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Bret M. Widman

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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

BECOMING AN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY: LEADING RIVER LIFE COVENANT CHURCH  
THROUGH NARRATIVE, METAPHOR AND PARABLE

Written by

Bret M. Widman

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

Doctor of Ministry

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

  
Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: July 27, 2012

BECOMING AN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY: LEADING RIVER LIFE  
COVENANT CHURCH THROUGH NARRATIVE, METAPHOR AND PARABLE

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

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

BY

BRET M. WIDMAN  
JULY 2012



## ABSTRACT

### **Becoming an Interpretive Community: Leading River Life Covenant Church through Narrative, Metaphor and Parable**

Bret M. Widman

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2012

The goal of this final project was to explore the role of narrative, metaphor and parable in order to lead River Life Covenant Church in East Sacramento, California. Through the examination of Scripture, it becomes acutely clear that Jesus chose to lead His disciples through the retelling of their history, illustrative word pictures, and stories with intent. By reaching back into their collective history, Jesus reinterprets it through metaphor and parable in order to build His church and return it to its original trajectory of being a “light to the nations.”

Western pastoral leadership has typically been impacted by modernity and tends to utilize strategic thinking, goal setting, program implementation, and has used these tools to evaluate whether a church is “successful” or not. Finding the right model of church to follow dominates the thinking of leadership. Intellectual reasoning and scientific method have governed pastoral leadership primarily because it is measurable, easily communicated, and rational.

Interpretative leadership is much more complex. Attempting to discern what God is doing, rather than what the church would like to see happen, requires a different skill set. This final project is an attempt to lead a small, community church through the tools of narration, metaphor, and parable. Confident that the Lord is still present and at work building His church, through the Holy Spirit, this project hopes to listen to the story that is being written through this church so that she will be able to be responsive to Jesus’ specific purpose for her in being a “light that shines in the darkness.”

Content Reader: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD

Words: 291

To Janine Lyn, Hannah Elizabeth, Claire Janelle, Madeline Grace, and Kate Olivia  
who spurred me on to complete what I began, each one gave me a sounding board, a  
laboratory, and a map for this chapter of my life to be written

I love you each more than words can communicate

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank River Life Covenant Church for their partnership in seeing this project come to completion. Your itch for a deeper walk with Jesus and a desire to bless Sacramento was fertile soil for this project to come to fruition. There are too many people to publicly thank so I want to thank those that have jumped into the river with me and call River Life their home. It's been a wonderful ride!

I would, also, like to thank Jesus for the transformative work He did in me through this project. My story has been forever altered as a result of His Presence, His encouragement, and His insights. This project started as requirement for my doctorate and resulted in a weaving together of loose ends of my life.



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## INTRODUCTION

Both at home and in the mission field the change in our thought was more important than any change in our method of work.<sup>1</sup>

- Roland Allen

Traditional church, Contemporary church, Mega-church, Emergent church, Missional church, House church, these are all models for the Church I have heard in the past twenty-three years of pastoral ministry. I have a framework for understanding “church” based on the experiences, education I have of “church,” and models taught to me along the way. However, my knowledge of church congruence must be measured by how Jesus has been building and continues to build. Compared to the two millennium Jesus has been building His church, my twenty-three year involvement is short. There must be a way to measure what I know about church from my experience with various models of church with what Jesus has built, is building, and will continue to build.

The models of church I listed are very easy for me to get my mind around and I can find a seminar or even a book to read to tell me all about the distinctiveness of each. Being a white, forty-eight-year-old male, Western-seminary-trained, seasoned pastor, it is easy for me to think about systems of church, style of church, and strategy of church. However, with the plethora of material currently being written about house church and missional church, I have begun to wonder if either of these models, compared to other models of church I have known, fully encompasses in them what Jesus was talking about when He said He would build His church. It is likely a new model will replace them, like

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1962), 81.

their forerunners. More importantly, is that the angst in finding the “right” model of church may actually hinder one from discovering what Jesus is doing with His Church. Perhaps changing the way the congregation thinks about who they are as church is more important than working on yet another model of church.

In Matthew 16:17-19, Jesus says the following to Peter after he declared Jesus to be the Messiah:

Jesus replied, “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

In this passage there are at least two important points. The first is Jesus is the One that builds His Church. Because He does so, all the powers of hell will not conquer it. The Church that Jesus builds is firm, steadfast, and able to withstand the very powers of hell. The second is Jesus would go about building His Church with the partnership of Peter. This conversation took place after Jesus said to Peter His proclamation that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, was revealed to Peter directly from Jesus’ Father (not human reasoning or input). Because of that, it is not a leap that Jesus would continue to build His Church with the partnership of anyone who acknowledges Jesus as Messiah, as revealed by the Father. This partnership is made evident by metaphorical keys of the Kingdom of Heaven given to Peter, and those following throughout all time.

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references are in the New Living Translation, unless otherwise noted.

Jesus did not propose a strategy to be followed for the Church He is building. He did not tell the disciples a step-by-step plan to follow or give them a model to emulate. He gave them a metaphor: “keys.” It seems this was the Way of Jesus. As the disciples continually came to Jesus to have Him explain Himself, or His teaching, to them, He painted word pictures through parables; narratives, made to complete the metaphor Jesus used to explain. In *Stories with Intent*, Klyne Snodgrass writes:

Stories are one of the few places that allow us to see reality, at least the reality the author creates. There, to a degree we cannot do in real life, we can discern motives, keep score, know who won, and what success and failure look like. Life on the outside virtually stops; we are taken up in the story. The storyteller is in control so that we are forced to see from new angles and so that the message cannot be easily evaded. Hearers become willing accomplices, even if the message is hostile. From this “other world” we are invited to understand, evaluate, and, hopefully, redirect our lives. Apart from personal experience, stories are the quickest way to learning. We learn most easily in the concrete accounts, our brains store most easily in the abstract.<sup>3</sup>

As I have been called to lead River Life Covenant Church in East Sacramento, California, I have been tempted to create a plan, uphold a model, and set some goals for the church. This is where I found a challenge and problem: attempting to give direction and leadership. I have served in three other churches as a staff member and taught at a discipleship college, but this is the first time I stepped into, and feel called, to be lead pastor. In other church contexts it was natural, normal, and expected that I chart a course for the church to follow. However, this time I have felt a “holy pause” from behaving the same in this ministry context as I have in other settings.

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<sup>3</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 1.

River Life was started approximately twelve years ago in the family room of a couple that were founding members of the church. Being a church plant, they had a fantastic lead pastor that gave very clear direction, steps, and plans; which helped the church form a solid foundation. It grew numerically and moved from a rental property in downtown Sacramento to East Sacramento, where they purchased an older Free Methodist Church that was closing. All decisions went through this founding pastor who gave a specific direction for the church of what he thought it should be and how to go about realizing his vision. They would serve the city of Sacramento in missional ways. Their tag line—A Church in the City for the City—was evident of their model of church.

Many of the people drawn to River Life were leaving other churches and wanted something “different.” I have been here two years and I frequently hear the congregation is defined by what they do not want, instead of being defined by what they want to do or be. River Life has collected some who have had negative experiences of “church” and in the first year, I listened to stories of the congregation to discern how to be church.

The four courses I attended at Fuller Theological Seminary have been excellent and instrumental in reexamining my view of *ecclesia*. My first course, “Developing A Leader’s Self Understanding and Assessing Ministry Health for Leaders” by Reggie McNeal, helped me focus my own leadership, gaining self-awareness as a leader. It was invaluable to examine my heart and cognitive style in leading the church. My second course was “Spirituality and Ministry” by Dallas Willard. This course connected the dots for me between the role of the Spirit and ministry in any setting. This highly theological

course set me on a trajectory of reexamining a lot of what I was taught in seminary about pastoral ministry. My third course was “Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World” by Eddie Gibbs. This course helped me analyze differences between modern and post-modern characteristics that have impacted the local church in the West. My final course was “Encountering New Ways of Being Church” by John and Olive Drane. This course was the pinnacle of my time in the DMin program, as I saw fresh start-ups of “church” in England that were foreign concepts for me in the USA. I believe all my courses have prepared me for my time at River Life.

These courses taught me about the DNA of the Church, as opposed to a program, model, or style of church. My final project is about helping River Life become an interpretive community that discerns the story God is writing through the congregation, both collectively and corporately, as engaging in mission to the community surrounding them. This came in light of Jesus painting pictures through metaphor and the narration of parable, coupled with what I have learned at Fuller. For this to take place, metaphor and narrative will guide this project as opposed to model and strategy.

The first part of the Ministry Focus Paper tells the narration. Chapter 1 is the spiritual narration of the city of Sacramento. Chapter 2 informs the spiritual narration of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Sacramento, in which River Life was born and resides. Because of the inseparable connection between church and surrounding culture, these two narratives are part of one another and the narrative God has been writing, is writing, and will write in Sacramento.

The second part of this Ministry Focus Paper provides the theological reflection of the project. Starting with some current literature that has guided my thinking, I include my theology of *ecclesia*. The three tenets of *ecclesia* I write about are Scripture, *Pneumatology*, and the relationship between discipleship and mission, using three of Jesus' metaphors. Because each of these elements impact and are impacted by each other, they are written about as a whole and not in a sequential manner. I start with the tradition I come from, the Evangelical Covenant Church, and evaluate how my theology is supported or challenged from this understanding.

The final part of my project is River Life implementing, evaluating, and utilizing the literary art form of metaphor and parable in order to respond to the active Voice of God: His leading to grow and send disciples. The conclusion is to benefit and guide River Life as she seeks discovery of a metaphor unique to her and the grand story of her beginning to her present and how, knowing that will shape where God's Spirit leads her future. However, because I attempt writing about *ecclesia* as a whole, my hope is that it be beneficial to other churches as they seek the leading of the Holy Spirit and discern His voice as He continues to speak in metaphor and parable. Instead of furthering to prop up modular thinking of *ecclesia*, which is heavily influenced by Western modernity, my hope is others find abundant life in *ecclesia* that Jesus is building through the power found in metaphor and parable. No longer looking to models, programs, and five-year strategies to lead the church, narration, through a kaleidoscope of metaphors and parables, will lead *ecclesia* of God: like keys to a Kingdom.

PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT



## CHAPTER 1

### THE HISTORICAL, SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE OF SACRAMENTO

“We ascended a pass to the highest point and we saw that the land opened into a great plain. We beheld that the estuary we were following was formed by two rivers, and that one of these rivers was formed by two other rivers. We made out that these three arms were formed by a very large river which descended from some high mountains, very far distant.” Account of Fr. Crespi in 1773. He was on top of Mount Diablo, looking east across the great Sacramento Valley, the first European to do so.<sup>1</sup>

- Phyllis and Lou Zauner

#### **Naming the City—Spiritual Seeds**

It is not surprising the first European to lay eyes on what would become known as Sacramento commented on the rivers he saw. Father Crespi, a Majorcan, Franciscan missionary was the first of many Christians that found themselves drawn to this fertile basin next to the river. Thirty-five years after Father Crespi peered from his perch on Mount Diablo, Gabriel Moraga floated down one of these rivers. He was not clergy, but a Spanish army officer who became a prominent explorer of all California. Moraga is credited with naming many of the major California rivers, each with roots in Catholicism. He named the Merced River “*El Río de Nuestra Señora de la Merced*,” which means

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Zauner and Lou Zauner, *Sacramento: The Way it Was Then and Now* (Tahoe Paradise, CA: Zanel Publications, 1979), 1.

“The River of our Lady of Mercy.” He named the Kings River “*Río de los Santos Reyes*,” meaning “River of the Holy Kings.” The river he traversed following Crespi’s discovery he christened “*Río de los Sacramentos*,” which translates “River of the Blessed Sacrament.”<sup>2</sup> The names christening the rivers serve as a template of Sacramento’s roots in faith. These roots would grow, alongside the city, for years to come.

From its inception, people of faith had a major role in the birth of Sacramento. Even though Crespi and Moraga were the first Europeans to see the region and name the rivers, neither was credited as the founding father of Sacramento; that title was reserved for Johann August Sutter, Jr., referenced today as John Sutter.<sup>3</sup> Sutter was the son of a Swiss Lutheran minister and arrived in the area in 1839. He established a settlement next to the Sacramento River and encountered many troubles from Native Americans who lived in the region. At first they were his greatest enemies, but because of persistence, he became their best and most steadfast friend. He devoted himself to agriculture in the fertile riverbeds next to the Sacramento River and erected Fort Sutter in 1840; Fort Sutter would become Sutterville and, finally, Sacramento.

### **Gold Rush—A Magnetic Pull to the City of Sacraments**

John Marshall discovered gold eight years later at a sawmill owned by Sutter. Like fire to kindling, this discovery ignited a rush of approximately six thousand

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<sup>2</sup> The names of each of the rivers can be found in: Barbara Marinacci and Rudi Marinacci, *California’s Spanish Place-Names: What They Mean and How They Got Them* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1980). 98.

<sup>3</sup> Thor Severson, *Sacramento: an Illustrated History – 1839-1874* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1973), 52.

squatters who came to find their fortune.<sup>4</sup> With the abundance of instant wealth generated by this gold find, an abundance of depravity followed closely behind. Neuenburg writes, “In the rush to gain riches, people had forgotten God and they had forgotten how to be human.”<sup>5</sup> Gambling, prostitution, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and lawlessness abounded. Since the site was not a chartered city, there were no restraints upon human behavior from any sort of governance. Immigrants arrived by the thousands from South America, Mexico, the Pacific Islands, Oregon, 90 percent of them through San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> They arrived sick, debilitated, and almost penniless, which caused widespread desperation and disease. A young man from South Carolina, whose name is unknown, after spending three years in Sacramento around this time said, “California has a barbarous civilization, licentious morals, crude manners, and inclement climate . . . No one here can be successful unless he assimilates himself with the people. He must carouse with the villains, attend Sunday horse races, and adapt himself to depravity.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Gold or God? The Church is Born**

It was this environment that birthed the church presence in Sacramento. If anyone can be credited for the establishment of church in Sacramento, it would have to be

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<sup>4</sup> Frances Hammond Neuenburg, *Turning Their World Rightside-Up: the Witness of Sacramento Churches - 1849-1859*. (Berkeley, CA: New College Berkeley, 1986), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Zauner and Zauner, *Sacramento*, 21.

William Grove Deal. Not only was he a pastor in the Methodist Episcopal Church, but he was also an MD and considered the chaplain of the city at the very beginning.<sup>8</sup>

The combination of a practicing physician and a Gospel preacher was exactly what was needed to address the chaos of 1848. Deal did not have a building in which he preached, but gathered under some oak trees by the docks of the “River of the Blessed Sacraments.” He stood there greeting men who came for gold preaching the good news about God. This area became known as “The Grove.”<sup>9</sup> The lure for gold was so strong, it was recorded that forty-six Baptist ministers came through The Grove between April and August 1849 but did not come to preach alongside Deal; they came for the gold.

Even though these ministers got swept up in the rush for gold, there were others who came alongside Deal and resisted the temptation of mammon. Joseph Benton was one of the few faithful that would be used by God to set down some roots for the Lord in Sacramento. Benton arrived in 1849 and became pastor of the Pioneer Congregational Church.<sup>10</sup> Deal invited him to share the pulpit in The Grove. He preached from Matthew 4:15-16 and Isaiah 9:1-22 and the main point of his message was “the people who sat in darkness, saw a great light.”<sup>11</sup>

Osgood Church Wheeler joined Deal and Benton in 1849. Wheeler, a Baptist from the East coast, when approached by his denomination to come to California,

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Kline Baker, *1849-1909 Souvenir History of the First Methodist Episcopal Church* <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~npmelton/sacmeth1.htm> (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Leonidas Latimer Loofbourrow, *In Search of God's Gold* (Stockton, CA: Historical Society of the California-Nevada Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, 1950).

<sup>10</sup> Lance Armstrong, *Progressive, Pioneer Congregational Church founded in 1849* <http://www.valcomnews.com/?tag=joseph-benton> (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Neuenburg, *Turning Their World Rightside-Up*, 12.

immediately responded “No.”<sup>12</sup> However, after some time, Wheeler agreed to go along with his wife, planting the first Baptist congregation in San Francisco in 1849. He eventually planted the first Baptist congregation in Sacramento on September 14, 1850.<sup>13</sup>

Isaac Owen a minister in the Methodist Episcopal denomination also arrived in San Francisco in 1849 to begin his ministry. However, when he landed in the bay area, he discovered that William Taylor, who later became a very close friend, had started work there already. Only three weeks later Owen left San Francisco and went to Sacramento. He preached his first sermon on October 23, 1849, in The Grove and joined the small, growing group of pastors.<sup>14</sup>

These early, faithful ministers, along with others that joined them in subsequent years, were galvanized with one another in helping Sacramento develop. Six apparent values of these early ministers seemed to guide them in this new work in Sacramento’s development.<sup>15</sup> Vision, unity, intercessory prayer, advocacy, hearts of mercy, and mission and evangelism became redemptive roots in this ecumenical gathering of ministers.

### Vision

Owen arrived in Sacramento with literally nothing but the clothes on his back. Evidently, all of his belongings from San Francisco sank to the bottom of Suisan Bay when the boat he was on capsized because of the drunkenness of the captain. He crossed

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<sup>12</sup> Osgood Church Wheeler, *The Story of Early Baptist History in California* (Sacramento, CA: California Baptist Historical Society, 1889), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, *1849-1909 Souvenir History of the First Methodist Episcopal Church*.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathon Peterson (24-7 Prayer International Community Leader), telephone interview by author, October 12, 2011.

the country by oxen from the east coast to get to San Francisco. Later in life he buried one of his daughters. He was a man of incredible endurance. His vision kept him focused to withstand all the hardships that came his way. It is said of him that he was charged to be instrumental in the rising up of a Christian church in a land that will be a “city set on a hill” so that it could not be hidden.<sup>16</sup> Frances Neuenburg said of this time:

Many of the above soon joined with the missionaries and with one another in establishing churches and Bible Study prayer groups. They were united in their belief that the Gospel message of love and forgiveness as found in the Bible and taught by all groups of Christians was needed above all else in California. These Sacramentans also believed that Christian beliefs should form the basis of action in all of life and Christian ethics to be the basis of civilization. To that end they worked to establish schools, to set up printing presses, to agitate for just government, and to fight against what they considered to be immoral practices in the community. Creating order in a rough and tumble society was important, a living out of one’s Christian life, and all of the good causes were seen as going hand in hand with the gospel presentation.<sup>17</sup>

Opportunity for them to fulfill their vision of bringing order to this chaotic rush of immigration to pursue gold happened immediately in the years after they arrived in 1848-49. In the years of 1850-52, this infantile city experienced numerous floods, fire, and disease. A cholera epidemic broke out in 1850 that wiped out 10-to-15 percent of the city. During these years of turmoil, one out of every four citizens of Sacramento died. Immediately, the many sermons given in The Grove by these early ministers were coupled with assistance in caring for the needs of the city. One specific need was in caring for the dead with a proper burial. A local historian would write later, “In spite of these discouragements and difficulties, these servants of the Kingdom never lost heart. They had a deep sense of mission. They were convinced of the strategic importance of

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac Owen letter to Dr. Pitman, (Berkeley, CA: Bancroft Library).

<sup>17</sup> Neuenburg, *Turning Their World Rightside-Up*, 3.

California in the future of the history of the world.”<sup>18</sup> With death, disease, and disaster paramount, the church united rose to meet the need.

### Unity

Working together with other ministers was not just implied; it was talked about and encouraged. Martin Briggs gave a sermon, which eventually ended up in the Sacramento Union newspaper at that time, about unity amongst the clergy. He said:

Let brotherly love assert itself in speech and spirit and heart some cooperation and hate would hush its hisses for very shame. The denominations of Protestants would then resemble wise divisions of a great army under a matchless generalissimo, marching to the sure conquest of a common prayer. Unity best asserts itself, not by a ceaseless plea for uniformity, not by a parade of union meetings, but by habitual tenderness of each others good name; by generous judgments of each others acts; by earnest intercession for our brother in the closet and at the family altar.<sup>19</sup>

Benton said about the non-sectarian environment amongst them, “Nowhere has a root of bitterness been planted. Each has given the other his liberty and has greatly enjoyed his own. Simple loyalty to the Master and sympathy for the cause have been the chains of gold which have bound ministers and members and churches together, and, so tied, they are still working on harmoniously toward the glorious hopes of all Christendom.”<sup>20</sup>

This unity was palatable and noticeable by those outside of their ministerium.

Secular historians Thomas Thompson and Albert West wrote:

While, however, it is our duty as historians to be strictly faithful to all the facts, and while it has been our purpose to religiously record whatever events of importance might come to our knowledge, we confess that a peculiar interest is felt in the primitive and undenominational efforts of those warmhearted old

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<sup>18</sup> Neuenburg, *Turning Their World Rightside-Up*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Briggs, *Papers – 1847-1908*, (Berkeley, CA: Bancroft Library).

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, personal interview.

pioneers. We have been struck with the peculiar earnestness and pleasure which invariably manifests itself when the subject is mentioned by any of them. They love to tell the rude and romantic circumstances under which they met, when they could say from the heart: “How good and pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”<sup>21</sup>

The first ministers of Sacramento were unified. They shared each others’ pulpits (something that may have taken root at The Grove), supported each others’ ministries, manually worked together to build each others’ sanctuaries, attended the dedications and prayed for the sanctuaries when completed, allowed other congregations to worship in their sanctuaries on account of flood or fire whenever it struck, prayed together for the good of the city, and, most importantly, spoke with utmost respect about each other and each others’ ministries.

### Intercessory Prayer

From his first days in Sacramento Benton insisted on gathering Christians from every denomination to pray together for the grand task of settling Sacramento with its many needs.<sup>22</sup> Because of their collaborative spirit from the very beginning, uniting in prayer was a natural response to Benton’s requests. Specifically, their prayers were centered on developing more love for God amongst those gathered, deepening love amongst all Christians in God’s family settling in Sacramento, and the Gospel mission that was well under way in Sacramento flourish and the lost would be found.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Oakland, CA: Thompson and West, 1960), 100.

<sup>22</sup> W.W. Ferrier, ed., *The Pacific: Congregational Churches in Sacramento, Volume LV. No. 27* (San Francisco: July 6, 1905), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, personal interview.



## Advocacy

As Sacramento was being settled because of gold, people of all races arrived to be part of the settlement and stake their claim. This would be yet another situation the early church responded to. The Chinese began to immigrate to California in 1849, with the discovery of gold. Some of them came to Sacramento. At first, the early settlers were curious of the Chinese, but over time fear and hate of them developed and spread amongst the white settlers.<sup>24</sup> The Chinese were not only in competition for the gold the white settlers sought, but had different customs and traditions that many White settlers were unaccustomed to and that ignorance caused intolerance and divisions. Racial prejudice against them inevitably led them to be relegated as non-status person, meaning they were not allowed to testify at trials and they were not allowed to vote.

Benton saw the injustice of what was happening and addressed this social evil from his pulpit, marrying his proclaimed faith with an issue of injustice for the treatment of the Chinese. In his words:

In some way the Providence of God will bring it to pass, that California shall fully compensate for every mischief she has done—that there shall be an antidote for her poison—that for all the avarice, covetousness, and cold hearted miserliness of which she has been the occasion, she shall make ample returns of good; of good in driving away superstition, breaking down the walls of prejudice and dissipating the darkness that has so long veiled and confused the minds of men uninstructed and half-civilized.<sup>25</sup>

His co-laborers once again joined Benton. Owen brought attention to Chinese immigrants by sending word to his denomination of the need for missionaries to reach

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<sup>24</sup> Lionel Utley Ridout, “The Church, The Chinese, The Negros in California, 1849-1893,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 28 (June 1959).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Benton, “*California As She Was, As She Is, As She Is To Be*,” Thanksgiving Sermon delivered November 30, 1850 (California Room, Sacramento, California).

them. Briggs stood openly against the inhumane treatment of the Chinese. It was said about him during this time, “When a wave of barbarism swept over the Coast and the Chinese were mobbed and outraged and churches were burned for the crime of teaching them the Gospel, his clarion voice was heard above the storm in defense of the oppressed race.”<sup>26</sup> Even as these ministers spoke boldly against the injustices, the prejudices against the Chinese continued to spread. They were hated, degraded, scorned, and ignored as human beings.<sup>27</sup>

In 1854, the pastor of the First Baptist Church, Lewis Schuck, came as a missionary to the Chinese immigrants and upon his arrival began building relationships with them. Within a month of his arrival, he organized Chinese Bethel Chapel. A year after his arrival in 1855, the Sacramento Union reported that he presented a petition to the mayor and council of Sacramento for a free school to be established for the Chinese, but they turned him down.<sup>28</sup> Undeterred, Schuck continued to advocate for the Chinese for the remainder of his time in Sacramento.

*The Pacific Banner* (Baptist periodical) printed the following in their vocal support of the Chinese:

These people ought not to be treated harshly. Because they are dressed in a costume that would not suit our tastes, they ought not to be despised. Because they speak in a language that is jargon to us, let it not be inferred that they know nothing. Because they cannot assert and maintain their rights, let it not be supposed that they themselves understand and value them. Let us not judge hastily or act precipitately against them. The reputation that California gives to

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<sup>26</sup> Edna Smith Sibole, *First United Methodist Church 135 Anniversary Publication – 1849-1984* (Sacramento, CA: River City Lithography, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Wilson Moore, *Areas of Impact of Protestantism Upon the Cultural Development of Northern California, 1850-1870* (Pacific School of Religion: Berkeley, CA, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Christianity in the view of the Chinaman will be an abiding one. By kindness and just treatment, we can open their minds to it; and by wrong oppression and cruelty, we can shut the Empire against it more effectually than could any Chinese wall, though reared to heaven. Let us beware of doing this great irreparable wrong.<sup>29</sup>

The Chinese were not the only group the early ministers advocated for. Even though California had entered the Union as a free state, there were racist sentiments and unfair treatment of Blacks. Briggs, once again, became an advocate for Blacks that were settling in Sacramento at the risk of putting himself in personal and professional danger. The intensity of this issue cannot be overlooked.

In 1851, Briggs found out that some southern politicians were meeting in Wilmington, North Carolina to plan on making California a slave state. Specifically, their plan included rushing in a large number of slaves to this developing state, having California law modified to annul the Constitution, and working for Constitutional Convention to introduce a clause to make slavery legal in California. It is not known specifically how Briggs found out about this backroom deal, but he publicly exposed it in the *California Christian Advocate* (Methodist periodical) that he founded.<sup>30</sup>

Briggs used his pulpit to publicly denounce the mistreatment Blacks received and politics attempting to make slavery legal. This not only got him into trouble with those from the opposing view, because he went everywhere to speak boldly against the mistreatment toward Blacks, but also his own Methodist congregation that had him presented to the Official Board of the Methodists who passed a motion that he stay home in his local congregation instead of traveling about the state speaking out against the

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<sup>29</sup> Henry Walsh, "Hallowed Were the Gold Dust Trails," (Santa Clara, CA: University of Santa Clara Press, 1946), 450.

<sup>30</sup> O.C. Wheeler, correspondence (Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA, 1854).

mistreatment and racism toward Blacks. However, Briggs did not stop. He mounted his horse and traveled wherever needed, speaking what he believed was Christian justice.<sup>31</sup>

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in Sacramento in the summer of 1850 and Owen helped erect the place of worship, carrying lumber on his own back doing whatever was needed to construct a church for his new friends. In 1856, a Black Baptist Church formed in Sacramento as well. Inevitably the relationships built across racial lines by these early church leaders with Blacks, Chinese, and other minority groups that arrived in Sacramento made a profound impact on the emergence of the city.

### Hearts of Mercy

Perhaps a major contributor to the unity created amongst the early Christian pioneers that came to Sacramento was the mercy they had for one another. When Owens's family lost everything in the capsized boat, they were immediately taken care of by other ministers. Deal organized a clothes drive for the Owens family. As a family struggling to find their place in Sacramento, this was just the beginning. After being there for only two months, the Owens' two-year-old daughter died of croup.<sup>32</sup> His friends and co-laborers in other churches extended mercy.

Benton was ill off-and-on his entire first year in Sacramento. Ellen Green Briggs, Martin Brigg's wife, got cholera in Sacramento in addition to the yellow fever she acquired in Panama while on her way to Sacramento. D.W. Pollack, the first Southern Methodist minister in Sacramento, died because of poor health. R.F. Burnham, the

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<sup>31</sup> Sibole, *First United Methodist Church 135 Anniversary Publication – 1849-1984*, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, *1849-1909 Souvenir History of the First Methodist Episcopal Church*.

Episcopalian rector, died in 1850 after only being in Sacramento one year. Amariah Kalloch, a Baptist pastor that held services in the Masonic Lodge, died of yellow fever. A young, twenty-eight-year-old Methodist minister, Elijah Merchant, died of disease as well. Death struck everywhere during these years. It was the church that rose to provide proper burials not only of their own ministerial ranks, but also for those that had yet to darken the door of any of their churches.

Both rivers flooded the city regularly and not only took people's lives, but also made the living conditions unbearable. As the gold rush made many rich, the early Christian pioneers allowed the gold to pass them by in order to continue attending to the ministry they were called to. Because of that, their income was meager and they needed to rely on one another, and the generosity of others to provide the basic needs of survival. Homes were primitive at best, with wood planks set on top of muddy, soggy soil from floods. The roof may have been just a canvas cloth, which would at times leak.<sup>33</sup>

In 1852, another round of cholera broke out on Sacramento. Many people fled the city, but the church stayed and ministered, to their own risk, to those that were dying or would die.<sup>34</sup> No matter what calamity descended on Sacramento, the church responded in acts of mercy and compassion to anyone afflicted.

In 1854, the entire city of Sacramento caught fire and burned and came to be known as "Black Saturday." This was the second fire to strike Sacramento and the early Christians rose to the occasion and worked alongside others to fight for their city. After the fire, they began the task of rebuilding what was lost, helping one another.

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Briggs, manuscript collection.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Waldraven Johnson, *Our Methodist Pioneers* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Advertising Service, circa 1930).

It should be noted that on April 21, 1857, Sisters Mary Baptist Russell and Mary deSales Reddan arrived in Sacramento with the goal of starting a convent and school in the city. They opened the school On October 5, 1857, only six months after they arrived with sixty-five students and by the end of the first term grew to 115. It was called St. Joseph's Academy. Even though the school was their goal, immediately the sisters joined the other ministers of Sacramento responding to the pressing needs of the city around them. It is recorded that the early environment of Sacramento seemed "apocalyptic."<sup>35</sup> There were diseases such as cholera, malaria, scurvy, typhoid fever, dysentery, syphilis, influenza, and pneumonia to name a few. Because of the gold rush, there were accounts of killings, hold ups, mining accidents, and conflicts with Native Americans. Saloons and gaming houses were everywhere, but medical facilities and schools were in short supply.

The vision for starting a convent and school, once they saw their surroundings, expanded their desire to starting hospitals (which still stand today), orphanages, and libraries. These pioneer sisters had rolled up their sleeves and worked alongside the Protestant ministers to meet the specific, immediate needs of the city. They came to call themselves, "The Sisters of Mercy" which was who they were.

### Missions and Evangelism

The need for mission and evangelism in the development of Sacramento is evident. There were those who withstood the lure of wealth and riches for the Gospel, and moved forward during those beginning years; and there were those ministers who left pastoral work to seek gold. Those that were faithful to their calling had an ominous task

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<sup>35</sup> Sisters of Mercy, "A Century of Caring. History and Reflections of Mercy's Healthcare Ministry in Sacramento" (Sacramento, CA: Mercy Healthcare Sacramento 1896-1996).

before them. There was a lack of co-laborers for the demands that they experienced daily. By 1854, 350,000 people immigrated to California and 300,000 of them were men.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the founding pastors wrote their sending and supporting denominations for more help and felt those they wrote to did not understand the dire circumstances in which they labored for the Gospel. Case in point: Owen was sent a letter from the Methodist Mission Room after the first few months of him arriving in Sacramento that said the following: “We wish to remind you that our rule . . . require quarterly reports from you regularly. Let us have them, clearly written in good black ink, and in a fair bold hand.”<sup>37</sup> From what is known about Owens, he had only been in Sacramento for a few months, lost all his personal property, his church had flooded, and his daughter had died. A Baptist minister wrote in November 1850, that everything about Sacramento was discouraging “except the religious necessities of the people and the promises of God.”<sup>38</sup> The Episcopalian Board of Missions visited Sacramento and, after seeing everything that was happening, wrote, “The Mission to California having performed what could be expected, California was no more considered missionary ground.”<sup>39</sup>

In as much as this was discouraging to the ministers that labored in Sacramento, it deepened their desire to remain steadfast and work hard realizing they had to rely on one another instead of their sending denominations. The need for meeting specific needs was

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<sup>36</sup> Wheeler, manuscript collection.

<sup>37</sup> Owen, correspondence.

<sup>38</sup> J.A. Benton, “Early Congregationalism in California,” *Overland Monthly*, 5 (1885): 95.

<sup>39</sup> D.O. Kelley, *History of the Diocese of California 1849-1914*, (San Francisco: Bureau of Information and Supply, 1915).

legion and the need for men and women to hear and receive the Good News of Jesus Christ was rampant. They continued to write asking for help for years to come.

In conclusion, Neuenburg said it best about these men and women who came to make a difference in the River City in her early years:

Having laid aside their differences in the early non-sectarian services by the river, Sacramento Christians continued to fellowship after denominational structures were erected. In spite of sectional differences, their common grasp of the importance of the Gospel, their common definition of Christian commitment, and their ascription to the authority of Scriptures over their lives and actions united them. Hardships also were a part of their commonality, and they were quick to aid one another in times of distress... Convinced of the future importance of their city and state, they worked diligently to make both city and state worthy of importance . . . The Christians who settled Sacramento did make a difference in the development of the city and in the state. Believing that the Gospel was not just a personal belief system but was to change how one lived and worked and viewed all of life, they dared to make an impact upon their community and their world, to attempt to turn their world right side up.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Neuenburg, *Turning Their World Rightside-Up*, 64-65.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORICAL, SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE OF RIVER LIFE COVENANT CHURCH

#### **Swedish Immigration**

Gold was the drawing card for many San Francisco and Sacramento immigrants in the mid-1850s to late-1860s. Specifically, Swedish immigrants wanted to stake their claim, seeing fertile land brimming with promise and prosperity. Prior to 1850, some eight-to-nine thousand Swedes came to America. Between 1851-1860, as many as 14,865 Swedes came to the United States. This was still considered sparse and it was not until the mid-1860s, as a result of the collapse of the grain market in Sweden, that immigration increased, resulting in 6.9 percent (325,285) of the entire population moving to America by the end of the decade.<sup>1</sup> They brought with them a desire to work hard and provide for their families and were drawn to California with its promise of gold and good fortune.

#### **Bags Packed with Reformation from the Home Country**

The faith of these early Swedish immigrants had roots in the Swedish Lutheran State Church. Those roots, however, were shaken with a spiritual revolution during the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), 179-181.

1850s and 1860s. Swedes questioned the authority of the State Church and were encouraged to read the Scriptures and act for themselves. Salvation was a personal concern and not necessary to be mediated by the Church or administered by the pastor. The freedom of the New World in America not only provided new financial opportunity, but, was used for exploring theological freedom since there was no State Church.

As early as 1873, Swedish meetings took place in Sacramento for spiritual edification through Bible meditations, song, and prayers without the leadership of a pastor or church. Commonly held in homes, these early Swedes gathered together galvanized by a common language, culture, and faith as Sacramento evolved.<sup>2</sup> It is recorded that they read and studied the works of Rosenius and Waldenstrom; two theologians from their homeland that were leading the spiritual revolution in Sweden.<sup>3</sup>

### **A New Denomination is Born**

The gathered Swedes were intricately familiar with the various synods taking place within the Lutheran Church. The progression of these synods eventually led to the founding of The Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant in 1885, later known as The Evangelical Covenant Church. On February 22, 1902, the Svenska Evangeliska Missionsforeningen (loosely translated as “Evangelical Mission Covenant Association of California”) was formed in California as part of the Evangelical Covenant Church. This “association” would later be called the Pacific Southwest Conference as part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Time Capsule, First Covenant Church, Sacramento, “Historical Summary—March 17, 1913 to March 17, 1938—Anniversary Issue.”

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Swenson, *A Foundation is Born*, <http://pswc.org/aboutus/history/index.html> (accessed November 26, 2011).

Evangelical Covenant Church. The six churches at this meeting were from San Francisco, Oakland, Fresno, Los Angeles, Kingsburg, and San Jose.

#### Sacramento Swedes join the New Denomination

It was simply a matter of time for the Swedes of Sacramento to get caught in the flow of this new denomination. In fall 1912, several friends gathered in a Sacramento home and laid the preparatory plans for a church with the Evangelical Covenant Church. Under the leadership of the elected chair, A.F. Carlson and visiting pastor A. Danielson, a church was launched. It did not have the resources to call a pastor full time or build a structure to worship in. They rented a space in downtown Sacramento at 9<sup>th</sup> and I Streets.<sup>4</sup>

As they grew in attendance and resources, O.H. Myhren was called to serve as pastor from spring 1913 until December 1914. His first post as pastor was short lived and various other pastors lead the church after he left. However, in August 1917, Myhren came back to lead until April 1924. Immediately, Myhren was able to secure the purchase of an Adventist's church in fall 1918 on the corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> and K Streets. A major hurdle of this early church was the conflicted decision to change the language of worship from their native tongue of Swedish to English in the 1920s and 1930s. This intentional decision opened the doors to other immigrants settling in America.<sup>5</sup>

#### First Covenant Church of Sacramento

The church was eventually known as First Covenant Church of Sacramento. All of the pastors were Swedish and trained in the Evangelical Covenant Church until the

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<sup>4</sup> Swenson, *A Foundation is Born*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

leadership of Ted Smith. Smith became pastor in 1980 and retired in 2010 passing on leadership to his son, Jesse. The fact that Ted Smith was not as tied to the denomination, or roots of the Swedes, caused a stir amongst the older Swedes in the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

First Covenant Church moved various places around downtown Sacramento in subsequent years. Currently, it is located in Rancho Cordova. This move was from downtown Sacramento to a suburb of the city. As Sacramento grew and more suburbs were established, other Covenant churches were planted. As of November 2011, there are Covenant churches in Galt, Citrus Heights, Lincoln, Placerville, Davis, Shingle Springs, Rocklin, Orangevale, El Dorado Hills, Roseville, Woodland, Granite Bay, and Plumas Lake. Covenant churches in Sacramento are Bayside of South Sacramento, Lighthouse Covenant (West Sacramento), Mien Covenant Church, House, Sanctuary Covenant Church, Valley Hi Covenant Church, and River Life Covenant Church. Each church is independent from each other, but formed as a result of a growing denomination intent on planting more churches.

### **River Life Covenant Church is Born**

Bud Locke was the founding pastor of River Life Covenant Church. He grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area in Oakland, San Leandro, and Pleasanton.<sup>7</sup> After graduating from Westmont College in 1991, Locke moved to Elk Grove, working with Youth For Christ. He was excited to begin his work as he was told Elk Grove, at that time, was a diverse community, something he wanted to be a part of since he had grown

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<sup>6</sup> Joe Myhren (grandson of O.H. Myhren), interview by author, November 21, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Bud Locke, interview by author, telephone interview, October 9, 2011.

up in this kind of context. However, when he arrived, he discovered Elk Grove was not diverse. That being the case, he stayed and served there until 1997 on staff.

In 1998, Locke became associate pastor for Central International Fellowship in Oak Park, a Baptist congregation. His duties included everything from “Graduate to Grave,” meaning he worked with high school students all the way to the elderly. He loved Oak Park because it was the diverse community he expected when he moved to northern California after college graduation.

At this point, Locke had become associated with Ray Johnston at Bayside Church in Granite Bay. Bayside is a Covenant mega-church of over ten thousand people and numerous daughter churches in the greater Sacramento area. The main campus, in Granite Bay, was planted in 1995. Locke and Johnston became friends and Johnston began to share with Locke his ideas about planting a church. Locke believed the core of a church plant, should he ever plant a church, was for people reconcile with God and reconcile with one another. He became aware that he had a slightly different idea of church paradigm than Johnston. This was unfortunately brought to light in a very public forum.

Johnston and Locke attended a leadership luncheon; Johnston spontaneously announced, “This is our new church planter for downtown Sacramento” and pointed to Locke. Locke was shocked as they had never talked about planting a church together. In response to this announcement, Locke found himself declaring he was planting a church, but not associated with the Bayside. He sensed the people that would go to this church plant were not people attracted to a mega-church. Rather than a mega-church paradigm, he wanted to connect with people in smaller, downtown neighborhoods of Sacramento.

Locke began sharing his vision for church planting to friends and some classmates at Western Seminary where he attended at the time. They discussed possible names for the future church; Locke was clear he wanted to tie the name to the city; specifically the “River City” Sacramento was also known as. “River Life” was selected connecting “The River of the Blessed Sacrament” and the life that is offered to those who follow Jesus.

When it came time to decide what denomination to join for support of River Life, Locke chose the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). He had grown up in the Evangelical Free Church and really enjoyed that experience, but knew they would not ordain him. He disagreed with their stand not to ordain women into full-time ministry and their doctrine of premillennialism. He knew friends in the ECC, so felt led to pursue ordination in the ECC to plant River Life. At first he was unsure on their view of infant baptism, but grew to understand their perspective. After that time he knew he would either go on staff at a Covenant church or plant a Covenant church.

Locke was selected and sent to the ECC assessment center to see if they would affirm him as a church planter. It was confirmed and with that affirmation, he contacted approximately sixty people who expressed interest in planting a church with him. He planned an initial meeting and, out of that sixty, only one single young woman came. This discouraged Locke, his wife, Kara; they decided to spend some time in prayer.

It was this time of prayer that Bud Locke was convinced that “it’s not about who comes or who doesn’t come to his church plant, but rather about following Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> Doing what Jesus would tell him to do became the framework for success at River Life, instead

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<sup>8</sup> Locke, interview by author.

of who, or how many, would come to church. Discipleship was a measure of success as opposed to church attendance.

### Small and Humble Beginnings—Looking for a Place to Land

River Life began meeting with a small group of people in a home in East Sacramento in August 1998, many of whom had attended First Covenant Church. There were conversations between Locke and Ted Smith and it became apparent that a new Covenant Church plant was not supported because of the proximity of First Covenant to downtown Sacramento. With a strained relationship already with Johnston at Bayside and half-hearted support from First Covenant Church, River Life formed in the shadows of two mega churches from the same denomination, holding a different vision, but, tightly to a diverse denomination.

It was only four months after this small group of people began meeting that they began a preview worship service on December 6, 1998. They met at Turn Verein, a German Community Center on J Street downtown Sacramento. Twenty-five people attended and River Life was officially birthed. After a full year at Turn Verein, River Life was excited about leaving this facility and moving to Sutter Middle School on Alhambra next to McKinley Park. At Turn Verein, they had to clean the facility in order to worship because of excessive partying from the night before. Sutter Middle School would not have this kind of issue. However, Sutter would only allow River Life to rent for a year.

After their year at Sutter Middle School, River Life found themselves taking the risk of purchasing a building to call home. The property was at 1901 X Street downtown. Locke reached out to a man named Buzz Oats, who was renowned for his philanthropic

history with the faith community in Sacramento. The property was an open structure and would serve as a gathering place for, not only worship, but, the downtown coffee shop River Life had visions of, connected to the property for weekly use. Oates appreciated the vision and purchased the property; River Life paid rent toward purchasing at a later date.

### Mission and Evangelism

Because Locke is an evangelist at heart, only 25 percent of those attending River Life at the beginning were from a church background. The church grew with a healthy ratio of people that were not yet followers of Jesus, as well as those that were looking for something a little bit different from traditional church. River Life, from the start, only worshipped three times a month. The other Sunday, they gathered together for a shortened time of worship and prayer and then engaged their community in acts of service. They called this “4<sup>th</sup> Sunday.” A variety of other missional activities sprung out of this infant church and it became known as “A Church in the City for the City.”<sup>9</sup>

The church continued growing and, eventually, wanted to purchase the property from Oates. They contacted National Covenant Properties of the Evangelical Covenant Church. National Covenant Properties secured the property. However, River Life was not in a position to purchase the property, after some time, from NCP. As a result, they began looking, yet again, for a property to gather and call home.

### Securing a Location—An Open Door

In 2005, the leadership of River Life discovered an old Free Methodist Church for sale at 4401 A Street. Once again, Locke contacted NCP to inquire about a loan to

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<sup>9</sup> Locke, interview by author.



purchase this property. Because of their budget and attendance, NCP could not in good faith grant River Life the loan they sought. Not to be deterred of what they saw as God's leading and provision, they began a conversation with the Free Methodists under the leadership of Forrest Bush; superintendent for the Free Methodists. River Life presented Bush with a plan to purchase the property, which they mutually agreed upon. River Life had its first service in this property on Christmas Eve of 2005.

### A New Call—A New Chapter

River Life continued serving their community missionally and the congregation gathered more people. There were more and more challenges in the days ahead of River Life, and with a deep love for the city, congregation, and community, Locke sensed the Holy Spirit calling him to something new around 2008. It was a process of discernment for Locke and his wife. Because the Lord created him to be as an evangelist and apostle, it was not surprising that the Lord gave Locke a vision of planting churches in Columbia with the Evangelical Covenant Church. He welcomed the input of trusted friends and leaders at River Life and it was confirmed this vision was truly from the Lord. He lead River Life until June 2009. It was a sad day losing the founding pastor as the church shared many years of fruitful ministry together. With Locke moving to a new place of ministry, the leadership wisely sought an interim pastor to lead them while they figured out their next steps as a church.

### Interim Pastor—Identity Shift

Doug Muraki served as interim pastor at River Life from June 2009 to April 2010. Mukari is a renowned “professional interim” in the greater Sacramento area. He was

raised in the Baptist denomination and served in various churches whenever a transition occurred. Doug knew of the Evangelical Covenant Church through his loose contact with First Covenant Church. He and Locke knew each other and Locke communicated to some on the leadership team at River Life that Mukari would not be a good match to serve as interim, however, he was called anyway.

Mukari lead River Life and called into question the financial arrangements with the Free Methodists. He was critical of the financial arrangement. He began teaching inductive Bible Study on Wednesday nights and preached with convicting fervor and Baptismal flair. Because of the difference in style and personality from Locke, River Life saw a decline in attendance. However, a small group of people who were frustrated while Locke was in leadership, welcomed Mukari's teaching, preaching, and doctrinal stance. He was not known to be available to people throughout the week or to do pastoral care. On Sunday mornings he preached and immediately left the church after his sermon, choosing not to stick around and be with the church afterwards.

Mukari's directive leadership was helpful when he walked leadership through the process of preparation for their next pastor. He wanted to ensure the new pastor would be supported by River Life. In as much as Mukari's motivation was beyond question, his personality was somewhat aggressive and demanding. He inserted himself and his opinions in a variety of ways whether they were welcomed or not. He stepped beyond the limitations of an interim and this was helpful in some arenas and not so helpful in others.

Mukari wanted to make sure leadership was aware that people would leave River Life with the transition to a new pastor. Because of his experience, he wanted to make sure the church would support the new pastor when friends of theirs may choose to leave.

He was around long enough to see congregational identity change with pastoral change. He saw changes in pastoral leadership brought about some unsettling church attendance. He stayed at River Life until April 2010 and passed the baton of pastoral leadership at River Life to me.

#### River Life's New Pastor—Shaping and Forming for What Lies Ahead

I was introduced to the Evangelical Covenant Church in 1986, serving First Covenant Church in Oakland. I began following Jesus in college through a Pentecostal college ministry at Eastern Washington University. Although it was a nurturing place and deep relationships were formed, I began attending Calvary Chapel in my final year at college before moving to Oakland. I loved the line-by-line teaching that I received at Calvary Chapel but missed the experiential expression of faith from the Pentecostals.

At the time I was against denominations, finding them divisive doctrinally for people who claimed to follow Jesus. I was surprised when, at a membership class at First Covenant Church Oakland, it was said one of the tenets of the denomination was offering freedom to disagree on issues of belief or practice where Scripture allowed for a variety of interpretations. Holding a position of being united in Christ to make disciples and extend mission, the Evangelical Covenant Church seemed a place of home for me.

After my internship in Oakland, I was called, and confirmed by the church in Oakland to pursue my Masters of Divinity at North Park Theological Seminary from 1988 to 1992. It was rich time of great information and theological foundation that I lacked from not growing up attending church. While it was good for this part of my life,

it lacked any sort of direction helping me understand discipleship for or equipping me to make disciples for any future church I may serve.

After seminary I served a church in McMinnville, Oregon as Associate Pastor to Youth and Students until 1998. When I began roughly 150 were in attendance and, by the time I left, average of 450 people came. It was exciting at the time and I was content there. I would have stayed longer, but the church ended up hiring a well-known denominational worship pastor. After he arrived, it was discovered he had a moral failure in his previous ministry location and was being brought before the Board of Ministry. It was recommended only the senior pastor and myself know this and we were told to withhold this information from leadership at the church. The toxicity of secrecy grew worse as his inappropriate behavior continued, even after he was reprimanded by the Board of Ministry. I witnessed the lack of character in this gifted musician, and because I was sworn not to tell anyone, felt I needed to leave the church that I loved.

I was called as High School Pastor in Bellevue, Washington at Newport Covenant Church. I served there 1998 to 2001. Arriving on the hinges of serious questions about what happened in my previous church, I entered a situation where the vision was becoming “the Saddleback of the Pacific Northwest.” The senior pastor took multiple pilgrimages to Saddleback Church in southern California with key leaders and pastoral staff. Because Newport Covenant Church was an older congregation, there was great resistance and conflict between the congregation and the senior pastor, which spilled over on to the other eight pastors on staff. I was once pushed up against the wall by a seventy year old man who cursed me out in the hallway, because I asked him if he wanted a chair

for his wife to sit in as she was elderly and could not stand in the line forming for our high school Mother's Day brunch.

My high school ministry grew from thirty to sixty during my first two years at Newport Covenant. However, something was bothering me. I was praised for students coming to our large gathering, however, I was aware of the lack of character formation and discipleship of my students, and consequently, their families as well.

This experience in conjunction with the one I left in McMinnville, propelled me to search for some closure or peace in this situation. That led me to spend three hours each week on my day off praying in a Catholic church. I could not understand the disconnect between church attendance and rampant bad behavior of those that attended. I picked up some books about discipleship and began seeing my ministry, as well as the churches I was serving, had no thought on helping people learn to follow Jesus Christ. The church had lots of programs that centered around Jesus and were about Jesus, but it was apparent what I witnessed in both churches stemmed from a lack of understanding about discipleship: the connection between knowing God and serving God.

While in my quest for understanding discipleship at Newport Covenant, Neil Josephson, who was the president of Covenant Bible College (CBC), contacted me. He wanted to know if I would come to their post-high school discipleship college to teach a one-hour class. I was aware of CBC and curious what it was about. I went and discovered they intentionally had discipleship as a vision and went about making disciples by focusing on three tenets: biblical knowledge (head), Christian ministry (hands), and spiritual formation (heart). Through classes, missional experiences, and a consistent small group for edification, encouragement, and challenge these students experienced and lived

in a discipleship culture. I was immediately drawn to this ministry because of the transformation and impact I witnessed in the lives of the students in this community. I was called to be on the discipleship faculty in 2001 and accepted.

I served at CBC six years and began Doctor of Ministry studies at Fuller Theological Seminary while there. The combination of a culture of discipleship at CBC and courses at Fuller provided new paradigms for ministry in a post-Christendom context was fertile ground for thoughts on growing people as disciples of Jesus Christ making an impact in the world. It caused me to look back and understand why prior ministry contexts did not seem to transform people and look forward to the church in the west with many questions and doubt. I would have stayed at CBC for many more years, but the ministry closed after sixty-six years due to financial strain.

I once again had to find a new place to serve. I began interviewing at churches, and from the questions I asked and the answers I gave to numerous churches, it was apparent I did not fit a traditional church paradigm. I asked questions about discipleship and mission and they asked questions about attendance and small groups; sometimes even throwing around the word “outreach” which really meant “in-reach.” After four months of searching, I went to Hilmar Covenant Church in Hilmar, California. Although it was 106 years old, they were looking for someone to come plant a church within the church. They had two worship facilities on their property: the main sanctuary built in 1905 and a state of the art worship center/gym. They wanted me to help reach the young people that had left church. The senior pastor had been there for twenty-five years and would stay to lead one church while I would lead the other. Each of us was under the same leadership team of the church council.

I started serving the church in 2006 and was encouraged to resign in 2009. This began as an opportunity to implement ideas of real discipleship and mission. Even though another worship service started, which around fifty people attended, started four small groups, and began engaging the community missionally, the congregation was fearful of books I recommended from seminary. They did not have the capacity to embrace the idea that life transformation was elevated over doctrine, and did not see the value of engaging the community missionally. This idea met with fear and suspicion, which led to mistrust and anger. Once again, my time in the church was filled with disappointment and dread. I met incredible people in each context, but the unfamiliarity of purposeful discipleship and mission in the church context compared with what I experienced at CBC created an environment of toxicity instead of the abundant life I read about in Scripture.

I eventually accepted an interim position at Stockton Covenant Church and used that time to process all I had experienced and examined what my next steps would be. I did not think serving a church again would be fruitful and began looking into a house church paradigm. I finished my coursework at Fuller and began believing for a church in a Western context to be vibrant it had to embrace a completely different paradigm. My past experiences of church gave me no sense of hope for its future given its existing paradigm. Surprisingly my time in Stockton changed my mind. The church was seventy-two years old and beginning to gather younger families. There was a renewed sense of vision, and yet the complexity and challenge of being an older church with older members. They started a denominational revitalization process called *Veritas* and realized they needed to have some difficult discussions regarding their health. They were truly

open to analyzing their church paradigm and design and implementing what was needed. They asked me to continue to lead them through this process.

I was hesitant at first because *Veritas* had been introduced at the Hilmar church. It angered the congregation intensely when they evaluated themselves as a High Risk Church; meaning they were at high risk of closing. They had hired me, in their opinion, to convince others that had left that they were a good church and had a lot to offer. What they received was me, helping them understand why people had left their church. Without honest assessment, there was no moving forward.

Stockton Covenant embraced their reality. They were a good congregation and humbly received that status. My nine months moving them through the process of honest reflection was not only welcomed by the congregation, but, redemptive for me and any sort of hope for a Church in the West to become healthy. I brought people together that were in conflict to resolve it in a small group context, giving and receiving communion at the end of our time together. I preached and addressed, publicly, the seven areas of focus that *Veritas* revealed about them as a church. I connected them to their neighborhood elementary school where they began serving missionally. I, also, helped them address the dysfunction on their pastoral staff, which led them to remove their Youth Pastor. Painful discussions gave birth to healthy living. This experience at Stockton prepared me to feel led to accept a call to serve River Life as their second full time pastor.

### The Call and First Year Challenges

Upon arrival at River Life, the leadership team and I worked hard on a vision for the church. It was apparent they needed to reconnect with one another and begin to serve,



once again, their community as they had lost steam during their final year of Locke's leadership and Mukari's interim. The marriage of my learning and the church's readiness was complete. What came out of our time together was a vision for life groups, that would not only gather together for encouragement and biblical growth, but serve together in the community. These were named IOU groups standing for In-relationships (with one another), Out-relationships (with those that have yet to follow Jesus), and Up-relationships (growing in their relationship with Jesus). I learned this language from my time at CBC as well as some of the education I received at Fuller when I began thinking of a home church paradigm. Leadership wanted the people at River Life to form these groups organically with others they had natural relationships and affinity with.

River Life's leadership wanted to communicate that vision to the congregation in a small group setting. There needed to be another membership class taught for those who wanted to join River Life. I had been on the denominational website and discovered the ECC just completed a four-session membership class called "Mission Friends." This curriculum is extremely missional; the four sessions are broken into Mission of God (a theology of *Missio Dei*), Mission of ECC (to familiarize people with the theology, structure, and DNA of the ECC), Mission of Local Church (where each church could insert their vision locally), and Mission of Self (helping those in attendance see their part of the mission of the previous three sessions). The Leadership Team saw this as a good way to introduce our vision of IOU groups to do discipleship and mission together. I called and met with a group of adults to go through this material together and, in turn, these leaders would invite all of River Life to go through this material to not only learn

more about the denomination, but, learn more about where the church was headed. These were called Compass Groups.

In theory, our strategy made sense. However, the outcome of these gatherings could have never been predicted. The first sessions about the Mission of God were widely accepted. However, a snag was hit when the second session about the Mission of the ECC began. River Life had never fully embraced being a denominational church. Locke was new to the ECC as a church planter and Mukari was Baptist to the core. In fact, many at River Life believed their church was non-denominational and would communicate that to people they invited to church. In particular, there were four handouts given during session two; the ordination of women to full time ministry, a non-penal substitutionary view of atonement, a non-inerrant view of Scripture, and inclusion of baptism of infants as well as adults upon belief. These four handouts caused a stir within the congregation. Congregants from various theological backgrounds at River Life that were not part of the ECC were fearful of what they read for the first time. Immediately, people began searching the internet on these theological views and even made contact with trusted friends from other churches as well as denominations.

Eventually some people left River Life that had attended for many years and were considered core people. This was relationally hard on the church. However, the converse was also true. It solidified an identity of the church that had not been there prior. Those that stayed began to consult me privately to understand more of the freedom in the ECC. Many wanted to talk for years about some theology they were afraid to do in years previously. At the leadership level, we talked about what happened and decided that we

were a denominational church and that this was the first time someone had led them through these denominational views. They wanted to remain a Covenant church.

### A More Complete Identity

River Life, at this time, is a congregation that has eighty children under eleven years old as well as twenty-five that are twelve-to-eighteen years old. Leading these ministries are a Children's Director that serves ten hours a week and a Youth Pastor that serves thirty hours a week. A Worship Pastor that serves ten hours a week and an Office Administrator that serves twenty-five hours a week complete the staff. Between 110 and 130 adults attend River Life.

According to the standards set by the staff of the Pacific Southwest Conference of the ECC, River Life is a multi-ethnic church with 72 percent white and 28 percent non-white. River Life attendees live throughout the Sacramento-area, even though River Life is a neighborhood community church located in East Sacramento. There is also a diverse economic community at River Life; there are those barely able to afford rent and food, as well as those that have significant financial resources. Involvement in the whole life of the congregation occurs regardless of income level.

### Retreat to Advance—Looking to the Lord for What is Next

We had our first leadership team retreat March 25-26, 2011. I sensed a need to pull the leadership team together as we recovered from a turbulent time. We shared our vision for IOU groups in the Compass Groups, but they were not organically starting. Even though the vision was good, it was difficult for people to know where to go or who would become a leader of these groups.

In preparation for our retreat, I became aware of how Jesus led his disciples and taught them. It seemed Jesus was a master of parable and metaphor. Whenever he wanted to talk about the complexity of God, he used a word picture through story, to speak of truth. As a result, I wanted to have an honest discussion with our leadership team about the truth of the status of River Life in the first year. I chose three passages where Jesus used a metaphor to teach in order to frame our time and discussion together. The three metaphors, and subsequent passages that they sprang from, were: “Wind” in John 3:1-9, “Word” in Acts 15:1-21, and “Keys” in Matthew 16:13-20. We had a lengthy Bible study on these passages that weekend and, from that, attempted to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in River Life (Wind), what passages we would turn to for God’s speaking about our current reality (Word), and what steps we might take to address our current reality (Keys). From this retreat, we created a list of the complex realities of River Life in its current state. One leader stated that, in her opinion, that a focus on discipleship would address each one of the issues we listed.

#### Discipleship—A Stated Value at Birth Reemerges

The leadership team agreed that we focus on discipleship for the remainder of the year. That said, one leader asked, under his breath, if the leadership team were disciples. I heard his comment and asked him to state it for the rest of the group. His response was, “If we expect to be able to lead our church in discipleship, it must start with us. Are we disciples of Jesus and following him?” Because he is a good man and not critical or judgmental, the leadership team received the question in the spirit it was asked.

A decision was made that the leadership team of River Life, which normally had two business meetings a month, would give up one of those meetings for a time of mutual growth. Our business meeting, we called “Vessel” time where we focused on the stewardship of the church. The other meeting we called “Treasure” time where we focused on the Treasure of Jesus in each of our personal lives. The hope was, that if the leadership team would focus on discipleship, the church would also see it as a value. By reaching back into the beginning narrative of River Life, its success would be about following Jesus as disciples rather than how many attended the congregation.

The process of paying attention to the narrative of River Life’s collective story enabled River Life to interpret its past for what would soon follow. Instead of arriving at a strategy and plan, we believed and trusted our next steps would be revealed to us by listening to the Lord, which is what the rest of my final project is about. I could not ask for a more rewarding and enriching place to serve. The church was and is ready to listen, interpret, and then act, not the other way around. The following chapters focus on that vision and purpose.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The bibliography at the end of this Ministry Focus Paper is filled with excellent resources that shaped and narrowed the topic of what it means to interpret the voice and presence of the Holy Spirit through storytelling. These images are created for the future hope of the local church, specifically River Life Covenant Church. There are, however, five texts that brought clarity and direction to the entire process.

#### **Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change**

Mark Lau Branson coined the term “Interpretive Community” in his book, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Branson begins with an awareness of the paradigm shift occurring to Christianity in Western cultures. He states that the Church in the West is “challenged to clarify its very reason for being.”<sup>1</sup> He does not propose a strategy to fix a problem this ministry challenge. Instead, he proposes the Church take an intentional pause to discern God’s redemptive presence, in discovering God’s new call for each specific congregation. The

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), ix.

enormity of the challenge requires churches go beyond mere programmatic or methodical solutions, and instead, rediscover their identity for existence.

An Interpretive Community is one that takes this necessary time exploring root narratives (congregational, biblical, and traditional) “in order to cultivate sanctified imaginations that can provide courage and direction for a more faithful future,” rather than one crippled by loss and discouragement.<sup>2</sup> These narratives, stories, and memories give the congregation positive images and pictures that give life to live into new possibilities of a desired future.

Branson uses a specific congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Altadena, California, as an example of a congregation that put Interpretive Community into practice and gives the reader an illustration for the process he proposes. His process involves four basic steps. The first step, called “Initiate,” starts with framing the process in the positive by inquiring how the Lord has worked in a congregation’s past. As a result of beginning the process with what God has done in the past (rather than starting with problems that need to be solved), “would give the church the capacity to know themselves well and to see encouraging images.”<sup>3</sup> Being grateful for God and one another is paramount for interpreting what happened in the past to reimagine what might happen in the future.

The second step, “Inquire,” collects the narratives that had life giving forces for both individuals and the congregation. In the Inquiry step, congregations interview their people to collect data that is analyzed by those interviewing. In the telling of the

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<sup>2</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, x.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



narrative, the interviewers pay attention to common themes that emerge. Once these common themes are discovered, more interviewing takes place centered on these themes.

The third step called “Imagine,” uses the data gathered in Inquire to create shared images and/or pictures for a preferred future. These images directly connect to the themes discovered in the congregations past stories and provide the link to its future. The fourth, and final step is called “Innovate.” In this step, the congregation finds innovative ways to create their future life together. Using their own narrative and identity as capital for a preferred future, the congregation is free to be creative continuing what has happened in their past, to their future life together.

Branson’s work is extremely helpful in intentionally paying attention to what the Lord has done in the past as an indicator for what the Lord may want to have a specific congregation do in its present or near future. Anchoring a congregation from the lessons learned in its past provides a foundation for future life together. The African term, *Sankofa* literally means: “go back and get it” (san - to return; ko - to go; fa - to look, to seek and take). Rather than set five year goals for what the congregation would like to see happen and create strategies to get there, the congregation learns how to interpret what has happened in its’ history and use the resources, strengths, values, and memories as capital to move forward in a specific way (go back and get to use). The congregation pauses, discovering their unique identity as a congregation through this interpretation.

This text is helpful and useful for River Life to become an Interpretive Community. The first two chapters of this Ministry Focus Paper are evidence of learning the narrative of, not only River Life, but, the context and culture surrounding River Life. That said, River Life is a fairly young congregation. Whereas Branson uses this process

for the purpose of congregational change, River Life gleans from his work to pause to discover their emerging identity. As an adolescent church, River Life's identity is in the process of maturing and there is not a lot of data in its' past to interpret. There has been a change in the demographic of River Life consistently from its beginnings so the collective memory is difficult to interpret.

### **Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: the Christian Ethic of Pietism**

*Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism* by Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom "seeks to rehabilitate and understand the Pietist heritage and the central role it played in the history of Christian orthodoxy."<sup>4</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom highlights the importance of pietism and draws the conclusion that its character and practices not only shaped evangelicalism but also has an important role offering present day evangelicals a framework, "ethic," for present day realities. Clifton-Soderstrom reaches into the past to shape and guide a present reality.

Pietism, as a movement, was a reformed movement that began amongst German Lutherans. According to Clifton-Soderstrom pietism, as a reformed movement, is "awkward, unsystematic, and difficult to define."<sup>5</sup> In order to do it justice, she chronicles the input of three individuals that were instrumental in the theological, as well as practical, shaping of pietism: Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705), August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), and Johanna Eleonora Peterson (1644-1724). Not only did she use the work of these three individuals, she uses three metaphors (angels, worms, and

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: the Christian Ethic of Pietism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

bogeys) as a way to provide insight into the theological virtues of pietism. She does so because “Pietists loved biological metaphors for describing the Christian life.”<sup>6</sup>

Clifton-Soderstrom used worms to talk about the state of the human condition in relation to the Creator. Francke designated humans nothing but lower than a worm in comparison to the Creator. This extreme word picture illuminates two truths for pietists. First, was the severity of human sin. The early reformers took seriously the consequences of sin on each individual and the collective manifestations of this sin on the environment of the Church and culture as a whole. Although each person was “lower than a worm,” the second truth was these worms were used to transform the environment of the Church. “By digesting God’s Word and allowing it to penetrate their lives, pietism revived dead dirt and turned it into living soil. The soil they helped create became the environment from which social engagement, lay participation, and missionary activity increased.”<sup>7</sup>

Angels give a picture for the potential of a soul when it becomes renewed in God’s image; they become nobility that is even higher than that of angels. These early pietists were concerned with the total transformation and regeneration of all who claimed to have a faith in Jesus. New birth and new life in Jesus were God’s intention for each of His creations in His image. New birth and new life express themselves in the excellencies of faith, love, and hope which have a direct impact on other people both inside and outside the Church. The pietists, like angels, longed to be involved in the mediation of people to God, as well as to one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Bogey was a metaphor Clifton-Soderstrom borrowed from John Howard Yoder and Dale Brown. According to Yoder and Brown, “pietistic” as a term “diminished the creative and critical contributions of the actual historical movement that was pietism.”<sup>8</sup> A bogey in golf is one over par, below average, and less than expected. Some believe the pietistic movement hurt the history of the Christian Church instead of enhancing it. However, for the pietist, “bogey” meant the actual working out of their proclaimed faith where faith, hope, and love come together. The intentional focus on transformation and new life is messy compared with the sterile and strict confessionalism and clericalism in the orthodox Lutheran church during this time.

Clifton-Soderstrom defines pietism as a renewal movement that emphasized studying God’s Word, a faith of the heart, and a connection between faith and life. Her desire to connect a retelling of this historical renewal movement for the purpose of assisting the present-day evangelical church using metaphors to guide the process helped create the framework for my Ministry Focus Paper. According to Clifton-Soderstrom:

The evangelical church in the United States is in a period of uncertainty, lacking in a unified identity. We are split in the areas of social issues, politics, worship, and theology. Whether evangelicals will ever have a unified identity is uncertain, but a minimal step in this direction includes a willingness to retrieve and reincorporate our roots-to reengage, in a sense, our family heritage.<sup>9</sup>

Clifton-Soderstrom’s work becomes an interpretive process of using the narrative of history as a trajectory for where the present-day church begins to imagine what future realities are possible. Her use of metaphor to clarify and teach only reinforces the power of images in interpreting what has gone before in order to shape what is to come. River

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<sup>8</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Life, as part of a denomination shaped by the pietistic movement, needs to reach back into its unknown history for reclaiming some values to shape its future.

### **I Is an Other: the Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World**

James Geary authored *I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*. This text, although not written from a Christian perspective, is an excellent resource to highlight the power of a good metaphor.

According to Geary, “the primary purpose of metaphor (is) to carry over existing names or descriptions to things that are either so new that they haven’t been named or so abstract that they cannot be otherwise explained.”<sup>10</sup> For him, metaphorical thinking discovers and invents at the same time. Metaphors discover what has been and invents what will become. Great metaphors are ones that are least expected as it creates novelty by combining what one already understands with what has yet to become known.<sup>11</sup>

Not only do metaphors discover and invent at the same time, they actually have the ability to draw us into pleasure and joy. Co-learning takes place and gives us space for what can be and what is possible:

Metaphors thus involve a “co-operative act of comprehension,” according to philosopher Ted Cohen, an act that involves seeking the hidden connection, the *ligamen*, which makes sense of the metaphor. So, though the speaker may make the metaphor, the hearer makes its meaning. Hearer and speaker are accomplices; the one unpacks what the other presents. In terms of creativity, producing a metaphor and penetrating one are almost the same act. Metaphors are so entertaining because of the pleasure we get from figuring them out.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Geary, *I Is an Other: the Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

This *liagmen* is what connects the speaker with the listener. Metaphors have the unique ability to create a sense of oneness from those who use metaphors to communicate a truth with those that receive the metaphor and attempt to figure out the implications. Compared to concrete communication where the communicator explains what truth is, and are accurate in that communication, the receiver is passive instead of involved. They receive information, not perceive meaning in the information.

Geary writes about metaphors and their importance, and also on parables which, he defines as narrated metaphors, placing a fictional story congruent to a fact of life.<sup>13</sup> The parable is a metaphor in story form. They serve a similar purpose to metaphors as they draw the listener into the story in engagement, but they also “help us solve essential psychological and social problems in the real world.”<sup>14</sup>

When the truth is discovered, metaphor and parable provide sudden insight, which illuminate present realities by enhancing and intensifying them. For those attempting to discover insight, they become a welcome tool. For those not attempting to discover reality, metaphors and parable can be unattainable. The purpose of metaphor and parable is to draw in, in order to flesh out. One must seek in order to find truth in the parable.

This is clearly evident in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus was a master of metaphor and parable; they were his primary medium to explain reality about spiritual truth. In Matthew 13:11-13, after hearing yet another parable from Jesus, the disciples ask why He chooses to use parables/stories to communicate. Jesus responded that His parables discerned who is really listening. Jesus told parables to create readiness and nudge people

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<sup>13</sup> Geary, *I Is an Other*, 181.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

toward receptive insight. To be an interpretive community, a church must value and experiment with metaphor, using its historical narration laid side-by-side with a metaphor and/or parable to stimulate creativity and envision a co-creation with the very live, and present, Holy Spirit, who becomes the *liagmen* between metaphor/parable and listener. Without an awareness of Jesus himself, through the Holy Spirit, nudging the Church toward receptive insight, the Church becomes captive to modular thinking.

Geary's work is paramount for River Life to guard itself against such thinking. Instead of coming up with a new model for church or paradigm for church, River Life must understand its story and the image that has already been created so that it takes necessary steps for its future. Finding the right metaphor is crucial.

### **Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time**

Margaret J. Wheatley wrote a helpful book about leadership called *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. Even though she is not addressing a spiritual audience, she masterfully lays out the need for any organization to change their paradigm for leadership from a modernistic, Western view of leadership that has dominated America since its inception. "For more than three hundred years, western culture has been developing an old story (that is) characterized as a story of dominion and control, and all-encompassing materialism."<sup>15</sup> She describes this as an old story because she traces the beginning of this story to ancient Greece where humans discovered their potential. The story unfolds and grows throughout history as humankind attempts to gain mastery over physical matter. What evolved was viewing all of life through the lens of clockwork

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2007), 17.

machines, engineering brilliance, and scientific rational. What eventually gave birth was the thought that all of life, if rationally understood and explained, could be managed and structures could be put in place to get to desired goals. If goals were not met, then a part of the machine was broken and could be fixed to get the preferred outcome.

How this affects leadership is captured perfectly when she writes:

Trying to be an effective leader in this machine story is especially exhausting. He or she is leading a group of lifeless, empty automatons who are just waiting to be filled with vision and direction and intelligence. The leader is responsible for providing everything: the organizational mission and values, the organizational structure, the plans, the supervision. The leader must also figure out, through clear use of incentives or coercives, how to pump energy into this lifeless mass. Once the pump is primed, he must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions. It is the role of the leader to provide the organizing energy for a system that is believed to have no internal capacities for self-creation, self-organization, or self-correction.<sup>16</sup>

Leaders in this kind of paradigm, attempt to find the right structure, usually through programs and methods invented some place else, and place them on top of their organization and then become perplexed on why it does not “work,” which the word choice alone indicates one is practicing the machine paradigm and old story.

Wheatley explains the problem of Western thinking about leadership accurately, and though she was not writing about leadership in the local church setting, it is applicable, underscoring how much the Church has been impacted by this kind of Western leadership, whereas the pastor is supposed to lead the organization of the Church from this posture.

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<sup>16</sup> Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 20.



After she defines the problem, she proposes a new story for leadership that focuses on process over structure. Making a contrast to the first story, this new story is explained this way:

Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world.<sup>17</sup>

To give an illustration for what this looks like, she quotes Brian Swimme, who compares this new paradigm of leadership to that of the early church that had nothing but a profound revelatory experience. According to Swimme, all the early church did was wander around and tell a new story and he encourages new leaders to become wanderers within their organization and good storytellers in contrast to being good managers.

For leaders to allow the organization to thrive, the leader must be aware of the identity of the organization. Wheatley believes that vision, mission, and value are important, but without an awareness of the story within the organization, leaders will fail at connecting that narrative to the vision, mission, and value, which frustrates the organization. To discover this identity, a leader must be a great listener and provide avenues for people to dialogue about the history of their organization. Once a clear history is discovered, the leader(s) take on the task of interpreting that history to get a sense of its future. “Identity is both what we want to believe is true and what our actions show to be true about ourselves.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

This text has been instrumental in understanding how to help River Life become an interpretive community in light of a collapse of modern paradigms that infected the church in a Western context. As River Life becomes an Interpretive Community, the role of pastor needs to be understood from the paradigm of equipper instead of manager. Instead of the first story of mechanical and western leadership leading the organization called the church, the role of pastor needs to be comprehended as the second story of focusing on process, equipping, and training the church to listen not only to the Lord, but one another as well. In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul highlights the equipping of the church as crucial for the ministry of the church.

### **Building a Discipleship Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did**

The final helpful resource is the ministry of 3DM. I have read many of their texts written by Mike Breen, attended a “Taster” in May 2011, and River Life is part of the Learning Community in Walnut Creek, California that began in December 2011. This is an intentional two-year process of assisting River Life in growing their understanding of discipleship so that missional communities will emerge.

Breen’s work is intentional about discipleship and how this is connected to mission. He created a process and language equipping leaders in the local congregation to multiply the discipleship process. This process involves being connected to the Spirit (Up), connected to one another (In), and involved in expanding the Kingdom of God in missional communities (Out). Through the theological lenses of covenant (relationship) and kingdom (representation) Breen’s teaching series is accessible and comprehensive in purposefully making disciples so that mission flows.

In his work, Breen sets out an expectation that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the lives of each person that follows Jesus. The problem for most churches is helping people discern what Jesus is telling them so they know what to do, and or, how to respond. Since most churches do not have a paradigm for active listening and interpreting what the Holy Spirit is doing, they inevitably rely on programs and set ministerial goals. Although these programs and goals are not inherently bad and spring from a pure desire to see God at work, they may actually hinder a church from living out a specific mission and calling, that is driven by the Spirit of God.

One word Breen uses to assist in discerning for how Jesus may be speaking to someone is the Greek word *Kairos*. This word literally means an opportune time, proper time, or a time of opportunity that is due for a specific season. In other words, a *Kairos* moment is a specific moment that may never occur again. God chooses these *Kairos* moments to announce the Kingdom of God in each of our lives. Discipleship is helping one another interpret what these moments are so that each person can discern what God is telling them through His Spirit so they can respond according to what is said.

A “huddle” of leaders of future “huddles” are invited into the discipleship experience and are clearly communicated that there will be challenge for them to learn how to listen to the Spirit (What is God saying to you?) so they can respond (What are you doing about that?). Each person in the huddle comes with, what they believe, may be a *Kairos* moment or experience that has happened. It could be something positive, negative, or something curious that lead them to believe God may be doing/saying something, but they are unsure about what it specifically is. The group then works together helping one another discern what this *Kairos* moment is all about.

The six steps of a learning circle used to discern what the Spirit may be speaking into this Kairos moment are: observe, reflect, dialogue, plan, accountability and act. In the first step, observe, the individual is encouraged to recount the specific facts of what they perceive their *Kairos* moment: Who? What? When? Where? How? In the reflect step, the individual is to explore what this *Kairos* moment may mean: The Why?

In the next step, members of the group dialogue with the person about their *Kairos* moment after attentively listening during the observe and reflect stage. A passage of Scripture can be shared, a picture/metaphor given, more questions can be asked, and words of encouragement shared. In the plan stage, the leader asks, “Now that we have spent some time listening to what has gone on, what do you think the Lord is asking you to do?” Instead of the group coming up with a plan for the person (which is extremely difficult to hold the group to), the person takes responsibility for what was discussed with them for some next steps in their obedience to what they perceive God asking of them.

After the plan is shared, the leader will then let the individual know that the next time the huddle meets, they will ask what happened and how it went for follow up. This is the accountability step. Finally, the group will come around the person to pray for them and they are encouraged to act on what has been discussed and discovered regarding this specific *Kairos* moment they brought to the group.

Through this process, a discipleship DNA is created at River Life where leaders are trained to interpret what God may be saying. The long-term goal is that missional communities result where discipleship is nurtured within the church. Instead of starting missional projects and plans, disciple-making proceeds mission so the church becomes responsive to what the Spirit of God may be speaking to the Body of Christ at River Life.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHURCH AS CENTERED SET – KNOWING JESUS AND MAKING HIM KNOWN

The historical narrative of the Evangelical Covenant Church is just one part of a larger church narrative. While the identity of many denominations formed primarily because of their distinct doctrine, the ECC has a unique identity based on specific affirmations centered in following Jesus and joining Him in mission. The metaphor of a solar system coined by Larry L. Sherman further brings into focus the core identity of the ECC in a center set paradigm. Finally, the four tenets of the Church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) are foundational to guide and direct. These distinctives shape the marks of an interpretive community such as River Life.

Sherman captures the identity of the ECC by quoting Paul Hiebert's work on mathematical set theory.<sup>1</sup> In this theory, people gather in social groupings in four basic sets. Sherman hones in on two specific grouping sets to contrast the identity of the ECC: a bounded set and a centered set.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Sherman, "What is a Covenant Church?" *The Covenant Quarterly* 65:2, (May 2005): [http://www.churchplantingwiki.com/index.php/wiki/What\\_is\\_a\\_Covenant\\_Church/](http://www.churchplantingwiki.com/index.php/wiki/What_is_a_Covenant_Church/) (accessed July 15, 2012).

### **A Bounded Set**

A bounded set is a social system with clear, defined boundaries communicating verbally and non-verbally who is actually in the social system and who is out of the social system. The boundaries for this to take place can be ideological, cultural, moral, and/or creedal. The center of the bounded set is not as strong as the boundaries that hold the social set together. The boundaries define the set, not the center.

Bounded set thinking crosses over in the life of religion. As one reads through the New Testament, the bounded set paradigm through the religious practices of the Pharisees becomes apparent. Law keeping, gender, health, ethnicity, interpretation of the Law, and an ascetic lifestyle separate the Pharisees from the rest of the Jewish community. This made it nearly impossible for the Pharisees to understand as Jesus challenged the bounded set of the Pharisees by being with tax collectors and notorious sinners who were outside the boundaries the Pharisee's set (Luke 15:1-2). Whereas the Pharisees, through their boundaries, established who was with them and who was "other," Jesus broke through boundaries and included those that did not follow the boundaries of the self-proclaimed devout of Israel. Jesus, fully aware of this, follows in Luke 15, with a parable of a good shepherd leaving the bounded set of the ninety-nine to search for the one that left the set.

### **A Centered Set**

A centered set is groups of people gathering with a very solid and firm center but having soft, open edges. Rather than allow the boundaries to define the group, the center is what keeps the group together and compels it to stay together. For the Church to be that

which the gates of hell will not prevail against, the center of the Church must be Jesus Christ, whereas the members of this centered set are on a life-long journey toward, and with, the One in the center. Holiness does not happen through clear boundaries, but when members of the group are influenced by the center which radiates outward. A magnetic pull from the center draws others toward the center for them to be changed, and transformed, by the center. Rather than focusing on boundaries to evaluate whether someone was part of God's movement, the early church, influenced by the Holy Spirit, focused primarily on how a person was in a relationship with the center: Jesus Christ.

In Acts 15:28-29, there are specific instructions and boundaries given to some gentiles that became followers of Jesus. The requirements of refraining from food sacrificed to idol worship and sexual immorality were not boundaries that excluded these new followers of Jesus from being part of a centered set. Following these requirements kept these followers connected to the center. Therefore, these instructions were not meant to exclude others from being a part of the movement of Jesus, they were meant to keep others connected to Jesus at the center as they followed Him.

Hiebert's work gives churches, as well as denominations, a paradigm for evaluating whether they are, as a social group, a bounded set or a centered set. Ideally, churches and denominations would want to perceive themselves as a centered set. However, this is a complex question. He asks:

How can we organize a church on centered-set principles? This is a problem particularly for those of us from the West for whom formal education, institutional order and planning are so important. It is clear that we need to rearrange our priorities. We must make people more important than programs,

give relationships priority over order and cleanliness, and spend more time in prayer than in planning.<sup>2</sup>

Hiebert believes formal education and institutional order in recent years may have changed from what early pietists envisioned when training for pastoral ministry. They believed theological training was important, but, the devotional life of those being trained was equally as important. As they sought reform from the institutional church paradigm (bounded set), they longed for the kind of Spirit-led ministry that Hiebert indicates.

Sherman believes the ECC core identity is a centered set, which, is not stationary. Jesus as center is moving and, by staying connected to Jesus as center, the ECC joins Him where He goes. Jesus is on a mission, the *Missio Dei*, and as followers draw close to Him, they join Him in mission. To help explain, Sherman uses the metaphor of a solar system. The gravitational pull of the planets draws moons into orbit in the same way that gravitational pull of the sun draws planets into orbit. That being true, our sun is not the center of the universe. It, too, is in an orbit and moving in a trajectory that planets and moons are caught up in and join in with. The sun's gravity draws planets, in relationship with other planets and moons, toward itself, but its path automatically take them along the path and the trajectory it is on.

This metaphor is the perfect picture for how discipleship and mission are connected, not separate, for the ECC. From the very beginning, as Mission Friends, their covenantal relationship with God and one another (Friends) is what compelled them to be in mission partnership (Mission). Sherman explains:

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Heibert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 125.



To state it in terms of Covenant history, we are mission friends. We are friends of Christ, centered primarily on him and his word. And, because Christ is always on a mission, all who are journeying toward Christ are also journeying on a mission with him. As Christ extends his influence through us, more and more people will be attracted to Christ, pulled into his orbit, and caught up with his mission.<sup>3</sup>

Gary Walter, current President of the ECC, claimed in 2007, when he was the Executive Minister of Church Growth and Evangelism, that churches should grow in two directions at the same time; deeper in Christ and further in mission. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus calls His followers to a relationship drawn inward (“come to Me”) to Him for a sustained life. However, Jesus sends His disciples in the opposite direction at the same time. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus sends His disciples outward (“go and make”). The disciples find Jesus with them “as they go out” where He is going. Intimacy with Jesus continues in the mission Jesus was charging. They were not separate directions, but connected.

In Luke 9 and 10, there is a connection between discipleship and mission. Jesus instructs His twelve disciples to be “sent ones” expanding His Kingdom. After this first experience, the twelve return for more teaching. After this teaching, He sends out seventy-two disciples. As a result of sending and teaching, the amount of followers grew.

Sherman asks three rhetorical questions to assist the ECC in evaluating whether it is staying consistent to its core value of being deeper in Christ and further in mission. They are how does any action or decision bring us closer to the center; how does our past path reflect on our present mission; and how can this reflection help us move further on the mission Christ has for us? These three questions are interpretative questions and, in the spirit of pietists appreciating a good metaphor for spiritual truth, the image of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sherman, “What is a Covenant Church?,” 41.

solar system compels the ECC to pay attention to its historical narrative finding the trajectory that Jesus is provoking the ECC to follow in mission.

The strength of the ECC is a commitment to discipleship and mission from a centered set paradigm. In as much as the ECC has held these two core values as central, the ECC has been impacted, like all denominations, by an institutional paradigm and bounded set thinking. However, there is a sense that reform is happening where the ECC fully embraces their identity of Mission Friends, and, once again, attends to the Holy Spirit in order to be sent in mission. Paying attention to the historical narrative of the ECC to interpret next steps has provided a denominational culture of freedom, creativity, and openness to new expressions of the *ecclesia*.

### **Historic Affirmations of the ECC**

The Evangelical Covenant Church traces its beginnings to the European reformation movement that occurred in the latter part of the 1500s. This reformation was embraced by Lutherans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of those specific countries was Sweden, wherein the ECC began.

#### **Pietism**

Clifton-Soderstrom's writes that Philip Jacob Spener was one of the major contributors to the pietistic movement. In his timeless text, *Pia Desideria* (Heartfelt Desire for a God-Pleasing Reform), Spener wrote reform, which began under Luther's leadership against abuses that occurred in the Catholic Church, should be present in the Church whenever It strays away from core principles of the Gospel. Reform does not happen once; it happens continually as God leads and builds His Church. Spener believed

this reform would be inevitable as the Church places before itself six evaluative benchmarks.

### **Scripture Reading**

Spener was convinced the amount and regularity of Scripture reading, wherever believers gathered, whether formally in the church or informally in homes was anemic, and often interpreted poorly. To counter this, he encouraged a daily reading of Scripture from one book to the other, expecting everyone reading the entirety of Scripture instead of a regular diet of familiar texts read and interpreted throughout the course of one's life.

### **Priesthood of All Believers**

There was no distinction between laity and clergy; the priesthood in the Old Testament is poured out to all who call on Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:9 it says, "But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of darkness into His wonderful light." Spener taught spiritual functions of the Church should be open to all Christians, without exceptions. These functions include public prayer, thanksgiving to God, good works, alms, and reading and reflection on Scripture.

### **A Practicing Faith**

The actual working out of faith (orthopraxy) is just as crucial as knowledge of Jesus and the Christian faith (orthodoxy). Pietists go a bit further. They say that love for God and others should take precedent over theological disputes.

## **Holiness amidst Religious Controversies**

Repentance and a holy life should be central for pietists. Rather than dispute and discover truth in theological debates that tend to divide, a humble posture toward the Lord, expressed to others, is walking in truth. A Christian's conduct is as important in disagreements, and Spener goes as far as teaching that Christians should refrain from disputations because, many times, it affects the love that is supposed to be held between Christians, as well as for those who have yet to become Christian.

## **Devotional Life Part of Theological Training**

To equip people for pastoral ministry, theological training should include small groups for the devotional life as well as personal Bible study. Spener believed academic theological training was important for future ministers, but not at the expense of cultivating the devotional life of the future minister. The reformed professors of the seminaries were called upon to address social and spiritual lives of the student body coupled with the academic life.

## **Fruitful Life**

When preaching the Word of God, Pastors should edify their congregation toward producing fruit instead of preaching to elevate the role of the pastor.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of preaching was not mastering the delivery of the sermon, but rather edifying the life of the Christian listening to the sermon. The content of the sermon was impacting the individual Christian and a by-product of that would advance reform that is taking place.

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1964).

## Conventicles

Groupings of people that resonated with these ideas gathered together in what were called “conventicles,” which met in homes of laity to devotionally read Scripture. Meeting without a priest to read and study Scripture went against the authoritarian structure of the institutional, state church in Sweden and other parts of Europe. As this reform took root in Sweden, it was brought to the United States as immigrants settled.

Conventicles continued meeting in homes in the new land. America did not have a state church making the soil fertile for these early pietists. With no desire to form an institutional church paradigm, whenever the early Swedes met, they read the works of reformers in their home land as well as grow spiritually together by asking two key questions: “How goes your walk with Jesus?” and “Where is it written?” Listening to one another and engaging Scripture would be an integral part of their shared life together.

## **Discipleship and Mission**

These two questions were central along with their desire to see others begin to follow Jesus. This *ethos* is what led them to refer to themselves as Mission Friends in 1885, which basically meant they sought to create a culture of friendship with Christ and one another (Covenant), in order to pursue God’s mission in the world (Kingdom). These Mission Friends later became known as the Evangelical Covenant Church. In 1893, at the World’s Fair, the Mission Friends attempted to define their movement as, “The Covenant is not a church organization in the ordinary sense, but a mission society having churches as its members. These churches have consolidated together because of the missionary

spirit which led them to missionary enterprises too large for any single church to undertake.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Affirmations Rather than Creeds**

As the denomination continued to emerge from Mission Friends to Evangelical Covenant, six “Affirmations” soon were penned to clarify identity as a denomination. They are the centrality of the Word of God, the necessity of new birth in Jesus Christ, a commitment to the whole mission of the Church, the Church is a fellowship of believers, the conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit, and the reality of freedom in Christ.

### **The Centrality of the Word of God**

The early Covenanters, influenced by Spener’s teaching, did not approach the Word of God with a proposal or doctrine about the inspiration of the text. Rather than focus on how it was created, they focused on what its intention is for anyone claiming to follow Jesus. They affirmed the authority of Scripture saying “the Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>6</sup> The purpose for this authoritative text, coupled with the Holy Spirit, is bringing about new life in followers of Jesus Christ. Scripture has the ability to change lives rather than just inform minds. As individuals submit to the authority of Scripture and new life takes place for their transformation, the community of faith validates

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<sup>5</sup> The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Mission Statement,” <http://www.covchurch.org/resources/mission-friends/> (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church,” <http://www.covchurch.org/resources/mission-friends/> (accessed February 10, 2012).

Scripture's authority to be shaped by it and, therefore, be a transforming agent in the world.<sup>7</sup>

### The Necessity of New Birth in Jesus Christ

Forgiveness and the gift of eternal life are central to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the Covenanter. However, new birth in Jesus Christ is more than experiencing forgiveness and the acceptance of God. It also involves the regeneration of those that put their trust in Christ's work and redemption.

When Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:3 that no one person can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of above, he taught Nicodemus about the role of the Holy Spirit, comparing it to wind. The Holy Spirit brings new life to the individual that results in new birth and kingdom entrance. Conversion, for the Covenanter, is when the Holy Spirit moves upon a person and that person turns toward Jesus with repentance of sin as an act of faith in Jesus. The individual makes a conscious decision to follow Jesus, rejects a life of sin, and begins a life of faith in Jesus. The individual experiences eternal life as well as a new life at that point. It is not a life of agreement of creeds and/or doctrine, but a life of a personal commitment and relationship with Jesus Christ.

Even though the Covenanter has this view of conversion from the influence of evangelicalism, conversion is a process rather than a one-time event. The evidence of new life is what validates conversion rather than an exact date or time of a decision. In Galatians 5:22-25, fruit, or evidence, of the Holy Spirit's activity in the individual's life

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<sup>7</sup> This is the premise of the book *Shaped By the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1985) by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. Spiritual Formation of the individual happens as they are shaped by the Word of God and the purpose of that shaping is for others benefit.

validates a belief in Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control can be viewed of proof of an active faith and new life.

New birth comes to the individual only through Jesus Christ who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Maturity in this new life is called sanctification and is a life-long experience. As individuals mature, they become co-participants with Jesus in Kingdom-living through word and deed. The work of the Spirit in the individual becomes a sign for those who have yet to trust and follow Jesus. The apostle Paul, writing a letter to the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 3:1-6), would go as far as saying that the Corinthians themselves, are letters from Jesus Himself, to others of the Spirit’s work within them. They, as a result of this work, are qualified to minister the new Covenant Jesus taught about: the one that gives life.

The process of new life, for the follower of Jesus, involves intentionality rather than passivity. By being active in spiritual disciplines, the follower of Jesus matures in their relationship with Jesus. Spiritual disciplines include being responsive to God in worship alongside other followers of Jesus, a life of individual and corporate prayer, being responsible stewards of all entrusted them, serving others, an intentionality in reading Scripture, meeting together with other followers of Jesus, participation in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, and regular acts of compassion, justice, and mercy, but even these do not save the individual. However, the work of the Holy Spirit through intentional discipline pleases God, gives the follower of Jesus joy, and enables the follower to be an ambassador of reconciliation for those that have yet to follow Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). The challenge, therefore, is how to be attentive to the Holy Spirit and the action and work of the Spirit in and through us.



## A Commitment to the Whole Mission of the Church

Covenanters have always cared about being united in the mission of God as evidenced by their label “Mission Friends.” The influence of the pietistic movement not only elevated a devout and holy life in pursuit of Jesus for the Mission Friends, it also gave examples of the by-product of a devoted life. Pietists committed to global missions, founded orphanages, started hospitals, and embraced Jesus’ words about loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40) as a mandate to extend God’s relationship in word and deed to others that had yet to know Jesus.

Mission of the Church flows out of relationship with Jesus Christ. By following Jesus, disciples get invited to participate in the ongoing mission of God. In John 20:19-23, followers of Jesus are given peace and the Holy Spirit is sent in the same manner as when He was sent by the Father. Forgiveness marks the tone and tenor of how we are sent in mission as Jesus was sent in mission. In Acts 1:6-8, Jesus instructs His disciples about what is to happen to them and for what purpose. Once again, they will receive the Holy Spirit for the purpose of being witnesses to the ends of the earth. Finally, in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus enlists his disciples to make other disciples of every nation by connecting them to the Triune God they had come to know themselves.

Disciple making is as a command to the followers of Jesus. They are to teach and baptize, making disciples of all nations in order be obedient. It is assumed that, since the disciples knew this was possible, they were charged with the responsibility of carrying out what they knew and experienced with Jesus. They, like what they witnessed in the life of Jesus, would forgive, reconcile, heal, feed, show compassion, be lavish in grace giving, proclaim justice for the oppressed, clothe the naked, touch the untouchable,

generously give, and proclaim good news to all. This ministry was given to all that call upon Jesus (priesthood of all believers) and not solely on a trained clergy.

### The Church as a Fellowship of Believers

The Church, for Covenanters, is all who confess faith in Jesus, who covenant to each other, and submit to no authority other than Jesus Christ, the Head of the Body of Believers. This does not limit itself to those within the Covenant denomination, but extends this paradigm to others in different denominations that confess faith in Jesus and submit to His authority. This results in giving the Covenant church the ability to partner, “covenant,” with others in different denominations who hold different doctrinal views.

This fellowship is relational, not institutional. Grace in relationship with others covers, not only human frailty and error, but differences of perspective in the Body of Christ because of the acknowledgement that sanctification is a process where people are at varying stages. Lifting up Jesus and making His life, death, and resurrection central unifies all who call on the name of Jesus. In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul exhorts his audience to make every effort to be unified and at peace with all who call on Jesus on account of one body (church), Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and God the Father.

Continually striving for unity among the fellowship of the Church Universal requires humility and gentleness. Jesus prayed for the unity of, not only those that were present and following Him, but for those that would follow Him in the future in (John 17). The unity among all who follow Jesus mirrors the oneness between Jesus and His Father and bears witness to the entire world that Jesus was sent from the Father. Unity is crucial for mission to take place.

Membership in a Covenant church is by confession of a personal faith in Jesus Christ and open to all believers. All members of the body of each congregation are called into the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. The sacraments of baptism, infant as well as adult believers, and communion are practiced by Covenant churches.

Each Covenant church is independent and practices congregational polity to govern its own affairs. That said, because of the relational DNA of the Covenant, it is structured to be in partnership in fellowship, decisions, shared mission, and ministries of other Covenant churches broken up in regional conferences, as well as, other churches around the world that call the Covenant their denomination.

#### A Conscious Dependence on the Holy Spirit

The Covenant holds a Trinitarian view affirming one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues the creative work of the Father and the redeeming work of the Son. Some biblical passages regarding the work of the Holy Spirit include John 14:15-17, Philippians 1:27; 2:1-2, Acts 1:8, Galatians 4:4-7, Ephesians 2:18, Ephesians 3:14-16, and Romans 8:26-29. The early Mission Friends said the warmth of grace in the gathered community was evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and it was this experience of grace that compelled them to want to reach out and extend grace, mercy, and compassion on others through mission.

The reliance of the Spirit's leading is crucial in determining what each individual believer should do, which is also true for each congregation. Because of that, early Covenanters would pause and wait for a voice of God through the Holy Spirit so as not to

wander aimlessly in planning. Their reliance on the active and alive presence of the Holy Spirit was what propelled them flexibility and creativity in their denominational mission.

### The Reality of Freedom in Christ

In explaining what a Covenant church is, Sherman makes the point that this last affirmation is really what sets the Evangelical Covenant Church apart from other denominations.<sup>8</sup> Having a center of a passionate commitment to Jesus and His mission, gives theological freedom and an environment of engagement and unity on matters of differing doctrinal views. What holds Covenanters together is the new life anyone can find in Jesus and the mission Jesus calls believers into together. Whereas other denominations are held together by a closed set of doctrinal positions about Jesus, the Covenant is open to discuss theological views, but wants to remain focused on “how goes one’s walk with Jesus” and where Jesus may be calling them to move in mission. Jesus Christ is what unifies all believers in Jesus and the Covenant church holds up that which unites us with other believers rather than which would separate us from others.

In Galatians, Paul states, “So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don’t get tied up again in slavery to the law” (Galatians 5:1). The issue which proceeds from this verse is whether a man who begins following Jesus should fulfill the law by being circumcised or not. Paul warns the Galatians that they should remain free . . . he does not say they should or should not become circumcised. The better focus for the Galatians is faith expressing itself through love as a result of the grace of Jesus Christ. Any male is free to be circumcised or not to be circumcised because there is

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<sup>8</sup> Sherman, “What Is a Covenant Church?,” 43.

freedom in this decision. This decision will not make a man closer to God and will not hinder or help in the mission that God has for any male faced with the decision. Paul warns against anything that hinders the freedom one has under the authority of Jesus Christ including a theological view of circumcision for his Jewish audience.

For the Covenant church, theological freedom is essential in keeping the right things central. Being confident in Jesus Christ's presence and activity through the Holy Spirit, the Covenant chooses to give theological and personal freedom where there may be a variety of biblical and historical interpretations of the will and purposes of God. Inevitably, this puts tension into the DNA of what it means to be Covenant on doctrinal issues such as a view of baptism, the second coming of Jesus Christ, the precise nature of the inspiration of Scripture, the exact nature of the atonement, women in ordained pastoral ministry, and a variety of other matters of life and practice.

Yet, because this tension is present, it challenges Covenant people to remain true to the challenge of loving brothers and sisters in Christ in spite of any disagreements, harkening back to one of the tenets of Pietism. In 1 John 2:7-11, love validates truth. Proclaiming to be "living in the light" while hating another Christian is actually darkness. To make a conscious choice to love those that disagree with us is the unifying factor in the midst of theological freedom. The ECC chooses to be a non-creedal denomination. While it values the historical confessions of the early church, particularly the Apostles Creed, it places a higher value on the Word of God than on any creedal interpretations.

## **One Holy Catholic Apostolic**

Sherman used an astronomical metaphor of the solar system to describe the uniqueness of the ECC. Jesus used metaphor, simile, and parable regularly when explaining the Church and the Kingdom of God. Perhaps this is the only way that a human can comprehend the spiritual, using the limitations of language to describe the complexities of faith. Those that were a part of drafting the Nicene Creed, used four words to describe the Church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These four words are the parameters for what the church is.

### **One**

In Ephesians 4, Paul instructed his audience to strive for unity amongst one another because there is only one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (v. 4-6). This was crucial because when unity is achieved, the Church matures to the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). The Church is joined and knit together for the purpose of working properly and building up love within Itself.

Oneness is not self-serving for the Church. Jesus spoke about oneness in His public prayer in John 17:11, saying those that followed Him would actually become one in the same way He was one with the Father, whom He was praying to. In John 17:20-26, Jesus highlights the purpose of divine oneness and unity: that the world believe Jesus was sent by the Father. The Covenantal relationship demonstrated between Jesus and His Father was to spill out to the Church to be in Covenant with one another so that the world, when witnessing such unity, would believe Jesus was from the Father. Unity and oneness are precursors to mission and evangelism.

Gilbert Bilezikian said Jesus, “knew that if the church should fail to demonstrate community to the world, it would fail to accomplish its mission because the world would have reason to disbelieve the gospel. According to that prayer, the most convincing proof of the truth of the gospel is the perceptible oneness of his followers.”<sup>9</sup> Looking back into Church history, divisions caused by a plethora of reasons, crippled the truth of the Gospel because divisions do not create a sense of wholeness, love, tenderness, and grace.

### Catholic

Oneness is a value of the Church, locally, as well as universal; this is what it means to be catholic. Even though each individual church is bound by time, place, race, and/or culture, the local church does not have the full expression of the Body of Christ within its limitations. The Church Universal is part of the ongoing Gospel narrative, free of times and dates, places, races, and cultures. Believing this to be true, a sense of humility and a desire to learn more fully the truth of the Gospel that has been, and is being experienced by other local congregations should result. When the local church inaccurately believes they are the only full expression of the truth of the Gospel (whether church or denomination), they have disconnected themselves from the Church Universal and inadvertently are only capable of presenting a partial Gospel. The freedom that resulted of the Reformation, coupled with the deification of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, seduced the Church into believing it did not, and was not, connected to the Church Universal. In fact, “protestant” finds its roots in the word “protest.” Each individual church (and denomination) became distinguished for what other churches it

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<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 37.

was against, instead of Whom it followed and was for. For those that do not know Jesus, it is confusing as to which church, which makes the claim of absolute truth in contrast to other churches, to trust.

### Holy

In 1 Peter 1:13-16, Peter instructs his audience to be holy as “he who called you is holy.” Holiness is a process of transformation, becoming like the One the Church follows. To be holy is to embody Christ’s love and grace in any situation. Holiness is not separateness from the world, rather being centered into the life of the world, while being different from it. Inasmuch as Jesus is the incarnate God (John 1:1-18), He was different than the world. He was without sin and was holy while being fully human and in the world. The Church is forever in the process of holiness and transformation. The call to follow Jesus (discipleship) and experience transformational and unmerited grace sanctifies the Church and makes it holy. This process can sometimes be called spiritual formation. Spiritual Formation is when the image of God is being restored as the identity for the followers of Jesus.

Dallas Willard defines spiritual formation as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself . . . It’s goal is an obedience or conformity to Christ that arises out of an inner transformation accomplished through purposive interaction with the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Obedience is an essential outcome of Christian spiritual formation.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22-23.



When obedience results from an inner transformation, the kind of holiness experienced by each follower, as well as those that have yet to follow Jesus, will be life giving. As people experience Jesus, more and more they are drawn to His holiness.

The call to be holy for the Church is paramount. Without being intentional in addressing the transformation and sanctification of the Church, there is nothing the Church has to offer the world. Transformation is actually good news and, when experienced, is motivational for those that have yet to follow Jesus.

### Apostolic

According to the Nicene Creed, apostolic referred to the calling of the first apostles and, consequently, the authority of that calling being passed down throughout church history. In John 6:70, Jesus chose His disciples. The focus, throughout church history, became who was being chosen instead of what purpose the choosing served.

Apostolic, for the Church, is being sent people into the world. In Ezekiel 47, God gives the prophet Ezekiel a vision while Israel was held as exiles in Babylon. Their Temple was destroyed, they were removed from their homes, and taken into captivity. God gives Ezekiel a vision of a small stream of water leaving the Temple and getting deeper and deeper as it left the Temple. The results of this stream leaving the Temple were trees growing on both sides of the river (v. 7), stagnant waters becoming fresh (v. 8), and swarms of fish of every living kind filling the river (v. 9). For those familiar with the swamps and marshes and the deadness of the Sea of Galilee, this was almost too good to be true. The fish in the sea would be plentiful for the purpose of feeding people (v. 10). The trees that grow would (v. 12) provide fruit for eating and leaves for healing.

This vision is apostolic. The Temple, for the Jewish audience, was a place God inhabited. A vision given where water is sent out from that place to provide life every where it goes, communicates God's intention for Covenant with His people; life would result further and further away from the Temple wherever the river went. Ezekiel was asked to go into the river to be sent where it went and this is what the Church is to do as well. The Church, as a result of being one, holy, and catholic becomes apostolic.

In John 5:19-20, Jesus says that the Son (He) doesn't do anything independent from the Father. Because of the love of the Father, the Son is included and invited to participate in doing that which He sees the Father doing. In John 20:21-22, Jesus, now resurrected, teaches His followers in the same way and spirit. He was sent by the Father, now He sends them. He also includes and invites them to participate in what the Father is doing. The Church is apostolic when It accepts the invitation to participate in the sending to provide new life to the entire world.

The historical narrative of the ECC, Sherman's work on centered set, and the four tenets of the Church found in the Nicene Creed lay the foundation for a healthy interpretive community enabling it to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying and how to join Him in His mission.

## CHAPTER 5

### WIND, WORD, KEY—TOOLS FOR THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

With a theological foundation of the *ecclesia* rooted in the history of the ECC, the Holy Spirit moves forward using metaphorical tools for interpreting what He desires for a specific church. These tools include wind which is the impetus that breathes life into the Church, the word which speaks directly to guide the Church, and the keys which are used to open doors for the Church to walk through. An interpretive community does not start with a plan for the church desiring a goal, strategy, outcome, and/or mission. This would be a church that humanity builds.

An interpretive community is one that is not passive either, believing that because Jesus said He would build His Church, the members can sit back and let Jesus do what He said He would do. An interpretive community is a responsive community. They are a community holding firmly to the belief that Jesus, as Head of the Body in which they belong, is real and has given direction in the past, gives guidance and a word for the present, and has a future reality that may not be comprehended presently. In 1 Corinthians 2:9, Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4 saying, “That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has

prepared for those who love him.”” By being responsive to Jesus, the Church lives into a reality they could never imagine or create on their own.

An interpretive community is attentive to narrative in order to discover where God is present and active, not only the narrative of Scripture, but the narrative of their culture and specific church history. Starting with an awareness and acknowledgement that Jesus is building His Church, an interpretive community seeks to find out where and how. Kyle Small writes, “History shapes the transformational identity of the church, and it must be aware of how the past will help to shape the future.”<sup>1</sup>

An interpretive community uses metaphor to draw a congregation into the narrative they are aware of in their past as well as the narrative that is currently in their present. There are three biblical metaphors to focus the Church, assisting them to be responsive, and to interpret, what Jesus wants them to do. They are wind, word, and keys. Each metaphor is crucial, though not sequential. They are tools that enable the Church to interpret the narrative of the activity, voice, and presence of Jesus Christ. Rather than uphold a model of church or a plan and/or program of church, an interpretive community leans into these three metaphors to guide and lead them.

### **Wind**

In John 3:3-8, Jesus was in dialogue with a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus about the Kingdom of God. He said to Nicodemus he must enter the Kingdom of God by way of water and Spirit. This is the spiritual life: entering into the life that is being created by the Spirit of God. Rather than create and control the Kingdom of God,

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle J.A. Small, “Potential for Prophetic Dialogue: Toward a Contextual Missiology for the Evangelical Covenant Church in North America,” *The Covenant Quarterly* (August 2008): 8.

Nicodemus must enter it. Jesus highlights this, comparing the Spirit of God to wind, something that blows wherever it wants, cannot be predicted where it might come from, and/or where it is going. Jesus says humans can produce human life, but without the Spirit's presence, like wind, humans can only experience spiritual life, not reproduce it.

In this passage, Jesus was not talking about how to build a church. He was illuminating for Nicodemus the reality of a spiritual life. In order for anyone to see the Kingdom of God or enter the Kingdom of God, one must be born of water and Spirit. Otherwise, humans produce human life devoid of the Spirit. Even though Jesus was not talking about the Church, it is possible to humanly create a human institution with the goal that people get to know Jesus, but be devoid of an awareness of the Holy Spirit.

An unawareness of the purpose of the Holy Spirit is highlighted in how the Apostle's Creed speaks of the Trinity. The Father is first and it states that, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty." This Father has a purpose stated "Creator of Heaven and earth." The Father is Creator of all that is seen and unseen.

About believing in Jesus Christ the Creed says, "His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried; He descended into hell; on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead." Not only does the Apostle's Creed get descriptive about the identity of Jesus Christ, it lists the major work of Jesus Christ in the past, which validates His identity, and ends with the major work He will do in the future. His past is thoroughly expounded on; His present sitting at the right hand of God the Father almighty, and He will come back to judge in His future.

How the Creed speaks about the Holy Spirit is revealing: “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Whereas God, the Father is Creator, and Jesus Christ is known through what He did and what He will do, the Creed does not give any guidance to knowing the identity or purpose of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, according to the Creed, is Someone we merely believe in, rather than listen to or experience.

The modern, Western Church mirrors this same lack of awareness of the role and movement of the Holy Spirit in Her midst. The institutional church has refined their doctrine and theology over the identity and work of God the Father and Jesus Christ resulting in denominations being formed to have agreement about this theology. Yet, what the Trinity is presently doing through the Holy Spirit appears to be of lesser importance. It has been marginalized by the elevation of Christology and ecclesiology, even though it may be unintentional.<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Spirit, however, is more than Someone to believe in. The Holy Spirit gives birth to the Church and has a purpose for the Church. Jesus’ last words to His disciples in Acts 1:4-5, were to go to Jerusalem and wait for this Spirit. The disciples appeared not to comprehend the gravity of Jesus’ instructions and followed His direct orders with a question about whether the Kingdom would be restored (Acts 1:6). Jesus, bringing them back to what He originally wanted them to know tells them again about the Holy Spirit they were about to receive: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts1:8). Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> This statement would not be true in the Pentecostal movement where a focus on *pneumatology* is prevalent.

was clear about the purpose of the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit would empower them to be witnesses for the entire world; this Someone would send them into mission.

The machine of the modern, Western Church is broken. Because of the influence of modernity on leaders in the modern, Western Church, attempts are made, books are written, seminars are taught and attended, and seminaries have more information on the Church. Models are experimented with and trends are tracked in this day and age on the internet for some of those models. “Home church.” “Missional church.” “Servant church.” “Mega-church.” Church technicians build a model and then expect it to work once construction is complete. Many times it goes for a while and then seems to lose momentum. Without the Holy Spirit, what they have built lacks the ability to move.

Without fully embracing, and being attentive to the identity and purpose of the Holy Spirit, there is not much hope for the Church. According to Jesus, it is the Spirit once waited on and received that gives rise to witness and mission. “It is thus by an action of the sovereign Spirit of God that the church is launched on its mission. And it remains the mission of the Spirit. He is central.”<sup>3</sup>

In order for an interpretive community to be attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit, it must have a working understanding of *Pneumatology*: the study of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for wind is *ruach*. In the New Testament the Greek word for wind is *pneuma*. Each of these words bears the basic meanings of wind, but are often times translated as spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Trent C. Butler, ed., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publications, 2003), 1673-1674.

### *Ruach*

*Ruach* is literally translated as wind and is mentioned throughout the Old Testament as an instrument, and manifestation, of Yahweh's involvement and activity. Considered a mighty force, only Yahweh could wield such a force. It is not only connected to the will of Yahweh, but Yahweh uses wind, or breath, to give life to humanity by breathing into them after creating them.

### *Pneuma*

*Pneuma* is a wind with effective power in nature as a soft breeze, a ranging storm, or a fatal vapor. It is the source of life for all of creation that inhales and exhales. It, also, could be a breath in the invisible, spiritual realm that influences the relationship between the Holy and humanity. After Pentecost, *pneuma* referred to the inner working of the human that works with, and communicates with, the Spirit of the Living God. Its purpose is to sanctify the Christian and form them, with other Christians infused with *pneuma* in them, into the Body of Christ. This *pneuma* blows where it wishes with as little or as great an influence as is needed.

Creating space to “go and wait for the Holy Spirit” is the hope for the interpretive community desiring to hear, once again, a fresh Word from God sent into the specific mission Jesus has for the Church. Beginning with a strategy for mission may actually hinder the Church because, without the Spirit's leading, it may give a false sense of identity. Rather than communicating what the Spirit said and did to propel the church into mission by specifically telling the story of the Spirit's leading, the church can unintentionally develop a sense of spiritual pride for what they created and did, like a



modern day Tower of Babel narrative. Lesslie Newbigin articulates this well when he writes:

At this point, the church has to keep silence. It is not in control of the mission. Another is in control, and his fresh works will repeatedly surprise the church, compelling it to stop talking and to listen. Because the Spirit himself is sovereign over the mission, the church can only be the attentive servant. In sober truth the Spirit is himself the witness who goes before the church in its missionary journey. The church's witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads.<sup>5</sup>

An interpretive community begins with discipleship and confidently believes that mission will be the end result. Inasmuch as Jesus' paradigm for launching a world impacting, history changing, life transformational, Kingdom of God reign on earth as it is in Heaven, began by inviting twelve men into a discipleship relationship where they were taught and challenged, the interpretive community invites specific people into a discipleship relationship where they are equipped and trained to discern the Word of God in their own lives. This small Huddle paradigm is the yeast of listening and waiting on the Spirit that works itself into the interpretive community, which will propel the church into mission. When the Spirit is tended to individually, it affects the culture of the church, which spontaneously propels the church forward toward the margins where God's heart for everyone to know him has left the ninety-nine to find the one. "Spontaneous expansion begins with individual expression (and) it proceeds to corporate expression."<sup>6</sup>

Creating a listening posture, for the interpretive community, takes time to tend to the Spirit. Since the Spirit is like wind, which the Church does not control or own, the

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<sup>5</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1962), 15.

only logical response is creating a culture of readiness. One does this by setting and mending sails through intentional character and spiritual formation in the local church. Pastoral and teacher gifts are crucial to be ready for a breath of fresh Wind of the Spirit in the local church. Skills in using compass, sextant, telescopes, and maps ready the church for when the Wind is caught in the sails propelling the church in mission. People with apostolic and evangelistic gifts know how to use these tools effectively and need to be cultivated and listened to for the church to move forward with mission. Finally, the prophetic gift valued in the church is the one that has a “sense” that the Wind is about to blow and uses image, narrative, and a Word to cultivate readiness and expectation for the church.<sup>7</sup> They are aware of God’s heart for the church and His heart for those that have yet to know and follow Him, the magnetic pull between each group.

The interpretive community gives up control while preparing itself for a spontaneous movement of the Spirit of God that is not known or cannot be created, but soon discovered. It dies to the expectation that they build the church, but creates expectation that the Spirit of God is alive and at work building his Church and is on a mission. It will have to have courage to face the fear that comes with both. The fear that the Church is powerless and cannot make something happen but is connected to a source of power, when unleashed, sends them to places they never dreamed. The modern, Western Church struggles with letting go of control. Although this paradigm intellectually assents to God’s leading, relinquishing control will result in a great

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<sup>7</sup> The prophet for the interpretive community is the one that licks his or her finger and then raises it to become aware of the Wind’s presence, or lack thereof. They then speak that Word to the church.

movement of God once again. When we admit our inability to create or control a spontaneous movement of God's Spirit will be experienced. This is easier said than done:

There is always something terrifying in the feeling that we are letting loose a force which we cannot control; and when we think of spontaneous expansion in this way, instinctively we begin to be afraid. Whether we consider our doctrine, or our civilization, or our morals, or our organization, in relation to a spontaneous expansion of the Church, we are seized with terror, terror lest spontaneous expansion should lead to disorder.<sup>8</sup>

For the church to be an interpretive community, it must be aware of and led by the Holy Spirit. This may sound simplistic, but in reality the modern, American, Western Church paradigm has been more influenced by business practices than Spirit responsiveness. Rather than embracing the mystery of the Spirit as wind "blowing where it wants," and not knowing where it comes from and where it is going, the American, Western Church has been busy setting up fans in an attempt to create Wind.

Kurt Fredrickson, in writing about the identity of a missio-ecclesiology<sup>9</sup> points to the Holy Spirit as the beginning of such a church.<sup>10</sup> Rather than focus on a model to emulate of the *ecclesia*, the focal point is on the Holy Spirit, Who is always doing something new. The form, structure, or model of the church flows from the Spirit of God, not visa versa.

There are dangers inherent in attempting to build a church without the patience of a listening posture to the Holy Spirit. The programmatic Western Church is heavily influenced on the mechanics of church by launching programs and experiences to create

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<sup>8</sup> Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Fredrickson uses this term to define a church culture that engages the margins, rather than the center, of society toward a life of service and witness.

<sup>10</sup> Kurt Norman Fredrickson, *An Ecclesial Ecology for Denominational Futures: Nurturing Organic Structures for Missional Engagement* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009), 65-66.

an atmosphere and environment for the Holy Spirit. The motivation is good in that the desire for people to encounter the Holy Spirit is the goal. However, if the Holy Spirit is like wind, efforts made to create wind may seem artificial and non-transformational in the lives of those present. The programmatic Western Church sets up fans, through human effort, and calls it the Holy Spirit. The *ecclesia* that begins with an awareness of the Holy Spirit sets up sails in anticipation of the Spirit's leading, guiding, directing, and life giving power to move the Church where it is to go in mission. Lesslie Newbigin says, "The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God. Mission is not just something the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey."<sup>11</sup>

Starting with mission, without an awareness of the activity of the Holy Spirit, is another example of a programmatic, goal-centered, strategy-driven, western paradigm of church. "Missional church theology, or missional ecclesiology, can too often be seen as the next saving church program, similar to the church growth and church health literatures of the 1980s and 1990s or is seen as a re-conceiving of mission activities."<sup>12</sup> Mission happens because of the activity of the Holy Spirit stirred within the Body of Christ: the Church. "The church is in God, not the other way around."<sup>13</sup> The congregation

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<sup>11</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Small, "Potential for Prophetic Dialogue," 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

embodies the Holy Spirit as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?”

An interpretive community is capable of looking back to its narrative, identifying clear movements, actions, and the Voice of the Holy Spirit. Inasmuch as one can read the narrative of Scripture, as well as church history, seeing this operative Spirit at work, an interpretive community will pause frequently to ask the question, “What is the Lord doing and saying and what is our response?” Active seeking and listening to the Spirit of God and one another must become primary before planning and goal setting for the interpretive community. Training individuals (discipleship) to be attentive to the Wind of God in their individual life cultivates an environment, corporately, of expectation that Jesus Christ has risen and that it is still possible to follow where He is going.

*Missio Dei*, literally means “mission of God.” The incarnation is evidence of the *Missio Dei* as God became human with the purpose of redeeming all of creation. Small writes:

*Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people. God welcomes the church as a partner empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the redeeming work of Christ to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The church is then a sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s missionary nature. There is not one aspect of the cosmos with which God is not concerned, and hence the Spirit creates and leads the church through all times and places. In other words, as for God, so the church – there is nothing outside the bounds of the church’s concern.<sup>14</sup>

Because Jesus is sent by the Father and is on a mission to redeem all creation, an attentive, interpretive community joins in this same mission rather than create it. Religion is created when humans attempt to create that which is devoid, or not attentive, to the

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<sup>14</sup> Small, “Potential for Prophetic Dialogue,” 9.

Holy Spirit. The church that Jesus builds is swept up in the Holy Wind of God on its mission to redeem the world.

### **Word**

Without an attentive posture to the Voice and Presence of the Holy Spirit, there will be an inability to hear a specific word from the Lord, individually and/or corporately for the *ecclesia*. When there is not an awareness of God speaking to each local *ecclesia*, an environment can be created of “what we want” rather than “what the Lord is saying to us and what He wants us to do.” An interpretive community is one that wants to respond to the Voice of Jesus speaking to the *ecclesia* and through the *ecclesia* to environment where the Lord has placed each *ecclesia*.

In John 10:1-5, Jesus highlights the importance of knowing the Voice of God. He contrasts Himself as the Shepherd of the sheep who recognize His voice, to a thief and a robber who are strangers the sheep run from because they do not recognize or know their voice. An interpretive community desires to instruct individuals in the Church to recognize the Voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, so they can follow Him where He goes. Discipleship is more than giving biblical information to an individual; it is assisting people in discerning the Word God speaks to each one. Intentionality in discerning this Voice for individuals affects the culture and climate of the Church. As individuals awaken to what Jesus is saying to them and follow Him where He goes, the Church is able to collectively discern the Voice of the Good Shepherd for each specific church. To partner in the *Missio Dei* where Jesus, by His Spirit, is seeking the lost, the

interpretive community must be intentional in training to hear this Voice and take personal, as well as corporate responsibility, in following.

### Jesus as the *Logos* of God

In John 1:1- 14, the disciple John begins his Gospel writing about the Word, being with God and being God at the beginning of creation, Who came into the world as human and made His home among us. The Word of God incarnates, takes on flesh, as Jesus Christ. The Greek word *logos* is translated as “Word” of God.

The Greeks understood *logos* as the “rational principle that governs all reality, providing meaning and order to persons and the universe. The *logos* creates coherence and unity, provides an orderly pattern for existence, and holds everything together.”<sup>15</sup> However, the Hebrews understood the *logos* from the Old Testament *dabar* for Word of God. “The Hebrews saw the word of God not as merely words but as a powerful and effectual means of accomplishing God’s purposes.”<sup>16</sup> By the time John wrote his Gospel and epistle, the two distinct understandings of *logos* and *dabar* overlapped. Jesus’ identity as *logos* “was not merely an angel or created being who was the agent of creation, nor another word from God or wisdom from God, but He was God Himself.”<sup>17</sup> The *logos*, Jesus Christ, is active in creation, revelation, and redemption.

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1045.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Scripture as the Word of God

Scripture is authoritative in that it is the perfect record of the intrusion of the Word of God, the *logos* of God, into human history. This history is littered with story after story of the Word of God breaking into human lives. The active presence, purpose, and power of Jesus Christ, incarnate Word, shows up specifically in cultures, communities, and individuals. The Scripture becomes authoritative because it provides insight in how the Word penetrates human lives and situations, discerns and reveals the truth of the human condition, and transforms flawed humans.<sup>18</sup>

Scripture becomes the Word of God because it illuminates the activity of the Word of God. In Hebrews 4:12-13, the Word of God it is alive, powerful, exposes innermost thoughts and desires, and reveals all things. The word “word” here is the same word *logos*. It is not referring to the scripture, it is referring the operative Voice of God, who not only speaks to all of creation, but comes to dwell amongst us and reveal that which is the most private of thoughts and desires. Because scripture is the only record of the operative work of the Word, it becomes the Word as well where God would continue to speak to his creation and reveal all hidden desires and thoughts.

## Seeking a Word of God

In Acts 15, the early church had to make a very important decision regarding what to do with Gentile men beginning to follow Jesus. It was evident the Holy Spirit was in these Gentiles, some however, believed the next step for them would be circumcision, since God clearly instructed Moses to perform circumcision as a sign of His covenant and

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<sup>18</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped By the Word*, 42.



would mark His people. The council wrestled with how to apply a past word from God to a present reality: what would God say about circumcision of these new Gentile men?

As the Holy Spirit obviously drew Gentiles to follow Jesus, it put the early church into conflict. Attempting to reconcile what they saw with what they understood from their past caused great conflict and fear for some. They resolved this conflict by going back to their Scripture. The Word of God active in converting and drawing Gentiles into the trajectory of the early church needed to be anchored in the Word of God in their own Scripture. This happened throughout the book of Acts as the Church was born and mission to all nations ensued past the boundaries of Jewish culture.

An interpretive community actively seeks a Word from God as the Wind of God continues to do new things that challenge the paradigm of what the church has known in its past. Because the Wind of God has a mission (*Missio Dei*), the Word of God will guide the Church. The interpretive community must be grounded in Scripture, as well as attentive to the Spirit, able to respond to where the Wind is taking the Church.

The interpretive community needs to respond to what the Word says to them and boldly follow. Inasmuch as the council demonstrated interpreting what the Holy Spirit was doing by engaging their Scriptures, they had specific leadership gifts to assist in the process. Paul, Barnabas, James, and Peter were a few leaders to interpret what the Spirit was doing with a Word from God.

#### Leadership for the Interpretive Community—Discerning a Word

Whereas the modern, Western Church from an institutional paradigm has been led primarily by the gifting of the pastor and teacher, and negligent to other giftings, the

interpretive community needs to include the gifts of apostle, prophet, and evangelist that are evidenced within the entire community. Alan Hirsch, in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, writes the importance of APEPT gifting (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher) crucial for the DNA of any community to call itself a church. These gifts are the foundation for the early church built upon what is written in Ephesians 4:11-12: “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.”

### **The Pastor**

According to the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, the word pastor comes from the Greek noun *poimen*. It literally means, a shepherd or one who keeps animals. However, used figuratively it is those called by God to feed, care for, and lead His people, who are His “flock.”<sup>19</sup>

The pastor in the interpretive community cares for and develops an environment of grace so there is intentionality in discipleship for the church. If a high value in covenantal relationships with one another is not cultivated in the environment, it becomes difficult to move together where the Lord is speaking to the church. The pastor is intentional about caring for the congregation, but creates other avenues for the congregation to be cared for.

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<sup>19</sup> C. Brand, *et al*, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1250.

## **The Teacher**

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns his followers about those who desire to be in the role of teacher. Specifically, He spoke about the scribes and the Pharisees. He did not necessarily critique what they were teaching (v. 3) and told His followers to do what they taught. However, Jesus warned them of imitating the actions of those teachers. Jesus highlights the difference between what they taught and what they did.

The teacher gift is demonstrated among the Body of Christ when an individual gets excited about truth and looks for ways to explain, enlighten, and apply truth. The *didaskalos*, teacher, in the interpretive community assists people in knowing the mind and character of God through teaching and learning. They assist in the interpretation of the Scriptures and are crucial so the interpretive community stays grounded in the narrative of Scripture. The teacher leading an interpretive community is able to explain and enlighten in a way the church is able to be attentive to the ever-present Jesus Christ.

## **The Evangelist**

The evangelist is a communicator of the Gospel message and tends to find the most conducive environment to share that message with those that have yet to follow Jesus. This gift does not interpret or teach a word for the Interpretive Community. They interpret the message of God so that unbelievers can know Jesus Christ.

The evangelist gift, in leading the church, continually reminds the interpretive community of its role to bear witness to those who have yet to know and follow Jesus Christ. Without the voice of the evangelist in leadership of an interpretive community, it can become isolated from the narrative of God that includes all created in His image. The

evangelist connects the interpretive community with those that have yet to follow Jesus, allowing their story to become part of the story of the interpretive community.

### **The Apostle**

The apostle charges the interpretive community to be aware the church is not static, but mobile. As “sent ones” their very presence challenges the church to follow where the Holy Spirit is leading the church. In Acts 15, Paul demonstrates this apostolic gift by arguing that Gentiles are to be included in what God was doing. This was problematic for the early followers of Jesus because it challenged their paradigm for the location of God’s activity. Apostolic gifts will always be out front looking at new horizons to reach people with the Gospel in mission.

### **The Prophet**

The prophet for the interpretive community is crucial. The Old Testament prophet usually brought a Word from God to Israel (thus saith the Lord) as a corrective for its trajectory. The prophet for the interpretive community:

Would be used by The Holy Spirit to confirm His vision for the specific churches and also for individual ministries within those churches. The prophets would also reveal the mind of The Holy Spirit regarding doctrine as applicable to each of the local churches. Each church would therefore know how the written foundational principles are to apply for the specific vision that has been given to them. The prophet would assist the Pastor(s) and Teacher(s) to consolidate and disseminate the practical application of the Will of God for the local church.<sup>20</sup>

The prophetic gift is characterized by knowing God and knowing God’s intentions for the church. Because God is on a mission, the prophet stirs the church’s imagination for what

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Odonga, *Character and Ministry of A New Testament Prophet* found at <http://www.billionsoulsforchrist.com/ntprophet.htm> (accessed February 26, 2012).

God may be calling each local church to join Him in. Small, in writing about the role of prophetic dialogue connected with the *Missio Dei* writes: “Evangelism practices that are committed to the prophetic dialogue will require conversations about where God is at work, and how Christians can effectively and responsibly communicate and witness to God’s participation in the World.”<sup>21</sup> Each of these gifts, dispersed, exercised, welcomed, and encouraged in the interpretive community, work together to help to discern the Word of God specifically for each local church, discerning His Voice and following where He is sending.

### **Keys**

In Matthew 16:17-19, after Peter declares that Jesus truly is the Messiah from God, Jesus gives Peter metaphorical keys of the Kingdom of Heaven which will be used to build his Church. These keys enlist Peter to partner with Jesus in building his Church. They have the ability to close doors (forbid) and open doors (permit) on the trajectory of mission He would send Peter and others to. The purpose of keys is for opening the doors, and giving access to, the Kingdom of God.

### **Doors Open for Kingdom Advancement**

In 1 Corinthians 16:9, Paul writes, “There is a wide-open door for a great work here, although many oppose me.” As an apostle, Paul was always looking for openness where the Gospel might take root as he was sent. He did not remain static hoping people would find him or come to him to know more about Jesus, but went out to see about doors that were open to communicate the reality of the risen Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Small, “Potential for Prophetic Dialogue,” 15.

In 2 Corinthians 2:12-14, he highlights a recent trip to the city of Troas. He speaks of doors being opened for a new mission to those who have yet to believe and makes the claim that the Lord is the one that opens doors for this specific opportunity. Yet, in this passage, Paul did not stay and walk through this door the Lord opened. He “had no peace of mind” because he was alone and Titus was not there so he went and looked for him, leaving the door the Lord opened on his behalf.

From these passages we can see that Paul was looking for open doors to share the gospel; the Lord is the one that opens doors for us to share; and we have freedom to walk through those doors or not, yet still carry the message of Jesus on mission “everywhere” and “as the Lord leads us” to be a procession before Him. Whereas Paul did not sense he should have gone through this open door he continued to be part of Christ’s procession, spreading the knowledge of Christ everywhere.

In Luke 4:31-37, Jesus chose to go to Capernaum. In this narrative, Jesus gives an example of door opening to the Kingdom of God that guides the interpretive community. It says He spoke with authority in His words used in teaching. These words amazed the people that gathered at the synagogue. Speaking and teaching others about the Kingdom is one-way doors of the Kingdom open. The other way is found one day when a demon possessed man came to the synagogue to shout at Jesus. Jesus responds by commanding the demon to come out of the man. Not only does Jesus teach with words, but, His words carry authority because they are coupled with a deed of healing.

Hearing about the Kingdom of God is one key to give access to people to this Kingdom. The other key is deeds of healing, compassion, justice, and mercy that serve specific needs of those that have yet to experience the Kingdom of God for themselves.

When people experience good deeds, the words about the Kingdom of God become authoritative.

Three of the affirmations of the ECC to assist the interpreting community discern what doors the Lord are opening for the church to express the Kingdom of God are centrality of the Word of God, commitment to the whole mission of the church, and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. As the interpreting community continues asking “What is the Holy Spirit specifically saying to us as a church” (a specific and present word from God using the Word of God to assist and guide them in their discernment) and “Where are we sensing the Holy Spirit wanting to send us in mission,” the church holds before it two core values of discipleship and mission where they start with listening and follow with responding. The Lord leads His church and has a specific mission for it to address by opening specific doors for them to enter. Being discerning of this prevents the Church from attempting to push open doors not meant for them.

### Shut Doors of the Kingdom

Paul looked for open doors, while the Pharisees were accused by Jesus of not giving access of the Kingdom of God to others in Matthew 23:13, when he said to them, “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either.” What they were specifically doing to close doors of the Kingdom of Heaven for others can be felt through the entire scathing words of Jesus in chapter 23. They were not practicing what they preached. However, what proceeds immediately following verse 13 is a footnote for verse 14 before moving

to verse 15. The footnote points to Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 explaining that the Pharisees were secretly cheating widows out of their property yet loved to get attention for their length and eloquence in public prayer.

The Lord would be One that opens doors for the mission of the Kingdom and we have the freedom to walk through those doors or not. The call to be the aroma of Christ everywhere we go is where freedom is (center set paradigm). However, when the Church erects boundaries of hierarchy in the Body of Christ, doors to the Gospel shut. Whereas all who follow Jesus Christ are included in the priesthood of all believers, the Pharisees created a system where they gathered more power, prestige, and position among the community of Israel. This hierarchical system supposedly placed them above everyone else, and caused others, such as widows, to believe they were further away from Yahweh.

Bounded sets of inequality based on power, financial assets, biblical knowledge, spiritual giftedness, longevity in following Jesus, social networking, race, gender, or any other barrier hinder doors from being opened and the mission of Jesus being accomplished. In Galatians 3:26-30, Paul addresses the divisions of clan and/or tribe, economic distinctions, and gender by saying that everyone is a child of God through faith in Jesus. The *Missio Dei* involves everyone and the Church that Jesus builds uses keys to give access and open doors to all. For the Kingdom of God to be experienced, the interpretive community seeks to find ways to include, rather than exclude, all people.

Advocacy for others is part of the mission of the interpretive community, even for those that have not chosen to follow Jesus and join the interpretive community in its orbit



around Jesus. In John 8, some Pharisees caught a woman in the very act of adultery.<sup>22</sup> They brought her before Jesus as a test for how Jesus would instruct. Jesus' first response was to bend down, begin writing in the dirt. Inasmuch as many attempt to figure out what Jesus wrote, that, most likely, was exactly what the Pharisees were thinking themselves. Their attention went from what sin this woman was caught in to what Jesus was doing and what he was writing (v. 6). After awhile, they demanded an answer from Jesus for what should be done to this woman. Jesus took the attention away from the woman and put it on those present that brought her before them to accuse by telling them to go ahead and fulfill the law and stone the woman to death, but the one who was without sin should throw the first stone (v. 7). Then, while they contemplated that, He bent down and began writing in the dust, putting the attention back on Himself again (v. 8).

In this passage, Jesus becomes an advocate for someone while they were yet a sinner. Because the interpretive community believes Jesus has a mission as seen in the narrative of Scripture with the call and command to invite others into the Kingdom, advocacy gives access to the Kingdom. After He became her advocate, He spoke with her about her sin. She was able to respond to Jesus because He was her advocate prior to a discussion and instruction about her sin.

In John 15:26, Jesus instructs His disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the *parakletos*. He was referring to the Holy Spirit that would be poured out on them at Pentecost, but uses this word to explain some of the functions of the Holy Spirit. This *parakletos* would be one that pleads another's cause, helps another by defending them, or

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<sup>22</sup> The Pharisees are a clear representation of using the "keys of the kingdom" in order to exclude others from access to God rather than include.

gives comfort to someone. Because the interpretive community desires to attend to the Wind of God, it will open doors with Keys of advocacy for those that follow Jesus as well as those who have yet to follow Jesus.

### Jesus in Relation to the Door

In Revelation 3:20-22, Jesus addresses the church in Laodicea. The book of Revelation addresses seven specific churches, Laodicea being one of them, enduring persecution at the hands of Nero. Jesus stands at the closed door of these churches, knocking, and wants to come in to them. In fact, each church Jesus addresses, He ends His words of correction and instruction encouraging them to listen to the Spirit, which opens the door.

He addresses the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:7, the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:11, the church in Pergamum in Revelation 2:17, the church in Thyatira in Revelation 2:29, the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:6, and the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:13 with the same words: “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.” An interpretive community desires to listen to the wind of the Holy Spirit, and receive a specific word of God to them, which propels them into advancing the Kingdom of God using keys to open doors and give access to others to this Kingdom of God.

Metaphors compel curiosity and draw us into larger truth. Interpretive communities, like the early Pietists, use metaphors to give spiritual insight and connect with Jesus, Who is building His Church. Without the wind of God, the Church will rely on human reasoning and strength to build, but lack the momentum and energy to move

forward resulting in stagnation. Without a word specifically given to the Church, she may find herself with good intentions, but not being obedient to a unique call. Without using the correct keys, a church may never get the opportunity to see new life in the host culture and world it finds itself in.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 6

### FRAMING THE ELEMENTS OF THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

The plan for River Life to be a healthy interpretive community involves intentionally listening to the narratives of Sacramento as its host culture, the forming denomination of the ECC, and River Life's past and present. Using the metaphors of wind, word, and key, the leadership of River Life interprets the specific narratives it continually gathers to discern the unique mission the Holy Spirit has for River Life. This plan includes purposeful gathering of stories by the Leadership Team, interpreting those stories at the Leadership Team retreat, and communicating the interpretation to the congregation in order to join Jesus in building the church at River Life. Another goal is for each member to become disciples equipped in interpreting, so they follow Jesus and join Him in a personal work along, with the corporate work of the church.

An interpretive community acknowledges Jesus is the One that builds His Church (Matthew 16:17-19) and invites each local church to join Him in what He builds (Ephesians 4:11-12). An interpretive Community is aware of what Jesus does and builds, and seeks to participate in that process with the sole purpose of the Kingdom of God being experienced and expanded. This involves intentionality knowing what Jesus is

building so the church knows how to join in this building process. Rather than build something that disconnects with what Jesus is building, an interpretive community is a partner and co-laborer with the plans Jesus has specifically for each church.

The ministry challenge is to equip River Life to be interpreters of the active presence and voice of the Holy Spirit. Rather than follow steps of a specific model of church toward a desired outcome, steps are taken to create skilled disciples capable of interpreting what Jesus is doing and joining where He is going. This is problematic for those with a paradigm of church that centers on strategies created by the church for mission. The goals and plans of the interpretive community are centered around the Holy Spirit, listening to the Spirit, and then responding to the Spirit by joining the mission of the Spirit. Faith is exercised when an intentional reliance on the Spirit, the Holy Wind and Breath of God, occurs. Discipleship is tending and raising sails to catch the Wind (rather than attempting programmatically to create the Wind), which sends the church into mission. Believing that the Advocate is real and active, goals and plans start with attentiveness and instructing people in interpretation rather than strategies and programs.

For River Life to become an interpretive community, it must become equipped in attentiveness of the presence of the Holy Spirit, capable to interpret a Word specifically spoken to self and the church through narration, and respond to the mission the Spirit has started and has invited River Life to be an active participant. The specific components of River Life becoming an interpretive community are exploring specific narratives in order to identify clear movements of the action, voice, and presence of the Holy Spirit, identifying an image and/or metaphor after listening to the narratives that connect past, present, and future stories, and finally discerning where the Spirit of God is leading River

Life in its on-going narrative of following Jesus and expanding the Kingdom of God. While telling the narratives are crucial, an interpretive community also needs to be intentional about a discipleship paradigm that assists one another in an awareness of the Holy Spirit, discerning what the Holy Spirit may be saying to one another, and accountability in responding to what the Holy Spirit is saying.

### **Collecting Narratives**

To become an interpretive community, Branson starts the interpretive process with the term Initiate. In this step, the church unearths the narration for how the Lord has worked in the past. This automatically frames the process in the positive because of the belief that, since the Lord has worked in the past, He will continue to work in the present and future. Rather than attempting to fix or change a congregation as a problem to be solved, the Initiate step raises the level of expectation within the church.

The way to Initiate at River Life is collecting the narratives pertinent for River Life interpreting what the Holy Spirit is saying so River Life can respond to what is said. The goal of telling stories, in order to interpret what God is saying individually and corporately, enables clarity about where He wants River Life to join in His mission. Expecting the Spirit to work in the future begins with hearing the stories of Spirit's work in the past and present. The specific narratives collected are about the spiritual beginning of Sacramento (the host culture of River Life), the narrative of River Life's beginning and growth, the pastoral narrative that joins in what has already been occurring at River Life, and the individual narratives of the congregation as they are a part of the what the Spirit does at River Life.

## Collecting

As Lead Pastor of River Life to initiate becoming an interpretive community, I collected the narrative of Sacramento, the narrative of the early church in Sacramento that led to denominationalism, and the narrative first twelve years of River Life. I included the narration of my own spiritual pilgrimage as it pertains to the leadership of River Life. To round out the narration completed for River Life as an interpretive community, the narratives of the congregation need to be collected. Collecting the narratives of the congregation happens in two ways: formally and informally.

### **Formally**

On October 21, 2011, an email survey was sent to the entire congregation with the following questions intended to gather narratives: “How long have you attended, or been associated with, River Life Covenant Church? Are you a member? What is your age group? When you consider your experience at River Life, what has contributed most to your spiritual life? What relationships or events have been the most powerful in fostering the congregation's relationship with God? Are there particular characteristics or traits of River Life that are most valuable as we grow spiritually: personally and as a church? Explain what has made a difference and how that happened. What are the healthiest, most life giving aspects of the relationships among people at River Life? What would you say has been the most valuable about your friendships? Have certain groups been valuable for you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other? Give examples of how we live together at our best. When you think about how River Life has related to our community and to the world, what do you think has been most important?”



When we are at our best, how do we express God's love and mercy and justice to others? What have been your own most important ministry or missional experiences in relating to others beyond River Life? What are the most valuable ways you contribute to River Life personally; your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, your character, your time. Give some specific examples. What are the most valuable aspects of River Life's worship? In worship experiences at River Life, what do you believe has been the most significant, most helpful in making worship alive and meaningful? When worship is at its best, how does it shape us? How has worship helped you connect with God? Describe those times when you are most engaged in and shaped by worship. How would you describe River Life to someone that wanted to know about your church? Final question: make three wishes for the future of River Life. Describe what the church would look like as these wishes come true." All of these questions were centered around the UP, IN, and OUT paradigm we began through 3DM.

In February 2012, each member of the Leadership Team opened their homes and invited small groups of the congregation to share what the Lord was doing in their lives. This was a listening campaign designed to collect more narratives. We called these gatherings "Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions" and they were held on different evenings, giving a wide range of times/weeknights for people to gather. The questions the leadership team asked for the evening centered around growing deeper in relationship with Jesus (UP), growing deeper in relationships with one another (IN), and where the Spirit may be calling each person to be involved in mission (OUT). The specific questions posed were: "When/Where do you feel connected to God and can hear His voice? How often do you experience this connection? Where are you seeing God

transform your life? How can River Life come alongside you and help connect you to the Lord? Where do you generally go for support? Church? Family? Friends? Co-workers? Do you sense you have place to connect with others at River Life? If not, why is that? How do you have fun with people? In what ways are you involved in your community? What issues facing your community do you feel a sense of urgency to address? Where do you find opportunities to talk about following Christ?"

Informally

Acts 2:46-47, discusses two environments in which the early church regularly spent time together. They had structured time in the Temple and unstructured time in their households, or *oikos*. Meeting in the Temple, as well as the homes of the church, created an environment of storytelling and listening. Whereas Temple was a structured time in devotion of God where community remembered God's action and presence in their past narratives, *oikos* time was unstructured, flowing organically where they told narratives of what the Spirit was doing amongst them. For the interpretive community, creating non-structured time for sharing narratives, and life together, is as important as the structured times that are purposeful in gathering narratives. The three ways River Life will create *oikos* is through Family Swim, classes offered in 2012-2013, and Talk Back.

On November 6, 2011, Family Swim started. The desire was to create a regular service that the *oikos* at River Life shared their narratives. Family Swim is the first Sunday of each month. There are specific elements of Family Swim, but the main component is the sharing of narratives rather than a sermon preached. Instead of using thirty minutes for a sermon, we allow people to stand up and share what they would like

to share as a prayer request or praise for how the Spirit has worked in their lives recently. I needed to give instruction at our first Family Swim and continue to do so each month. We call it the ABC's of sharing. When sharing you need to be "Audible." We want everyone to hear the person sharing and know who the person is that is sharing. I stay at the front and we have a worship host that comes to them with a wireless microphone. They need to speak into the microphone and say their name. River Life continues to have new people each Sunday, so it is important that each person share their name. The B stands for "Brief." We tell the church that this is not the time to share a lifelong story. We want to make sure everyone has time to share, so we ask people to be brief and to the point. The C stands for "Christ-centered." We ask that the person sharing tell a narrative of how they would like Christ to engage their specific narrative or how they witnessed Christ move or speak since our last time we gathered.

After thirty minutes of sharing, we move into a time of prayer. I encourage people to feel freedom to get up and move toward a person that has shared to lay hands on them and pray in groups. We allow space and time for them to pray together and then I close our time of prayer.

River Life has approximately eighty children under the age of eleven. We have fifteen junior high students and ten high school students. For Family Swim, we have our children and youth join us for the service. At first some parents were convinced the children would be a distraction during the service and would take away from what might

happen.<sup>1</sup> What was a surprise is that our children and youth began to, not only stand up in church and ask for prayer, but during the prayer time some of them will actually join with other adults to lay hands on them and pray for them for their requests.

Family Swim has been somewhat risky because there is no control for what might be shared or might happen. However, the response we received has been a surprise. There has not been one negative complaint about Family Swim. I still get evaluations regarding my sermons being helpful for people and they love to hear preaching. Yet, many find their favorite time at River Life is Family Swim and they look forward to it each month.

Beginning in September 2012, River Life will offer a series of classes taught by a member of the congregation. The last time classes were taught was during the interim period before I was called as Lead Pastor. During previous classes, the paradigm was teaching more information to those that came to classes taught by the interim pastor. While information is important, River Life will offer classes with the intention of gathering people together to continue sharing their narratives with one another.

The Leadership Team selected teachers of these classes and gathered as a group on May 6, 2012. There was intentionality in choosing specific people as they are good teachers, very diverse in personality and life experience, and capable of the purpose for the classes we plan to offer for the upcoming school year. After a shared meal and some intentional time getting to know one another, I shared why they were selected and the vision for these classes. Our purpose is for people to gather and be taught, but also

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<sup>1</sup> We created Pizza Boxes that have a treat in them as well as crayons, paper, and word puzzles to keep them focused. Also, because we have included the children, our Worship Pastor includes some songs just for the kids; they all sit in the front row. There is a lot of movement between the children in the front row to their parents sitting elsewhere, but we decided this is OK because they are part of our Family and this is how children are in Family.

providing time for those that attend to share their narratives and their perspectives. We trust they will provide great information for people, but what we truly are looking for is an ability to create a sense of community where people begin to know one another further and share their lives. A class schedule is being created for four one-hour classes on a Sunday morning before worship, or a two-hour class on a Friday evening and two-hour class on a Saturday morning (a weekend seminar).<sup>2</sup> Each month we will offer one of these choices for the entire year.

Talk Back is a time in our worship service for people to turn to one another, in pairs, to share a narrative with the person next to them. We began Talk Back on June 23, 2012. Talk Back is designed to get people sharing about themselves in a safe environment. These moments in our service help River Life practice listening to one another's stories that further creates a culture of gathering narratives and being attentive. The questions posed for Talk Back will be posed right before the sermon that frame and set up the topic of the sermon. Rather than preach and then ask people to discuss, giving people freedom to share about a specific topic before the message enables them to share openly instead of what they may perceive I would like them to talk about.<sup>3</sup>

### **Interpreting Narratives**

After the Initiate Step, Branson encourages an interpretive community to the next step of discussing the narratives collected. He calls this step the Inquire step. This

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<sup>2</sup> River Life has never had a Sunday School.

<sup>3</sup> When preaching about the Kingdom of God and how it breaks into our lives and the lives of those around us, I displayed the definition of "breakthrough" and asked them to turn to a person next to them to talk about any kind of breakthrough they ever had in their lives: relationally, occupationally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, etc. They could share any breakthrough moment. This set up the sermon time as I spoke on how the Spirit breaks into our lives so we can experience the Kingdom of God.

discussion is paramount before any kind of interpretation can take place. Wheatley says leadership should create an environment where people can dialogue about the history of an organization in order to unearth a specific identity of any grouping of people. Because each local church is unique, each church has a different narrative to discuss and interpret.

For River Life to be an interpretive community, it needs to be intentional about collecting narratives so the Leadership Team can do the necessary work of interpreting the narratives collected. Each year, the Leadership Team goes on a retreat, after intentionally gathering narratives, for the purpose of hearing a word from the Lord about what He is doing and how we should respond. On March 16-17, 2012, the Leadership Team went on a retreat. We took with us the formal narratives I collected from Sacramento's history, River Life's history, my own history, our online survey, the information we received from our Delicious Desserts, as well as, the informal narratives we were attentive to from our public gatherings (specifically Family Swim).

We gathered on a Friday night for corporate worship and a time set aside to listen to the Lord. I used an online devotional site to lead us through music, prayer, Scripture, and reflection questions.<sup>4</sup> This site is designed to lead us while we listen and was intentionally chosen to incorporate, and validate, a listening posture rather than reading and studying posture. Following this time, I lead us through a Bible study on the three biblical metaphors as tools for interpretation; wind, word, and keys. Finally, we told the narratives. Each part of the Leadership Team had a specific narrative to share and then, after we listened to the narratives we collected, asked about the common themes that we found weaving themselves through the stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Jesuit Media Initiatives, [www.pray-as-you-go.org](http://www.pray-as-you-go.org) accessed March 16, 2012.

We set up a time for interpreting the narratives. The by-product of that retreat resulted in a clear word from the Holy Spirit that River Life needs to know one another on a deeper level. What was lacking in our congregation was the kind of covenantal relationship the founding pastors of Sacramento experienced as they engaged mission together, the relational strength of the Swedes as they settled in Sacramento and birthed a denomination, and dependence on one another that the community of faith experienced in the birth of River Life. With a new pastor and many new people attending River Life, there was a clear sense, amongst the Leadership Team, that we were to address our IN relationships with one another for the 2012-2013 church calendar. In each past narrative we noticed that mission was the natural outpouring of a vibrant relationship with Jesus and His Spirit and interdependence on one another. The Leadership Team at River Life wanted to create a specific mission, but realized, through the narrations, that creating relational depth was the precursor for mission. Our narratives revealed that and, we believe, it was a specific word from God to us.

### **Communicating Narratives**

The collection and interpretation of narratives is foundational for an interpretive community. However, the ongoing narration of the church continually needs to be communicated: its past, its present, and its future. In Exodus 12, Yahweh instructed His people, whom He had entered into a Covenant with, to celebrate the Passover every year (v. 17) reminding His people what He had done on their behalf. The specific instruction included not just their past, but when they would enter the Promised Land (v. 25-27). Finally, when they arrived in the Promised Land, they were to include slaves and

foreigners that were not native born Israelites, in the Passover Feast. The narrative of the Passover was to be told annually as they went out and as others were brought into the emerging narrative post-Passover. The narrative continually told was the avenue for the sending of God's people to include slaves and foreigners.

For the interpreting community regular communication of narratives past is foundational for its present reality of being sent people with the purpose of including other people. The plan for communicating the collected narratives at River Life includes our metaphor, our membership, and our ministry leaders.

#### Metaphor –River

Branson's third step for being an interpretive community is for the church to, after collecting common themes from its past, to "Imagine" a preferred future. Although this is important, for River Life to be an interpretive community, instead of asking the congregation to imagine a preferred future together based on the past, River Life presents an image that we sense the Lord will use to nudge us toward further spiritual insight coupled with a specific mission.

Geary talks about how crucial a metaphor is as it carries over what is known about the past (narration) to the future which is, hopefully, so abstract that it is difficult to explain.<sup>5</sup> An interpretive community does not seek what it already knows, but is sent to the "new things" the Holy Spirit is doing that may not be perceived. The metaphor becomes the tool drawing people into the narration for the purpose of fleshing out what the Spirit wants accomplished. They combine what a church already knows with what is

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<sup>5</sup> Geary, *I Is an Other*, 20.



yet to be known; the metaphor is the process of discovering a future reality. This is what happened to the Israelites through the retelling of their Passover story. The Passover becomes the narrative in which to interpret their future life by remembering their past life; they were slaves and foreigners in their past and because of what Yahweh did, they would be called upon to remember and include slaves and foreigners in their future. The Passover narration becomes a metaphor for interpretation.

River Life needs such a metaphor to serve as a lens for interpreting their past, present, and future. The Spirit becomes the *liagmen* that connects this metaphor to the future direction of the church. Inviting people to participate with the image of a metaphor involves the church in the ongoing narration, which creates energy and momentum.

After compiling the collected narratives and spending time interpreting those narratives, it was decided upon to have a river be our metaphor for interpreting our collected narratives of our past and present to determine our future. The specific river in Sacramento, the River of the Blessed Sacrament, has been paramount to the host culture that River Life finds itself. It was certainly central in the story of the settling of Sacramento and, because of it, unified founding pastors in life together and mission as they planted the first church in oak groves next to the river. Through the story of River Life's beginning, a name was chosen to connect the River City to this new church.

Using Ezekiel 47 as the biblical narrative to connect Sacramento and River Life's narrative to the present, a new logo was created. This image is of a river flowing to provide life. In Ezekiel 47, the river leaves the Temple, gets larger as it goes and provides everything needed for new life in the water, as well as, on the shores in vegetation. Wherever it goes, it transforms. This image/metaphor of a flowing river providing life

will be used on all forms of communication and will be painted on one wall of the sanctuary of River Life.

#### Membership—Telling the Narrative

River Life's membership class has been rewritten into four, one-hour sessions teaching potential new members the identity of River Life as an interpreting community. Session One is called "Tell Us Your Story" where participants hear the narratives of one another. Session Two is called "The Background Story" where participants are told the narratives of Sacramento, the Evangelical Covenant Church, River Life Covenant Church, and my narrative. Session Three is called "An Interpretive Community" where participants are taught the process of River Life's attempt at listening to the Holy Spirit and one another so that we respond to where the Holy Spirit is sending us into mission. Included in this session is our intentionality of discipleship to mission using 3DM as a paradigm for helping us listen and respond. Finally, Session Four is called "Jump In" and is a Bible study on Ezekiel 47 coupled with specific ways for participants to jump into the flow of River Life's story. The next membership class is in September 2012.

#### Ministry Leaders—Telling the Story

One of the requirements of being a ministry leader at River Life is to be skilled in interpretation in order to lead specific areas of ministry. Each of the ministry leaders is included in the 3DM discipleship huddle process as well as being fully aware of how past narratives help River Life interpret where the Holy Spirit will guide us. As a ministry leader, one does not create programs, but rather gathers teams of people to work together on interpreting what the Holy Spirit may be telling them in their specific area of ministry.

## **Discipleship—Creating a Culture of Intentional Listening and Responding**

As the leadership team has and continues to work on listening to the Holy Spirit's voice through the narration given them, River Life began the process in September 2011 of equipping and training a group of leaders in discipleship. Through the ministry of 3DM, we create a common language for listening to the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of one another, to help interpret how the Holy Spirit may be leading a person or speaking to a person, and responding to the direction of the Holy Spirit. It has been a long process of integrating a listening approach to discipleship as opposed to a curriculum approach, imparting information about the Holy Spirit. Although 3DM uses various shapes as tools for equipping and training people in discipleship, these shapes frame a conversation of attentiveness to the Word of God to each person.

I have invited seven leaders into this year-long process and we meet bi-monthly. At each meeting I remind them our purpose is to be attentive to the Spirit, and to one another, so we can respond to the Spirit. Believing the Spirit is at work, these leaders then train others through the process of discipleship the following year. The instruction of these seven will then work its way to the potential of fifty other people at River Life. Multiplication of equipping and training leaders who will then, in turn, train other leaders, gives us a paradigm of discipleship at River Life. Like yeast working itself through dough, this paradigm creates a culture of discipleship with the belief that, as individuals begin to expect God to speak to them, they attend to the open doors God has for them for mission.

### ***Missio Dei—Initiate***

Branson's fourth, and final, step of the interpretive community is to initiate the plans made during the imagine step. River Life, as an interpretive community, initiates what the Lord directs through the process of collecting narratives, interpreting narratives, and using the metaphor of a river as a lens for any emerging narratives of the Holy Spirit through the life of the church. What flows out in the initiate stage is natural and normal to what has come before in the other stages. Who the church is will connect to a specific mission that the Spirit has for us.

Reading through Acts, which sheds light on the birth of the Church, it is apparent early believers responded to the Spirit's initiative to make decisions, rather than make decisions for mission and ask for the Spirit to bless their goals for mission. As the Holy Spirit was poured out, followers of Jesus were emboldened and sent into mission wherever they found themselves. Doors were opened and they confidently walked through them. However, they could have never anticipated where that would take place. Great persecution broke out and that seemed to only fuel their sense of mission further; their faith grew exponentially as they continued responding to the Spirit's leading. Their awareness of God's presence was stronger than any worldly hindrance and/or strategy.

An interpretive community needs to fully embrace the *Missio Dei*. God's Spirit is on the margins drawing people to Himself; the Spirit pulls the church and margin together. The interpretive community seeks to discover where and how, which will send them into the most unlikely and, for some, uncomfortable situations. Questions, concerns, and fears (that were clearly evident in Acts 10-11) become a regular part of the process of joining the *Missio Dei*. However, once the church follows where the Spirit takes them in

mission, great joy, and new life, is a by-product of the process.

Teaching *Missio Dei*, and the complexities of that, with the group of leaders in my Huddle, the Leadership Team and church, will prepare them for when a door is open to “go there.” Because of River Life’s presence in proximity to a variety of places where the Kingdom would expand in downtown Sacramento, might be uncomfortable for some.

### **Preferred Future at River Life Covenant Church**

“When was the last time you heard Jesus speak to you? Describe what he said, how you were able to realize it was Jesus, and if there was any kind of response Jesus wanted from you.” This question has been asked regularly at River Life recently. It has been asked from the pulpit. It has been asked in Life Groups. It has been asked in emails. It has been asked in one-on-one conversations. Usually there are a couple of responses. Either the people posed with this question retell a story in their past narrative or say they have not heard Jesus speak to them. This question allows some people an honest answer, saying they have never heard Jesus speak, but want to know how He does.

A preferred future is one where people can readily answer that question. By intentionally training people in discipleship, being attentive to Jesus Christ, River Life continues to join the mission the Spirit specifically has for River Life. An environment that best suits this to take place is one where people are regularly invited and challenged to listen and respond to the Spirit.

Groups of people, equipped and trained, to disciple one another through listening to the narratives of their lives, as well as the Holy Spirit, and responding with a word for them not only draw people toward more intimacy with Jesus and one another, but propel

them into a mission the Spirit has for them. This process moves people from passivity in the church community to responsibility and accountability to what the Spirit is specifically saying to someone.

Intentional discipleship creates an interpretive community. It creates leaders that lead from a responsive posture rather than business model. It creates joy and expectancy that the Jesus read about in Scripture continues to build His church, and River Life gets to be witnesses, as well as participants, of that process. It measures success by how many people are intentionally disciplined rather than how many are in attendance. It takes River Life to places they never dreamed of or imagined. Because of that, a preferred future can be found in the entire chapter of Matthew 10. Specifically, in 9:37 – 10:5a, as a great harvest is ready and workers are needed and sent to bring in that harvest. The sending of more people from River Life into the world to announce and give witness to the Kingdom of God where people can find new life is the ultimate goal at River Life and discipleship is the vehicle that will take us there.

## CHAPTER 7

### LAUNCHING THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

The intention of an interpretive community is to listen and respond to Jesus. The sharing and interpreting of story is a powerful way the Church can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. Scripture, itself, is evidence of the ongoing narrative, which continues today in individual and corporate life. It is a timeline of the activity of God and His people. In order for the Church to be in a posture of listening and responding, it must have some intentional structure as well. A timeline is a helpful tool to create an environment to guide the Church in these practices.

The *Torah* is the first five books of the Jewish Scripture. It came into being by the oral tradition (narration) of the Israelites that was passed down from one generation to the next, revealing the active role of Yahweh in their collective history. The *Talmud* is the central text of mainstream Judaism. It takes the form of a record of rabbinic discussions (narration) pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs, and history. The *Midrash* is a homiletic method of biblical exegesis that literally means “story to investigate.” This method of listening to investigate fills in the gaps left in the biblical narrative regarding specific events.

The New Testament is the continued narration of God's activity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. His teachings, specific events, life, death, and resurrection are recorded by firsthand encounters or stories told to secondhand authors (i.e. Luke). The Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts becomes the continuation of God's activity by giving birth to the Church, which includes those outside the Israelites. The epistles are specific letters to specific churches. They are stories told of what took place as the Church attempted to follow the Holy Spirit that formed them to send them.

Scripture, both Old and New Testament, is the narration of God and His people. It is authoritative because it becomes the benchmark to evaluate the continuation of the narration of God and His people. The Bible, in its composition, gives evidence that God is always at work creating new stories in, and through, His people. It highlights God has worked, is working, and will work with His people. The narration of Scripture, alone, should create an anticipation God is still at work building His Church and His people need to figure out how.

### **Timeline**

An interpretive community is a community that desires to listen to, and respond to, the ongoing work of God through His Spirit in building His church. Because of that, interpretation is not a one-time event, but rather a value elevated by the church and takes place intentionally. For River Life to be purposeful in being an interpretive community, the following annual timeline will guide her in creating an environment to interpret and respond to the work of the Holy Spirit.



## January

The start of every year, River Life holds the first of two yearly congregational meetings. It is scheduled at the first part of the month. This meeting takes place after the worship service and includes a potluck in the Fellowship Hall. The purpose is sharing the narratives of what God had done the year prior and how River Life responded to what we believed the Spirit leading us toward. The Leadership Team takes responsibility for sharing these specific stories, which highlight the role of the Leadership Team as ones who collectively attempt to interpret the voice, and presence, of the Holy Spirit. This intentional communication of collected stories illustrates spiritual responsiveness, by River Life, instead of goals achieved.

At the end of this congregational meeting, it is communicated to River Life, by the Lead Pastor, that we desire to listen further to what the Holy Spirit is doing and how we can affectively respond the following year. Because of that, an online survey is sent out in January for the purpose of gathering more stories. Following in February, we invite each person that calls River Life their home church to the homes of the Leadership Team to hear their specific stories.

## February

Dates are secured in February for the purpose of listening to the stories of the congregation and receive further input. These gatherings are called *Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions*. Each member of the Leadership Team opens their homes to the congregation creating an environment of fun, telling stories, and recording the input from those present. Specific questions are generated each year by the Leadership Team to pose

to each group. These questions are slightly different than the online survey, in that, we evaluate what else we think we need from our congregation that the survey did not address or that we think needs to be expanded upon. Verbal communication and dialogue provide feedback that sometimes is lacking in written communication.

The schedule for the evening for the Leadership Team to follow starts with a greeting time making sure everyone in attendance knows one another and the story of how they came to find River Life as their home church. Following these introductions, the sharing of desserts and more informal time of being together is encouraged. This creates the desired goal of *oikos* that River Life is intentional in developing. The following part of the evening asks everyone to find a comfortable time to sit and communicate the purpose for the evening, the Leadership Team attempting to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to River Life so we can respond to the Holy Spirit. Their input is part of that process and the Leadership Team thanks them for taking time to gather for the evening to help. Finally, the set of questions crafted by the Leadership Team in January is asked of the group. It is important that the Leadership Team take good notes as they collect these narratives so we can process, and interpret, these findings with what we discover in our online survey.

### March

In March the Leadership Team will have collected the input from the online survey, as well as from Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions. They will take this input and go away for a two-day, one night retreat. The purpose of the retreat is to interpret (evaluate) the information gathered using the biblical metaphors of wind, word,

and keys in order to actively respond to what we believe the Holy Spirit is specifically saying to our congregation, through the narration of our congregation. The retreat will be close in proximity to Sacramento so the Leadership Team can arrive in the early afternoon on Friday and complete the retreat later in the afternoon on Saturday.

#### April and May

An annual membership class will be taught each April. These four sessions will, not only teach potential members about what an interpretive community is, but, in Session Four, Jump In, the interpretive work that took place during the Leadership Team retreat will be communicated. This class takes place in our Ministry House, located next to the church, and taught by the Lead Pastor. In May, a sermon series is created for the purpose of communicating to the entire congregation the information gathered and shared in Jump In, and interpreted at the Leadership Team retreat. Devoting an entire month, rather than just an hour in Jump In, assists in communicating clearly where the Leadership Team senses the Holy Spirit's specific word to River Life and how we intend to respond to that word.

The annual men's retreat takes place in May at River Life. This is an intentional IN and UP experience for the men at River Life to connect to one another and the Holy Spirit. The location of the retreat is at Lake Tahoe at Zephyr Point. Discipleship huddles are intentionally created to connect men with one another assisting in responsiveness to the Holy Spirit and creating sustaining groups to continue to meet throughout the calendar year. Over 70 percent of the men at River Life participate in this retreat. The results from the Leadership Team retreat are highlighted and communicated at the men's

retreat with specific ways for men to plug into what the Lord leads us to for the year.

## June

The beginning of the summer, at River Life, initiates the process of creating a budget for the next church calendar year that begins October 1. Reflective in this budget are any necessary funding to support the direction that River Life senses the Holy Spirit wants the church to follow. Funding a specific initiative of the Holy Spirit, as well as some general budgetary line items, requires River Life to follow through with what was heard from the Holy Spirit rather than well intended goals that the Leadership Team creates for the congregation.

Another thing taking place in June that will be carried throughout the rest of the summer is the interviewing of potential new members of the Leadership Team. The Leadership Team serves for two years and new members of the Leadership Team are rotated in each year as their two-year service is staggered between two different groups.

In order to discern who should be on the ballot of potential Leadership Team members, nominations are open for the summer and interviews will be scheduled for those nominees. A team of people, recruited and selected by the Leadership Team and led by the Lead Pastor, will interview the nominees. Questions posed will be in narrative form. They are: “In John 15, we read we are to be connected to the vine, abide in Christ, in order to bear much fruit. Tell us how you are intentional in your abiding with Jesus. What do you do to listen to the Lord? We have been talking a lot about *Kairos* moments here at River Life where the Kingdom of God breaks into our lives in a specific way. Tell us a story about how the Spirit has led your, or spoke to, in the past month. The apostle

Paul, in Philippians 3:17 was confident in his ability to follow Jesus so that he told the Philippians to pattern their lives after his. Tell us about whom you have followed, or patterned, your life after and whom you suspect is following you, or patterning, their life after you. Are you able to commit to a two-year term on the Leadership Team meeting bi-monthly? Are you willing to be disciplined as a part of serving on the Leadership Team for those two years? Do you have any questions you have of this team?"

### July

The Leadership Team continues working on the budget for the summer months. July tends to be a slow month around River Life. That being said, River Life has made an ongoing commitment to be Church Of The Week at Love, INC. "Love In the Name of Christ" brings Christian churches together, across denominational lines, to help some of Sacramento's most in need. This OUT experience, as a congregation, is in the spirit of the five founding pastors of Sacramento in our collective narrative as well as the Fourth Sundays in River Life's narrative. Sign ups for COTW begins in June.

### August

Each August, River Life takes a Family Camping trip to Lake Tahoe. This is an IN experience and is an extremely organic, *oikos* time together. The only scheduled activity is a potluck dinner on Saturday evening. This four-day, three night, camp out not only gives people time and space to tell narratives, but creates new narratives together.

## September

Because September is the beginning of the school calendar, people are back from summer vacations. In September, we have our second congregational business meeting for the year. The purpose of this meeting is to vote on the budget the Leadership Team created during the summer months. This budget is reflective of the process of collecting and interpreting narratives at the first part of the year. There is dialogue regarding this budget and the congregation can interact with it. It is sent out two weeks before the congregational meeting. Another thing that takes place at this congregational meeting is voting on the new members of the Leadership Team.

A new season of classes begin at River Life in September. These classes are taught by various members of the congregation for the purpose of helping one another grow closer to God, as well as, connect to one another in a classroom setting. The classes address specific spiritual needs of the congregation discovered during the collecting of narratives in January and February and interpreted by the Leadership Team in March. Only one class will be offered each month at the Ministry House. It will either be an hour before our worship service, or in a weekend seminar format on a Friday night and Saturday morning time frame.

River Life partners with other churches in Sacramento in September for Convoy of Hope. Similar to Love, INC, Convoy of Hope is a collaborative effort between dozens of local churches, businesses, social service organizations, local government and Convoy of Hope, Inc providing food for the hungry and relief for people in crisis. Again, this is in the spirit of working together with other congregations, as well as city departments, for the good of the city.

The annual women's retreat at River Life takes place in September. They go to Sky Mountain Christian Camp and Conference Center in Emigrant Gap. The purpose for this retreat is similar with the men's retreat in that it is designed for women to connect with the Holy Spirit (UP) and one another (IN). As a result of listening to our women, it is apparent the women at River Life need to be intentional about relationships with one another. This was unearthed as we began our listening campaign the year prior through Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions.

Finally, in September (specifically 2012), River Life will begin our second generation of discipleship huddles. The leaders I have worked with for the past year will begin to disciple their own groups and I will gather another group of seven leaders to be equipped to listen to the Holy Spirit and respond. The multiplication of disciples will have gone from seven to approximately fifty. Our Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry begin using the 3DM paradigm for discipleship in their prospective ministries. The curriculum used for the ministry to our children from 3DM give parents conversations and activities to do with their children at home. The purpose of this stems from a belief that parents are the key disciplers for their children.

#### October, November, and December

The new budget year begins October 1. The fall is kept open for any kind of response that arises out of the interpretive process from the beginning of the year. December is a busy time of year because of Advent, which we celebrate. During this time, the new Leadership Team will compile new survey questions for the online survey in January as well as plan for the congregational meeting in January.

## **Monthly Initiatives to Listen and Respond**

An interpretive community is intentional about providing opportunities and avenues to listen to the Holy Spirit and one another. Because of that, River Life provides monthly experiences where listening is purposeful.

### *Taize Service*

To assist River Life in being attentive to the Holy Spirit, we have promoted a communal *Taize* service in downtown Sacramento at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic parish that meets every Wednesday evening. I have taken my first generation huddle group and our worship team to this service to help them connect with the Holy Spirit. River Life continues to promote this service for those that want to learn to listen to the Holy Spirit in this model. The plan is to encourage future huddle groups to expose their discipleship groups to this kind of worship service at least once during the year.

### *Still Waters*

Still Waters is a monthly worship time in our sanctuary on the first Wednesday of the month. It is similar to the *Taize* service led by a man at our church. It involves quiet music, candles, and some Scripture read and prayers offered by this leader. In Psalm 23:2-3, David writes the Lord, as a Shepherd, leads him besides still waters for the purpose of restoring his soul. The Leadership Team created Still Waters for people to have time to connect to the Lord and have their souls restored. This is an UP experience intended to have people able to create some space to listen to the Holy Spirit. Evaluating whether Still Waters will be continued for the following year takes place at the Leadership Team retreat in March.



## Family Swim

Family Swim will continue on the first Sunday of each month. This is an intentional time of sharing with one another (IN) and praying for one another. Another component of Family Swim is serving one another communion. After intentionally creating space for informal narratives shared and prayers offered, River Life is invited to receive the sacrament of communion (UP). The Lead Pastor offers words of institution and the table is open to the congregation. When ready, people move to the center of the aisle and come to the front to receive communion through intinction. The person that had received communion, then walks to the other side of the table, replacing the person that just served them, and they serve the next person in line. This occurs until everyone has received the elements.

The final component of Family Swim is our Joseph Offering. The Joseph Offering began with our first Family Swim and it is a specific offering we take alongside our regular tithes. In Genesis 41, Joseph finds himself in Egypt and is brought before Pharaoh to interpret a disturbing dream he had. The dream's interpretation was that Egypt was about to experience seven years of famine. Therefore, Joseph instructed Pharaoh to store up grain in the seven years of prosperity that would happen prior the famine. As a result, when the famine struck, all people were drawn to Egypt to find food.

The Joseph Offering at River Life is not financial; it is something specific to meet a need in the community that has been discovered through listening to various narratives in our community. As in the *oikos* of Acts 2:42-45, the early church was taught to share whatever resources each had with one another. Some went as far as to sell some property and share this money from the sale of this property with others in need. We collect

possessions for our Joseph Offering to give to those in need. Family Swim will continue at River Life. It allows people to share their narratives as well as connect them immediately to mission. Evaluation of Family Swim will take place at the Leadership Team retreat in March.

### **Evaluation—*Missio Dei***

The ultimate evaluation of an interpretive community is the fruit born from listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another; the congregation joins in the specific mission of God for that local congregation. As River Life intentionally creates an atmosphere of listening to the Holy Spirit and listening to the various narratives of its people, the hope is that they are capable of interpreting where the Holy Spirit is inviting them to participate in the mission of God.

There are two specific missional opportunities, open doors, that River Life currently attempts to interpret from the narrative of its beginning on its current property. The first is an open door to provide a Christian Preschool for the community as a service and for a mission. When River Life purchased the campus from the Free Methodists, there was a non-Christian preschool on the property called Phoenix Preschool. They are good tenets and provide a safe preschool for working parents in the community. They have leased the property from the church for the past eighteen years. When River Life purchased the property, a new lease was crafted with Phoenix Preschool and that lease has been renewed one time since. The lease is due for renewal in January 2013.

Three months ago a team of people gathered for the purpose of discussing whether River Life should allow the lease to expire and then open our own preschool for

the community surrounding the neighborhood. The Holy Spirit sent a Christian woman from another church who heard about our process, through a member at River Life, asking us if we would like to have her consult for our process. This woman has started two preschools from the very beginning at two other churches, one of which she currently serves as director. This preschool opened its doors with eleven students and currently have over one hundred children with a majority of children coming from families that do not know Jesus Christ.

The timing seemed perfect to begin the process of discerning what the Holy Spirit wants River Life to do and a team formed. The team was our consultant, a female team leader gifted in leadership, two business men from our congregation that were aware of what it takes to start a business from the ground up, our children's director, one member from our Leadership Team, and a volunteer that has been living in this community for the eighteen years that Phoenix Preschool has been meeting on the property.

Over three months, the team gathered all sorts of data, interviewed other Christian preschools in Sacramento, sought legal advise from one attorney, and evaluated the cost analysis to start and maintain, a preschool on our property run by River Life instead of Phoenix Preschool. The decision was to present these findings to the Leadership Team for a decision to be made whether the Leadership Team wanted to proceed and bring this plan to the congregation or not.

Currently Phoenix Preschool has a waiting list to get into the school and there are approximately fifty-two students that are enrolled. It is financially solvent and generates a lot of revenue. The plan that was provided to the Leadership Team included a possibility of losing a good majority of those children if we were to initially take over. This is

important, as the rent from the preschool is a major source of revenue for River Life. The data revealed that if River Life were only to retain eleven of these children, fifteen thousand dollars would be generated and, after six years with enrollment increasing, we would have over \$150,000 in the black.

This data was exciting for the Leadership Team as River Life has a limited budget because of being a smaller congregation. Generating this kind of revenue would provide the resources for other kinds of missional opportunities for River Life. Logically, it made sense to move forward and present this plan to the congregation for a vote to move forward and start this new mission. However, because River Life has been spending this past year learning what it means to be an interpretive community, the leader of the preschool team asked if this is something the Holy Spirit wants for River Life. That question made the entire team, as well as the Leadership Team, pause. Even though there was thorough analysis for starting this preschool and would benefit River Life, as well as the community surrounding River Life, that one question pushed the team to ask if this was what God wanted or not.

Because the preschool team and Leadership Team could not answer the question, it was decided that River Life would offer to renew the lease with Phoenix Preschool for one year so River Life could intentionally interpret whether this is a door that River Life should open or not. At the congregational meeting in September, the Leadership Team will invite all of River Life to join in interpreting what the Holy Spirit is saying.

The process includes a thirty-day prayer campaign specifically seeking the Holy Spirit to speak to River Life that begins in October 2012. Specific questions pertaining to opening a preschool will be generated for our online survey in January 2013 and other

questions will be generated for our Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions in February 2013. The Leadership Team will process this information at the Leadership Team retreat.

The second potential door for mission, the Lord may be opening, is planting a missional community in Oak Park. From the very beginning of River Life, the founding pastor, Bud Locke had a vision of planting smaller missional churches in the distinct neighborhoods of Sacramento. Because Sacramento is filled with larger churches, River Life at its inception never desired to be a big church and desires to stay connected to the small community of East Sacramento.

One of the men on the Leadership Team was in the process of finishing his course work at Fuller Theological Seminary when I arrived. He is employed as a community organizer in Sacramento and been involved in a variety of community organizing events on behalf of the government tackling targeting gang violence by bringing Cease Fire to Sacramento. When asked why he was attending Fuller, he said he is pursuing whether the Holy Spirit is calling him into pastoral ministry. His wife is the area director for InterVarsity and the connections they have across the city with young couples are legion.

In fall 2010, I asked him if he would like us to form a discernment team to listen to his story and spend significant time praying for him to help discern a specific call to ministry. He was open to that process and so we began. I selected a team of people that included our church chair and one other member of the Leadership Team as well as three other mature, and spiritually sensitive, adults at River Life. The process was six-months. Afterwards, it was unanimously affirmed that he has a call on his life for pastoral ministry. Now, he needed to figure out how to specifically live out that calling.

This young couple lives in Oak Park, which is a community bordering East Sacramento where River Life is located. It is a diverse community that Bud Locke originally began his ministry in. There are numerous people that attend River Life that intentionally live in Oak Park wanting to make a difference in the neighborhood. This young man graduated from Fuller with his MDiv and he and his wife are expecting their second child. Both are currently in my first generation of huddles here at River Life and are going to begin calling others into a discipleship relationship this September.

This narrative, like the narrative of the preschool, is one that River Life needs to interpret. It is becoming more apparent that there is an open door for River Life to plant an intentional missional community in Oak Park with this young couple and some other families that attend River Life. The timeline for processing will be the same as the one for the preschool. The Leadership Team will process this information and include this opportunity in the thirty-day prayer campaign in the fall. Specific questions will be generated for the survey in January 2013 and conversations at our Delicious Desserts & Divine Discussions in February 2013. These are two specific missions that may be presenting themselves to River Life.

Like a river that leaves the Temple to provide new life, an interpretive community that is equipped and intentional in listening to the Holy Spirit and the narratives of one another, will be sent to join in the mission that God has for each specific congregation. River Life has become, and is becoming, an interpretive community.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project has been transformational for me on many levels. Primarily, this is the first time I have served in the role of lead pastor. My story of church life has been full of peaks and valleys, great leaders and some that were not so great. In all honesty, stepping into this role made me wonder which one I would be: great or not so great.

By stopping to be somewhat reflective about my own story, I picked up some clues on how I should lead River Life from the humble lead pastors I have known over the years. There was one thing that seemed to separate them from the pastors that seemed to cause conflict, frustrate the congregation, and dishearten the staff; they were responsive to what the Spirit of God was saying and doing. The other pastors had a vision they were attempting to impose on the congregation and there was great conflict as to whether the congregation would buy into that vision or not. Those congregations had great debate, divisions, and frustrations.

It seemed natural, and normative, for me to want to look back on my own experiences to learn from them, not wanting to repeat mistakes I witnessed other lead pastors make. However, my own story was not enough data. I believed it was important to spend time with the founding pastor of River Life, Bud Locke, attempting to learn what was on his heart, what he heard from Jesus, and what he hoped River Life would become by some of the stories in her history. I met with him numerous times before I moved to Sacramento and asked a lot of questions and listened to his perspective.

All this converged with me having to write this Ministry Focus Paper. As I expended a lot of mental and spiritual energy on trying to figure out how to lead this

church well, I also needed to try and write about something that would wrap up the incredible input I received in Fuller about the *ecclesia* of God over the past eight years.

Not wanting to bring a new vision to River Life that was not part of her DNA or the host culture of Sacramento, I began thinking about how to step into what God was already alive and at work at doing in both. Through a *kairos* moment in a conversation with a friend, I realized I wanted to create a culture more attentive to the narrative the Holy Spirit was active in writing through River Life than my own voice as pastor.

If I, as pastor, were attempting to seek the Holy Spirit and be led by the Spirit by listening to the narratives of the past, I would want to include the entire congregation in that process. The friend I was talking to pointed me in the direction of Branson's book *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*. That work, coupled with my experience with discipleship and the input from Fuller, resulted in an attempt to create a culture, at River Life, where the congregation would be equipped and capable of listening to the Holy Spirit through narratives told, in order to respond directly to what the Spirit is saying and doing. My role of pastor is to tell the story, and give room for story, so that the work of Christ in our past, present, and future would be witnessed to, instead of created by, me.

Creating a culture of readiness takes a long time. Telling stories require time and space as well. I had to fight the urge to jump in and make something happen and, in all honesty, there are times I found myself leading this way. But, because of this project, I have had to stop myself and ask if this story was mine or the Lord's.

The intentionality of paying attention to the work of the Spirit collectively and individually, and then interpreting what one sees and hears, requires a lot of trust, intimacy, and sense of community among one another. It is easier to keep people at a



distance and go to church in order to get something. Interpretation requires you to come and give of yourself, entrust your story to others around you, and for you to be skilled at listening to the stories of other people, the pleasant stories and the ones that might not be so pleasant. The Lord of all is discovered in these narratives.

The implications for River Life are the continual call to be connected to the Holy Spirit and one another in a covenant of grace, so that we can be a congregation that will follow where the Lord is leading to expand His Kingdom and join Him in where He goes and in what He does. Embracing the value of intentional discipleship so that mission will result will affect the future of River Life in ways that we are not aware of today.

The future of River Life is in the process of emerging through what has come before in Sacramento, the founding of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Sacramento, and the trickle of River Life's beginning. Me being called and led to this congregation, along with everyone that has jumped into the stream of River Life, is part of an overall story that we discover and respond to together. River Life is not my church. It does not belong to any one person in the congregation regardless of how long they have been attending. And it will not embrace an ill-fitting vision from an outside source. It will, however, continue to flow where the Holy Spirit directs and moves.

A modern, Western *ecclesia* does not know this language. The *ecclesia* of the East, as well as many post-modern and pre-modern cultures where the *ecclesia* takes root, understands Spirit responsiveness rather than the modular, programmatic, mechanical, and goal-orientated modern church. Even though the modern church has motives, most of the time, of seeing people begin to follow Jesus and desire transformation to take place, their efforts of creating such things seem sterile and clinical. Pausing to ask why they do

what they do, usually causes frustration because they do not know another way. Most leaders were seminary trained in doctrine, church management and mechanics, and numerous courses on communication so that preaching (telling) was accurate. I did not receive one class in listening to the Lord in order to lead during my MDiv at North Park Theological Seminary from 1988-1992. It was not until I took Spirituality and Ministry in my doctoral program at Fuller when direct connection to Spirit responsiveness affected the ministry that would flow in, and through, a congregation. Not only did we learn the theology of it, but, we experienced it together by practicing spiritual disciplines of engagement and abstinence while staying at a monastery for two weeks. Clearly teaching us to listen to the Holy Spirit while in the process of learning and gathering of information to lead the church was a value that was new to me, someone that has been around awhile.

More experiences helping future leaders of the *ecclesia* interpret what the Holy Spirit is saying so that She could respond to the voice of the Spirit, would change the DNA of the modern, Western Church. Telling stories and narratives of the Holy Spirit's work in building the Church through a covenant with them and their covenant with one another, is what creates momentum and movement in the Church. Models do not. Even models created of past movements of the Holy Spirit in one congregation that are attempted by another congregation to replicate. An interpretive community pays attention to the Holy Spirit, through narration, and is intimately led by the Holy Spirit.

As River Life Covenant Church cultivates a culture of interpretation, it prepares itself for a movement of the Spirit it has yet to know or experience. It listens well to the narrative of God's Word, to narratives of one another, and the movements of the Spirit on

a mission to redeem all of his creation. It affirms the work of the Trinity in its past, present, and future, which creates a hope that Jesus is still building His Church, against which the gates of hell will not prevail.

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