

*I really don't believe one way or the other.*

So, it's just your own, then.

*Yeah, I mean it's one of those things where the only thing I am sure of is that I will die one day. And after that, who knows.*

So, what about people that you encounter that do have faith, how do you—?

*I don't discriminate one way or the other. I could care less, I mean, what they do, as long as they don't try to push it on me.*

Have you had experiences where you felt like it was pushed on you?

*No.*

OK. What persons or events would you say have been the most influential about what you think to be true or not true about God?

*Wow. That's a tough one. I mean, I guess when my sister was killed I was really pissed off, so it pushed me away even further. So, you know, other than that, I mean, basically I really don't even think about it much. I just live day by day, do what I need to do.*

How long ago was your sister killed?

*June 17 of 2000.*

Wow, actually 17 years ago.

So, some of these you kind of already answered, but, when was the last time you have had a conversation about God or faith with anybody?

*I can't even remember. I mean, I don't know, probably with you once maybe. I mean, I don't know. It's hard, because, I mean—*

Have you ever even had like philosophical discussions about the meaning of life or why we are all here?

*Not in a long time, no.*

Do you think about those things?

*No, not really. Like I said, I think about what I am going to do today, I think what I have to do, you know, and that's basically all I do.*

Have you encountered someone, I think I asked you this, but have you encountered someone who has tried to persuade you in their faith?

*No. No, I mean, like I said, you know, people can go to church, do what they want to do, you know, that's fine. They can believe what they want to believe. I have no problems with that.*

So, you haven't had anybody from Jehovah's Witness or Mormons, or Baptists,

*They come knock on the door, and I apologize, you know, but it's not my cup of tea, you know, have a good day.*

Do they receive that well?

*Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Look, no problem, okay, thank you.*



When was the last time that you were in a church?

*Are you talking about just a service?*

Any reason at all.

*My sister's funeral.*

17 years ago.

*I take that back, though, a wedding, a friend's wedding.*

And how were those experiences?

*I just think of it as a place, you know. Like, mourning for my sister and then celebration for my friend's wedding.*

When have you seen the church at its best? When have you seen the church get it right? Whether it's a local church or the church worldwide.

*That's a difficult question, because there is no right. Everybody's belief, so I mean—*

What about like, the church sometimes responds to things in society.

*As far as helping others?*

Yeah, have you had any experiences where you see the church visibly doing something good for the world?

*Not personally. I mean, I haven't come across it. I mean, I am sure they do go out help those who need it, you know. They do things like food drives or whatever, I'm sure they do stuff like that, I just haven't encountered it.*

So, let me ask an alternate question—when have you seen the church do it wrong, or do something wrong, or hurt the world?

*I really haven't seen that at all. I mean, like I said, I mean, the church, they pretty much tend to their people, try to gather others, but they don't force it upon anybody, so—*

Have you thought much about other world religions?

*No, I really, like I said, I don't think about religion at all. I could care less, I guess as long as they don't force it on me, let me do my thing, they do theirs, it doesn't matter.*

So, do you do anything to cultivate your own, uh, . . . do you think you have a soul?

*I have a life, that's about it. I mean, as far as a soul goes, I mean, I just feel when I die I'm dead, you know I'm dead. You know, it doesn't matter.*

Can you describe a time when you shared this kind of conversation with somebody else?

*I haven't, I haven't come across anybody.*

One more question here. What do you wake up for in the morning? What's very important to you?

*Family. Family and friends.*

What makes it so?

*Just, I mean, you do so much to help each other out, especially mom. Friends—I got a friend now who is terminally ill, and she has been battling cancer pretty bad, so being able to help them out. I go to work, have fun.*

Are you working here, you don't work here though? You only work on the tour? Do you enjoy that?

*Yeah. Next Wednesday I go to Chicago.*

Do you see some of the same people?

*A lot of the time. A lot of the same players, a lot of the same dealers. And all we do is travel, you know, like I said, Atlantic City, Chicago next, Oregon after that.*

OK, well, how are you feeling about this conversation now.

*I feel kind of awkward, you know what I mean. Like I said, I'm not really religious, so talking about religion is a little bit awkward for me.*

Well you did a good job.

*Thank you, sir!*

Thanks a lot, P8.

## INTERVIEW #9—P9

P9 is actually P8's mother. She is about sixty-five years old. Fortunately, P9 and I had a really good conversation, but for some reason my phone recorder stopped at thirteen minutes, so we missed the last half of the conversation when it started going well. I may do a follow up with P9. I told her that I might.

So, before we even begin, how are you feeling about what we might be talking about.

*A little nervous.*

OK, that's normal. So, tell me a little bit about who you are, where you are from, how you got to this place—Mankato—what's your life history about?

*My life history, um—*

Yeah, where are you from?

*I am originally from St. Peter, Minnesota. I'm divorced. Went through various jobs raising the children. Gone through a lot Fred, I think I told you that, went through a lot of pain growing up.*

What was that related to?

*My childhood. I was molested from 3 to 17 by my stepdad.*

Oh, I'm so sorry. Maybe you told me that.

*I went through a lot of hatred towards my stepdad, and two years ago I couldn't carry that hatred anymore, so I forgave him. My good friend, Jackie, from third grade, said, "P9, I don't think I could have done what you did." And I said, "You know what—it's the best thing I ever did. I just lifted a weight off my shoulders." And now my mom, she was a social worker, and I think she knew a lot of what was going on, but she closed her eyes to it, and we were never allowed to have a relationship because of him. And my dad, stepdad, had aged all these years, and I told my kids, I used to warn them because of their children. Anyway, to make it all short, things are good now. My stepdad and I have a great relationship.*

Really?

*It's awesome. It has taken a tremendous effort—I've got goosebumps now just talking about it. My mom and I are real close, and the kids new, things I had told them because it changed his outlook on life, he became a happier man, because he had aged so. And he was very*

*quiet and, like, lived in his shell, so the minute I forgave him he came out of his shell and became a happy man again.*

Did he admit that he—?

*Oh, he apologized to me.*

He knew that he had done something wrong?

*Oh yeah, yeah. Mom knew some of it and I always had beatings on a daily basis and everything else. So, and he was also a high school tennis coach. So, anyway, things are good there.*

So how would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually? Would you describe yourself as a spiritual person?

*Yes.*

What is some of your background when it comes to your own faith journey?

*I was baptized Catholic. I grew up—my grandma raised me the first few years of my life because my mom had me when she was very young. I believe she was 16. She was sent away to an all-girls school. My real dad was sent away to an all-boys school. My grandma and grandpa worked at the State Hospital. They fought to keep me. When they couldn't find a sitter, they snuck me up in the State Hospital, into the laundry room, and different nurses took care of me. I had a lot of love in my life. So, I went to the services at the State Hospital for many years of my life growing up. Then when my mom married my stepdad, of course then I lived with them. I went to regular school, so I went to Catechism.*

Were your mom and stepdad active church attenders?

*No. Mom was later in life. I'd say she became very active after I left the home. Now she is a very active Catholic.*

What about your grandmother?

*My grandmother was very active in the church, yeah.*

So, your parents saw fit to send you to Catechism, even though they weren't necessarily active, they wanted that to happen for you, is that right? So, they would just sort of drop you off?

*Yeah.*

What would you say have been some events in your life that have hurt your understanding of who God is?

*When my daughter, Farrah, was killed. I didn't understand it. They say things happen for a reason. And I thought I would turn away from God, but that brought me even closer.*

Did that happen—P8 was just telling me about that—did that happen in 2000?

*June 17, 2000. I went to church probably every day for probably six months. And that brought me so close to God.*

Did you go to the Catholic church, or did you go to a different church?

*I went to whatever church was closest to me at the time. It didn't matter to me.*

What persons or events have influenced your spirituality and your understanding of God, either negatively or positively? And you said it could have been negative, but it turned positive. Are there other significant people in your life, or significant events, that have kind of helped you understand your own spiritual self?

*Um, my best friend, Jackie. She goes to HosP6a on Saturday nights. I wish you had a Saturday night service—I would go there. It's hard for me on Sunday. I really wish you had a Saturday night service.*

Well, we actually did at one time, but then—

*It was [omitted].*

We were just too small to do that much. It's a lot of responsibility to do a service, and we were like, wow, we got like eighteen people showing up, and it's a lot of work. We are always stretching ourselves to figure out what's a better time, because for a lot of people Sunday doesn't work.

So, do you currently attend?

*I go probably once a month with Jackie.*

In what ways has Jackie been an influence in your life?

*We've been there for each other since third grade.*

Really?

*Yes, and we are both sixty-five. So now you are the only one that knows my age.*

I'll delete that.

*Like I said, she goes to church faithfully, every Saturday, and she has been there through my whole life, through everything. We talk all the time. We get together as much as we can.*

Can you tell me a story—it doesn't necessarily have to be with Jackie—but can you tell me a story about the last time you had a robust conversation about your faith with another person?

*When I forgave my dad. Jackie and I talked. She said, "P9, why did you ever say that?" I said, "Jackie, I couldn't carry the hatred anymore." I said, "I almost killed him when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Mom and the kids were gone, and I had a gas can full of gas, and I was going to pour it all around the house. Mom came back unexpectedly with the kids.*

Oh, my gosh. How long ago was that when you forgave him?

*I was in 7th grade—oh, gosh. We moved there, probably in 1970.*

No, when you forgave him?

*Oh, when I forgave him? Two years ago.*

Just two years ago? Really recent.

*Very recently. And Jackie and I talked for hours on this, and she just said, "P9 I don't understand you." I said, "Jackie, when you have that much hate and anger," I said, "and it was just eating me up inside." And I said, "it just took over, took over everything. I thought about it all the time, all day, and every night before I shut my eyes, it was all I could think about was him. And I had to get rid of it." And she said, "Yeah, you're right. I couldn't have done it." Because her dad was abusive and sexual also. "But I could have never done it." And she said, "Well, God was there with you when you made this call, and he was watching over you." And she said, "I'm so proud of you for doing it." And she said, "I love you, P9." And she said, "I'm always here for you, and God is always here for you. He's always in your heart."*

Have you ever had an encounter with a pastor or a priest recently where you talked about faith, or someone who represented the church?

*Yes, when I was in Pathstone. I received communion.*

Oh, just recently.

*I received communion twice a week.*

From the Catholic priest? How was that interaction?

*Yes, that was wonderful.*

Who was the priest, do you remember?

*No, I can't remember.*

Do you know what he looks like?

*He was a short, elderly gentleman. We talked about my knee surgery and we prayed about that and hoped for future success.*

So, did he just make the rounds, or did you make a special request, or the nurse asked if you would like to see a chaplain?

*Yes. She asked, and I said yes. So twice a week I received communion, four times.*

Oh, that's great. Have you ever had an encounter where someone has tried to persuade you with their particular belief or faith? Where someone has tried to convince you that their way of believing is best for you?

*Oh, years ago someone tried to convince me to go Lutheran.*

How was that experience—was it positive or negative, or just normal?

*It was negative because he was very rude about it. I think there was about six of us. We were at a gathering at someone's house. It was just how he was putting it—it was his way or the highway, basically. That this is the way it should be.*

What were you feeling at the time that he was talking? What were your emotions?

*I was getting very upset, and then uncomfortable.*

My recorder shut down, unfortunately, about halfway into the conversation with P9. It was going really well, we got into some good stuff, and I might have to do a follow-up interview; but in the meantime, I want to just recall some of that conversation.

I specifically asked P9 about if she could say one thing to the church, what would she want to say, and she said she doesn't like the way that they are not open to gay people. So, we

talked about that a little bit. She asked me what I thought about that, and we talked about that a little bit. She particularly felt that the church should be open to all people, and she doesn't understand homosexuality to be a sin, and that her own experience being in a psych ward because of an attempt on her own life, I think is what she said, she just met people who were gay and learned a lot about them, and many people she felt were either born gay or are abused in such a way that they can't express love to someone of the opposite sex. She just has a lot of compassion and would like see the church feel more. I kind of expounded and said that what is frustrating to me, when it comes to the church regarding that issue, is that there are some pretty significantly bigger issues—like greed, consumerism, how we care for the immigrant, how we care for the poor, and how we care for the widow and the orphan—that we are omitting; and yet we focus on one sin that isn't even the most important one. We talked a little bit about how God wants so much more for us than Heaven, that he wants us to experience fullness of life now, and she went on to talk about some people in our poker community who are just tough people and

(Tape ended.)



**INTERVIEW #10—P10** (Recalled from notes only, not audio-recorded.)

Male. P10 grew up in China near Shanghai and is currently studying business at MSU. About twenty-nine years old

Paternal grandparents were Christian and maternal grandparents were Buddhist, while his parents (who are quite old) were influenced by the Chinese cultural revolution and claim no religious affiliation.

He has a belief system Taoism (Yin-Yang) and much of conversation was spent seeking to understand more about that faith.

In his teenage years he did some self-exploration of different religious beliefs—read the Koran, the bible, and other faith's chief or sacred texts. When reading about Taoism it resonated with him.

He describes Taoism to be “more natural.” It takes account for the natural order of things. He used an analogy from poker of watching me get upset when my two pair didn't stand against his flush draw. He said your reaction was natural. Something bad happened, you should be upset, when good things happen it's natural to be delighted.

Taoism is very much built on a “yin-yang.” Doing something good should expect reward and doing something bad should expect punishment it is the natural order of things.”

I asked him how his faith influences his life on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. He said, I guess it does, and gave an example that his girlfriend—also a Taoist—was considering taking a drug to fight an illness, and she had to weigh the benefits with the side effects. He describes this process as a sort of “Pros and Cons” approach which you must weigh.

When asking if he has had robust faith conversations with others about his faith. He said he is glad to talk about it if someone asks but it's not a principle of his faith, or there is no particular motivation to share it with another.

I asked if others have thought to persuade him to their faith and to describe that encounter. He said he is okay with it, but sees it as fruitless, particularly encounters with Christians who often present “illogical concepts” that they themselves don't understand so how will they convince me. “They can't detect their own logic, couldn't possibly convince me.”

We spent some time talking about sacred texts. He said Taoism has a sacred writing called Daode Jing. He only read one book explaining the principles of Taoism and that it was enough for him to embrace it as it resonated with him.

While he professes his commitment to the natural world, he does give in to the possibility of supernatural things. He describes this more like “a feeling you will win a hand in poker and

then you do.” All of his examples could be explained by natural probabilities so I gave him some examples of others. Angels, miracles, answered prayer, or the feeling that a brother across the ocean was going to die, on to learn that he did. He said “yes this happens.” “I do believe in the supernatural—a spiritual realm”

Have you experienced Christian worship? “Yes, to be honest, I have no positive comment. I felt nothing, I felt that its purpose was not religious but instead was a small community held together.” A social club? “exactly, especially in rural area—drink and talk shit.” Does the church do any good in the world? “yes, it’s hard for the church to do good for the rich people, they have everything they need—money, power, influence, support, but the church is beneficial for the poor people. They gather them, organize and start mission. They have a leader. This is why the church is successful, Muslims too. They are able to bring societal transformation to those who have no power, money, authority. The rich famer church I went to?! It’s nothing for them.

Are there daily or weekly practices in Taoism? Do you pray? “A kind of prayer, (searched for the word)” I said “mediation” “Exactly we have mediation.” Do you do it much? No. Are they’re really committed Taoists/ and less committed ones? “Committed? That’s matters to you, to Christians and other faiths, not to Taoism? You are not more or less committed, you just are.” “There is no motivation for it.” Is there an ultimate destination for you? What do you mean? Heaven, reincarnation? “Death” is the ultimate destination. Ok, some coming back to the idea of the “natural” It’s natural that we will all experience death.

Do you try to persuade others? Even though I am an extroverted I try to talk less, like at poker. It’s better to say less. Like our friend P2: “Opens his mouth and it proves he is a donkey.” Is that a Chinese proverb? I learned it at Buster’s poker, someone said it about P2. It’s true. If you are an asshole, you will do asshole things. It’s natural. It’s who you are. Don’t fight it. An asshole speaks as an asshole, a good person does good things. Should we try to change Assholes to be good? You can’t. Why harm the order of things. Their assholeness (bad) must go somewhere. Better it stay with them.

When I talk about my faith, it’s more of an explanation not trying to teach or persuade.

How do you feel about this conversation? Was it positive or negative? What do you mean? Did it discourage you or encourage you, or in the neither? In the middle. It just was. Why do you ask. I explained to him my research is trying to understand how faith conversations can be more positive. As a representative of Jesus and the church, I want people’s encounters with Christians, to reflect the character of Christ. Many people enter these conversations as a Top/Down, Teacher/Learn. They want to influence you, come out the winner and in the process in seeking to lead people to Christ they dishonor the character of Christ. “I feel like I influenced you more.”

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