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Imaging Spiritual Growth for the iPhone Generation: Taking College-Aged Young Adults on a Pilgrim's Journey in Dallas, NC

Jonathan Pugh

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IMAGING SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR THE IPHONE GENERATION:
TAKING COLLEGE-AGED YOUNG ADULTS ON A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY IN
DALLAS, NC

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE M. CHRISTOPHER WHITE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY
BOILING SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

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

BY
JONATHAN PUGH

MAY 12, 2018

APPROVAL FORM

IMAGING SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR THE iPHONE GENERATION:
TAKING COLLEGE-AGED YOUNG ADULTS ON A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

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The experience of learning in community with the doctoral students and faculty of the M. Christopher White School of Divinity has proven to be one of the greatest encouragements to my commitment to remain in service to the church. The lessons of community found in this project have been embodied by the learning environment created by the Doctor of Ministry program.

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The folks willing to facilitate this project in their homes and with their time have done so because they care about the generations following them. The young men and women who participated in this project give me great hope that the Christian church in America's best days still lie ahead as this generation assumes leadership roles in the coming years.

I acknowledge that my love for learning, the local church, and the movement of God in lives of people did not start with me, but was nurtured by my parents, Kent and Naomi Pugh. Their unsung and sacrificial lives in ministry have set a bar for service and excellence that I strive to reach every single day.

The most influential person on the success of this project has been my wife, Jennifer Pugh. She is an inspiration to me by her sacrificial love for God, her family, and people in the community who do not possess voices to speak up for themselves. Her daily encouragements and exhortations have allowed me to persevere in anything that God has called me toward. She has certainly been one of God's great means in making me more the kind of person He desires me to be.

ABSTRACT

Today's generation of college-aged young adults have proven to be the least-connected to the church in American history. Their immersion in technology absent of the traditional church setting has necessitated the strong need for church leaders to actively engage this generation in communities of deep relational discipleship.

This project created a small-group setting geared particularly toward young adults to introduce them to the themes of spiritual journey found in John Bunyan's classic work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The small group proved to be a successful method that most churches can replicate to reach young people who might otherwise find themselves outside of a church body.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is the foundation for the identity and purpose of the church. The companion Great Commandment to the people of God in the Old Testament is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Every church is called to know, love, and obey God, but obedience does not stop at committing to know God on a personal level. The Great Commission makes clear that complete obedience requires that Christians undertake actions such as “going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching” in the same way that Deuteronomy commands the people of God to “hear, love, teach, talk, bind, and write.” The propagation of the Christian message is bound up in its heart, which is to pass that message along from person to person, nation to nation, and generation to generation.

Commenting on a companion passage from Acts 1:8, the pastor of Venture Church, Austin Rammell says, “He did not tell them the Holy Spirit was coming to empower them to be a Christian subculture, but rather a powerful movement that brings the Gospel to the ends of the earth!”¹ Life groups at Venture church are designed to equip and confront believers and non-believers with the Gospel of Jesus in the context of organic, hospitality-based, lay ministry. This ministry project attempted a step in the process of extending life groups as a ministry of Venture to a group of people that

¹ Austin Rammell, “The Essential Leadership Elements for Transforming the Ethos of a Local Church” (D. Min. Thesis Project, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 17-18, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1807&context=doctoral>.

Venture and many other churches have found difficulty engaging and assimilating into the life of the church. This project was a six-week discipleship group for young adults aged eighteen to twenty-three who are residents of Gaston and Lincoln Counties in North Carolina.

Project Setting

Despite its contemporary worship style and casual feel, Venture Church is actually a nearly century-old Southern Baptist church that was formed in a rural textile-mill community in the northern part of Gaston County, NC. The fifteen-year ministry of the current lead pastor has served as a catalyst for extreme change in the bylaws, worship style, membership makeup, location, and ethos of the church. This fifteen-year transition has resulted in a great deal of upheaval, conflict, and growth in the diversity of the religious backgrounds in the makeup of the congregation

Having moved six miles from its rural location, Venture Church now meets in a converted textile mill in a culturally diverse, lower income area of the town of Dallas, NC. Weekly adult attendance averages around 300, with about sixty children in the fifth grade and below participating in the Sunday morning children's ministry. The median age of all attenders at Venture has decreased from the fifties to approximately thirty.

The church's decision-making processes are led by a team of paid and volunteer pastors rather than deacons and committees. There is a high level of socio-economic diversity at Venture with more moderate levels of ethnic diversity. The church reflects

the surrounding Gaston County community in the sense that most, but not all, of the church's attendees work in blue-collar occupations that do not require bachelors or professional degrees.

Less than a decade ago when the church was marked by upheaval and conflict, the attendance had dropped to around fifty members. The future of the church was very much in doubt for all but the lead pastor, a few key congregational leaders, and a core group of members. Consequently, over eighty percent of Venture attendees today are new to the church over the past ten years. The majority of those new attendees are either new converts to the Christian faith or Christians who had gone many years without any meaningful church involvement. Consequently, most of the program of spiritual formation centers on introducing people to the Bible, church life, and spiritual disciplines.

Outside of the worship services most of the opportunities for spiritual education that occur at the church campus are geared toward students in preschool through high school. Two older adult groups meet for Bible study on Sunday morning. A men's and a women's Bible study meet on different nights of the week. The student ministry takes place on Wednesday night. A drug and alcohol recovery group takes place every Thursday evening. The rest of the spiritual education takes place in home-based life groups that form based generally on the physical proximity of group members to one another and the stage of life in which the families find themselves. These groups meet bi-weekly and are led by volunteers with hosting responsibilities shared amongst members of the group.

Life groups are designed to reach all ages of people in the Venture Church community. Conspicuously missing from the list of life groups at Venture Church before this project was a consistent group that reached out to the segment of attenders who are between high school graduation and marriage and family formation. This is a significant group of attenders at Venture Church. Somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty people fitting that description worship at Venture on a weekly basis, but there is no way of knowing precisely given that the only way of tracking the demographics of individual attenders is through taking attendance at life groups.

Ministry Question

The rise of the “nones” has been a topic on the minds of many church and denominational leaders across the American religious landscape. The “nones” are a relatively new nomenclature given to people who claim no religious affiliation. The headlines of the surveys that have caused so much alarm and trepidation in the religious world is that millennials (those born after 1981) are three times more likely than the silent generation (those born before 1945) and twice as likely as baby boomers (those born 1946-1964) to claim no religious affiliation.² Clearly there has been a gap in the cultural influence of many types of churches across generations in American life over the last half century.

² Michael Lipka, “Millennials are Increasingly Driving the Growth of the ‘Nones,’” [pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones), May 12, 2015, Accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones>

Millennials are perhaps the least Christian generation of Americans since the generation that came of age between the American Revolution and the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening. That such a youthful and modern church as Venture would show such a glaring gap in its ministry to various life cycles as to not have a group consistently targeting college-aged young adults likely says something about the statistical rise of those younger people who identify with no religion. Whatever breakdown has occurred in thoroughly assimilating this age group to a church that is largely built to attract them should speak to both the symptoms and causes for non-religiosity among younger generations.

The age group that is currently younger than twenty-three years old entered their formative teenage years with two very significant cultural innovations being introduced on a massive scale to the American public. In September 2006, Facebook was opened to any user who had an email address, kicking off in earnest the ubiquity of social media in everyday life. In the summer of 2007, Steve Jobs announced the release of the iPhone. The mass consumption of the iPhone has tied adults and children of all ages to a constant connectivity with the social media universe.

For young people who have never known life without these two innovations, the effects on the outlook for life cannot possibly be underestimated. Face to face interaction with live human beings has come to be seen as an unnecessary, if not frightening, possibility in daily existence.³ Traditional institutions of community engagement, such as church, can easily seem to be outdated and insufficient in

³ Christopher Mims, "Ask Not for Whome the Bell Tolls. They Won't Answer," *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2017. This story describes how young adults are frightened by chimes that would indicate someone is standing at their front door. They would much prefer to receive some sort of visual message on their phone to indicate that someone is wanting to interact.

comparison to the constant stream of communication that can be found in online community. The nonstop nature of that social connectivity has left little time for personal introspection apart from the glare of stardom in one's own personal social media universe.

While the advent of online social connectivity comes nowhere near giving a total explanation for the rise of the "nones," it does point out some important contrasts between typical church life and life as it has always been known to young people under age twenty-three. The idea of coming to a physical place of meeting to engage in face-to-face preaching and conversation about spiritual truths that claim not to have changed for millennia might seem to the iPhone generation as antiquated and quaint at best and irrelevant or threatening at worst. Young adults of the iPhone generation will often speak of friendships as entities that can exist exclusively in the realm of online communities. Their view of community seems to be more influenced by a disembodied Gnosticism than historical Christianity. Yet the church identifies with a Christ incarnate into physical time and physical space to pursue a life-altering relationship with mankind. The church cannot uncritically accept the iPhone generation's cultural norm as it regards the importance of face-to-face relationships.

There exists a tension between technological innovation and the deep-seated need for community present in every human being. The author's conviction is that this is where the church must make its presence felt if it is to begin to make inroads in the least-churched recent American generation.

Many ministry strategies have been developed and proven successful to reach the youngest group of adults who are already gathered as traditional students in the life

of a college campus. The combined municipalities of Dallas and Gastonia, with over 80,000 people, are unique among urban locales in North Carolina in that they do not have any education institutions designed to offer four-year college degrees. Almost all young adults who remain residents of the community around Venture would be classified as either community college students, workforce participants, or unemployed. These demographics present unique challenges that will allow a young adult ministry at Venture to glean some principles from successful college ministry, but not be able fully to adopt any existing model of college ministry.

CHAPTER TWO

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In writing about the rise of syncretism and “nones” amongst youth in 2014, Len Kageler quotes atheist Alaine de Botton in her assessment of what good is lost by such trends:

Secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our own decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues which impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolution.⁴

Christianity as expressed in the church should not fear competition with non-religiosity for the answers to life’s big questions. The only thing the church must consider is whether or not it is still answering the questions that people have been asking since the dawn of creation. The goal of the project is to reframe age-old questions rooted in biblical theology about the meaning and direction of life. These questions need to be asked in such a way as to make the questions accessible and compelling for young adults between high school and marriage. Asking these questions reintroduces young adults to the importance of finding their community and sense of belonging in a Gospel-centered church body.

The ministry project was a six-week small group for young adults who are aged eighteen to twenty-three. This small group sought to recruit members in equal numbers

⁴ Len Kageler, *Youth Ministry in a Multifaith Society: Forming Christian Identity Among Skeptics, Syncretists and Sincere Believers of Other Faiths* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 75, Proquest ebrary, Accessed March 4, 2017.

from young adults who attend and participate in ministry at Venture, young adults who attend but do not serve in ministry, and young adults who do not attend church regularly but are acquaintances or family members of people who do. The project sought to measure spiritual awareness, participation in spiritual disciplines, and relational connection to the people of Venture Church over the course of the project.

The small group sought to operate from the same principles that drive all life groups at Venture Church. Its goal was to embody the core values of Venture Church, which are community, evangelism, discipleship, and missions. The group met on Thursday evening at seven o'clock since that was a time said to be convenient for most prospective participants. It rotated meeting spaces to reflect a variety of potential gathering spots in order to evaluate which environments were most conducive to the goals of the small group.

The curriculum used was developed to re-introduce and engage the group with a prominent piece of historical Christian literature, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. This particular work was selected because it is rich in biblical theology and has influenced the spiritual lives of millions of Christians, including the author's, over the past 340 years. Previous generations of American Christians would be well acquainted with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but much current anecdotal evidence points to a general unawareness of the work amongst Christians under the age of fifty.⁵ The

⁵ The author grew up attending Southern Baptist Churches three times per week but only remembers hearing about *The Pilgrim's Progress* one time on one Sunday morning when he was about six years old. Dr. Derek Thomas in teaching a seminary-level course on the book found that fewer than twenty percent of *seminary students* had ever read *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The author only learned anything significant about the work when he took an elective class during seminary about the history and theology of the Puritans.

relevance of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to young people today who might be struggling to chart a course for their lives is found in the nature of the allegory.

The story is about a tortured sojourner's physical journey that mirrors a real life spiritual journey of growing to be a disciple of Jesus. It is an engaging narrative that presents a broad range of theological topics without reading like a systematic theology book. Some of the contemporary life topics addressed in *The Pilgrim's Progress* include sin, peer pressure, depression, fear, doubt, temptation, marriage, friendship, conversion, assurance of salvation, fatigue, sickness, persecution, suicidal thoughts, and death. Bunyan is careful to weave biblical illustrations into every aspect the story, so *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a creative way to study Scripture while organizing it around the theme of an individual's spiritual life journey.

Even though it is considered to be a classic of English literature, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not written on a level of English that is intended to make it appealing only to academically inclined young adults. Generations of Christians have grown to love the work while they were still children. The author's mother recently introduced her own middle school English students to *The Pilgrim's Progress* and was able to receive indications from class assignments that they comprehended the spiritual themes very well. Asking a group of young adults to read *The Pilgrim's Progress* did not seem to be an overly burdensome pursuit for a group of high school graduates.

The mission of Venture is "to engage those far from God with the Gospel to know and follow Christ." That mission should permeate the end goal for every activity of the church, including this ministry project. This project would be judged to be successful if it engaged members of the iPhone generation who have varying degrees of

connectedness with church in such a way that they gained a better grasp of the biblical story of the Gospel and a better understanding of how that Gospel is relevant to their modern lives. The practices that result from this understanding will be greater involvement with the church community, a greater attempt to incorporate spiritual disciplines into everyday life, and a greater intentionality in setting life goals with the sense that God has a desire and unique purpose for each individual's life.

In planning for this project, I identified a critical need in connecting young adults to older spiritual mentors. I set about to pray for and identify potential individuals to fill this role, but throughout the summer of 2017 none came to fruition. In August, just before the project was set to launch, a new family moved to our area from another state. They came for job prospects and had a sense that God was calling them to move, but no extended family or social connections of which to speak. In getting to know this family through Venture Church's assimilation class, we discovered that the wife had served as the youth director at their church in another state. Her retired father, who moved with the family, had training as a Christian life coach. The couple has three adult children who did not move with them, but who are all in the age range for which the group would cover. On Week 4 of the project I asked the former youth director to attend the group and pray about whether it might be God's will for her to serve as a potential co-leader.

In addition to leaders, there were some other important components to the NextGen Venturers group that needed to be put into place before we could meet. A cohesive group of young adults meeting to study old texts for six weeks is not assumed to be an appeal that would gain automatic enthusiasm from potential participants.

Details were important in making the small group an event that would appeal to the attention of folks who are used to carrying smart phones. These are some of the preparations that had to be made.

Every life group is an opportunity for people to exhibit gifts of hospitality. Hospitality is especially important to a group that might otherwise be estranged from the life of the church. I enlisted a longtime leader at Venture Church who is in his sixties to provide meeting space in his home for two of the weeks that we met. He has long been a friend and advocate for ministry to young adults and has a downstairs apartment in his home that serves as an ideal home atmosphere that is also capable of handling a crowd. My wife and I also decided to open up our home to the group, since this would be a way to establish trust and rapport with the young adults to whom I would be ministering.

I also needed to find public meeting space for the group. This would have ideally been a coffee shop that offered affordable snacks, drinks, and a place to conduct a group discussion. There is not such a place located in Dallas NC, so finding a spot where participants could agree to meet proved to be a bit of a challenge in our circumstance. Our week of meeting in a public location was at a locally-owned coffee shop in a small town about ten miles away from Dallas. I chose that location because it has excellent products, customer-oriented ownership, and they were willing to allow me to reserve a room for the time I needed to conduct the small-group meeting.

Since the group met on Thursday night, there was a scheduling conflict with Venture Church's addiction recovery ministry. Because confidentiality is an important aspect to that ministry, Venture's building was not a strong option for conducting a

Thursday night meeting. The church where I was previously on staff was about three miles away from Venture and offered to host our group for two meetings. Since that church is a more traditional type of church setting than Venture, this gave the chance to evaluate how young adults might respond to meeting in an older and more traditional church space.

The people who were among the most interested in seeing the success of this project were parents who are regular church attenders and want to see their children involved in church as young adults. I asked parents to encourage participation of their kids, but I ultimately do not believe any of the participants came simply because their parents wanted them to come.

The time commitment for a small group is not insignificant. It's important that people of any age see that the time it takes to participate is worthwhile. I asked group members to give at least two hours to the meetings per week as well as time between meetings to try the spiritual disciplines being challenged.

There is no shortage of scholarly works that deal with Bunyan's work. I focused on those works which give insight into life application and are able effectively to bridge the gaps between seventeenth century society and twenty-first century society. I was also interested in those works that show each part of the allegory's Scriptural context. Charles Spurgeon published a book of some of the ways in which *The Pilgrim's Progress* illustrates Scripture. Ligonier Ministries published a series of lectures by Derek Thomas on the theological aspects of the book. One of the most readable and accessible modern translations that emphasizes life application is the one written by Barry Horner. I was able to contact Mr. Horner and find a source to purchase

copies of his Accurate Revised Text edition. He also published a very helpful study guide to *The Pilgrim's Progress*.⁶

I purchased a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English* for every group member who requested one. For those who did not request a copy, I gave them a link to the PDF of *Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*. I also had printed out versions of the public domain text available at each meeting for folks to follow along who forgot to bring or download the text for that week.

There was a component for the group to stay in contact throughout the week. Part of my initial interview was to ask potential participants which social media platform they most frequently use. Since Facebook predates the introduction of the iPhone, I believed that the iPhone generation was likely to use a different social media platform from people who might be in their 30s. Much to my surprise, almost every young adult I spoke with utilizes Facebook on a somewhat regular basis. They also use more smart-phone centric apps like Snapchat and Instagram, but for staying in touch with a group there was near-universal consensus that Facebook is the most effective means. In light of this, I created a private Facebook group and invited every group participant to join. This, plus text messaging, were the primary means of small group communication throughout the week.

I also needed a contact person for a community-service organization to point the group toward a service project. I was introduced through a Charlotte-based network for people in their 20s and 30s to Project 658. Project 658 is a Christian ministry that is dedicated to helping refugees build a sustainable life in the Charlotte community. I

⁶ Barry Horner, *John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress: Themes and Issues* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2003).

found the staff at Project 658 to be very helpful in suggesting service projects with immigrants in Charlotte with which our group would be primed to help

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The goal of the project to transfer an understanding of faith in Jesus Christ from older generations to younger generations should be understood as the primary means of the propagation of faith from the very beginning of the story of God's relationship with mankind. This biblical principle has not changed in its application to millennials born between 1980 and 2000. Out of 1200 millennials responding to a survey, 93% agreed, with 50 % strongly agreeing with the statement "I tend to have great respect for people in older generations."⁷

Making the focus of a small group study an allegory about spiritual life as a journey has a tremendous amount of precedent from the pages of Scripture. One could even describe the sixty-six books as a metanarrative about a journey describing God's redemptive plan for humanity. Graeme Goldsworthy contends that the message of the entire Bible is "God bringing *his* people into *his* place under *his* rule."⁸

When we speak of the topic of discipleship in a Christian context, we are essentially speaking of changes that occur in people's lives as they respond to encounters with God. These encounters take place sequentially and take many different forms and fashions throughout the lives of individual men and women. The author would affirm that these encounters are ordained by God, who supernaturally causes them to work together to effect change in the life of a disciple in a time and manner that

⁷ Thom Rainer and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2011), 59.

⁸ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Kept* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 26.

He deems proper for that disciple. These encounters with God, taken together over the course of a lifetime, resemble in modern lives a spiritual journey that parallel the geographic journeys that are also guided by God in the lives of many of the patriarchs in Genesis.

Old Testament Background

In the first pages of Genesis, God creates the earth and places within it a garden that is cared for by the man, Adam. Adam dwells in this garden in unbroken community with the LORD until he and the woman eat from the forbidden tree and are driven away from the garden to dwell under the curse of the LORD. The very first journey described in Scripture is a painful one filled with the heartache of exile from the presence of God. Adam's journey away from paradise ended with one son dead and the other cursed to wander the earth, but the birth of Seth demonstrates that the LORD did not leave Adam without the hope of a brighter future. Adam experienced the same highs and lows of faithlessness and hope that would characterize all subsequent spiritual journeys. He was almost certainly changed by the experience.

The theme of journey in the Torah does not relegate itself to lives of individual characters. The journey of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy has to do with a multi-generational journey from nomad to slavery to salvation to *shalom*. The overarching theme of the journey of Scripture is that God moves people from place to place and generation to generation so that in the end generations will find salvation

through faith in him and declare his glory to the world. Mark Dever captures this sentiment well.

That initial phrase, ‘All the world’s a stage,’ well captures how the Bible presents this world as a divinely made stage for playing out the great story of human history. The Bible is a theatre full of comedy and tragedy, indeed, more than ever entered Mr. Shakespeare’s fertile mind. And it is a theatre above all for the display of God’s glory.⁹

In Genesis 5, we find the first of many genealogies in Scripture. This particular one is entitled “The Book of the Generations of Adam.” This list follows Genesis 4, which is largely regarded as a tragedy for the offspring of Adam bearing the full fruit of Adam’s fall into sin and marring the image of God. In the list we are introduced to two extraordinary characters who are said to “walk with God.” Those two characters are Enoch and Noah. While little is said about Enoch in the Torah, the mystery surrounding the account of his death coupled with the phrase “walked with God” indicates privileged entry into the secrets of God.¹⁰ For Noah, Genesis indicates that his “walk with God” is the function of being a “righteous man, blameless in his generation.”¹¹ His life was anticipated by his father, Lamech, as one who would come from the ground that the LORD had cursed to “bring relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”¹² Brueggemann notes that the word for relief in Genesis 5:29 is identical in meaning to its use translated as “comfort, comfort” in Isaiah 40:1.¹³ The comfort declared in Isaiah 40 is the rest that Israel will enjoy following the exile that

⁹ Dever, 87.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 68.

¹¹ Genesis 6:9 ESV.

¹² Genesis 5:29.

¹³ Brueggemann, 70.

she received as chastisement from the hand of the LORD. There is little coincidence that the Bible's journeys of exile always find some form or fashion of an ending point with rest and comfort in the good graces of God.

The narratives of Abraham that begin in Genesis 11:30 are themselves a sort of remedy to the exile and scattering of mankind from the city of Babel in Genesis 11. When Terah and his family “went forth from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan” they began an epic journey that extended through the patriarchal period to the time of Moses and Joshua when God fulfilled the promise of land and protection to Abraham's descendants.

The book of Deuteronomy stands as the foremost Biblical mandate for older generations to teach younger generations about the ways of God. Its very existence at the end of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness stands as a reminder of the failures of the previous generation of Israelites to obey Yahweh and walk in faith. The nature of this second law is future-oriented toward how the generations that follow will conduct themselves in faithfulness to Yahweh. Even the lawgiver, Moses, dies in the book. One commentator states, “He must forfeit his future so that the nation might have theirs!”¹⁴ This very Mosaic attitude is what is required for those who wish to teach faith meaningfully to younger generations.

The key text for how the new generation is to pass on faith in Yahweh can be found in Deuteronomy 6. This chapter answers several key questions about how worship is to extend beyond the lifetime of Moses. What is at stake in keeping the Law? Who is Yahweh? How are we to relate to Yahweh? What is the meaning of the

¹⁴ Ronald Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” *The New Interpreters Bible*. Vol. II. Ed. by Leander Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 340.

story of Yahweh delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt? How are we to instruct the next generation about that story? These questions should form the core of what a spiritual formation group of older people teaching younger people should seek to accomplish.

John Sailhamer summarizes Deuteronomy 6 by saying, “Fear (i.e., a deeply felt respect for the Lord) is to be taught to all generations as the basis for godly living and obedience.”¹⁵ Verses 1-3 describe the weight being placed upon obedience to the commands of Yahweh. Moses’ job is not to simply publish the laws, but to “teach” Israel “to do them.”¹⁶ The reward for success in this task will be “that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly,” in the land given as a promise to Israel.

The next paragraph of the chapter includes the statement that would form the core of worship and devotion in later Jewish tradition. This statement is known as the *shema*. The clear message to the people in “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” is that Yahweh is singular, that Yahweh does not share his divinity, and that Yahweh does not share the devotion of His people.¹⁷ The command to love stems from the covenant nature of Yahweh’s relationship with Israel, which is likened to the relationship of a father to a son.¹⁸ Obedience to Yahweh is not a series of actions, but a relationship that encompasses the totality of one’s existence. Continual attention to Yahweh’s

¹⁵ John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 438.

¹⁶ Mark Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2003), 124.

¹⁷ Biddle, 125.

¹⁸ Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 169-70.

commands will cause them to be a perpetual component in decision making for the people as well as for their children.¹⁹

The final paragraph of Deuteronomy 6 describes a future familial interchange between a father and a son who has grown up being taught obedience to the Law of Yahweh. The son will naturally want to know and understand the meaning of the statutes that have shaped his young life. The father is then commanded to recount Israel's history as slaves, the deliverance of God's people, the judgment of God on Egypt, the blessing of God on Israel, the giving of the law, and the conditions for obedience to the Law of God.²⁰

As Deuteronomy progresses into the prophets in the canon of Scripture, we see the fruits of Deuteronomy 6 playing out in the manner in which God calls some of the great prophetic leaders of Israel. Joshua's preparation to lead Israel first occurred in Exodus 33:11 when he lingered at the tent of meeting as Moses' young assistant. Young Samuel learned to hear the voice of Yahweh while living in the presence of Eli the high priest; Samuel also learned the negative lessons of how to raise sons who are poor leaders and faithless prophets. Elisha followed Elijah everywhere he went so that when Elijah was taken his mantle would naturally fall to Elisha (2 Kings 2:13-14).

The Psalms make clear that generations have a duty to commend worship one to another. In Psalm 78:5-7 Asaph reflects on the law of Moses and declares:

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

¹⁹ Biddle, 127.

²⁰ Craig, 175.

David writes in Psalm 145:4, “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”

Psalm 71:17-18 says,

“O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.”

New Testament Witness

From the Gospels to the Epistles, one of the primary threads of the New Testament cannon is the story of the dissemination of the life of faith from Jesus to the generation of the apostles to the third and fourth generations of the Christian church. The pattern of Jesus’ ministry in the gospels was to gather a group of younger men and women around himself to go wherever he went and learn by doing the work of his ministry throughout the three years that he was in the public eye. These people became the disciples who would lead the church when Jesus had returned to the Father.

When Jesus climbs up a mountain in Mark 3:13 to call the twelve, Mark is evoking associations and continuity with the ministries of Moses and Elijah. The covenantal promise of a land and a nation became the promise of the kingdom of God.²¹ Jesus’ twin purposes for appointing twelve apostles was that they might “be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” (Mk 13:14-15) Alan Culpepper sees a blueprint for the ministry of the church in these

²¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 106.

verses to worship, religiously educate, evangelize, and minister to those affected by evil in society.²² For the purpose of a spiritual formation group this passage tells us that the plan should be to form a community with each other and Jesus so that we can in turn preach the Gospel to others and apply the fruits of the Gospel to healing hurting people in our world.

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 places Jesus once again on a mountain in the spirit of Moses and Elijah. This time he is giving the gathered disciples their marching orders to carry on in his absence. As the disciples go out into the world, they are to make disciples, baptize, and teach observance to the commands of Jesus. That process lies at the heart of movement of Jesus, Venture Church, and everything that takes place in the discipleship group. This passage is often preached with the command to “go and preach.” Ben Witherington says, however, that the language of the Great Commission is similar to that which would be used by a scribe. The main verb is not to “go” but rather to “make disciples,” and the means of disciple-making is “to teach.”²³ Teaching is a much more personal process that takes place in the context of smaller groups in intimate settings of homes and meals. This is the paradigm the project will follow for small-group disciple making.

One final key text for inter-generational discipleship from the Pauline epistles can be found in Titus 2. This text puts forward the idea that propagating sound doctrine from generation to generation is intertwined with living before one another in righteousness. Disciple-making serves as the intersection between orthodoxy and

²² Culpepper, 127.

²³ Ben Witherington, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 534.

orthopraxy. A discipleship group will explore doctrine, see where doctrine is applicable to their lives, and be involved in each other's lives well enough to see doctrine put into action. This is how disciples truly learn the doctrine they are taught. Titus 2:11-13 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

Paul here is addressing a Cretan problem that had to do with how new Cretan Christians were representing the Christian message with their conduct.²⁴ This Cretan problem may well be similar to the problem of pastoral care for young Americans who come from an increasingly secular background and must learn how to live an ethical Christian life.

The word translated as older men and older women in Titus 2 is πρεσβύτερης. Hippocrates used this word to describe men between fifty and fifty-six years of age along with character traits that should be present in the life of a respectable Greek elder. Paul names several respectable character traits for older men to embrace, but is likely addressing all adults in the church as they relate to younger people, not simply those aged fifty to fifty-six.²⁵

Titus 2:1-5 is one extended sentence saying what older men and women are to be taught. Similarly, young men and young women are to be "urged."²⁶ Teaching and

²⁴ William Mounce, "Pastoral Epistles," *Word Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 46. Ed. by Bruce Metzger, et. al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 407.

²⁵ Mounce, 408.

²⁶ W. Hulitt Gloer, *1 & 2 Timothy-Titus*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2010), 51.

urging, as with the *shema* discourse and the Great Commission, must go beyond merely getting people to assent to propositional truths. Truth that is properly taught in the context of disciple-making must result in a change in the very character traits of the live of the disciple. Hulitt Gloer says, “Teachers of faith must embody that faith. As the rabbi was “living Torah,” so the Christian teacher must be “living gospel.”²⁷

Christian Tradition

What is known in church life today as discipleship and teaching has been known through most of the history of the church as catechism. The post-apostolic church developed a formal discipleship program for baptismal candidates known as the catechumenate. This was training that was meant to prepare converts for membership into the church in an era where persecution and heresy were the cultural norms. Andrew Burggraff writes, “Through this process commitment to Christ was evaluated, discipleship was implemented, education in theology and apologetics was taught, and moral character was mentored and enhanced.”²⁸ An example that Burggraff cites as the content of early church catechumenate is the *Didache*. This document would give new converts a very basic instruction both in doctrine and lifestyle that would be expected from a believer in Christ.²⁹ Tertullian taught that those professors who sought baptism

²⁷ Gloer, 61.

²⁸ Andrew Burggraff, “A Historical Study of the Catechumenate and its Implications for Discipleship in 21st Century Churches,” (Ed.D. Diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), Accessed April 7, 2017, Proquest (3582385), 13.

²⁹ *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Commonly Called the Didache*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.viii.i.iii.html>.

should have a change in life to accompany their learning of doctrine. He taught that those who are baptized should not visit the circus, the amphitheater, the stadium, or the theatre because the entertainment of those places were temptations, or what Tertullian called “pomps of the devil.”³⁰ His famous quote on discipleship is that “Christians are made not born.”³¹

Augustine wrote extensively of the process by which he came to faith in Jesus Christ. His mentor in faith, Ambrose, began the process of his catechism even while Augustine was a pagan who adhered to the cult of the Manicheans. When Augustine as Bishop was responsible for teaching the Christian faith to new converts, he was able to reflect back on his own conversion. Music, preaching, and memorization of creeds were all a part of the faith journey that culminated in baptism. But Augustine writes little of the baptism itself because of his respect for an early church tradition known as the *disciplina arcani*, or the discipline of secrecy.³² There were many teachings about sacraments that would be reserved until after someone had gone through the entire process of baptism. Some things of faith were to remain an intentional mystery to the outside world and could only be discovered by entering into the inside of the body of the church.

Like the church fathers, Luther, Calvin, and those who follow in their steps took great care toward the catechism of children and new believers. For Luther, catechism taught essential doctrine as well as sacraments, confession of sin, and blessings for the

³⁰ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, Revised Edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 45.

³¹ Harmless, 47.

³² Harmless, 89.

various stages of the day.³³ Each of the essential Scriptures and creeds were accompanied by an explanation of meaning in the catechism. Once again, catechism is a sort of intersection between knowledge and practice in the lives of those growing up in faith.

Charles Foster, writing from a perspective of mainline Protestantism, says that churches today can engage in catechism of young people through hospitality, celebration, and conversation.³⁴ The Catholic Church expresses a helpful way to view the life-changing aspect of discipleship even today when it speaks of catechumenate in Vatican II.

Those who, through the Church, have accepted from God a belief in Christ are admitted to the catechumenate by liturgical rites. The catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training period in the whole Christian life, and an apprenticeship duty drawn out, during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher. Therefore, catechumens should be properly instructed in the mystery of salvation and in the practice of Gospel morality, and by sacred rites which are to be held at successive intervals, they should be introduced into the life of faith, of liturgy, and of love, which is led by the People of God.³⁵

³³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, trans. by Timothy Wengart (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 3.

³⁴ Charles Foster, *From Generation to Generation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 99.

³⁵ Vatican II Council, *Decree Ad Gentes on the Mission Activity of the Church*, Chapter 2 Article 2, accessed April 8, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

CHAPTER FOUR

CRITICAL EVALUATION

In June, I began work with the Associate Pastor of Administration to develop a roster of all known attenders of Venture over the previous twelve months who are local residents between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. We then consulted with our senior pastor to determine which of these would make ideal candidates to ask to be in the small group. The goal was to identify twenty to thirty potential candidates so that we could have a group size of ten.

Beginning in late June and July, I contacted the candidates and their parents, if the parents are involved in church, to secure a commitment to the covenant to join the small group for six weeks. During this process, I arranged for the candidates and their parents to be interviewed for the pre-project questionnaire. I also secured a host for the group at this time. The host would ideally be an older adult who would have potential to carry on a ministry to this age group beyond the timeframe of the ministry project.

Through July and August, I developed the weekly curriculum as well as the social media tools to enhance the connectivity of the group in between meetings. I opened an invitation-only Facebook group and invited prospects to join on that platform so they could receive messages pertaining to the upcoming group meetings. I began the group meeting the second Thursday after Labor Day and continued it for six weeks. Once I secured commitments to the group, I asked for their preference in beginning the group early in the evening (6 PM) or later in the evening (8 PM). The consensus among participants in these preliminary conversations was that a time

between early and late evening, 7 PM, would be the ideal start time. The first meeting took place in the home of the host I recruited. Week two took place in a classroom at another church, and Week Three took place in a coffee shop or restaurant that was as convenient as possible for the group. We began this cycle again in week four, making an adjustment for the less than ideal meeting setting that turned out for week three.

By week three, I expected the group to decide on a plan for a mission or service project to take place on a weekend following the Week Six meeting. I offered some possible suggestions for this on week one and then observed the process by which these young adults made a decision based on their values and understanding of Christian missions.

Calendar

June 2017	Receive Proposal Approval from Project Committee
Early June	Develop Prospect List
Late June/July	Contact Prospects and Secure Group Covenant
July 18	Begin Pre-project Interviews
September 14	Week 1 Small Group
September 21	Week 2 Small Group
September 28	Week 3 Small Group
October 5	Week 4 Small Group
October 12	Week 5 Small Group
October 19	Week 6 Small Group

November 11	Missions/service project
October 23	Begin Post-project questionnaire interviews
January 2018	Present Findings of the project to Church Pastors/Small Group Leaders
March 1, 2018	Submit Report and Analysis
March	Oral Defense
May	Graduation

Means of Evaluation

My project is judged to be a success if young adults, church leaders, parents, and potential leaders of ministry to young adults can articulate three truths about the faith of young adults: 1) Young adults have a vitally important role to play in the life of a local church congregation. 2) The local congregation has a vitally important role to play in the lives of young adults. 3) Christian faith for all living people is a journey, not a completed process. These truths inform ministry tactics that include using the small group setting as a tool to enhance young adults' faith and involvement in the life of the local church.

I used interviews before and after the project as well as surveys during each meeting to evaluate whether the project has been impactful in helping those groups of people learn those truths and embrace ministry methods that will lead to young adult ministry being an ongoing concern at Venture Church. I also asked these same questions to some group members after the project to determine if their responses

changed over the six weeks. Success of the project methods are partially determined by whether there is a measurable change in the way that participants answer some of these interview questions.

The substance of our small group consisted of drawing responses out of group participants that would lead them into conversation about their own views of God and their own spiritual developments. I asked these types of questions during our group meetings to get participants to think about their spiritual journeys as well as to learn how they view their own relationship to the church:

- 1) What is a Christian?
- 2) How do you know you have faith?
- 3) Is salvation a process or an event? How do you mean that?
- 4) Is the church very important to your life? How do you mean that?
- 5) Is the church a movement or an institution? How do you mean that?
- 6) Are you welcome at church?
- 7) What difference does your faith make in your life?

Project Results

After the interviews were complete, the curriculum written, and the host homes scheduled, the only activity remaining was to start the small group meetings as we continued to invite young people into the project. Our very first meeting was held in the large basement of a former youth director at Hardin Baptist Church who has remain engaged in the lives of young people in the church and community for many years. This

first meeting was one of the most sparsely attended of the six. The striking thing about the participants who showed for the first meeting is that they were all males.

Five of the participants were very faithful attenders of Venture who also are involved in some type of volunteer service at the church. If the group consisted solely of these young men, the effect would be the enrichment and development of people who will be leaders in Venture Church in the very near future. The sixth participant was a friend of one of the Venture regulars who had formerly been a co-worker at a fast-food chain restaurant.

We began the evening very informally around the kitchen island with an ample amount of chips, salsa, cookies, and soft drinks supplied by the host. The host made only a brief greeting and returned to his work in the upstairs of the house. I filled the role of host and leader from that point forward, which was fine since the group was small enough to engage in conversation with each individual present. I took particular care to focus most of my conversation on the participant who was completely unfamiliar to me. This conversation paid off when the discussion started by making the entire group comfortable enough to share very personal matters with one another.

The most poignant section of the discussion in week one concerned the slough of Despond. Our group had a church background and could all identify with the conversion experience that Bunyan wrote about. What is less common to be talked about in church settings is the struggle with spiritual depression that is represented in the slough of Despond. Several young men talked about their own multiple bouts with depression. One young man spoke in great detail about an attempt to take his own life the previous year. This particular story was eye opening to the group. Many of the

issues leading up to the attempt dealt with childhood sexual abuse and questions about sexual orientation. It was from this young man's story that I believe the other group participants began to see the commitment to community and emotional safety that are especially valuable in making the group a success.

The second weeks' meeting took place in a Sunday School room set by itself in the parking lot of a nearby traditional Baptist Church. Leading up to that meeting I had to give directions to group members, text the address to everyone for whom I had a number and place a Google Maps link to the address on the NextGen Venturers' Facebook page. Since there was no host for a meeting held in a public building, I acted as the group host and purchased cookies, chips, and sodas sufficient to give everyone a snack during the group time. I arrived quite early, which turned out to be necessary because many of the group participants arrived at least thirty minutes early for "hangout time."

Our attendance doubled from week one to week two. I was especially encouraged that all of the new group participants in week two were young people who may occasionally attend Venture church on Sunday morning, but none of whom were on my radar as people who were active in serving in the life of the church. This was unexpected, because I thought an old traditional church building might serve as a deterrent for iPhoneers who are not regular church attenders. I should have asked a question in the evaluation instrument that would either confirm or deny that a traditional setting is a factor for iPhone generation church attenders.

The main topic for our discussion in week two revolved around the issues of genuine and false spiritual conversion. What I discovered is that even among those who

seem disconnected from church, all of the young people had some sort of conversion experience and/or baptism as part of their upbringing. There was almost a sense that conversion had left the sort of rare life-altering experience that Bunyan described in the *Pilgrim's Progress* and has become an expected rite of passage for young people whose families identify as Christian.

One young man in particular came to the group for the first time and went into great detail about his own life's spiritual journey. Even though he had no knowledge about the discussions of depression and suicide from week one, he included stories of times when he also had attempted suicide in recent years. We did not prod anybody to affirm the group concept and what we were doing, but this young man expressed appreciation for the kind of group and community we were starting with NextGen Venturers and said he felt that God had a purpose for his life that included him getting more involved in church.

The third week of the NextGen Venturers Group was the most unlike the other weeks. We met that week at a small locally-owned coffee shop in a town nearby Gastonia. I had scheduled to reserve a room at the location one week prior to the meeting, but when I came to set up our meeting space that room was occupied by others. Not wanting to put the small business owners in a position where they were kicking customers out of a space they already occupied, I offered to set up our groups' meeting space outside on the patio so that we could enjoy the nice late-September weather.

My attendance during week three was only six, and three of the six came after our discussion had already begun. We began the meeting with only four participants,

counting myself, so we went ahead and spent a little extra time taking prayer requests. The theme that emerged from this discussion centered on family and friend relationships. One young man had a younger brother in his home who had been missing since running away the previous night. Another young man needed guidance on how to continue a friendship with an older person he respected who had been very caustic toward him in a recent theological conversation. Our only resolution for those relationship problems on that evening was to pray about them as a small group of friends.

Another participant who had attended each of the first three sessions announced that this would be his last Thursday night meeting. He had made it further into a semester of college without dropping out than he had either of his first two semesters. He was now adding a job to the mix that would take him away from the group. Even though this news would detract from the group, it underscored the personal growth that is always possible to observe in this type of ministry.

The section of *Pilgrim's Progress* that was covered in week three dealt with the Palace Beautiful. This section is one of two places where Bunyan goes into great depth to illustrate his doctrine of the church. Even though our group was small, we had as lively of a conversation as I would have expected. Every person had strong opinions about what the church should be and how the church both met and failed those expectations. I went into detail to explain the historical context of the church in England following the restoration of the monarchy. I did so because we in America often take for granted the separation of church and state and the absolute freedom of the church.

Even though our group was young, it was interesting to see them agree with Bunyan's 350-year-old assessment of what the church should be. They used such pictures as a place of protection, a rest from the weariness of life, and a place where you can trust that those on the inside are fundamentally different from those on the outside.

Week three was also the week that I led the group to dig down and come up with some definite ideas about a missions' service project in which we could participate together. We mainly spoke about the importance of serving together and how that helps to build community within the group. I also challenged them to think about ways to be cross cultural in how they served. This made it easy for them to agree for me to set up a time to serve at Project 658 in Charlotte, where I had gained some familiarity.

Week four's meeting returned to the home of our host. Our attendance bounced back up to ten. The discussion this week for the first time did not involve any heavy personal problems, but rather centered around the theme of authenticity. This word comes up often as something that is very important to members of the iPhone generation.

Social media was very pertinent to our conversation about authenticity as it related to the dialogue between Christian and Talkative. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Talkative is a character who is able to project himself as a fellow pilgrim, but who, in fact, has not genuinely seen a conversion. He seems to be something other than what he is. Social media is notorious for the opportunity it presents users to present themselves as a person totally unlike who they truly are. The group agreed wholeheartedly that most social media users only put selective information online that will present

themselves in the best light possible. I was struck that a generation that claims to long so much for authenticity has lost so much of it in their primary means of communication with others.

We also had a discussion about Christian and Faithful's journey through Vanity Fair. The twenty-first century equivalent Vanity Fair that many of our young people related the discussion to was the prevalence of internet-based television services, such as Netflix and YouTube, that make any selection of content available instantaneously. Our NextGen participants were not overly concerned with the content of what they were watching on Netflix as much as they were concerned with the amount of time wasted and procrastination that was caused by the habit of binge watching.

Week five's meeting returned to the traditional church meeting space. The attendance dropped back to six, with all of the six participants being male once again. The lady who had joined the group as an assistant leader brought food to share for the first time this meeting. I would say that her gradual involvement in the lives of the participants is one of the successes that this project brought about. She indicated that she is excited about the level of Christian commitment and leadership potential that she sees in the NextGen Venturers group.

One group participant brought a birthday cake because he knew that another participant's birthday was that day. It was really neat to see the group participants take unprompted effort to build a true community environment in the meeting. Community-building is the way to meet some of the major objectives of the group's foundation.

The group discussion from week five was probably the least compelling of any of the five weeks, but it was still worth having. I attribute the lack of energy to the fact

that Bunyan is revisiting several themes that have already been covered in previous sections of the book, as well as the fact that the group was much more familiar with each other by the point.

The capstone of the six weeks of group meetings was a cookout hosted at my home. I have four children aged 9 to 2, so it is very difficult for my wife and me to engage in ministry together to groups of people who do not have small children. My wife, Jennifer, has a real heart for hospitality as well as a heart to mentor young adults, so this session had the added benefit of being able to involve her in NextGen Venturers. We feel that hosting is an opportunity to invite people, particularly in a stage of life where they don't necessarily interact with family on a daily basis, to part of our family for the evening.

The discussion that evening centered on the section of *Pilgrim's Progress* that deals with end of life issues and dying. Today we think of these concerns as pertaining to senior adults, but I explained that death was so common for the young in the seventeenth century that everybody would have to come to grips with a theological answer to death. We talked about how every person's journey at the point of death is different. Hopeful crossed the river without even a struggle, but Christian felt that he would nearly drown. I related a story of a close family member whom I had prayed with and encouraged greatly in the months leading up to his death. The day before he died, however, he said that he was not ready and still had great struggles with what lay beyond.

Despite the subject matter centering on death, most of the group's conversation returned to doubts and struggles in the present. This was to be expected, because it is

highly unlikely that this age group has even been close to someone their own age who has died recently. In that regard, we are far removed from Bunyan, who buried multiple children in his own lifetime. The topic that gained more traction centered on finding a mate for marriage. It was interesting that in a group of eleven young people, two were engaged to be married, one was dating, and the rest were single in every sense of the word. I ended that evening by asking the group if they had a desire to continue to meet and whether marriage might be a worthwhile topic for future discussions. They were affirmative to both suggestions.

NextGen Venturers is not a group based on a formal written covenant about group participation. Group participants held to a wide range of scheduling patterns for job, education, and family obligations. Attendance would be a fair measure of the effectiveness of the group since there was no formal obligation for continued participation. We opened the group to all comers with the verbal agreement that the ownership of the group belonged to participants, so if they want the group to exist they would need to try to attend. Only those who saw value in the group would be likely to continue to attend. We also verbally agreed that sensitive personal stories shared within the group would remain within the group and not be shared outside of it. This structure led to weekly attendance numbers of 6, 11, 6, 10, 6, and 11 with 18 unique participants overall. Two of the unique participants attended for the first time in week six and four other unique participants only attended one week. That leaves twelve participants who had ongoing attendance over the six-week project period.

Evaluation

Attendance after the project period has been more consistently close to the number 10 than the number 6 with only one of the 12 twelve ceasing his participation due to increased work hours. The most tangible result of my project is that Venture Church now has a young adult home life group that meets weekly for participants who have graduated high school in the past few years. This group's members show a high level of commitment to the group as well as to the elements of discipleship that were presented during the project phase of the group. There is a commitment from Venture's pastors to see that this group remains a vital part of ministry to the next generation of leaders at Venture as well as two committed lay leaders who possess the maturity and understanding to minister to young adults.

The essential element of discipleship that the NextGen Venturers now see as vital to their own spiritual development is a deep level of community. Community in the small group is being carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- 1) Community is a safe space to share your thoughts, feelings, history and struggles without being judged on that basis. We might say that community involves a basic level of intimacy that is common among friends.
- 2) Community involves meeting together not for the purpose of accomplishing a particular task, but because meeting together has its own inherent social and spiritual benefits that cannot be found outside of the community.
- 3) Growth in number of small group participants does not preclude intimacy of friendships. While there must be some consistency in the makeup of the

community, and there is a limit to the size a group can grow and still be considered a “small group,” the community is not a closed unit in which faces will not change. The benefits outweigh the challenges of adding new people to the group.

- 4) Diversity is a strength. The young adults in our group absolutely love being in fellowship with people of different ethnic characteristics, genders, educational backgrounds, family situations, denominational backgrounds, and overall life experiences.
- 5) Discussion is best received when it aims to challenge unsaid beliefs and practices in participants’ lives. Our participants like to be around people because they expect to be challenged and expect to learn something that will make their lives better.

I was personally most surprised by the willingness of the young adults in the group to be as open as they were about their own lives. As we discussed the concepts of spiritual journey the course of the conversation naturally led participants to reflect on their own personal stories. These stories were not generic and were not what we would think of as typical Sunday School conversation. Some of the conversation included such struggles as divorce, cohabitation, rape, questioning sexual orientation, depression, and attempting suicide. It was obvious that the group had the feel of a safe community for sharing and that those in the group were interested in bearing burdens as well as bearing burdens.

Assessment of Impact on Spiritual Disciplines

Four post-project interviews have been completed with group participants and two post-project interviews have been completed with non-participants. They do indeed reflect an increase in connection both to church as well as to the spiritual disciplines the church teaches as part of a Christian life. Some started asking questions about God's will for marriage and vocation. The week following the conclusion of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the group's consensus was to begin a series of discussions on God's plan for marriage. I do not believe that any participant in our group left with the impression that Christianity is a religion only meant to be practiced in a church building on Sunday morning. They may have already held that belief, but the NextGen Venturers groups served to strengthen it by giving them avenues to practice faith outside of Sunday.

Comparing the frequency of participation in spiritual disciplines, the increase was modest, yet noticeable for group participants in at least some of the spiritual disciplines that I asked about in the interview. One female group participant went from praying with others three times per week to praying with others five times per week. She went from never donating money or volunteering to tithing twice monthly and volunteering with meals-on-wheels once per week. One male participant began praying with others three times per week after never doing that practice before the group. He also began reading his Bible devotionally three times per week from not practicing that on a regular basis. Another male doubled the number of times per week that he read the Bible and prayed alone while tripling the number of times per week that he prayed with other people. The same young man also began the practice of twice weekly fasting for

the first time. A fourth participant increased his level of weekly volunteerism but plateaued or fell back in the number of times he participated in other disciplines. He stated that the reason for the decreased level of spiritual disciplines is that he was fresh from serving on summer staff at a Bible camp in the first interview but was two months removed from that time in the second interview.

My sample size for post-project interviews is much thinner for group non-participants. Many of the interviewees who did not end up participating in the group also did not continue to attend Venture Church. In the absence of data, it would be logical to assume that there would be no change in the patterns of spiritual discipline for young adults who are not actively engaged in church, unless some life event or outside relationship causes them to change their pattern of spiritual disciplines.

I only had success in contacting two of the pre-project interviewees who were not regular group attenders. Those two interviewees each attended one small group session and continue their attendance at Venture Church on Sunday mornings. They each reported a doubling of the number of times per week that they volunteer. One non-participant increased frequency of weekly prayer and one decreased the frequency. One participant increased the amount of devotional Bible reading and one decreased devotionally Bible reading. The number of times they discussed faith with other people remained unchanged.

Assessment of Missions Component

The group participants had surprisingly little by way of ideas and initiative for a mission project in which the group could participate together. When I mentioned in the first and second meetings that service would be a core component of the group, most everyone nodded in agreement. When the time came in weeks three and four for group participants to give ideas for service projects, nobody offered any. In the absence of leadership on the part of the participants, I organized a date with Project 658 for us to serve lunch to a soccer league at an apartment complex in East Charlotte. We did that project on November 11, 2017, with two of our young adults, one of our mature adult leaders, the leader's father, and my wife, Jennifer, and four young children. We spent that Saturday morning at the Sailboat Bay Apartments cheering on amateur teenage soccer players, feeding lunch to them and their families, and getting to know families who have immigrated to Charlotte, often under negative circumstances.

By taking on the planning of the missions' component of NextGen Venturers myself, I violated my own standard of seeking to force leadership to rise up from within the young adults of the group. Given the makeup of our group, however, I felt strongly that we needed to model the mission of Venture and not simply be a "community organization of Christians." Outward focus is at the heart of our small group ministry. An outward focus for Gaston County young adults means to go to a more urban setting with young immigrants who might otherwise be outside of their everyday social circle. I chose to introduce the group to the work of Project 658 after I was introduced to them through Charlotte One, which is an organization that exists to connect people in their

20s and 30s to churches in Charlotte. Joint service projects of this type are a major means of introducing civic-minded young adults to churches who view service to the community as part of their Great Commission.

The lack of strong participation from the young adults in my group could potentially be the result of four factors:

- 1) When I, as a pastor, push a particular project it begins to seem like my preference instead of a “group idea.” I failed to generate buy-in from the group on the idea of a mission to focus on immigrants in East Charlotte. I am hopeful that the two participants who did come that day will be able to generate group buy-in that I failed to generate in the scope of the project.
- 2) The recent history of Venture Church has not been one that has given young adults a frame of reference for missions work outside of the Dallas community. A lack of missions focus in the church has led to a lack of missions focus in the young adults coming of age in that environment.
- 3) The project was on a Saturday morning. Weeknights may be an easier time for group participation than Saturdays.
- 4) East Charlotte is unfamiliar territory to young people who live, work, go to school, and worship in Gaston County. A 30-minute drive from Gastonia to Lincolnton or Shelby seems like a much shorter distance than a 30-minute drive to Charlotte because the cultural affinities are much greater from Gaston to Lincoln and Cleveland counties than they are from Gaston to Mecklenburg County. As with people of any age, young adults are less

likely to participate in experiences if they are unfamiliar with the setting or people involved.

Despite all of these factors working against the mission project being a strong component of the ministry project, I believe it will result in a greater awareness of cross-cultural ministry in the months and years ahead. The door is open for our church to have greater involvement in the soccer league and begin to build bridges with different immigrant communities. These types of ministry involvements in churches seldom take off without a pastor to catalyze that process.

Assessment of Meeting Locations

NextGen Venturers met in four different locations over the course of six weeks. Weeks 1 and 4 were located in a large downstairs apartment located in the home of a lay leader in Venture church. Weeks 2 and 5 were located in a wood paneled Sunday School classroom at a traditional 1970s-era brick Baptist church that graciously allowed us to use their facility. Since the town of Dallas does not have a coffee shop or comparable venue located nearby, Week 3 took place at a coffee shop in a town about ten miles from Venture's building. Week 6 featured a cookout at my home where we were able to meet as a group on my back patio around a bonfire.

The furnishings in Weeks 1 and 4 featured sofas, plush chairs, kitchen chairs, and no tables in the commons area. The church classroom features four long tables arranged in a rectangle with cushioned folding chairs surrounding the outside so that participants can face each other. The coffee shop setting was an outdoor table with

chairs between the main entrance and the parking lot. My house featured an outdoor table with plush chairs as well as a concrete bench and metal folding chairs.

The variety of locations served as an overall advantage over meeting in the same location every week. First of all, no host experienced burnout when his home was only used twice over six weeks. Secondly, with participants living up to twenty-five miles apart, moving locations meant that no one felt like they were geographically “out of the loop.” Thirdly, we were able to gain insight as to which types of locations made this group of young adults most and least comfortable and most open to spiritual growth.

Each week the participants were asked to give a 1-10 scale assessment on the effectiveness of the meeting location for making it easy to learn as well as in helping the participant connect to other people in the group. The three meeting locations in homes scored an average of 9.6 out of 10 in making an environment easy to learn and 9.7 out of 10 in helping people connect to others. There was no statistical difference between the two homes. The coffee shop scored a 7.83 in both measures. The church Sunday school classroom had an average score of 7.7 in both measures. The difference in how the setting impacted learning and connecting showed no statistical difference in any week. There was also no statistically significant difference between being located in a traditional church building versus a coffee shop. There was a twenty percent statistical difference in the advantage of meeting in homes versus the more public types of locations. There seems to be an intrinsic value in leaders offering hospitality to group participants.

The comments regarding the group locations that I received on the surveys generally regarded either the availability of food, the comfort of the temperature or the distance that participants have to travel to get to the group location. In two surveys, I asked if participants would be less likely to attend a group in a setting where food was available for purchase. Approximately 40% of respondents to that question indicated that purchasing food might make them less likely to attend a group. Others said they would come even if they couldn't afford food. I mitigated that factor in Week Three by purchasing drinks for two participants who came but did not immediately purchase a coffee. If planning to visit a coffee shop, I found it helpful to have a small budget to keep anyone from feeling excluded if they lacked money for a coffee drink. One participant commented the week of the cookout that we were short on food. Week six was the highest attended week, and I didn't anticipate having the number of people come to the cookout who came.

The two homes used for group meetings were each seven miles away from Venture Church. The traditional church is located three miles away from Venture. One of my lowest attended group sessions was week three, which also happened to be the coffee shop ten miles away from Venture Church's location. This was in spite of the fact that the group overall had been excited about the idea of meeting in a coffee shop. Among the six who attend week three, two were late and one person wrote that the location was too far away. A NextGen Venturers meeting in November at a coffee shop location indoors and only four miles away from the Hub had twice as many participants as the meeting in week three.

One surprising thing about the young adults that generally differs from older adults is their transportation habits. Most of our participants will carpool to meetings. Only a small minority arrive alone. A life group composed of adults in their thirties to fifties carpooling is almost non-existent. Because of transportation, proximity to a central location for group participants was a much bigger factor in group participation for very young adults than I anticipated. Location seems to be an even bigger factor than furnishings or the “traditional” feel. Only one respondent commented negatively on the church classroom, and that comment was negative about it being a classroom, not negative about it being at a church.

Assessment of the Group Leader

The anonymous weekly surveys each carried a question asking group participants to assess my preparedness as a group leader. In addition to preparation, a group leader must also lead the discussion in such a way as to provoke thinking and generate discussion from the participants. He or she must also facilitate an environment of discussion that gives participants a sense of emotional security where they can be honest enough to contribute to the discussion. The group leader, more than any other individual, has the responsibility for the spiritual and emotional safety of the group. When people are disrespected or have trust violated in any way, it is the group leader’s responsibility to call out and put a stop to that line of discussion.

Part of my growth as a small group leader is to assess how young adults felt about my leadership of the group. Since this group is a voluntary association, and

young adults of this age seldom feel a sense of duty to participate in classes simply because the church is offering them, part of my evaluation is whether or not young adults would continue to choose to attend the group. I also consider part of my success in whether or not participants contribute meaningfully to the conversations each week. Finally, I will look at the numerical scores that participants anonymously give to the three questions that pertain to the performance of the group leader.

The upward trajectory of attendance throughout the six weeks of the project told me that participants found value in the group, felt welcome to the group, were learning enough to consider the group a worthwhile use of their time, and thought the benefits could be extended enough to invite friends along with them. Since this was a new group and all of the participants were not previously part of a clique, the effectiveness of the leader is a big part of helping attendance to grow and stabilize. Six of the eighteen unique group participants were not originally invited to the group but came because they were friends with an attendee who thought enough of the benefit of the group to invite and bring a friend. I take this as a positive sign that I fulfilled my role to both teach and create a space where attendees felt socially, emotionally, and spiritually safe.

I rely on field notes taken after each session to gauge the level of engagement in conversation and assess how my leadership furthered or hindered the openness of dialogue and its contribution to encouraging thoughts about spiritual growth. My notes after the very first session reflect a surprise at the level of openness, honesty and engagement with the text of *Pilgrim's Progress*. This was the smallest (six) and least diverse (all male) of the attendees to any session, I was nonetheless blown away with their openness to each other. All six participants engaged in sharing thoughts in the

conversation. When we discussed Christian's faltering in the Slough of Despond, the majority of the group admitted to their own battles with depression. There was even discussion of how depression interfaced with suicide attempts, bullying, and sexual identity for some participants.

This first session set the tone for openness in dialogue that was experienced for each of the following five sessions. Even as we added new faces and had a greater presence of young ladies to join in the group, the level of openness to discuss personal difficulties in the context of a Biblical spiritual journey remained just as strong as it did in the first session. I identify several of my own actions as a group leader in facilitating this level of openness and learning.

I began the first session by getting participants verbally to agree to two basic non-negotiable ground rules: treat each other with respect and maintain confidentiality of things shared in the group setting. At no point in the course of the project did I sense anyone coming close to breaking those ground rules. I also made a point to speak to each person as they entered the group, get to know their names, and make eye contact with all people when I asked questions in the course of the discussion. When participants at times became wordy or repetitive in their answers, I would make a point gently to say "let's see what others might have to say about this." The one time that I can identify as a failure in my duties of facilitating discussion was in the fourth session when I allowed one of our adult leaders to spend too much time telling stories about shooting a dog and meeting Mike Huckabee in the 1970s. They were very compelling and interesting stories, but they were not germane to the purpose for which the group was meeting that night.

In the numerical rubrics that participants gave my performance as leader, I am pleased with the overall result. I am especially pleased that the numbers participants gave for the discussion being thought-provoking only increased as the weeks moved forward. While I did not expect a strong critique from a group of very young adults on my performance as a leader, I do believe they have a strong awareness of how performance affected them and their learning experience in the group. My average score for preparedness as a leader ranged from 9.7 to 10 each week. My average score for the discussion being thought provoking fell below 9.3 only in Week 1, when it was an 8.3. The average score for participants feeling safe and respected ranged from 9.4 to 10.

Assessment of the Curriculum

A core function of life group ministry is to give participants intellectual tools that can result in spiritual growth. *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been such a tool in my own life as well as the lives of I sincerely hoped that doing a curriculum on *The Pilgrim's Progress* would motivate some of the young adult participants to take time to read the material.

I suspected in beginning this group that all participants would not be equally enthusiastic about reading a book and having to do "homework" for the group. For that reason, I did not make homework mandatory for participation in the group. I felt that a mandatory workload would be counterproductive to the mission of the group, which is to engage young adults in thinking about spiritual discipleship and to better connect

them to the church community. I simply would not be able to accomplish those goals if mandatory reading prevented young adults from being willing to attend the group.

I am disappointed that the average score for participants' assessments of their own preparation for the group each week ranged between 2.3 and 5.3 out of ten points. In discussing the curriculum with potential participants before the group, I expected that three would be heavily engaged in reading the whole text beforehand. It turns out from the weekly survey that one participant was consistently prepared every week while three others were well prepared at least some weeks. The other participants likely did little or no reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* outside of the group time.

Despite my disappointment, I do not consider the lack of pre-reading of the text to have undermined the objectives of the group. I postulated that *Pilgrim's Progress* had very little familiarity to this generation of people, and that proved to be true. Only one participant indicated that he was familiar with the text, and that was because it had been mandatory reading in his home school English literature curriculum. The participant who did take the time to pre-read the text made a comment every week about how he was challenged in his own Christian journey by doing so. Almost all other participants indicated that they walked away seeing the relevance of a 350-year-old allegory to their personal lives today. If group participants were given a tool that they may choose to read and further engage at a point further on their lives, that makes the assigned curriculum to be a worthwhile investment.

The nature of the target audience of NextGen Venturers would be young adults who may not be enrolled in formal education beyond high school and may not have plans to do so. I cannot assume in writing or teaching curriculum that the participants

would desire or even have the skills to engage with *The Pilgrim's Progress* as an academic-style exercise. At the same time, I have a foundational belief that young people should be challenged intellectually every time they are in a teaching environment about faith. Striking the right balance between these two concerns would be very important in the writing and presentation of curriculum.

The weekly survey asked participants to assess whether the teaching material was written in such a way that the participants found it to be understandable. The average of those responses each week bounced between a 9.5 and 10 on the 10-point scale. I did have one comment made on the survey from Week 5 that the reading was too long and could possibly be broken up over multiple weeks.

In addition to intellectual/academic challenges, I believe that any group that has Christianity as a subject matter ought also to serve to strengthen faith for the participants. The weekly survey asked participants to score how the teaching material made them to think about their relationships with God that week. The average rubric given for that response ranged between 7.8 and 9.4. This question received lower scores than the others because one participant consistently rated that question from 2 to 5 each week. That participant gave no written feedback concerning the teaching material, so it is impossible to gather what might have made the curriculum to be more thought-provoking about matters of faith for that individual. The individual did comment on the survey in Week 4 that the group is awesome and he/she feels comfortable discussing anything with them.

As stated in previous chapters, the mission of Venture Church is “to engage those far from God with the Gospel to know and follow Christ.” Everything done under

the auspices of Venture Church ought to have a direct purpose in fulfilling that mission. If NextGen Venturers is an opportunity to train leaders for the future of Venture, then I ought to be able to help them to see how these types of ministry activities fit into the broader mission of life as a church body. This sense of the broader mission of the church will also help young adults realize that they are not disconnected or forgotten by the body of believers.

The final question asked each week in the questionnaire is whether the participants are able to see a connection between the meeting of NextGen Venturers and the mission of Venture Church. The average rubric score over the six weeks of the project ranged from 8.8 out of 10 to 10 out of 10. I take this as a strong indication that the participants understand that this group is exactly the type of thing that Venture Church wants attendees to participate in and will continue to support these types of efforts.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Every movement must eventually come to terms with its own demise or find a way to incorporate future generations. Sacred Scripture as well as the proud history of the Christian church informs us that it is a durable and flexible movement that God designed to remain across nations and generations until the appearing of Jesus Christ on the earth. As we take a look at the decline of professed Christian faith as well as the shuttering of many individual churches, we must evaluate each and every aspect of church ministry to determine how it translates to become part of the lives of younger people in our communities.

Technology has radically altered social norms in twenty-first century life, and these changes are most pronounced among people who are younger than twenty-four. Relationships for this age group are no longer defined by regular spatial proximity. Virtual persons do not often correspond with actual persons, and few people are able to differentiate between the two. Long form books are not often read outside of a forced educational setting. Ministry to young adults must be cognizant of these changes in norms.

Ministry, however, should not be dictated by changes in norms. This is especially true when those norms are making relational community more difficult. Something about the life of the church must prove to be compelling to the iPhone Generation if it is to be a viable movement over the next twenty years. Every church

has the same compelling story today that it has offered for two thousand years. The church is a diverse mosaic of individuals spiritually bound together on a journey to know and follow Christ and be progressively transformed into his likeness. It is mandatory for every church to translate this story to be told anew to its children, teenagers, and young adults.

If I were teaching this curriculum again, I would certainly want to do more to encourage the group to read *The Pilgrim's Progress*. That may, however, be a near-impossible task. No one at any point of our six-week conversations mentioned any other books that had been reading for their own intellectual enrichment. Because the group was not made of students seeking liberal arts degrees, none of them were enrolled in courses for English literature or Western civilization that would force them to read old texts.

In retrospect, I should have made more of an accommodation for the fact that this was not a group of young adults who were seeking four-year college degrees. I should have expected that there would be little interest in reading the text of *The Pilgrim's Progress* outside of group time. My study curriculum might have engaged this audience more effectively if we had read carefully selected paragraphs from the text together in the group setting. We could have focused our discussion more narrowly on the selections that everybody in the group had the opportunity to read together.

I know after doing this project that there are topics in *The Pilgrim's Progress* that young adults identify as highly relevant to twenty-first century life. It would be a simple change to highlight and read those passages as a group while allowing the leader to put those in the context of the broader narrative. This would also allow the smaller

number of group participants who want to engage more heavily in reading the entire book to do so without precluding the majority of the group from any discussing. I could have set aside fifteen minutes for a phone call during the week to talk one-on-one to the participant who was reading the book cover-to-cover. Those conversations would have enriched the group discussion times.

A timeless allegory about a spiritual journey has been a fascinating means of portraying the work of the church to a small group of young people. The NextGen Venturers group identified with nearly all of the underlying spiritual challenges that the *Pilgrim's Progress* presents. They were quite open with each other about their lives, even though there was an even mixture of old friends and new acquaintances. The limited diversity of our group demonstrated to everyone involved that we each have enough in common in our spiritual journeys that we can gain insight and encouragement from a wide range of people.

Because the core of our NextGen Venturers group was a group of young men who had pre-existing friendships, we did not get to experiment how diversifying the group by gender would impact the dynamics. The young men were more likely to invite their friends to the group and the young women who came typically came alone. Would a group that was 50% female instead of 25% female affect the openness of the young men? Would the young women feel more empowered to speak their minds if they had greater numbers in the group? If I were putting a group together again, I would have sought to find more ways to increase the presence of young women. Recruiting a female co-leader at the beginning of the project instead of midway through the project could have greatly affected the outcomes.

The fact that our core group of young men did not invite young women to be part of the group is likely because they do not have many close relationships with females. I regrettably was not able to measurably observe an improvement in communication and listening skills in the participants of NextGen Venturers. While our young men may have been less open with their personal struggles in a more mixed-gendered group, I believe the opportunity to improve communication skills could have been a benefit to such a group. Venture Church also needs a more gender-balanced group so that we can more equally engage men and women in the mission of making disciples.

Service to the community is a professed value that is given great lip-service by many in the emerging generations. Most high school and college diplomas now carry a requirement for volunteerism that is usually endorsed as a good component by the students. The two weeks that I spoke about service to refugee and immigrant communities to the group, they professed great support for the idea of missions as volunteer service. However, the level of actual participation in the Saturday of volunteer service ministry had a much higher level of participation from the older adult leaders than it did from the young adults.

The mission project in East Charlotte seemed to be compelling to everyone with whom it was discussed. There was even a church partner of about thirty years old who participated despite his having no connection to NextGen Venturers. I cannot conclude from this project that the lack of action on missions is due to the generation of the participants in NextGen Venturers. It could also be due to a lack of outward focus in the general blue-collar community from which the participants come, a lack of

emphasis on global mission in the recent history of Venture Church, or that a mission thirty minutes away is less exciting than an overnight trip to a different state or country.

Because of the professed values of the iPhone generation as well as the mandate for the church to be going into all the world, I would not scrap the missions component of this project if I were given the opportunity. A ministry of making disciples should always actively involve its participants in leaving their comfort zones to make other disciples. Perhaps this is an area in which some tough love from me as a leader could have challenged the young adults to be more sacrificial with their time and be more willing to cross cultural boundaries to serve people who are not like them. Every church in every context should be looking for these types of opportunities in which to engage their young people.

The iPhone Generation is the most directly marketed-to generation in history, so there has been a certain amount of savvy in reaction against marketing that seems like marketing. Marketing is not the most critical factor in the discipleship of young adults. Venture Church is above average in the skill, time, and money it typically spends toward marketing. Marketing has proven to be very effective at communicating with and attracting adults who are over age 30 or who have children. None of that usual effort was taken in promoting NextGen Venturers. Every person who participated in NextGen Venturers did so because he or she had a personal relationship and invitation from a group leader or participant. Perhaps a little more of the marketing we use to appeal to older church attenders could have at least broadened the number of potential group members who were female.

NextGen Venturers was a success at capturing the attention of a small group of technologically infused young adults. Authentic community that challenges young adults to connect with God is a welcome reprieve from the everyday social landscape. Small group community plays a critical role in connecting young adults to the ancient practices and beliefs that make up historical Christianity.

The Pilgrim's Progress proved to be a text with relevant topics that captured the attention of iPhoners. Their engagement with the group, however, was not solely because of the curriculum we used. NextGen Venturers continued to meet and thrive in the weeks after we finished the project because the participants valued the opportunity to meet together and honestly discuss matters of faith and life. Any curriculum that prompts honest conversation in such a way as to point participants back to the biblical text for answers will be effective. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was interesting to me because it allowed me to connect the faith of today to the faith of previous generations. Such a connection is not necessarily as important to people in their early adult years as it might be later on in life, but it does give them a sense that there is a timelessness to the Christian faith.

While each church has different styles, peculiarities, and demographics, I believe that every church can and should make an effort at small group ministry to its iPhone generation young adults. I will even assert that some form of targeted small group discipleship ministry is absolutely critical for any church that has any design on surviving the passage of the Baby Boomers and Generation X.

The critical factor to making a small-group discipleship ministry for the iPhone generation successful has to be laid at the feet of the quality and preparation of the

leaders of such a ministry. A church should search for and develop leaders for young adults that embody the following characteristics: hospitable, generous with time, Biblically and theologically knowledgeable, spiritually mature, not easily shocked, respected, compassionate, a good listener, and able to direct conversation without dominating conversation. In short, these need to be men and women who are absolutely convinced of the Great Commission necessity of passing the faith from generation-to-generation.

A pastor may not easily be able to identify these types of leaders in his church. He may need to begin the small group discipleship himself and then train someone for such a role as he is himself fulfilling that role. He should also remember that of all the demographic groups in a church, young adults 18-23 years of age will be the most primed to assume new leadership roles in the near future. Investing in them is absolutely critical for growing the capacity of a church's ministry. I was reminded of this as I saw several of the young men in NextGen Venturers express a renewed commitment and vigor for their own volunteer services at Venture Church.

I was often surprised at the level of candor with which iPhone generation participants were willing to discuss personal issues that would be considered taboo for a group conversation of people even as young as their thirties. Part of a leader's commitment to hospitality and spiritual maturity needs to lie in the fact that he or she is responsible for the spiritual and emotional safety of the group environment. Our group readily accepted the ground rules of not trying to "fix" each other and not talking about each other's issues outside of the group. An attitude of judgment or shock can diminish the openness of dialogue in a group setting. Participants were emotionally moved by

some of the life experiences that peers shared in the group setting, but they were able to use that to build a system of trust and mutual support.

No church should assume that it is college-aged young adults will simply transition from children's and student ministry to the same social group discipleship settings to which middle aged and senior adults are accustomed. Having age diversity in every discipleship ministry should be an ultimate goal. The flexibility for mature leaders to listen and converse on the terms of the newer generation will ensure that the church continues to be a disciple-making movement for generations to come. My experience with adding a volunteer co-leader to the group demonstrated that vital role that leaders with a calling play in the success of ministry to young adults. She has been a real spiritual mother-figure to the group ever since. Her father has been a mentor to some of the young men in the group as well. Their involvement has reinforced my belief that a team of leaders is vitally important to the success of ministry.

The most logical place for a pastor to find the type of leadership necessary to start a small group similar to NextGen Venturers should be amongst the empty-nest and senior adults in the church. People who have had many years of commitment to the faith and to a particular church should have both a strong competence in biblical Christianity and a desire to see the faith and the church continue beyond their lives. A seasoned leader with the time to give to the group, a commitment to hospitality, the posture to continually learn new things about the faith, and a demonstrated ability to listen and ask questions to younger people could successfully lead such a group in most contexts. Polling, as well as my experience with NextGen Venturers, show that young

adults crave real interaction with older generations. Experience with iPhones is not required.

APPENDIX A

Pre-Project/Post-Project Interview

- 1) What is your gender?
- 2) Which describe you? (You can answer more than one) A) Community or technical college student B) Full-time employee C) Part-time employee D) Entrepreneur E) Non-traditional student F) Unemployed/Searching for Employment
- 3) Do you consider yourself to be active in church?
- 4) How long have you been active in church?
- 5) Are you a church member/partner?
- 6) Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?
- 7) How long have you been a Christian?
- 8) What makes a person a Christian?
- 9) On a scale of 1-10, do you consider your relationship with God to be weak or strong?
- 10) Over the past six weeks, how many times per week have you prayed alone? Prayed with somebody else? Fasted? Read the Bible devotionally? Talked about faith with another person? Given money to church/charity? Volunteered at church/community?
- 11) How many people at church do you consider to be friends?
- 12) Over the past six weeks, how many times per week have you had some sort of contact with a person from your church outside of church?
- 13) How many of those contacts have been through social media? By phone, text, or e-mail? In person? Incidental to some other activity (i.e. you always see them at work/school)?
- 14) In your own words, what does it mean that faith is a journey?

APPENDIX B

Post-Session Survey Week 1,2,3,4,5,6

Agree with each statement on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree:

I prepared for this session by reading/listening to the material for the week.

The leader was well-prepared for this session. _____

The teaching material is written so that I find it understandable. _____

The teaching material made me think about my relationship with God this week.

I felt safe and respected in the group this week. _____

The discussion tonight was thought-provoking. _____

The location and setting of this meeting helped make it easy to learn. _____

The location of this meeting helped me to connect to other people in the group.

I see a connection between this meeting and the mission of Venture Church.

APPENDIX C

Pilgrim's Progress for the iPhone Age**Session 1- September 14**

Pilgrim's Progress was written by an interesting and unique preacher named John Bunyan all the way back in the late 1600s. He wrote it while he served one of his many jail sentences in Bedford, England, for preaching without a license from the government. After much soul searching he gave into the requests of some of his friends and published the book in the year 1678. Since that date there has only been one book in the English language printed more widely than **Pilgrim's Progress**, and that is the Bible.

This book has obviously been a source of deep spiritual questioning, inspiration, and encouragement for many generations of English-speaking Christians, but it has curiously fallen out of interest in the past two generations or so. A big part of the reason might be that business of Christian literature has exploded with many options that have simply crowded out a book that is 350 years old.

I remember being taught **Pilgrim's Progress** exactly one time in children's church growing up, but I remember being drawn to the story with that one brief exposure when I was around six or seven years old. My interest renewed when I studied it as a major course textbook on the theology of the Puritans at Southeastern Seminary in 2009. As a general rule in Christian life I believe that we have the most to learn from books and texts that have been meaningful to many people across many generations. If I accomplish nothing else in these six weeks I will have succeeded if I inspire you to read the classics of Christian literature alongside things that are written today.

Do you have any previous familiarity with the Pilgrim's Progress?

Why do you think people today know less about the book than people did 100 years ago?

Are you apprehensive about reading and discussing a book that is so old?

The City of Destruction

The first thing to know about *Pilgrim's Progress* is that it is an allegory. It is a fictional story that uses symbols to represent Biblical truths. The allegorical method of teaching is likely why so many people throughout generations have identified with *Pilgrim's Progress*. A world-famous preacher in the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon, read through the **Pilgrim's** at least once a year. He identified the book so closely with the Bible that he said "If you cut Bunyan anywhere he will bleed Bible."

The narrative begins with a man who is holding a book and has become deeply troubled about the pending destruction of the town in which he lives. The book has

apparently given him knowledge that no one else seems to have or even care about. The man is derided even by his own family as something of a lunatic.

In addition to the book he is introduced to an important figure known as Evangelist. Evangelist is helping the man to make sense of the book and help him to answer the question “so what do I need to do about it.” The quote is actually from a couple of stories in the book of Acts where men asked apostles “What must I do to be saved?” Evangelist is modeled after the pastor who was influential to pointing Bunyan to faith in Christ when he himself was a young man. Evangelist is not a constant companion in Pilgrim’s Progress, but he will appear at critical points in the story.

What does it feel like to be out of step with everyone around you, including your own family? How do you think that God sometimes leads people to “not fit in?”

Was the man’s terror a good thing or not? Why?

What is the role of the book and the evangelist? Do they play a role in your life?

Why can the man not see the wicket gate yet? How does Evangelist guide him toward something he cannot yet see? What is the significance?

Was it a good thing for the man to leave his family behind?

Obstinate, Pliable, and the Slough of Despond

As the man leaves the city he meets two other folks. Obstinate and Pliable represent two common responses that people might get as they begin on a spiritual journey. It’s only after he meets Obstinate that we find out the man’s name is Christian. Obstinate is nothing but discouraging toward Christian, Pliable is convinced to explore Christian’s journey a bit further.

We also become aware of a great burden on Christian’s back that is playing a major role in him seeking salvation. Their journey meets its first halt in a place called the Slough of Despond. This is a phrase that originated with Bunyan that has made its way into conversational English today.

Have you encountered Obstinate and Pliable among your own friends?

Why do you think that different people respond differently to your faith journey?

What is the Slough of Despond? Have you heard people talk about their own?

Why did Pliable give up so easily? Would it have been easier in the long-run to continue forward?

Was the Slough of Despond as dangerous as Christian and Pliable thought when they were in the midst of it? Why could Christian not find the steps? What do those steps represent?

How do you deal with depression? Do you have Help?

Mr. Worldly Wiseman and Legality

Mr. Worldly Wiseman comes along to present Christian with his first counterfeit Gospel. Remember that Christian has not yet come to the wicket-gate, so he can be easily tricked into believing the gate is actually something else. What Mr. Worldly Wiseman presents sounds a lot like religion and clean, beautiful and attractive. It frankly sounds a lot like a typical church.

We often don't find out about the true nature of danger until after we are through the danger and have time to reflect and analyze the situation in which we just found ourselves. This seems to be the case with Christian and Legality. He knows he is in danger only after his flight instincts kick in upon seeing the hill about to crush him and the weight still heavy upon his back. Only after Christian fears for his life is he able to hear Evangelists explanation on the difference between the path of salvation and the path of Mt. Sinai (for that is what the hill of Legality should remind us.)

What does legality look like in today's world?

How does it differ from the path that evangelist lays out?

When did Christian realize he was in trouble at the Hill of Legality?

Why do so many people get confused with morality and salvation?

What are some of the Biblical passages this scene reminds you of?

Think for next week about how you might describe your own spiritual journey in geographic terms.

Session 2- September 21

The Wicket Gate has been the object that Christian has set his sights upon for the past section. Bunyan is using very Biblical language from Jesus' mouth about the way of salvation. We in evangelical churches have often claimed that this is the pivotal, most important moment in any person's life. It is becoming apparent that it is also the most misunderstood moment.

I have talked to many Christians who are confident of their relationship with Christ but cannot point to a moment in time when that relationship began. Some people have no evidence or confidence that they are saved, but they hold onto the fact that they walked an aisle, said a prayer, shook a preacher's hand, or even were baptized at an early age. Many Christians like to debate what is the relationship between man's free will to enter the gate and God's role in bringing him through the gate. A lot of these issues will come up through the course of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Two things I want to note here: 1) Goodwill gives Christian the opportunity to recount and make sense of his spiritual journey up to this point. 2) The fact that the place of deliverance is still ahead seems to give us the belief that salvation should be thought about as a process more

than a one-time event. A lot of this reflects Bunyan's own testimony as told in *Grace Abounding*, his autobiography.

Does Bunyan address the role of freewill and God's work at salvation (the Wicket Gate)?

Is Beelzebub effective by setting up a castle near the Wicket Gate?

What do you think that Goodwill means by saying he is willing with all his heart for Christian to enter?

Would Christian have made it inside if Goodwill had not pulled him in?

The Interpreter's House is personally my favorite part of Christian's journey. There is so

Much rich truth here that we could spend six weeks just on this section. Here is a list of the visions that Christian sees in Interpreters House:

- 1) The portrait of a "one-in-a-thousand" pastor.
- 2) Law and Grace Cleansing the dirty room.
- 3) Patience and Passion
- 4) The inextinguishable fire of faith
- 5) The persevering pilgrim
- 6) The man in the iron cage
- 7) The impending judgement

Explain why each of these pictures at Interpreter's House is important for understanding the Christian spiritual journey?

After Interpreter's House is when Christian finally comes with some difficulty to the cross to have the burden removed from his back. This marks a moment of transformation in Christian's life and a real sense of joy in the story. I think it's interesting to note that this is still near the beginning of the journey, but if you heard the common church testimony it would be the end. He loses the burden and has it replaced with a scroll.

Christian meets with some more characters who could easily sidetrack him from the intended path. They are Simple, Sloth, Presumption, Formalist, and Hypocrisy. These are people that many Christians will encounter on their faith journeys.

Which of the scenes and characters do you believe to be the most compelling? Why?

Which ones are the most dangerous?

How does Christian recognize folks like Formalist and Hypocrisy who don't come by the wicket gate?

Is Christian narrow-minded in his view that Formalist and Hypocrisy did not come in the right way?

What does Christian have that they don't?

Take time now to complete your own spiritual map up to the present time. You may choose any of the regional maps that you believe provides terrain that allows you to describe your spiritual journey. Look for things like beaches, mountains, cities, towns, deserts, forest, and plains. How can these relate to experiences in your own life? We will take the rest of our time tonight and next week to share those.

Session 3- September 28

If there were an element in American Christianity that I believe is the most misunderstood I would say that it is the church. We are such an individualistic personal-salvation-focused culture that we have missed most of the corporate aspects of worship. This next session is wildly important because it focuses on Christian's introduction to the church.

John Bunyan lived in a day in age when religion actually somewhat resembled the religious landscape of today. He came of age during the English Civil War where people for the first time in history had options to decide for themselves what they wanted to believe. Prior to this you belonged to the church that the King of England decided everyone would belong to. This led to all sorts of churches and faith communities gaining acceptance. Some groups have died off, but you may be familiar with others (levelers, diggers, Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians). Bunyan is propagating a view of church that was known in his day as "Non-conformist." Today we use the terms Free Church or Baptist to describe the church that Bunyan was advocating. Here are the principles of a Free Church:

- 1) The church is locally governed
- 2) Not officially tied to a government sanction
- 3) People are not required to be members based on where they are born
- 4) Only those who are true Christians are a part of the church
- 5) The church determines who gives evidence of being a true Christian

Free and Baptistic churches became the norm in America in the 1800s, but we have to remember that these were still revolutionary concepts in the 1600s. Bunyan was in jail, where he wrote Pilgrim's Progress, essentially because he refused to compromise on the principles of non-Conformity (free churches). It was only when the establishment clause was written in the Constitution over 100 years later, drawing on Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, that the idea of a free church became the law of any sovereign nation.

Christian's path leads him up the Hill Difficulty. He meets with some characters who try to convince him to take paths around the hill. We come to find out that the easy path is the path that leads to destruction, so Christian begins up the hill. He needs a rest but ends up falling asleep and losing something very important to him.

Why is the Hill of Difficulty a necessary part of every journey?

What do you think that the scroll represents?

Why could Christian not proceed until he had recovered the scroll?

Christian is behind schedule but proceeds upward. He realizes that he won't reach his destination before nightfall. This feeling is further complicated by meeting Timorous and Mistrust coming the other way. They were scared away by the Lions that prowled at the entrance to the house beautiful.

Why was Christian able to walk past the lions that had scared away Timorous and Mistrust?

Why would God use these Lions at the gate of the palace?

How many people did Christian have to talk to in order to gain entrance to the palace?

Why do you think the Palace was such an important stop on Christian's journey?

Why were people so protective of entrance in to the palace?

What is the church?

What role does/should the church play in your own journey?

How is it that Christian gets his first glimpse of the celestial city from the bedroom of the church?

The Palace was important in Christian's case because it is where he was equipped to face the valley of humiliation and Apollyon. The important point about Apollyon was that Christian had to face him head-on. To turn around and run would be to have certain defeat. Apollyon focuses his attack on making Christian give up, because he knows that when Christian is equipped with the armor of God he can't lose as long as he fights.

John Owen, a friend of Bunyan's has a famous quote that relates to Christian's fight with Apollyon: "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

Do you think Christian battle with Apollyon is a valid metaphor for struggles with sin? Why or Why not?

Have you experienced the verbal attacks that Apollyon gives?

At what point was Christian able to make Apollyon flee?

What does this say about our own ability to "fight?"

The Valley of Humiliation is immediately followed up with the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's interesting that when Christian later catches up to Faithful that they have completely different experiences in going through these twin valleys.

What were the two pitfalls for Christian in the Valley of the Shadow of Death?

Have you ever experienced the confusion and self-blame that Christian experienced?

What do you make of the bad report that Christian got of old Pliable?

Do you feel sorry for Pliable?

What was the old man who nearly enslaved Faithful at the Hill of Difficulty?

Why do you think Christian and Faithful had different struggles?

Have you ever met Shame or Moses?

Why do the pilgrims say that Shame is shameless?

Session 4- October 5

If we have learned up to this point the things that make a true Christian and a true church, the section for this week deals with how those theoretical doctrines are practically put to use when the rubber hits the road. Bunyan masterfully deals with the temptations that prevent Christians from putting their spiritual faith into physical action.

We are introduced to a character who we are led to disdain. His name is Talkative. Talkative has fooled Faithful into believing that he is a pilgrim just like Christian and Faithful. Only when Faithful gets Christian's opinion of Talkative's good talk does he begin to know the truth. Christian was acquainted with Talkative back in their hometown. Talkative has always been known religious talk, but his family and his neighbors knew that his way of living did not match his talk. All of us have probably met Talkative. Unfortunately, we have often been Talkative as well. The truth of our world is that there is a lot of religious talk, but very little Godly action.

Why is Talkative so damaging to other people's spiritual journeys?

Why was Faithful initially deceived by Talkative?

What did Christian tell Faithful to ask Talkative to know whether or not he was just a religious talker?

Why does this generation react so strongly to people who talk the talk but don't walk the walk?

We can safely say that Christian and Faithful did not gain a friend in their response to Talkative. Many of us might even say that they were rude. Bunyan wants us to begin to see that Christian is gaining a quality of discernment as he progresses in his journey. They next encounter their old friend Evangelist, who has an important message of encouragement. His message will both prophecy what will take place for them in Vanity Fair as well as steel their resolve to face it. One gets the sense that The Pilgrim's ability to withstand Vanity Fair at this point in the journey is much greater than it would have been when they first set out.

What are some of your favorite Scriptural references in Evangelist's message?

Why is Evangelist such a critical figure in their lives even after they have passed through the Wicket Gate?

Vanity Fair is a term that is still a part of our modern vernacular. I find it interesting that its context today is not the negative one that Bunyan intended to give it. Perhaps this should be expected. Bunyan's view of the world is very much at odd with the world's view of itself. This should be apparent in his extended discourse of Vanity Fair. One of the genius things that Bunyan does is that it makes Vanity Fair a broad enough place to encompass the experience of all Christians at all times in history. He states that the fair is year-round, and that it has many streets worth of vendors to appeal to the appetites of people with many different dispositions from many different backgrounds. The common theme of the whole place is summed up as temptation.

I personally love the idea that there are different streets for people from different countries. My life experience is unique and different from the experience of people from other backgrounds. Nevertheless, the principles of Vanity Fair remain the same. Just because most people in England in the 1670s were not tempted to follow the Pope did not mean that they weren't tempted to follow something else that might replace Christ. Faithful gives us a model in how he walked through Vanity Fair with humility, steadfastness, and a sense of purpose. He and Christian were not looking for confrontation, but they received confrontation nonetheless.

Which vivid imagery of Vanity Fair stands out the most to you?

Do you think Bunyan is Puritanical in the worst sense of the word, or is he correct in his view of worldly pleasures?

Do you think he is correct that different people are tempted differently?

What is the significance of the fact the Blessed One passed through here?

Why do the pilgrims seem so strange to the townspeople?

Why do the townspeople react violently to the pilgrims?

Do you see any comparison between Vanity Fair and modern American consumerism?

Faithful goes through a trial where the verdict seemed to have been given before the it even started. Even though it seemed like a fair trial, the personalities and values of the judge and jury made them his opposition. He was misconstrued, misrepresented, and lied about. All of this goes back to the fact that he was very different from the townspeople. We must also remember that Bunyan is writing this from Prison. He likely felt that he didn't get a fair shake from the civil authorities in his own life.

Where in Scripture do you see the persecution promised that Faithful received?

Do you admire Faithful, or think that he acted a bit foolishly in not preserving his own life? How could he have preserved his own life?

God provides Christian with a new companion. They encounter a man by the name of By-ends. By-ends and his friends represent what might be called a sort of fair-weather civil Christianity. This is the type of Christianity that we see very commonly in the Bible Belt.

How has God been faithful in providing new friends when you need them?

- Does By-ends feel like Christianity in the South? Why or why not?**
Is it a fair criticism to say that some people use Christianity to get ahead in the world?
How do you feel about the fact that belonging to a religion does have practical advantages?
Should we eschew those advantages or embrace them?
What do you make of Bunyan's criticism of ambition?
How do those pastors contrast with the pastor back at Interpreter's house?

Session 5- October 12

By this point you may have picked up on a distinct pattern of ease followed by difficulty throughout *Pilgrim's Progress*. This week we will see that the difficulties get progressively worse, but Christian's enjoyment of the easy times seems to grow greater as the journey progresses.

The plain of ease before the hill of lucre is a very brief period. Bunyan calls it "enjoyable but narrow." It is immediately followed by a period of temptation. The temptation comes from a character named Demas to stop and go down into the mine to "strike it rich in silver." Hopeful is nearly persuaded to go, but Christian seems to have the experience by this point to see Demas for who he is. Christian knows that the group travelling with By-ends will go right into the mine, but that a true pilgrim must keep his eyes on the way forward. Demas is mentioned three times in the letters of Paul. The third time (II Timothy) he is mentioned as someone who abandoned Paul because he loved the world.

Christian's foresight is vindicated when they come to a monument that seems to be set up as a warning for those who might follow the path of Lot's wife back in Genesis 19.

Is getting rich really conflicting with being diligent in your spiritual journey?

How should we view money?

How have you been tempted by money or things?

Is consumerism a powerful temptation even (or especially) for Christians?

What do you know about Lot's wife in the Genesis 19?

Why was her fate so severe?

Why do you think Bunyan related such a disturbing Biblical story to a contemporary pilgrim?

Despite Christian's discernment about the dangers of lucre, he next comes to a temptation that is more effective at snaring him. This is known as Bi-path meadow. The idea here is that there are two parallel paths on either side of a fence. They appear to go in the same direction, but one is well-kept and the other is difficult. This episode

continues Bunyan's focus on the Biblical theme of the wide way and the narrow path (Matthew 7).

As was the case in so many other instances, Christian and Hopeful saw others along this path (Vain-confidence) but could not necessarily discern if that person would indeed reach the Celestial City. There seems to be a great concern for Bunyan about whether many of these characters are true or false pilgrims. In case of Vain-confidence Christian is not able to see when he falls into a pit along the way.

When Christian and Hopeful later fall into the pit and deal with flood and misery, they are easy pickings to become prisoners of Giant Despair. This is a very interesting section where Bunyan deals with a very modern issue: suicide.

Like Apollyon, Despair's M.O. is to berate Christian into believing that he is a complete and total failure. He subjects Christian and Hopeful to days of physical, emotional, and spiritual torture. Christian takes the brunt of guilt for leading his friend, Hopeful, down the By-path and into harm's way. This guilt likely plays into the greater sense of despair that Christian faces at the hands of the Giant. The tortures seem to be an apt description of what people who deal with suicidal thoughts go through even today. It is interesting that Christian was much more subject to Despair's temptation than Hopeful. It is also interesting that only Christian had the key to get out of Despair's dark dungeon.

It's easy to imagine John Bunyan giving us a glimpse into his own mindset as he sat in prison year after year after year. Depression and suicide were certainly things that entered into his emotional state. Bunyan certainly felt that his key in getting out of the state of despair was close to his own heart. The Promises of faith ultimately are what Bunyan relies on to overcome depression and suicidal thoughts.

Why is Christian more affected by Giant Despair than Hopeful?

Would Christian have survived without Hopeful at his side?

Why are Christian friends so important to have nearby?

What do you agree with in Bunyan's assessment of suicide?

What do you disagree with about Bunyan's assessment?

Why does suicide continue to be a big issue, particularly for young people?

Would Bunyan change his opinion if he knew about modern psychiatry?

Do you think Bunyan's solution is too simple?

This section ends with another period of ease in the delectable mountains. This seems to be another commentary on the importance of the church. Christian also gains understanding of the things that could have happened to him had he not been restored to the path. There is a great distinction made between people who can see spiritually and those who are spiritually blind. This, interestingly, echoes a concern for blindness in the Gospels?

In today's world, how can a person have spiritual eyes?

Why are so many folks spiritually blind?

What is the role of the shepherds in helping Christian to gain understanding?

Who are the shepherds in your life?

Session 6- October 19

This is the final section as Christian and Hopeful make their way to the Celestial City. There are fewer and fewer trying events in this last section and many more long dialogues where Christian and Hopeful help each other to make sense of the journey as it draws to a close. The dialogue plays an important role when they cross the enchanted ground. If the pilgrims do not stay awake and alert they will be lulled into a sleep that will prevent them from reaching their destination.

The first character that Christian and Hopeful meet in this section is a man named Ignorance. Ignorance here is not used in the sense of meaning uneducated. The ignorance of which Bunyan speaks is a willful spiritual ignorance. It ignores the Word of God in favor of its own thoughts about God, which are usually out of sync. This type of ignorance is one that I believe pervades much of modern Christianity. We have more access to more education than any generation in history, and yet most of us give very little critical thought to the deeper spiritual things. We think that every thought we have about a given matter is valid because it is our thought- not because it is validated by an independent source. Think of the thoughts of ignorance as spiritual “fake news.” Everybody creates their own narrative and then rejects any nugget of information that might contradict their own pre-constructed narrative.

Where do you see ignorance at work in the lives of most modern Christians?

Do you think Bunyan is right to focus so much on the doctrine of original sin?

Why do modern people have such a difficult time with the Puritan concept of man as fundamentally evil?

The pilgrims recount an allegory between themselves of a man named Little-Faith who travelled alone and was robbed of all his money, minus some precious jewels, and made it to the Celestial City “by the skin of his teeth.” He constantly retold the story of how he was robbed and could not see the grace of God in keeping his jewels from being ransacked by the thieves. Christian and Hopeful have sharp argument about why Little-faith never sold his jewels and whether Little-faith could be compared to Esau for selling his birthright. The lesson from Bunyan is that not all who falter along the journey lose their salvation, but they do lose the assurance of their salvation and the joy that comes from following Christ.

How can you tell if someone has true faith, even if it is little faith?

What is the role of God’s grace in not simply “getting us saved” but in “keeping us saved?”

Christian and Hopeful are led off the path by a man named Flatterer, who the Shepherds had warned about. They were rescued by an angel, but also whipped in discipline so they would learn to be wary of such men. When another similar character named Atheist came down the road telling them that he had seen there was no Celestial City, Christian and Hopeful were not so easily led astray.

What does spiritual flattery look like in your life?

Why is flattery so hard to guard against?

Why does straight out atheism usually seem less compelling?

Why is it that the atheist in this story began as a pilgrim?

Do you think Christians are the ones most in danger of becoming atheists?

Why?

In order to pass time in crossing the enchanted land, Christian and Hopeful also recount their spiritual journeys to one another in great detail. Bunyan seems to suggest that this is the sort of spiritual conversation that ought to be encouraged. I am struck at how much Hopeful struggled within himself before he gained salvation. Hopeful spent some period of time pursuing the idea of repentance before he was convinced that he had attained it. When you put this dialogue with the scene of the valiant pilgrim at Interpreter's House and the necessity of putting up a fight against Satan, Bunyan seems to suggest that this struggle itself is a sign of the genuine nature of one's conversion.

Do you agree with the idea that a person can know the Gospel and yet still have deep struggles with whether or not he can actually be saved?

Why do you think Bunyan is concerned throughout the book with portraying the Christian life as a spiritual fight? Has this been true for you?

The final great struggle comes as Christian and hopeful pass through the river that symbolizes death. Hopeful has a very easy time crossing over while Christian very nearly drowns. The process of dying was a very present reality for most people in the 1600s, when someone was and old man if he made it to 50 years. This section has been a comfort to me as I have watched my own family members sometimes exhibit doubts as they were dying.

Do you often think of death?

What is the scariest part about death for you?

Are you more afraid of death for yourself or for your family?

Why do some people have an easier time with death?

Are you encouraged by Christian's experience with death?

Post Session Survey Week Two

Participant Number

QUESTION	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	AVG
I prepared for this session by reading/listening to the material for the week.	2		10	1	4	1	1		4	3	1	1				2.8
The leader was well-prepared for this session.	10		10	10	9	10	10	10	10	8	10	10				9.73
The teaching material is written so that I find it understandable.	10		10	10	9	10	10	10	9	8	8	10				9.45
The teaching material made me think about my relationship with God this week.	2		10	6	9	10	8	10	9	7	9	6				7.82
I felt safe and respected in the group this week.	10		10	10	9	10	10	10	10	9	8	10				9.64
The discussion tonight was thought-provoking.	10		10	8	10	9	10	10	10	8	7	10				9.27
The location and setting of this meeting helped make it easy to learn.	5		10	3	8	2	10	10	6	8	1	10				6.64
The location of this meeting helped me to connect to other people in the group.	5		10	1	8	10	10	10	5	7	5	8				7.18
I see a connection between this meeting and the mission of Venture Church.	10		10	10	8	10	10	10	9	8	5	8				8.91

Post Session Survey Week Four

Participant Number

QUESTION	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Avg.
I prepared for this session by reading/listening to the material for the week.	1		10	1		10	5					1		0	0	3.5
The leader was well-prepared for this session.	10		10	10		10	10					10		10	10	10
The teaching material is written so that I find it understandable.	10		10	10		10	10					10		10	10	10
The teaching material made me think about my relationship with God this week.	5		10	9		10	8					10		10	9	8.88
I felt safe and respected in the group this week.	10		10	10		10	10					8		10	10	9.75
The discussion tonight was thought-provoking.	10		10	10		10	10					10		8	10	9.75
The location and setting of this meeting helped make it easy to learn.	10		4	10		10	10					10		10	9	9.13
The location of this meeting helped me to connect to other people in the group.	10		9	10		10	10					10		10	10	9.88
I see a connection between this meeting and the mission of Venture Church.	10		10	10		10	10					10		10	10	10

Post Session Survey Week Five

Participant Number

QUESTION	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	15	16	AVG
I prepared for this session by reading/listening to the material for the week.	1		8	2									2	0	1	2.33
The leader was well-prepared for this session.	10		10	10									10	10	9	9.83
The teaching material is written so that I find it understandable.	10		10	10									9	10	9	9.67
The teaching material made me think about my relationship with God this week.	5		10	7									10		10	8.4
I felt safe and respected in the group this week.	10		10	10									8	10	10	9.67
The discussion tonight was thought-provoking.	10		10	10									10	10	10	10
The location and setting of this meeting helped make it easy to learn.	10		10	4									10	10	9	8.83
The location of this meeting helped me to connect to other people in the group.	10		10	2									9	10	9	8.33
I see a connection between this meeting and the mission of Venture Church.	10		10	10									6	10	9	9.17

Post Session Survey Week Six

Participant Number

QUESTION	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	14	15	17	18	19	AVG
I prepared for this session by reading/listening to the material for the week.	1		8	2	1		10	5			1	7	1	0	10	4.18
The leader was well-prepared for this session.	10		10	10	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	10	10
The teaching material is written so that I find it understandable.	10		10	10	10		10	10			10	9	10	10	8	9.73
The teaching material made me think about my relationship with God this week.	5		10	10	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	8	9.36
I felt safe and respected in the group this week.	10		10	10	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	9	9.91
The discussion tonight was thought-provoking.	10		10	9	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	9	9.82
The location and setting of this meeting helped make it easy to learn.	10		8	9	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	9	9.64
The location of this meeting helped me to connect to other people in the group.	10		8	9	10		10	10			10	10	10	10	10	9.73
I see a connection between this meeting and the mission of Venture Church.	10		10	10	10		10	10			10	10	10		10	10

APPENDIX E

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August 3, 2017

Dear Fellow Journeyman,

Venture is a movement where we encourage all people to dare to try new things for sake of engaging people with the Gospel of Christ. As I have looked around the church environment in Gaston County, I see a great need to engage young adults with a place of community where we can ask tough questions and grow in our faith. The only way to see this need met is to innovate new approaches to ministry so that we can learn together how best to help young people become lifelong disciples of Jesus.

You are likely a young person who is close to graduation, but not in a place where you have left town to attend a university or married to start your own family. If you are receiving this letter it is because you are invited to participate in a new small group experience this fall at Venture Church. This small group will have some things in common with what we typically call a "Life Group" at Venture, but it will be somewhat unique as well. This group will specifically target young adults who have not plugged into a regular Life Group at Venture.

Each one of us has a past and each one of us has a future where we are going somewhere special. Christians have identified life as journey guided by God, and have talked about spiritual journeys for many, many centuries. Our six-week small group will focus on identifying and discussing our own spiritual journeys. We will use as our guide a 350-year old story told by a man named John Bunyan. His story is title *Pilgrims Progress*. It is a very brief and fast-moving story. The book will be given to you free of charge if you choose to participate in the group.

For full disclosure, I want you to know that your participation will be of help in my own journey of learning. I am conducting this group as part of my Ministry Project for the Doctor of Ministry degree at the School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University. Your generation is unique and I want to be able to use the experience of this small group as a way to learn how to lead folks in your age group in the journey of following Jesus.

You will be asked some brief survey questions each week of the study, as well as some interview questions before and after the six-week period. Even if you aren't able to participate in the group I want to have the chance to ask you the interview questions. You will each be considered partners in my learning experience, so I will give each of you a report summarizing what I have learned. You will remain personally anonymous in that report, so that you have the freedom to be honest in anything you have to say about me, yourself, or the way that you think the church has responded to your generation.

Our group will meet on six Thursday evenings beginning September 14 and ending October 19. The start time will be 7:00 and the end time will be approximately 8:30 (we will encourage socializing, so that is why the end time is not firm). I WANT TO EMPHASIZE THAT THIS GROUP IS OPEN TO FOLKS AT ANY STEP IN A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY. You don't have to even consider yourself a Christian yet. I am simply asking for your participation, your honesty, your respect of the people in the group (which includes an agreement to not go outside of the group to gossip about what people say in the group setting), and your commitment to try to be consistent in attendance for those six weeks. I realize things come up, but your consistency will help you to gain the most from the group experience as well as allow me to have good data in learning about how your generation learns. Even if you cannot participate for six weeks, I still would love to hear from you. Thank you for your help!

In Christ,
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