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Developing a Community Group Ministry for Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri

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DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY GROUP MINISTRY FOR SECOND BAPTIST
CHURCH IN LIBERTY, MISSOURI

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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

BY

JASON EDWARDS
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ABSTRACT

Developing a Community Group Ministry for Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri

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2011

The goal of this project was to develop a small group program for Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri that utilized specific spiritual practices to facilitate meaningful community, personal transformation, and synergistic missional engagement within the congregation. Liberty has experienced significant population growth, and this expansion, combined with cultural pressures and increasing busyness has weakened people's sense of community, encouraging individualism and low ministry participation. To address these challenges, "Community Groups" was developed to meet stated goals and needs.

This paper first examines the area surrounding Second Baptist, as well as the unique character of the church's ministry. Sources of Liberty's expansion are identified, as well as new related challenges. An examination of the practices, values, and beliefs of Second Baptist identify its identity and vision. The need for a new small group ministry at Second Baptist is explored, as well as obstacles and opportunities related to such a ministry. The paper then engages the relevant biblical and theological data, examining the strengths and weakness of Baptist ecclesiology for this initiative, as well as the supportive theological concepts of *imago Dei*, *shalom*, and "the priesthood of all believers." Finally, the paper details the creation of a pilot project supported by the data. Church members were invited into high-commitment "Community Groups" with upward, inward, and outward foci. Groups were also informed by the Christian practices of hospitality, service, noticing, discernment, Sabbath, and celebration.

The project succeeded in raising awareness about the importance of community, offered a holistic formational opportunity, and prompted the creation of new, member-driven ministries. The goal of personal transformation was difficult to measure, but was evidenced in the personal reflections of participants. The new ministry program is now in its second year and continues to serve as a catalyst for transformation within Second Baptist's congregation and city.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD

Word Count: 299

To the most important small group in my life:

Christy – With you moments have color and contour. Chronology becomes story. Events become adventure. With you the horizon never overshadows the earth just beneath our feet. Life has breadth and depth because of your love and partnership. Your support made this possible and meaningful.

Jackson – Every laugh, every tear, every hug, and every kiss remind me why I am alive. Every time you fall asleep against my chest, there is a moment of sheer joy. Being your father is a healing, life-giving grace. God has transformed my understanding of love through you.

Luke – I write this on the day you will come home from the hospital. We have eagerly awaited your arrival, and now you're finally here. It's been such a joy to welcome you into our family. We have already loved you for months, but now we finally get to show you. And in a matter of days, that has made life so much sweeter.

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INTRODUCTION

Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri is known as an unwelcoming congregation, practices an individualistic approach to Christian formation, and has a leadership structure that inhibits agility, creativity, and effectiveness in ministry. This was the reality I walked into when I became the Senior Pastor of Second Baptist Church (hereafter, Second Baptist) in April 2009. I am a young pastor with different strengths from those of my predecessor, and was called to this position because my congregation sensed it was time to make some adjustments. The Pastor Search Committee identified three things Second Baptist was looking for in a new pastor: strong preaching, visionary leadership, and a warm and welcoming presence. These criteria were indicative of church struggles, and offer some insight into the rationale behind my selection as Senior Pastor. The church hoped I would be able to help them create a new vision for their future. As we have moved into this process of reimagining our future together, it has become clear to me that Second Baptist must, in light of the stated needs, rethink its approach to spiritual formation.

Second Baptist must become a more welcoming congregation. This is one of the prevalent needs in the church. I recently had a conversation with a woman who plans to join the congregation. She said that she was tired of being on the fringes and was ready to invest. When I asked her how long she had been attending the church, she said that she had been attending the church on and off for about sixteen years. When I asked her why she had not joined before now, she said that she never felt fully welcomed and, consequently, never felt that she fully belonged. She told me it had been difficult for her

to break into the community of Second Baptist. As an outsider, she found it difficult to develop relationships with other church members as well as difficult to find a place of service. She said, however, that she has been sensing that it is time for her to invest so that she can become an example of what it means to be a welcoming, growing, and committed member of the church. She told me she plans to become a full-fledged participant in the community whether she is fully welcomed by others or not.¹ This person's story is indicative of the church's need to develop programs that foster a deeper sense of community by emphasizing Christ-centered relationships.

This paper will demonstrate that experiencing community and connectedness is a significant need for people in Liberty, Missouri. Second Baptist would have a deeper sense of community if the church practiced a more holistic approach to spiritual formation. Currently, the primary vehicle for spiritual formation and community building at Second Baptist is Sunday school. At most, Sunday school provides a time for members to catch up, pray briefly for one another, and then spend about twenty minutes studying a Sunday school lesson. The goal of Sunday school has been to give class attendees a little bit of information about the Bible. Sunday school is helpful in that it provides both visitors and longtime church members a space for Bible study and relational connection. However, Sunday school cannot effectively foster meaningful community and personal transformation. The structure, goals, and varying levels of commitment among participants are simply not conducive to the kind of formational experience that will meet the needs created by the crisis of individualism in American culture today.

¹ A prospective member of Second Baptist Church, in a personal conversation with the author, Liberty, Missouri, December 13, 2009.

In his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block writes,

We are living in an age of isolation, imitating the lament from early in the last century, when life was referred to as the age of anxiety. . . . Our isolation occurs because western culture, our individualistic narrative, the inward attention of our institutions and our professions, and the messages from our media all fragment us. We are broken into pieces. . . . This is important to understand because it is this dividedness that makes it so difficult to create a more positive or alternative future—especially in a culture that is much more interested in individuality and independence than in interdependence. The work is to overcome this fragmentation.²

To address these needs, Second Baptist needs a spiritual formation program that offers more than casual relational connections and opportunities to learn information about the Bible. Second Baptist needs a program that will foster wholeness. This kind of whole-life transformation is possible in the context of small groups that nurture high commitment in multi-dimensional Christian community.

To nurture this kind of community at Second Baptist, there must be greater engagement and creativity in ministry among church members. Members must understand that participation in ministry is an essential part of Christian formation. Tom Sine addresses this need in his book, *The New Conspirators*, when he asks, “Is the church simply a place to go once a week to get our needs met or is it something else? Is it possible that we may be unwittingly working from seriously flawed assumptions about what it means to be the community of God?”³ It seems that many at Second Baptist are working from this flawed assumption that the purpose of the church is to meet their needs. This assumption translates into low-level participation instead of a deep

² Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2009), 1-2.

³ Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 255.

commitment to the Christ community. Second Baptist is led by a small percentage of its membership in the context of a non-rotating committee structure. This leadership structure will not support the creativity and agility necessary for timely ministry adjustments. Affordable housing, quality schools, and easy access to Kansas City have contributed to significant growth in Liberty. This expansion, combined with cultural pressures and increasing busyness, has weakened people's sense of community, encouraging individualism and low ministry participation. As Second Baptist moves into the future, it must have programming that will prompt broader participation and missional innovation among members of the church.

The stated needs for community, transformation, and innovative missional engagement must be met with a more holistic approach to spiritual formation. David Augsburger, in his book, *Dissident Discipleship*, offers a vision of Christian spirituality conducive to such an approach. Augsburger argues that transformative Christian spirituality must be communal spirituality.⁴ He writes that “in communal spirituality, ethics is the preamble to, the preparation for, the initial impulse of all authentic spirituality. In communal spirituality, justice as well as harmony is essential. No one dare overlook domination and oppression, injustice and injury, exploitation and abuse; they are central concerns.”⁵ Augsburger calls communal spirituality tripolar spirituality because it is three-dimensional. He states, “The spirituality of personal transformation, the experience of divine encounter and the relation of integrity and solidarity with

⁴ David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

neighbor cannot be divided. Tripolar spirituality sees all three as interdependent.”⁶ This kind of approach to Christian spirituality will facilitate meaningful Christian community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement within Second Baptist’s congregation.

In light of this, the goal of this ministry focus paper is to develop a small group program for Second Baptist that utilizes specific spiritual practices to facilitate meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement within the congregation, and will ultimately establish “Community Groups” as the primary vehicle for spiritual formation and ministry at Second Baptist. To achieve this, a pilot project will be created to help establish this ministry as the preferred future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist. Community Groups will enable members to experience a holistic approach to spiritual formation by incorporating Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad’s “up, in, and out” approach to balanced spiritual growth.⁷ Each group will create a covenant in which weekly attendance is required, and will use Richard Peace’s book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, as an initial resource to encourage deep relationships.

This paper is comprised of three parts. Part One will examine the area surrounding Second Baptist, as well as the unique character of the church’s ministry. Specific attention will be given to demographic analysis showing Liberty’s recent growth. Sources of Liberty’s expansion will be identified, as well as new related challenges. An examination of the practices, values, and beliefs of Second Baptist will

⁶ Augsburger, *Dissident*, 13.

⁷ Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad, *The Passionate Church: The Art of Life-Changing Discipleship* (Colorado Springs: NexGen, 2005), 81.

identify its identity and vision. The paper will then explore the need for a new small group ministry at Second, as well as obstacles and opportunities related to such a ministry.

Part Two will engage the relevant biblical and theological data. First, an examination of Baptist ecclesiology will reveal the tenets that both support and detract from the ministry initiative. In light of deficiencies, Celtic Christianity will serve as a resource. Then, a study of the *imago Dei* will present humans as created in the image of a social God. Next, the concept of *shalom* will be explored as a vision of universal wholeness that is both missional and communal. Lastly, attention will be given to the Baptist distinctive of the “Priesthood of all Believers” as supportive of participation and responsibility in Christian community.

Part Three will focus on creating a pilot project that is supported by the theological data. Christian practices of hospitality, service, noticing, discernment, Sabbath, and celebration will also inform the project. The project will raise awareness about the importance of community, offer a holistic formational opportunity, encourage congregational change, and prompt the creation of new, member-driven ministries. The pilot project will provide structure and content for groups. Careful consideration will be given to the timeline, leadership development, resources, personnel, and assessment.

The needs that have prompted this project are not unique to Second Baptist. Cultural forces have prompted a growing fragmentation among Americans. Churches across the country must learn how to effectively address the human longing for meaningful relationships, the deficiencies of a faith that only informs, and the importance

of service in Christian discipleship. My hope is that this project will also serve as a resource for other Christian communities.

PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT OF LIBERTY, MISSOURI

Second Baptist Church is a 166-year-old, intergenerational congregation in Liberty, Missouri. It is impossible to understand the culture of this historic congregation without some knowledge of the city of Liberty. This chapter will focus on the demographics of Liberty, recent population growth, the major challenges related to that growth, and cultural forces that that may compound them.

The Demographics of Liberty

Liberty is the county seat of Clay County, which has one of the highest per capita incomes in the state. Neither the community of Liberty nor Second Baptist is very ethnically diverse. Liberty is a predominately Anglo community, with 93.8 percent of the population being White, 2.9 percent Hispanic, 2.4 percent Black, and the rest falling into other categories.¹ Second Baptist is fairly reflective of this ethnic mix, with 92 percent being Anglo, 1 percent African American, 1 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, and 7 percent who fall into the category of “other,” indicating Greek, Russian, or mixed race

¹ Aquila Economic Development, “Demographic Detail Summary Report,” provided by Experian/Applied Geographic Solutions, 2006.

dissent.² It does seem, however, that the community will become more diverse in the coming years, as there is a growing population of Latino immigrants. The city's 2005 demographic research study shows 0.3 percent growth in the Latino and Hispanic population between 2000 and 2005 and a projected 9 percent growth between 2005 and 2010. Liberty also has a low level of poverty. Only 8.4 percent of the households in Liberty make less than fifteen thousand dollars a year. A slightly higher 9.0 percent make between fifteen thousand and twenty-five thousand, and 10.4 percent make between twenty-five thousand and thirty-five thousand dollars a year. This means that a high percentage of households in Liberty (more than 70 percent) have an annual income of more than thirty-five thousand dollars a year. Of this 70 percent, 15.8 percent make between thirty-five thousand and fifty-thousand, 21.3 percent make between fifty-thousand and seventy-five thousand, 16.7 percent make between seventy-five thousand and one hundred thousand, 12 percent make between one hundred and one hundred and fifty thousand, and 6.4 percent make over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year.³ Liberty is a predominately Anglo community with a low level of poverty, and there is good reason to believe that it will remain that way in the years ahead.

City Councilman Greg Duncan remarked, "I don't expect the profile to change much at all in the next five to ten years. The largest employers are not likely to leave and there is no huge new employer on the horizon that would affect the demographics."⁴

² Ministry Connect, "Second Baptist Church Survey" (survey given to the congregation during the pastoral search, Liberty, MO, 2007).

³ Aquila, Economic Development, "Demographic Detail Summary Report."

⁴ Greg Duncan, Liberty city councilman and realtor, interview via email by author, Liberty, Missouri, June, 19, 2009.

Mike Lassiter, Associate Pastor of Second Baptist, told me that one of the reasons Liberty has remained predominately Anglo and has maintained a low level of poverty is because Liberty's mayor and city council made intentional decisions to make sure that Liberty remained a light industry community.⁵ Councilman Harold Phillips also commented that "there is still a Ford Plant in nearby Claycomo that serves as a major employer for Liberty citizens, but I think it is safe to say that Liberty has never desired to leave its historic identity as a county seat and college town to try to get jobs and heavy industry here."⁶

Stephen Hawkins, former mayor of Liberty, offers good perspective on this. Hawkins said that during his tenure as mayor, there were councilman and citizens who were determined to maintain Liberty's historic character and distinctiveness. These distinct features include: small town life in close proximity to Kansas City, historically preserved buildings and residences in seven nationally recognized historic districts, a low level of poverty, quality schools, affordable housing, and the presence of William Jewell College. In efforts to preserve Liberty, Hawkins noted resistance to heavy industry, low-income housing, and even the addition of traffic lights. However, Hawkins said that Liberty is as it is primarily because of its geographic, topographic, and economic situation. In a personal interview with him, Hawkins stated, "The physical context of Liberty has never been conducive to heavy industry. The clay soil and the hills and valleys of Liberty do not make it ideal for building railroads, water lines, or sewage lines.

⁵ Mike Lassiter, Associate Pastor of Second Baptist, personal conversation with the author, Liberty, MO, June 15, 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

This is what kept Liberty as it was for so many years.”⁷ Hawkins said, therefore, that Liberty’s pursuit of light industry, such as Hallmark’s distribution center, was not about trying to keep certain kinds of people or businesses out, but about finding good economic opportunities that make sense for Liberty.⁸ Hawkins made it clear that Liberty’s demographics are “a result of happenstance, not of city policy.”⁹ Interestingly, Hawkins also made two comments that would support resistance to demographic change. First, he noted Hallmark’s strong desire that no heavy industry be added in Liberty, and second, he reflected upon how citizens would often fight against any proposal that might bring in heavier industry or low income housing. Hawkins said, “Citizens would say some of the most dramatic things I had ever heard about apartment dwellers being drug addicts who do not make much money or pay taxes.”¹⁰ Regardless of the rationale, it seems the ethnic and economic demographics of Liberty will not change much in the near future.

Significant Population Growth

Liberty currently has approximately thirty-five thousand residents and is situated near Kansas City, Missouri. Liberty used to be a much smaller city, but has experienced significant population growth over the last twenty years as Kansas City has expanded in its direction. Population growth within the city limits of Liberty has actually become

⁷ Stephen Hawkins, former mayor of Liberty, phone interview by author, Liberty, MO, February 9, 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

stagnant, but the Liberty area (which will be described below) continues to experience noticeable growth.

In addition to the city of Liberty, there is a region known to many as “new Liberty” just beyond the Liberty city limits that is technically part of Kansas City. The area is known as “new Liberty” because it is part of the Liberty School District. It is about fifteen miles from downtown Kansas City. The business and residents moving into this area consider themselves Liberty residents. One city councilman estimated that there are at least twenty-five thousand residents in “new Liberty.”¹¹ This brings the population of Second Baptist’s context to around sixty thousand and counting.

As the population has grown, Liberty has experienced commercial growth as well. Richard Groves, director of Historic Liberty, Inc., shared that “just ten to fifteen years ago there was almost nothing but farmland for about half a mile on the Liberty side of I-35.”¹² This farmland has become home banks, grocery stores, restaurants, hardware stores, clothing stores, and a movie theatre. It is now filled with new business, neighborhoods, and schools.

Ann Posey, organist at Second Baptist, moved to Liberty in 1965. In that year Ann says there was “one high school, one junior high, and three elementary schools. This meant that all the children and young people had the same history.”¹³ This situation has evolved drastically in recent years. Liberty Superintendent of Schools Mike Brewer says

¹¹ Harold Phillips, Liberty city councilman, interview by author, Liberty, MO, October, 9, 2009.

¹² Richard Groves, Historic Liberty, Inc. Director, interview via email by author, Liberty, MO, February, 5, 2011.

¹³ Ann Posey, organist at Second Baptist, interview via email by author, Liberty, MO, February, 6, 2011.

that he has seen many changes during his twenty-three years in Liberty. He stated, “The district’s enrollment has more than doubled. The biggest change has been caused by the Shoal Creek Valley development west of I-35. We now have 5,077 students who live west of I-35, which is nearly half of our student population. Since 1999, we have built eight new schools and completed nine additions to existing schools.”¹⁴ The Liberty Independent School District now has ten elementary schools, two middle schools, three junior highs, and two high schools.

Growth Factors

The most significant factors contributing to Liberty’s recent growth are quality schools, affordable housing, and easy access to Kansas City. The greatest impetus for this growth is the school district. Liberty schools are known as the best in the region, and because the district extends into Kansas City, many Kansas City employees will buy houses in the Liberty area just so their children can attend Liberty Schools. The Community Housing Assessment Team Report affirms that the “Liberty’s public school system has a strong reputation for excellence and is a major attraction to family households. However, the Liberty school district extends across I-35 into rapidly growing areas of Kansas City. This has helped encourage rapid residential growth in this area.”¹⁵ A recent report from Liberty Independent School District describes enrollment trends over the last twenty years:

¹⁴ Mike Brewer, Liberty ISD Superintendent Mike Brewer, interview via email by author, Liberty, MO, February, 5, 2011.

¹⁵ Martin H. Shukert, *The Liberty CHAT Report* (Liberty, MO: Aquila Community Housing Assessment Team, 2006), 35.

Enrollment growth accelerated quickly in the early 1990's, jumping from less than 1 percent growth per year in 1991/92 and 1992/93 to nearly 7.0 percent growth in 1993/94. The enrollment growth rates remained in the 4 to 5 percent range through 1999/00. The growth rate declined to about 2.5 percent in 2000/01, though, because of a lull in residential construction from a sluggish national economy. Despite this temporary down-turn, the robust rate of enrollment growth resumed and single-family home construction returned to previous levels. The enrollment growth rate again increased to about 5.0 percent in 2001/02 and remained strong until peaking again at just over 7.0 percent in 2006/07. However, the lack of new home building and the national recession have contributed to a decline in the enrollment growth rate the last 4 years, with recent enrollment growth rates settling at around 3 percent.¹⁶

The report goes on to affirm the important reality that:

Most, but not all, of the growth in the District has occurred west of I-35. However, the more established portions of the District within the City of Liberty also show increases in the majority of attendance areas. This data implies that even though a large share of the growth can be attributed to recent developments and in migration to the District, the established portion of Liberty has also grown and shares responsibility for the increases in demand for services from an expanding student population.¹⁷

This quality of Liberty schools in comparison to the Kansas City schools is an important part of the growth in the Liberty School District. This growth is also supported by the cost of housing in the Liberty area.

The average price of a home in Liberty is just under \$160,000 dollars. This price does not seem unusual for most of the Kansas City metro region, until you consider the quality of home you are able to buy for this amount of money. Greg Duncan notes, "The Kansas City metro area divides itself into north and south of the river. South of the river has higher incomes, newer infrastructure, and the higher cost of living that goes with it. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars buys a lot more house in Liberty than in Leawood

¹⁶ Applied Economics, *Liberty School District: Demographic and Enrollment Analysis* (Liberty, MO: Applied Economics, prepared for the Liberty School District, 2011), 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

or Overland Park.”¹⁸ It is also worth noting that the home prices in the Liberty School District contribute both to population growth and to current demographics. Stephen Hawkins said that “our topography makes it expensive to build water and sewage lines in most residential areas. This means that most developers will want to build higher priced homes on the lots.”¹⁹ These homes are affordable to middle-class families with household incomes consistent with most current Liberty residents, and therefore support the continuance of the current demographic makeup of Liberty.

The ability for middle-class families to purchase a higher quality home at an affordable price is a major factor for growth in Liberty. The school district confirms this, reporting:

New housing units and increases in occupancy rates have been key drivers in the population increases experienced within the District. Between 1990 and 2000, District home inventory increased by about 2,900 units, an average of 290 units per year. Approximately 92 percent of these units were single-family, increasing the overall proportion of single-family units to 83.7 percent by 2000. This growth also increased the share of owner-occupied units and decreased the share occupied by renters. Greater proportions of owner-occupied units tend to increase student populations more in the near-term, but then experience somewhat higher losses over time as the population ages in place.²⁰

Growth has been stifled in the last few years because of the recession, but the school district expects this to change as the recession lifts. Their findings show:

The relatively small, but stable, population growth experienced in recent years is expected to continue through 2011/2012, at which time population growth is expected to accelerate as the housing market recovers. After that, housing construction is expected to return to near pre-recession levels as a variety of new housing opportunities, and housing projects in the District proceed with planned

¹⁸ Duncan, interview.

¹⁹ Hawkins, interview.

²⁰ Applied Economics, *Liberty School District, 2011*, 8.

residential developments. The population per household in the District is expected to stabilize around 2.8, as a mix of older and younger families.²¹

The plan to increase affordable housing in a great school district near Kansas City will continue to foster growth in Liberty in the coming years.

The ease of access to Kansas City should not be underestimated as a growth factor in the Liberty community. Stephen Hawkins shared that “forty years ago, Kansas City started rapidly annexing land. This is why when you cross over I-35 you have moved into Kansas City.”²² It takes about twenty minutes to drive from the Liberty City limits to downtown Kansas City. It takes even less time to get from Liberty to Kansas City International airport. Liberty’s proximity to Kansas City makes it an ideal place to live for Kansas City employees. As Greg Duncan said, “We’re no longer a small town, but in many ways it still feels like it, and that is desirable to people. We have historical areas, an old downtown square, William Jewell College, the Hospital, good schools, an involved government, nice neighborhoods, and high development standards. All of this contributes to a unique sense of community.”²³

Duncan’s perspective is confirmed in a recent Community Housing Assessment Team (CHAT) report: “People in Liberty are attached to the traditional character of a small town near but separate from the Kansas City metropolitan area. Liberty’s growth has been enough to support the needs of a quality community, but not so much as to cause strain on basic systems. This moderate growth rate has helped Liberty maintain its

²¹ Applied Economics, *Liberty School District, 2011*, 16.

²² Hawkins, interview.

²³ Duncan, interview.

community character.”²⁴ Residents of Liberty can benefit from all of the things Duncan mentioned, while also enjoying access to the work, air travel, shopping, and entertainment of Kansas City. This reality, along with quality schools and affordable housing will continue to contribute to Liberty’s appeal and growth in the coming years.

A Weakened Sense of Community and Connectedness

The growth Liberty has experienced in recent years has resulted in some growing pains. Despite the CHAT report’s assertion that “Liberty’s growth has been enough to support the needs of a quality community,” there is an increasingly weakened sense of community and connectedness in Liberty.²⁵ The greatest factor in this is the emergence of “new Liberty.”

Liberty experienced a 28 percent population growth in the nineties and an estimated 11 percent population growth in the first five years of this decade.²⁶ However, none of this population growth represents the “new Liberty” growth which has taken place over the last decade. As mentioned above, one city councilman estimated this new part of Liberty’s population to be around twenty-five thousand people.²⁷ Over the next ten years “new Liberty” is expected to grow by 42 percent and the number of school-age children is expected to grow by over 50 percent.²⁸ All of this population growth is

²⁴ Shukert, *The Liberty CHAT Report*, 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ IDcide.com, “Liberty, Missouri Profile,” <http://www.idcide.com/citydata/mo/liberty.htm> (accessed November 13, 2009).

²⁷ Phillips, interview.

²⁸ Applied Economics, *Liberty School District: Demographic and Enrollment Analysis* (Liberty, MO: Applied Economics, prepared for the Liberty School District, 2009), 14.

changing the character of Liberty. It has quickly shifted from being a small town to being a Kansas City suburb. This change has prompted city leaders to work hard to maintain Liberty's distinct character. They have been somewhat successful. Liberty still has a weekly farmer's market, annual festivals, and a well-maintained historic district. However, new businesses and housing developments are popping up everywhere.

The strain of this was evident in a recent conversation with one senior adult at Second Baptist, who recalled, "It used to be that you knew everyone. We were all part of the same small community. There were just a few churches. You had to drive for miles to see anything that resembled Kansas City. William Jewell College had a significant role in the life of the city, and had a strong relationship with our church. Liberty has changed so fast. We have gained and lost so much."²⁹ This church member's sentiments are felt by many of Second Baptist's long-time members. They remember a time when living in Liberty felt like belonging to a small community. There is still this sense among some church members who live in "old Liberty," but increasingly the community of Liberty is becoming divided by I-35, and people's lives are becoming fragmented by urban sprawl.

One of the newest symbols of this fragmentation is the new high school. Population growth in the Liberty School District has facilitated the need for Liberty North High School, which opened in the fall of 2010. This prompted much conversation at Second Baptist. Parents were concerned about which high school their children would end up at. In these early years of Liberty North, some siblings will be required to attend different local high schools. The effects of this new high school will, however, go well

²⁹ Harvey Thomas, member of Second Baptist, interview by author, Liberty, MO, January 28, 2011.

beyond temporarily inconveniencing some families. It will serve to further divide the sense of local community in Liberty.

In the fall of 2010, Liberty enjoyed its final homecoming parade. This was an annual event that had brought the city together for celebration for years. The decision to end the tradition was based on the existence of Liberty North High School. Liberty has seen the emergence of new elementary schools, middle schools, and junior highs in recent years, but through all of this the one large high school has helped maintain a sense of solidarity among the entire Liberty community. This is one symbol of the growing changes in Liberty that have fostered its increasing shift from a small city where residents felt deeply connected to a large bedroom community for Kansas City. As Liberty continues to consider the impact of growth upon its sense of community and connectedness, residents must pay attention to the new reality of having a second high school.

One final noteworthy factor contributing to Liberty's weakened sense of community and connectedness is the increasing busyness of its citizens. This problem is not unique to Liberty. In their book *Living on Purpose*, Tom and Christine Sine write that "a new contagion called 'hurry sickness' is sweeping across the land. Hurry sickness is simply the consequence of people trying to jam more activity into twenty-four hours than is humanly possible—and becoming hyper stressed in the process."³⁰ Robert Putnam confirms the reality of this epidemic in his book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam writes:

The most obvious suspect behind our tendency to drop out of community affairs is pervasive busyness. "Too busy" is by far the most common explanation we give

³⁰ Tom and Christine Sine, *Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 64.

for not volunteering. We certainly feel busier now than Americans did a generation ago: the proportion of us who say we “always feel rushed” jumped by more than half between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s. The groups that feel most harried are full-time workers (especially those with advanced education), women, people aged twenty-five to fifty-four, and parents of younger children, especially single parents.³¹

Putnam goes on to say that it is not time but financial pressures that create the scenario that requires us to work harder with less rest and recreation.³² Financial anxiety and need facilitate the time crunch and the hurry sickness. Putnam’s observations suggest that there are many Liberty citizens who are not experiencing healthy community of any kind because they do not feel they have the time to make the necessary investment. Time and financial pressures have not only kept them living at an unhealthy pace, but have prevented them from experiencing the kind of rest, recreation, and relationships that would relieve their stress and contribute to a healthier existence. These stressors are keeping people from church and other communal activities. They are weakening the sense of community and connectedness in the city of Liberty and within its churches.

Erin Hilton is an example of a church member at Second Baptist who strives to remain invested in Christian community in the midst of increasing busyness. Erin writes,

I work part time as a nurse, which includes working two twelve hour shifts a week, and being on two committees that meet every other month. I am taking a couple certification classes right now. I am a “room mom” for Josie's preschool class. I serve as a discussion group leader for Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS). This includes keeping up with the women throughout the month, planning activities and play dates, and then being at MOPS to lead discussions. I am on the board for the food allergy walk in Kansas City. At church I am involved in finding volunteers for child-care. I lead a Bible study with the middle school girls on Wednesday night, am on the women’s retreat committee, and I help out with our contemporary worship service in the evening. I also have two girls who keep

³¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 189.

³² *Ibid.*, 193.

me very busy. Between all of their activities: doctor's appointments, playing with them, teaching them, and cleaning up after them, it is a full time job. I am now pregnant with my third child.³³

Erin goes on to talk about the stress that this schedule places on her life. She still tries to make time for friends, family, and her relationship with God. However, she also said that since having children, she has little time to devote to prayer and personal Bible study, and has limited time to spend time nurturing her marriage with her husband. His schedule is similar to hers, and they, therefore, have little time for each other.³⁴ Erin closed her email with this remark: “If I cannot keep up with everything that is going on, I ditch time with my friends. You know they will understand. The people closest to you are often the ones that get the short end of the stick when things get busy.”³⁵

Erin is one example of a young woman in her twenties who is struggling to be invested in meaningful community as she juggles a number of responsibilities. Most of the members at Second Baptist are not nearly as invested as Erin, but are equally busy. Like Erin, some things in their lives have to suffer—usually family, their spiritual life, their personal health, and their church commitment. One committed family at Second Baptist stopped participating in church a few years ago because of the demands of their children’s hockey schedule. They have now been inactive in church for over three years. Time and financial pressures have created this reality. Most of the young families at Second Baptist would like to find a way to relieve these pressures and live a healthier,

³³ Erin Hilton, Second Baptist church member, email to author, February 9, 2011.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

less stressed life where they enjoy meaningful relationships in community, but they are not sure how to do this. Churches must help people navigate this issue.

Cultural and Subcultural Influences on the Community

As church leaders help people navigate these pressures, they must also pay attention to cultural influences upon the community. The most prevalent are the changing perspective on “religious hours,” the predominance of two-income households, the presence of internet and television, and media messages about “the good life.” It is these issues that this chapter will now discuss.

There was a time in Liberty when the school district and athletic leagues would not schedule events on Sundays or on Wednesday evenings. These were considered sacred spaces in the week, reserved mainly for religious activities. This is no longer the case. Families with teenagers at Second Baptist will often miss church on Sunday for a sports tournament. It is not uncommon for one family in the church to show up for worship after a game in their athletic jerseys. The school district will schedule practices and programs for extra-curricular events on Sundays and Wednesdays. Many of the teenagers at the church have academic and extra-curricular commitments that keep them busy late into the evenings and throughout the weekends. This shift represents more than a decline in church attendance. It represents less space in people’s schedules. It creates an additional time strain on community in general, and on people’s ability to invest in Christian community in particular.

One of the reasons the mentioned time and financial pressures create more strain on families now is because of the predominance of dual-income households. Since

observes that the “only thing that kept many families in the middle class in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s was wives going back to work.”³⁶ Elizabeth Warren agrees: “The average two-income family earns far more today than did the single-bread winner family of a generation ago. And yet, once they have paid their mortgage, the car payments, the taxes, the health insurance, and the day-care bills, dual-income families today have less discretionary income – and less money to put away for a rainy day – than the single income family of a generation ago.”³⁷ As Putnam suggests, financial pressures have created the time pressures that are weakening American communities. The rise of single-parent households and the need for dual-income families has created a culture of busyness from which people must seek relief.

The internet is one cultural force which must not be overlooked. Putnam writes that “when the history of the twentieth century is written with greater perspective than we now enjoy, the impact of technology on communications and leisure will almost certainly be a major theme.”³⁸ The story of the effect of the internet on us is still being written. It is too soon, for instance, to understand all of the ways the social networking site “Facebook” has affected the way people relate to one another. Putnam speculates on whether or not the internet ultimately helps or hinders community. He says that it is helpful when it is used within the confines of “an extensive, deep robust, social infrastructure of relationships so that those using it will truly understand what others are

³⁶ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 163.

³⁷ Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers are Going Broke* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 8.

³⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 216.

communicating to them.”³⁹ The internet hinders community when it replaces face-to-face relationships. Putnam says, “Anonymity and fluidity in the virtual world encourage ‘easy in, easy out’ ‘drive-by’ relationships. This discourages the creation of social capital. If entry and exit are too easy, commitment, trustworthiness, and reciprocity will not develop.”⁴⁰ Wuthnow critiques Putnam, saying the important thing to note “about social relationships among young adults is that they are changing. Young adults today are no less social creatures that young adults were in the past.”⁴¹ Wuthnow goes on to say that “in the past people would gain their information about their religious community from friends at church, the pastor, religious magazines, or a visit to the library. Now they can be found on the internet. The internet is not replacing participation, but simply adding ways of finding information beyond one’s congregations.”⁴² It is difficult to speculate on whether or not the internet will ultimately improve or detract from relationships in community. It is easy to observe, however, that more teenagers and young adults at Second Baptist are using social media and text messaging as their primary forms of communication with one another. They often do this with little consideration for time boundaries, which can have negative effects on personal health. One ABC News study showed,

Children who send text messages or use other electronic media just before bed may suffer poorer sleep at night as well as mood and cognitive problems during the day. These young people averaged 33.5 messages or emails sent per night to

³⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 177.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 42.

⁴² Ibid., 210.

an average of 3.7 people. These occurred from ten minutes to four hours after bedtime. These technologies woke up surveyed adolescents and young adults once a night on average. More than 77 percent of those surveyed had persistent trouble getting to sleep. The study concluded that the adverse impact on sleep hygiene and daytime function could be significant.⁴³

The internet can be a valuable tool in many areas of life. It can also affect social skills, keep people isolated, and impact health if used poorly. Its presence will impact American communities for years to come.

Finally, the impact of television and media messages about “the good life” must be considered. First, the presence of television has a significant impact upon a community. Putnam writes,

Americans at the end of the twentieth century were watching more TV, watching it more habitually, more pervasively, and more often alone, and watching more programs that were associated specifically with civic disengagement. The onset of these trends coincided exactly with the national decline in social connectedness, and the trends were most marked among the younger generations that are distinctively disengaged. Moreover, it is precisely those Americans most marked by this dependence on televised entertainment who were most likely to have dropped out of civic and social life – who spend less time with friends, were less involved in community organizations, and were less likely to participate in public affairs.⁴⁴

In addition to fostering disconnectedness in American communities, media messages on television, the internet, and similar mediums also shape the culture of the communities.

Tom and Christine Sine note that “the average child is on-line thirty-seven hours a week, including television, MTV, CDs, video games, and the internet. They are exposed to three thousand to four thousand advertisements a week. That number is increasing as corporations are invading both public and private schools with inexpensive curriculum

⁴³ ABC News, “Bed Time Texting for Bad Sleep,” <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Sleep/bedtime-texting-bad-sleep/story?id=12035026htm> (accessed February 10, 2011).

⁴⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 246.

that includes their corporate ads.”⁴⁵ This means that children are spending more hours in front of advertising than they are listening to their school teachers and far more than they are engaged in any spiritual formation program at church. In an article for *Mothering Magazine*, Gary Ruskin writes, “Advertising is a type of curriculum—the most pervasive in America today. They teach that the solutions to life’s problems lie not in good values, hard work, or education, but in materialism and the purchasing of more and more things.”⁴⁶ Craig Detweiller and Barry Taylor emphasize this point: “We all have stories by which we live—family stories and larger cultural stories that tell us who we are as a nation or a people. These stories give us our identities. Advertising has become our shaping story. The stories that give us our identity and shape our sense of self are more likely to come through advertising than religion.”⁴⁷

It is critical, then, to pay attention to the content of the media messages that are forming people. In a Fuller Seminary Doctor of Ministry class, Dr. Richard Peace taught that television both shapes and is shaped by the culture.⁴⁸ Peace assigned the class the task of watching several television programs to observe what advertisers know about our culture, as well as how television is shaping our culture. Interestingly, the underlying messages were similar in both secular and Christian programming. While watching the Christian program *Behind the Scenes* on TBN, I noticed a self-centered, success driven

⁴⁵ Sine and Sine, *Living on Purpose*, 32-33.

⁴⁶ Gary Ruskin, “Why They Whine: How Corporations Prey on Children,” *Mothering Magazine*, November/December 1999, 43.

⁴⁷ Craig Detweiller and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 65.

⁴⁸ Richard Peace, “Spiritual Formation and Discipleship for a Postmodern World” (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 12, 2009).

focus. Even Christian television is reinforcing a materialistic vision of the “good life.”

Sine calls this “marketing cool to all generations.”⁴⁹ He explains,

You would be amazed at how much information they collect, on everything from our car preferences to our political views. They even place us in cluster groups of consumers with similar preferences. They know exactly how to get our attention, stir up our envy, and influence us to buy into their stories and products. Essentially, the marketers of McWorld are seeking to convince adults everywhere on the planet to embrace a new definition of the good life as one of high status, high fashion, and high living. We are invited to live into a story where we enjoy the luxurious lifestyles once reserved for the super rich, whether we can afford it or not. And it is working.⁵⁰

This message of “good life” is individualistic and self-centered, and therefore contradicts the biblical vision of the good life of God.

Significant population growth and an ever-changing culture have created a weakened sense of community and connectedness in Liberty, Missouri. The citizens of Liberty need to find creative ways to slow down and reorient themselves toward a healthier way of life. Second Baptist can respond to this need by engaging people in a spiritual formation program that fosters a pursuit of wholeness. In order to do this, the next chapter will examine the unique character of Second Baptist.

⁴⁹ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 86.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT OF SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH

As Liberty continues to change, Second Baptist must make adjustments to effectively meet emerging needs. In order to create a ministry program that will enable Second Baptist to better respond to these needs, it is important to understand the congregation's unique character. This chapter will explore the history, vision, values, and structures of Second Baptist, as well as the obstacles and opportunities related to the creation of Community Groups.

History of Second Baptist Church

Long-time members of Second Baptist are proud of the church's name. The *History of the Second Baptist Church*, by R. P. Rider, A. M. Tutt, and H. I. Hester, states, "For several years there had existed in Liberty an anti-mission church."¹ In 1843 several of the members of the anti-mission Baptist church decided it was time to start a new church that would be committed first and foremost to missions. The members of the new church decided it would only "add insult to injury to call the church The Baptist Church or the First Baptist Church, so they decided to name it The Second Baptist Church of

¹ R. P. Rider, A. M. Tutt, and H. I. Hester, *History of the Second Baptist Church, Liberty, Missouri* (Liberty, MO: Second Baptist History Committee, 1968), 7.

Liberty, Missouri.”² For members of Second Baptist who know this story, the church’s name is a reminder of the church’s commitment to missions.

This commitment to missions was unusual in Missouri at the church’s inception. Writes Adrian Lamkin in his history of the church titled *Second Baptist Church*, “If someone were interested in finding a Baptist church in or near Liberty that would support the efforts of the missionary forces, such a church could not be found.”³ In 1843, according to the Rider, Tutt, and Hester, the “anti-mission spirit in Northern Missouri was not only regnant but rampant, and the little church, almost from the beginning had to fight for the maintenance of its principles.”⁴ The Baptist association was decidedly anti-mission, and therefore chose to exclude the new church from fellowship. Write Rider, Tutt, and Hester, “Consequently, Second Baptist was in the condition of an alien in its own country.”⁵ However, despite denominational pressures to the contrary, the new renegade Baptist church with a commitment to missions would establish itself and grow.

Second Baptist has a rich, 167-year old history. Threaded throughout its history is a number of defining stories and congregational heroes. These people and events are integrated into the DNA and memory of Second Baptist, and therefore are worth mentioning for the purposes of this project.

The arrival of Reverend A.P Williams in the Liberty area in 1842 was critical for the establishment and growth of Second Baptist. Lamkin records, “[At] only twenty-nine

² Rider, Tutt, and Hester, *History*, 7.

³ Adrian Lamkin, *Second Baptist Church* (Liberty, MO: Second Baptist Church, 1994), 25.

⁴ Rider, Tutt, and Hester, *History*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

years old, this dynamic missionary-pastor was not afraid to overcome tremendous odds in establishing strong missionary churches.”⁶ During Williams’ tenure he would be “recognized as one of the strongest early leaders of the Missouri Baptist Convention (MBC),” writes Lamkin. “Four times elected moderator of the state convention and four times selected to preach the annual sermon, he was a missionary force to reckon with.”⁷ Williams not only helped establish Second Baptist as a viable congregation, his missionary zeal and denominational leadership left a strong imprint on the church’s identity.

The missionary imprint on Second Baptist was further strengthened by Carolyn Moss. As early as 1867, records Lamkin, she became “impressed by the need to support foreign missions. She also was strongly impressed that this support should be given through the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).”⁸ In December of 1967 Moss was invited by the Foreign Mission Board of Richmond, Virginia to begin promoting the work of missions within the church. The Mission Board’s James B. Taylor “hoped that a Female Missionary Society could be formed in the church at that time, but the pastor gave no encouragement,” states Lamkin.⁹ Moss worked hard raising money for the board, and “by 1869 the atmosphere had changed towards the women’s society in the church,” writes Lamkin, “and on November 9, 1869,

⁶ Lamkin, *Second*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the Female Foreign Missionary Society of Second Baptist was organized.”¹⁰ Lamkin comments that “this was the first documented Female Missionary Society in Missouri, a noteworthy honor for a missionary minded church.”¹¹ This Missionary Society would later come to be known as the Women’s Missionary Union (hereafter, WMU). Carolyn Moss captured the pioneer missionary spirit of Second Baptist and is an early representation of Second Baptist’s support for women in ministry.

There is perhaps no greater congregational hero at Second Baptist than Bill Link. Records Lamkin, “With thirty-four year tenure, he served as the pastor of the congregation for one-fifth of the church’s history.”¹² Many current members of Second Baptist remember Link’s pastorate, and long-time members recall his tenure as the height of Second Baptist’s history. Lamkin reports, “Throughout most of the 1950’s and 1960’s the Sunday school enrollment topped one thousand. Likewise, throughout the late 1950’s and 1960’s, the Sunday school average attendance exceeded five hundred, reaching its peak in 1960 with an average attendance of six hundred thirty attendees.”¹³ During Link’s pastorate, a new educational building was constructed, a full-time minister of education was hired, the music ministry became one of the strongest attractors of new people, and missions support continued to expand.¹⁴ Under his leadership, the church gave 20 percent of its budget to the Southern Baptist Convention (hereafter, the SBC), and in the 1970s

¹⁰ Lamkin, *Second*, 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165-172.

and 1980s sent five church members to serve internationally for a short time. Additionally, several retired missionaries decided to make Second Baptist their home, which kept the missionary spirit alive in the congregation.¹⁵ Of course, Lamkin also notes that “the 1960’s saw the cultural ‘revolution’ in American life which caused many to question the status quo, and led some to speak publicly that Second Baptist protected the status quo.”¹⁶ Over time Second Baptist established itself as a solid, multi-staff, multi-program congregation, and as it did it developed traditions and structures that seemed to inhibit some of its free-spiritedness. The rebellious start-up congregation was now the established “downtown” church. Second Baptist’s success reinforced and began to fossilize much of Second Baptist’s philosophy and practice, and ultimately, the church’s strong commitment to civic leadership, Christian education, excellence in music, and missions. These traits were combined with marked church growth throughout Link’s pastorate, which etched his ministry deeply into Second Baptist’s congregational memory. Lamkin writes that “the congregation was so appreciative to Dr. Link for his many years of ministry that a small volume entitled *The Link Legend* was printed outlining the major events during his pastorate.”¹⁷

One final person who must be noted is George Steincross. When Steincross succeeded Bill Link as pastor in 1983, he inherited a strong multi-staff congregation with stable ministry programs. He also inherited several issues to which the church needed to respond. “These concerns were the response of a ‘downtown’ church to changing

¹⁵ Lamkin, *Second*, 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

worship trends, a consideration of new mission opportunities as well as consideration of ways to grow the Sunday school and other ministries, and the church's response to the controversy within the SBC."¹⁸ Steincross led the church toward a continued commitment to both traditional worship and a dynamic support of missions. He also helped the church begin to navigate issues related to the growing fundamentalist leanings of the SBC. This paper will soon address this in more detail, but it is important to note Steincross' "progressive" guidance toward ordaining women as deacons and ministers, and toward moving support from the SBC to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (hereafter, CBF).¹⁹ It is also important to note that conflict with leadership at Second Baptist prompted Steincross to retire earlier than he had planned. This prompted some families who were central to the fellowship to leave the church, and this left a painful mark on the congregation that still resides to this day.²⁰

Steincross' early retirement was one of a several significant losses Second Baptist has experienced in its recent history. To understand the nature of things lost, one must understand the nature of the church's historical relationships to Liberty, William Jewell College, and the SBC. This paper will now turn its attention to these relationships.

Second Baptist used to be "the Liberty church," according to many of the older church members. With only a few protestant churches in Liberty for most of its history, Second Baptist was able to enjoy prominence as an elite downtown Baptist congregation. Long-time member of Second Baptist Harvey Thomas remembers a time when new

¹⁸ Lamkin, *Second*, 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179-188.

²⁰ Dr. Harvey Thomas, in a personal interview with the author, Liberty, MO, January, 28, 2011.

educators and business leaders moving into town would almost automatically join Second Baptist.²¹ However, the population growth discussed in Chapter 1 changed the nature of the church's relationship to the Liberty community. Bill Riggs, former minister of Education, reflects:

Liberty has changed from a small town, to a larger town, and now to a small city. Thirty years ago Liberty Hospital was a small six year old institution with relatively few specialties. Now it is a relatively large regional medical center with multiple specialties, and a large medical staff. The attainment of the school district to premier status resulted in many younger families moving to Liberty. That growth meant more of everything: more businesses, more restaurants, more traffic, more schools -- and more churches. There was a time when Second Baptist was one of only four protestant churches and the only Baptist church in town, whereas now there is a Baptist mega-church, and a church meeting in almost every public school of various denominations and some non-denominational.²²

This new Liberty reality means that the closest thing to “the Liberty church” in Liberty is Pleasant Valley Baptist Church (hereafter PVBC), a growing mega-church situated on the “new Liberty” side of I-35. However, even PVBC is not “the Liberty church,” because the Liberty community has expanded into an era where no one church will ever be able to hold the role Second Baptist held when Liberty was a smaller city.

Second Baptist was also known as “the William Jewell church.” Second Baptist's important relationship with William Jewell College began in 1849 during a time when the church had stopped growing. Lamkin writes, “At this time a decision was made which would nearly single-handedly reverse the weakened position of Second Baptist. The decision would guarantee a new pool of potential members, a supply of educated clergymen, and a position of prestige within the Missouri Baptist General Association.

²¹ Thomas, interview.

²² Bill Riggs, retired Minister of Education at Second Baptist, in an interview via email with the author, Liberty, MO, February 4, 2011.

This important decision was to place the new Baptist college in Liberty.²³ William Jewell College started in the basement of Second Baptist and from thenceforth their futures seemed inseparable. Harvey Thomas shared that when he was hired as a professor at William Jewell College he was told by the president that he was expected to join Second Baptist.²⁴ The college was built within walking distance of Second Baptist, so as it established itself, Second Baptist grew as a place for college students, professors, administrators, alumni, as well as Liberty's educated professionals. This is a reputation that would help Second Baptist for years, but would eventually become a hindrance to its growth as it seemed increasingly closed to those who had no connection with William Jewell College.

Additionally, new factors arose that weakened the connection between William Jewell College and Second Baptist. More students began to drive, which gave them access to new churches that were being planted further away. Second Baptist's commitment to traditional worship held increasingly less appeal among college students. William Jewell College's religious commitment changed. It first distanced itself from the Missouri Baptist Convention (hereafter, MBC), and later from its identity as a Christian college altogether.²⁵ Second Baptist still hosts William Jewell College music concerts, and has many college employees among its membership, but many professors and most students attend other churches. Second Baptist is no longer "the William Jewell church."

²³ Lamkin, *Second*, 45.

²⁴ Thomas, interview.

²⁵ Neita Gelker, former William Jewell College English professor, interview with the author, Liberty, MO, February, 3, 2011.

In addition to its role in Liberty, Second Baptist was a significant MBC church for many years. Lamkin writes that in 1977 the church was “giving twenty percent of all undesignated funds to the SBC’s cooperative program, which ranked it tenth in the state of Missouri.”²⁶ This financial commitment was reflective of Second Baptist’s role within and commitment to the SBC in Missouri. In 1968 the church record clearly states,

The church cooperates heartily in the program of the Southern Convention and the MBC. We subscribe generously through the cooperative program. The Sunday school, Training Union, the Women’s Missionary Union, and the Men’s Club all follow the convention programs. We always support special missions offerings. Members of our church serve on official boards and commissions of the SBC and the state convention. The list of denominational leaders who have been guests of our church on special occasions is a long and impressive one. No informed person could question the denominational loyalty of our church.²⁷

However, in 2001 Second Baptist voted to end its relationship with the SBC.²⁸ This vote happened in response to a growing controversy in SBC life. Southern Baptists were fighting, primarily over the role of women in the church and family, as well as the inerrancy of scripture. Second Baptist had been ordaining women to the diaconate since the 1980s, which placed it in a more liberal position than most Missouri Baptist Churches. In 2001, after Second Baptist voted to end its relationship with the SBC, the MBC voted to unseat Second Baptist at the state convention.²⁹ After ties were severed with the SBC, the church voted to transfer its partnership at a state and national level to

²⁶ Lamkin, *Second*, 172.

²⁷ Rider, Tutt, and Hester, *History*, 168-69.

²⁸ Missouri Baptists.org, “An Open Letter to Missouri Baptists,” November 11, 2001, <http://www.missouribaptists.org/Where%20Do%20We%20Belong/2BC/Press%20Release.htm> (accessed November, 13, 2009).

²⁹ *The Baptist Standard*, “Missouri requires affiliation with SBC, escrow funding for five institutions,” November 5, 2001, http://www.baptiststandard.com/2001/11_5/pages/missouri.html (accessed February 14, 2011).

the more theologically moderate CBF. In response to this decision several members left the church based on theological differences, and others left the church because their positions at SBC schools would not allow them to be members of a non-SBC Church.

Second Baptist experienced much loss in the wake of changes in its relationship with Liberty, William Jewell College, and the SBC and MBC. Average Sunday school attendance declined from 400 in 2000 to 268 in 2008.³⁰ This loss in membership is indicative of a loss of congregational identity. The congregation spent much of the last decade grieving their lost place as the church for Liberty, William Jewell College students, and Southern Baptists. However, these losses have poised the church to realize its current identity. When Second Baptist called a new pastor in 2009, the church seemed prepared to move forward. They had embraced their identity as a CBF congregation. They had acknowledged their burdensome reputation as an unwelcoming congregation, slanted toward the educated and elite. Second Baptist began 2009 ready to embrace a brighter future. Of course, before moving forward it is important to evaluate what makes the congregation distinct.

Values and Vision

Second Baptist is a unique congregation that must celebrate its distinctiveness as it continues to develop and embrace its future in Liberty. These distinctives are rooted in its historically Baptist identity, civic and denominational leadership, missional entrepreneurship, and commitment to justice and equality. The values linked to these characteristics will serve Second Baptist well as it seeks to develop a vision for its future.

³⁰ Second Baptist Church Visioning Research Team, *Second Baptist Church Visioning Report* (Liberty, MO: Second Baptist Church, 2010).

One cannot give adequate treatment to Second Baptist's identity without acknowledging its commitment to Baptist distinctives. The church's commitment to the autonomy of the local church has enabled it to persevere through difficult theological controversies and even change its denominational affiliation. Its affirmation of the "Priesthood of all Believers" has allowed for a variety of theological opinions to exist within the same faith community. Second Baptist's commitment to the authority of Scripture has enabled the church to wrestle thoughtfully with difficult ecclesiological issues, such as the ordination of women, and to maintain a biblically based focus in Sunday school and worship. This paper will address Baptist ecclesiology more adequately in Chapter 4. For now, it is important to note Second Baptist's deep commitment to being Baptist. This must be considered in any discussion of future vision and identity.

One must also pay attention to Second Baptist's history of civic and denominational leadership. This paper has noted the congregation's historical reputation as "the Liberty church," and "the William Jewell church." Currently five of the ten Liberty City Councilmen are members of Second Baptist. The President, University Chaplain, Campus Minister, and several current and retired William Jewell professors are members of Second Baptist. The Platte County prosecuting attorney and the entire CBF Missouri staff also worship at Second Baptist. Second Baptist has a history of civic and denominational leadership, and its current membership indicates that this value will continue to be a part of its future.

Second Baptist has a history of missional entrepreneurship. This paper has already described Carolyn Moss's role in starting the WMU of Missouri, as well as Second

Baptist's strong financial support of mission organizations and mission trips. Examples of Second Baptist's innovative missional spirit run throughout its history, and there are several examples to note in recent history. In April 1970 Second Baptist member Loretta Moore decided to start a privately run preschool in the church's building so that "families who had not been previously associated with the church could learn of its mission and program," writes Lamkin.³¹ This preschool, known today as Second Friends, is now run by the church, and has a two-year waiting list for students. Second Baptist helped start eight new churches in Liberty and the surrounding area in the twentieth century.³² Liberty social service organizations like Meals-on-Wheels, LOVE inc., and Inasmuch were started by Second Baptist members in the church building. The local chapter of Mothers of Preschoolers (hereafter, MOPS) was started by Second Baptist members and is now the largest MOPS program in Liberty.³³ Second Baptist is seven years into a twenty-year partnership with a Lakota Indian Reservation in South Dakota. This partnership began with the creation of Warm Embrace, a non-profit started by members of Second. Warm Embrace recently evolved into Together for Hope-West, a ministry responsible for helping churches minister in the poorest counties west of the Mississippi.³⁴ These are wonderful examples of missional entrepreneurship at Second Baptist. In the last decade, most entrepreneurial ventures have, however, happened in spite of the congregation's

³¹ Lamkin, *Second*, 172.

³² *Ibid.*, 169-170.

³³ Second Baptist Church Visioning Research Team, *Second Baptist Church Visioning Report*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

current leadership structure. As the church moves forward, it must find ways to encourage this entrepreneurial spirit at Second Baptist.

There is also a strong value for justice and equality at Second Baptist. This can be seen in the congregation's history of helping the poor and oppressed, as well as its affirmation of women serving in all areas of church life. The creations of previously mentioned social service ministries, as well as Second Baptist's partnership with Lakota Indians, are strong symbols of Second Baptist's commitment to ministries of compassion and justice. Another example of this value is the church's partnership with Ed Chasteen. Dr. Chasteen is a former professor from William Jewell College who started a ministry called Hatebusters. Hatebusters works to create an atmosphere of peace among racial and religious groups in America.³⁵ Second Baptist commissioned Chasteen to be the church's ambassador to other faith communities. Partnerships with Hatebusters, Together for Hope-West, LoveInc, Inasmuch, and Meals-On-Wheels, as well as Second Baptist's ongoing commitment to support social ministries through CBF, keep this value of justice alive in the congregation.

This value is also embodied through the role of women at Second Baptist. Carolyn Moss, the founder of the first WMU in Missouri, is an early example of women being affirmed to lead at Second Baptist. In more recent history, the church went against the grain of Missouri Baptist life and decided to ordain women to the diaconate. In 1984 Second Baptist ordained Lorreta Moore and Betty Pierce, and Lamkin notes that this

³⁵ Hatebusters.com, "About" page, <http://www.hatebusters.com/about.htm> (accessed February 14, 2011).

decision was controversial, “applauded by some and questioned by others.”³⁶ This affirmation of women also extended to ministers, as Second Baptist hired female Ministers of Education in the 1980s and 1990s. The congregation’s recognition that women may serve in all areas of church leadership was progressive for a Missouri Southern Baptist congregation in the 1980s. This is a significant way Second Baptist embodies its value for justice and equality.

As Second Baptist looks toward the future, it must pay attention to the important values noted above. Its historical commitment to its Baptist character, civic and denominational leadership, missional entrepreneurship, and issues of justice and equality can continue to foster a relevant ministry presence in the world. However, in order to embody these values effectively, Second Baptist will need to imagine new structures and programs that will facilitate effective ministry in an ever-changing context.

People and Structures

Second Baptist currently has 867 resident members and averages between 325 and 425 in weekly worship attendance. One might assume that in a church that values justice and equality among all people that there would be more diversity, but this is not the case at Second Baptist. This is due in part to the demographics of Liberty. As mentioned previously, the ethnic makeup of Second Baptist is reflective of its context, with 92 percent of its membership being Anglo.³⁷ Second Baptist is also fairly homogenous in regard to education and economics. Within the congregation, 37 percent

³⁶ Lamkin, *Second*, 183.

³⁷ Ministry Connect, “Pastor Search Survey” (survey given to the congregation during the pastoral search, Liberty, MO, 2007).

have a college degree and 39 percent have a graduate degree.³⁸ This has contributed to the justifiable perception that Second Baptist is primarily a church for the educated. Second Baptist is not a wealthy church, but it does have good financial resources at its disposal. The annual operating budget is just over \$800,000, the endowment is over a million dollars, and church members earn incomes reflective of the middle to upper-middle class of Clay County, which has one of the highest per capita incomes of the state. The possibility for ethnic and economic diversity is limited in a homogenous context, but Second Baptist must continue to think about creative ways to serve and embrace those of different racial and socioeconomic statuses.

One must also pay attention to age demographics. The congregational makeup is weighted toward older adults. According to the 2010 *Visioning Report*, “The largest segment of the membership [is] between fifty and sixty-four years old, and the second largest [is] between thirty-five and forty-nine, representing 24 percent and 21 percent of the total membership, respectively. It is estimated that about 17 percent of adults under the age of forty could be considered in some sort of church leadership role.”³⁹ The current number of younger adults is significant when one considers the need for a leadership structure that will enable the congregation to respond with agility to emerging needs.

The leadership structure at Second Baptist has not been conducive to broad ministry participation among members or agility in its approach to emerging needs. Second Baptist is filled with leaders, but tends to be led by a relatively small group of its membership. This is partly because Second Baptist has been governed by a Church

³⁸ Ministry Connect, “Second Baptist Church: Pastor Search Survey Results” (results of a survey given to the congregation during the pastoral search, Liberty, MO, 2007).

³⁹ Second Baptist Church Visioning Research Team, *Second Baptist Church Visioning Report*.

Council comprised of the church's ministerial staff and the chairs of each of the standing committees. These committees have been non-rotating, which means the members have had the freedom to remain in their positions until they die, move to another church, or choose to vacate their position. This leadership structure has minimized broad leadership participation, and has hindered the flow of new ideas. It also requires any major church decision to go through committee, and then the Church Council before approval. Some of these decisions cannot be approved without a vote at the quarterly Church Conference meeting. When needs arise, they are typically addressed by either paid staff or this small group of lay leaders. In the future, Second Baptist must find ways to engage a broader percentage of its membership in service and leadership. This will encourage engagement and new ideas from many who are scarcely involved in ministry.

It is worth noting that a new team ministry structure was recently proposed to the Church Council at Second Baptist. This structure would have facilitated more flexibility and engagement among the membership, but ultimately it was not approved. Many of the members of the Church Council could not understand how a more flexible system would work, and a few others were hesitant to vote for a structure that would require long-time volunteer leaders to vacate their positions. However, a second proposal was made to implement a non-rotating committee structure. This proposal was approved in November of 2010, and will begin to take effect at the beginning of 2011. The new rotating committee structure will create the possibility for broader engagement in ministry. Additionally, this ministry focus project will also enable broader missional participation in the context of Community Groups. Second Baptist will need these kinds of

empowering structures in place if it is to handle continued church growth and ministry possibilities.

Second Baptist has experienced numerical growth in recent months. The Visioning Research Team reported that average worship attendance increased by fifty-one people between the end of 2008 and February 2010.⁴⁰ The church has continued to grow since then. The highest attendance of the year is typically Easter Sunday at Second Baptist. I joined Second Baptist on Easter 2009 and the attendance that day was 550 people. The following Sunday when I preached my first sermon the attendance was 410. These were both high attendance marks. On Easter in 2010 the worship attendance was 786, and there were four Sundays during Advent of 2010 when the attendance was 465 or higher.⁴¹ Second Baptist is experiencing growth and with it comes challenges and opportunities. A new approach to spiritual formation will help the church better assimilate new members. It will also engage more of these new members in ministry, while simultaneously encouraging the communal creativity needed to be effective in the future. With this in mind, this paper will now examine the approach to spiritual formation at Second Baptist.

Re-imagining Spiritual Formation

Sunday school has been the primary medium for spiritual formation at Second Baptist. Rider, Tutt, and Hester report that Sunday school “goes back to early days. For many years this program of teaching was facilitated altogether by superintendents,

⁴⁰ Second Baptist Church Visioning Research Team, *Second Baptist Church Visioning Report*.

⁴¹ Second Baptist Church Attendance Records, December 2010.

teachers, and secretaries on a voluntary basis, and then in 1953 an Educational Director was hired.”⁴² Sunday school actually began at Second Baptist in 1850 after a community-wide revival. The revival caused church growth and the pastor felt that a Sunday school “would be the main lever for lifting up the church and congregation,” writes Lamkin.⁴³ Second Baptist was “one of the first Baptist churches in its Association to have Sunday school in 1851,”⁴⁴ a further symbol of the church’s historic ingenuity. In the beginning, Sunday school did not meet at the church, but in 1967 the church decided the program needed to become more coordinated and a committee was appointed to study the process. They recommended the regular Sunday morning training schedule that is still used today.⁴⁵ This model of spiritual formation was effective for a number of years.

The approach to Sunday school at Second Baptist is to offer small group Bible study opportunities between Sunday morning worship services from 9:45 pm until 10:45 pm. These studies are taught by members of the congregation who utilize both lecture and discussion-based teaching styles. Some classes use denominational Bible study curriculum, others use books to study special topics, and others simply rely on the teacher to create a lesson. Teacher training is minimal, and there is little expectation for any commitment from class members. There are no stated goals for these classes, but the apparent goals are to offer a space for worship attendees to connect with one another, and to learn something about the Bible or another topic of special interest.

⁴² Rider, Tutt, and Hester, *History*, 138.

⁴³ Lamkin, *Second*, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 139-41.

There are many deficiencies to the current model for spiritual formation. First, there is no expectation for a commitment from class members. Someone can belong to a Sunday school class and rarely attend. This means that the class is not significantly impacting this individual's spiritual formation on a regular basis, and it also means that he or she is not contributing to the formation of others. Participation is important for formation in community. An effective approach to spiritual formation will consider ways to maximize attendance.

Secondly, the time and setting of the Sunday school classes do not sufficiently support meaningful relationships or transformation. Many church members linger in the Welcome Center and show up late for their classes. When everyone arrives, it takes the class time to actually get started. Senior Adult classes typically do not have this problem, but other adult classes tend to move into Bible Study around 10:00 or 10:10. This gives them about forty-five minutes to accomplish their learning goals before dismissing in time for the 11:00 worship service. Many Sunday school teachers have to choose between having a class that focuses on relationships or Bible study. The time and setting of Sunday school make it difficult to accomplish either with great success. Block emphasizes the importance of physical space in building community; he asserts, "The room needs to express the quality of aliveness and belonging that we wish for the community."⁴⁶ Sunday school rooms at Second Baptist vary, but mostly they offer the atmosphere of a classroom or conference room. An effective approach to spiritual formation pays attention to when and where small group meetings are scheduled.

⁴⁶ Block, *Community*, 153.

The sizes of the Sunday school classes also limit community building and spiritual transformation. Richard Peace, in his lecture titled, “Spiritual Formation and Discipleship for a Postmodern World,” contends that effective small groups must be between five and thirteen people. Five is critical mass, and once a group gets larger than thirteen people are able to hide.⁴⁷ Sunday school classes at Second Baptist range from five or six people to over twenty people, with little consistency in attendance. Peace says that if fifteen people show up for a small group, the group should begin thinking about splitting into two groups.⁴⁸ It will be difficult to regulate attendance in Sunday school, so an effective approach to spiritual formation will require another small group medium.

Finally, one measure of an effective learning experience, as communicated by Ralph W. Tyler in his book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, is that “a student must have experiences that give him an opportunity to practice the kind of behavior implied by the objective.”⁴⁹ It has been mentioned that the time, setting, class size, and expectations of Sunday school are not conducive to the practice of meaningful community or spiritual transformation. One might expect class members to engage in practices that meet these objectives outside of class, but with increasingly busy schedules, one can assume these practices will be inconsistent. An effective spiritual formation program should nurture whole-life spirituality in and beyond the class context. At its best, Sunday school at Second Baptist only nurtures what Augsburger calls “bipolar

⁴⁷ Richard Peace, “Spiritual Formation and Discipleship for a Postmodern World” (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 22, 2009).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 65.

spirituality.” Writes Augsburg, “[It] seeks to know God and through that relationship to understand and claim authentic freedom for the inner self.”⁵⁰ Augsburg urges believers toward tripolar spirituality, one that is “inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed.”⁵¹ Sunday school is deficient in that it provides insufficient direction, framework, and opportunity to practice a holistic, tripolar spirituality.

In his book, *Shaped by the Word*, M. Robert Mulholland Jr. contends that “spiritual formation is the primal reality of human existence. Every event in life is an experience of spiritual formation.”⁵² Mulholland acknowledges that spiritual formation is a whole-life process, that “human life is by its very nature spiritual formation,”⁵³ and that people are always either being shaped toward or away from wholeness in Christ.⁵⁴ The goal of this ministry focus paper is to develop a spiritual formation program for Second Baptist that will help church members move toward wholeness. To accomplish this, a holistic approach to formation is needed. In this regard, Peace’s reflection on Christian pilgrimage as it relates to Maslow’s concept of self-actualization is helpful. In his book, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth*, Peace notes that “Maslow defined the self-actualized individual as one in whom there was an ongoing actualization of potentials, capabilities and talents; a fulfillment of mission; a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person’s own intrinsic nature; and an increasing trend toward unity,

⁵⁰ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵² M. Robert Mullholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

integration or synergy within the person.”⁵⁵ Peace goes on to say that this path toward God and self-actualization is one that “leads to ever increasing wholeness,” and one of the necessities of this path is commitment.⁵⁶ He adds, “Christian pilgrimage demands commitment in at least five areas: there is a commitment to Christian ideas, to Christian ethics, to the Christian community, to people in general, and to Jesus as a person.”⁵⁷ A spiritual formation program that nurtures these kinds of commitments will foster multi-dimensional spirituality, and consequently, wholeness, more effectively than Sunday school. The aim of this project is the development of such a program.

Finally, for a program like this to be effective at Second Baptist, it must be flexible. Participants will need to be able to schedule their small groups at times that fit into their busy schedules. As Liberty continues to expand, Second Baptist must have formational opportunities that are not tied to one specific geographic location. Small groups should be able to meet in living rooms on the Kansas City side of I-35. Each person and group will have different interests and needs based on where they are in their pilgrimages. The groups should have guiding parameters, but should also allow freedom for each group to choose a path and covenant that enables them to engage in formation in a way that makes the most sense for them. The need for this kind of flexibility will be considered in the creation of this ministry.

⁵⁵ Richard Peace, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

Obstacles and Opportunities

Some obstacles and opportunities must be considered in the creation of this new small group program. The most important obstacle is the fear that this program would replace Sunday school. Sunday school has played an important role in the life and history of the congregation and to some, small group ministry is a threat to that heritage. This paper has stated that the purpose of this project is to establish Community Groups as the preferred future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist. However, Community Groups cannot begin as a threat to Sunday school. Sunday school has played an important role in the life and history of Second Baptist. If Community Groups are to be successful, they must first serve as a supplement for spiritual formation at Second Baptist. This will allow the ministry to grow and adapt in a stable and inviting context.

Another obstacle has already been mentioned as good rationale for creating this ministry. Members of Second Baptist are dealing with the problem of navigating increasingly busy schedules. The prospect of adding one more commitment to their schedules will be a deterrent for some, especially considering the high commitment nature of the new ministry. The program will need to simultaneously address the needs of higher commitment and rest. If it is effective with some, it will gain credibility with others over time.

The opportunity to create a new small group ministry was apparent early on in my tenure at Second Baptist. This is a congregation that is open to new ideas and activities. The entrepreneurial spirit that existed when Second Baptist began is still alive and well. Membership decline over the last decade has also made the church willing to try new things, such as hiring a thirty-one-year-old pastor with no previous Senior Pastor

experience. Combined with this willingness is a growing interest in small group ministry. Five years ago, the education minister experimented with *Renovare* groups for a short time. This experience left a small section of the membership longing for more and others curious. This longing and curiosity, combined with openness to new ideas, will overcome initial obstacles.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine literature pertinent to the development of this new ministry initiative, beginning with material focused on developing a philosophy of spiritual formation that is both communal and missional. The next section will present small groups as the preferred medium for spiritual formation, examining principles that support effective groups. Finally, the last section will identify specific Christian practices that Community Groups might utilize to foster transformation. The chapter will evaluate each of these resources in light of the project thesis, focusing specifically on the ways each contributes to the development of a small group ministry that fosters meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement.

Developing a Philosophical Framework for Spiritual Formation

The first set of resources focuses on developing a philosophy of spiritual formation that is both communal and missional. Texts include: *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-first Century*, by Robert A. Muthiah; *Dissident Discipleship*, by David Augsburg ;and *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, by Gareth Weldon Icenogle. Each text made significant contributions to this project.

The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-first Century, by Robert A. Muthiah

In his book, Robert Muthiah argues for “a fresh understanding and embodiment of the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ by putting a Trinitarian ecclesiology, postmodern culture, and congregational practices in dialogue.”¹ This publication offers support for a communal ecclesiology, focuses on the celebrated Baptist distinctive of the “Priesthood of All Believers,” and contextualizes it in Christian practices. Additionally, the claim that the Christian priesthood is more about corporate responsibility than individualistic entitlement is an insight that lends both strength and credibility to this project at Second Baptist. For these reasons, Muthiah’s work is particularly helpful in the development of a philosophical framework for this project.

First, by grounding his argument in the doctrine of the Trinity, Muthiah directs his readers to an ecclesiology that “points to the priesthood of all believers as a social entity that is egalitarian, non-dominating, unified, and differentiated.”² Muthiah agrees with Miroslav Volf that “because we are created in the image of a triune God, who we are – including our relationships and social structures – must to some degree reflect the Trinity.”³ He argues that the “relationality of the Trinity calls for a relational ecclesiology.” Muthiah goes on to say that the “relational nature of the Trinity means that

¹ Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-first Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

each Person of the Trinity is present with and for others.”⁴ This means we are to “assume an inviting posture that hears and receives the other,”⁵ and is both open to each other and to the outside world.⁶ Muthiah’s work is supportive of an approach to spiritual formation that is both communal and missional.

The “Priesthood of All Believers” is an important Baptist distinctive, and therefore supports legitimacy for this new ministry at Second Baptist. In light of this, Muthiah’s explanation of it is particularly helpful. He notes that in 1 Peter 2:4-10, the passage most often connected with the priesthood of all believers, Peter only cited Old Testament references to priests and priesthood that “refer to the whole people in priestly terms.”⁷ These verses, then, should be understood “in terms of the mutuality that Peter says should characterize the community.”⁸ Essentially, this perspective on the “Priesthood of All Believers” supports higher participation and communal responsibility within Christian community, and is therefore supportive of the goals of this project.

Finally, the author contextualizes his research in Christian practices. This is relevant, because Muthiah reminds his readers that one’s philosophy must be embodied. Specifically, believers must engage in the “communal activities of the Christian faith that

⁴ Muthiah, *Priesthood*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

form us into the people of God.”⁹ It is one’s participation in these sacred, corporate activities that conforms him or her to the image of God.

Muthiah’s application of the “Priesthood of All Believers” to church leadership structures is not particularly helpful for this project. However, he offers wonderful support in presenting this Baptist distinctive as one that supports communal responsibility and greater participation in ministry and mission. Muthiah’s biblical and philosophical contributions to this project are invaluable.

Dissident Discipleship, by David Augsburger

David Augsburger draws upon Anabaptist roots to write a book about spirituality that is “lived, practiced, communal, relational, subversive, dissident, revolutionary, concrete, and thick.”¹⁰ He calls this “tripolar spirituality” because it “links discovering self, seeking God, and valuing people into a seamless unity.”¹¹ The communal nature of tripolar spirituality is an essential piece of this project. Augsburger writes, “Spirituality is not free-floating; it has a location, and that location is community. Individual spirituality is only one part of personhood, one half of the alternating rhythm of human wholeness.”¹² Meaningful community, the first goal of this project, is the necessary context for the realization of its second goal of personal transformation. Augsburger writes,

The person-in-community, the self in tripolar relationship with God and neighbor, the disciple in solidarity with fellow disciples joins fully with those who travel the path from one-dimensional narcissism through two-dimensional religiosity to a

⁹ Muthiah, *Priesthood*, 142.

¹⁰ Augsburger, *Dissident*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

full, three dimensional spirituality of radical participation in the multiple richness of actual, local, creative personal communities. The way to selfhood, the way to personal emotional health, the way to fully dimensional spirituality, is the way of community.¹³

Tripolar spirituality is “self transforming, God encountering, and other embracing.”¹⁴

For this kind of spirituality to develop, participation is crucial. Augsburger contends, “Participation is the central theological framework of all careful thought about spirituality. Tripolar spirituality is observable. It is visible connectedness with Christ and with others lived out in identifiable, recordable, measurable relationships.”¹⁵ This participation can be measured in committed relationships with other Christians, as well as in collaborative service to others. He adds, “In the way of Jesus, serving others is the way to a loving spirit, concern for the neighbor, and the authentic authority of compassionate service.”¹⁶ In this kind of spirituality, asserts Augsburger, “service to neighbor and service to God cannot be divided; like two sides of the same coin, they are the same reality.”¹⁷

Augsburger describes a communal, mission-oriented discipleship as the type of spirituality necessary for transformation toward Christ-likeness. He writes that “the dissenting disciple will not settle for a spirituality of personal growth or a religious experience of individual salvation and goodness. Concern for others, love for God, discovery of one’s caring vocation and calling are all bound up on one another in the

¹³ Augsburger, *Dissident*, 80-81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

daily practice of following Jesus.”¹⁸ This multidimensional vision of Christian spirituality necessitates a holistic approach to spiritual formation that is consistent with the goals of this project. Therefore, Augsburg’s philosophy of Christian discipleship will shape Community Groups at Second Baptist.

Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry, by Gareth Weldon Icenogle

Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry is about how “God launches, sustains, and completes humanity through the mutual ministry of small group community.”¹⁹ The book is thorough in accomplishing its purpose, and has therefore provided broad support for this project. However, Icenogle’s greatest contribution to Community Groups comes through his commitment to biblical rootedness. His purpose is the “theological tuning and rooting of small group ministry. The book explores Christian community as the very nature and character of God.”²⁰ Through theological grounding, affirmation of small groups as a preferred unit of transformation, and suggestions about the nature of effective small groups, Icenogle makes a powerful contribution to the philosophy and development of this project.

Icenogle grounds his work theologically. He explains, “The Genesis creation presents both divinity and humanity as communities of being and action. The human community is created male and female, a reflection of the image and likeness of God.”²¹

¹⁸ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 209.

¹⁹ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

Icenogle states, “Scripture begins and ends with God calling us into the presence of divine and human persons and relationships and activity.”²² He goes on to say that the Old Testament offers a “brief survey of God’s struggle to create, re-create, and participate in the *shalom* of human community. Wherever two or more persons come together, they become an actual reflection of the image and likeness of God.”²³ This grounding in the image of God and the bringing of *shalom* is significant for this new ministry project.

Icenogle explains how small groups provide greater flexibility in the face of changing times. He writes, “A large organization networked through small groups can experience rapid metamorphosis. The church of the twenty-first century needs to become a small group ministry network.”²⁴ He points to Jesus and the twelve as a model for small group discipleship, noting that “the unrooted and shallow expectations and behavior of the crowd is never the nurturing environment for spiritual growth. But the good soil of Jesus’ small group community with the Twelve empowered them to hang in there for a more complete explanation when they were alone with Jesus.”²⁵ In this regard, the life of Jesus supplies us with a practical vision of the life God intended from the beginning of time, and equips us to meet the changing cultural landscape of the future. Icenogle’s biblical and cultural affirmations of small groups as a preferred method for promoting transformation and mission in community provide a good foundation for this project.

²² Icenogle, *Biblical*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

Finally, Icenogle makes suggestions regarding the nature of effective small groups. First he mentions that “relationship without mission is not a complete view of small group life and not a true reflection of the nature of God.”²⁶ This emphasizes the need for outward service in small groups. Second, he states the “development of a healthy small group ministry structure has to do with the careful appointment and placement of key leadership.”²⁷ Third, he writes, “The gathering of persons into a small group carries the immediate implication of covenant.”²⁸ Deep, clarified commitment will be an essential piece of this ministry. Fourth, he writes, “Remembering is a relational and dialogical event. Small groups are places where people remember their past, and where Christians remember the stories of God among the people.”²⁹ Sharing stories must be a foundational piece of this ministry.

Icenogle’s offers a thoughtful presentation of the biblical, cultural, and psychological rational for small groups as well as suggestions for group structure and practice. This publication provides many wonderful insights for this project. It will be an important key to its success.

Developing a Structural Framework for Spiritual Formation

The second set of resources will examine principles that support effective groups. Resources include *Community*, by Peter Block and *The Passionate Church*, by Mike

²⁶ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

Breen and Walt Kallestad. These texts provide specific guidance for actualizing the philosophical assumptions of this project.

Community, by Peter Block

In an age of fragmentation, Peter Block writes *Community* for “all who are willing to take a leadership role that affirms that without a willingness to be accountable for our part in creating a strong and connected community, our desire to reduce suffering and increase happiness in the world becomes infinitely more difficult to fulfill.”³⁰ Block writes, “We are in community each time we find a place where we belong,”³¹ and “the intent of this book is to give definition to ways of structuring the experience of belonging.”³² Consequently, Block’s work supports the development of an effective small group ministry. As Christians seek to move beyond dividedness toward a more positive future, Block’s insights on small groups, communal space, and hospitality are significant.³³

Block contends that “the small group is the unit of transformation. It is in the structure of how small groups gather that an alternative future will be created.”³⁴ Furthermore, he writes, “It is the small group that allows every voice to be heard. It is in

³⁰ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2009), xi.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

groups of three to twelve that intimacy is created.”³⁵ This insight affirms that small groups of a certain size are the preferred medium for creating community and fostering transformation. Block asserts, “The power of the small group cannot be overemphasized.”³⁶ Well structured small groups will enable our communities to move beyond fragmentation. This means that “people must create structures that are defined by a quality of aliveness, and this aliveness grows out of a sense of wholeness.”³⁷ One key ingredient in fostering this lies in how our groups occupy a room. “The room needs to express the quality of aliveness and belonging that we wish for the community.”³⁸ Block shares that this should include groups “sitting in a circle, picking a room with a view, sitting in the right kinds of chairs, making sure everyone is able to be heard, and bringing life to the room with aesthetics.”³⁹ These insights affirm the decision for groups to meet in homes, and give instruction to the small group leaders as they choose and prepare the room in which their group will meet.

One final insight involves the need to build hospitality into the structure of small groups. Block notes that “in western culture, where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to bring the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being.”⁴⁰ He believes that hosts should “greet people at the door. People enter in isolation. Reduce the isolation they came in with; let them know they

³⁵ Block, *Community*, 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

came to the right place and they are not alone.”⁴¹ Food is an important part of this: “It is a symbol of hospitality and it brings the sacred into the room.”⁴² Block’s words affirm the need to build meals and other forms of hospitality into the group experience.

Block’s focus is not on religious communities, but the principles and goals of *Community* are easily transferrable. Beyond what is stated above, he even lists the kinds of questions group leaders should utilize to facilitate connectedness. Block offers invaluable insight into the development of a structural framework that supports personal and communal transformation.

The Passionate Church, by Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad

In the ever-changing cultural landscape of post-modernity, Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad offer a simple, yet dynamic approach to Christian discipleship. *The Passionate Church* seeks “to equip believers for kingdom life by linking the discipleship principles of Jesus to memorable images called Life Shapes.”⁴³ These Life Shapes help Christians embody biblical principles as they pursue spiritual formation in community. In this regard, *Passionate Church* made a significant contribution to the philosophy and guiding parameters of Community Groups at Second Baptist.

First, the authors frame the Christian journey of faith as circular, not linear, noting that a “disciple’s relationship with God is dynamic.”⁴⁴ They describe spiritual growth as

⁴¹ Block, *Community*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴³ Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad, *The Passionate Church: The Art of Life-Changing Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NexGen, 2005), 30-31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

something that happens in response to “*kairos* moments,” that is, “God-given opportunities to enter into a process of learning kingdom living.”⁴⁵ Once believers experience a *kairos* moment, they can enter into a process of awareness, reflection, and decision that will prompt change. An important part of this process is conversation and vulnerability with others.⁴⁶ In response to this need for spaces where transparency and reflection can occur, each Community Group will create a covenant that requires attendance and confidentiality. Each group will also begin their time together with curriculum that facilitates the sharing and processing of each member’s spiritual story.

Secondly, *Passionate Church* asserts that spiritual growth “is the result of the right rhythm being established.”⁴⁷ This rhythm should include “times of pruning in our churches, times when most, if not all, activity ceases.”⁴⁸ With this in mind, each Community Group will have a definite starting and ending point. An ending date will bolster the likelihood that members will honor their attendance commitment, give them a clear opportunity to exit their groups, and more importantly, give group members a time of rest from group activity.

Finally, the authors’ image of a balanced Christian life was perhaps their most important contribution to this project. They write that “Jesus lived out his life in three relationships: Up – with his Father; In – with his chosen followers; Out – with those around him. This three dimensional pattern for living a balanced life is evident

⁴⁵ Breen and Kallestad, *Passionate*, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

throughout scripture. It can inform us in how to experience fruitfulness in our ministry, our relationships, and our personal spiritual walk.”⁴⁹ With the image of a triangle, the authors remind their readers that transformational discipleship must have an upward, inward, and outward focus. Community Groups will use this image to guide groups as they establish their covenants, reminding them that during their time together they are to adopt this three-dimensional life rhythm, which will involve nurturing their relationship with God, caring for each other, and discerning an area of ministry that they can engage in together.

The authors of *Passionate Church* do not offer much specificity in how believers are to live into these principles in the context of a discipleship program. However, the images and ideas give invaluable guidance to this ministry project. The actual embodiment of these ideas will come from other sources.

Corporate Spiritual Practices that Support Transformation

This third section will identify specific Christian practices that Community Groups might utilize to foster transformation. The resources that will be used will include *Celebration of Discipline*, by Richard Foster and *Practicing Our Faith*, by Dorothy C. Bass. The practices described in these texts have fostered transformation in Christians for centuries, and are therefore essential for the success of this project.

Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster

Richard Foster shares that after three months of serving ineffectively as the pastor of a congregation he realized that “I had no power to help people. I had no substance, no

⁴⁹ Breen and Kallestad, *Passionate*, 82.

depth.”⁵⁰ Foster’s pursuit of depth resulted in this book, “for all those who are disillusioned with the superficialities of modern religious culture.”⁵¹ It is a resource that supports transformation. Foster divides spiritual disciplines into three categories: inward, outward, and corporate disciplines. This project does not discount the value of spiritual disciplines practiced in private, but is primarily concerned with communal disciplines, such as group study, noticing, confession, and service.

Foster lists study as an inward discipline, but he also notes the importance of group study. He writes, “Live discussion refers to the ordinary interaction that occurs among human beings as they pursue a particular course of study. When we gather for discussion, debate, and Socratic dialogue, insights emerge that would never have come without this exchange.”⁵² The practice of group study challenges people to consider the subject matter in new ways and prompts synergy in their understanding and actions. Additionally, Foster mentions the study of non-verbal books, which prompts people to practice the discipline of noticing how God is moving in nature and in relationships. These kinds of group study will be an importance practice of this ministry.

Community Groups must foster the opportunity for participants to practice confession. When one practices Christian confession, “it involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.”⁵³ In addition to inner transformation, Foster recalls

⁵⁰ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), xiii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 144.

Bonhoeffer's words: "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person."⁵⁴ This experience confronts our isolation and reflects corporate approach to spirituality this project hopes to nurture. In light of this, Community Groups will create spaces where members of Second Baptist feel the freedom to be vulnerable and practice the discipline of confession together.

The project will also incorporate the practices of service and celebration. Foster writes that "true service builds community. It quietly and unpretentiously goes about caring for the needs of others. It draws, binds, heals, and builds"⁵⁵ He later adds, "Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service."⁵⁶ This project will encourage group members to engage in the transformational, community building practice of service. Likewise, Foster writes that "celebration is central to all the spiritual disciplines. Without joyous celebration to infuse the other disciplines, we will sooner or later abandon them. Joy produces energy and makes us strong."⁵⁷ The practice of celebration will encourage small group members to remain committed as they pursue transformation together.

Foster states that God intends the disciplines for "ordinary people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns, and these disciplines are best

⁵⁴ Foster, *Celebration*, 148.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

exercised in the midst of our relationships.”⁵⁸ Foster’s classic work is an important resource for this project because it presents communal spiritual practices that support transformation. It offers depth and substance for a ministry designed for real people.

Practicing Our Faith, Edited by Dorothy C. Bass

The eleven authors of *Practicing Our Faith* offer “reflection on practices as a way of connecting our faith with our daily lives.”⁵⁹ The book defines Christian practices as “things Christian people do together over time in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”⁶⁰ An important observation for this project is that “inward journeys are not enough to meet our need. Our lives are tangled up with everyone else’s. We need to cooperate if we are to find ways of living that are good for ourselves and others.”⁶¹ In light of this, the book offers perspective on some of the most important activities that compose the Christian way of life.⁶² The communal, down-to-earth nature of these practices, specifically hospitality, testimony, discernment, and shaping communities, will support transformation at Second Baptist.

Ana Maria Pineda writes, “It is not just hospitality to the stranger that is in peril in our society. We are also short of tables that welcome friends.”⁶³ Pineda emphasizes our need welcome one another. She contends, “In traditions shaped by the Bible, offering

⁵⁸ Foster, *Celebration*, 1.

⁵⁹ Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), xiii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶³ Ana Maria Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass, 32.

hospitality is a moral imperative. It emerges from knowing the hospitality God has shown to us.”⁶⁴ In light of this, Community Groups will encourage members to practice hospitality through welcoming, sharing meals, and sharing burdens.

Thomas Hoyt, Jr. writes, “The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. Testimony is basic to human community.”⁶⁵ He goes on to say that “Christian testimony has two dimensions. One is testimony to the church and the world, where witnesses tell others about the action of God. The other is testimony to God, where witnesses tell God the truth about themselves and others.”⁶⁶ This project will foster transformation through the sharing of testimonies, or spiritual stories, in community.

The practice of discernment will be an important part of Community Groups. Frank Rogers writes, “Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.”⁶⁷ Community Group members will learn to notice this divine activity in each participant’s individual life, as well as in their life together. This practice will be significant as groups decide about their ministry focus. This will place group decisions within the context of God’s transforming activity.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Pineda, “Hospitality,” 32.

⁶⁵ Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass, 92-93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁷ Frank Rogers, “Discernment,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass, 107.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

Finally, Larry Rasmussen reminds his readers that the “perennial Christian strategy is to gather the folks, break the bread, and tell the stories.”⁶⁹ Rasmussen is ultimately interested in the implication of this strategy on congregational governance, but the simplicity of these initial words captures the essence of this ministry project. God chooses to foster transformation through Christ followers practicing faith in Christian community. In this regard, the ideas and tools presented in *Practicing Our Faith* offer vital support for transformation at Second Baptist.

⁶⁹ Larry Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass, 119.

CHAPTER 4

EXAMINING THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF SECOND BAPTIST

Second Baptist values its identity as a Baptist congregation in the Free Church tradition. Therefore, the success of this new ministry initiative will depend, in part, on its understanding of the church's distinctively Baptist theological context. This chapter will first examine the ecclesiological distinctives that define Second Baptist. It will then reflect on how the strengths and weaknesses of Baptist ecclesiology affect spiritual formation. Finally, in light of weaknesses, the chapter will explore how some Celtic Christian models of ministry might support this new spiritual formation program.

Baptist Distinctives

Second Baptist's commitment to its identity as a Baptist congregation is evidenced in Chapter 2 of this paper through its historic involvement in Baptist education, Baptist missions, and Baptist denominational life. In light of this commitment to its Baptist identity, this project must pay attention to the unique character of Baptist Free Church ecclesiology. This ecclesiology is embodied at Second Baptist particularly through its high regard for the "four freedoms," the authority of Scripture, the importance of missions and evangelism, and its congregational style of leadership.

In his book, *Why Baptists: A Study of Baptist Faith and Heritage*, William R. Estep writes that “it would appear presumptuous for one Baptist to attempt to write a confession of faith for all Baptists or even one Baptist convention. There is far too much diversity within the Baptist movement for anyone to attempt such a project, and yet there are some theological principles that make Baptists distinctly Baptist wherever they may be found.”¹ The “four freedoms” make up an important piece of what makes Baptists distinct. These are Bible Freedom, Soul Freedom, Church Freedom, and Religious Freedom.²

Walter B. Shurden, in *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, writes that “Bible Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, must be central in the life of the individual and church and that Christians, with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the Scripture.”³ Shurden further explains that Bible Freedom means freedom for ongoing obedience to the word of God, freedom from all other religious authorities and creeds, and freedom of interpretation by each individual believer.⁴ This conviction was a source of friction between conservative and moderate Baptists in the twentieth century. Specifically, conservative Baptists held that the Bible was inerrant, “without error in any

¹ William R. Estep, *Why Baptists: A Study of Baptist Faith and Heritage* (Dallas: BaptistWay, 1997), 21.

² Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-18.

facet of its content, whether faith, ethics, geography, history or anthropology.”⁵ Moderates rejected the term “inerrancy” while affirming “biblical authority.”⁶ This controversy resulted in the emergence of groups such as the CBF, the national Baptist group with which Second Baptist now affiliates. The distinction in this belief was crystallized for many moderate Baptists when the SBC released its “2000 Baptist Faith and Message” (hereafter, BFM). This update of the 1963 BFM had removed the statement, “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ,” from its description of the Bible.⁷ The 2000 BFM also added a section about the role of women in the family and church. For many moderate Baptists, these changes represented a move away from Bible Freedom. Shurden acknowledges that the “believer’s right of private interpretation of the Bible brings conflict with it. Legalistic creedalism often interprets differences of interpretation as destruction of the Bible itself. Such differences also bring the weighty responsibility to study and seek to understand the Bible.”⁸ Second Baptist is a church that values Bible Freedom and, therefore, spiritual formation at Second must honor this freedom of interpretation.

Shurden explains, “Soul Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without imposition

⁵ Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 414.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Baptist Start website, “1963 Baptist Faith and Message,” http://www.baptiststart.com/print/1963_baptist_faith_message.htmlress%20Release.htm (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁸ Shurden, *The Baptist*, 19-20.

of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.”⁹ Soul Freedom, sometimes called the “Priesthood of All Believers,” preserves the right of each individual Christian to decide what they believe about any individual Bible teaching. Shurden writes, “Baptists assert that each individual is created in the image of God, and therefore is competent under God to make moral, spiritual, and religious decisions.”¹⁰ This belief undergirds the Baptist conviction of believer’s baptism. Historically, “Baptists wanted the person being baptized to make a free and voluntary choice for Christ. The idea of Soul Freedom with its emphasis on personal and voluntary nature of faith drove Baptists to adopt believer’s baptism in order to have a believer’s church.”¹¹ Soul Freedom emphasizes individual responsibility and choice, and any successful spiritual formation program at Second Baptist must honor this value.

Shurden continues, “Church Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine membership and leadership, to worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female, and to participate in the larger Body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are proudly a part.”¹² Church freedom pertains specifically to the local congregation. E. Y. Mullins, in his book, *Baptist Beliefs*, explains that “the great majority of New Testament passages use the word “church” to indicate a local body composed of believers in Jesus Christ who are associated together for the cultivation of the Christian

⁹ Shurden, *The Baptist*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.* 33.

life, the maintenance of the ordinances and discipline, and for the propagation of the gospel.”¹³ Mullins further explains that each church is “free and independent. No church or group of churches has any authority over any other church.”¹⁴ This Baptist conviction that the local church must be autonomous further highlights the role of freedom and individuality in the Baptist congregation and undergirds the need for each Community Group within the church to be both connected to the local body and to maintain its own freedom within the congregation.

Shurden writes, “Religious Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and freedom from religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar.”¹⁵ Religious Freedom further emphasizes the Baptist doctrine of individualism. This freedom emphasizes both religious liberty and the separation of Church and State. Shurden states, “Historically Baptists have been clear that religious liberty is for all, not for a selected few. One’s right not to believe is as sacred as one’s right to believe.”¹⁶ This right is protected by a clear separation between Church and State. This freedom reminds us again that the rights and preferences of individuals and local churches are highly valued in Baptist churches.

Beyond these four freedoms, other Baptist distinctives should be noted. First, Baptists affirm the authority of Scripture. This was noted in the section on Bible Freedom, but is worth expanding upon. Cecil Sherman writes, “The first Baptists

¹³ E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009), 55.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Shurden, *The Baptist*, 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

changed everything. Authority had rested in bishops, councils, and traditions. Now authority, along with the standard for both right thinking and right conduct would be in the Bible.”¹⁷ In light of this, it is crucial that the rationale for this new ministry initiative and the guidelines that define it are rooted in biblical principles. This will be the work of Chapter 5.

The Baptist emphasis on missions is also important to consider in the creation of Community Groups. William H. Brackney, in his book, *A Capsule History of Baptist Principles*, states, “Since their origin, Baptists truly have been evangelical and engaged in mission, and Baptists continue to be at the vanguard of mission.”¹⁸ Claude L. Howe, Jr. agrees: “Baptists today affirm that the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-19) applies to this generation and all other generations since the first century. Christians are responsible for going, discipling, baptizing, and teaching all people. God’s people are to be a missionary people. Not surprisingly, missions has served as a potent impulse for Baptist expansion, organization, unity, and purpose.”¹⁹ This missions emphasis is vital. It supports Second Baptist’s need for a spiritual formation program that encourages missional engagement.

Most Baptist churches operate under a congregational style of leadership. This style of leadership is related to the Baptist affirmation of Church Freedom, or the autonomy of the local church. Rosalie Beck notes that “because Baptists believe in local-

¹⁷ Cecil Sherman, “The Bible is the Sole Written Authority for Faith and Practice,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W. Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1996), 57.

¹⁸ William H. Brackney, *A Capsule History of Baptist Principles* (Atlanta, GA: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2009), 80.

¹⁹ Claude L. Howe, Jr., “The Missions Impulse Propels the Baptist Experience,” in *Defining*, 148.

church autonomy, each congregation bears responsibility for choosing and maintaining their minister. They should help their minister understand the church is a theocracy, not an autocracy.”²⁰ Beck goes on to say that “some Baptists have absorbed the corporate world’s view of leadership, and ministers declare themselves chief executive officers of their churches. Baptists need to remind themselves that although the pastor is the spiritual leader of the church, he or she still has only one vote and does not possess the power to alter the decisions of the congregation.”²¹ This style of leadership allows for the kind of freedom that will support the successful emergence and maintenance of Community Groups at Second Baptist. The philosophy that undergirds it will encourage group decision making and group responsibility for ministry. However, this style of leadership also has weaknesses that will soon be explored.

Strengths of Baptist Ecclesiology

The Baptist distinctives above lend much strength to the creation of Community Groups at Second Baptist. Namely, they encourage personal responsibility, freedom for innovation, a high level of accountability to Scripture, and a missional life. These strengths will aid in the fulfillment of the goals of this new ministry initiative.

The emphasis on freedom in Baptist distinctives encourages personal responsibility. Shurden notes,

Freedom is often undermined by irresponsibility. However, for every Baptist freedom there is a corresponding responsibility. Bible Freedom is undermined when one fails to bring one’s life under the control and direction of scripture. Soul Freedom is simply another way of stressing individual responsibility for moral

²⁰ Rosalie Beck, “The Church is Free to Make Its Own Decisions Under the Lordship of Christ,” in *Defining*, 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

and religious decision making. Church Freedom calls for free and responsible participation in church life. Religious Freedom calls for the church to take seriously and practice the principles which it declares should govern the relation of church and state.²²

This paper has noted the need for a higher level of congregational participation at Second Baptist. If these Baptist distinctives encourage personal responsibility, then reminding Second Baptist members of them will support the goals of Community Groups. Likewise, the goals of Community Groups are consistent with these Baptist distinctives.

Additionally, the Baptist emphasis on freedom supports innovation in mission. Shurden explains that “the Baptist concept of Church Freedom means that the ministry of the church is open to all classes of people and specific mission strategies.”²³ Shurden further states that Baptists have “historically stood solidly for the concept that the ministry belongs to the laity. Every believer is on equal footing with every other believer in the local Baptist church. No pastor has official authority to rule over anyone in a Baptist congregation, because all Christians are priests before God.”²⁴ This reality ought to nurture innovative missional engagement among members at Second Baptist.

The Baptist perspective on biblical authority necessitates a high level of accountability to Scripture in faith and practice. Brackney notes that “Scripture was of particular importance and authority to all of the direct and indirect ancestors of Baptists. For their positions on individual accountability before God, religious freedom, and

²² Shurden, *The Baptist*, 56-57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

believer's baptism, various Anabaptists became martyrs."²⁵ It has been and is crucial for Baptists to live as biblical people. This supports Community Groups in several ways. First, it necessitates thorough biblical reflection in the creation of the ministry. Second, insofar as the new ministry is able to reflect biblical principles, it ought to be attractive to Baptist Christians who want to embody biblical principles. Third, a ministry grounded in biblical principles will foster biblically reflective spiritual formation in its participants and will nurture deeper relationships between group members and the God of Scripture.

Finally, the historic Baptist commitment to missions is significant for this project. In Chapter 3, this paper noted Breen and Kallestad's assertion that "Jesus lived out his life in three relationships: Up – with his Father; In – with his chosen followers; Out – with those around him."²⁶ Similarly, Augsburg notes that "service to neighbor and service to God cannot be divided; like two sides of the same coin, they are the same reality."²⁷ This project seeks to nurture three-dimensional faith at Second Baptist by encouraging members to become more deeply engaged in mission. This goal is strengthened by the missional character of Baptists.

Weaknesses of Baptist Ecclesiology

In light of the goals of Community Groups, Baptist ecclesiology also presents some definite weakness. Baptists tend to emphasize individualism and underemphasize spiritual growth. Scripture is often used as an instrument of information rather than an

²⁵ Brackney, *A Capsule*, 24.

²⁶ Breen and Kallestad, *Passionate*, 82.

²⁷ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 157.

instrument of transformation, and the congregational style of leadership can be slow and stifling. These weaknesses must be addressed for Community Groups to be successful.

Shurden writes that the Baptist distinctive of Soul Freedom means that “the individual is central.”²⁸ Shurden states, “For the most part Baptists never crouch in a defensive position when the charge of individualism is hurled at them. With all of its inherent weaknesses, individualism is to a great degree a Baptist badge of honor.”²⁹ This tendency toward individualism presents problems for a ministry initiative that seeks to foster meaningful community. Shurden asserts, “Baptists insist that saving faith is personal, not impersonal.”³⁰ Baptists believe that “the individual comes before God personally, directly, and voluntarily.”³¹ This fact supports believers as they pursue a vibrant personal relationship with God, but it often hinders the experience of God that can only come through community. The individualism present in Baptist life is consistent with the individualistic nature of American culture. It will be an obstacle for a communally focused spiritual formation program.

Another weakness in Baptist ecclesiology is that it often underemphasizes spiritual growth. Brackney writes that “the principle underlying the Baptist doctrine of church is that is a believer’s church.”³² He further acknowledges that “for Baptists and others in the believer’s church tradition, the public profession of faith is a key element in

²⁸ Shurden, *The Baptist*, 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Brackney, *A Capsule*, 40.

the individual's personal testimony and a shared act of religious experience for the congregation."³³ The goal of the Christian life becomes conversion to Christ and the conversion of others to Christ so that they will not spend eternity in hell. In this way, believing in Jesus becomes more important than a life of following Jesus, and consequently, the Baptist emphasis on personal conversion hinders ongoing discipleship and spiritual growth. This reality presents a challenge for a ministry that seeks to foster holistic, personal transformation in the lives of its Christian participants.

The primary vehicle for spiritual formation at Second Baptist has been Sunday school, which has tended to emphasize Bible study for information rather than transformation. This Baptist tendency to approach Scripture as a sourcebook for information is implied in Mullins's words about the Bible. He explains that the Bible first "gives us enough truth for all religious purposes. In the scriptures we have all the truth required for the religious life of humankind. The Bible also gives us certainty about truth, and the Bible is authoritative."³⁴ Mullins's words about the Bible imply that God's truth is found primarily in knowing the Bible's information. In contrast, Community Groups will attempt to help members experience the Bible's transformative truth. Mullholland affirms this approach. He asserts, "We have a deeply ingrained way of reading in which we are the masters of the material we read. We come to the text with our own agenda firmly in place. We control our approach to and interaction with the text. This mode of reading is detrimental to the role of scripture in spiritual formation."³⁵ Bible reading will

³³ Brackney, *A Capsule*, 40.

³⁴ Mullins, *Baptists*, 1-2.

³⁵ Mullholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 19.

not be the only spiritual practice present in Community Groups, but the whole-life approach to spiritual formation in these groups will aim to help members experience holistic transformation as they read scripture and engage in other spiritual practices. The tendency toward an information centered approach to learning may hinder this ministry's goal of fostering personal transformation.

Finally, a congregational leadership structure can foster a slow and stifling decision-making process. One of the goals of Community Groups is to foster innovative missional engagement. This will result in broader member ministry participation, new member-driven ministries, and greater ability to respond to emerging ministry needs with agility. The current model encourages members to wait for approval from either an appropriate committee or the Church Council. The congregational leadership structure is laity-driven and fosters good accountability, but inhibits ministry agility and broad member participation. To achieve the goal of innovative missional engagement, Community Groups will need to compensate for the sometimes stifling leadership structure of Second Baptist.

Ecclesiological Insight from Celtic Christian Communities

The weaknesses presented by Baptist ecclesiology necessitate the identification of another Christian tradition that may provide ecclesiological support to Community Groups. In this regard, an examination of the early Celtic Christian communities of the British Isles is helpful. The emphasis on community, spiritual formation as a lifelong journey, and missional innovation in many of these early Celtic Christian communities will serve as an invaluable resource in light of Baptist ecclesiological deficiencies.

One distinguishing feature of Celtic Christianity was its strong monastic character. Ian Bradley, in his book, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, explains that the monastic character of the Celtic Christian communities “produced a model of ministry that was collegiate and communitarian rather than individualistic.”³⁶ Timothy Joyce, in his book, *Celtic Christianity*, notes that a “Trinitarian consciousness permeated Celtic spirituality.”³⁷ Celtic Christianity lived out of a consciousness of the relational Trinity that expressed itself in a “horizontal equality, deemphasizing the vertical, hierarchical differences. Together, the Christian community practiced a holistic spirituality that embraced the mind, the heart, and the body.”³⁸ Joyce writes, “Celtic spirituality will not allow us to go at it alone. The community is important for that is where I know who I am.”³⁹ Ray Simpson, author of *Exploring Celtic Christianity: Historic Roots for our Future*, agrees: “The essence of the Celtic Way of being church was relationship.”⁴⁰ Community Groups will seek to nurture this kind of communitarian approach to the Christian life in the midst of an individualistic Baptist and American culture. In this regard, this project is supported specifically by two spiritual practices modeled in early Celtic Christian communities, namely soul friendship and hospitality.

³⁶ Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longmann, and Todd Ltd, 2000), 5.

³⁷ Timothy Joyce, *Celtic Christianity: A Sacred Tradition, a Vision of Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁰ Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Christianity: Historic Roots for our Future* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 154.

Joyce describes a soul friend as an “intimate spiritual friendship which involved the exercise of spiritual direction and mentoring.”⁴¹ George Hunter, in his book, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West Again*, further explains that “a soul friend was a peer with whom you were vulnerable and accountable; to whom you made confession; from which you received penance; that both supported and challenged you.”⁴² The Celtic Saint Bridget is quoted as having said that “anyone without a soul friend is alike a body without a head.”⁴³ Community Group leaders will be encouraged to form intergenerational groups. In these groups every member will be equal, but their interactions will reflect aspects of soul friendship. Older members offer wisdom, and younger members offer fresh perspective, supporting one another in their spiritual journeys.

This kind of spiritual friendship in a small group context was expressed in early Celtic Christianity. J.C Doherty, in *The Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality*, describes a Celtic Christian small group: “When people came into a monastic community they were put into a small group of people that they worked and lived with in community. Usually the group was ten or less people led by someone chosen because of their great devotion to God.”⁴⁴ Community Groups at Second Baptist will invite members to live in covenant relationships with one another for eight months.

⁴¹ Joyce, *Celtic Christianity*, 45.

⁴² George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 48.

⁴³ Joyce, *Celtic Christianity*, 45.

⁴⁴ Jerry C. Doherty, *The Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 115.

The vulnerability in these groups makes room for confession, guidance, and spiritual discovery. Bradley affirms the need for this today, remarking that “there is perhaps a wider and more basic need to affirm simple friendship as a Christian vocation. More and more people are isolated, and at the same time there seem to be fewer and fewer people with the time and the ability simply to sit and listen.”⁴⁵ In light of this, Community Groups will challenge people’s individualism by fostering intimate spiritual friendships like the ones expressed in the early Celtic Christian communities.

The early Celtic Christian communities also practiced hospitality in a way that is instructive for this new ministry initiative. Doherty stresses hospitality as crucial for the welcoming congregation: “There was a rule of hospitality. A chief ministry was a monk whose job it was to welcome all newcomers, introduce them to everyone and find them a place to stay. The monk would then introduce the person to the abbot who would provide for their needs.”⁴⁶ Simpson writes that “in seventh-century Northumbria, the Christian church gathered all the people of the locality together for feasts, in which they were caught up together in the human joys of celebration and relaxation.”⁴⁷ Community Groups will practice this kind of hospitality when members open their homes and share meals. This practice will challenge members to open their lives to new friendships with members and non-members of Second Baptist.

In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, Hunter affirms the Celtic Christian practices of soul friendship and hospitality, connecting them to a philosophy and method of

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Colonies*, 109-110.

⁴⁶ Doherty, *A Celtic Model*, 115.

⁴⁷ Simpson, *Exploring*, 140.

evangelism and spiritual formation he believes will effectively enhance the ministries of Western churches today. Hunter explains that in Celtic monastic communities, outsiders were to be welcomed as if they were Christ himself. They would soon be given “a soul friend, a small group, and a place for periods of solitude. They would learn scripture, worship with the community, and members of the community would pray with them daily.”⁴⁸ Hunter writes that eventually these outsiders would believe what the Christians believed, and then would be invited to commit their lives to Christ.⁴⁹ Hunter contrasts this model of evangelism and spiritual formation with what is usually practiced in Western churches. Instead of asking people to first believe, then behave, and then belong, the Celtic way asks outsiders to belong first. Belonging then leads to behavior change and then, eventually, belief. Hunter asserts that most people in the West will come to Christ in this way: “Belonging comes before believing.”⁵⁰

In light of this, Community Groups will serve as a resource for helping outsiders develop meaningful relationships at Second Baptist. The high covenant level of the groups will not support the addition of new group members once groups are several weeks into their process, but group leaders will be encouraged to recruit participants who are not members of Second Baptist. There are examples of this happening in the pilot project. Couples who were not members of Second Baptist were invited to join a Community Group. Consequently, two of these couples have now become active

⁴⁸ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 52.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

members of Second Baptist. In this way, Community Groups will help Second Baptist welcome others and foster meaningful community.

Additionally, the emphasis on the life of faith as a journey among the early Celtic Christians supports this goal of this project. In early Celtic Christian communities, faith as a journey was best embodied through pilgrimage. Bradley is convinced that “pilgrimage is Celtic Christianity’s single most important and distinctive theme.”⁵¹ Tracy Balzer, in her book, *Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity*, writes, “Unlike the conventional understanding of pilgrimage in which people journey to shrines, the Celts traveled without distinct destiny in mind. They learned that it is not so much the final destination that brings us to greater Christ likeness, but the process of journeying itself.”⁵² This is something Kate Tristran emphasized in a Fuller Doctor of Ministry seminar on Celtic Heritage. She explained that after a Celtic Christian monk experienced his initial training, he was told, “you put your hand out, and God takes your hand and takes you somewhere new – that you know not where. You would die out there. If you returned, it was a breaking of your pilgrimage.”⁵³ St. Patrick was an example of this. He returned to his parents in Britain after being a slave in Ireland, but decided to go back to Ireland after God spoke to him in a dream. Patrick says in the dream he heard the voice of the Irish. Oliver Davies, editor of *Celtic Spirituality*, reports the words of St. Patrick: “It was as if they were shouting with one voice: ‘O holy boy, we beg you to come again and

⁵¹ Bradley, *Colonies*, 197.

⁵² Tracy Balzer, *Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2007), 89.

⁵³ Kate Tristran, “Celtic Heritage” (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, September 22, 2010.)

walk among us.’ And I was brokenhearted.”⁵⁴ Patrick continued his journey with God by going to the Irish and journeying among them.

For Celtic Christian monks, this kind of journey was both physical and spiritual. Bradley explains that “in symbolic terms, pilgrimage was a favorite metaphor to express the Celtic emphasis on the dynamic character of Christian faith. It is there in the sermons of Columbanus which describe the Christian life as a journey and this earth as a way and not a resting place or destination.”⁵⁵ Bradley continues, “For us today, pilgrimage often carries the connotation of walking together with others, including those from different denominational and theological perspectives and even, perhaps, different faiths.”⁵⁶ In this regard, pilgrimage is a helpful for this project as it seeks to develop a holistic, transformational approach to spiritual formation at Second Baptist.

The project aims to foster innovative missional engagement among the members of Second Baptist. It has been mentioned that the leadership structure of Second Baptist may be an obstacle. In this regard, the early Celtic Christian communities offer important examples of Christian communities that fostered innovation in mission. Peter O’Dwyer notes that there was a gradual change in Celtic Christian communities as the leadership structure shifted from “episcopal to monastic,”⁵⁷ and as leadership “passed from bishops to abbots of large monasteries.”⁵⁸ There was still a connection with the Roman Church,

⁵⁴ Oliver Davies, ed., *Celtic Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 73.

⁵⁵ Bradley, *Colonies*, 198.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁵⁷ Peter O’ Dwyer, “Celtic Monks and the Culdee Reform,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark Ltd, 1995), 140.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

but the geographic and cultural context fostered a practical autonomy in the early Celtic Christian communities similar to the autonomy in Baptist churches. This autonomy supports innovative, indigenous mission efforts. However, inflexible local church leadership can also hinder church members and small groups from engaging in new ministry projects as they feel prompted by God. This was probably true in early Celtic Christian communities as well, with the strength of the abbot hindering the creative efforts of the monks. There are, however, examples of Celtic Christian communities that will serve to support this project. Bradley notes that in these communities,

Ministry in all its aspects was not a solitary individualistic task, it was rather undertaken by teams of men and women, ordained and lay, who lived together in community and operated from a central base from which they went out among the people. Community life in some form was the normal and accepted expression of vocation, not just to monastic professions but also to clerical orders of any kind and indeed to a variety of lay ministries.⁵⁹

Community Groups at Second Baptist will be encouraged to operate as small ministry teams, and in that regard, these Celtic monastic communities can serve as a positive example. Hunter affirms this, explaining that “the Celtic Christian Movement multiplied mission-sending monastic communities, which continued to send teams into settlements to multiply churches and start people in the community-based life of full devotion to the Triune God.”⁶⁰ The genius of these new communities is that they were indigenous. While connected to the Roman Church, these monastic communities had their own unique character. When new faith communities were started, “the church that emerged within the

⁵⁹ Bradley, *Colonies*, 6.

⁶⁰ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 35.

tribe would have been astonishingly indigenous.”⁶¹ The spirit of ingenuity and autonomy in these Celtic Christian communities will serve as an inspiration for missional ingenuity and agility in Second Baptist Community Groups.

The Baptist ecclesiology of Second Baptist will support the success of Community Groups. Its emphasis on freedom with responsibility, the authority of scripture, and missions all serve to aid the goals of this project. In the areas where there are ecclesiological deficiencies, the spirit and practices of the early Celtic Christian monastic communities will be helpful.

⁶¹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 22.

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS

Scriptural authority is an important distinctive for Second Baptist, so it is important that this new ministry initiative be grounded in good biblical theology. In light of this, Chapter 5 will develop a theological framework for Community Groups at Second Baptist. It will first explore Genesis 1:26-27, examining our relational character as beings created in the image of a relational God. It will then focus on Jeremiah 29:7-14, presenting the Hebrew idea of *shalom* as a vision of communal wholeness that God has promised and has commissioned his people to pursue. Finally, it will examine 1 Peter 2:4-10 as supportive of the “Priesthood of all Believers,” a communal Baptist distinctive that encourages corporate responsibility.

The Image of God: Genesis 1: 26-27

The image of God is an important theological concept that will support the development of Community Groups at Second Baptist. According to Scripture, God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created human beings in his

own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27).¹ Miroslav Volf, in his book, *Practicing Theology*, asserts that “the identity of human beings and the goal of their lives are bound up with the fact that God created them to image God.”² In light of this, any informed attempt at spiritual formation ought to have a good understanding of the meaning and implications of humans being created in God’s image.

Scholars have interpreted the meaning of God’s image in a number of ways, including resemblance, ability for rationale thought, and dominion. This project, however, has been influenced primarily by perspective that God is, in essence, a social being. In his book, *Theology for the Community of God*, Stanley Grenz explains that “the presence of the image of God separates humans from other creatures, for only we are created in the divine image.”³ He then determines that “the divine image is a shared, corporate reality. It is fully present only in community.”⁴ The first clue to this interpretation of the divine image in Genesis 1 is the plural reference to God in verse 27. Bruce T. Dahlberg writes, “It cannot be merely coincidental that here God is represented as speaking in the first person plural: *Let us make... in our image, according to our likeness*. The language and imagery is that of a divine council in heaven.”⁵ Grenz also

¹ All biblical references will be taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

² Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmanns Publishing Co., 2002), 252.

³ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 173-74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵ Bruce T. Dahlberg, “Genesis,” in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible: Volume 1*, ed. Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 13.

notes this, stating, “The foundation for the understanding of the image of God as a community concept lies in the creation narratives.”⁶ Icenogle reflects upon this as well, writing, “The Genesis account does not initiate an immediate Trinitarian understanding of God, but does affirm a community of God in action and through creation. Since this community is reflected in *image* and *likeness* on the human side as male and female together, we can extrapolate that God exists in plural being of at least two persons.”⁷ Ray Anderson, in *On Being Human*, clarifies this matter further, contending, “It is instructive that the plural pronoun is used with reference both to God and to man as created in the image and likeness of God. Quite clearly the image of God is not totally present in the form of individual humanity but more completely as co-humanity. It is thus quite natural and expected that God is also a ‘we.’”⁸

The plural language about God here is not specifically Trinitarian, but this corporate picture of God in Genesis is not inconsistent with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In his book, *Created for Community*, Grenz writes, “God’s Triune nature means that God is social or relational – God is the social Trinity. And for this reason we can say that God is community. God is the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship.”⁹ This theme of God’s relationality is fully present in the Genesis text. Grenz asserts, “Implicit in Genesis 1:26-28 and more explicit in the

⁶ Grenz, *Theology*, 179.

⁷ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 22.

⁸ Ray Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 73.

⁹ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint Books, 1998), 52.

second creation narrative is the theme that God creates the first human pair in order that humans may enjoy community with each other. More specifically, the creation of the woman is designed to deliver the man from his isolation.”¹⁰ There is an implicit connection here between the relationality of God and the relationality of the humans God created.

Grenz writes, “This aspect of the biblical narrative suggests that humans in relationship with each other reflect the divine image in a way that the solitary individual human being cannot.”¹¹ God’s divine image is a corporate reality that is fully present in us only as we enjoy community.¹² Dahlberg explains that these verses in Genesis suggest that “human beings are relational beings, not merely a race of individuals. The image of God applies not to humanity in the abstract, but to actual sexual persons, political persons, family persons, artistic persons, craft persons, good citizens, outlaws, and everyone.”¹³ Grenz further states that humans will “come to find our true identity only as we participate together with others in the community of the followers of Christ. In so doing, we bring honor to our Creator by reflecting the very character of the Triune God.”¹⁴ Icenogle affirms this, writing, “Wherever two or more persons come together, they become an actual reflection of the image and likeness of God. The biblical record

¹⁰ Grenz, *Theology*, 179.

¹¹ Grenz, *Created*, 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 79

¹³ Dahlberg, “Genesis,” 13.

¹⁴ Grenz, *Created*, 81.

calls every small group to consider their source and purpose.”¹⁵ Nigel G. Wright, author of *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*, agrees, noting that the emphasis on God as a communal reality suggests something important for humanity in general and the church specifically. He writes,

The church is called to reflect God and to embody the life of God within its communities. If God is understood to be Triune, that is to say a community of persons indwelling each other in indivisible unity, this immediately suggests a pattern for the church. Before the church ever takes form as an institution, the church is a community, a communion, a fellowship of persons in relationship. This is suggested by the very life of God.¹⁶

In this regard Grenz asserts that the life of the Christian must be a life lived in community. He writes, “Conversion is no mere transaction between God and a single individual. Nor are we converted in isolation. Rather, conversion always involves the faith community, the church of Jesus Christ. Christ’s community plays a significant role in the process of coming to faith. And our life-changing encounter with God involves our incorporation into the community of Christ.”¹⁷ Grenz further contends,

God saves us together, not in isolation. God saves us for community, not out of it. . . . [This is because] God’s purpose is to establish a reconciled creation in which humans reflect the very character of the Creator. The Triune God desires that we be brought together into a fellowship of reconciliation. This fellowship not only reflects God’s own eternal essence; it actually participates in God’s nature, which is love.¹⁸

This examination of Genesis 1:26-27 supports the idea that human beings are by nature relational because they have been created in the image of a social, Trinitarian God.

¹⁵ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 20-21.

¹⁶ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Wayneboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁷ Grenz, *Created*, 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

When human beings engage in meaningful, Christ-centered community, they are conforming to the image of God, and are participating with God in God's purpose for creation. The Genesis account affirms this, showing us a God who "created and addressed humanity as community with community, as group with group."¹⁹ As Grenz asserts, "Because God is Triune; we are in the image of God only as we enjoy community with others. Only as we live in fellowship can we show forth what God is like. Only by being persons-in-community do we find our true identity. Indeed, we are created for community."²⁰ In light of this, a spiritual formation program will only be able to foster the kind of transformation God intends for human beings if it is by nature communal. This is why Icenogle believes that "the small group is the base community in which men and women can meet God and one another to be, to plan, and to act for the careful nurturing of relationships with created things."²¹ This truth creates a strong biblical foundation and rationale for the creation of Community Groups at Second Baptist.

God's Shalom: Jeremiah 29:7-14

This project will also be biblically supported by the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, examined now in Jeremiah 29:7-14. Specifically, this paper will focus on presence of *shalom* in verses 7 and 11, which read, "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. . . . For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:7, 11). The

¹⁹ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 21.

²⁰ Grenz, *Created*, 80.

²¹ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 23.

words translated “peace,” “prosperity,” and “prosper” in verses 7 and 11 are actually the Hebrew word *shalom*.²² The substance of the concept of *shalom* and its usage in this passage are significant for Second Baptist Community Groups.

This chapter must first explore the biblical meaning of *shalom* in general before it gives specific attention to its usage in Jeremiah 29. In his book, *Living toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, Walter Brueggemann identifies the word *shalom* as the biblical word that best describes the vision of whole-life faith. Brueggemann explains that *shalom* is the “vision of wholeness, which is the supreme will of the biblical God, in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with not to make them afraid.”²³ In this regard, the original meaning of *shalom* was far more than the usual English translation “peace.” Brueggemann writes, “*Shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those resources and factors which make communal harmony joyous and effective.”²⁴ Foster agrees, stating, “This wonderful vision of *shalom* begins and ends our Bible. In the creation story God brought order and harmony out of chaos. In the Revelation of John we look forward to the glorious wholeness of a new heaven and new earth.”²⁵ Brian McLaren sums it up well in his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, stating that God’s Kingdom of *shalom* comes on earth when God’s dream for his people comes

²² J. Andrew Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah/Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 262.

²³ Walter Brueggeman, *Living toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (New York: United Church Press, 1976), 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), 30.

true.²⁶ McLaren writes, “In creating the world, God was not dreaming of prisons and kidnapping, child abuse and racism, greed and poverty, pollution and exploitation, conformity and chaos. God’s dream was for freedom and creativity, kindness and justice, generosity and peace, diversity and harmony.”²⁷

This paper has affirmed the need for a spiritual formation program at Second Baptist that will foster wholeness, and Brueggemann makes it clear that God’s vision of wholeness is rooted in God’s *shalom*. Brueggemann further explains that *shalom* cannot be experienced in isolation; he asserts, “If there is to be well-being, it will not be just for isolated, insulated individuals; it is rather security and prosperity granted to a whole community – young and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependant. Always we are in it together. Together we stand before God’s blessings and together we receive the gift of life if we receive it at all.”²⁸ Christine Sine, in her book, *Wholeness and the Shalom of God*, agrees: “Implicit in *shalom* is the idea of souls-in-community, an expectation that we function and grow as God intended in conjunction with others.”²⁹ In this regard, God’s *shalom* is a vision of communal wholeness that can only be experienced in relationship with others. The need for Community Groups is supported by this important biblical concept, as well as its usage in Jeremiah 29.

Brueggemann translates Jeremiah 29:7, 11 in this way: “But seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*. . . . For I

²⁶ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 141.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *Living*, 16.

²⁹ Christine Sine, *Wholeness and the Shalom of God* (Seattle: Mustard Seed Associates), 7.

know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for *shalom* and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”³⁰ There are two important implications of this reading. The first comes from verse 11, which states that God’s will for God’s people is a future of *shalom*. Jeremiah’s prophecy is directed to a group of God’s people who are living in exile in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem.³¹ This is significant, writes Jeremiah commentator Douglas Rawlinson Jones, because for the faithful Jew, “worship of the Lord was inextricably bound up with the Temple and the Land, and this was reinforced by the conviction that the Land was of the great gifts of the Lord to the chosen people.”³² These were people whose identity as God’s people had been tied to land and temple, so geographic exile would have seemed like exile from their God. However, in the midst of their despair, Jeremiah’s words bring the assurance that God intends for them to experience his *shalom* again. This is consistent with an ongoing theme in Scripture, which Icenogle describes as “God’s struggle to create, re-create, and participate in the *shalom* of human community.”³³ Implied for readers of this text today is God’s desire for them to experience *shalom* as well.

The second important implication from Brueggemann’s translation of this text comes from verse 7. Verse 11 tells the exiles that God has planned a future of *shalom* for God’s people, and verse 7 tells them how they can begin to experience *shalom* in the present. “But seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile . . . for in its

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Living*, 22-23.

³¹ Dearman, *The NIV Application*, 262.

³² Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 363.

³³ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 20.

shalom you will find your *shalom*.”³⁴ Brueggemann emphasizes the striking nature of this promise. He writes,

Imagine that! A letter written to displaced persons in hated Babylon. And they are still there, yearning to go home, despising their captors and resenting their God. And the speaker for the vision dares to say, “your *shalom* will be found in Babylon’s *shalom*.” The well-being of the chosen ones is tied to the well-being of that hated metropolis, which the chosen people fear and resent.³⁵

God’s promise of *shalom* in verse 11 is predicated in verse 7 by the exiles being told that they will find *shalom* by seeking to create *shalom* for the city where they are in exile. In this way, the prophet commissions God’s people to participate in God’s *shalom* mission. In this regard, *shalom* is both God’s promised future of wholeness and *shalom* is also the future for which God’s people have been commended to work. The implication holds true for today’s reader: *shalom* is both gift and mission. Sine expresses this idea well:

Shalom is meant to provide us with a focus and purpose for our lives. To be a disciple of Christ today means to live in the spirit of *shalom*, to dedicate ourselves to bringing glimpses of God’s *shalom* vision into other people’s lives. It is an important focus for holistic Christian mission; *shalom* works to restore individuals and communities to relationship with God, relationship with each other, and relationship to God’s creation as well.³⁶

In this way, the biblical concept of *shalom* will support Community Groups as they strive to pursue wholeness through committed relationships and missional engagement.

The Priesthood of All Believers: 1 Peter 2:4-10

Finally, “The Priesthood of All Believers” is another important theological concept that will support the development of Community Groups at Second Baptist. This

³⁴ Brueggemann, *Living*, 23.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sine, *Wholeness*, 5.

concept is especially significant when one considers the congregation is distinctively Baptist in the Free Church tradition. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, in his book, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives*, notes that one of the most distinctive emphases of the “Free church view of ministry lies in the appeal to the ‘Priesthood of All Believers,’ which connotes access to God and a participation in ministry on the part of all believers.”³⁷ Baptists sometimes view the “Priesthood of All Believers” as an individualistic Baptist distinctive, but this paper’s examination of 1 Peter 2:4-10 will present the “Priesthood of All Believers” as a communal concept that supports corporate participation and responsibility. In this way, the “Priesthood of All Believers” will support Community Groups as it seeks to foster community and broaden ministry participation at Second Baptist.

Of the New Testament passages connected to the “Priesthood of All Believers,” 1 Peter 2:4-10 is the passage that “has traditionally been most closely connected to the “Priesthood of All Believers.”³⁸ This paper will focus specifically on verses 5 and 9 and their implication for Christian life and ministry. The verses state, “You also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:5, 9). The author of 1 Peter cites two Old Testament passages in this section, and this is significant for one’s interpretation of the passage. Muthiah notes, “Of the hundreds of

³⁷ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), 65.

³⁸ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 7.

Old Testament references to priests and the priesthood, Peter selected from the few that refer to the whole people in priestly terms.”³⁹ Peter references Exodus 19:6, where God says, “You will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” and Isaiah 43:20-21, “which refers to the whole people of Israel, not to a chosen class within that nation.”⁴⁰ Muthiah explains that “Peter’s grounding of his conception of the royal priesthood in these carefully selected Old Testament texts shows his theology of a royal priesthood to consciously include the whole people of God.”⁴¹ This idea that every believer is a member of God’s holy priesthood is an important one for Baptists, but it is also one that has been somewhat narrow in its use.

Herschel Hobbs, the author of the *1963 Baptist Faith and Message*, “declared the principle of the priesthood of the believer the basic belief of Baptists,” according to Gary E. Parker in his book, *Principles Worth Protecting*.⁴² He wrote, “There are certain basic things that are generally held by Baptists today, but underlying all of them has been this principle of soul competency in religion.”⁴³ Unfortunately, Baptists have often made soul competency the complete substance of the “Priesthood,” and that does not seem to be the point of this text. Muthiah affirms this, stating, “New Testament scholars call into question the notion that these verses mean each person can interpret Scripture for himself or herself because each person is a priest. One problem with this understanding is that 1

³⁹ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gary E. Parker, *Principles Worth Protecting* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993), 10.

⁴³ Herschel Hobbs, *1963 Baptist Faith and Message*, quoted in Parker, *Principles Worth Protecting*, 10.

Peter 2:5, 9; Exodus 19:6; and Isaiah 43:20-21 all refer to a corporate entity. None of these references describe individuals as priests.”⁴⁴ John Elliot, in his commentary on 1 Peter, affirms this passage’s application to the whole people of God, writing that “as part of the covenant formula of Exodus 19:6, its application to Christian believers affirms that they too stand in continuity with the people of God brought into being at Sinai. Whether formerly pagans or members of the House of Israel, they too now by God’s mercy enjoy membership in God’s elect and holy people.”⁴⁵

With this in mind, Muthiah asserts that “an individualistic understanding of this passage does not find textual support.”⁴⁶ In light of this, the passage has two important implications. First, it presents the believer’s special status before God as a corporate reality. The “Priesthood” refers to the whole people of God; therefore election is for the Christian community, not individual believers. The idea that the “Priesthood of All Believers” is simply about individual believers being priests that can interpret Scripture for themselves is not supported by this passage. Second, it speaks to functionality, prompting an understanding of how believers are meant to live and interact with each other and the world around them.

Reinhard Feldmeier, also a commentator on 1 Peter, asserts that 1 Peter 2:5 demonstrates that “the new life of the regenerate has the form of a new community. Only as a ‘building,’ as a collective, can the ‘living stones’ fulfill their intended purpose to be a

⁴⁴ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 8.

⁴⁵ John H. Elliot, *The Anchor Bible: 1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 438.

⁴⁶ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 8.

‘spiritual house.’”⁴⁷ Feldmeier concludes then that “the point here is not the priestly statues of each individual Christian, but the status of the community. This verse ascribes the priestly function to the whole community.”⁴⁸ J. Ramsey Michaels, in his commentary on 1 Peter, explains that central to the function of this new priesthood is mutuality. Michaels argues that 1 Peter 4:9-10 presents a vision of a community “where there is no hierarchy. All Christian believers are to have love for each other, practice hospitality toward one another, and be ministers to each other. Love is the dominant command here. Mutual hospitality and ministry are but the concrete expressions of mutual love.”⁴⁹ In this way, all believers are called to ministry within the Christian community. Michaels writes, “Christians are not a temple merely in order to be something, but to do something. They are a temple for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.”⁵⁰ Michaels acknowledges that this passage has often been misused to support an individualistic interpretation of the “Priesthood of all Believers.”⁵¹ Peter’s meaning, however, is that the “Priesthood of All Believers” does not have to do “with the interpretation of scripture itself, but with the offering of ‘spiritual sacrifices.’ These sacrifices Peter describes as Christian worship and Christian conduct.”⁵² This passage, then, highlights a conception

⁴⁷ Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 135.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Themes: 1 Peter* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 82.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

of the “Priesthood of All Believers” that involves the whole people of God and should be understood in terms of the mutuality Peter says should characterize the community.⁵³

The kind of mutuality presented should encourage participation and responsibility among believers in local congregations. Muthiah connects this with the nature of the Trinity. Muthiah argues that “given the nature of the Trinity, the church should be a pneumatic community marked by relationality.”⁵⁴ Consequently, Muthiah writes, “A Trinitarian ecclesiology calls for a common priesthood in which all believers participate. Each Christian is called to active involvement in the mission of God. The institution of individualism fosters passive observation rather than active participation. The passive nature of individualism is at odds with the participatory nature of the royal priesthood.”⁵⁵

Likewise, Wright states,

To participate in Christ is also to participate in his priesthood and through him to have access to the Father in the Spirit. This is not to be understood in an individualistic way, but in terms of the participation of each within the unified priesthood of the whole church in Christ and through him. . . . The call of Christ is therefore not to passive subjection but to active discernment of what is pleasing to God, to responsible engagement and decision-making in the service of the kingdom of God, to the common ownership of the power of the congregation, so that is distributed among the congregation as a stewardship in which they all share.⁵⁶

Icenogle agrees, writing, “God’s pattern for empowerment of humanity is not in the building of hierarchical power structures but in the gathering of priestly circles of face-to-

⁵³ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

face communities.”⁵⁷ This has a profound effect on what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Carolyn D. Blevins, in her article, “Baptist History and Heritage Society,” explains that being members of his holy priesthood means “hierarchy no longer exists, all are equal, and each believer is a responsible priest.”⁵⁸ Blevins continues, “[It also means that] each believer is responsible for using God given gifts in a way that will serve the community.”⁵⁹ Implied in this communal responsibility is active presence in the community, lending ones gifts to the mission of God in Christian community, and responsibility to others in interpretation and application of Scripture.

This understanding 1 Peter 2:4-10 presents the priesthood of all believers as supporting a high level of participation among church members and shared responsibility in ministry. Muthiah argues that “all Christians are to mirror the Trinitarian presence. All Christians are called to be present with others – both others in the church and others outside the church.”⁶⁰ Muthiah further states that “believers are to use their charisms conjunctively to move outside themselves, to be open to the world.”⁶¹ Icenogle contextualizes this truth within the ministry of small groups: “Small groups are to be circles of mutual priesthood, where power is shared and care is reciprocated as every member of the group defers allegiance to God in their midst. Each person turns to a neighbor to administer the grace, mercy, peace, and love of God. These are the circles in

⁵⁷ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 101.

⁵⁸ Carolyn D. Blevins, “Baptist History and Heritage Society,” <http://www.baptisthistory.org/priesthood.htm> (accessed 4 January 2010).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

which there is only one law of love to practice: love your neighbor as yourself.”⁶² In this regard, the “Priesthood of All Believers” in 1 Peter supports the stated goals of Community Groups at Second Baptist.

⁶² Icenogle, *Biblical*, 101.

PART THREE
MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

GOALS AND PLANS

In light of contextual and theological considerations, this chapter will first present the need for Community Groups to become the primary vehicle for spiritual formation at Second Baptist. It will then describe the transformational potential of these groups and the parameters and practices that will foster this transformation. The chapter will go on to present the plan for identifying and supervising group leaders, and will reflect on a profile for church members who will be invited to participate in this ministry. Finally, it will note the expectation for groups to either form around or discern together a common mission focus. The clear rationale, goals, and plans of this chapter will be crucial for the creation and implementation of Community Groups at Second Baptist.

Theological Implications for Second Baptist Community Groups

This paper's examination of Genesis 1:26-27, Jeremiah 29:7-14, and 1 Peter 2:4-10 has significant implications for Community Groups. These passages demonstrate that community is at the center of God's design and vision for humanity, and that an ecclesiology consistent with the "Priesthood of All Believers" should support communal responsibility and ministry participation among the entire congregation. These

theological implications support Community Groups as the preferred future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist.

This paper's examination of the image of God and *shalom* has demonstrated that community is central to God's design and vision for human beings. Grenz aptly writes,

The image of God is a community concept. It refers to humans as beings-in-fellowship. Although present in other dimensions of social life, the focal point of community can only be the community of Christ expressed in his church, which ought to be the highest form of human fellowship in this age. As we live in love—that is, as we give expression to true community—we reflect the love which characterizes the divine essence. And as we reflect the divine essence which is love, we live in accordance with our own essential nature, with that for which God created us. In this manner, we find our true identity.¹

Icenogle adds that “spiritual growth is the process and product of being in community. Isolated individuals cannot grow spiritually.”² In light of this, community must be central to spiritual formation. In his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*, Eugene Peterson asserts, “The Christian life is lived with others and for others. Nothing can be done alone or solely for oneself.”³ Any attempt at spiritual formation apart from Christian community is incomplete at best, destructive at worst. Grenz believes the understanding of community as the essence of the divine image means “that sin is ultimately our human failure to live in community with God, each other, and the natural environment.”⁴ He writes, “Sin is essentially both the lack of and the loss of

¹ Grenz, *Theology*, 180.

² Icenogle, *Biblical*, 281.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

community. Sin is the destruction of community.”⁵ Chapter 1 presented the weakened sense of community and connectedness in Liberty. This study of the image of God in Genesis 1 demonstrates that loss of community and the tendencies of hyper-individualism inhibit humans from experiencing life as God intended. Likewise, spiritual formation contextualized in committed Christian community supports personal transformation because it helps humans experience the life as God intended. Dallas Willard emphasizes this in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, writing, “Anyone who thinks of spiritual formation as merely a private matter has misunderstood it. Anyone who says ‘it’s just between me and God,’ or ‘what I do is my own business,’ has misunderstood God as well as ‘me.’ Strictly speaking there is nothing ‘just between me and God.’ Relationships with God and others must be transformed if I am to be transformed.”⁶ Humans were created as social beings in the image of a social God. This biblical truth affirms the need for a communal approach to spiritual formation. This is further affirmed by this paper’s examination of *shalom*.

Brueggemann explains that “the vision of wholeness, which is the supreme will of the biblical God, is the outgrowth of a covenant of *shalom*.”⁷ Brueggemann helps his readers understand *shalom* as a communal vision of “how the world shall be and is not yet.”⁸ Healthy relationships are central to this vision, and this paper’s examination of Jeremiah 29 presented a picture of one way this vision might become a reality. Jeremiah

⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 187.

⁶ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 182.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Living*, 16-17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

told the people in exile that they would begin to experience God's *shalom* when they started seeking the *shalom* of those around them. God's people are invited to participate in the fulfillment of God's promised *shalom*. In light of this, an effective spiritual formation program should foster *shalom* relationships between the people and God that also encourage those people to seek *shalom* in the world. Augsburgur affirms this, stating, "True spirituality is seen in the love that expresses self-giving on behalf of another."⁹ Augsburgur further explains, "We find that a shared spirituality possesses a sociological authenticity not possible for an individual on a private journey; we become a community of co-questers. Authentic witnesses live a common life of affirmation of all they value and invitation for others to join them in a life of shared virtues. This is a mutual process of serving one another while serving the wider, surrounding world."¹⁰ Likewise, Breen and Kallestad assert that a balanced Christian life must include outward engagement with the work of God in the world.¹¹ This approach to the Christian life is consistent with Jeremiah's instructions regarding *shalom*. The biblical vision of *shalom* encourages believers to pursue transformation in, through, and by Christian community. This supports the formation of Community Groups with goals of fostering meaningful Christian community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement.

Theological considerations for this new ministry initiative must consider the ecclesiological setting of Second Baptist. In this regard, this paper's study of 1 Peter 2 and the "Priesthood of All Believers" is significant. Instead of focusing on Christians as

⁹ Augsburgur, *Dissident*, 166.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

¹¹ Breen and Kallestad, *Passionate*, 101-05.

individual priests, 1 Peter presents the believer as belonging to a community of priests. This vision of the “Priesthood of All Believers” prompts Muthiah to recall Elton Trueblood’s belief that Christians should be viewed “as the company of the committed, an ecclesiology that points to the relational and participatory nature of church.”¹² The “Priesthood of All Believers” supports a highly participatory, communal approach to spiritual formation and ministry. It also encourages non-ordained church members to exercise their right to creatively engage in the mission of God as God call them. This celebrated Baptist distinctive offers special legitimacy to this project as it encourages the successful fulfillment of project goals within the framework of Baptist ecclesiology.

Second Baptist needs a spiritual formation program that helps its people embrace the divine image, seek *shalom*, and faithfully live into their role as members of God’s holy priesthood. Currently, the primary vehicle for spiritual formation at Second Baptist is Sunday school. This program has value, but it is also limited. Sunday morning Bible studies in a low commitment context do not nurture committed, transforming relationships. They also lack the ability to nurture the innovative missional engagement needed for Second Baptist to respond to ministry needs in timely, relevant ways. With this in mind, this project seeks to develop Community Groups as the preferable future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist.

Strategy Goals for Community Groups

The thesis of this project is to develop a small group program at Second Baptist that will foster meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional

¹² Muthiah, *The Priesthood*, 22. Muthiah references Trueblood’s phrase here, taken from the title of his work: Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper, 1961).

engagement within the congregation. The success of Community Groups, therefore, must be determined through specified, measurable objectives which, as reached, will signal the attainment of the aforementioned goals. These objectives are to raise awareness of the transformational potential of Christian community, to offer experiences in meaningful Christian community, to foster personal transformation and congregational change, and to nurture the emergence of new, creative ministry initiatives.

The objectives of awareness and experience are unavoidably intertwined. Awareness of something desirable creates the longing for experience, and experience raises awareness both within and through the affected participant. With this in mind, this project will first seek to raise awareness of the transformational power of Christian community among the congregation of Second Baptist. Through preaching, teaching, and church newsletter articles, the church will become aware of the biblical and sociological evidence that merit deeply committed engagement in Christian community. The biblical concepts of the image of God, *shalom*, and the “Priesthood of All Believers” must become familiar to Second Baptist. The emerging biblical vision for Second Baptist presented in worship in preparation for Community Groups must affirm commitment to Christian community as essential for personal and congregational transformation. Additionally, Second Baptist members must understand Block’s affirmation that “the small group is the unit of transformation.”¹³ The success of Community Groups at Second Baptist will be measured by the growing awareness among church members of the importance of Christian Community in general, and the transformational power of committed Christian small groups specifically. The change in awareness will be

¹³ Block, *Community*, 95.

measured both by surveying Community Group participants after their group experience ends, and by surveying the congregation about their understanding of the value and potential of Christian community during a visioning weekend scheduled to take place near the end of the first year of Community Groups.

Awareness will increase as members of Second Baptist experience meaningful relationships within their Community Groups. In his book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, Ralph Tyler explains that “for a given objective to be attained, a student must have experiences that give him an opportunity to practice the kind of behavior implied by the objective.”¹⁴ Community Groups will emphasize the need for a certain kind of experience in Christian community. Specifically, participants will be invited to commit to groups where they are encouraged to nurture their relationships with God and others, as well as to join together in the service of others. This is what Augsburger refers to as tripolar spirituality: “It is inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed.”¹⁵ Augsburger further describes tripolar spirituality as the “breakthrough in which: love of God transcends and transforms love of self, love of God and love of neighbor become one, love of neighbor and love of self become one, and submission to God and solidarity with neighbor are indivisible.”¹⁶ Through their participation in Community Groups, members of Second Baptist will practice this kind of spirituality, will therefore become more aware of the potential of such experiences, and will then share details of their experience with others in the congregation. As these

¹⁴ Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 65.

¹⁵ Augsburger, *Dissident*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

experiences continue to raise awareness over time, the congregation's growing understanding of holistic spiritual formation will support the ongoing emergence of Community Groups as the preferred vehicle of formation at Second Baptist. The objective of experience can be measured by the number of participants actively engaged in Community Groups, participant feedback at the end of the group experience, and the number of new participants who enlist in the second year.

Community Groups will foster personal transformation and congregational change. As group members participate in their Community Groups they will experience the kind of transformation possible through committed Christian community. This transformation will nurture an ever-changing understanding and approach to spiritual formation and ministry within the congregation. Henry Cloud discusses the struggle to help someone understand the necessity of Christian small groups for human transformation in his book, *Making Small Groups Work*. Cloud recounts a situation in which one small group member accused him of misrepresenting the Bible, saying, "All this stuff about vulnerability and opening up to each other in groups is not in the Bible. You are distorting the way people grow. We are to teach the Word of God and let the Bible do its work."¹⁷ Cloud then went on to share several Bible passages with this person "that affirmed the basic power of community and relationships and the New Testament's commands for us to walk in community."¹⁸ Finally, Cloud reflected on this person's own story, recalling instances with the Christian community in general and a Christian small group in particular which had played a vital role in this person's transformation. Cloud

¹⁷ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 20.

¹⁸ Ibid.

said to the individual, “In that small group, you lived out and experienced biblical truths, you opened up to others about your struggles, you confessed your sins to others, they offered and helped you feel God’s forgiveness, you held each other accountable, they prayed with you, and you sought God together.”¹⁹ Finally Cloud said, “Your growth came from the role that body of Christ, your small group and your leader, played in your life. They delivered the goods you learned about the Bible. They obeyed what it said and you were the beneficiary.”²⁰ Similarly, Community Groups will help members of Second Baptist affirm the role Christian community has played and must continue to play in their own spiritual development. Group members will come to understand and experience the necessity of Christian small groups in their pursuit of wholeness.

Parker Palmer speaks of the need for groups such as these in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*. In reference to his own small group experience in a Quaker community, Palmer describes

a rare form of community—one that supports rather than supplants the individual quest for integrity—that is rooted in two basic beliefs. First, we all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution or leader. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice for three reasons: 1) the journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo, 2) the path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company, and 3) the destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture where the inner teacher is calling us.²¹

¹⁹ Cloud and Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

²¹ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 26.

Palmer calls the kind of group that knows how to welcome the soul and hear its voice a circle of trust.²² These groups make the soul feel safe and welcome. Second Baptist Community Groups will nurture and environment where souls feel safe and welcome. In doing this, Community Groups will create transformational space where members can become vulnerable with each other and with the spirit.

Dr. Archibald Hart elaborated on the power of this kind of vulnerability in the Fuller Seminary Doctor of Ministry seminar, “Minister’s Personal Growth.” Hart said that keeping things buried inside contributes to depression. He said there is actually something that happens inside our brains when we say something out loud that moves us toward health. When we pray out loud or share something with someone else, the issue that was lodged in one place in our brain will then move throughout our brain. This enables us to process and deal with our problems in a way that facilitates health and wholeness.²³ Augsburger affirms the necessity of community in the pursuit of wholeness. He writes, “Spirituality is not free-floating; it has a location, and that location is community. Spirituality is not a private inner temple; it is a place of meeting where we can safely share our private souls, and that meeting place is community.”²⁴ Furthermore, explains Augsburger, “individual spirituality is only one part of personhood, one half of the alternating rhythm of human wholeness. The other half is community. Christian spirituality is a public encounter with the God who meets us in community. The natural

²² Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 22.

²³ Archibald Hart, “Minister’s Personal Growth” (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, September 30, 2008.)

²⁴ Augsburger, *Dissident*, 64.

habitat of any true disciple of Jesus is community.”²⁵ Second Baptist Community Groups will invite church members into a high commitment experience in vulnerable Christian community. This experience will facilitate a movement toward wholeness among group members, and in time, the larger congregation. The achievement of this objective will be measured through a survey completed by group members at the end of their group experience.

Community Groups will also foster innovative missional engagement, resulting in the emergence of new, creative ministry initiatives. In their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch state, “Mission is not merely an activity of the church. It is the very heartbeat and work of God. It is in the very being of God that the basis for the missionary enterprise is found. God is a sending God, with a desire to see humankind and creation reconciled, redeemed, and healed.”²⁶ Bonhoeffer agrees, writing, “The church is only the church when it exists for others.”²⁷ This is one of the reasons why this project is developing an approach to spiritual formation that includes small group members engaging in common service together.

Additionally, this project seeks to help Second Baptist become more agile and effective in its response to emerging ministry needs. Alan Hirsch encourages this in his book, *The Forgotten Ways*, by inviting churches to nurture apostolic genius, “the built-in life force and guiding mechanism of God’s people, and the missional DNA that make it

²⁵ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 64.

²⁶ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 18.

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 382.

up.”²⁸ Hirsch contends that when apostolic genius exists in a missional equation, it prompts the power of the gospel to be unleashed out onto the world, and missional movement naturally begins to happen.²⁹ In pursuit of this, Community Groups will be encouraged to create new ministry initiatives for which they will not normally need the approval of any church leadership body. Tom Sine calls these kinds of ministry initiatives mustard seeds. In his book, *The New Conspirators*, Sine encourages churches to “consider creating a small group program that enables participants to discover God’s mission call on their lives. In other words, create small groups to equip your members to look beyond their own needs and discover how God can use their mustard seeds to be a part of God’s compassionate response to the needs of others in your community.”³⁰ By encouraging groups to either form around a common sense of ministry calling or to discern a common mission during their group life, Community Groups will nurture apostolic genius as they foster the emergence of mustard seeds of mission. This objective will be measured by accounting for the new ministries that have emerged via Community Groups at the end of the pilot project.

The Content of the Strategy

In order to accomplish the stated goals of this project, Community Groups will be informed by specific parameters and materials. Small groups will be the primary tool for achieving project goals. Breen and Kallestad’s “up, out, and in” model for a balanced

²⁸ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

³⁰ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 278-79.

Christian life will provide the basic parameters for each group.³¹ Community Groups will be asked to develop a group covenant which will facilitate a high level of member commitment to their small group. Groups will also practice specific spiritual practices, each chosen to support the fulfillment of project goals and informed by trustworthy spiritual formation resources.

The selection of the small group as the vehicle for this new spiritual formation program at Second Baptist was intentional. Block writes, “The future is created one room at a time, one gathering at a time. Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. This means the small group is where transformation takes place.”³² Block further states, “The power of the small group cannot be overemphasized.”³³ Peace affirms the transformational potential of the small group. In his book, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth*, he writes, “Something happens when not more than twelve or thirteen people gather to discuss a particular topic in a setting that allows for face-to-face interaction. There is a give and take, a sharing, a mutual support that can be quite overwhelming.”³⁴ Peace further explains, “In a small group that is functioning properly, there is a warmth, acceptance, honest sharing, forgiveness, and mutual encouragement—hence an atmosphere highly conducive to

³¹ Breen and Kallestad, *The Passionate*, 81-105.

³² Block, *Community*, 93.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ Richard Peace, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 129.

growth and change.”³⁵ In view of the potential small groups, this tool was chosen as the vehicle of transformation and ministry for this new spiritual formation program.

Community Groups needed basic parameters that would support the creation of a culture of meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement. In this regard, this project was informed by Breen and Kallestad’s book, *The Passionate Church*. The authors use a triangle to describe the necessary ingredients for a balanced Christian life. These biblical ingredients are “in, out and up.”³⁶ Breen and Kallestad reference Micah 6, which states, “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God. . . . He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:6, 8). Breen and Kallestad write, “Here we have, in one verse, the summation of what is expected of us as followers of Jesus. It is a lifestyle balance in our relationships: up, in, and out. ‘Act justly’—Out; ‘love mercy’—In; ‘walk humbly with your God’—Up.”³⁷ This triangular pattern for Christian spirituality is consistent with Augsburg’s presentation of tripolar spirituality. Augsburg writes of tripolar spirituality, “The spirituality of personal transformation (the inner journey), the experience of divine encounter (the God-ward journey), and the relation of integrity and solidarity with neighbor (the co-human journey with friend and enemy, with neighbor and persecutor) as interdependent.”³⁸ Tripolar spirituality is not “the ordinary quest

³⁵ Peace, *Pilgrimage*, 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁸ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 13.

spirituality of individual discipline and discovery, but a communal spirituality of disciples following a cluster of practices, practices that are lived out in the relationships of community, where believers share in the rewarding struggles of faithful dialogue, discernment, and mutual discovery.”³⁹ Breen and Kallestad’s triangular pattern is reflective of this three-dimensional approach to spirituality and will provide a clear guide for groups as they embark on their time together. Each group will work out the substance of that guidance in their group covenant.

Icenogle writes, “The word *covenant* has its etymology in the word *convene*. Covenant brings two or more persons together. It is a binding and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals to do or not to do specific things. The gathering of persons into a small group carries the immediate implication of *covenant*.”⁴⁰ Icenogle reflects further on the nature of healthy covenant groups, saying these groups “are called together to experience the salvation of God among one another and to bring the *shalom* of God to persons and groups outside themselves. Every covenant group has a call to itself and beyond itself.”⁴¹ In this spirit, each Second Baptist Community Group will begin with a covenant. This covenant will include, but is not limited to, these commitments: 1) “in, out, and up” components, 2) weekly attendance, 3) confidentiality, 4) respect, 5) meals, 6) a two-hour weekly meeting, 7) an approximate thirty-six-week group life, and 8) childcare if applicable. In addition to these commitments, group leaders will be

³⁹ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 20.

⁴⁰ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

encouraged to consider adapting their covenant to include the learning path, ministry objectives, and unique challenges and desires of their specific group.

An essential part of each covenant will be the “up, out, and in” components. This means that while every Community Group will have its own unique personality, all group members will also begin with a commitment to: 1) nurture their relationships with God (up); 2) care for one another (in); and 3) participate in some area of service together. Some groups will form around a common ministry interest; others will discern their group’s outward focus over time. Attendance will also be a requirement of group membership. James Wilhoit, in his book, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community*, writes, “We generally find help and healing through community when we are willing to commit to being part of a community, period.”⁴² The most important piece of curriculum for each Community Group is the human curriculum, meaning the content that each person’s life brings to the group. If group members do not show up consistently, community will not happen. Each member is affected by the presence or absence of other members. In this regard, confidentiality and respect will be essential to each group covenant because this nurtures the trust necessary for an effective small group experience. Groups will be asked to share a meal each week because, as Rasmussen states, the “perennial Christian strategy is to gather the folks, break the bread, and tell the stories.”⁴³ Sharing meals also breaks down social

⁴² James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If The Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 184.

⁴³ Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” 119.

boundaries, and Peace explains that meals are an essential part of any good small group.⁴⁴ With the inclusion of a meal, group members will be asked to plan for two-hour weekly meetings. They will do this for thirty-six weeks, approximately eight months. Finally, if any group members have children, the group will be asked to consider how the group can collectively provide childcare for those children. Each group's covenant will serve as the group's basic rule of life.

Community Groups will engage in specific corporate spiritual practices that support this project as it seeks to foster meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement. These practices will include, but are not limited to: small group community, participation, sharing spiritual stories, noticing, study, sharing meals, Sabbath, service, and celebration. Understanding and utilization of these practices will be supported by resources from several respected authors on the subject of spiritual formation.

Engaging in small group community is itself an important spiritual practice. In his book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes, "It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed."⁴⁵ He further acknowledges that "the communal life is again being recognized by Christians today as the grace that it is, as the extraordinary, the 'roses and lilies' of the

⁴⁴ Richard Peace, "Spiritual Formation and Discipleship in a Postmodern World" (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 22, 2009.)

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), 20.

Christian life.”⁴⁶ Each time Community Groups gather, members will be practicing this grace that Christians have enjoyed since the beginning of the Church. Foster discusses the fact that for the early Christians, being gathered together was a vital feature of their faith. Foster writes, “First they were gathered in the sense that they actually met as a group, and second, as they met, they were gathered into a unity of spirit that transcended their individualism.”⁴⁷ Icenogle explains that *koinonia*, the Greek word for community, is a descriptive word for the gospel’s impact on all aspects of human relationships in the book of Acts.⁴⁸ Icenogle contends, “[The] apostles understood that the reality of reconciliation would not happen unless there was intentionality and space to practice the disciplines of reconciled relationships. From the model of Jesus they understood this disciplined space to be in small groups of persons who came together around the real person of Jesus.”⁴⁹ Icenogle later argues that “spiritual growth is the process and product of being in community. Isolated individuals cannot grow spiritually. We remain in spiritual infancy when we refuse to participate in community.”⁵⁰ In light of this, the practice of participating in a small group—the essence of this ministry—is essential for the spiritual transformation of people at Second Baptist.

Community Groups will be successful to the degree that group members engage in the spiritual practice of participation. Augsburg writes, “Participation is the central

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 20.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Celebration*, 163.

⁴⁸ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 259-260.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

theological framework of all careful thought about spirituality. Participating is the soul of all active imitation of Christ. Authentic spirituality is self transforming, God encountering, and other embracing. It accepts no substitute for actual participation.”⁵¹ Augsburg further declares that “nothing is real until it is embodied.”⁵² Participation is a vital spiritual practice. This paper has noted the need to raise participation among the majority of the membership of Second Baptist. Participation at Second is hindered by a number of factors, including cultural changes and the increasing busyness of members. In spite of other pressures on their schedules, Community Group members must practice participation, the discipline of showing up. When they honor the group covenant and participate, they will experience the reward of transformation. Participation will support them in their pursuit of wholeness through Christian community.

Sharing stories will be one of the more significant spiritual practices for Community Groups. As Group members tell their spiritual stories, they will grow in their relationships with each other and with God. In his book, *Testimony*, Thomas Long affirms the importance of people sharing their spiritual stories. Long writes, “Christians believe we cannot tell the truth, not the whole truth, without talking about God, and if we cannot tell the whole truth, we cannot be fully alive as human beings.”⁵³ Long further explains, “When we speak about our faith, we talk our way toward belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply. Trying to put our faith into words is a part of

⁵¹ Augsburg, *Dissident*, 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵³ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 5.

discovering what we know about God, believe about God, and trust about God.”⁵⁴

Similarly, Peace encourages believers to write out and share their spiritual autobiographies, “the story of God’s interaction in our lives.”⁵⁵ He states that when we write our spiritual stories, “it draws strands of our lives together in a way that points us to their meaning; it reminds us of where true reality lies in contrast to the illusions of modern life. A spiritual autobiography encourages us to notice God, and as we notice, our lives are changed.”⁵⁶ With this in mind, every Community Group will begin by focusing on the practice of sharing their spiritual stories.

Peace’s book, *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story*, will support this practice. As groups work through Peace’s book, members will learn to name the ways God has and is working in their lives. This process will foster personal growth in the lives of individual group members, and it will also create the relational foundation necessary for the success of each Community Group. Wilhoit describes Christian spiritual formation as the “intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷ He describes it as intentional because he is interested in the deliberate pursuit of spiritual growth and communal because he believes community is the ideal context for formation.⁵⁸ In this regard, Community Group members will spend

⁵⁴ Long, *Testimony*, 6.

⁵⁵ Richard Peace, *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁷ Wilhoit, *Spiritual*, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

approximately three months developing and sharing their spiritual stories in pursuit of meaningful community, personal transformation, and where needed, the ability to experience healing through confession, and to discern their group's common ministry interest.

Community Groups will also practice the discipline of noticing. Icenogle states, "God changes people who walk together with Christ in small groups. This transformational process begins with the practice of intentional observational disciplines."⁵⁹ Icenogle further explains that "observation of the behavior of persons with one another in a small group context helps the leader and the group to prepare themselves for change and transformation, for new action in the realm of God."⁶⁰ In this regard, the discipline of noticing will be vital to the Community Group experience. Diogenes Allen, in *Spiritual Theology*, refers to this discipline as cultivating awareness, or habitual presence. Allen states,

The goal of the Christian life – both in this world and the world to come – is union with God. But this union should not be identified with ecstatic states, even through such states occur. More fundamental to union with God is our sense of God's continual presence, an inner stillness that is available to all Christians. This habitual presence is to be in constant prayer, to be always present to God and to know that God is always present to us.⁶¹

And Brian McLaren, in *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*, refers to this discipline as "practicing God's presence."⁶² McLaren describes it as

⁵⁹ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 188.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 149.

⁶² Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 95.

“learning to be aware of God as constant companion, staying in constant contact with God, living with one’s spiritual windows and doors open to God.”⁶³ Peace’s book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, will introduce this discipline to the groups. His book will help participants cultivate awareness of God by asking them to notice God’s presence in their own stories and in the stories of the other group members. As members learn to notice God’s presence in their collective past, they will also learn to become more attentive to God’s presence in their present. Foster encourages this practice, noting, “If we will observe the relationships that go on between human beings, we will receive a graduate-level-education. We should become attentive to the ordinary relationships we encounter throughout the day: at home, work, and school.”⁶⁴ Utilization of this practice in daily routines will help participants to slow down and pay attention, fostering a spirit of quiet awareness as they move prayerfully through their busy days. This practice will, in turn, support group members in their pursuit of wholeness.

Study will also be an important spiritual practice for Community Groups. Foster describes study as “a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction.”⁶⁵ Willard emphasizes that “in the spiritual discipline of study we engage ourselves, above all, with the written and spoken Word of God.”⁶⁶ The study of Scripture is vital for spiritual growth, but study in Community Groups will not be limited to Scripture. Willard actually expounds on his

⁶³ McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again*, 95.

⁶⁴ Foster, *Celebration*, 74.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 176.

statement about study, commenting, “In study we also strive to see the Word of God at work in the lives of others, in the church, in history, and in nature.”⁶⁷ Foster goes further including books and papers beyond Scripture that are valuable for spiritual growth, nature, and significant relationships.⁶⁸ In this sense, study and noticing are closely related, and both practices benefit from Foster’s rules of study. Foster writes, “[There are] three intrinsic and three extrinsic rules that govern our study. The intrinsic rules are: understanding, interpreting, and evaluating. These are inadequate in themselves. They must be accompanied by the extrinsic aids of experience, other books, and live discussion.”⁶⁹ In this regard, study within the context of Community Groups will support spiritual growth in members, as they are encouraged to study scripture, spiritual practices, ministry, their own lives, and various books of their collective choosing.

Community Groups will engage in the spiritual practice of hospitality. Marjorie Thompson, in her book, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, discussed the concept, writing, “Hospitality in the Ancient Near East was originally offered to complete strangers. . . . Hospitality was a hallmark of virtue for Ancient Jews and Christians. In biblical times, it was a way of meeting and receiving holy presence.”⁷⁰ In Community Groups, many members will first enter the group as strangers. They will then proceed to share meals, open their homes, and open their lives to one another on a weekly basis. In this regard, they will practice hospitality, and they will continue to

⁶⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 177.

⁶⁸ Foster, *Celebration*, 67-76.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁷⁰ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 120-21.

practice this as they move from being strangers to friends. Thompson describes hospitality as “receiving the other, from the heart, into my own dwelling place. It entails providing for the need, comfort, and delight of the other with all the openness, respect, freedom, tenderness, and joy that love itself embodies.”⁷¹ Thompson further explains, “The *other* can be literally anyone apart from ourselves. . . . [Hospitality is an] expression of love where we share who we are as well as what we have.”⁷² As Community Group members share welcome, meals, stories, and kindness together on a weekly basis, they will experience meaningful community and personal transformation through the practice of hospitality.

The spiritual practice of Sabbath will be important to Community Groups. Bass exclaims, “How often people today cry out in exasperation or despair, ‘I just do not have enough time!’ There is so much to do: earn a living, fulfill a vocation, nurture relationships, care for dependents, get some exercise, and clean the house. Moreover, we hope to maintain sanity while doing all of this, and to keep growing as a faithful and loving people at the same time.”⁷³ Bass suggests that in today’s busy world, Sabbath keeping is an essential spiritual practice. In the Bible, she writes, “the Sabbatarian pattern is six days of work, followed by one of rest.”⁷⁴ However, finding one specific holy day of rest for most people is difficult. Members of Second Baptist must learn to observe Sabbath moments when possible during their weekly routine. Bass offers an example:

⁷¹ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 122.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Bass, “Keeping Sabbath,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass, 75.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

“Eugene Peterson describes the ‘sabbaths’ he and his wife observed every Monday: a drive to the country, a psalm, a silent hike for several hours, a quiet evening at home.”⁷⁵

Cancelling programming at Second Baptist will not help members practice Sabbath. They will simply continue to fill their time with more things. Community Groups will create a space for restful, worshipful, renewing, celebrative Sabbath keeping for group members in the midst of their weekly routines.

Henri Nouwen, in *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, writes that the rhythm of the Christian life should move from solitude, to community, to ministry.⁷⁶ Likewise, Icenogle asserts, “Discipleship always moves toward ministry and mission.”⁷⁷ This movement reflects the tripolar approach to spirituality that is central to this project. In this regard, each Community Group will engage in the spiritual practice of service. “Nothing,” contends Foster, “disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service.”⁷⁸ Willard agrees, “In service we engage our goods and strengths in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world.”⁷⁹ With this in mind, each Community Group will be asked to either form a common ministry interest or to discern one over time. The groups will then be expected to practice service together in their selected areas of ministry.

⁷⁵ Bass, “Keeping Sabbath,” 85.

⁷⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 125.

⁷⁷ Icenogle, *Biblical*, 231.

⁷⁸ Foster, *Celebration*, 130.

⁷⁹ Willard, *The Spirit*, 183.

Finally, Community Groups will practice celebration. Foster notes, “Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. It is central to all the spiritual disciplines.”⁸⁰ Foster gives celebration this place in his study of spiritual disciplines because “joy is the end result of the spiritual disciplines functioning in our lives. God brings about the transformation of our lives through the disciplines, and we will not know genuine joy until there is a transforming work within us.”⁸¹ Foster goes on to say that “many people try to come into joy far too soon. Often we try to pump people with joy when nothing has happened in their lives. God has not broken into the routine experiences of their daily existence. Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are redeemed.”⁸² In addition to the joy of weekly meetings, Community Groups will be encouraged to practice celebration each time they finish a particular focus of study. For example, when groups finish *Spiritual Autobiography*, they will plan to do something celebratory together the following week. This integration of celebration will support the vitality of this ministry and spiritual health of its participants.

This project’s utilization of the aforementioned spiritual practices is informed by resources from several respected authors in the field of spiritual formation. These include: Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Richard Peace, Dorothy Bass, Brian McLaren, David Augsburger, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Diogenes Allen, Gareth Icenogle, Marjorie Thompson, Henri Nouwen, and Eugene Peterson. Their presentation of these and other

⁸⁰ Foster, *Celebration*, 190-91.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁸² *Ibid.*

spiritual practices have provided valuable resources for the project creator and the Community Groups themselves.

Finally, Community Groups will be invited to either form around a common area of service or to discern one together over time. In this way group members will experience transformation as they embody together their group's unique missional vocation. Groups can decide to engage in an existing ministry at Second Baptist, but will also be encouraged to dream about new ministry possibilities. In response to this, group synergy will foster the creation of new ministry initiatives at Second Baptist. This supports the project goal of fostering innovative missional engagement.

Target Population and Leadership

The success of the Community Group pilot project will be contingent upon the successful recruitment and preparation of group participants. This process will involve the careful selection of group leaders, leadership development, congregational preparation, group member recruitment, and each group's selection of a common mission focus. This process will support the launch and continued success of the pilot project.

The success of Community Groups will depend heavily upon the group leaders. Each Community Group will have two leaders: a facilitator and a hospitality coordinator. The facilitator will either lead group discussion or coordinate leadership. The hospitality coordinator will be responsible for group communication during the week and for either hosting the meeting or arranging a schedule of hosts. It is essential that each Community Group has good leadership. Good leaders will make up for flaws in philosophy and structure. When they work together in leader meetings, good leaders will create a synergy

that will foster the kinds of ideas that are necessary for continual ministry improvement, as well as the innovation in mission sought after by this project. Also, strong leaders will require less training to ensure a positive group experience, and will more easily attract church members to join the new groups. All of this makes leadership selection a vital component of the Community Group strategy for success. With this in mind, the Senior Pastor will first recruit an intergenerational group of leaders from Second Baptist who are known to be mature, gifted, and respected by the congregation.

The next step in preparation for the launch of the pilot project will be leadership development. In addition to being mature, gifted, and respected, these men and women will also have had some history of leading small groups. With a background in small group leadership, they will need less development and oversight and will ensure a positive beginning for the new ministry. Leadership development will consist of three meetings. The first will include every leader from the congregation deemed to fit the stated leadership parameters. These leaders will be identified in consultation with the Associate Pastor, and will be invited to the meeting by the Senior Pastor. During this first meeting the Senior Pastor will present a vision for Community Groups, outlining the basic parameters and goals of the groups. The Senior Pastor will answer questions and will then present each potential leader with the opportunity to lead a Community Group.

The second leader meeting will be comprised of those who have committed to lead a Community Group. Leaders who have not chosen their co-leaders will be given the opportunity to pair up at this meeting. During this meeting the Senior Pastor will go into more detail about the nature, structure, and goals of Community Groups. Group leaders should leave this meeting with a clear idea of the purpose of the groups. Group leaders

will be given their copy of Peace's book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, and will be instructed to read the section on leading a group in the back of the book before the next leader meeting. Leaders will then be instructed to go ahead and begin recruiting group members. The groups will have eight to ten participants and the leaders should try to secure at least half of these people before the official sign-up date.

In the third leader meeting, group leaders will be invited to discuss the leadership principles presented by Peace in *Spiritual Autobiography*. They will discuss these principles and will be prompted to share best practices in group leadership learned from their past experiences. Additionally, leaders will be invited to ask any questions they may want to know before the official launch of their group.

The congregation must also be well prepared for the launch of Community Groups. In light of this, before the first leader meeting a series of messages will be preached on the importance of community and service in Christian discipleship. The future formation of Community Groups will be mentioned in these sermons so that the congregation knows there will be a specific opportunity available for them to respond to what they have heard. Then, in the early fall, themes relevant to Community Groups will be preached to further prepare the congregation to participate. Additionally, after the initial meeting with prospective Community Group leaders, the Associate Pastor and I, as the Senior Pastor, will write a series of church newsletter articles about Community Groups. This will include the opportunity to email any questions, as well as the listing of sign-up and start dates. This recruitment will work in tandem with the recruiting being done by the group leaders.

The opportunity to participate in a Community Group will be open to all members of Second Baptist, but given the nature of the groups, leaders should know that a certain profile for group members is preferable. Community Groups require high attendance, so group members should be willing to offer a high level of commitment. The most important curriculum is the human curriculum. In this regard, groups will benefit from an intergenerational makeup of women and men. Finally, group members should be open-minded. This will be conducive to healthy conversations, attempting new spiritual practices, and the possibility for transformation.

Finally, each Community Group should have a common ministry focus. Group leaders can decide upon this before the group begins, or can wait and allow their group to discern this focus together. Groups that begin with a ministry focus will have the ability to specifically recruit church members who have an interest in that ministry. Groups that do not begin with a ministry focus will begin with more mystery in this area, and perhaps a greater possibility for something surprisingly innovative to happen. The project will benefit and learn from both approaches to the ministry focus.

Chapter 6 has presented an overall ministry strategy for Community Groups. This will provide the framework for the pilot project, which will implement these strategies at Second Baptist. The details of the pilot project will be presented in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS AND EVALUATION

This goal of this project has been to develop a new small group ministry that would utilize specific spiritual practices to foster meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement within the congregation. In an effort to achieve these goals, a Community Group pilot project was implemented in 2009. This chapter will describe the implementation and evaluation process. The chapter will outline the pilot project, presenting an overarching timeline, and including a plan for identifying and preparing group leaders, as well as a strategy for recruiting group members. This chapter will then list literary, physical, and human resources that support project implementation. Finally, the chapter will present how conversations and a questionnaire were utilized to evaluate and refine the new ministry initiative.

Pilot Project Summary and Timeline

In light of needs at Second Baptist and the biblical witness of Christian community as the preferable context for transformation and catalyst for mission, it was decided that Community Groups would be developed at Second Baptist. This program

was implemented with the development of guidelines, leadership selection, guidance, and the launch of six Community Groups.

Phase One: Planning, Leader Selection, and Congregational Recruitment

The pilot project began in 2009 as the Associate Pastor and I, the Senior Pastor, initially discussed the idea and made preparations. Phase One consisted of planning, leadership selection, and congregational recruitment. These were the building blocks towards launching successful Community Groups.

Planning

The first step involved developing guidelines and resources. As discussed in Chapter 6, it was decided that the small groups would be guided by the “up, in, and out” parameters, where members establish a covenant and engage in specific corporate spiritual practices. Specified corporate spiritual practices were noted, including service, which would accomplish the outward component, and result in the development of a group ministry focus. The parameters of these groups, by their nature, would support the project goals of fostering meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement at Second Baptist.

The basic makeup of Community Groups was also established. Each group would include two leaders: a facilitator and a hospitality coordinator. These leaders would ensure group discussions were well led and that a culture of hospitality was being nurtured. Based on Peace’s suggestion that a small group should consist of between five and thirteen people, it was decided that Community Groups would preferably consist of eight people, with the possibility of no more than ten.

Finally, resources for the Community Groups were identified. Resources on spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines from Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Marjorie Thompson, Eugene Peterson, Richard Peace, Brian McLaren, and Dorothy Bass were identified and studied. *Community* by Block and *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry* by Icenogle were also helpful in the areas of leadership and community formation. Most importantly, Richard Peace's book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, was identified as an ideal resource for Community Groups to use in their initial efforts at building relationships with one another.

Leadership Selection and Training

The second step in Phase One involved selecting and training leaders, which took place in the summer of 2009. In preparation for this part of the process, a series of messages was preached related to Community Groups in an effort to prepare the congregation and, specifically, potential leaders and other participants for the new ministry. Then, the Associate Pastor and I identified potential leaders who met the criteria of being mature, respected, and gifted for small group leadership. In an effort to establish intergenerational groups, these adults spanned the age range, from their twenties to their eighties. Potential leaders were invited to a Community Group leader interest meeting. In this meeting they were informed about the new ministry initiative and invited to commit to lead groups in the fall of 2009. Ultimately, there were enough leaders to form six Community Groups.

Three leadership training sessions were held in preparation for the start of Community Groups in the fall. The first meeting was the initial interest meeting,

designed to present potential leaders with a vision for Community Groups, outlining the basic parameters and goals of the groups, as well as to offer attendees the opportunity to lead a group. The second leader meeting was comprised of those who had committed to lead a Community Group. More detail was given about the nature, structure, and goals of Community Groups. Group leaders left this meeting with a clear understanding of the purpose of the groups. They were also given copies of Peace's book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, and instructed to read the sections on leadership and the discipline of noticing before the next leader meeting.¹ Leaders were then instructed to begin recruiting group members. In the third meeting, group leaders were invited to discuss the leadership principles presented by Peace in *Spiritual Autobiography*. Leaders then discussed these principles and were asked to share best small group leadership practices they had learned from past experiences. In addition to this discussion, leaders were invited to ask the any questions they may want to know before the official launch of their groups.

Congregational Recruitment

The official Community Group member recruitment process was preempted by the congregational preparation. As mentioned, a series of sermons was preached related to Community Groups in the spring and summer of 2009. Additionally, the Associate Pastor and I wrote a series of articles for the church newsletter related to Community Groups. This raised awareness among church members before they were asked to commit to groups. Then, at the last leader meeting in August, group leaders were asked to start recruiting group members. Leaders were told that groups would have a better chance of

¹ Peace, *Spiritual*, 89-112.

being full if at least half of their participants were committed before the church was given the opportunity to sign up. This would also ensure that group leaders were able to select some of their participants. Then during the last two weeks of September, church members were invited to sign up via phone, email, or at a table after Sunday worship. In the preceding weeks in September, this opportunity was mentioned after each worship service and the congregation was also alerted via the church newsletter and church-wide emails.

Phase 2: Program Launch

In October of 2009, Second Baptist members were committed to participating in six Community Groups. Each group met for approximately eight months. When the Community Groups started in October, three groups had ten members, one group had nine, one group had eight, and one group had four. The group with four members was the only group whose leaders did not recruit before the official sign-up date.

Four of the groups began with a specified ministry focus. These were: cross-cultural ministry, justice ministry, interfaith ministry, and gardening. Two of these groups decided not to specify a ministry focus, but to discern one during their group's time together. Five of these groups started in October. The gardening group decided to start in January so that its group life would extend through the growing season.

In conversation with the leaders, it was decided some groups could have the freedom to veer slightly from the initial project guidelines. For instance, the gardening group decided to meet every other week. The justice group decided to meet for an hour and a half three times a week, instead of two hours weekly. One group, which was

comprised of only women, decided they only wanted to have a meal together once a month because they were regularly responsible for preparing meals for their families. Finally, the interfaith group decided not to use *Spiritual Autobiography*, but rather work on creating a group autobiography that was comprised of the stories of everyone in the group. This group narrative idea was presented as part of their effort to create a tool for an interfaith group to use in the future. This group also unsuccessfully tried to recruit people of other faiths and ethnicities to join their group.

Initially I was hesitant about some of these variations, but decided to allow them in an effort to gather information that might improve the ministry. Throughout the process I stayed in communication with group leaders through regular leader meetings and emails. This communication allowed leaders to learn from one another and give feedback to me, including updates on the evolution of each group's ministry focus. In May of 2010, every group except the gardening group ended its time together. The gardening group, which started meeting in late January, continued meeting until the following September.

Phase 3: Closing Retreat and Evaluation

The pilot project successfully introduced Community Groups to Second Baptist, and served as an opportunity for those involved to identify important ways this new ministry could become more effective in the future. A retreat marked the end of the groups in the summer of 2010. This time provided closure, as well as an opportunity for participants to give feedback to be used for future Community Groups.

Community Group Retreat

In June 2010, all Community Group participants were invited to attend a retreat at Conception Abbey, a retreat center two hours from Liberty. This end-of-the-year retreat was optional, and consequently only twenty-one participants attended. During the retreat participants met for worship three times. During Friday evening worship an abbey monk was invited to speak about Sabbath. On Saturday morning participants attended morning prayers, and then worshipped together in a service in which another monk was invited to speak about community. After lunch participants worshipped together a third time during which they engaged in a discussion about their Community Group experience.

Evaluation

Throughout the life of these groups, the Associate Pastor and I met with leaders for leadership development and group evaluation conversations. Group leaders were also invited to regularly report on their groups' processes via email. In addition, during the retreat participants provided helpful feedback. Group leaders were also asked to suggest possible future Community Group leaders from their groups. After the retreat, all Community Group participants were asked to fill out an online survey about their Community Group experience.

During the summer of 2010 I evaluated Community Groups based on personal observations, as well as leader and participant feedback. Some Community Group leaders decided to lead another group the next year, and new leaders were recruited in response to suggestions made by leaders from the previous year. In July, leaders for the next series of Community Groups were invited to come together for leadership training. The groups

were publicized to the congregation in August, and in the fall of 2010 seven new Community Groups were launched.

Leadership Development

Icenogle asserts, “The development of a healthy small group ministry structure has to do with the careful appointment and placement of key leadership.”² Icenogle points to the ministry of Jesus, observing, “Jesus understood this basic leadership rule: lead a small group of leaders who will in turn lead their small groups of leaders, who will lead the people.”³ With this in mind, leadership selection and development were an important part of the Community Group pilot project.

Good small group leadership was necessary to support the success of the pilot project for multiple reasons. The positive reputation of good leaders would attract participants and lend credibility to the new ministry. Good leaders would strengthen the ministry with their skills, ideas, and experience. Their collective leadership would also create positive synergy in leader meetings that would foster continual ministry improvement. Experienced leaders would also require less training, and each leader would support the development of other leaders through their collaboration. All of these factors made leadership selection a vital component of the strategy for the successful launch of Community Groups.

In light of this, the Associate Pastor and I compiled an intergenerational list of men and women who were mature, respected, experienced, and gifted in the area of small

² Icenogle, *Biblical*, 93.

³ *Ibid.*, 161.

group leadership. These prospective leaders were then invited to the Community Group leader interest meeting where a vision for Community Groups was presented, which included congregational needs, the proposed ministry guidelines, and goals for the program. Attendees were invited to ask questions and to consider a commitment to co-lead one of the new groups. They were given one week to make a decision regarding their commitment. In response to this, there were enough leaders to form six Community Groups.

Each group had two leaders: a facilitator and hospitality coordinator. These leaders worked to fulfill the goals of fostering meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement within their Community Groups. Specifically, the group facilitator either led weekly discussion or assigned that duty to other members. The hospitality coordinator either hosted the weekly meeting or coordinated a hosting rotation, and communicated with group members during the week to encourage them and to coordinate food responsibilities and childcare needs.

Leadership training was an important component of the pilot project. Community Group leaders were given specific tasks for their own preparation and development. Leadership guidance was offered to Community Group leaders through the three preparatory meetings as well as with best practices conversations between the leaders and me every two months during the pilot project.

The first meeting was the initial interest meeting. It focused on ministry philosophy, purpose, and parameters. First, I explained that I as Senior Pastor I would not dictate their every move in this ministry, but would count on them as ministry partners. This would be a mutual learning process. Second, contextual needs and theological issues

mentioned earlier in this paper were presented. In light of these, the goals of fostering meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement were discussed. Third, the guiding philosophy of Community Groups was presented. The approach to spiritual formation was framed as a pursuit of wholeness, and the need for a three-dimensional approach to spiritual formation was presented as supportive of this pursuit. Celtic Christian models of ministry were discussed as being supportive. Fourth, group parameters, such as the “up, in, and out” principles, group size, meeting times, the thirty-six week duration, the importance of weekly group meals, childcare responsibilities, the importance of a covenant, and other details related to the covenant were presented. Fifth, the ministry focus component was discussed with emphasis on creativity and discernment. Sixth, the importance of meeting in homes was emphasized. Seventh, the rationale and responsibilities of the two leaders were addressed. Eighth, curriculum options were suggested. Ninth, the preferred start date for groups was given. Finally, an open discussion time was facilitated, driven by the questions of the potential leaders. A meeting agenda had been given to attendees at the beginning of the meeting and participants used it as a tool to reference items presented during the discussion.

During the second meeting with those who had committed to lead groups, more detail was provided about the nature, structure, and goals of Community Groups. Group leaders had more questions, and this meeting gave them an opportunity discuss them. Group leaders were given a copy of Richard Peace’s book *Spiritual Autobiography*, and instructed to read the section on leading a group and the discipline of noticing in the back

of the book before the next leader meeting.⁴ Leaders were then instructed to begin recruiting group members.

By the third meeting, Community Group leaders had chosen a ministry focus if they intended on beginning with one, had members signed up for their group, and were preparing for their first group meetings. This meeting was comprised of a brief presentation followed by a series of discussion questions. The presentation was given with three goals in mind. First, leaders were reminded that these were Community Groups, not task groups. They were encouraged to resist letting their mission foci become the sole purpose of their groups. Second, leaders were reminded to establish a covenant in their first meeting, and to talk to their groups about the importance of regular attendance being a part of this covenant. Finally, the group leaders discussed how to be a good group leader. The leaders discussed the section on leadership in Peace's *Spiritual Autobiography* as well as Block's thoughts on how to foster transformational community. Block's practical instructions on the nature of community and small groups, the importance of hospitality, the kinds of questions that foster community, and the significance of using physical space that supports community were helpful.⁵

The group leaders also provided good insight for one another from their own experiences. They emphasized the importance of preparation, giving everyone a chance to share, monitoring the time, and managing talkative group members. It was a beneficial discussion. For instance, one leader suggested assigning one group member the responsibility of monitoring group "rabbit chasing" (that is, spending discussion time

⁴ Peace, *Spiritual*, 89-112.

⁵ Block, *Community*.

talking about tangential subjects). Another leader felt that this might seem cold and businesslike and would hinder the building of community, especially among her female group members. In contrast, this leader suggested having a space during the meeting for members to share off-topic ideas and struggles. These kinds of conversations were instructive for the leaders as they continued to grow in their experience and ability. The shared reflections from Community Group leaders, combined with the leadership insights of Peace and Block, served as instructive resources for best practices conversations during Community Group leader meetings.

Resources

Several important resources supported the Community Group pilot project. Peace's book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, served as the initial group material for every Community Group, as well as a primer for small group leadership. Additionally, the pilot project utilized meeting space, the shared meal, financial resources, and a retreat center. All of these resources supported the success of the pilot project.

Spiritual Autobiography served as a significant resource for Community Groups. Peace explains that the book is intended to teach group members three things: "1) How to examine your life in order to understand the ways in which God has been active there; 2) How to notice the activity of God in your life and in the lives of those around you; and 3) How to share with others what God has been doing in your life and your responses to God's activity—the good, the bad, and the ugly!"⁶ These purposes helped Community Groups accomplish two important tasks in their early weeks. First, the curriculum helped

⁶ Peace, *Spiritual*, 7.

group members cultivate awareness of God. The discipline of noticing helped members to pay attention to God's presence in their stories, as well as in their daily routines, fostering wholeness.

Secondly, Peace's book helped group members form deeper relationships with one another. The book gave each group member the necessary tools to write their own spiritual story and share this story with their group. The sharing of stories in an atmosphere of confidentiality fostered the rich, trusting relationships necessary for meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovation in mission.

Thirdly, Peace organized *Spiritual Autobiography* in a way that set a good tone for how group members were to learn from and relate to one another throughout their time together. In Peace's leader notes he emphasizes the role of group leader being someone who asks questions, guides discussion, models answers, keeps time, and exercises sensitivity to others in the group.⁷ This is a thoughtful, respectful, non-domineering style of small group leadership that facilitates a safe and enriching community in which Christians can grow. Peace's leadership guidelines set the tone for Community Groups to effectively move members toward wholeness in community.

Meeting space was another important resource for Community Groups. Block writes, "Every room we occupy serves as a metaphor for the larger community that we want to create. This is true socially and physically. . . . Meeting rooms are traditionally designed for efficiency, control, and business as we know it. Change the room, change

⁷ Peace, *Spiritual*, 106.

the culture.”⁸ Second Baptist Sunday school classes meet in rooms at the church that have been mostly designed for efficiency. In contrast, Community Groups met in the homes of church members to foster a future of meaningful community at Second Baptist. Groups needed an area to meet that told them “that they were in the right place and were welcome, with eating spaces that refresh and encourage relatedness.”⁹ Within these homes, Block’s guidance urged groups to meet in rooms with certain characteristics. These include: a window with a view of nature, a room where all could be heard, a room with chairs that swivel and have low backs, a room where everyone can sit on the same level, and a room with good atmosphere and art on the wall.¹⁰ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits affirm this by calling one type of small group at their church a “living room,” explaining, “The living room is designed for people to become better acquainted.”¹¹ The comfort, atmosphere, and resources present when meeting in homes supported the success of the pilot project.

Food and table were important resources for the pilot project. Community Groups were encouraged to share a common meal at the beginning of each meeting. Block writes, “Food brings the sacred into the room. It is a symbol of hospitality.”¹² Likewise, Stanley and Willits write that “the kitchen table is often where life’s most meaningful conversations take place. It is here where people share experiences, discuss important

⁸ Block, *Community*, 152.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 154-57.

¹¹ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community: 5 Keys to Building a Small Group Culture* (New York: Multnomah Books, 2004) 118.

¹² Block, *Community*, 148.

decisions, and enjoy meals. It is where people reveal their dreams and disclose their fears. The kitchen table is where close friends begin to feel more like family.”¹³ This is one reason why the weekly meal was an important part of the Community Group pilot project. Members began each week around a common table sharing a meal that they had prepared together. Groups were encouraged to consider a taco stack, where one member would bring tomatoes, one would bring meat, one beans, one cheese, and another chips and salsa. This was an easy meal that groups could collectively prepare each week. The preparation practice, preparation, and benefits of sharing a meal around a kitchen table supported the project goals of community and transformation.

Financial resources were also a consideration for the pilot project. On a weekly basis members were responsible for the ingredients of the shared meal, meaning members needed to pay for and prepare a portion of the meal. The materials also cost money. Members paid for *Spiritual Autobiography* as well as other books their group decided to use. Members also needed to pay for any expenses related to their group’s mission focus. The community garden group actually applied for and was awarded a grant to pay for their gardening tools. That group also was given the use of land at William Jewell College for their garden. Additionally, members that attended the end-of-the-year retreat were asked to pay a \$20 retreat fee. This retreat was financially supplemented by a Second Baptist education fund. Finally, any group that needed to provide childcare had to consider how they would provide this. Some groups paid for childcare; others asked their teenagers to watch the younger children.

¹³ Stanley and Willits, *Creating*, 119.

Finally, Conception Abbey served as a resource for the end-of-the-year retreat. Conception Abbey is located two hours from Second Baptist. Its serene setting, combined with its lodging and dining facilities, provided a wonderful place for the group retreat. Additionally, two of the monks at the Abbey shared with group members about Sabbath and community, and group members also joined the monks for morning prayers. The retreat supported a good, restful, evaluative end to the pilot project.

Additional Personnel

In addition to the Senior Pastor, other personnel were needed to support the Community Group pilot project. These included the Associate Pastor, the Second Baptist ministry and publications assistant, and the retreat worship leader. This additional leadership provided invaluable support for the new ministry initiative.

The Associate Pastor of Second Baptist has job responsibilities in the area of spiritual formation. He was utilized as a consultant for choosing group leaders, as well as for facilitating leadership development meetings. He also wrote some of the preparatory articles for the launch of Community Groups. Finally, the Associate Pastor identified the retreat center and coordinated the administrative details for the end-of-the-year retreat. The Associate Pastor is also the potential future leader of Community Groups.

The ministry and publications assistant of Second Baptist kept the new ministry in front of the congregation. She formatted and published the preparatory articles, sent out Community Group information to the congregation via email and the church website, and helped with the group sign-up process. She also helped format and send out the Community Group survey at the end of the year.

Finally, the project needed a worship leader for the end-of-the-year retreat. This position was filled by a student from William Jewell College. After personally consulting with this student, he planned and led three worship services for the retreat. Group members were pleased with and refreshed by this time of worship together.

Assessment Plan

A pilot project assessment plan was devised to support continued improvement of this new ministry initiative. This plan included evaluative emails and group conversations with Community Group leaders, an evaluative discussion with all participants at the Community Group retreat, the utilization of an assessment survey, the tabulation of results, and the analysis, presentation, and integration of results. This careful assessment plan supports the successful future of Community Groups.

Throughout the pilot project, feedback was requested from group leaders via emails and meetings. An email was sent to group leaders at least once a month asking them to report on their groups, including any insights or concerns. Group leaders were also asked for feedback at the preparatory meetings and the bi-monthly group leader meetings. Leaders offered significant feedback during these meetings that affirmed and sometimes challenged the methods of the small groups. These meetings also helped leaders evaluate their approaches and decipher whether or not they needed to make adjustments. All of this feedback was recorded, both from leader meetings and emails.

Participants were then given an opportunity to share positive and negative feedback in a one-on-one dialogue with me at the Community Group retreat. This evaluative time affirmed the Community Group process and demonstrated the successful

accomplishment of the project goals. This discussion was followed by a brief meeting with leaders where they recommended potential future Community Group leaders. The feedback from this meeting was recorded as well.

In consultation with the Associate Pastor, I created a tool to survey the Community Group participants. Nancy T. Ammerman's book, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, was also utilized as a resource for creating this assessment survey.¹⁴ The ministry and publications assistant then used "Zoomerang" (an online survey-creation tool) to create and send the survey to all Community Group participants via email just before the retreat. Surveys were also mailed to members' homes. A cover letter was attached to the survey explaining the rationale for the survey, giving instructions for filling out the survey, and listing deadlines. The survey did not request names, allowing for anonymity. A copy of this survey is found in the appendix. The ministry assistant used "Zoomerang" to tabulate the survey results and then created an overall tabulation.

The information from the assessment plan was documented from emails, personal conversations, leader meetings, the retreat discussion time, and the participant survey. Additionally, Second Baptist sought congregational feedback for a visioning process in 2010 that indicated effects from Community Groups. The visioning research reflected the creation of meaningful Christ-centered community as a congregational goal, and this goal was subsequently included in the church's new mission statement. The visioning research also identified and celebrated several new ministries initiatives that had been formed as a result of Community Groups.

¹⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 217-27.

Assessment Results

Throughout the pilot project, feedback was sought from Community Group leaders through emails, personal conversations, and leader meetings. Significant insights were shared that supported a thoughtful assessment of the pilot project. This section will present insights gleaned from leader meetings, the development of each group's mission focus, and the survey and end-of-the-year conversations.

Insights from the Leader Meetings

The most significant information provided during the leader meetings has been compiled and will be presented in this section. The first insight relates to the value in ending well. Early in the group process, leaders emphasized the need for an end-of-year retreat. This had been presented as an option in the leader orientation, but was not emphasized as necessary for leaders and members. The Associate Pastor also stated that it was important to end well, and it was decided that for future years, the end-of-year retreat should not be an optional component for leaders. The leaders would do their best to encourage their participants to attend the retreat as well.

The second insight gained was that more leader meetings would be beneficial. It became clear after the second leader meeting that more frequent leader meetings were needed for support and reflection. Meetings every other month were not enough to address ongoing questions. Monthly meetings were more effective.

The third insight relates to group bonding. Some groups were bonding quickly, while others were struggling to establish an environment of trust and relational comfort. Further investigation revealed that the groups that were struggling to develop deeper

intergroup relationships were ones that had not followed some of the guidelines given. Specifically, the gardening group was meeting every other week and had not emphasized the importance of attending every meeting. Additionally, the interfaith group had decided not to use *Spiritual Autobiography*, but instead to have their leader create a curriculum that facilitated the creation of a group spiritual autobiography. This group never succeeded in creating this group autobiography and also struggled to develop relational depth. Ultimately, both groups had positive experiences, but their struggles affirmed the utilization of the original project guidelines.

The fourth insight involves the need to develop time management training. Some group leaders struggled with time management. One group leader stated that it was impossible to accomplish all of the goals of their meetings in two hours. Since other groups were doing just that, the leaders spent some time talking about good time management skills. Time management was an ongoing issue for this group, which emphasized the need for better leadership training.

The fifth insight relates to childcare. Leaders discussed childcare options. Some group members had teenagers who would look after younger children. Other groups hired child care workers. Ultimately, many options were presented, but there did not seem to be a perfect option for any group. This emphasized the need for further conversations about childcare for groups in the future.

The sixth insight relates to whether the groups should be open or closed to new members after they have begun. The positive group experience of many members prompted others from Second Baptist to request the opportunity to join a group during the pilot project. While some groups did add members within the first couple of weeks, most

groups felt that after a few weeks they had bonded and did not want to add new people. Group leaders felt the addition of members would disrupt community. This reality supports starting new Community Groups at different times of the year, as well as offering different kinds of midweek small groups to give people more opportunities to join a group.

The seventh insight involves a learning path. At the beginning of the pilot project, the team of leaders discussed the possibility of a group learning path, but neither the structure nor presence of any learning path was made mandatory. This was intentional, so that groups would have the freedom to discern their own learning processes. However, as groups finished *Spiritual Autobiography*, it became apparent that more guidance and intentionality was needed. This demonstrated the need for leaders to propose a specific learning path at the beginning of their Community Group experiences. This discovery benefited the gardening group, as they started in January. The gardening group identified Christine Sine's *Gardening with God* as an important piece of curriculum for their learning goals.¹⁵ The cross-cultural group also developed a learning path for their second year together, as they had decided to stay together for the purpose of creating a cross-cultural pilgrimage experience as their ministry focus. These learning paths will inform future Community Groups as they embark on their experiences together.

The eighth insight relates to the ministry foci. It was beneficial for some groups to begin without a set ministry focus project. The groups that did not have a set ministry focus project naturally developed community first and then discovered their common ministry interests. The lack of a set project also kept the group from automatically

¹⁵ Christine Sine, *To Garden with God* (Seattle: Mustard Seed Associates, 2009).

excluding persons without a specific interest or skill. In light of these factors, more Community Groups will be encouraged to form without a set mission focus in the future.

Insights from the “Mission Focus” of Each Group

The mission focus efforts of the Community Groups also serve as an important piece of evaluative data for the pilot project. The successful creation of new member-driven ministries demonstrates the effective fulfillment of the goal of fostering innovative missional engagement. Community Group leaders provided an ongoing report of group ministry efforts, and group members reported on these efforts at the Community Group retreat. The six Community Groups engaged in various ministry efforts.

The community garden group partnered with the local college to create the Harvest Hill Community Garden. This was advertised in Liberty and by the summertime, garden plots had been reserved by church members, college students, and other Liberty citizens. This ministry continues to grow and serves as symbol of the potential for innovative mission through Community Groups.

The cross-cultural ministry group developed its own ministry pilot project, a New York City mission trip as pilgrimage experiment. This included a learning path they would follow in their second year together. They would study Peace’s books *Spiritual Journaling* and *Meditative Prayer* in preparation for their trip, utilize Phyllis Tickle’s *Divine Hours: Pocket Edition* during their New York trip, and study the book *Living the*

Good Life on God's Good Earth as a resource for integrating reflections on poverty and loving their neighbors from the New York trip.¹⁶

Another Community Group focused on justice issues, specifically related to the gay and lesbian community. This group attended a seminar in Kansas City and read material together related to the subject, but struggled to form a specific ministry project for a few reasons. First, this is not a ministry focus that is highly supported by the congregation. There are varying views on homosexuality, and most at Second Baptist have chosen not to engage in these issues. Second, this group was comprised of only four members, due partly to the fact that they did not recruit members prior to the sign-up. The lower participant number did not seem to create the same energy for ministry. It also is probable that this group might have been more successful if Second Baptist was eager to support such a ministry.

The interfaith group also struggled with its ministry project. Several group members were already involved in justice ministries outside of their Community Group, so perhaps a group that gave them a place to share these ministry experiences was sufficient. However, there were other issues at play with this group. First, they did not utilize *Spiritual Autobiography*, so they did not begin with as much structure as other Community Groups. Second, one of their group leaders needed to leave the group for health reasons after a few weeks. Another group member eventually left the group. This

¹⁶ Richard Peace, *Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey toward God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998); Richard Peace, *Meditative Prayer: Entering God's Presence* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998); Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours: Pocket Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David S. Koetje, ed., *Living the Good Life on God's Good Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2006).

lack of stability hindered this group's process. However, the group continued to send positive reports.

Two groups did not begin with a set ministry focus, and demonstrated the value of such an approach. One of the groups discerned a common interest in ministering to the poor. Their group decided they wanted to create a summer ministry for children who participated in the free and reduced lunch program at the local elementary school. Every Thursday during the summer this group hosted a free hot dog lunch at the church. They invited families of children from the neighborhood and local school, as well as families connected to the church's ESL program. This group ministered to about fifteen families over the summer.

The final group was composed of ten women from Second Baptist. This group also did not begin with a ministry focus. During the course of the year these women learned that they all had a common experience struggling with loneliness and depression. This insight prompted three ministry decisions. First, one of the group members started a knitting ministry at the church. This created space for women to come together in large groups, spend time with each other, and knit items for ministries or family members. Second, the group decided to meet as a Community Group again in 2010/2011 in an effort to support one another. Third, one member of the group decided to start another Community Group for women in 2010/2011, in an effort to meet the same need. These women were adamant that the most important ministry focus of their group was the ministry to each other.

Insights from the Survey and End-of-the-Year Dialogue

In addition to the ongoing input from leaders, the Senior Pastor sought feedback from group members through dialogues at the retreat and the Community Group Assessment Survey. The dialogue and survey enabled group participants to provide important evaluative data. A review of this data supported the key insights provided above as well as additional insights that will support Community Groups in the future.

The survey asked, “What percentage of your community group’s meetings did you attend?” Of the participants, 88 percent responded they had attended 80 percent or more of their group meetings. This is important because high attendance is necessary for group success. This was emphasized by comments from the garden group. This group met bi-weekly and did not stress high attendance. One member of this group addressed this in the survey, saying, “Our group did not gel as quickly as it could have. Weekly meetings would have been better. We also did not stick to our meetings times and had sporadic attendance.”¹⁷ This was consistent with feedback from the leader of this group.

The survey results also supported the utilization of *Spiritual Autobiography* as a tool for forging intimate relationships within Community Groups. While many participants said sharing their stories was initially intimidating, the consensus among participants was that this sharing laid the groundwork for strong relationships, group cohesiveness, personal healing, and the discovery of common ministry interests. One survey respondent stated that “getting to know the other group members through sharing

¹⁷ Community Group participant, shared in a Community Group Assessment Survey, Liberty, MO, June 2010. The names of the participants will remain anonymous in most cases due to the fact that these individuals have indicated such a preference.

our spiritual autobiographies was the most meaningful part of my group experience.”¹⁸ Another said that “writing the spiritual autobiography made me more aware of how events in my life have shaped my spiritual formation. This has made me even more committed to helping others in their faith walk by showing them faith is an integral part of everyday life, not just something you ‘put on’ for church. All of life is lived and influenced by our faith walk.”¹⁹ These responses reflect the value of *Spiritual Autobiography* as a tool for fostering community and personal transformation, and they are consistent with what was shared by the majority of participants at the retreat.

The survey and end-of-year dialogue also emphasized the need for better communication from leaders about group expectations. The survey asked: “What do you wish you had known before the group began?” While several participants mentioned they had been made completely aware of group expectations by promotions made in church publications and worship services, a few commented that they signed up thinking it would only be a Bible study, and others were surprised by the expectation to share their faith stories. Some were not made aware by their leaders of group expectations until they had met for several weeks. These kinds of responses emphasize the need for better initial communication about the nature and purpose of Community Groups.

The survey and dialogue both offered group members the opportunity to share how their group experiences impacted them personally. Positive testimonies from group members offer some of the most compelling reasons to continue this program. One woman from the women’s group was so intimidated by the idea of sharing her spiritual

¹⁸ Community Group participant, shared in a Community Group Assessment Survey, Liberty, MO, June, 2010.

¹⁹ Ibid.

autobiography that she quit the group after the second week. However, after some reflection she came back to the group offering to be the first one to share her story. During the retreat this woman expressed that sharing her story with these women was “one of the most powerful experiences of her adult life.”²⁰ The women of this group said this was the first time in their lives they had been this vulnerable with others in community. In their vulnerability they discovered they had all struggled with depression. One group member shared that this group had “saved her life.”²¹ One person surveyed said, “Everyone in our group was in a very dangerous place in their personal lives that we never got to a specified ministry project. I guess our project was helping each other make it until the next meeting.”²² This group’s consensus was that their future mission would be to help other women who were struggling with depression and loneliness to discover this kind of life-saving community. One woman said, “We all realized that if all of us could come together and have all of these issues, then the church must be filled with people who feel alone, and now we are sensitive to that.”²³

A member from the cross-cultural ministry group shared how the experience of sharing autobiographies supported a more meaningful learning experience. She said, “The learning highlight of our group was the book that we studied about missions, but that experience would not have been nearly as meaningful if we had not first shared our

²⁰ Community Group member, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Community Group participant, shared in a Community Group Assessment Survey, Liberty, MO, June, 2010.

²³ Community Group member, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

autobiographies.”²⁴ Another member of the group agreed: “Everyone in our group had some experience working in another culture. This helped us have important, practical conversations about our understanding of missions.”²⁵ The foundation of this group’s relationships with one another provided important depth and understanding to their learning experience. It prompted them to decide to plan the previously mentioned pilgrimage experience in New York City, and to refocus their personal efforts on cross-culture ministry in Liberty. One member commented, “This group renewed my passion for ministry to internationals. As a result I decided to become involved with the Second Baptist ESL ministry.”²⁶

Members of the interfaith Community Group read the sacred texts of other religious groups. In the midst of this, they had conversations about struggles with their own Christian faith. Their leader shared that this led to an ongoing conversation about doubt. “Many of our members were uncomfortable with doubt at first. They were twisting and turning in their seats. However, by the end of our group process, our members seemed comfortable with doubt. They all understood it as a natural part of faith. They learned to see doubt as strength, and to respect differences in belief.”²⁷ James W. Fowler, in his book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, explains that this ability to

²⁴ Karen Rodgers, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

²⁵ Gwen Phillips, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

²⁶ Christy Edwards, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

²⁷ Chris Thompson, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

become comfortable with ambiguity and doubt is the mark of a maturing faith, a movement into what he calls “conjunctive faith.”²⁸

Overwhelmingly, the group dialogue and survey indicated a growing understanding of the importance of community and the value of corporate spiritual practices in the Christian life. One member remarked, “For me this is what it means to have abundant life. If we are really in community, we will have intimate relationships and this is integral to having the life Christ wants for us.”²⁹ Another member said, “I learn better in community than I do alone. When I am reading and thinking in community I learn more deeply about things and self.”³⁰ Still another concluded: meaningful, faith-based community is what the church has to offer that no one else can offer. When we forget that we lose our purpose.³¹ One senior adult member emphasized the importance of his group: “The autobiographies helped me get some things down on paper, for myself and for my children. Additionally, as I wrestle with getting older, the depth of these relationships, knowing others and being known by them in this way, and the encouragement to continue to reach out has been life giving.”³² Finally, one person wrote, “It has reminded me of the basic mission of being church. Loving God and loving our neighbor cannot be separated into two parts of our lives. As our group grew to love each

²⁸ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 51.

²⁹ Blane Baker, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

³⁰ Karen Rodgers, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

³¹ Sherry McLaughlin, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

³² Harland Ginn, shared at the end-of-year retreat, Liberty, MO, June 5, 2010.

other we grew closer to God—even when we were not intentionally focused on traditional ways of growing closer to God—like prayer or Bible study.”³³

The dialogue and survey offer a glimpse into the Community Group impact upon personal transformation. The Community Group experience alleviated a sense of isolation, and supported a more holistic learning experience. Groups also supported greater creativity and participation in ministry among members of Second Baptist. In these ways this project accomplished its goals of fostering meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement. However, the data gathered from the pilot project shows a number of ways that this new small group ministry could be more effective in the future. In light of this, the Associate Pastor and I will integrate this data into the implementation of Community Groups in the future. The primary modes of integration will be summer leadership training seminars and a series of leadership development meetings during the group process.

³³ Community Group participant, shared in a Community Group Assessment Survey, Liberty, MO, June, 2010.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Community Group pilot project made successful steps toward transforming the future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist. Community Groups have sought to respond to stated congregational and cultural needs, and to provide an embodied witness of the biblical concepts presented in this paper. The pilot project has fostered meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement at Second Baptist. In the process, significant insights were discovered regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the new ministry. These insights will be important for the future of Community Groups at Second Baptist, as well as for the utilization of this concept in other congregations.

First, the importance of good leadership development and communication cannot be overstated. Leaders were chosen from the congregation who were known to be mature, gifted, and experienced as small group leaders, which contributed to the success of the pilot project. However, the assessment survey confirmed that the group experience was diminished for some because their leaders had neither followed the group guidelines nor communicated those guidelines to them. A more extensive leadership development process that encourages adherence to guidelines, effective small group leadership principles, and clear communication about the expectations of the experience will be necessary for this ministry to experience continued growth. Additionally, a more extensive process will help Second Baptist utilize and train a larger group of leaders as need arises.

Second, a covenant that includes a commitment to regular weekly attendance contributes significantly to a positive Community Group experience. The group that met

bi-weekly and did not stress attendance took much longer to bond than other groups. In this ministry, the regular presence of others is essential for community, transformation, and mission. When one person is absent, the whole group's experience is diminished because each person brings his or her unique experience with God into the group.

Third, there is a need for different kinds of groups. Block asserts, "The small group is the unit of transformation."¹ In light of this, it will be important to provide different kinds of small groups at Second Baptist so that members can experience small groups at differing commitment levels. Some people are intimidated by the prospect of participating in an experience with the high, long-term expectations of Community Groups. In light of this, groups of differing levels of commitment and subject matters are being developed to exist alongside Community Groups at Second Baptist. The Associate Pastor also recently suggested building a lower commitment covenant with an outward ministry focus into the church's Sunday school classes. This represents an important Community Group contribution to the future of spiritual formation at Second Baptist. These new and adjusted small group offerings will help more long-time church members engage in holistic spiritual formation, and will also be more accessible new members and visitors. These plans, combined with a growing congregational interest in small groups, further reflect the positive impact of this ministry on spiritual formation at Second Baptist.

Fourth, the contribution of the *Spiritual Autobiography* was significant. This material laid a foundation for strong relationships, helped members begin to notice God's presence in their stories and in the stories of others, and enabled them to discern their

¹ Block, *Community*, 31.

common ministry passions. However, the sharing facilitated by this book has intimidated some, prompting them to cite this as a reason for their hesitancy to sign up for a group. In light of this, some future groups will be invited to utilize Peace's book *Spiritual Journaling* as an alternative to *Spiritual Autobiography*. The *Spiritual Journaling* book invites participants to share segments of their stories, but does not call for the same level of vulnerability as *Spiritual Autobiography*.

Fifth, childcare and other factors that might inhibit participation must be seriously considered. There does not seem to be a perfect option that fits every situation, but a number of appealing options will need to be considered for Community Groups to include more people in the future. This was emphasized by conversations with several young families. For them, Sunday school was still the best option because they did not have the time or resources to participate in a midweek small group. Additionally, in two-income households, many parents did not want to be away from their children during the evening. In light of this, Second Baptist will also need to consider ways for these kinds of small groups to meet on Sunday mornings.

Finally, the inclusion of the outward ministry focus was vital in making Community Groups a catalyst for change. Women in the women's group discovered they were not alone in their depression and started thinking about how they could serve others. Gardeners created a way for people across Liberty to come together and serve. A pilgrimage experience was crafted in search of a more appropriate way to engage in cross-cultural ministry. Meals were provided for poor neighborhood families. The ministries themselves were an accomplishment, but the greater success was the methodology, the ministry participation, and the witness of it within the congregation.

When encouraged to dream together about God’s specific call on their lives in that moment, church members became innovative, created opportunities, and then engaged in mission together without hesitation. Building the outward focus into the covenant of a small group fostered innovative missional engagement at Second Baptist.

The culture of Second Baptist is slowly changing. In recent new member fellowships, the number one reason people said they joined Second Baptist was because it was a friendly congregation. A newly approved rotating committee system was implemented in January 2011. After leading a visioning session at Second Baptist in May 2010, Tom Sine reported, “There are more new innovative expressions of ministry at Second Baptist than any church I have worked with in recent years.”² This progress cannot be attributed to Community Groups alone, but there is correlation between this congregational shift and the existence of Community Groups. As Community Groups have sought to foster meaningful community, personal transformation, and innovative missional engagement, the embodiment of this pursuit by these groups has served as a witness within the congregation toward the preferred future of the congregation, a future grounded in ancient biblical principles. In light of this, Community Groups will continue to serve as an important resource for Second Baptist and other churches who are struggling to better embody God’s vision for us in this world. Grenz aptly writes,

This Christian vision focuses on the central truth that we were created for community. This central truth should motivate and stimulate us to respond to God’s call to community in every aspect of our lives. It should draw us into fellowship with God as we seek to reflect with greater clarity the character of the Triune God. It should draw us into fellowship with one another, as our awareness that community lies at the center of God’s intention for us begins to shape our actions toward others, and it lead us to a new sense of personal identity, as we

² Tom Sine, in a personal phone conversation with the author, Liberty, MO, June 2010.

discover that living in fellowship with God and others is the pathway to finding our true selves.³

³ Grenz, *Created*, 300.

APPENDIX

COMMUNITY GROUP END-OF-YEAR SURVEY



Community Group Assessment

Second Baptist Church Community Group Assessment

Page 1 - Question 1 - Yes or No

Did you serve as one of your group's two leaders?

- Yes
- No

Page 1 - Question 2 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

What percentage of your community group's meetings did you attend?

- 30-40%
- 50-60%
- 70-80%
- +80%

Page 1 - Question 3 - Open Ended - Comments Box

What do you wish you would have known before your group began?

Page 1 - Question 4 - Open Ended - Comments Box

What was the best thing about your community group experience?

Page 1 - Question 5 - Open Ended - Comments Box

Is there anything you wish would have been different?

Page 1 - Question 6 - Open Ended - Comments Box

Each group is unique. Name one unique feature of your group?

continued on back side . . . Over →

Page 1 - Question 7 - Open Ended - Comments Box

Tell me about your group's ministry focus project(s). How did you participate in this? Do you or your group intend to do anything with this project in the future?

Page 1 - Question 8 - Open Ended - Comments Box

How have you been affected personally by your community group experience? (How have you changed, what have you learned, what do you intend to do in response to your experience, etc?)

Page 1 - Question 9 - Open Ended - Comments Box

How has this experience affected your thoughts and feelings about the importance of community? Please explain.

Page 1 - Question 10 - Open Ended - Comments Box

If you attended the retreat, please share how it contributed to your community group experience?

Page 1 - Question 11 - Open Ended - Comments Box

Is there anything else you would like for us to know about your community group experience?

Thank you for completing the survey! Your insights will be extremely valuable to the further development of our Community Group ministry and to help me personally with my studies!



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