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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

LISTENING FOR GOD AS AN IMPORTANT AND HOLY ENDEAVOR

Written by

CHRISTOPHER ADAMS

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary  
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

  
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Date Received: August 10, 2016

LISTENING FOR GOD AS AN IMPORTANT AND HOLY ENDEAVOR

A DOCTORAL PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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

BY  
CHRISTOPHER ADAMS  
MAY 2016



## ABSTRACT

### **Listening for God as an Important and Holy Endeavor**

Christopher Adams

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

May 2016

Hillsboro Presbyterian Church (hereafter, HPC) has a history of service in our community. But our focus on meeting the needs of others, while rightly intended as mission, has inadvertently created an inability to enter into genuine relationship with others. The purpose of this project is for a small group of HPC members to intentionally engage with their neighbors in learning the theological task of awakening and becoming more mindful of the presence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world around us.

Part One describes the overall process design that has led to identifying members to endeavor listening to their own neighbors. This group was chosen from those who regularly attend our congregational worship. The need for genuine relationships with outsiders is the rationale and purpose this project will test.

Part Two explains the details of the project. The group will meet on Sunday for *Lectio Divina* and discussion about what is being learned together during the project. Pairs of listeners will be sent to gathering places during the week to listen and attend to the stories they discover there. The process design will explain how this small group, as a part of those who gather for our worship, will create the opportunity for feedback when they return to tell us about their experiences and learning as part of our worship service.

Part Three offers reflection on congregational life and practice in light of what is being learned through listening. The difficult shift to new understanding rather than results as a focus of missional life is discussed, as well as how this new understanding is shaping our church into new expressions of the gospel. This section also offers specific recommendations in light of the project that will continue to transform our church more into a missional, praxis-reflection oriented congregation.

Content Reader: Alan Roxburgh, ThM, DMin

Words: 300

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT	
Chapter 1. SERVING AND RE-ENGAGING OUR NEIGHBORS	8
Chapter 2. THE PASTOR-CENTERED LEADERSHIP MODEL	26
Chapter 3. PROJECT FOCUS AND WORK	44
PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION	
Chapter 4. REPORT OF THE PROJECT	57
Chapter 5. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION	79
PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY	
Chapter 6. DIFFUSING LEARNING INTO THE CONGREGATION	92
Chapter 7. NEXT STEPS	111
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	116
APPENDICES	119
BIBLIOGRAPHY	124

## INTRODUCTION

In its very first paragraph, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part II, also known as the *Book of Order*, identifies God’s mission “to create, redeem, sustain, rule and transform all things and all people.”<sup>1</sup> God’s mission in the world is the very first thing the *Book of Order* wants the Church to consider. Before the constitution says anything at all about the Church, the organization, and the ministry, it confesses God as primary and invites the Church to then consider who they are in response. Like Moses on the mountain asking God’s identity before setting out, the Presbyterian Church (USA) (hereafter, PCUSA), out of its history of theological doctrine and careful reflection, identifies God’s mission before joining with him in ministry to the world.

This important revelation that the Church belongs to God and is made up of God’s people engaged in God’s mission is more than simply a way by which to start a book of polity, or even a document such as this doctoral project. This revelation is already theologically predisposed, meaning it asserts and acknowledges where all things start for the Church, and this provides the Church with a core identity. Alan Roxburgh identifies the Church’s core identity as “a sign to the world of who God is.”<sup>2</sup> God is the one who “creates, redeems, sustains, rules and transforms all things and all people.”<sup>3</sup> Because this

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<sup>1</sup> The Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Order 2011-2013, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part II* (Louisville: The Office of General Assembly, 2013), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 54.

<sup>3</sup> PCUSA, *Book of Order 2011-2013*, 1.

is who God is, then this is also who God's people are, joining with God for the transformation of the world. Lesslie Newbigin writes,

The church in each place is to be the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God, present in Christ for that place; a sign planted in the midst of the present realities of the place but pointing beyond to the future which God has promised; an instrument available for God's use in doing of his will for that place; a foretaste—manifesting and enjoying already in the midst of the messianic tribulations a genuine foretaste of the peace and joy of God's reign.<sup>4</sup>

By the time we get to paragraph two of the Presbyterian Church constitution, a discussion of the Church and what it is to do as God's people, the PCUSA has already firmly established who and what it is. The logic of its function then follows the form that it has established theologically. The *Book of Order* also states, "In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ."<sup>5</sup> The Church is in service to God's mission to transform all things and all people. The Church is to be a demonstration of the Kingdom of God, with transformation as well as peace and joy. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said it this way: "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission that has a church."<sup>6</sup> It is a critical distinction, and one that the PCUSA's *Book of Order* has concretized in its foundation. The Church is not a disconnected body of people who practice faith with nothing at stake in the local

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<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 119.

<sup>5</sup> PCUSA, *Book of Order 2011-2013*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, as quoted in Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 20.



and the ordinary. The mission of God and the Church do what William Stringfellow calls the “incarnating and sacramentalizing of human life.”<sup>7</sup>

Hillsboro Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee (hereafter, HPC) has a long history of service in our community. We are very proud of that service, and many among our ranks tell stories of how they witnessed that service transform our congregation in years past. Before the arrival of the previous pastor of thirty-seven years, the church was on the brink of closing its doors. The idea of courageously serving others in Christ’s name across the city and around the world is what many believe brought new members and saved the church. Even today, one of the key ways the church identifies itself is as a servant congregation, perhaps even at the expense of other ideals.<sup>8</sup> We may not do everything right, one man recently said, but we know how to do an important project of service together.

It seems, however, that times have changed. Today, virtually every church, and in fact almost every corporation and business, social club, and affinity group, works to serve others. It is no longer a virtue of fearlessness that enables HPC to stand out among the over seven hundred congregations and other organizations in our city. The church seems still united around such a theme, however in a continuing understanding of church as individualized and disconnected from the local endeavor, our “brand” is no longer attracting others to the congregation as it once did. It used to be the “brand” that enabled

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<sup>7</sup> William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 58.

<sup>8</sup> HPC’s motto from Psalm 100 is “Serving the Lord with Gladness.”

HPC to receive new members and resources in this area of Christendom in America,<sup>9</sup> when a more significant number of people were already coming to church and only needed to choose where. But that society is quickly disappearing, even in a Bible Belt culture like Nashville and Middle Tennessee. Suddenly and seemingly without warning, the church is struggling for its very existence.

During the years of thriving, while HPC was busy serving others in mission, the particular location of place in the city and modes of theological reflection by all the members of the church were not as emphasized. The unique gifts of the strangers who lived around the church in the neighborhood were less emphasized and even ignored at times. There was little perceived need. The church was too busy serving in the places where it was perceived there was desperate need, under the leadership of a gifted pastor and leader who either identified ways to serve on his own or heard about them from other key leaders. The pastor then provided the theological framework for engagement and designated the church to serve around that vision.

The former pastor retired in 2009. In the absence of such a leader, and the introduction of a new pastor with different gifts, the church is searching for a new way forward. HPC suddenly finds that is struggling to find enough participation, even in important missions that have been executed with efficiency and purpose in years past. The church is struggling with the aging of its population, and a difficulty in attracting new, younger families to the church. The abundance of its budget once afforded ample staff and resources, but now the church falters under the expectations of the past.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 321.

Clemens Sedmak writes, “Theology is an invitation to wake up: to be mindful and attentive.”<sup>10</sup> The theological task is not simply to get all things in proper order before setting off on a journey. In some ways, this might be described as almost atheistic or deistic in that God is not an active agent in the present moment. God has not merely provided the plans for the mission, but he is actively engaged in the mission. Thus, theology is also the process of looking around, at the local and the ordinary, in search of what God is up to and then joining with it. This broader theological reflection about joining with God in the particular place and time we now find ourselves, listening for God’s direction as well as the abundance for peace and joy in the Kingdom of God, is now the work of both the leadership and membership of HPC in order to discern a path forward for the church.

In order to engage the congregation in missional transformation, a small group will be sent out from within the HPC community seeking the abundance of God and our particular part in the mission that God. The group will be rooted in Scripture and daily prayer. They will engage with outsiders to our community. The group will consider the theological and ecclesial ramification of this engagement and will be a micro-learning community of missional life and practice. The experiment will be a step in helping us to continue to discover what God is doing with us as HPC.

This doctoral project describes and highlights the issues that have informed the experiment, what we have done together in engaging our readiness for missional life and practice, and finally the next steps that must be further engaged. Part One describes the

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<sup>10</sup> Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 1.

overall process design that has led to identifying members to endeavor listening to their own neighbors.

Part Two explains the details of the project. The group will meet on Sunday for *Lectio Divina* and discussion about what is being learned together during the project. Listeners will be sent to gathering places during the week to listen and attend to the stories they discover there. The process design will explain how this small group, as a part of those who gather for our worship, will create the opportunity for feedback when they return to tell us about their experiences and learning as part of our worship service.

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PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

## CHAPTER 1

### SERVING AND RE-ENGAGING OUR NEIGHBORS

I became the pastor of HPC in January of 2012. My predecessor, Dr. David Kidd, who was pastor of the congregation for thirty-seven years, retired in December of 2009.<sup>1</sup> Initially I felt a sense of call to HPC from the stories I heard the search committee tell about the church's deep connection to the greater service within the Kingdom of God. One by one, the members of the search committee identified the ways they were engaged in the ministry of HPC as part of their introduction to me. A colleague I had met previously in Florida, who was enrolled in the Missional Church Cohort at Fuller Theological Seminary, identified HPC as a missional congregation fully engaged with the mission of God in the community and beyond. I heard stories about ministry in the Peten region of Guatemala centered upon the education of indigenous Kechi children. The search committee told of the important work with orphans in Zimbabwe through a farm bought and sustained by funds from the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor Kidd announced his retirement three years in advance. The interim minister was only in place for a year, and his contract was not renewed by the Session, and subsequently the Associate Pastor, Dr. Nancy McCurley, assumed the role of Head of Staff until my arrival. She also retired at the beginning of 2012, completing a five-year pastoral leadership change.

Over and over again, as I got to know the congregation, I heard stories of almost entrepreneurial efforts at ministry across the city of Nashville. A homeless ministry called Room in the Inn was started with HPC's participation. A physician who is an elder at HPC founded the Siloam Clinic, a health ministry for refugees. The church provides full-time housing in two homes located on our church grounds for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The stories go on and on about the important ways the church has served over decades and decades of ministry. I was very excited to be the pastor of such a servant congregation, committed to the love of Jesus Christ made real in the hands and feet of the congregation.

### **The Transition Team**

Immediately upon my arrival we formed a transition team, whose stated goal was to help complete the pastoral transition and begin to re-engage in the work of ministry. Over the two-plus years without a permanently installed pastor, much of the work of the church had slowed, and it seemed that many were eager to re-engage. I intended for the transition group to be a sort of an initial guide team towards missional engagement. My hope was to bring some of what I had already learned about missional life and practice and begin to diffuse some of the language in this initial group, while I also hoped to get to know the members of the congregation and the work of the church.

There was nothing secret or hidden in this, but it is important to note that missional language was not yet present in a way that naming a "guide team" would have

made sense.<sup>2</sup> It was not part of what Roxburgh calls the “language house” of the church,<sup>3</sup> or what Charles Taylor calls “a social imaginary,” that is, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, and how things go on between them.”<sup>4</sup> I believed part of the work of the team was to begin to introduce some language or even a renewed imagination around the ways we described who we had been and now are as a church, and how we might continue to work together in the particular location where God has called us. It was somewhat surprising that the very idea that God was on a mission, and our joining with God is what our service had been about, was new language for this congregation, even one that has participated in service and outreach for decades. HPC had not identified this service perhaps using missional language.

In February of 2012, this transition team composed of eight members was formed and began meeting to discuss and practice dwelling in the Word, missional language, and some practices of missional life. We quickly developed three specific tasks towards our goals as a transition team. The first was to set up home visits with every member, the second was to introduce a survey called the Missional 360 survey to the congregation,

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<sup>2</sup> A Guide Team is comprised of six to ten people who: “have a deep and genuine commitment to the church and its people; support the leadership and this process; are inside the big picture of what missional change is about; have caught a vision for the mission-shaped life of their church; are able to assess and analyze in order to realistically implement the process; have good relational skills; demonstrate a keen sense of how to effectively communicate across the church; and are aware of the opportunities and barriers to change and can effectively bridge differences.” Roxburgh, *Mission-Shaped Leader Field Guide* (West Vancouver, BC: Roxburgh Missional Network, 2010), Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.



and the third was to participate in a house blessing at the home my family and I had moved into.

The first task involved making home visits with every member of the congregation. These “kitchen table” conversations, as they were known, were designed simply to meet the members of the congregation and for me to begin to listen to what God was up to in the congregation. I did not see these visits as any formal process, but rather a practice of appreciative inquiry, by which we listen to people as they share important characteristics and values of the congregation. The hope of the team was partly that these visits would begin to empower the members of the church to “clear their throats” again, after a long period of transition, and to begin to revive energy for our ministry together.

In the years leading up to the retirement of the previous pastor, a hired consultant had identified the church as a truly pastor-centered congregation. Pastor Kidd had done much, if not all, of the theological discernment work, identifying the values and priorities of the congregation. At times he had even been criticized by some for such a leadership style. The church had been successful, however, in a culture of Christendom in which professional clergy were expected to provide answers to the congregation. Perhaps this was the most effective model of leadership for the time during which Pastor Kidd served. In the end, the result was that the church was a very pastor-centered congregation. Pastor Kidd was heavily involved in most of the decision making regarding ministry for the church. The hope of the transition team was partially discussed as a method of beginning to empower the membership for more participation in leadership.

Second, the team was responsible for helping to introduce a survey called the Missional 360 for the congregation at large.<sup>5</sup> Our intention for the Missional 360 was to encourage dialogue and conversation about the kind of church we had been and what kind of church we ought to be in the future. Roxburgh identifies four types of churches in terms of how they are responding to the changing landscape of religion and church in America—reactive, developmental, transitional, and transformational.<sup>6</sup> These were discussed among the transition team as well as the Session,<sup>7</sup> and it was clear at that time that HPC had developed parts of all four of these responses.

As we met monthly and even more often at times, I began to introduce some missional language through our reading together. We read Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren’s book, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Become One*. As we received the completed Missional 360 survey and spent some time discussing the results, we reflected together in conversation using some of the language from the book. We discussed the meaning of an adaptive challenge, as one in which an answer is not readily available without perhaps learning a new skill. This group was essentially HPC’s first listening team, as they began to assess “what all this means for

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<sup>5</sup> The Missional 360 survey was a tool offered by the Missional Network. It offers online survey questions that generate a report that might begin to spark conversation about missional ideas and concepts. Approximately forty-five people at HPC completed the survey in 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> The Session is the meeting of HPC’s twelve ruling elders.

who we are as a church at this point in terms of God’s calling for us to be mission-shaped people in our neighborhoods and communities.”<sup>8</sup>

As a third practice together, the transition team participated in a house blessing at the house my family and I had moved into. As we discussed missional change and the need to move back into our neighborhoods and our communities, this seemed like a way to model a different approach to ministry. This approach would seek the presence of God in a particular place, that is, in the neighbor we are obligated to and not simply the one we choose. A book from the Northumbria community, *Celtic Daily Prayer*, shaped that blessing. We used the following prayer: “Seeing a stranger approach, I would put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place, and look with joy for the blessing of God, who often comes to my home in the blessing of the stranger.”<sup>9</sup>

All of these efforts with the transition team were simply my attempt to test some missional language and practice as I sought to get to know the congregation and its ministry. I was very aware that these efforts were being heavily influenced by me as the leader and frankly, were functioning in many of the ways the previous pastor had operated. These were being viewed as my ideas for ministry, ideas that I hoped the congregation would hear and even confirm as part of their own. This process involved discussing ideas; it did not include experiments that others were being invited to participate in and then reflect upon.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 168-169.

<sup>9</sup> The Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 147.

In addition to the transition team’s work, I also began to test missional language and practice with the Session of HPC. From February to August of 2012, I spent time at each meeting discussing the work of the transition team, the Missional 360 survey, and the concept of an adaptive challenge.<sup>10</sup> There was always healthy discussion and engagement in these discussions, and I felt like we were making good progress. From the work of the transition team, the Missional 360 survey, and my own observations, some initial interpretations began coming together related to the working of the church.

### **Ecclesiologies of HPC**

Robert Schreiter writes of a critical shift in perspectives in theology: “While the basic purpose of theological reflection has remained the same—namely, the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances—much more attention is now being paid to how those circumstances shape the response to the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> As I was engaged in testing missional language and practice with the transition team and the Session, I was also keenly watching and observing the church for such local circumstances that were shaping a response to the gospel. This so-called “balcony work”<sup>12</sup> is a way of getting up above the day to day operational realities of the congregation in search of some of the contextualized ecclesiologies found within the congregation. The question was about how members and leadership see the church and its work together in terms of the underlying convictions and theological commitments. It

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard School of Business Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 65-67.

was possible that the church did not see itself as missional as my friend had surmised. If missional was not the imaginary used by HPC, then one of my tasks was to begin to ask what the operating narratives were. This section considers the functional ecclesiologies observed in the congregation during the past three years from my perspective as pastor of HPC. There are three primary ways leadership and membership readily identify the ecclesiology of the church: as a city on a hill, as a servant church, and as the diverse Body of Christ. It is also important to note the observation that HPC perceives itself as being very independent from the PCUSA, of which it is officially a member church.

The first metaphor for HPC is that of a city on a hill. In Matthew 5:14, Jesus taught the disciples they were salt and light for the world, a city on a hill, a light which stands against the darkness, so that all would see it and give glory to God. The physical location of the sanctuary and the rest of the church buildings are literally on a hill that sits back from a major road leading into the city of Nashville, known as Hillsboro Pike. Each day, hundreds if not thousands of cars pass right by the church as this road serves as a main route from Franklin, Tennessee into the city. Constructed in front of the main buildings is a large white cross. This cross is one of the first things passersby would notice about our church as they look up from the road to the hill upon which the cross stands. We hope and believe we are a witness to Jesus Christ for those who pass by.

Sometime during my first year as pastor, I listened to a recorded sermon the previous pastor had preached in the year leading up to his retirement. He boasted about the courage of the congregation to witness to any and all “in desperate need.” Over and over again, Dr. Kidd indicated that the HPC way for ministry, while courageous and on the edge, was not for everyone. Not every church would embrace the homeless in such a

way. Not every church would welcome those who were mentally ill or struggling with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The church's witness was one not readily embraced by the majority of churches in the community, and for that reason as much as anything, it was unique as that city on a hill. As members leave the campus each week, a sign placed by the driveway reads, "Go Out Into the World and Fear Nothing." This imperative statement comes from another sermon preached by Dr. Kidd at some point, in which he highlighted this idea of witnessing courageously in the community. The idea of salt and light was that the church is unique and different from other congregations in the community, and I believe perhaps this is true. I have heard from others outside the church community about the unique witness of HPC.

What is clear, however, is that the hill spoken of in such an ecclesiology is not a particular hill located in our particular city. The surrounding neighborhood is virtually unknown to us. The metaphor serves as an image for the general Nashville and Middle Tennessee area and not simply the houses and people who live in the immediate neighborhood around the church. When we speak of witness, we are opening that image up far and wide.

More than just a witness, the second ecclesiology of Hillsboro is that the church is a servant church. Again, from the road below, strangers and neighbors would notice that the HPC sanctuary has an unusually small and non-proportioned steeple. This steeple was given to the church several years ago when leadership signed a contract with a cell phone provider that wanted to use the "city on a hill" as an antenna for wireless services. In exchange, the church receives payment each month that can be used for benevolent causes. This narrative is very much present within the leadership and membership as

another reflection of who the church is and what priorities dictate the use of resources. The church is proud to give away a full 10 percent of its revenue to benevolence. Many hours are committed toward serving the needs of those in the community. This is a church that believes deeply in answering the gospel call in Matthew 25, as Jesus said to “do to the least of these” in my name. Prior to my arrival, the interim pastor once described the congregation as tired and weary from all the many years of service beyond the walls of the church to the greater Middle Tennessee community. HPC is a servant church, and this high ethical value is one that is shared by a great number of members. Even if the church exhausts its resources, many believe fundamentally in this service to others. As stated earlier, this is also what attracted me to this congregation as pastor.

Finally, the church sees itself as the diverse Body of Christ. In the many years of service together, HPC has both encountered and included a fairly diverse group within the membership of the Middle Tennessee community. This diversity is ethnic and cultural, but also political and theological, and even includes diversity in terms of sexual orientation. Fifteen years ago, HPC nominated and elected an openly gay man to become an elder serving on the church Session. This was in opposition to the *Book of Order*, PCUSA’s constitution, and some were so frustrated by this act of civil disobedience that they left the congregation over the issue. Yet to the core of church membership, this too was seen as a witness of the church’s diversity. When even the PCUSA was not quite

ready to recognize homosexuality as faithful for church leadership, HPC was willing to take such a stand.<sup>13</sup>

It is another great source of pride within the membership that the church is so diverse in a very homogenous part of the country. While the rest of Tennessee is both politically and religiously conservative, white, and even undereducated, Nashville has welcomed in all sorts of people, and HPC has embraced them as children of God who are worthy of the grace of Jesus Christ. For the most part, the church has maintained a strong sense of unity even with such diversity, and this is again how the church sees itself as living out the gospel. While many disagree with one another sometimes, the congregation continues to serve together and love one another.

One other observation related to ecclesiology is that HPC does not necessarily see itself as Presbyterian nor does it consider itself a participating member of the Middle Tennessee Presbytery. When Pastor Kidd arrived in Nashville in 1972, he found a United Presbyterian Church (traditionally a northern church) in a southern city (where the Presbyterian Church of America was more common).<sup>14</sup> In those years, the church learned to operate independently, and by 1983 when the two denominations merged to form the PCUSA, all the processes and operational procedures were already in place. For the most

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<sup>13</sup> Elder Greg Gardner was elected by the congregation and seated on Session, even though it was known that he was gay and outside the constitutional guidelines of the PCUSA. He served his full term and went on to Vanderbilt Divinity School, leaving HPC in 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The former United Presbyterian Church was the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States from 1958 until 1983. The UPC, as it was known, is sometimes referred to as the “northern church” from a split that occurred during the American Civil War over the issue of slavery. In 1983, the United Presbyterian Church of North America and the Presbyterian Church of America merged to create the new PCUSA.



part, other than staff serving on denominational committees from time to time, most members consider themselves part of HPC only and not the larger denomination.

Such a denominational reality is largely unknown to most in the congregation, even those who have been members of the church for a long period of time. It is another example of how the attitude and practice of the former pastor as the primary leader and theological voice provided much of the narrative for the congregation. Because the pastor did not feel a need for overall denominational support and connection to the larger Church, church members also believe themselves to be somewhat independent of such. The Middle Tennessee Presbytery also has learned to relate to HPC from a position of limited engagement. Very few church members, other than clergy, have been asked to serve on a presbytery committee or in other significant ways. When I arrived, I was not asked to serve on a presbytery committee, despite the fact that I had been very involved in a previous presbytery and asked for such an assignment. I have since been asked to serve.

In point of fact, these ecclesiological images of being the church in response to the gospel have served HPC well over the years. The congregation knows and expresses its identity in these ways and seeks for others to join the church out of these models for being the church. This is the HPC brand. While other congregations in Nashville might emphasize other aspects, like contemporary or traditional worship, high liturgy or relaxed dress, HPC has worked hard to emphasize courageously reaching out in service to others across the city and even the world with time, talent, and resources. This has been the primary identity that has enabled the church to grow over the years and be very successful. One member describes the congregation as a “destination church,” in that

people from all over the Middle Tennessee area travel to HPC out of a desire to be connected to such unlimited outreach and courageous service. There is an underlying assumption that those who join the church believe and trust in these ecclesiologies.

### **HPC's Understanding of God's Work in the World**

From an understanding of this identity, I then started to identify and to test what the church might be lacking if the hope is to be able to re-engage in more missional life and practice. In reality, we tend to start our work with community with a presumption that there are needs outside the congregation and its membership that must be filled, and we seem to believe that the congregation is the provider of those needed resources. There is a directional ecclesiology operative at HPC. Even though the church identifies diversity as one of the hallmark ways of being church, it still views neighbors as “insiders” and “outsiders.” The insiders are those whom the church members know, and these individuals are different from those whom the church does not know.

This division then gets incorporated into how the church understands God working in the world. Leaders invite people to come into HPC to experience God so they can then be sent out to serve the needs of the city and the world as a response. The church motto has been taken from Psalm 100, “Serve the Lord with Gladness.” Those who are part of the church go out not necessarily in search of God's presence, hoping to discover God in the places where they serve, but instead they go out of a theological imagination about the direction of God's work. It seems most often expressed as from us to them, with some largely unexamined ideas about God being present already in the places we

serve. This is a yet unidentified but functional ecclesiology very present at HPC, and it is perhaps an unintended combination of all three of the other ecclesiologies.

Underlying such a presumption is the theological idea that the world around the church is a place of scarcity yet to be filled up with the resources that HPC has to bring. However, when it is assumed that the community around the church is only a place of need, then the church has denied the theology of the goodness of creation. One of the primary theological convictions out of the Reformed tradition (to which the Presbyterian Church subscribes) is that God is everywhere all the time. John Leith writes,

Popular estimates of the Reformed tradition have always identified it with the sovereignty of God and with predestination. This popular estimate has good basis in fact. While efforts to identify Calvinism with a central doctrine from which others are deduced have all failed, a case can be made that the central theme of Calvinist theology, which holds it all together, is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the *living* God.<sup>15</sup>

God created the world around us and called it very good. God also continues to provide for all the needs of the world. The Church and the people of God are merely the instrument God has chosen to interpret the ongoing goodness of God's creation for the world around us. The Church is not the entity that does the providing, but merely points to the ongoing agency of the provider as the creator God. God is the creator, redeemer, and transformer, and the Church is not on its own. If the Church is going to re-engage with the missionary God, it first must discern ways of being formed in an alternative narrative about God. The Church must ask about joining with God and not merely serving God, even out of the goodness of its diversity and courage to be unique.

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<sup>15</sup> John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 70.

This calls for the discernment of new learning beyond the ways we currently understand HPC's ministries, especially service. One primary way of doing this is shaped by the theological imagination of the incarnation. It is God who dwells with us in the local, in HPC's learning how to re-engage with its neighbors outside of the narratives of meeting needs or helping, but in meeting them as the "other" in whom dwells the incarnational presence of God.

In Eugene Peterson's interpretation of John 1, we read that Jesus as the Word of God "became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:1, *The Message*). Jesus dwelled in a particular man, in a particular family, in a particular neighborhood, religion, and culture. The Word dwells in the midst of a particular location in creation and continues to make it a place of abundance and goodness. This indwelling with the abundance of God's creation in the particular people and world around the church, and the work then of identifying how the mission of God is formed out of that abundance, might offer HPC the transformation it is hoping for.

In the church's attempts to be the diverse city-on-a-hill and to serve all who are in desperate need, it has inadvertently adopted a different narrative, one in which the world is a generalized place of scarcity. The Gospel of John would testify that a particular place and neighborhood, no matter where it is located, has both needs but also peace and abundance because God dwells there. HPC seems at times to only see the needs in the world that are dependent on the church as the ones that it can provide. When the church fails to see a particular neighborhood as a place where God dwells, then it can also miss the entire character of God in that place. The fullness of God is also the abundance of

God that affords the church a sense of peace and wholeness as reflections of the Kingdom of God.

This directional ecclesiology can also become a narrative of power and control, of privilege that denies the need for the agency of God. Many of HPC's members are successful people of wealth and position in the community. They work in law, medicine, research, or healthcare. These are leaders who work hard to get things fixed when there is a problem with their business or professional strategies. This is the essence of that entrepreneurial spirit so present over the years in starting ministries and programs designed to serve. Leaders and members are highly educated and know how to bring all the resources they have to the various needs at hand. These resources have been personal and hands-on resources. This is one imagination they live in their everyday lives: solving problems is dependent on what one knows and how much power they wield.

As a result, when the church then faces a challenge or identifies a general need in our city or world, the church tends to go back up to the hilltop vantage point in order to assemble the resources needed from within to conquer whatever it needs going out. The church comes down from the hill directing the necessary resources to others. This service has made a huge difference to many people in the city and beyond. However, we have unknowingly adopted an imagination in which God is not already out ahead of us in the places where we are being called to work, but God is almost unnecessary to the church's work. All that is needed is a serving heart, knowledge, relationships, and the resources to do good. When the church is only dependent on its own skills to accomplish ministry, it is not really joining with God in the world.

The end result of this directional ecclesiology is that the church is both tired in trying to do God's job, which the church is not at all equipped for, isolated from God, and also at the same time making any relationships formed with outsiders not a sacred incarnational interaction with God's world but the object of good intentions. The church fails to see the abundance of God, but rather the limits of its own resources. When resources become limited, as they are becoming more and more today, then perhaps the church begins even to see God as failing in abundance and limited. This limited vision of the goodness of God's presence in the world around us is limiting every relationship the church enjoys as the people of God, but most especially the church members' relationship with God.

When the church assumes that the community is only a place of need, then it has isolated itself from what John McKnight and Peter Block have called "the abundant community."<sup>16</sup> The abundant community is a different culture, a new way to see the world. It is that foretaste of the Kingdom with peace and joy that Newbigin refers to. A new movement is required, one in which the church can "see the abundance that we have individually, as neighbors, and in this place of ours, know the power of what have grows from creating new connections and relationships among and between what we have, and know these connections are no accident."<sup>17</sup> The outside-the-church-walls world is not

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<sup>16</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

just a place of need, but a place where God is already present, “creating, redeeming, sustaining, governing and transforming all people and all things.”<sup>18</sup>

Listening for this abundance of God in the particular Christian gospel and culture, combined with the particular neighborhood community in which the church has been planted, is truly the next most important and holy endeavor. However, since the church’s founding, there have been clear roadblocks to the ability of the church to listen for the abundance of God. This occurred as a result of the leadership models that were present at HPC as well as in our inability to identify our particular location.

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<sup>18</sup> PCUSA, *Book of Order 2011-2013*, 1.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PASTOR-CENTERED LEADERSHIP MODEL

By the fall of 2012, it was clear that connecting in any real and meaningful way with God's mission was surely a long-term process of overall cultural change within the church. There were several mistakes made in the early endeavors to re-engage missional living that would begin to negatively critique how the church might form a new way of engaging with God's abundance. These led to the formation of a new team, called a listening group, whose purpose it was to identify how God was at work within and around the church.

#### **Early Efforts to Re-Engage Missional Living**

In spite of my hopes to begin to infuse missional life and practice, defaults and cultural church habits were very present in both myself and in the congregation. Those defaults were quickly taking over. Because of the long transition and the excitement of welcoming a new pastor, the congregation's leaders and the transition team had been willing to listen and to test missional language and practice with a new pastor. Listening to the pastor as the expert in what the church needed to do was part of their understanding



of pastoral leadership. They had long lived in a narrative in which the pastor did the primary theological discernment, and as the new pastor, I had their attention for a while.

For many in the church's leadership, this was an academic exercise, in that it was information to be taken in, evaluated, and then acted upon. Within our ranks are twentieth-century thought leaders in business, medicine, and law who regularly interact with the ideas and concepts of modernity. We continue to be what Stephen Toulmin identifies as those always in search of a post-Descartes "rational" method, meaning everything is decontextualized and objective.<sup>1</sup> Our leaders wanted me as the new pastor to name for them the newest and easiest techniques toward the success of our church. Others wanted to me to confirm the ways of the past as still the best and truest way to operate as a faith community.

There did not exist any sense of the particularity of our context and our ministry. Again, our leaders were successful professionals. When tested with adversity, church leadership operated with a corporate mindset, assuming that what worked in other church communities would automatically work in the HPC context. A consultant had been hired towards the end of Pastor Kidd's tenure, and that consultant had delivered a notebook binder full of information about the size of parking lots, organizational structures that were most effective for churches of a certain size, and a five-year plan for leadership transition that included the resignation of Pastor Kidd three years before his leaving.

I learned during this time that this resignation so far in advance had been a disaster for all involved. Even though such a strategy had worked effectively in other

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 200.

church communities, it had not been effective for HPC. Perhaps the congregation was aware of how important Pastor Kidd had been to leadership and was very anxious about the transition, with three years to anticipate it. Pastor Kidd had delivered a strong sense of courage and risk-taking as a means to stabilize the ministry and even to make it thrive. With the news that Pastor Kidd would soon retire, that courage now turned quickly into a strong sense of fear and anxiety about the future. The presence of a strong pastor had provided the comfort necessary to risk. Besides, there was not a lot to risk at the beginning. In 1972, most in the presbytery did not believe the church would survive anyway.<sup>2</sup>

However, forty years later, there was lot to risk, and the level of anxiety about the future and the pastoral transition was palpable. The congregation entered into a season of caution and prevention, hoping no mistakes would be made. The leadership carefully evaluated every move from a do-no-harm perspective. The leadership believed this was the best course of action: to carefully enter the future even though this had not been the way to success up to this point. When I arrived the church was still very much in this mindset of caution and fear. They looked to the new pastor for the latest and best answers to the question of how to fix the church.

A technical challenge is one in which a solution to the problem can be formulated and executed given enough time and resources. This is the way most churches, ours included, approach the problems they face especially at times of stress. People simply do

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<sup>2</sup> Pastor Kidd related to me the story of how when he arrived as pastor in 1972, he was greeted by a presbytery that expressed cynicism about his success. They had already made plans to close the church and merge it with another congregation. The presbytery allowed Pastor Kidd to try some new ideas in order to see what happened, but had every intention of closing the church.

the things they already know how to do in order to get out of trouble. At this point in our time together, the leadership and membership of the church was looking to the pastor for problem solving and setting a new course for our congregation based on technical change. They were asking for strategies and a new vision for ministry based on what the church already knew how to do.

As I started to provide some basic technical changes, however, my leadership quickly became mired in the classic conservative versus progressive rationale mindset. Many in our church were already questioning whether the old way to do ministry under Pastor Kidd's leadership was best, or whether there were new ways we might engage the future with a new pastor. Peter Block teaches that this way of looking at leadership and even problem solving is a false dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> If "conservative" by definition is choosing to maintain the traditions and practices that have made something successful, and "progressivism" by definition is embracing new ideas and strategies to solve age-old problems, why would a person want to choose between them? The opposition of these two ideas divides what might be best, that is, the combination of both.

To make matters worse, as the leader I failed to understand that what really was happening was all technical rather than true cultural change. My work was intended to instigate cultural change as a different way to engage our particular neighbors. I was working to engage what Scott Cormode discusses as issuing a challenge to the members of my congregation to embrace being sent to the stranger in search of the space in which

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<sup>3</sup> McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 133.

God is creating salvation.<sup>4</sup> As I was attempting this, many in the congregation were still working at technical changes designed to fix our church. We quickly reverted back to the idea that our church is serving a scarcity of needs, and my teaching was simply a new way of assessing those needs and therefore was the reason I had suggested we talk to strangers. Things began to fracture quickly.

The transition team became less and less interested in setting up appointments for us to visit members for appreciative inquiry. “You already know that person, right?” was a common phrase, missing the point that even though we know a person, even one of our own members, this does not mean we have listened to them or invited them to re-awaken to God’s presence in their lives. The design of these visits was also problematic in the way I participated as the pastor. If the goal was to inspire a higher level of participation and theological engagement from all the membership, one sure way for that not to happen is the presence of the new pastor who represents the old system of pastoral leadership. That old system encouraged members to listen to the pastor for a vision, and not necessarily to search their own hearts and spirits for what God might be doing with them and their neighbors. This was a key mistake I made out of my own misunderstanding about the difference between what facilitates listening and learning and what is simply completing the task of meeting each person for the first time.

Another mistake was in my lack of awareness that the Missional 360 survey was another in a long list of surveys done during the pastoral transition time, and that members of our congregation were simply too fatigued to engage with it. The only reason

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 64.

even forty had participated in the survey was because I as the pastor had asked them to and they felt obligated to give it a try. It was not a method towards dialogue and re-engagement, but another quantifiable outcome led by the pastor, which the church believed it had already measured in the transition period between pastors. There were only forty people who participated, and that was discouraging for the team. In fact, it was exceptional that this many had agreed to participate, given my short tenure at HPC. Once again it proved the high degree of credibility and power held by whomever was in the role of pastor at HPC.

Finally, the last of the experiments in missional life and practice was intended to be the house blessing. This too did not accomplish what was hoped for. It was understood not as an opportunity to see the connection of ministry with the abundance of community, but simply as another part of the process of welcoming a new pastor. Without better understanding a different way to approach a new imagination for God's presence, which we had only started to test and to talk about, the blessing was in no way intended to engage our neighbors but only for the church as insiders. Simply moving the location of a church event designed and understood only for church insiders was not a way to engage with the neighbors. In addition, hosting such an event at the home of the pastor simply reconfirmed that this was all about a vision I was pushing. It was still directional in our approach to the community at large, led by me as the pastor setting and casting a vision for the church.

I also quickly realized that over against any of my work for missional innovation, the congregation was continuing to feel increasingly anxious over its growth and budget. In June of 2012, the church had to raise more money to balance a budget shortfall. In

October of that same year, the church had to re-organize its staff just short of layoffs. At the same time, folks who had stopped attending worship during the transition were not coming back as many had hoped, and that too was discouraging. There was a genuine sense of fear and dread in the face of the changes that we were dealing with day to day.

In responding to these failures, the church was quickly moving back into what James K. A. Smith calls a *pragmatic evangelicalism*: “looking primarily to its surrounding culture for the norms of what it means to be, or better, to do, church.”<sup>5</sup> By culture, the church was looking to religious culture of so-called successful churches in the area. There was a cry to begin working on our programs and our marketing, comparing ourselves to the legion of mega-churches that surround us. “They must be doing something right,” some said, and a few members leaving our ranks to join those congregations only reinforced this. Some began to question my leadership as the new pastor in the face of this perceived crisis, when I was not interested in engaging with such pragmatic evangelicalism. My leadership with both members and staff continued to work towards engaging in a different way. I continued to teach that “a missional church is a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

It was at this point that I realized the depth of the change in my own thinking and way of leadership that I would need in this new environment. First, I realized that I had

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<sup>5</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Post Modernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 124.

<sup>6</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2006), xv.

not yet earned the trust that would be necessary for any long-term cultural change, and we were moving far too fast and too comprehensively. Some in the congregation were suspicious that I was critiquing the past in a very negative way, asking them to walk away from the successful past they had enjoyed without any reason to do so. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky have written about the perils of such leadership: “Asking people to leave behind something they have lived with for years or for generations practically invites them to get rid of you.”<sup>7</sup> One person rightly perceived that I was pointing at Luke 10 rather than Matthew 25, and this was perceived as moving away from being a servant church into an unknown understanding. Richard T. Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja encourage leaders to “abandon the familiar organization principles and processes and adopt strange and unfamiliar ones.”<sup>8</sup> The church seemed to be reacting negatively to the changes I was trying to implement. I even began to hear rumors that some in the congregation hoped I would simply move on to a church more interested in embracing some of the changes I had been proposing.

At first, I wrongly concluded this was simply about earning the trust of the congregation. I believed the congregation and I needed to build a level of trust, and I concluded that such trust had to be based on something other than just technical engagement with our pragmatic evangelicalism. We also had to work together towards more missional engagement with our neighbors and our community, but that could not just be out of my own vision for the future and not the history and the participation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Richard T. Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Goija, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 14.

congregation and other leaders. Because we had not yet earned one another's trust, we were not working together and, at some levels, we were even working against one another. I wondered how I could begin to invite the congregation into neighborhood engagement in a way that was slower and more diffuse.

Here again, I failed to see that my own leadership style was at this point still blocking any real cultural change. Earning the trust of the congregation was still a way for the pastor to cast a vision and directly lead with a mandate for change, just as my predecessor had done. If I was able to earn the trust of my church, so I concluded, they would listen to my leadership more closely and I could influence more heavily.

What was truly needed is what Everett Rogers calls a diffusion of innovation.<sup>9</sup> Roxburgh teaches that when people face change head-on, the reaction we see is resistance and obstinacy. Nobody likes change, and when its being forced upon them, most will fight or flee. The truth is there are new learnings that are required in reengaging with our neighbors and reflecting theologically upon that engagement. I had work to do and so did the congregation. Much of this work was at this point unknown. Roxburgh and Boren write, "It's about beginning the process of asking how we listen to the Spirit together as a local church to move forward on the missional journey."<sup>10</sup>

But nobody is going to be comfortable enough to move out into that journey to learn those new practices without the safety of knowing that the congregation and its history and mission up to this point are intact and continuing. Pascale, Millemann, and

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<sup>9</sup> Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 136.



Gioja also write, “As a general rule, adults are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.”<sup>11</sup> Two actions are required: both to value the traditional way of doing things while at the very same time doing the innovations we must do in order to engage with our new reality.<sup>12</sup> The congregation needed to participate in some new intentional practices that would help us reawaken to the presence of God in our neighbors and begin to form a new imagination for our life together as disciples of Jesus Christ, while at the very same time congregants needed enough comfort and predictability to feel safe. Roxburgh and Romanuk write, “The process of cultivating the missional congregation and leader is not linear. It is iterative, looping back and forth in an interplay within which one builds on the other.”<sup>13</sup> More patience and continued development of my own leadership skills, while intentionally engaging with the congregation in a diffusive cultural change strategy, was required.

By this time a full eighteen months had gone by, and with the mistakes made up to this point, I felt forced to simply back off for a while, leading the congregation in ways that they understood and could appreciate. I had learned how deeply ingrained defaults could hinder and limit any kind of missional understanding, but also limit what were intended as missional life and practice. Up to this point, even with the introduction of new language and practice, it seemed most in the congregation believed the only reason to engage with their neighbors was either to invite them into our existing ministry and

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<sup>11</sup> Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 35.

programs in hopes of membership, or to serve them and their desperate needs. We were still practicing a mindset of insiders and outsiders. Those potential church members were inherently like us, while those we were serving were not likely to be part of our community of faith.

### **A Second Team: The Listening Group**

The rationale for a second team following the original transition team was based on the learning experiences delineated above and the realization that, if I was to help form a people with a renewed theological imagination, I needed to learn and practice the processes of diffusion. The transition team was selected by the pastor personally based on their diversity, as well as a perception as to the level of respect and trust each has within the congregation at large. This team was led by the pastor and was not open to the congregation.

The second team, called the listening group, was to be different from the transition team. The purpose of another group was to continue to introduce some initial missional readiness ideas in a more diffusive way. Those selected were members of the congregation who expressed interest in some initial missional ideas. The group was introduced to the congregation as a Sunday school class with three primary commitments. The first was to pray the daily office using the PCUSA Daily Prayer App. The second was to spend time dwelling in their neighborhood inviting conversation with neighbors. Mapping the neighborhood and writing down observations were suggested but not really intentionally introduced. Lastly, the group would meet each week to study Scripture and to discuss what they were learning through this engagement with God in these three

ways. This group began studying Scripture and observing both the other members of the listening group (in order to better understand the congregation) and also their neighborhoods.

The listening group initially participated in taking the Missional 360 survey<sup>14</sup> to assess an understanding of the sixteen identifying characteristics of a missional community. This was the second time HPC was exposed to the survey.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the Missional 360 survey was both to continue to infuse some language around the church's readiness in being a missional church, and also to invite the group to talk about some of the challenges present for the congregation in becoming more aware of God's presence.

The listening group sensed a need to hear from the congregation concerning the sense of identity as a church following the pastoral transition and subsequent struggles. As the pastor, I suggested the process of Appreciative Inquiry as a method of getting information and also inviting members of the congregation to be more involved in theological reflection. The class designed four questions, found in Appendix A, and began by interviewing each other and recording their answers. Once the class conducted these interviews with each other, the next step was to interview the Session with basically the same questions. The class did tweak the questions to be more focused and relevant to the congregation, based on what was learned from the initial run, but they were not

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<sup>14</sup> The Missional 360 is a survey designed and offered by The Missional Network to assess sixteen factors that identify missional practice.

<sup>15</sup> When I initially arrived, one of the first things I did was ask the church to compete the survey. Unfortunately, participation was very limited and almost no discussion took place. This time, all those who were asked participated in the Missional 360.

significantly different. Following was to be a congregation-wide interview process designed to continue to assess the congregational identity.

In August of 2015, a congregation-wide retreat was held at a local PCUSA camp and conference center called NaCoMe. Approximately seventy members participated, and the interview questions were the main focus of the retreat. Groups of three were designated by the listening group and sent off to interview each other about experiences at HPC, their particular gifts for ministry, the uniqueness of the HPC community of faith, and some dreams and hopes for HPC in the future. The data was collected and the listening group then spent time discussing the answers and summarizing what was learned from this congregational survey. The results are found in Appendix A. The most interesting summary question was in what the members of HPC felt was unique about their congregation. They wrote, “We see ourselves as informal, accepting, non-judgmental, diverse, and welcoming, and we work hard to do outreach to any and all in need in our community and beyond.” In other words, the congregation sees itself as doing things for other people in need as a means of both serving the Kingdom of God and bringing a sense of belonging in doing things with our own people.

In addition to discussing the survey information, the listening group also continued to dwell in Scripture each week. It became clear that observing and listening in their neighborhoods virtually stopped during the course of interviewing. Given the chance to engage the congregation in a program-like activity quickly defaulted attention away from engaging with neighbors.

The final step for the listening group was to identify some experiments that might be conducted to continue to engage our neighbors. The hope was that by starting to

identify the identity of our congregation, while at the same time engaging with neighbors, a way of joining with God and those outside the church would emerge. However, no such experiments developed or were suggested. The group found it difficult to understand how the two were connected, and they continued to look to me as the pastoral leader to identify places where the two might meet.

In the end, I suggested an experiment in which each member of the class would host a small group from their neighborhood for dinner to discuss life in the neighborhood and what they hoped for their lives. The group became very anxious at the suggestion of such an experiment. Ultimately they agreed to try it, however this was only because I as the pastor had asked them to do it. They did not understand the need for such engagement, and I knew at that point that such an experiment would ultimately be a failure if the only reason the participants agreed to conduct it was because I asked them to. They continued to operate with a pastor-centered imagination for ministry. Even this second group highlighted the reality that the church continued to see itself primarily as a servant church, with insiders and outsiders. The church hopes to engage both groups, but they still clearly see them as two different groups. Moreover, the mandate for the church to engage primarily comes from the pastor who assigns ministry to the membership of our church.

### **Learning via Action and Reflection**

What has become necessary now is a long-term strategy for inviting people to discover from among themselves a different imagination and, with that, new learning and new habits. It is not now primarily about testing missional life and practice, but rather

understanding how to call a people forth from deeply embedded defaults into new habits and practices framed by the mission of God and, more particularly, the discovery that God is the primary agent in our life together. This life and practice cannot be simply theory, understood as only academic and objective skills; as Parker Palmer writes, this “holds us at arm’s length as detached analysts, commentators, evaluators of each other and the world.”<sup>16</sup> The church will not learn these new necessary skills quickly and with an urgency to simply get it done.

Our congregation also has to form a new imagination to dwell in this work of learning again about God and the presence of God in the particular of our neighbors. It is only as we intentionally reengage with our community in hopes of experiencing the abundance of God and God’s mission for our congregation that we discover a new way. This innovation will take years of careful and intentional learning and living together. We will need to move slowly and deliberately, creating the space “to both be and become” . . . because in this space we “not only speak, but listen, not only give answers but ask questions and welcome our insights.”<sup>17</sup> It is not the primary space of a pastor giving direction that must be acted upon. Rather, in this created space, through the diffusion of innovation, we allow God to both open us to new ways of being the church in a particular place and time and to embrace whatever changes are necessary in order to be that church.

Within this created space, there is action and there is reflection. There is recognition that this work of movement out and then theological reflection takes place

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<sup>16</sup> Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

within a particular context. Sedmak writes, “Theologies are developed in response to and within a particular social situation.”<sup>18</sup> We cannot simply be asked by a pastor to go out and serve together, and then move on to the next thing to do and then the next. There must be the time and space to carefully reflect on what we are learning and what God is showing us about ourselves and about the particular place we inhabit as the church. This is how long-lasting missional change happens, through action and reflection.

The truth is our particular social situation and context is fraught with images and narratives that are not biblical and that do not support the mission of God. The church is located in a very wealthy, largely homogenized neighborhood. As Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat explain, there are “powerful myths of our own culture evident in the images that surround us in daily life.”<sup>19</sup> They are narratives of power and privilege, ascendancy and control. Dealing with those myths requires careful theological engagement with the Bible over against such ideas of the empire that we live under. The church serves as a counter-narrative to much of what the church will see and experience each day as it engages in its particular location. Going out in service to Christ, as Luke 10:1-12 would call us to, will require a return to and reflection upon what we have experienced together.

However, it is also clear that our pastoral leadership, which my predecessor inherited and which I have continued to propagate, has been a primary inhibitor to such a missional understanding. It has already been noted that the congregation has at times

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<sup>18</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 63.

approached the world around us as a place of limits and scarcity, to be filled up with our own resources. This was how the congregation embraced the future decades ago when Pastor Kidd restarted ministry in crisis of failure. It preconditioned the congregation to serve others in a directional way from the inside of our community outwards. The pastor became the primary director of such efforts, and the congregation came to trust in that leadership for its calling and effectiveness. In those days it worked well as a method of growing the church and succeeding in what was the measure of ministry.

When I arrived, I assumed the same mantle of leadership, albeit with a missional hope and orientation. However, I am still the one casting the vision, setting the directions, and designating what our ministry will be. The world has changed, and such leadership no longer points us even to the old definition of success, let alone a new way of living a missional life. If we are to truly engage in missional life and practice, more participation and theological engagement from a broader group of leadership—in fact, the participation of all members—will be necessary. But it must not be in a congregation-wide endeavor troubled with resistance, but rather diffusive and action oriented, allowing a smaller group to engage in learning, and then report what they have learned, so that another group might do the same.

### **The Project**

Therefore, this project will not be in grand, sweeping strokes and big ideas. Instead, a small group of ten will venture out from within the Body of Christ seeking the abundance of God and the mission that God is calling our particular church to be a part of. Each day the group will dwell in Scripture and daily prayer. The members of this



group will engage with Luke 10. The group will engage with people in places where they gather, each day for fifteen to thirty minutes. Each night they will journal about what they are learning and how they might join with God. With one another, the group will engage weekly in dialogue about what they see and what it means. They will endeavor to be a micro-learning community, seeking the abundance of God and God's ways for life and peace. Then they will both report to the leadership of the church and to the rest of us what they are learning about God and about missional life and practice, and they will also help the Session learn of experiments and the necessary future learning. Both will be critical in helping us to continue to discover what God is doing with us as HPC.

The assessment of the project will be in the form of a survey measuring learning from the experiment. Again, this is not to determine measurable outcomes, as that would suggest the importance of skills and practices rather than learning and awakening to a new imagination. Our work will be to ask how our actions and subsequent reflection are being heard within the congregation at large. The work will also be to evaluate what change might look like for the church going forward, and how it can engage in better understanding and continual learning. The assessment is not about accomplishing an end for a program or a ministry, but instead beginning to assess the way the church will know when it is learning, when we have learned all we can in an area, and what the next stretching will be to gain new understanding.

## CHAPTER 3

### PROJECT FOCUS AND WORK

As an action learning process designed to help inspire greater awareness of God's presence in our lives together as the church called Hillsboro Presbyterian Church, as well as in the community in which we live and work, this project will invite ten members of the church to engage in relearning the theological task of awakening to the presence and the mission of God around the church. The group will commit to daily prayer, availability to neighbors in local gathering places, and daily journaling over the course of six weeks. Each of these commitments represents elements of missional readiness and engagement, as well as engaging the abundance of God in a particular community. Roxburgh and Romanuk write, "A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

As pastor, I will make a series of announcements, inviting members of the congregation who are interested and willing to commit to join the group of ten. The purpose of these announcements is to identify those already interested in some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, xv.

practices of missional readiness—mainly prayer, study of Scripture, and listening to our neighbors—but they also inform the congregation that this work is happening among us. Limiting the group to ten will keep the project small as well as create a mandate for future groups to follow beyond just the ten who initially sign up. The Session will also approve the class, as it has been proposed, introducing our leadership to the same missional readiness practices.

First, each member of the class will pray the daily office in the morning, using the Morning Daily Prayer from the Northumbria Community.<sup>2</sup> Beginning each day with the acknowledgment of and aligning with God’s presence in the world around us sends us off embracing abundance and not scarcity. In the middle of the day, the group will then pray the Lord’s Prayer. This too is intended to connect the group with God’s abundance, even in a short and easy-to-realize way. Immersing the group in daily Scripture and prayer is fundamental to de-compartmentalizing faith and everyday life. In order to learn something other than a directional orientation of service from the church out to the community, it is necessary for the group to experience the everyday presence of God as a fundamental realization. God is not just present on Sunday in the ways the pastor is directing, but also in our everyday living. The psalmist writes in Psalm 139:2, “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.”

Second, the group will be asked to discover places in the neighborhood where people gather and then spend fifteen to thirty minutes per day to be available for conversations in those places. Examples of such places might be the break room at work,

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<sup>2</sup> This daily devotion is located online at Northumbria Community, “Morning Prayer,” accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/morning-prayer/>.

the trailhead before or after running, the dog park, the front porch, or a favorite lunch hangout. The purpose of engaging in conversation with people is to seek and listen for the presence of God in neighbors and in others. This is a way of being we no longer seem to possess as a congregation. We know how to engage another in serving a desperate need, but to meet with and even to receive hospitality from a stranger as receiving the abundance of God is no longer something we know. This is not a skill to be acquired, but a way of being present with other people. However, in order to begin to develop such a way of being, a set of four questions based in the practice of appreciative inquiry will be used as an initial basis of that interaction.

Each member of the group will ask the following questions in their own words: 1) Where are you from? How long have you lived in Nashville/Franklin? 2) What part of the city (neighborhood) do you live in? How long have you been there? 3) What do you like about your neighborhood? What is unique? 4) If you could change one thing about your neighborhood, what would that be? These questions provide the basis for receiving hospitality from the other, in the same way Jesus sent the seventy out in Luke 10:1-12. The group is not to introduce themselves as conducting a project, or as being connected with a church, as this would precondition the interaction away from merely receiving hospitality, listening, and experiencing the abundance of God and turn it back into directional service, from us to them. The message would then be that we are here to do something for you. In Luke 10, the seventy are sent out without purse, bag, or sandals, representing the things we carry with us designed to sustain us independent of the hospitality of others. Those sent out were fully dependent on the people they came in contact with to be the abundance of God. The group sent to gathering places will be

similarly dependent. Again, this interaction is not a new set of skills to be acquired but rather a different way to be present in daily living. This interaction will open the group up to the power of the Spirit to shape us in a new way through the abundant presence of God in the other.

Each night the group will be asked to pray and to journal, answering two main questions: 1) Where and in whom did you see God today? 2) How did you join with God in the neighborhood? The purpose of prayer and journaling is to begin to awaken to the theological task of discerning the presence of God and what the missionary God is doing in and through us, but also through our neighbors and in our neighborhoods. This is the reflection portion of the action-reflection learning cycle. Theological reflection does not happen without intentionally asking “God questions.” Roxburgh and Romanuk explain that most people learn by taking action and then reflecting about how the outcomes of that action might lead to new understanding or new ways of being.<sup>3</sup> The loop then reoccurs as that new understanding then leads to new action, and new reflection.

As the group journals each night with the answers to what God is doing in the midst of their work, they will be writing down new understanding and learning that will affect the next day’s action. Each of these days then becomes a small experiment in a new way of being with God, a theological reflection on that experiment, and then a re-engaging with the presence of God again the next day. God is at the center of each of these experiments, during each of these days, through dependence upon and the sustaining of the Holy Spirit. This is a significant change from a directional orientation to

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<sup>3</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 35.

faith, in which God is only marginally present as the one who blesses our resources towards filling needs in the other.

To further reinforce the action reflection cycle, the group will agree to dwell in Scripture each week, and to participate in a group discussion sharing the reflections they are recording each day in their journals. The group will study Luke 10:1-12, using *Lectio Divina*. In Christianity, *Lectio Divina* (Latin for “Divine Reading”) is a traditional Benedictine practice of scriptural reading, meditation, and prayer intended to promote communion with God and to increase the knowledge of God’s Word.<sup>4</sup> As pastor, the so-called expert in biblical study, I will not lead this conversation but will attend as a participant. Members of the group will rotate and convene this conversation weekly. This study is not intended as biblical study in search of meaning and scholarship. Instead, the purpose of dwelling in Scripture is, as Sedmak writes, “to see the relevance of the Bible for present-day contexts” in order to re-appropriate the Bible for everyday living.<sup>5</sup> This dwelling in Scripture offers the group a different rhythm to their days during the project, in which they are able to hear the way of being offered by Jesus to the seventy and to make it their own. This different rhythm is what enables each member of the group to think theologically about their daily experiments. Luke 10 provides the model for learning how to have theological conversations as well as theological reflection on those conversations. We go fully dependent on others. We interact with those who are already

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<sup>4</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson and Evan B. Howard, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 164.

present. We heal the sick and share in peace. We reflect on joining with God in the places where we have been sent.

By the end of the six weeks, each participant will have breathed in a different way of being, grounded in daily prayer and Scripture, called out to be dependent on the Holy Spirit through the hospitality of others, and theologically re-appropriating their lives to a different rhythm based on what they are learning each day. Each day will be a new experiment in being available to the abundance of God. It is this abundance of God that transforms our lives and ultimately our church, as the work of this group and other groups informs the congregation. Since each member of the group will have conducted weeks of experiments, at the end of the six weeks they will be asked to identify another experiment in how they might continue engaging with their neighbors beyond the project. This learning will be reported to the Session and to the congregation at large. Members of the group will be interviewed at multiple times in worship about what they have learned about the abundance of God and the power of listening for God in others through the course of this project and the many experiments. The congregation will be aware that this group is meeting and will expect to hear about their journey of faith. In addition, members of the group might then be part of inviting others into another group of ten for another similar project of missional engagement.

The purpose of this project is to develop a new way of interacting with God, one another, and the world around us, and then to assess what the group has learned about the presence of God in the world around us and in the neighborhoods where we live and work. In order to assess that learning, a questionnaire has been developed (see Appendix B). This will serve as a baseline assessment of the group's awareness and understanding

of missional life and practices, and how such practices are opening the group members up to a new way to be present with God and with others in search of the future God has in store for us. We are assessing what Mark Lau Branson offers as “a different way for the people of an organization to know, to communicate, to discern, and to imagine.”<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire will also help me reflect theologically about this project, and thus it will be administered at the beginning and again at the end of the six weeks.

The assessment tool has seven questions and each question has been written to categorize the answer in one of the four ways churches might react to change. These four types are those introduced in the Missional 360 survey: reactive, developmental, transitional, and transformational. The first two types, reactive and developmental, are internally normative in that they identify assumptions about faith and life believed to be inherently correct. In the reactive view, the church is simply denying that any change in culture is happening and hunkering down against outsiders. In the developmental view, the church is working hard to improve the way it communicates and attracts others to its already firmly established assumptions. The third and fourth types, transitional and transformational, operate as if the church needs to adjust its assumptions based on the narratives being encountered outside the church in a particular context or culture.

Each of these is working to adjust existing programs and ministry based on those outside cultural assumptions and how the salvation story of Jesus Christ interacts with that particularity. Each of the questions identifies an answer that fits into one of these types. The questions are also directly measuring learning outcomes related to the

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 19.



elements of the project: daily prayer and Scripture, listening to strangers in gathering places as a way of listening to God, and theological reflection through journaling and dwelling in Scripture with Luke 10. Thus, the combination measures how missional ways of engaging with the world and listening for God are moving the group towards different ways of understanding and assessing the church and its ministry.

Question one assesses how often the group prays and reflects on Scripture as a measure of listening for God. The reactive view might rarely participate in daily prayer and Scripture as a way of listening for God to inform the narrative of church life, while a developmental view might participate on a weekly basis as a program designed to welcome visitors to the church. In the transitional view, daily prayer and Scripture reading is a more regular practice, as individuals begin to adopt a new way of being that is centered upon listening for God's direction. The transformational answer would be "daily" as a new way of engaging with the mission of God by re-appropriating Scripture into daily life. The assessment measures different responses by each of the ten participants in the group to identify where changes happen based on what has been learned.

The second question measures how likely the group expects to encounter and engage with strangers. Again, each of the answers represents one of the four church types. The reactive type would assume all its life and practice is already as it should be and nothing would be gained by engaging with others. The developmental view would engage with the other only as a way of welcoming. The third and fourth views would indicate a willingness to engage with others in seeking the abundance of God in others, leading to a transitional or transformational assessment.

Question three comes directly from Luke 10 and assesses how the group is evaluating the idea of peace as that which the seventy are sharing. Here the measure moves from simply serving the other in desperate need as reactionary, which requires no real interaction, to offering hospitality to the stranger as developmental. Such offering of hospitality keeps the church in the position of power and privilege, and attempts merely to welcome same-minded people. The transitional view would be to begin to see the importance of receiving hospitality from strangers as a way of listening to what God is doing in our midst. Finally, the transformational view would be joining with God in proclaiming the Kingdom of heaven on earth in a particular place as it says in Luke 10.

Question four is designed to assess theological reflection. The questions are placed in reverse order in this question, with the transformational-type question listed first. Those who are very comfortable practicing theological reflection would be of a transformational mindset, while even those in the transitional view would begin to see the value of such work and embrace it. In the developmental view, such theological reflection would continue to be the domain of the pastors and other professionals. The job of the average church member would then be to invite others to hear from professional theologians. Lastly, in the reactive view, considering what God is up to in the world around us is not of high value and would not measure very high in priority.

Question five is a true or false answer taken directly from the Missional 360 survey. It is an attempt to measure how the group sees the ministry of the church and how it is connected already to the mission of God. It would point to the transformational type of church.

Question six invites the group to consider how often or likely they are to experiment with their faith. Experiments here are simply defined as trying new ways to live in faith. There is no assumption that participants will necessarily understand such a definition from the outset, but that understanding will be critical to moving into becoming more missional. Most congregants in reactive-type churches perhaps would not yet be familiar with a need to try such experiments. When our assumptions are already correct, there is no need to test new ideas or ways of engaging with God. In the developmental type, experiments would still be primarily viewed as opportunities to attract new members and have an evangelistic conversation. Experiments in this type would likely default into methods and strategies to get more members or grow the budget. The transitional view would begin to attempt such experiments and would perhaps be most likely where the group would end up following this project. In a group setting with the comfort of others, it would be something some would try. The regular, almost everyday experimenting of how God is interacting with us and with the world would be how someone in the transformational type would answer.

Question seven is written specifically about church leadership; however, it also alludes to how the group might view the overall ministry of the church. This question too was developed from the Missional 360 survey, from the category of church leadership. A reactive view would indicate that maintaining the best things already in the community should be the focus of the leadership and the church in general. A developmental view would urge leaders to improve things, but only as they continue to be attractive for those visiting and interested in joining the existing ministry as it stands. A transitional type of leader would invite the group to begin to explore ministry in the communities where

members live and work, and lastly, in the transformational type, innovation and new ways of ministry would be fully in place.

These assessment questions will afford the opportunity to reflect theologically on the project and on my own leadership. The combination of missional readiness factors in the four types, with the questions being written in a way that is directly related to the practices of the group, will provide measurable outcomes. The final expected outcome of this project is for the participants in this group to help me as the pastor to think more deeply about leadership in the midst of missional readiness and change. I will not participate in the group as one of the ten members, and will only observe what is being brought back to the weekly reflection group.

In Luke 10, Jesus is the one who sends the seventy out into the world to learn, “to cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Built into such a mandate was both action and reflection, serving in the name of Christ and also participating in what God was doing in the world. My learning will be in hearing the stories that are being brought back from those who were sent, and then interacting with them in a way that encourages my own theological reflection and the re-appropriation of our church’s ministry and programming. My learning will be in asking how HPC might continue to join with what God is doing. Lastly, my learning will be in measuring the outcomes through the assessment tool. Such learning will provide a baseline for my own theological reflection and even further discussion among the Session about the overall nature of leadership in our congregation and how each of us will engage in missional life and practice. These continuing reflections and experiments in the

mission of God in Christ will give future shape and substance to the life and work of our church.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize, this project has three elements, each with a set of key actions toward engaging in the theological task of awakening to the presence of God in the local gathering places and joining with what God is doing there. First, a small group will begin each day praying the daily office, engaging in Scripture and grounding their daily journey in the abundance of God's presence. Second, the group will gather with people in their neighborhoods, depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to open others to sharing hospitality, so the group might hear what God is doing with them and with our group. Finally, each night the group will complete the action-reflection cycle by journaling answers to questions designed to help them reflect on what they are learning about God and themselves, and then to imagine different ways to experiment further.

An assessment process about what we are learning will enable further theological reflection as part of this project. It will also help me and all our leaders begin to reflect on this new space in which we find ourselves doing ministry, as well as the new leadership imagination required to engage with it. The final step of conducting additional action learning experiments and determining what will be involved in diffusing this new learning further into the larger congregation is beyond the scope of this project.

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<sup>7</sup> PCUSA, *Book of Order 2011-2013*, 1.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 4

### REPORT OF THE PROJECT

This chapter presents the details of the project, which took place over the course of six weeks between November 2015 and January 2016. The demographics of the participants and what we did together are discussed, followed by observations made throughout the project and the role of leadership. Following the six weeks, the experience was shared with the congregation.

#### **The Demographics of the Project**

On Sunday, November 29, 2015, seven members of the church embarked on the experiment together. Even though the original invitation to the congregation had been for ten “fearless lambs,” only seven volunteered for the project. Rather than wait for or recruit additional participants, we started the journey together with those who were willing. Thus the project was predisposed to those who already had some interest in the missional practices of the experiment. Some of those who had already been involved in previous groups—the transition team and the listening group—elected not to participate, and no insistence to do so was suggested. There were also no prerequisites required for any who had not participated already in any of the previous activities.

Of the seven who participated in the group, two members were from the second listening group that had been meeting together as a Sunday school class for over a year at that point. These two participants had already read Alan Roxburgh's book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of Church in Our Time*, and they were familiar with missional life and practice as conveyed in that book and through our conversations. They had already been working in their neighborhoods, listening and discerning what God was doing in those places. Their participation in this experiment was a continuation of that work.

Two of the participants were members of our existing church leadership, one elder and one deacon. These two participants had joined the listening group just a month prior, out of an interest in some of the reporting about the group they had heard during our monthly Session meeting. They had some exposure to missional life and practice, and also were encouraged to read Roxburgh's book as an introduction.

The remaining three participants in the group were brand new to the conversation, responding to the congregation-wide appeal. During the initial orientation to our work together, they were exposed for the first time to what the experiment intended as the practices of praying the daily office, gathering with people in their neighborhoods, and engaging theologically in the action reflection cycle. Other members of the group were helpful in explaining what we were endeavoring to do together, and I was the primary leader, outlining the process for the entire group. All seven members participated in the first gathering on November 29, 2015.

The group participants ranged in age from forty-four years old to seventy-three years old. Three of those participating were men, while the remaining four were women.



Almost all the group, with the exception of one participant, have been members at HPC for over twenty years. All of them are heavily involved in our ministry and community life at HPC. Four of the participants are retired, but all four of them had worked full time before their retirement. There were no full-time mothers, nor were there any participants who were disabled in any way. The remaining three participants were all employed full time. Two worked a regular nine-to-five schedule, five days a week, while one participant, a real estate agent, had a more flexible and yet equally demanding schedule. Six were married and two of the participants had children still living at home. All were white and economically middle class.

### **What We Did Together**

In this section and following, the results of the work done together by the group are reported. This reporting is done through the observations of the group during its weekly gathering, along with the responses to the survey questions. Appendix C presents the survey questions, both the initial assessment and the final one.

The group met together in the church parlor during the Sunday school hour each Sunday from November 29, 2015 until January 10, 2016. The first week was an orientation to the practices, and the remaining six weeks primarily involved the group sharing their experiences. The first third of the hour-long sharing time was focused upon reading Luke 10:1-12 together and then reflecting on it together using the process of *Lectio Divina*. The second third primarily involved sharing our experiences of meeting people in the places where they gather. Sometimes this sharing continued until the end of

the hour, but when it did not, the remaining third of the class involved reflecting together on what these encounters might mean for our faith and life.

The group answered the seven survey questions outlined in Appendix B (and discussed in Chapter 3) at our first meeting. The group then completed the survey questions again at the end of our time together, which took place after the sharing of our experience with the congregation on March 3, 2016.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 6 of this project discusses this congregational gathering in greater detail, in terms of diffusing what we were learning into the larger congregation. It seemed important to include this time of sharing in the overall experience of the project, and so the survey was administered following that event.

All seven of those who participated were able to consistently practice the daily office using the Northumbria devotion each morning and then again to pray the Lord's prayer each afternoon. All reported right away their success, and we often discussed how meaningful the participants believed this to be in starting their day with the right mindset and focus. One member of the group was so enthusiastic about the morning devotion that he carried it with him during a family holiday gathering and used it with his entire family. When we gathered to share our project with the congregation, he spoke specifically about the devotion time each day as a significant learning. He believed it had made a difference in transforming the rest of the experiment for him.

Question one of the assessment had tested the frequency of daily prayer and devotion by the members of the group. At the outset, the answers to the question had

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<sup>1</sup> The group elected to share their experience of "Ten Fearless Lambs" during our Wednesday night dinner program on Wednesday, March 3, 2016.

been a mixture of both daily and weekly, as well as one person even answering “rarely.” By the end of the project all the responses to question one were listed as “daily,” with exception of the participant who had shared them with his family citing as “regularly,” with a comment written that said, “I try daily but not every day.” The importance of daily prayer and Scripture through the daily office was clearly elevated during the project in all the members of the group.

From the beginning of the project, it was evident that those who were working full time had a much harder time finding fifteen to thirty minutes per day to engage in gathering places. Those who were retired had a schedule that better facilitated the time necessary to engage in such a way. Even with such a challenge, five out of the seven members of the group were able to consistently spend fifteen to thirty minutes per day in places where people gather, engaging them in conversation and listening. One participant used her morning walk in her neighborhood to join with people and to engage them in conversation as they walked and observed the neighborhood. Another participant owns a small farm outside of town and spent time each day in the supply and feed store engaging with other farmers and residents who stopped by the store for supplies and conversation. Two of the participants are members of the local YMCA and spent time in the coffee area meeting people. They attended the gym at different times during the day, so they did not meet the same people and did not work together on the experiment. Lastly, the real estate agent had a wide range of experiences matching the different geographical locations where she worked with her clients. She met people in restaurants, while shopping, and even as she showed properties to clients.

Two members of the group were more inconsistent. One had attended a conference out of town during the first week of our experiment, and he never quite regained his place among the group who seemed to be off to a quick start sharing stories. In addition, he has a very busy schedule with children and work that made it more difficult. The second participant who struggled is a very busy community physician with a large practice. She met with people in the break room at her office and also told stories about times she intentionally gathered with people while Christmas shopping, but it seemed as if she were working very hard trying to come up with the time to do this gathering. Overall, all seven participants made significant attempts to complete this second part of our experiment together.

Perhaps the most disappointing part of the overall experiment was the time of theological reflection, completing the action learning cycle.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this part of the experiment was to be awakened to the presence of God around us in search of what God might be doing in us and through our neighbors. One of the thesis statements offered by Sedmak is the idea that “theology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context.”<sup>3</sup> As I observed, however, there was never any real sense that such reflection was happening with the group, nor that it was a particular priority. The group was very intent on completing the other two practices, devotion and engaging with others, but was not as willing to engage with this last part. Question four of the survey was designed to assess theological reflection. In both the initial assessment and the

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<sup>2</sup> A fuller explanation of the action learning cycle was presented in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 15.

assessment completed at the end of the project, scores for this question indicated a very high rate of comfort and competence with theological engagement. In fact, the scores were virtually the same, equally confident. Yet in spite of this perceived acuity by the members of the group, the first two practices of devotion and engagement were not necessarily leading them to reflect on their experiences theologically. Without a pastor or religious professional leading such a conversation, which was not happening in this case, the group did not go there.

### **Initial Observations**

Overall, a central theme began to emerge as the group discussed and reflected on their experiences of engaging with people in gathering places. There was almost an overwhelming positive sense of receiving hospitality from strangers. Participants in the group described this as an “opening of the flood gates” type of experience. They would engage with someone and suddenly that person would be totally open to sharing their life and their experiences with them. Question two of the assessment survey was intended to measure how likely our participants were to start a conversation with a stranger. Here the answers changed from the initial survey to the final one, but not in the way I expected. Almost all the participants claimed an ease of starting such a conversation. When asked how likely they would be to start such a conversation, “I do it all the time” was the most popular answer given. However, when the assessment was completed at the end the answers had generalized more, including, “Somewhat likely, I enjoy meeting people.” Those who were struggling realized perhaps that such a practice was not as easy as it had first seemed. Still no participant ever shared being rebuffed or turned away rudely by any

person, which was remarkable. Southern culture in a city like Nashville would dictate such hospitality, and yet it seemed unique for the full six-week time period. It is also possible that such a rebuff occurred and that perhaps the members of the group were not willing to share such a perceived failure in light of how positive the conversation had been.

Even if that was the case, and in spite of the changing response in the survey, there was a momentum developing around the perception of success in our participants. The more the group engaged with their neighbors and with each other, the more confidence they seemed to discover. Again referring to question two of the assessment, those who offered the same answer as “I do it all the time” were likely more confident in offering this as their answer than they were the first time if the conversation was any indication. The more the group practiced daily prayer and devotion, as well as engaging with strangers, the more they seemed to have a desire and a competence for both. They were connected to these simple practices, which Albert Borgmann identifies as “the new realm of the holy.”<sup>4</sup>

Lastly in the way of initial observations, the group sensed right away that their engaging with others was more effective as a mutuality of relationships rather than their serving someone or doing something for another. It was a little surprising given our ecclesiology as a servant church and the openness of the parameters of this project that no participant of the group ever returned from the weekly engaging with a story about giving someone money or helping someone. It was not explicitly stated in the initial orientation

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 93.

that such an engagement was inappropriate, and yet there were no reports of service to our neighbors. The group had seemingly listened to others, engaged with them in a mutual dialogue of caring and sharing, and had somehow been able to resist the temptation to try and fix someone or help with some expressed need. Question three of the survey had asked about the meaning of “sharing the peace” within the context of Luke 10, and during the initial assessment only one person had responded with, “service to those in desperate need.” When the final assessment was completed, more people had responded in that way, which again makes it remarkable that nobody ever returned citing an example of serving someone in such a way.

The answers in question three were designed in part to evaluate the definition of the peace that is being shared by the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus in Luke 10. Often if peace is understood in the way of the developmental church, the church and its members maintain their position of power and control over others, especially those with perceived needs to be met. The transformational view would be more of a sense that peace is a mutual joining with God and others in the neighborhood, and that seems to be a sense that was embraced by the participants in the project. They were able to see the stranger as not the “object of good intentions” but as a person capable of God’s presence.

One anecdotal observation was one participant’s story of encountering a man in the coffee area of the YMCA who almost immediately professed himself to be an avowed atheist. Yet, the member of the group who engaged him in conversation multiple times over the course of several weeks testified to the presence of God he observed in the man’s life. Rather than succumbing to the temptation to evangelize the man, which certainly many would have assumed to be not only permissible but necessary, our group

member simply encountered the man, listened to him, and observed God's presence in a situation many would assume as a forsaken life. It was again remarkable.

One member of the group responded to question three by stating that none of the answers provided expressed her beliefs. She stated that she no longer saw the answer to what is "sharing the peace" as simple and limited to a choice of just four possibilities. More feedback is necessary from this person in order to fully understand what she is trying to express, which has not been done yet as part of this project.

The initial observations were very positive. Perhaps due to such early momentum as well as the relatively short duration of the project, all those who started the project in November of 2015 completed it in its entirety. Throughout the course of the entire project, from a leadership perspective I remained as an observer and the administrator of the survey.

### **Leadership of the Project**

From the outset of the experiment to the end, I tried to express the limited role I intended to take as a leader in the midst of our work together. My intention was to outline the project and provide some guidelines to the Christian practices established by the experiment. In addition, I was the one who administered the survey questions and collected the answers. I explained that while I was available to answer questions, the scope of those questions should be related only to the practices themselves. My intention was to set a boundary that I would merely be an observer of the work being done by the group, and not an active participant. I openly shared with the group that my learning would be in listening to them and the stories they brought to the group.



A rotation was set up for the group meeting so that each week a different person would act as the convener. That person would call the meeting together and then choose someone to read the Scripture. He or she would then also ask for feedback and attempt to moderate the responses to questions as well as the stories shared. Some of the members of the group were far more comfortable with this than others. Since there were seven members of the group and only six weeks, it was intended that one person would not have the chance to lead the group.

In past experiments with missional practices of studying Scripture and sharing stories about our community involvement, it was clear that my leadership had become problematic. Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez write, “Leaders have the work of helping participants to notice differences, to have conversations about the experiences and values behind such diversity, and to shape experiments that draw on varied strengths of those involved.”<sup>5</sup> As pastor, members of the group would often address me either with a question or in search of an affirmation that they were in fact doing it “right.” I also wondered at times if some of the members of previous groups were going through the motions to please me or because they simply sensed that this was important to me and they wanted to help. In the past, this had limited the full engagement with the practices and some of working through the difficulty of adopting new habits and actions. This was the primary reason I wanted to remain silent, or as silent as possible, during the course of the experiment. I had hopes that limiting my leadership with the boundaries described would facilitate more and deeper engagement in the project.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 110.

It was very difficult at times to simply listen and to stay quiet. My physical presence in the room made eye contact possible, and even though nobody during the six weeks directly asked me to intervene, often the members of the group looked towards me as they were reflecting on the Scripture and the stories they shared together. I started to experiment with moving my chair from the midst of the circle to more of an outlying place in the room in hopes that the group would better recognize my role as an observer. However, on one specific occasion, one member of the group physically turned in her chair towards my location in the back of the room in order to share a story she clearly wanted me to hear.

The most difficult occasions to remain quiet for me were at those times where it was abundantly clear that theological dimensions to the conversations were occurring and yet nobody from the group seemed to be noticing or calling them out verbally. It was frustrating to observe that perhaps moments for change and development were occurring, not to be identified as such. These were moments for growing discipleship. Gerhard Lohfink writes, “Discipleship means to sense the miracle of the reign of God and to pursue radically the path of Jesus, fascinated by the gift of a new possibility of human community.”<sup>6</sup> There was a lot at stake, and yet I observed that the group seemed to have little access to making the connections. I remained silent through the project as an observer and resisted the temptation to participate, believing that my leadership would only limit others’ participation.

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 180.

The survey questions answered at the end demonstrated some theological movement. In question three, the first set of answers identified the developmental response to what “sharing the peace” meant. Participants in the group were almost exclusively in agreement that this was what Luke intended in the story at the outset. By the end of the experiment, when the same set of survey questions was administered, the answers were almost equally dispersed across the spectrum of possibilities. Clearly, some theological movement had occurred, and members of the group had changed what they believed “sharing the peace” meant. So while I had been frustrated by my inability to demonstrate leadership at key moments, the group was having an experience of some degree of cultural change.

In fact, question seven of the survey demonstrated the most significant movement on the part of the group. Question seven was intended to assess leadership and the role of church leaders in general. At the outset of our experiment, the answers in question were almost equally dispersed across all four of the possible responses: reactive, developmental, transitional, and transformational. At least some members of the group believed that church leaders should “preserve things of the past,” while others thought leadership was “keeping things from getting stale.” The most responses to the first survey were from the transitional view, to “involve the church in community ministry where we live and work.” There were even two responses included in the transformational view at the beginning.

By the end of the project, the answers had clustered in the transformational view, with all but one identifying the role of church leadership to “create opportunities for us to innovate new ways of ministry.” It is not clear whether the explanation at the beginning

of the project about my role as leader was primarily the reason for this change, or whether the group itself had moved in such a way regarding leadership. Perhaps it would be fair to assume that both were reasons for the shift.

In *Introducing the Missional Church*, Roxburgh and Boren write, “The role of the leader is to cultivate these safe spaces and assist people in finding (but not provide) the means whereby they can name what is happening. People need time and opportunity to work through their feelings to the place of a new awareness, and they need the space to discover language for what is happening in their rapidly changing world.”<sup>7</sup> The challenge of leadership in such an experiment is to discern how to create and cultivate that safe space in a way that does not provide the answers or the expected responses, but instead invites the participants into their own experience of God’s presence. This is difficult to do, given the imagination most of our congregation has in regards to the role of the pastor and especially how the pastor has functioned at HPC over the last four decades. As the world changes, there are even more expectations that the pastor would provide the answers to what the future might bring. This was clearly the leadership challenge in the midst of this experiment.

### **Mid-Term Observations**

By week three or four of the experiment, there were several observable changes happening to the members of the group. These changes were also measurable according to survey questions one, two, and five. These address the commitment to daily devotion,

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<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 141.

daily interaction with others, and the perspective of what it means to be the church in one's community.

Most of the members of the group were able to see how crucial daily reading of Scripture and prayer were to their observance of the Christian life. The group discussed the specifics of the Northumbria Community devotion, citing and agreeing on the impact of certain days and readings from the week. Even those who claimed that they had always done daily devotions and readings from a whole host of sources were newly energized by the practice of doing these together with others who were doing the same. At the outset of the survey, our small sample had again dispersed their ideas about the regular practice of prayer and Scripture. By the end, the answers given were focused on either "daily," with the majority of answers in this category, or "regularly" as the alternative answer. Clearly the group was seeing the daily practice of reading and prayer as an important element to their Christian lives.

Second, and with almost equal affirmations, the group was also indicating the transformation of their daily interaction with others. The movement was from just being friendly and southern with the offering of hospitality, to the receiving of hospitality from others. One member of the group talked about her job as a visiting nurse as a place where she often had experienced the need to be kind and gracious to her patients and clients. She had always made a point to be kind and generous to others as a way of doing her caring. Now she was opening to the possibility that others had something she needed as well. The receiving of kindness and welcoming from others was a way to experience the receiving of God's grace in her life. It was a new way of being that had not occurred to her over the many years of following Jesus Christ. In some ways, what was happening to

her was a conversion experience, described by Newbigin as “a total change of direction, which includes both inner reorientation of the heart and the mind and the outward reorientation of conduct in all areas of life.”<sup>8</sup>

Question two asked the “likelihood that you would start a conversation with a stranger.” In the initial survey, almost all the members of the group had indicated that they “do it all the time” as their choice. This indicated a high capacity for engaging with others from the beginning. By the end of the survey, the answers to question two had not changed. Almost all the members of the group were continuing to offer the same answers. However, what did seem to change was how the group was beginning to perceive that interaction with others; rather than simply being friendly, they were experiencing God’s mercy and grace in the other. It was the combination of the observable mid-term outcome and the measurable outcome in the end that enabled this overall reflection. There was clearly something happening within the group.

Each week we centered the first part of our time together in studying Luke 10:1-12 as agreed upon. By this time in the experiment, it became a bit of a joke amidst the group that we continued to study the same thing over and over again. One person quipped that there were other parts of the Bible that were important too and perhaps we might include them in addition to reading Luke 10. That was one of the Sunday gatherings that was particularly engaged by the group, and some new insights were discussed about how Luke 10 was a different way for the church than they had previously known. There were enough of those conversations to keep the group interested throughout the six weeks.

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<sup>8</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 135.

Another mid-term observation was an observable shift in the way the members of the group sensed our way to be the church. HPC has a long history of serving the needs of others. Previous leadership had identified the ethos of the church as serving those in desperate need. At the outset of the experiment, there were members of the group still talking about searching out those in the community who were lonely and lost, hurting and fragile. While the group still saw these as concerns, maybe even preferential concerns of their work, they were also beginning to see the stranger as someone capable of seeing them as fragile or in need of God's grace. The idea that Christians can receive from others in mutuality was not a new concept for the group, but one that seemed to be gaining in merit as the experiment went along. There was also a genuine sense of peace and joy in the activity of engaging with the stranger. The group members smiled and laughed easily as they talked about their encounters with others. No longer was it as scary a process as it had been perceived. Now the group seemed to be experiencing more of an abundance of God's presence in the world around them.

Like question two, the answers to question five were not measurably different from the beginning of the experiment to the end, and yet the way the group was answering that question was different. As a true or false possibility, the members of the group identified the truth of the reality that "most of the people in the church should be actively engaged in mission and ministry in the communities where they live and work." Prior to the experiment, it was clear that most felt that engagement as to be in serving others almost exclusively. That has long been the practice of hospitality in the HPC community. However, by the end the possibility that engagement with others in places

where we live and work includes receiving hospitality as well as giving to others was clearly something that the group was considering.

The last mid-term observation was in the area of theological engagement, or with the journaling and reflection on the two questions each night. This was a third crucial part of the experiment, and yet it did not appear to be happening. Almost no discussion of theology beyond the Scripture was taking place. No stories from journals were being shared, and no reflections on the presence of God in their day were being offered. The discussion of Luke 10 at the beginning was spirited and thoughtful, and then the group mostly stayed with stories of their interactions with others. This could be observed as theological, as relational in the same way God is observed in the Trinity, and yet it did not appear that the members of the group were making a connection to the practice of their daily lives. Colin Gunton reflects on the way Christian medieval thinkers were able to see God as one who “enables the human mind to understand something of the way things belong together in space and time.”<sup>9</sup> Our world of modernity has largely moved away from such an idea. We had been clear about journaling and the need to ask the two primary questions, “Where did you see God today?” and “How did you interact with God?” Yet, these two ideas were never really referenced in much of a direct way without prompting from me. The leader did not ask for such a response and no response was given.

One note of interest was that the protocol we had established early on with leadership rotating from week to week was also not happening. One member of the group

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<sup>9</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.



had assumed the role of leader for the first week and then never relinquished it. In this area I felt it was too important not to intervene, so I asked each week for the first three weeks if someone else would be willing to lead the group the following week and relieve the “brave first leader.” I reminded the group that this indeed was the protocol we had agreed upon at the outset. Still nobody was willing, and thus it continued to be the same person throughout the entire project.

Perhaps in the absence of my leadership, the group felt they needed to designate their own permanent leader. They were not satisfied simply to rotate, with each person taking a turn to embrace his or her own leadership of the group. The members of the group elected a new overall leader by default. If nobody else was willing, then naturally a leader would emerge. This observation was a very real reminder that our current system of church remains highly dependent on hierarchy rather than shared participation. Even as the group was engaging with others and seeing the gifts they each had to share through daily devotion and interaction with strangers, they still defaulted back to the idea of one primary, permanent leader.

### **Reporting Our Experiment to the Congregation**

By the end of the six weeks, not much beyond the scope of what was observed in the mid-term had emerged within the group. The group continued to meet weekly and continued the missional practices until the end of the agreed upon time. The first two components, daily devotion and engagement with strangers in gathering places, continued, while the last component of theological engagement remained largely an

unobserved practice. The group discussed ways to share what they had experienced with the larger congregation, as had been originally part of the scope of this project.

It was agreed that the group would present their learning to a group that gathers for Wednesday night dinner. This group is composed of approximately seventy-five adults and meets for a four-week series of conversations several times per year. The series offered at the time of the group's presentation was called "Identity" and involved a discussion on personal as well as corporate identity. The format of these meetings is normally one in which a featured or expert speaker is invited to come and present. Seminary professors, book authors, and others have all participated.

Our group sharing was a bit of a departure from the normal format. In and of itself, the format was already a change in the way that HPC typically hears information. The learning provided by our group was not from experts or thought leaders on a topic, but from the average ordinary members of our congregation who spoke with only the authority of their experience. The only other time in recent memory when we did not have an outside, "official" speaker was when the pastor or other member of the church's paid leadership staff presented. This again reinforces the idea that only certain voices should be heard when it comes to faith and practice, and those voices are the expert, professional ones. The group's presentation was a departure, even for one night, from that narrative.

Each member of the group stood before the Wednesday night group assembled that evening and reported on the experiment. With energy and enthusiasm they shared what it had been like, from the initial fear at the outset of engaging with strangers, to the difference the daily devotion had made to that work, and how sometimes it seemed as if

the devotion was informing the work they were doing with their neighbors. Those gathered to listen were equally enthusiastic and listening with good questions. One member of the group took it upon herself to extend an invitation to the others to do another version of this very same experiment. She believed it was important to include others in what she had experienced as having the same potential to change their outlook on ministry at HPC.

Again, my leadership during the reporting was to simply introduce the missional practices that were conducted during the experiment and then to introduce each member of the group. As I introduced the members, I commented on something I had heard that person say during the six weeks of our work together. This was to reinforce both in those reporting as well as those listening that I had been listening to them and their work.

Finally, this time of reporting on the project served as the final meeting of the experimenting group. There was a genuine sense in the group of wanting to continue the work and experimenting they had done together. Many were fully engaged and even if the group did not continue, they reported, they intended to continue with the missional life and practices. It was agreed that another group would be offered to the congregation during the summer, and each offered to be part of the invitation process to those they knew in the congregation who might be willing to try it. This was the first sense I had as the leader that the concentric circles of this work were beginning to move out across a larger cross section of the church.

Further, it was suggested that once another group had formed and completed a similar experiment, perhaps the two groups might meet together to share their experiences in search of what common themes and practices would suggest about the

future of the church's ministry. As pastor, I would still plan to be part of the second group as an observer and perhaps would even function differently with regards to the theological reflection part of the experiment. More discussion of this continual shift in my leadership is discussed in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This experiment was primarily based upon the action reflection cycle as described by Roxburgh in his book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*. In the book, five primary practices are outlined that are designed to create an environment for missional culture change to begin to take effect in a congregation. These five practices are listening, discerning, experimenting, reflecting, and deciding.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Listening**

Listening is about “entering, receiving hospitality, and dwelling with the other.”<sup>2</sup> In the experiment, listening was happening on multiple layers. First, through daily devotion and prayer, each member of the group was encouraged to start each day with the daily practice of listening for God in their own lives. This listening was oriented in the devotions written by the Northumbria community, whose rule is availability and vulnerability. Listening to God as it was intended by the experiment was not primarily an activity of self-actualization or individualism, but rather as connecting life to the mission

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (New York: Morehouse, 2015). The five practices are discussed in Part II.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

of God as it exists when those who participated opened themselves to a new way of discovering God. The primary theological mover in such an orientation is not the self but God.

The experiment also involved listening to one another. Each week, as the team gathered to help one another process the week's activity on behalf of the experiment, each member of the team shared how God was active and engaging them in this work. The church is a gathering of people, each acting to connect the mission of God to a particular set of circumstances and neighbors, and this too was a process of listening. Through the sharing of stories, the group practiced what it is like to listen with attentiveness to the experiences of another person. This action is not passive, as some might assume, but takes intention. This is a simple way for members of a congregation to begin to live more carefully into a more missional orientation by listening to the activity of God in those they already know.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to the scope of this experiment, was the listening that was happening with strangers in the gathering places where our team went searching. The members of the group went out to get to know people and to receive hospitality. This activity was almost entirely about listening. The set of questions suggested as part of the experiment was simply a vehicle to provide a conversational opening, without any predisposed activity of saving or fixing or setting people straight. It was suggested that members of the group invite stories from those they came across. Members of the group reported stories about children and work experiences. People talked about moving to Nashville and what hopes and expectations they now had for the

city. One person who had been a part of Vanderbilt University discussed in detail what it had been like to watch the changing and growing university over the years.

In Luke 10, Jesus sends the disciples out ahead of the places where he himself intends to go. He instructed them to leave their “baggage” behind, meaning their presuppositions about people and places and any cultural or religious bias. They were simply to say, “Peace to this house!” Sedmak writes, “Local cultures are expressions of God’s continuing creation. Theology begins with a human situation.”<sup>3</sup> The first step in listening for what God is up to in a particular place and time is to enter into that human situation with ears and eyes open, listening to what is happening there. Are there people in a place who are working to make it better? Are there hurting people there? Are the stories people tell in that place, stories of healing or transformation, stories that sound characteristic of God?

Listening to God, to one another, and to others without a predisposed goal or strategy opens us up to what God is doing in our lives and potentially even in our churches. It is not simply a technique with a particular outcome in mind. Listening is also a way of attending to the presence of God in a community. It is a way of being in the world alongside God. Gunton writes, “The expectation is that if the triune God is the source of all being, meaning and truth, we must suppose that all being will in some way reflect the being of the one who made it and holds it in being.”<sup>4</sup> The members of the group were able to enter into this process with others during the course of our

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<sup>3</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 73.

<sup>4</sup> Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many*, 145.

experiment. It was truly a different way of being the church for most of them, and yet the group worked hard to embrace it.

### **Discerning**

The second practice of the experiment was discerning. Roxburgh writes, “A congregation’s vocation is to discern the ways the Spirit is continually inviting it to join with God in their neighborhoods.”<sup>5</sup> In the past at HPC, the pastor and other key leaders were the ones tasked with hearing ideas for ministry and then discerning whether pursuing a particular idea was faithful for the congregation. It was assumed that the pastor was the vision caster who was granted the authority, not only by the congregation but also by God. The pastor then carefully and prayerfully determined what direction the church would take.

The experiment encouraged a different way to practice discernment. Each member of the group was invited to consider the listening each had done with God, the others in the group, and the stranger in the neighborhood. Based upon that listening, each member was to discern how what they were hearing might imply ministry with and for the others. Lohfink writes, “The church is then quite simply the efficacious sign of the presence of God’s salvation in the world.”<sup>6</sup> He describes the church as a contrast society, intended to demonstrate what the gospel would look like on behalf of others. The task of listening is not just to gather information, but to begin to imagine and to help others imagine what the gospel looks like in their lives and in the community. However, for the

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<sup>5</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 146.



group, discerning was a way to encourage other members of the group. Those who were struggling with some aspect of the experiment received advice and counsel from the others.

By the end of the experiment, some members of the group and one woman in particular had discerned that others would be interested in such a practice. She wanted another similar group to happen and took it upon herself to suggest and invite such a group. This was based on the listening she had been doing and what she believed God was calling her to do next. The last meeting of the group was composed almost exclusively of discernment, as the members of the group wrestled tentatively with what to do next. Each had heard something important for their own lives and, they believed, for the church as well, and they were trying to determine what path to take next.

### **Experimenting**

The third practice in the action reflection cycle is experimenting. Perhaps it was confusing to some in the group to imagine that experimenting was a part of this overall process and not the whole thing. The group used the word “experiment” many times as a way to encourage something beyond its own experience. Roxburgh explains that an “experiment communicates that we are testing something we are not entirely sure we know how to do for which the results are not guaranteed.”<sup>7</sup> This is the part where the most learning can take place because people must act their way into new habits and not simply think their way into a decision for something else.

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<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 81.

The opportunity for experiments happened daily in the way group members were encouraged to interact with others. They tried different questions with someone or a different posture in which to approach someone. Selecting a new location in which to observe and engage was another way of conducting an experiment without knowing just exactly how it would turn out. Each of these experiments was a small step, but when taken together they were the ingredients that made up the courage to embrace something most in our group were not experienced in doing. It was important that group members experienced an experiment as permission to fail. To test something means to risk, and if there is pressure to simply perform with excellence, doing a task with perfection, most will not have the courage to try. However, when a task or an idea is seen as something that has a very real possibility of failure, it is much easier to engage.

Virtually all seven members of the group experimented at one time or another during the course of their six weeks together. The physician who struggled to find time to spend in gathering places because of her busy practice began to report to the group in the middle of the overall experience that she had started trying to engage people differently while shopping or going about her medical practice. She was not sure it would work, and often she was right and nothing happened. However, as she continued to work through the daily experimenting with how to engage others, she was able to find some ways that were meaningful to her and gave her insight into the lives of others in our community. She told a story about a clerk in a store she had started a conversation with who shared with her the difficulty of dealing with people who are frustrated and angry at seemingly insignificant things. This opened the physician's eyes to how her patients described their

symptoms and anxiety to her and thus how she saw the community in which she practiced medicine.

Another member of the group named David took experimenting to a higher level than most of the others. Hillsboro has a long-standing relationship with a retreat center called Penuel Ridge. The forty-acre property outside Nashville is wooded with a beautiful lake and chapel made from hay bales. A former professor from Vanderbilt Divinity School and member at HPC founded the center as a place for spiritual renewal and retreat. HPC has supported a monthly outing of homeless men and sometimes women for a daylong retreat outside the urban streets of the city and in this peaceful, natural setting. Up until now, HPC has provided only money as a resource to support this ministry.

Penuel Ridge approached the church asking for use of our church bus. The bus the retreat center had been using was worn out and no longer able to be in service. Our Session debated the use of the bus, our insurance, and liability when it comes to allowing an entity outside the church to use it. At this point, one of the elders participating in the experiment heard about the situation and made a suggestion that I understood as an experiment for him. He asked what would happen if he drove the bus as a member of Session, in which case all liability with our insurance company would be covered. To the members of our group, and also to the Session, David also explained that this gave him an opportunity to interact with and to listen to the men and women on the bus. Over the course of the next few months, David drove the bus and returned to our group reporting the amazing stories of those he heard from while on the daylong retreats.

Experiments do not have to be complicated or difficult. The experiments conducted by our group were simple and often would seem almost insignificant to those

outside the processing and sharing stories of our group. However, when taken together and shared with other members of the group during the course of its work, these experiments enabled the group to begin to engage in the work of listening and discerning at a level that would not have been possible otherwise. The group asked David to write a newsletter article about the experience he had and also about his work with the homeless ministry.<sup>8</sup>

### **Reflecting**

The fourth practice of the action learning cycle is reflecting, and it is at this stage of the overall experiment that the process began to break down. Reflecting, according to Roxburgh, is a series of critical questions asked by those who have already participated in the first three practices in the cycle. The questions begin with helping the participants recount what took place, and they move on from there to consider how God is at work.

The first question is, “What have we done?”<sup>9</sup> This is the place where a member of the group could tell a story or account what they had been engaged with. The second question is, “What happened?”<sup>10</sup> Again, this is another question in which an answer might be offered from the experiences shared with the group.

At this point in the reflection process, Roxburgh suggests asking what he calls “God questions,” such as, “In what ways did you experience God at work in all this?”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>9</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

This is where our group did not seem to have the capacity to ask or answer that question about God’s activity in the midst of the experimenting. It became clear that much of what we were doing together was still a series of techniques designed towards a common goal, and not yet a different way of being together. Lohfink states, “What makes the church the divine contrast society is not self acquired holiness, not cramped efforts and moral achievements, but the saving deed of God.”<sup>12</sup> It is not techniques designed to realize personal goals, but a different way of seeing the world. Perhaps it had always been a pastor asking and answering theological questions, and the members of our group were either too uncomfortable or lacked the capacity to do it for themselves. In addition, I as the current pastor did not engage the group collaboratively or otherwise out of perhaps a deficit in my own leadership style. Each week the group gathered, it was able to successfully engage in sharing about Scripture and the stories they were encountering along the journey of the experiment, but when it came time to connect those stories to something larger, the church as a contrast society, the group struggled to go further.

Perhaps only David’s experiment with the homeless ministry was done out of a sense of purpose or meaning derived from the experiences he was having. It was another way to continue to engage in finding stories and listening for God in the other. While listening, discerning, and experimenting are clearly important practices to continue to engage in for the church to complete any kind of cultural change or shift, overall it seems we still lack the ability to connect the stories to a larger narrative about our life together. Lohfink also writes, “The true nature of Christ can shine forth only when the church

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<sup>12</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 147.

makes visible the messianic alternative and the eschatological new creation which have taken their place in the world since Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Without the ability to transition from techniques to reflecting on a new way of being, we are unable to realize the mission of God in our community.

The next few question in reflecting are “So What?” “New Questions?” and “Key Takeaways.”<sup>14</sup> In the short time the group endeavored to work together, the members of the group seemed unable to engage effectively in answering any of these last important questions. This then affected how well they were able to complete the final step of the action reflection cycle, deciding.

### **Deciding**

According to Roxburgh, this phase of deciding is where pastoral leadership needs to get involved in moving the church from being centered on itself to being centered on what God might intend for the mission of the congregation. He writes, “The skill needed here is knowing the difference between making decisions for the congregation and ensuring that the congregation makes the decisions.”<sup>15</sup> This is the part where perhaps the pastoral role would be to connect the key takeaways from the last step together, in order to demonstrate to the congregation where it might find a way forward. This involves summarizing and associating together key ideas and frameworks.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>14</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 95.

Out of such work, the church's leadership might make decisions about how next to conduct itself, continuing to move ahead into the future of its ministry together. This way forward might take the form of another experiment, or committing the whole church to a new ministry or project based on what has been heard and discerned by a smaller group of people. This is the step in which the whole congregation becomes aware of what has been done and learns what is next.

### **Conclusion**

In our case, it seems our defaults took over when it came to leadership and the role each member has to play in the action reflection cycle. There was great enthusiasm for the missional practices of devotion, listening for God, and even sharing the dwelling in Scripture each week. The group had prayed together and encouraged one another to move beyond the safety and comfort of those we knew best in our own congregation out into the world of the unknown strangers in our neighborhoods. Each and every member had returned to the group with stories to tell about their adventures—the success and even the failures of what they had done. This was a wonderful result of collaborating for information and experiences. Still, the ability to reflect theologically about the presence of God in those stories was elusive.

Therefore, those experiences, while important and good soil, ended up largely as a string of information the group was not really sure what to do with. The only next steps or key learning they could discern was to invite other people into the very same experiment. While this was not a bad outcome, it is difficult to see how the very same thing would not occur if repeated with a different group of people. It likely could

degenerate into another individualized practice of faith that is largely disconnected from the very strangers and communities where the group had encountered God's presence. When it was time for the final step of deciding what to do next, the group had not provided itself with enough information to know what was next in order to continue to engage. Thus, we ended up in a loop with no logical way forward.

The leadership opportunity for me here is to search for ways to intervene in the cycle earlier to encourage collaborative theological reflection in the daily and weekly interaction of the group, which then might be diffused into the larger congregation. This is a careful balance and part of my learning in this experiment. The question becomes, how can the pastor with training and experience in theological reflection encourage others to do theological work for themselves instead of simply looking for the answer from the expert? There is a lot at stake. Without the ability to reflect upon the first three steps of the action learning cycle, the network of members of the church will not be able to fully participate in what God might have in store for the neighborhood and for the congregation.



PART THREE  
MINISTRY STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 6

### DIFFUSING LEARNING INTO THE CONGREGATION

This chapter considers where HPC has come from and where we are going. It discusses the importance of being sent to a particular place in Luke 10, and the mistake of being “above place” as believers seek to minister to others. I also reflect upon my own leadership role, and consider the final words of Jesus in the Luke 10 passage as they reveal again the importance of place as we seek to be the church in our community.

#### **What Is God Up To Here?**

In 1972 when the previous pastor arrived at HPC, the world was a different place and the church was a vastly different place. The world was much smaller and the church was much bigger. In 1972 in a small city in the southern United States, at the height of our trust of institutional integrity and expert analysis, most people assumed that given enough resources, almost any problem we faced could be solved. Those resources were primarily advancing technology and money. In the midst of such abundance, suddenly the world seemed within reach and it would only a matter of time until we achieved all our goals.

The church existed in that world too as an overarching institution. Even a struggling church like HPC knew how to turn its fortune around. Hire a daring young pastor with energy and enthusiasm. Such a pastor would know what to do. Such a pastor would challenge the church to embrace the lost and those in desperate need with the hope of the gospel. There was a sense of adventure in embracing such service with nothing to lose and only the renewal of the church to be gained.

In this imagination of church, God shows up in the weekly worship gathering as people hear a challenge or a call to service. In this imagination, God is present in projects conducted by the church towards achieving a goal. There is energy around hosting refugees and sheltering the homeless. New ministry is conducted and it is a very exciting time to be part of the church called HPC.

At the beginning of Luke 10, perhaps there was the same sense of energy and excitement. Jesus of Nazareth has come on the scene in the previous nine chapters of Luke with profound and even divine gifts of preaching and teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God on earth. People have flocked to follow Jesus, watching perhaps with delight as Jesus performed amazing acts of transformation. In Luke 7:16-17 the people conclude, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

This too was a culture in which the world was small and the church, or temple in this case, loomed large. The people of God knew exactly where God was to be found. It was inside a large institutional structure in the great and holy city of Jerusalem. If you wanted to have an experience of God, that is where it took place. Perhaps there was even

the same sense that all Jewish people were united around the goals of Judaism as expressed in the law and the prophets. The Kingdom of God was located above any sense of the local or the place where everyday, ordinary people lived and worked and went to school. The Kingdom of God was a promise most people did not have daily or regular access to. Access to God was through temple worship and ritual sacrifice.

The world was about to change, however. In just a few decades, in 70 AD, the temple would be destroyed, and any sense of the place of the Kingdom of God would be destroyed with it. That was the future for those who followed Jesus. Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had come not just in the temple or with the officials of Judaic religion, but in him and those who followed Jesus. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus was moving the Kingdom of God out into the world, and the Word of God was moving into the midst of neighborhoods and families, on farms and by roadsides. In the words of John 1, translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

By the time we get to chapter nine in Luke’s gospel, to the words just prior to the passage the group studied each week, there is a sense that the changes Jesus intends to bring are being resisted or at least misunderstood by those following him. Some villages are refusing to receive Jesus and the Kingdom of God at all, deciding that the place of such a message was still to be located in Jerusalem (see Luke 9:53). The Samaritans would not receive Jesus because they knew he was heading to Jerusalem, and they did not

recognize the hierarchical authority of the city of Jerusalem as the center of worship and power. Their imagination would not allow them to imagine that God could be present in the person and the work of Jesus, on the ground in the local and the neighborhood. Later in Luke 10:25-37, Jesus would tell the story of loving one's neighbor using the very same identity as Samaritans. This story comes after the encounter of the seventy disciples sent out ahead of Jesus and highlights the shift in imagination that is already occurring.

In the verses just prior to Luke 10, there is even apathy on the part of those following Jesus. This apathy betrays the same imagination in Jesus' followers that was located in the Samaritan village, that Jesus is the exclusive center of what God was doing in the world, located far away in Jerusalem, and their participation did not matter all that much. Those invited and called to follow begin to cite the reasons they will be delayed for the more pressing issues of personal matters. "But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:60).

This is the same place we find ourselves at HPC these many years later. The world has changed, and more change is surely coming. The result of modernity has been to displace God as the center of meaning and purpose for life. Gunton writes that in modernity, "God was no longer needed to account for the coherence and meaning of the world, so that the seat of rationality and meaning became not the world, but the human reason and will, which thus displace God or the world."<sup>1</sup> The world is no longer small. Our technology and our resources have not delivered. In fact, the world now has become so large that many struggle to find any real sense of place within it. Most at HPC are

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<sup>1</sup> Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many*, 28.

classic modern people in that they dwell without a sense of place. They are not connected to the local neighborhood, and they find their sense of community in other ways that are connected to more individual pursuits and interests. In North America this is a reflection of our culture of individualism and experience-driven entertainment and consumerism. Life exists above any sense of place in an almost virtual sense. Most have a connection with people who are just like them, with shared interests and shared habits, right at their fingertips in smart phones and social media apps. In such a world, it becomes easy to become apathetic about the role each might play in serving the common good in a particular place or even a church community.

In such a new culture, the church has suddenly become very small. The experience of worship or even important programming designed to serve those in desperate need, as we have done in the past, is not enough to hold the attention of only members or of those who might be interested in what the church is doing. Suddenly and seemingly without warning, the church struggles even to do the things we once did well. Like the disciples who offered excuses rather than following Jesus, HPC seems to be finding it harder and harder to involve people in its ministry.

The church does not have any sense of place either. For most of the last four decades, HPC dwelled and served above place in our neighborhood and in our city. Some of this attitude came from denominational patterns or habits that promised a one-size-fits-all type of orientation, steeped in historical assumptions about faith and life together. Some of this attitude came from the difficulty of connecting with a neighborhood of gated communities and very wealthy neighbors who themselves had no connection to one another. There is no need to be connected to the mansion next door when one lives in a

mansion. Lastly, this attitude came from an ethos about being a destination church with a brand of being diverse, serving, and theologically engaging. It is not that any of these are misguided goals or inherently wrong; rather, it is the lack of connecting to place that has left the church dislocated and apathetic.

### **To a Particular Place**

Jesus sent the seventy disciples out ahead of him to all the places he intended to go. Newbigin writes that “the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus appointed seventy others, a congregation, and sent them to a particular place. This was not meant by Luke as a generic idea of place or as going out above place.

One of the ideas that came to light during the group’s discussion of Luke 10 was the idea that the harvest is not some spiritualized metaphor, as it is normally first considered, but is in fact an actual, on the ground in the dirt and under the hot sun kind of harvest. There was an economic and human capital need for men and women to help when harvest time came upon a community or neighborhood. Often the individual households did not have the resources to gather their own harvest and relied upon the visiting laborers who moved about from place to place in the ancient world. Perhaps those visiting, or migrant laborers, in the ancient world would also have lived above place. There is no real need to connect one’s life to a farm or to a household when it will always be time to move on to the next. Again, perhaps this might remind us of the way

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<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

many often look at their sense of place and being in the ever-changing branding world of social media and consumerism.

But Jesus had a different idea in mind. Jesus sent the disciples with a specific mission to connect to the place in which they were living and helping with the harvest. The harvest afforded them an opportunity to become part of a neighborhood. In Luke 10:7, the disciples are instructed, “Do not move about from house to house.” In the ancient world, a household was more than just a suburban home on a small lot where inside dwelled a family or even a single individual like it is today. In the ancient world, a household was itself an entire economic and social system of place. This is exemplified in Acts 16:34 when an entire household is baptized in Jesus name. With that in mind, those who were following Jesus’ call were located in the place of harvest with a particular place of a household. In this place they were instructed to proclaim the Kingdom of God. They were to “cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:9). The disciples sent out by Jesus “have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and led back to a believing community.”<sup>3</sup>

In our culture of modernity, in which very few people dwell in any sense of place whatsoever, it becomes very hard to stay and dwell in any place for a long period of time. Even our idea of what is happening in Luke 10 is mutated by our lack of staying in a place long enough to learn the culture and habits of a place. Most assume that Jesus has these early evangelists located in a town for a week, maybe two, before moving on to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 227.



next location. This is inherently an idea of lack of place. This is almost a virtual existence, in that this place matters not from that place, and they become interchangeable like the many different apps that all accomplish the same things on our smartphones. Jesus knew that it would take disciples months, if not years, of dwelling in the same place with the same people in order to fully understand the place they were living.

Perhaps this is the reason the disciples are instructed not to carry with them any bag or sandals or purse. This would indicate a traveler who intends to move on fairly quickly. Such a traveler would be self-sufficient and only in need of a bed or a meal. Jesus intends that his disciples enter into a place with nothing, to be fully dependent on that place to provide for their needs. In such a way, the disciples are almost forced to get to know others in that place for their very survival. They bring nothing but themselves and their intention to become part of the place. This posture of openness and dependence was crucial for the sharing of the Kingdom of God in a particular place.

It is the same today. What is needed most at HPC now is to begin to develop more of a sense of place and a connection to that place. We can no longer live as a church as if the world is small and the church is large. Instead, we must reverse such a dynamic slowly and with a diffusion of innovation until more of our members see the world as large and as vast as the abundance of God, and their place in that abundance as small and dependent on God's moving and mission. Jesus identified the mission of God as the Kingdom of God coming near. In order to participate in such a proclamation for the church to the world, the church must move from a posture of dwelling above place to one that becomes more of the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ in every small place where we dwell. Gunton writes that if this takes place, "then Christian theology will have

a genuine contribution to make to the understanding and shaping of the modern world and enable us to probe some of the mysteries of what it is to be a human being living on earth before God and in varying structures of relations with our neighbors and with the universe in which we are set.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the way we will continue to diffuse learning into the congregation is to continue to inhabit and repeat the story of Luke 10 with similar groups of experiments, including the things we have learned from this experiment. If this is the way Jesus intended to shape his followers into those who would be part of the Kingdom of God, then we too have a part to play in such a story. We too become supporting actors, behind the one true missionary who came in order that the world might know that the Kingdom of God was not to be found in one place but in all places.

### **Shifting to the Next Experiment**

In reflecting on the last experiment, one key element was not present in any real and tangible sense. That key element was that sense of place that is so critical in Luke 10. Many in our group, including myself as leader, unknowingly adopted the same stance above any sense of place, even though we were operating outside of the church and in community. In hindsight, seeking out any gathering place in which to engage strangers and others is not a particular place to do that. It was merely another technique. There was not any real sense of connection to that place, a different way of being, in the way Jesus intended that connection to be. In Luke 10, Jesus intends for his disciples to be dependent upon and connected to the economic and cultural realities of a particular community.

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<sup>4</sup> Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many*, 154.

That meant the disciples had a stake in what happened there. They were not temporary observers or experimenters, as we were in the sense of existing without any needs and/or any contributions. Our group maintained its posture of existing above place, and as such, the deployed practices and habits of devotion and engagement did not yield any real meaningful theological insights.

In order to have a sense of what God is up to, we have to get outside of our own need for individualistic affinity with a group or an identity. This is the command of Jesus to leave behind our purse and our bag. Our group was not able to do that because they were not connecting themselves to a place long enough to make any such identity subservient to the larger purposes of God and common good located in their new place. “Parachuting” in to a YMCA or even a neighborhood street without understanding any deep connection to the people who live there, the concerns and joys they share, and even the land of that place will not yield any sense of theological engagement with God. This is because the people and the joys and concerns and even the land are all the places where God is already to be found, and missed if not paid attention to.

The next group of so-called Fearless Lambs must be more strongly connected to a sense of place where they are living out the designated Christian practices. They must develop not just a joy in encountering the openness of people they engage, but also a joy of getting to know the connection the people have with the place in which they live and also how that same connection can be held by the members of our group. Listening to others is intended not just as a detached theoretical practice or technique, above any sense of meaning in place, and must become incarnational in that it becomes part of who we

are. There is hope because just as Jesus did, the members of our congregation can be sent out in search of place, but that will require leadership and courage.

### **The Shape of My Leadership**

The shape of leadership in such a challenge also imitates the way Jesus leads in Luke 10. Jesus appoints and calls groups to be sent to place in search of what God was up to there. Jesus acknowledges their fears and the challenges they would face along the way. Lastly, Jesus encourages his disciples with a strong sense that what they were doing was not of their own doing, but was deeply connected already to what God was doing. There were several things I learned about my own leadership during this experiment that must be incorporated into future work.

First, while I did orient the group to the missional practices of devotion, engagement, and reflection, I did so without a strong sense of connecting those practices to place. This occurred even in the way I introduced the reading of Scripture. Roxburgh writes, “There is little experience of Scripture as a location where we encounter God; it’s usually a source of ideas and concepts about God, or perhaps for inspiration.”<sup>5</sup> In many ways this is how we encountered Scripture. Perhaps this was due to my own lack of understanding as to how important and underdeveloped a sense of place was at HPC. In reflecting on our history, our ecclesiology, and our recent challenges, it is very clear that the church exists above place, trying its best to continue to serve needs and maintain the church. However, we do not see ourselves as located in our neighborhood of Forest Hills.

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<sup>5</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 102.

We have no sense of our own place within the geographical neighborhood in which the church is located.

Therefore, it becomes crucial that participants, in experimenting with missional life and practice, identify right from the outset the need to locate their discipleship in a particular place. My leadership is critical here as the one who “appoints and sends” in Jesus’ name and on behalf of the congregation. I will need to continue to develop my own sense of the importance of place.

In *The New Parish*, Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen reflect on the different ways leaders can help others get a sense of the importance of place.<sup>6</sup> There are at least two ways leaders in faith communities lead. The first is in the identified and official leadership capacities. These are the times when it is clear to everyone involved that you are leading. Preaching and leading worship are examples, as are presiding over a funeral or a wedding. These are important functions for any pastor, and pastors must continue to do these well, offering meaningful liturgy that itself is not dislocated from the day-to-day life of those in worship. Preaching about and praying for the needs of a people, means doing so for a particular people not a generic people. Celebrating the sacraments is also best when connected to the everyday lives of the people participating. In these official capacities, as pastor I can help identify the importance of locating our ministry again to the particular places where our members dwell. Our worship very likely could become a network of places, in that our worship is not located within our geographical place as a sanctuary and a campus, but instead is located in the everyday

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 167.

experience of those who are gathered. This new reality might even be a step on the way to finding more meaning in the place where the church is actually physically located, but it also might release a new hunger of moving our place to a neighborhood we might find more connection with and for.

There is another kind of leadership identified by Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, which is the example we provide to others in the way we live our lives, as well as the values and priorities we are living when we are not in an official capacity.<sup>7</sup> In our history, many members would identify the concept of the almost heroic leadership of our previous pastors. In his book, *Heroic Leadership*, author Chris Lowney describes another heroism of leaders:

Heroes lift themselves up and make themselves greater by pursuing something greater than their own self-interest. Our classic heroic models often do so through extraordinary bravery at uniquely critical moments. But heroism is not limited to those rare and privileged opportunities. They are also heroes who demonstrate courage, nobility, and greatness of heart to pursue a personal sense of magis, to keep themselves pointed toward goals that enhance them as a people.<sup>8</sup>

Whether we like it or not, members in our churches and people in our communities who know we are faith leaders are watching us and making judgments all the time about what our priorities might be. They are not expecting us to be heroes, not really, but they are watching the way we live and conduct our work.

Jesus was certainly aware of this as he sent the disciples out, encouraging them to share the words, “Peace to this house!” when each of them entered a home (Luke 10:5). If we are viewed by others as having a preference and love for a particular place, then

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-year-old Company That Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), 244.

others will see that as our witness. However, if we drive out of our place each day, leaving it behind in favor of the work and ministry of a dislocated church community, then we have also communicated a message about which house peace is intended for. My own leadership must be in growing proportion to finding my own sense of place in my own neighborhood, and then allowing others to witness that priority in the way I live in my unofficial leadership capacity. Perhaps this might take place in continuing to tell members of my church stories about life in my neighborhood and the deep love I have for the people, their joys and concerns, and even the land located there. My leadership must set a priority for place.

Second, I must continue to acknowledge the fears and challenges and maintain patience with a process that will surely take years if not decades. Here I am also aware of my own struggles, having my own defaults about success and the speed of reform. I am very much a part of the expert system and have some identity and even ego centered in people of my church looking to me for answers. There is always a part of my own leadership that resists giving up power and control.

A new culture of seeking God in the places we are deeply connected to will require not an expert but fellow traveler who can encourage stories and self-reflection. In the movie, *The Way*, actor Martin Sheen plays a grieving father who is traveling the Camino de Santiago on the way to bury his son.<sup>9</sup> A character named Tom is an ophthalmologist, classically the expert as a specialized physician. As he walks, at first he is reluctant to enter into conversation with others for fear that they will delay his journey

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<sup>9</sup> *The Way*, directed by Emilio Estevez, Filmax Elixir Films, 2010.

or take him off his appointed task. He rushes ahead to get the important things done. He is frustrated by others who cannot seem to do things as he does them, and when he tries to lead them as the expert who knows better, they are not convinced. However, his posture changes after serendipitous misadventures, when his friends end up caring for him. From that point on, Tom becomes not an expert leading others but a fellow traveler. In the end, Tom leads his friends more effectively than he ever could have as an expert, simply because they see him as one with them and not above them. In my leadership, I identify with Tom and find a sense of hope in the story of how he was transformed.

There are deep cultural assumptions about leadership at HPC. The former pastor exercised the leadership of his time and place. He was successful when the world was small and the church was big. However, that same style of leadership no longer works, and my challenge is to discover ways to lead that are not from the perspective of the expert. Surely that means allowing time to pass and exercising patience in the midst of that time. It will require many similar experiments, with small groups of people who engage in messy, uncontrollable ways in order to realize more fully our changes. As the leader, my task is not simply to observe as I did this time, but to invite stories of place and connection. After each experiment, leadership will demand that we consider what we experienced together before setting off again in a similar but modified way based on that reflection. Over time, perhaps much time, we will more fully realize what God is up to with us. Patience is not a passive task, but it is perhaps the most intentional quality I must learn as leader.

Finally, my leadership task is to follow the example of Jesus and encourage the members of HPC that what they are doing is not on their own, but is deeply connected



with the Spirit of God in the world in a particular place. When the world was small and the church was big, it was easier to see the presence of God inside the church building. Many might assume now that God has become scarce, like the members of our church or our ability to complete a big project. However, now leadership would require that members be reminded that God is on a mission, and that mission is out ahead of us to the people and the places of our locating ourselves. Leadership would suggest that locating ourselves in the neighborhoods and communities where we live is where God is to be found, in the stories of joys and concerns and even the land itself.

In Luke 10, Jesus told the disciples to share their peace, and if their peace was not received it would return to them. There was a real sense that God's peace was something they did not control or direct. God's peace was not theirs, but even when they gave it away it remained with them. This too is evidence that this work done by the church is not the church's work, but is the work of God. As pastor, that leadership witnessing to the presence of God will manifest not only in what I say and do but also in the way I live. Together, my leadership will be to set an environment in which we can truly seek out and listen for the Spirit of God in a particular place and connect with it.

### **The Ending Reflection**

The passage of Luke 10 that we studied ends in a very peculiar way, which up until the very end of the experiment continued to seem strange and almost offensive to the group. In verses 10 through 12, Jesus states, "But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God

has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.” The question is why Jesus would treat those who did not comply with his experiment so harshly. The group wondered what about their behavior would have been so troublesome to Jesus that Jesus would call down fire and brimstone, as in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps that is not the point Luke wants us to understand.

In the ancient world, hospitality was critical. In a world without hotels and travel stops, the welcoming of strangers was the sign of the presence of God in that place. The presence of God would mandate that doors be opened, that strangers be welcomed, and that any with need be cared for. This was also the calling of those Jesus sent to share such gifts in mutuality. This ancient practice of hospitality could be reflected in the same words Jesus spoke in reading the prophecy fulfilled in Luke 4:17-19 cited earlier. The practice of hospitality was much more than just being friendly or kind to others; it was a sign of the presence of God in a place.

Perhaps that is the reason it is included here as an ending to the story of Jesus sending out the seventy. Ultimately, the goal of the seventy disciples of Jesus was to discern the presence of God and to call it out in the particular places to which they were sent. If they determined that the presence of God was in a place, they were instructed to connect with it, and to seek the common good proclaiming peace. If the presence of God, perhaps in the form of hospitality, was not discerned, then as a theological task the disciples were to make a determination and move on in search of where God is to be found. This did not mean that God was not there—“Know this: the Kingdom of God has come near”—but was only in the disciples’ ability to connect with it and to make others

aware of it. The abundance of God is fully present in every place, and yet the task of the seventy was to share the peace that Kingdom represented.

In the end of our group's experiment, only one member of the group seemed to be able to connect the work with others outside the church in a particular place with a connection to the presence of God. These final lines of the Luke 10 passage continued to make the group uncomfortable throughout the experiment. Each time we arrived upon them, there would be an almost audible gasp. It is possible that most of the members of the group had not yet arrived at a significant enough connection of place that would enable them to reflect upon the presence of God and to know what the common good of a place might look like.

In this way, Luke 10 acts as the story of our experiment in total. The HPC congregation has become dislocated from place in the same way some of the people of God were dislocated in the ancient world of Jesus. The world was changing, and central worship with expert theologians was giving way to a more abundant understanding of the Kingdom of God everywhere and at every place. Sedmak writes, "Theology is an invitation to wake up: to be mindful and attentive."<sup>10</sup> Jesus was engaged with this movement of God in the world, waking up to it and demonstrating to others how to connect with it. Jesus appointed disciples, in much the same way of our experiment, and sent them to the places where they were to dwell, getting to know the place and seek its common good. Then and only then were the disciples able to discern whether or not the

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<sup>10</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 1

presence of God was located there in such a way that they might connect with it and proclaim peace as an alternative or contrast society of Jesus.

Surely the presence of God was in every place in which we engaged with others, but we were not yet in that place long enough to know what God intended as the common good. Thus, we were not able to connect with it. Behind this inability to connect were history, defaults, and the messiness of modern life and culture. The last chapter summarizes the next steps forward in the midst of these challenges.

## CHAPTER 7

### NEXT STEPS

This has been a hopeful journey, not because of the way that all objectives were met and everything the church does now is successful, but in the way that theology about the very real presence of God in the world has been confirmed. There are next steps to the journey that will continue to move HPC along the path towards realizing what God is doing in our community. These steps have been informed by all the work that has taken place, from the early observations of the first transitional group, through the survey data, early groups meeting around Luke 10, all the way through and including the latest experiment conducted by these seven members of the community. Three next steps will include the following: continued group experimentation with missional life and practice in place, continued theological work about place and connection amidst the church leadership, and increasing the capacity of the church to share stories across a wide variety of venues and media.

#### **Continued Experiments**

Without question, the primary way of continuing our journey together towards more missional life and practice and engaging in the particular places in which we live is

through continued experiments. The next experiments are likely to look very similar to the one the small group just completed. Short-term, limited experiments seem to be limited in size and scope enough to gain participation. The smaller size of these groups is less threatening to existing ministry and programming and thus does not create backlash about change. At this time, the Session has already approved another six-week experiment for the summer of 2016.

The critical correction for the next experiment is to more intentionally ground the missional practices not in techniques that are displaced from the particularity of a place, but more in a sense of place. The instructions will mandate that the experiment must be done in the neighborhood where people live or in a place where people plan to spend significant time engaging in life in such a way that the participants might learn about joys and concerns, hear neighborhood stories, and even connect with the land in those places. Examples of other-than-neighborhood places might be a college campus or community association. These groups would need to be approved by the group as providing enough capacity for particularity of place.

In addition, it is already planned that the participants in this new group will meet with the participants from the first group when the experiment is over. The purpose of this gathering is to network these two experiences together in order that the two groups might collaborate and share mutual learning as well as important distinctions. With an increased emphasis on place in the second group, it will be critical to see what changes happen between the two groups.

Once this second group occurs, then what is learned will be reflected upon and a new decision will be made as to the next experiment. Future experiments may take the

form of new ways to engage missional life and practice in place, and are yet to be determined. It is important that the church's Session continue to be informed of and approve each experiment for diffusion of learning. Hearing reports from groups as to what they are learning is crucial, and sharing those stories in other ways across the congregation will be considered as part of step three.

### **Continued Theological Work**

One of the most important learnings from this group was the critical and neglected role of place and particularity of place for each expression of church. Because this was so critical, another future step will be for the leadership of the church and specifically the staff to continue to study and learn about the importance of engaging with neighbors and seeking the common good for community. The staff will read together and discuss *The New Parish* over the summer of 2016 in search of a way to see the local neighborhood in the form of parish. Based on what is learned during this staff reflection group over the summer, it is possible that the Session of the church might read the same resource.

The reality of living above place in disconnected ways is so pervasive that it alters and corrupts any discussion of church life and practice and makes the church susceptible to defaults and backtracking. The idea of the switch between the world as small and the church as large moving in the opposite direction is a phrase that might continue to highlight the change that has occurred in church and culture. There are many resources being developed in the form of books and websites that encourage reconnecting with the

local and with a particular place or community. These resources can help continue our dialogue.

### **The Development of Ways to Share Stories**

Lastly, in the way of next steps, the church will continue to develop ways to share the stories of our journey together. Over the last few years, we have conducted interviews at various levels of the church's membership and leadership. We have shared with the congregation the results of these stories and have encouraged the telling of stories in Sunday school classes and small groups. Our church newsletter has included interviews with church members, asking them to reflect on some of the very same appreciative inquiry questions highlighted in our work.

The purpose of this communication is to encourage a community of stories that will enable us to better appreciate the stories of others in our particular neighborhoods and places. There is practice that must take place in listening to someone tell stories, reflecting on their meaning for life and faith. The more we tell stories, the more capacity is created for finding connections and meaning.

As a next step, more venues for sharing stories will be created. We will follow models such as the Parish Collective,<sup>1</sup> in which maps, stories, and expressions of ministry based on those stories are key resources. Published newsletter articles, Facebook posts, and even seasonal devotions written by members of the congregation all encourage a culture of sharing stories in search of meaning. Every preacher has the experience of preaching a funeral only to learn from the family about a particular story the preacher had

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<sup>1</sup> Parish Collective, "Home Page," accessed August 4, 2016, [www.parishcollective.org](http://www.parishcollective.org).



never heard while the person was alive. The hope for creating a story culture is also that even members will know one another better. The truth is that much of what we understand of Holy Scripture is simply the gathered stories of men and women of faith in search of meaning. A missional church community like ours in search of place might be primarily linked by celebrating the stories of what God is doing among us.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

At the end of each day's morning devotion, which many of the group from the experiment continue to use each day, the Northumbria community closes with this blessing:

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,  
wherever He may send you.  
May He guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you through the storm.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
at the wonders He has shown you.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.<sup>1</sup>

So this particular part of the journey of missional life and practice at HPC ends, with the beginning of each day. In the course of learning about the particular HPC community, it has become clear that amazing and transformative ministry has happened in the church and beyond over the course of many years of faithful and devoted service. The saints of the church, many who have passed on, gave everything they had and more and must be commended. The church's leadership served equally faithfully and devoted literally the work of their lives to building up the church called Hillsboro Presbyterian Church. Members have come and members have gone. Those who remain have deep longings about what the church will become. Some have anxiety and worry over the church's future.

In many ways, we hear the calling of Christ to begin a new journey. That journey is fraught with grief over things lost and unrealized hopes and dreams. Some of what has

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<sup>1</sup> Northumbria Community, "Morning Prayer," accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.northumbria.com/morning-prayer/>.

been done under the leadership of a new pastor has been met with resistance, and some of it has even slowed the process toward real and meaningful change because of the chaos of staff changes and budget issues. Work like this does not move ahead on a continuum of steady process, but rather in fits and starts. One challenge is to ensure time is taken regularly to reflect on what has happened and where we are being called into new ways of doing ministry.

Perhaps the most profound learning of this journey is how dislocated and disconnected the church has become to any real sense of place. In our efforts to serve others beyond our neighborhood, we have taken a posture of ministry above place all together, and so we become purveyors of charity with a lessening pool of resources of time and money. Our leadership struggles to know the path ahead. It seems dark with no light up ahead.

A brave few have ventured out beyond the walls of our “city on a hill” and brought back stories of engaging with others in meaningful and even profoundly faithful ways. They were surprised at how open others were to conversations and the sharing of stories. They returned with energy and curiosity about what God might be doing. Yet without the same commitment to place and common good that Jesus’ early disciples had for the places they engaged in ministry, the connection with what God is doing is elusive. More work has to be done around the idea and theology of place.

In all, the church and its leadership has been encouraged by the journey. That encouragement comes when the realization that Christ is with us is heard. The work the church must do is not its own work, but work God has decided to do, and therefore the church is simply the supporting cast to a mission that is much larger than itself. In such a

realization, suddenly the world is flipped again right side up. The world is large and the church is small. But God is God not just of the church but of the entire world, just as it should be.

This work has seemed just like that blessing from the devotion. We have seen the peace of Christ. We have entered the wilderness and we have been protected through the storm. We have seen the mighty wonders of the world that are around us, and we are grateful to be with God and with one another. Listening for God is surely a worthy and holy endeavor!

## APPENDIX A

### Questions and Answers from the Congregational Retreat

***\*Key Question:** Based on the learning we are doing, where might the Spirit be inviting us to join with God in our neighborhoods?*

**1. Reflecting on your entire experience at Hillsboro Presbyterian Church, remember when you felt the most engaged, alive, and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?**

In response to this question, two themes emerged:

The first was the idea that doing things together was a time when people felt motivated, alive and engaged. That togetherness was sometimes outreach, the helping of those in need in and around our community, and sometimes it was programs oriented to the members of our church. For example, the “shows” or other fellowship type events.

The second was Christian formation for all ages. Participants said they felt most alive and engaged in Sunday school, youth ministry, Wednesday night programming, and other intentional, “formative” activities.

**2a. What are the most important contributions the church has made to your life? Tell me when this happened? Who made a difference?**

**2b. Don't be humble; this is important information: What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our church-your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, your character? Give some examples.**

**2c. When have you known the most significant spiritual growth for yourself and the church? Tell me how this happened?**

The summary of answers from all aspects of question three identified the way our members and friends feel fully embraced and welcomed in a non-judgmental way. They were comforted by the knowledge that it's okay to have problems and many expressed their contribution as a willingness to help and support others in times of need. Care for one another was expressed as gifting for some as well as gifts of hospitality and event planning for fellowship.

The time when our members and friends felt part of a family and nurtured was what was identified as times of most spiritual growth. The ethic of the community is what provided the foundation for spiritual moments of growth through sermons, prayer and Bible study.

**3. What are the essential, central characteristics or ways of life that make our church unique?**

We see ourselves as informal, accepting, non-judgmental, diverse, and welcoming, and we work hard to do outreach to any and all in need in our community and beyond. *(Doing things for other people in need as a means of both serving the Kingdom of God and the sense of belonging in doing things with our people.)*

**4. Make three wishes for the future of our church. Describe what the church would look like if these wishes came true.**

1. More young families and children
2. An emphasis on spiritual growth and Christian formation
3. Supporting membership where they are
4. More community engagement

## APPENDIX B

# Ten Fearless Lambs

## An Advent Season Journey of Faith

*See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. –Luke 10:3*

### Assessment

1. How often do you personally pray and reflect upon Scripture?
  - a. Daily **(Transformational)**
  - b. Weekly **(Developmental)**
  - c. Regularly **(Transitional)**
  - d. Rarely **(Reactive)**
  
2. What is the likelihood you would start a conversation with a stranger?
  - a. I Do It All The Time **(Transformational)**
  - b. Somewhat Likely, I Enjoy Meeting People **(Transitional)**
  - c. Rarely, When I Have Time **(Developmental)**
  - d. Never **(Reactive)**
  
3. Luke 10 invites the seventy to share “the peace” with others. What is this peace most closely described as?
  - a. Service to those in desperate need **(Reactive)**
  - b. Offering of Hospitality to Stranger **(Developmental)**
  - c. Receiving Hospitality from a Stranger **(Transitional)**
  - d. Proclaiming the Kingdom of God **(Transformational)**
  
4. Theological Reflection is:
  - a. Something I Am Very Comfortable Doing **(Transformational)**
  - b. The Best Part of My Sunday Routine **(Transitional)**
  - c. The Job of Pastors and Other Clergy **(Developmental)**
  - d. Not All That Relevant to My Daily Faith **(Reactive)**
  
5. True or False: Most of the people in the church should be actively engaged in mission and ministry in the communities where they live and work.  
**(Transformational)**
  
6. How likely are you to experiment (*practicing faith in a new way*) with your faith?
  - a. Experiment? What’s that? **(Reactive)**
  - b. Sounds interesting. Maybe others would join us? **(Developmental)**
  - c. Once or twice, when I have been challenged to do so by a group  
**(Transitional)**
  - d. Every day **(Transformational)**
  
7. Church Leaders should primarily:
  - a. Focus on preserving the best things in our church **(Reactive)**
  - b. Try to improve things and keep them from getting stale **(Developmental)**
  - c. Involve us in ministry where we live and work **(Transitional)**
  - d. Create opportunities for us to innovate new ministry **(Transformational)**

## APPENDIX C

### David Warren's Newsletter Article

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The purpose of this letter is to share my experience of HPC's involvement in the Homeless Retreat at Penuel Ridge and of the Seven Fearless Lambs project that has been going on for about a year as a Sunday school class with a mission. These are two unique activities.

On my spiritual journey, I have found the more I to engage in the journey the more I grow, and that I grow still more when the journey is experiential, rather than academic. Over the course of this past year I have been involved in two such opportunities. The first is the **Penuel Ridge Solidarity with the Homeless Program**. HPC provides the bus and a driver (me) on the fourth Thursday of the month. I go to the Campus for Human Development (Room in the INN) and meet John Z. and/or Madge (the program leaders) who have rounded up a bus load of homeless individuals for a day retreat to Penuel Ridge, a 130-acre paradise near Ashland City. We have 3 men-only, 3 women-only, and 6 co-ed excursions per year. We arrive at Penuel Ridge by 9AM to a small breakfast with coffee. HPC's own Don Biswinger was the founder and primary contributor to Penuel Ridge, which was also his home years ago. It is a non-denominational retreat center, and the Solidarity Program is one of many things that go on there. After breakfast we meet in the living room for introductions and orientation. There are several volunteers to cook, to be available to the guests for talks and walks, and to connect them with the lake and the fishing poles. Many people just want to sleep and there are ample beds available. The highlight of the day is lunch. Everyone knows to get back around noon, when we sit down for a family-style meal with good food and good portions. After lunch we convene in The Well, a round chapel constructed of straw bales and stucco, truly a spiritual spot. This is a time of reflection and sharing and it is usually led by John Z. We then head back to town and I get the bus back to the church by 3:00 or 3:30.

So, that is what we do, but what actually happens is both magical and mystical. Every group is different, and yet, by the end of the day, we have touched and been touched by the experience of sharing and being in community, if only for a few hours. Being homeless is not easy. They are vulnerable physically, mentally, and emotionally, and yet



for the short time they come to Penuel Ridge, they are fed, clothed, and healed. If that rings familiar, then you can imagine what a powerful takeaway it is to see the Words of Jesus in the flesh.

The second opportunity I've had at HPC this year is the mysterious Seven Fearless Lambs project. The class has met on Sundays for about a year, reading Luke 10 1-14 at least twice at every class. Jesus sends the seventy out in pairs to all the place He planned to go. They take nothing, dependent on the hospitality of others, with the task of healing and bringing the news that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. The Scripture was not easy as we attempted to transpose these directions from that time and culture to our time and culture to determine how we could go into our "neighborhood" and see God working there. This is complicated by the fact that we are a destination church (we don't have a neighborhood), and we Presbyterians are not comfortable evangelizing and proselytizing. Spoiler Alert: we interpreted Luke 10 fairly loosely, intentionally read out the message of evangelizing. We were and are looking to join in God's work where and how we find it. We were not trying to fix anything or anyone, but trying to join God where he is in our world through listening. With some trepidation, the Seven Fearless Lambs set forth to find God working in our neighborhoods during the Advent season. And like the seventy, we were startled and excited when we were successful.

The really amazing and humbling results are in what Jesus said after the seventy shared their experiences . . . "The great triumph is not in your authority over evil, but in God's authority over you and presence with you. Not what you do for God but what God does for you. . . . Fortunate the eyes that see what you're seeing. There are plenty of prophets and kings who would have given their right arm to see what you are seeing but never got a glimpse, to hear what you are hearing but never got a whisper."

What a joy it is to live with Jesus whispering in my ear. I invite you to share these journeys as you are so inclined.

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