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## Discipleship in the Earbuds: Developing a Podcast Curriculum as a Component of Congregational Equipping

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# Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EARBUDS: DEVELOPING A PODCAST CURRICULUM  
AS A COMPONENT OF CONGREGATIONAL EQUIPPING

Written by

CHRIS GRIGGS

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

  
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Date Received: May 13, 2020

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EARBUDS: DEVELOPING A PODCAST CURRICULUM  
AS A COMPONENT OF CONGREGATIONAL EQUIPPING

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

CHRIS GRIGGS  
MAY 2020

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## ABSTRACT

### **Discipleship in the Earbuds: Developing a Podcast Curriculum as a Component of Congregational Equipping**

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Doctor of Ministry

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2020

The purpose of this doctoral project is to evaluate the effectiveness of a podcast for the community of First Presbyterian Church Glen Ellyn as a component of disciple equipping, so that the congregation will be able to overcome some of the barriers that preclude participation in traditional ministry formats. An effective congregational podcast will drive its listeners to deeper participation in the life of the Christian community and personal spiritual disciplines. An ineffective congregational podcast will be either ignored by the congregation or will further a consumer mindset where listening to the podcast is a substitute for active participation in the community of Christ. This podcast curriculum was tested in the setting of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Through a literature review of relevant classic and contemporary works, this study makes the case that contextualization is a key component of gospel ministry and that a new kind of ministry contextualization needs to occur in the church in order to adjust to changing cultural realities presented by technological habituation and the growing prevalence of handheld devices as basic parts of daily life.

This study outlines the elements of a podcast curriculum that are most fitting to the podcast medium and designed to catalyze participation in personal spiritual disciplines, commitment to the Christian community, and transformative understandings of the self, the church, and the journey of discipleship.

The conclusions of the study indicate that a podcast can be an extremely effective tool for overcoming some of the barriers of ministry participation present in the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, is able to catalyze further action steps in spiritual disciplines and has significant potential to find a broad listening audience in the congregation.

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PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION:  
THE MINISTRY CHALLENGE

On a crisp, fall evening a few years ago I met up with my wife to watch one of my son's baseball games. Both of us had come from work, we had driven separate cars, and we were both half-watching the game and half-working on our handheld devices. At one point in the evening she needed to use the restroom and so we walked together into the Community Center adjacent to the baseball field. As I waited for her in the hallway, I took in the scene. A long row of chairs lined the hallway wall, and in each chair was a parent, waiting for his or her child to finish some sort of dance class taking place in the gymnasium. Every single parent was looking down at the screen on his or her phone.

When my wife returned, I asked her to look at what I had seen. "Do you see this? This is the reality of the people in our congregation. They spend tons of time at their kids' activities. They drive them all over the state, they sit and wait while their kids participate in practices, meets, games, and recitals. And all the while, they are connected to their phones."

The mental snapshot I took that day affirmed our recent experience as a congregation. The pervasiveness of busyness has had a profound impact on participation levels in the ministries of the congregation. Even while participation metrics in mission, small groups, and financial giving had been steadily rising, participation metrics in on-campus ministries such as worship and adult education had been falling. As the



leadership of the congregation has worked to understand the reasons behind these inconsistent metrics, we discovered that we do not have a worship problem or an adult education problem; we have a calendar problem. Regardless of when the congregation offers its ministries, fewer and fewer people consider themselves available to take part.

There was once a day of the week that was sacred and protected. Those committed to Christian discipleship and the community of Christ were mostly free from work, travel, social and family commitments to participate in the mission and ministries of the congregation on Sunday morning. For the growing majority of the people of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, this is no longer the reality. We have discovered that even people who love our church, who brag about its accomplishments, give generously to its ministries, serve sacrificially in its mission endeavors, and invite their friends into the fold, are participating less frequently in physical gatherings at the church.

There are multiple reasons for this reality. Surely some of it is attitudinal. Of course, anyone could come to worship on Sunday morning if it were the highest priority to do so. But there are external barriers to physical participation as well. The proliferation of the work week into the weekends and evenings, the explosion of travel for both work and social or familial reasons, the abundance of travel sports with extensive schedules and games spread across the region if not the country, and the prosperity that affords individuals and families vacation homes and resources for travel, all push against the perceived availability to take part in the spiritual formation and worship ministries of the congregation.

A few anecdotes describe well this reality. A couple of years ago a young mom joined the congregation. She was excited about her faith, enthusiastic about her new

congregation, and was taking the faith-step of being baptized in worship. She could not have been more emotionally or spiritually committed to the church. As we sat down together to talk about her baptism, I was encouraged and energized by what the Holy Spirit was doing in her life. Then came the discussion about scheduling her baptism. I suggested this coming Sunday, the date that the New Members Class would be presented in worship. “I can’t this weekend, our family is in Dallas for a wedding.” Next Sunday? “In Wisconsin for work.” The following Sunday? “In Florida for Thanksgiving.” It took one month to find a Sunday not already committed elsewhere in her calendar.

Another young mom came forward after another new membership class. She was likewise proud to be a part of the congregation and excited about uniting her journey of faith with the community of Christ at First Presbyterian. She approached me with a sense of desperation. “I am so excited for my family to be a part of what God is doing here. I just wish hockey wasn’t every Sunday from September to April. Do you have any thoughts for us about how we could participate more?” I suggested small groups, mission, and other non-Sunday morning approaches, but emphasized that there really is no substitute for gathering with the community of Christ for worship. She was discouraged and lamented feeling like she had to make a choice between being a good mother and a good congregation member.

As the congregation’s leadership has worked with this reality for our people, we have decided that this is not something that we can successfully fight. The current is too strong. We can stand our ground, curse the reality of busyness and condemn those who do not come to worship or adult education with regularity. Or we can look for ways to come alongside our people in the reality of their current context.

One place worthy of exploration and experimentation is finding a way to change the definition of the word present by leveraging the ability of our people to participate in mission, education and ministry through their phones. If we can find a way for our people to take ownership of their spiritual journey by asking them to give us something they actually have to give, rather than asking them to give us something they do not feel they have to give, we think we can be more effective at empowering their discipleship journeys.

The purpose of this doctoral project is to evaluate the effectiveness of a podcast for the community of First Presbyterian Church Glen Ellyn as a component of disciple equipping, so that the congregation will be able to overcome some of the barriers that preclude participation in traditional ministry formats. An effective congregational podcast will drive its listeners to deeper participation in the life of the Christian community and personal spiritual disciplines. An ineffective congregational podcast will be either ignored by the congregation or will further a consumer mindset where listening to the podcast replaces active participation in the community of Christ.

The project will explore the importance of doing ministry in a highly contextualized way, in order to make the Christian discipleship journey accessible and intelligible to the broader community in which we are situated. It will explore the impact of technology on our people and identify the opportunities for ministry that technology is currently presenting to us. We will develop podcast content that aligns with desired spiritual formation outcomes and assess the strengths and liabilities of incorporating a distance approach to education as a part of the spiritual formation model of the congregation. The project will explore how a podcast might be utilized to empower the

individual congregant to partner with the Holy Spirit in working out his or her salvation and develop a deeper commitment to Christ and the Christian community. The goals and outcomes of a pilot project for a congregational podcast will be addressed and assessed and the experience of implementing a podcast documented and evaluated.

## CHAPTER 1:

### COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

Situated twenty-four miles due west of downtown Chicago lies the Village of Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Known for its excellent schools and robust Park District, Glen Ellyn is an affluent community with an estimated median family income of \$123,000.<sup>1</sup> A majority of households in the community are married couples living together and a high percentage have children under age eighteen living with them.<sup>2</sup> Glen Ellyn is served by the Metra West Line, a direct train route into the city of Chicago.

In order to fund the strong school district and parks department, Glen Ellyn residents are assessed significantly higher property taxes than those of a typical Chicago suburb.<sup>3</sup> While not approaching the most extreme levels of affluence in the Chicagoland area, Glen Ellyn is known stereotypically in the region as a community of prosperous, family-oriented, professionally-educated individuals. Realtors in the Chicago area often

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<sup>1</sup> “Glen Ellyn Village, Illinois,” *American FactFinder*. United States Census Bureau. 2010, accessed November 5, 2014. [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml/](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml/).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

suggest Glen Ellyn to relatively affluent families relocating to the region who have one or more members of the household working in downtown Chicago.

The Village of Glen Ellyn is roughly 90 percent White, 5 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian, and 2 percent African American.<sup>4</sup> Because of the high levels of homogeneity with respect to race, education, and family composition, those who do not fit into the majority groups of socio-racial, marital and economic segments are likely to feel their minority status more profoundly than in the more diverse communities which surround Glen Ellyn. This reality has a self-perpetuating impact upon the culture and composition of the community with immigrant, minority and non-married individuals being less likely to make the Village their home.

The relatively high property taxes and home values in Glen Ellyn mean that the majority of adults living in the Village have a bachelor's degree or better and work in professional occupations.<sup>5</sup> The definitions of success in Glen Ellyn are somewhat varied but professional success is a broadly subscribed cultural value with ascendancy and upward mobility in the vocational sphere expected outcomes of work life. A majority of working adults could be described as driven and achievement-oriented, with financial security a frequent result of these education levels and professional pursuits.

The Glen Ellyn Park District was established in 1919 as a way to provide recreational opportunities such as sports, dance, arts, childcare, and more.<sup>6</sup> Currently the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "About the Park District," *Glen Ellyn Park District*, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://gepark.org/about/>.

Park District provides more than 700 programs year-round at thirty local parks and recreational buildings. The Village offers baseball fields, soccer fields, indoor track and basketball facilities, an aquatic center, fitness centers, and dance studios. The Park District and its programs are a major draw to the community for young couples and families in the city of Chicago looking to relocate to the suburbs to raise their children.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason families choose Glen Ellyn is the reputation of the school system. The primary schools in Glen Ellyn are a part of Glen Ellyn School District 41 and its High Schools are a part of Glenbard Township High School District 87. Additionally, a number of excellent private parochial schools operate in neighboring communities. Test scores in the primary and Junior High Schools rank between 45 percent and 105 percent higher than state averages.<sup>8</sup> Proficiency in the schools within the district at the lower end of the testing is significantly impacted by the inclusion of homes outside the Village of Glen Ellyn but within the boundaries of School District 41. Parents moving to Glen Ellyn can expect smaller class sizes, better special education supports, and higher levels of teacher education than in average Illinois school districts.

The high school in the Village of Glen Ellyn, Glenbard West, is widely recognized as one of the top high schools in the state. Ranked the number three High School in DuPage County by Niche.com, Glenbard West is consistently rated among the Top Twenty High Schools in the state of Illinois.<sup>9</sup> The school is known for its outstanding

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Glenbard West High School,” accessed August 10, 2019, <https://www.niche.com/k12/glenbard-west-high-school-glen-ellyn-il/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

academic, athletic, and college preparation programs, as well as possessing top tier facilities and extra-curricular activities. Normative expectations for students attending Glen Ellyn schools would include college education, extra-curricular involvement and social engagement. Much like their parents, the typical student at Glenbard West is achievement-oriented and ambitious.

The suburban life of Glen Ellyn also includes a significant level of participation in religious life. In 2010, 40 percent of residents were Catholic, 21 percent Protestant, and 28 percent claimed no religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> The first Protestant Church in Glen Ellyn was founded in 1862, thirty years prior to the incorporation of the Village of Glen Ellyn.<sup>11</sup> For families of faith, Glen Ellyn is a location that offers a wide variety of congregations and Christian worship traditions from which to choose.

Because the community surrounding the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn is so oriented toward family life, some attention needs to be given to the reality of family life in the modern context. When compared to the typical church family in the 1990s, it becomes apparent that today's typical church family is facing a profoundly different existence. In the 1990s, some travel was a component of many jobs. Today, international travel and global work relationships are very prevalent in our context. In the 1990s, kids who chose to play sports, did so at practices and games at local YMCAs or neighborhood ballfields a couple of nights a week. Today, families refer to themselves as Hockey

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<sup>10</sup> "Glen Ellyn Illinois," *City Data*, accessed August 10, 2019, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Glen-Ellyn-Illinois.html/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Glen Ellyn, IL" *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, accessed April 27, 2020, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/517.html>.



Families or Soccer Families and they spend substantial amounts of time every week at games and practices as well as transporting their kids to these events. In the 1990s, most people had two phones, one at the house and one at the office. Office-related calls went to the office phone and a call to the home number or a work-related call placed after work hours would likely be a relatively rare exception, or something done in emergency circumstances. Today's work day greets our people before their feet hit the floor as they grab their handheld device from the bedside table and their work will be available to them (although they may choose not to be available to it) until the moment they go to sleep at night (or in the wee hours of the morning).

There is another agitating force in the ministry context of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn that impedes regular participation in mission and ministry. That force is affluence. As the disposable income of Americans has grown, so has our willingness to spend money on things that take us away from home. The number of people in the congregation with a timeshare, a lake house, a second home, or some kind of a place to get away is relatively high. The people of First Presbyterian like to ski, and fish, and take vacations, and ride motorcycles, and go away to the sunshine in the winter, and do all the sorts of things that people with money can afford to do. Additionally, because these people are used to traveling in their work lives, and because they often have miles or points to use on personal or family travel, their social and recreational lives take them away from the physical community on weekends with great frequency.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Versions of these paragraphs were originally submitted to Fuller Seminary faculty as a component of TM 753, "Church Rising: A New Season for the Church".

The proliferation of travel, kids' activities, technology, and competition in the work and school environments impacts many areas of modern family life. Perhaps no part of family life is as greatly affected as is the family calendar. Family dinner which was once sacrosanct is often a victim of the team practice, tutoring, homework or work schedule. The competition for field or court time is high, meaning that coaches and teams schedule practices at all hours of the afternoon and evening. Athletic participation does not primarily take place at school and after school for a couple of hours. The modern family travels up to an hour each way multiple times per week to find the location of the evening's practice, event, or session with a personal trainer. Family dinner is as likely to take place at a drive-thru window as a dining room table.

The weekends, which once were reserved for rest, church, household chores and play are now as highly scheduled as weekdays, if not more so. Many young people have multiple games per day on the weekends, families spend all weekend in a gym or at a ballfield watching their child participate in a tournament, and often traveling out of the area or out of state for competitions. Similarly, the prevalence of technology enables and often demands that parents are monitoring their devices for work emails, messages and phone calls over the weekend. The number of parents who are splitting time between work and family sports on the weekends is exceedingly high.

The highly programmed and scheduled lives of families often create a sense of frenzy and rush for family members. The typical reaction to this experience is not to program less into the calendar but to carve out times of respite in the calendar for travel and escape. What once might have been viewed as occasional family delights, have become normative rhythms of the year. Trips over spring break, winter break and

summer vacation are almost a competitive sport amongst modern suburban families. Getting away for a cruise, time in the sun, skiing, European travel, time at the lake, and other vacation activities are ordinary agenda items each year for a preponderance of families in Glen Ellyn.

Some congregations operate on the liturgical calendar. The First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn operates around the school calendar and programs its ministries with an awareness of when school district breaks occur and the expectation that attendance at church activities will be substantially negatively affected by family travel during those times. It is never a challenge to find a parking spot in downtown Glen Ellyn during spring break, summer break or Christmas break, as the Village becomes a shell of itself when school is not in session. The reality of family life in the modern context of Glen Ellyn is that it is frenetic, affluent, and oriented around the kids' activities.

While the picturesque Village and its wonderful parks and schools may give an impression of a suburban Utopia, the reality is far from the image projected. Divorce, addiction, anxiety, suicide, and depression are common realities in the Glen Ellyn community. Many residents of the region deal with chronic loneliness, as well as the effects of living in a community where the pressure to succeed is high. Because the appearance of accomplishment is such a part of the fabric of the community, those who are dealing with significant challenges can feel all the more isolated. The impact of a frenetic pace of life is to distance individuals from deep connection with family members, friends and even themselves. The pressure to succeed in school and in professional life can create heightened levels of anxiety and unhealthy coping mechanisms, including alcohol, drugs, and sexual infidelity. Financial hardship, which is a normal part of life in

many communities, can be seen in this community as a sign of weakness or personal failure. It is not a comfortable thing to be a family who does not travel to exotic places during school breaks, to have a child who is not headed to a prestigious college, or to not have positive news to share while watching the children compete in their sporting events. The relative success of the community and its members creates an impulse to hide personal struggle and often that means hardship is dealt with in unhealthy and even dishonest ways.

### **The First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn: A Tradition of Success and a Future of Innovation**

The congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn takes on many of the tendencies and pathologies that exist in its surrounding culture. Just as the surrounding community is inhabited by fast-moving people pursuing success, the congregation carries with it an expectation of activity and accomplishment. The general attitude of the congregation towards budgets, mission endeavors, and ministries is that there should be ongoing growth. I have often heard leaders in the church and the community refer to growth as a marker of institutional and organizational health, both inside and outside the church. The people of the community thirst for a sense of growth in their spiritual lives, in the ministries of the church and in its various mission efforts. Related to this culture is an expectation that the congregation will be innovating and creating new things.

There is much grounding in the New Testament for a growth-mindset when it comes to the Christian community and its ministries. The evangelistic missions of the

Apostle Paul, the growth and spread of the church through the Mediterranean world, and the “striving” and “pressing on towards the mark” language of the Pauline epistles all reflect an attitude that the church is a movement of people and part of the work of the church’s leadership is to keep the movement moving (Phil 3:14).<sup>13</sup> In recent years individuals in the congregation have launched mission ministries that align with this culture of growth and innovation. A bike ride of eighty-four miles to raise funds for a school in Uganda now has hundreds of riders participating each year and raised \$50,000 at the 2019 event, tabbed for the construction of a girl’s dormitory at the school. In previous years, funds from the ride were used to construct a S.T.E.M. center and an industrial kitchen on the campus. Another individual in the congregation co-founded a community organization to help develop positive relationships in the public life of the Village with those of other faiths and nationalities. The child sponsorship ministry of the church has grown in its reach and impact such that more individuals in the congregation sponsor a child than do not. The congregation has added staff positions, re-organized the session make up, rebranded its logo, pursued a building renovation study, and built a podcast studio on campus. The people of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn are a people on the move who expect to be challenged, desire progress, and pursue ministry with passion.

Because there is a general, cultural expectation of growth in the church, the places where there is stagnation or decline in the ministry of the congregation are seen as a problem. Church leadership is genuinely bothered by declining average numbers in

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<sup>13</sup> All scripture quotations will be New International Version, 2011 edition, unless otherwise noted.

weekly worship, flat membership statistics, and indicators of congregational vitality that are sluggish. While generally a very healthy perspective to hold on congregational ministry, there are pathologies related to expecting unfettered success as a church. It can be more challenging for this congregation to be than to do in its shared life. Staff and congregation members whose ministries and initiatives are not growing can feel defeated. And focus on faithfulness can be overwhelmed by focus on success. The congregation works hard at serving one another, the surrounding community and the mission of Jesus Christ in the world, and it generally expects that its hard work will be fruitful in ways it can easily see and observe.

Founded in 1926, the congregation is approaching its one-hundredth anniversary. The congregation's relationship with its denominational identity has never been more tenuous. As the PC(USA) has been experiencing significant decline in its membership over the previous decades, the congregation has found itself increasingly disconnected with the movement and activity of the broader denomination. While relationships with the Presbytery of Chicago remain active and healthy, actions of the General Assembly have created disquiet for some in the congregation. The change in the definition of marriage from being between a man and a woman to being between two persons, the denomination's stance on Israeli-Palestinian relations, the denomination's political lobbying in Washington for Pro-Choice legislation, and questions about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ have all impacted individuals in a variety of ways. While the congregation is diverse politically and, to a lesser degree, theologically, the policies and advocacies of the PC(USA) have been celebrated by some and grieved by others.

Some members of the congregation have advocated following the hundreds of other PC(USA) congregations in leaving the denomination. Some members of the congregation feel deeply connected to the Presbyterian church, its history and brand. Many members of the congregation feel no affiliation with the broader denomination beyond their membership at First Presbyterian Glen Ellyn.

Over the past eight years, a significant majority of every class of new members has come to First Pres from a non-Presbyterian background. There are those who grew up Roman Catholic, those who come from non-denominational upbringings, those who join from another mainline denomination, and those for whom this is their first church experience of any kind. Because the congregation is not primarily made up of Presbyterians, it is logical that the body would not feel a deep connection to the PC(USA). While the congregation is distinctly Presbyterian in its polity, and Reformed in its theology and worship, there are many who do not identify as Presbyterians in the traditional sense and who do not find themselves enthusiastic about the congregation's denominational affiliation. For the most part, this lack of connectedness to the Presbyterian denomination is generally experienced as a source of freedom in ministry. There are few sacred cows in the congregation in general, and even scarcer is the objection to ministry innovation rooted in an appeal to denominational tradition.

While the passion of the congregation for denominational affiliation is apathetic at best, the passion of the congregation for Children's and Student Ministries is white hot. Due in part to the high density of families and children in the surrounding community, the congregation has a long-established history of commitment to ministry with young people. Working effectively with young families is a named strategic priority of the

congregation and resources have been repeatedly brought to bear to support ministry to children and students. When families who are new to the Glen Ellyn area begin to search for a church, they often prioritize the children's ministry of a congregation on their wish list for a church home; even ahead of worship and teaching ministries.

More than just a strategically important area of ministry, sharing Jesus with young people is a theologically significant area. The opportunity to invite young people into a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ is a Kingdom priority, informed by the teachings of Christ and undergirded by research into the most opportune time of life to initiate a faith journey. The people of the congregation are aware that not every faith community has the opportunity to present the gospel to 250 children at Vacation Bible School, to place students in formative relationships with Christian adults during their adolescent years, or to walk alongside parents who desire to see faith take shape in their children. The children and student ministries of First Presbyterian Church set the pace of the congregation's mission and ministries; affecting the congregation to thrive or to struggle in its common life.

Because the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn has a history dating back to the 1920s, it has as a part of its story many different pastors and leaders, each who have put their own unique stamp on the mission and ministry of the congregation. As the culture of congregational ministry in the United States has changed and evolved, so have the ministry foci and emphases of the congregation. There have been seasons in the life of the congregation where the church has been known for its unparalleled Adult Education program, for its profound commitment to global mission efforts, for being the best church in the Village for music and worship, for its large ministry to students, for its



dynamic preaching, for the Chinese adoption ministry, for a theatrical production of Holy Week, and for its tutoring programs to underserved communities in the Chicagoland area. I should note that there have been other seasons in the congregation where the church has been known for its mediocre preaching, its sub-par music ministry, its rapid decline in numbers, and its failed building campaigns!

In 2012, when I arrived to serve as Senior Pastor, the congregation appeared to have a history of everything and, at the same time, no particular sense of what God might be calling the congregation to be and do in this particular season of its ministry life. If one were to ask ten different congregants what the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn was all about, it would be possible to hear ten different answers, and none of them would be wrong. The preceding years of ministry had been challenging ones for the congregation. Staff conflict, congregational conflict, significant staff transition, decline in giving and membership, and amplified growth in larger surrounding congregations had all combined to leave the church with a tested sense of morale, and a muddled sense of what the church should be once it returned to its former self.

It became clear that the congregation needed to become aligned in a shared sense of its core DNA and to articulate the specific vision of what sort of ministry it felt compelled to pursue in this present season of its life. In order to move forward in ministry rather than looking back with sentimental longing, the session of the church initiated a discernment process to partner with the staff in clarifying the Mission and Vision of the

congregation. Six visioning documents emerged from that multi-year process and were formally adopted by the session in March of 2017.<sup>14</sup>

Much sweat, a little blood, and sustained prayer were invested in the creation of these Mission and Vision documents. Extensive study was undertaken to discover the realities, challenges and opportunities facing those in the community in the contemporary context, as well as the way the theological convictions and values of the church could be brought to bear in an impactful way. Two items from the Mission and Vision discernment process are especially significant to this project. The first is the “Strategic Pivot” document. The leadership of the church was faced with a decision of how to react to shifting culture around Sunday church attendance and patterns of congregational participation. Rather than fighting the tide of disintegrative forces that pull individuals and families away from campus, the leadership of the church has committed to seek ways to reach the frenzied citizen with some of the classic spiritual practices of Christians, integrating ministry into the more transient lifestyle of those in our surrounding community.

The second especially pertinent item from the Mission and Vision Documents to this project is the articulated Ministry Goal of launching a congregational podcast. In an expression of pure experimentation, the leadership of the church decided to attempt to make its way onto the handheld devices of its membership. In order to reach our people where they are in the way they live and act, the decision was made to find a way to journey with them wherever they might go, through audio programming. The

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<sup>14</sup> A summary of the function, content and target audience for each of the six documents that comprise the Mission and Vision guides can be found in Appendix A.

commitment to launch a congregational podcast by December 31, 2020 was entered into without a firm knowledge of all that would mean for the church, its staff, or its budget.

By and large, the generations of consistent, weekly church attendees have aged or are in the process of aging out of the life of the congregation. What has been left in their wake are generations of scattered, frenzied, and over-calendared moderns whose participation in the congregation's ministries is sporadic. In many cases, Jesus has their hearts and their minds, but the church does not have their backsides in the pews come Sunday morning with any consistency. The cultural shifts of the past decades have caused the traditional platform of the gathered church community to erode. The congregational podcast is one way the congregation of First Presbyterian Glen Ellyn can align its ministries to take advantage of the evolving definition of what it means to be gathered as a community, to use the tool of technology to reach our people wherever they might physically be on Sunday morning, and to take the DNA of this congregation and represent it in a form that could allow for more consistent participation in the ministry of the congregation.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn seeks to explore a new platform to carry on the gospel ministry in the face of a changing cultural landscape, it can lean upon those in the Christian tradition who have gone before it in contextualizing ministry to new circumstances. In addition to drawing upon historical sources, the congregation can learn from contemporary sources who are coming to terms with how best to reach out in the modern context. This chapter will explore historical examples of contextualization and make application to a podcast ministry, as well as examining the findings of those who have begun to analyze and respond to new cultural realities catalyzed by technological evolution. After noting a couple of historical precedents and identifying places of resonance from those precedents with the ambitions of the podcast ministry, the research of two sociologists studying the specific impacts of technology on culture will be explored. Finally, two trailblazing thinkers who are pressing the modern church to adapt into new and innovative ministry efforts will be reviewed.

## Contextualization of the Discipleship Invitation

*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Leslie Newbigin

Originating from a series of lectures given in 1998 at Glasgow University, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* has become a classic work of Christian engagement in postmodern culture. Newbigin argues that Christian faith is both contextual and relatively understood as well as universal and intended as truth for all people. The book first defines the pluralist culture of the postmodern setting as fundamentally different from the previous context in which mission and evangelism occurred. The contemporary context is not one of calling people back to their spiritual roots but of engaging a people who are living in multi-cultural settings and carrying with them a resistance to the idea of Christianity, or any philosophy of life, as universal truth. Newbigin writes, “Today the situation is different. Our large cities have substantial communities of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Muslims. Their native neighbors soon discover that they are, in many cases, much more godly, more devout, and more pious than the average native Christian. What, then, is the meaning of evangelism in this kind of society?”<sup>1</sup>

In the contemporary context, missions, for Newbigin, is not something that we do far away from home but is the work of every Christian community in its local setting. Just as a foreign missionary laboring in an international context would need to do the work of translating the message of the gospel into the native languages, forms, and

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 4.

culture in which he or she works, so the contemporary church must find ways to translate the gospel into forms and structures that make sense to the modern, secular individual. It will not do to rely on the methods and approaches which were previously effective in earlier generations and contexts. The church must find new ways to contextualize the universal truths of the scriptures. Newbigin writes, “The first thing to be said is that a movement of this kind is irreversible. One cannot go back. It is one thing to say, “the church has always taught,” or “the Bible teaches,” if one is part of a culture which accepts these as authoritative. But it is quite a different thing to say these things in a culture which does not.”<sup>2</sup>

Among Newbigin’s great contributions in this work is his relentless commitment to diagnose and understand the modern setting and the culture into which the church endeavors to communicate the message of Jesus. “Human beings only exist as members of communities which share a common language, customs, ways of ordering economic and social life, ways of understanding and coping with their world.”<sup>3</sup> For the Christian community to preach the gospel to all people in all circumstances, it is necessary to find language and methodologies fitting to the setting in which the local church ministers. “If the gospel is to be understood, if it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the real human situation, if it is, as we say, to “make sense,” it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in the symbols that are meaningful to them. And since the gospel does not come as a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Newbigin, 141.

disembodied message, but as a message of a community which claims to live by it and which invites others to adhere to it, the community's life must be so ordered that it "makes sense" to those who are so invited."<sup>4</sup>

Because the gospel is always communicated in a context, by a people who exist in particular ways, think in particular modes, and live with particular habits, and because the gospel is always communicated to a particular people with their own desires, needs, and customs, the church must listen sensitively to the people and try to understand their situation. The starting point for mission and ministry is God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as witnessed to us in Scripture.<sup>5</sup> But a bridge must be built from the scriptures to the people the church desires to reach with the message of Jesus. In order to be effective, that bridge to the people must be built to the location where they really are situated, not to a location where the church wishes they were.

In the context of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, the place where the church wishes the people were is in the pews; but they are not. The more aged generations are in the pews. Those who are in their late sixties and above are significantly more likely to be in worship regularly. Many members of the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boomer Generation have habituated church worship attendance as a regular part of their lives. They truly miss church when they miss church and their attendance is only prevented by health challenges, seasonal travel, and the occasional Sunday morning conflict. If the congregation of First Pres were to use the Sunday morning gathering for

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 153.



worship as its sole methodology for reaching the people of the community with the message of Jesus Christ, we would essentially be ignoring Newbigin's strong admonition that "there is no going back" to the reality of previous years.<sup>6</sup>

While Newbigin is primarily focused on the language and thought forms with which the church communicates the gospel in the modern context, his arguments are equally applicable to methodology. In the same way that the church cannot hope that the arguments of the pre-Enlightenment apologists will be compelling for the contemporary listener, so the church cannot take a pre-technological revolution approach to teaching, worship, and discipleship and expect to reach those in its current context. New contextualization methods are needed to reach the people where they really are.

There is a strong tradition of marketplace preaching in the Christian tradition. Prior to Newbigin's missionary admonition to contemporary churches, preachers took the Christian message to the locations where the people were and spoke to them in their own languages. The New Testament is replete with examples of similar approaches to ministry, whether it is Paul on Mars Hill, Jesus teaching in the Temple courts, or Phillip in the chariot with an Ethiopian eunuch. The message of the gospel has always been carried to the contexts and locations where the people are in order to make the good news accessible. The New Testament itself is written in Koine Greek, which was the language of the marketplace.

The modern marketplace is not a physical location in the center of town. The modern marketplace is the handheld device. It is a place where people encounter ideas, a

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<sup>6</sup> Newbigin, 39.

place where goods and services are purchased, and a place where interactions occur with one's personal community and the broader public. For the message of the gospel to reach people where they truly are, and in the habits and customs in which people in our context really live, the Christian community must find a way to get onto the handheld devices of its people. Following Newbigin's example of listening sensitively to the customs and situations of the people in order to be able to contextualize the gospel into forms and communications that make sense to them, a congregational podcast is one way to enter into the lived reality of our people with an accessible message of Jesus Christ.

*The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*, George  
Hunter

One shining example of a Christian minister coming to understand the people whom he desired to reach with the message of Jesus is found in Patricius in the Fifth Century A.D. George Hunter describes St. Patrick's approach to the work of ministry in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*. Patrick's understanding of the Celtic people was earned through six years of enslavement in Ireland, having been captured by a band of Celtic pirates who invaded his homeland. During this time Patrick "came to understand the Irish Celtic people, and their language and culture, with the kind of intuitive insight that is usually possible only, as in Patrick's case, from the underside."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 2.

This deep understanding of the Celtic people would serve as the most significant advantage to Patrick's ministry to the Celts and provides an important awareness for ministry in the current context. Hunter continues, "Indeed, the fact that Patrick understood the people in their language, their issues, and their ways serves as the most strategically significant insight that was to drive the wider expansion of Celtic Christianity and stands as perhaps our greatest single learning from this movement."<sup>8</sup>

Years later, after escaping enslavement and having spent time in training for the priesthood, Patrick sensed a call to return to Ireland and take Christianity's gospel to the barbarians of the island. The language and customs of the Celtic tribes that Patrick had learned as a slave not only aided Patrick in his decisions about what to say and do, but demonstrated to the Celts that they were understood. Only "after years of reflection on how the Irish might be reached" did Patrick move into mission.<sup>9</sup>

Hunter draws upon the example of Patrick to demonstrate the essential need of any missionary or minister to understand the rhythms, thought patterns, habits, and culture of the people whom they desire to serve.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps his greatest contribution comes in an analysis of the "zones of human concern" that Patrick chose to address in his ministry to the Celts. Drawing upon language originally offered by Paul Hiebert, Hunter describes three zones of human concern in explaining life, living life, and facing the future; "The bottom level deals with the features in life that our senses can directly

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

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

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, 9.

apprehend. At this level, people learn to plant a crop, to clean a fish, to fix a water pump, to build a house, and to do a thousand other things.”<sup>11</sup> The top level deals with the issues in life that lie beyond our senses and are ultimate issues. Questions of human origin, human purpose, the destiny of an individual or a society would lie in this realm. Hunter argues that this is where religion has spent the majority of its concern and spilt most of its ink. Religion tends to concern itself with the metaphysical matters of life and sacred or transcendent issues. This has led to a neglect of what Hunter describes as the middle issues of life by the church.

Middle Issues of life relate to the matters that people are facing in the coming weeks and years of their lives. Living in the uncertainty of the near future and the struggles and pressures of being human occupies the thought life of most people most of the time. Hunter argues that “Western Christian leaders usually focus on the “ultimate” issues, as they define them, to the exclusion of lesser issues; indeed, they often consider middle issues to be beneath what they were educated and ordained to address!”<sup>12</sup>

Citing research about the Celtic Christian spirituality of the early Celtic church, Hunter shows how Patrick taught people how to pray for the matters that were right in front of them and to pray while they were attending to the matters of their daily lives.<sup>13</sup> Rather than founding monastic movements that withdrew from society, the Celtic Christians developed Christian communities that were mission stations; empowering the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Hunter, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

living of Christianity in the Irish context. Employing a life of private prayer, the Christian life of the Celts became defined by radical hospitality, human imagination, spiritual friendship, and public witness.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on the “middle issues” of life, Patrick was able to engage the people of Ireland with a Christianity that was not only true, but helpful.<sup>15</sup> The marks of the Christian faith community were very attractive to non-Christians and, Hunter argues, crucial to the rapid spread of Christianity among the peoples and tribes of Ireland.

By understanding the culture of the people and engaging them with teachings of Christ and the practices of discipleship that integrated into the everyday life of society, Patrick was able to reach people where they really were and offer them a transformative experience with Jesus Christ and his church. There is a lesson here for the potential content of a congregational podcast. Rather than concerning itself with metaphysical topics of Christian doctrine, an effective podcast may choose to target the middle issues faced by those in the congregation. Helping people to recognize God in their daily lives, to establish routines of prayer and study that empower Christian living, and directly engaging questions and pressures faced by those in the congregation could prove an effective area of concentration for podcast curriculum. This project will explore how to leverage the availability of podcast content in the midst of the seven-day routine, in order to empower Christian living wherever and whenever people listen to the content. It will build upon Hunter’s work in identifying the “middle issues” as a neglected but crucial

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

element of Christian focus and explore ways that the access provided by technology might be able to offer a uniquely well-placed vehicle for engaging such issues.

### **Technology and Frenzy: The Modern Context**

*Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters*, Phyllis

Tickle

Having established that the gospel message must find language and forms appropriate to the cultural context in which it is presented, a deeper consideration of the what is happening in American religious culture and the ways in which the community of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn reflects those shifts is warranted. The most substantive cultural shifts for this project relate to the impacts of pervasive busyness and the role of technology in contemporary life. Because of the seismic cultural shifts in these two areas, the congregation is now confronted with a need to adapt its ministry approach in order to continue to translate the gospel into a shifting cultural context.

In *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters*, Phyllis Tickle offers an assessment of how Christianity in America continues to radically change. Her report is expansive, covering shifts in the way American Christians are thinking about the church, themselves, one another, authority, history, and religion. The most helpful components of her work for this project relate to the changes technology has made on the broader culture and, in turn on the church. Tickle writes, “The fact is that

technology has changed every single thing about our lives, including the fact that even locality itself has morphed into something very different from what once was.”<sup>16</sup>

Tickle argues convincingly that the modern person is really in two places at once; the physical location in which his or her body is situated, and, concurrently, wherever our computers and handheld devices take us. The ability to relate to others on social media, to participate in meetings through virtual forms, and to consume information concurrently with others through mediums like a podcast, has changed the definition of what it means to be local or present. Both places, the physical and the technologically empowered virtual, really exist.

The implication is clear. It makes no sense that the church would confine its ministry only to the physically local reality and ignore the realm of virtual habitation. The opportunities to teach, gather, worship, share, and study through technological tools, are before us. Tickle continues, “As surely as we can and do conduct business in cyberspace, maintain our social and familial connections there, inform ourselves constantly about events impacting our lives there, and expand our information banks to accommodate to our changing need for tricks and techniques as well as facts there, so too we can now worship in cyberspace. In point of fact, millions of us already do.”<sup>17</sup>

The new frontier of ministry offered by a changed or expanded definition of local or present is not disconnected from current or historical forms of ministry. Cyber abilities need not create a separate cyber church that exists exclusively in virtual reality, but can

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<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012) 151.

<sup>17</sup> Tickle, 151.

integrate a net-based life with face-to-face interactions. Whatever ministry happens in cyberspace, enabled by the tools of technology, will wash back into the physical realm and impact the traditional ministry of the church. The ability to participate in ministry when not physically present at the church or with other members of the community, will have a profound impact on how the Christian church operates and understands its ministry. This could be as simple as integrating online giving opportunities into a physical worship service, or as complex as extending the Sunday morning gathering to the online community. Seeing traditional, analog ministry forms as compatible with and essential to effective use of technology in ministry, allows for the best understanding of how to move into the new cultural realities presented by technology. Tickle concludes, “Rather, in the hands of some Emergence pastors, there is a form or site or blend – there is not yet a precise word that works – that binds experience in physicality and experience in virtuality together into one experience.”<sup>18</sup>

Tickle’s work points to both great opportunity and unanswered questions about how to effectively integrate the opportunities of technology into the ministry of a Christian community, without losing things that are essential to a congregation’s identity. While Tickle resists the urge to play the role of futurist and predict what will be, she does reference some important realities present in modern culture and their implications for the church. Two observations appear to be most significant to this project. The first is that “most twenty-first-century folk do not want, or ever intend to “belong” to a worship

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 154.



group, not even to one they attend on a regular basis.”<sup>19</sup> The emerging Christianity Tickle observes has an inherent reluctance to belong or make a binding commitment to a community and prefers instead to maintain loose associations and remain free of institutional membership.<sup>20</sup>

There is a risk that leaning into the flexibility and opportunity presented by technology could further enable the emerging generations in their proclivity to never commit to a particular community, composed of real people. One need not dive far into the comments section of many websites to recognize that the anonymity offered by virtual access is an encumbrance to healthy relationships and interaction. The Apostle Paul’s language about the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, wherein he describes each member as “belonging the others” is reflective of a theologically sound understanding of the Christian community. Were a podcast to enable loose, uncommitted participation in a Christian spirituality divorced from authentic experience in a flawed but redeemed congregation, it may do more harm than good by affirming a consumer approach to the Christian faith. An effective podcast must find ways to leverage the opportunity of technology to drive the listener to more committed, more lasting connections to the community of faith, rather than allowing an individual to remain at a distance.

The second pertinent reality Tickle names is the absence of an anchoring experience for those Christians who engage in a more free-form and transient spatial journey of spirituality. The locations of worship, prayer, and faith practice are locations

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<sup>19</sup> Tickle, 202.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of physical space, but they are also locations “of emotional and psychic space.”<sup>21</sup> The physical sanctuary where a congregation gathers to sing, pray and celebrate the sacraments occupies a powerful emotional space in the participant’s mind. Tickle notes, “Religion- or perhaps just religious humankind- historically has needed a place, a locus, a center...Space sometimes affirms when nothing else will.”<sup>22</sup>

This observation raises an important question for this project and for all ministries attempting to make use of the tools of technology for participation in ministry wherein individuals are not physically present in a sacred space. Specifically, a decision must be made as to what degree something important to faith formation is given away or lost when participation in Christian equipping is encouraged in the midst of the daily routine. The desire to, like Patrick with the monastic communities of Ireland, empower the Christian to live a life of prayer in the midst of a life of work and family is admirable. But it is possible that there is an unseen liability in asking the podcast listener to attend to the things of God while on a morning commute in the car, working out at the gym, or paying bills in the home office. The extent to which the experience of the listener is impacted by the physical environment the listener is in when he or she engages the content of the podcast will be an interesting research query.

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<sup>21</sup> Tickle, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

*Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,*  
Sherry Turkle

In 2001, professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, Sherry Turkle, published a wide-ranging work on the impact of technology on our relational and emotional lives entitled, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Focusing on adolescents and tracking participants of the emerging generation from age five through their early twenties, Turkle paints a largely negative picture of the impact of the digital age on the capacity of young people to become relationally engaged in substantive ways. While technology, and specifically the constant access to the web and social media provided by handheld devices, affords modern people access to massive resources and information, our connection to technology creates a paradox of isolation. A mix of clinical and philosophical inquiry, this work notes a number of impacts technology has upon our psychological outlook, patterns of relating, and cognitive functions.

Of particular importance to this project are Turkle's observations about the impact of being constantly connected to the internet and to one another through virtual realms. While in its infancy, the internet was seen as a resource for empowering centered and productive living, this "tool for being better" has become a substantial liability for healthy living.<sup>23</sup> As much as people love their technologies of connection, the revolution of business, education, and communication comes at a cost. Many of Turkle's research

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<sup>23</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 2011) 151.

subjects report checking their email as the last activity they do before going to bed at night and the first thing they do in the morning. The growing demand to be responsive to the communications delivered by these technologies means that “moments of more may leave us with lives of less.”<sup>24</sup> The reality of multi-tasking has created an environment of almost constantly divided attention. In the digital culture, multi-tasking is often seen as not just a skill “but the crucial skill for successful work and learning.”<sup>25</sup>

The end result of the digital revolution and the phenomenon of being constantly connected to communication devices is that one’s life “contains more than one has time to live. It is, after all, our life. We strive to be a self that can keep up with its email.”<sup>26</sup> The resulting frenzy erodes the traditional patterns of work, rest and play. Individuals are asked to be always attentive to work and to respond to social or business communications quickly, and without respite. Turkle observes, “The self shaped in a world of rapid response measures success by calls made, emails answered, texts replied to, contacts reached. This self is calibrated on the basis of what technology proposes, by what it makes easy. But in the technology-induced pressure for volume and velocity, church leaders must confront a paradox. We insist that our world is increasingly complex, yet we have a created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 164.

and think uninterrupted. As we communicate in ways that ask for almost instantaneous responses, we don't allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems."<sup>27</sup>

The cultural shifts Turkle observes have massive implications for the church. Specifically, because the church is one of the places where individuals and communities are invited to consider complicated problems, to dedicate focused thought, to practice deep relationship, and to sit and think; its habits and invitations are becoming increasingly foreign to the culture. In the weekly gathering for worship, the community is asked to disconnect from the outside din in order to participate in prayer, reflection, study, and praise. In previous generations, this was not such a radical concept. The church's people were accustomed to daily taking a break from work to be with family, to rest, and to pursue social connections. Work was left at work and attention was turned elsewhere. In the modern context, this sort of movement is increasingly rare. This, of course, does not mean that gathering for worship and shutting out technological connectivity is a bad thing; it simply means the church would do well to recognize just how counter-cultural it has become.

Additionally, the local congregation can identify the opportunity brought on by the reality of its community's constant connectivity. Turkle comments, "Increasingly, people feel as though they must have a reason for taking time alone, a reason not to be available for calls. It is poignant that people's thoughts turn to technology when they imagine ways to deal with the stresses that they see as having been brought on by

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<sup>27</sup> Turkle, 166.

technology.”<sup>28</sup> Part of what this project will endeavor to do is to explore to what degree a congregational podcast can become the reason our people have for taking time alone. If the realities of their work, family, social and travel schedules increasingly encumber their ability to make the Sunday morning worship service a sacred time of disconnection from technology and connection with God and the Christian community, we must determine to what extent is it possible for us to use the handheld device as a prompt for them to attend to their spiritual lives, wherever they may be.

The digital age has created massive sociological shifts. Even those, like Turkle, who are not Luddites by nature, observe that many of these shifts are having negative impacts on our personal health and interpersonal relationships. Rather than bemoaning the fact that the people and the church are not what they once were, a congregational podcast is one way to explore how the digital revolution might be used to reclaim the patterns of pausing, thinking, praying, reflecting and interacting which are essential to Christian discipleship and increasingly disappearing from our culture.

### **The Urgency of Innovation in the Church**

*Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger

The massive cultural shifts driven by the digital revolution have created a challenge for the local church and its ministries. In *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, professor Tod Bolsinger makes the case that modern

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<sup>28</sup> Turkle, 202.

congregational leaders must adapt to the challenges of a quickly changing world. Christian leaders today face a world they often do not recognize and that looks remarkably different from the world in which they were trained to do ministry. “Churches and church leaders are becoming increasingly irrelevant, even marginalized,” comments Bolsinger, and “this moment requires those of us in positions of authority ... to embrace and adventure-or-die mindset, and find the courage and develop the capacity for a new day.”<sup>29</sup>

Bolsinger works to empower church leaders to think and act differently than they might have done in previous contexts of Christendom in order to seize the new opportunity that is before the church. Experimentation and innovation are at the forefront of what the church needs from its leaders at this time. While there are no quick fixes or easy answers, for Bolsinger, the way forward lies in leading adaptive change that brings forward the lessons learned in previous generations and creates a new “communal transformation for mission.”<sup>30</sup> The bulk of the book focuses “on developing resilience and problem-defining and problem-solving capabilities – amidst disequilibrium- required for equipping a congregation for the missional challenges before them.”<sup>31</sup>

Bolsinger identifies the tendency of congregations to revert to ministries and missional approaches with which they are already familiar. With the hope that the future will be like the past, and feeling more comfortable engaging in the sorts of ministry for

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<sup>29</sup> Bolsinger, Tod. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) 22-23.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 41.

which they were trained, it is extremely difficult for congregational leaders to take their people into new forms of ministry that look different from the past, but that also remain aligned with the core of who the people are in their identity and mission. Bolsinger advocates for an adaptive leadership approach that studies the realities present in the broader community and then moves into places of ministry experimentation with a commitment to persevere in the face of opposition and resistance.

The podcast experiment at First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn fits well with Bolsinger's model of adaptive leadership in an adventure-or-die context. The declining numbers of physical participation in on-campus ministry, coupled with the increasing numbers of individuals and families connected with the church in meaningful ways demonstrates to us that worship and educational gatherings are not having the same amount of reach or impact as they did in the pre-digital revolution. Preaching remains one important component of teaching, discipleship, and community identity formation. But the congregational leadership can no longer rely on the assumption that its people will be in worship to hear the messages preached on a consistent basis. We must experiment with innovative approaches in order to find the people where they are and empower their Christian living in the midst of a newly emerging pattern of dis-oriented and fragmented lifestyle.

*The Gospel after Christendom, New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions*, Ryan K.

Bolger

Ryan K. Bolger has compiled an anthology of essays exploring Christian ministry in the post-Christendom context in the book, *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices*,



*New Cultures, New Expressions*. These voices from non-traditional, often non-Western, and transformational communities of Christ recount learnings as they explore what may be possible and helpful in a new era of church and ministry. The book is a collection of ideas, reflections, suggestions, and narratives from missional communities around the world that gives a glimpse into the present innovation future of the church and its ministries.

Many of the authors describe the kind of adaptive leadership that generates innovation following a time of intense observation which Bolsinger points to as being of particular importance in the modern ministry context. These practitioners have pushed out into new fields of originality as they find Christian expressions in the post-Christendom environment. One section of the book is comprised entirely of reflections by Christian leaders who are leading experimental communities of faith and is entitled simply “Part 4: Experiments.”<sup>32</sup>

Relevant to the current project is the section of the work wherein Christian leaders are adapting to new and changing cultural realities. Stefan Pass, a church planter in Amsterdam, describes living out the mission of Christian community among individual consumers. While situated half a world away, there are a number of points of resonance between his culture and that of First Presbyterian Church. Pass writes, “only very few people whom we introduce to Christianity actually connect to our church or to any other

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<sup>32</sup> Ryan K. Bolger, *The Gospel After Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2012) 299.

church.”<sup>33</sup> Similar to the experience of First Presbyterian, many people who are a part of Pass’ community are “embedded within largely individualized patterns of life,” and a connection expressed through belonging to a congregation is much less likely than a connection expressed through participation in the community.<sup>34</sup> Traditional approaches to creating and fostering Christianity community through concepts like membership and obligation to a group must be acknowledged to be minimally operative in their context and new ways of seeking authentic, committed Christian community sought. Pass also describes a pervasive busyness in the context in which he serves, He writes, “In a church where almost everyone is young, pressed by demanding jobs, and in the first stage of family formation, we cannot expect people to have all the time in the world. We have found that the main obstacle for people to become active in diaconal ministries is lack of time. So we help people by...”<sup>35</sup>

After keenly observing the major obstacles that impede the sort of ministry participation he would like to see from his people, Pass leads innovation that overcomes the barriers of his context to enable greater participation in the Christian community. In a similar manner, the congregation of First Presbyterian must explore how to help its people participate in meaningful ministries rather than demanding that they participate in the forms and ministry vehicles which were well-suited to a previous cultural context. It

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<sup>33</sup> Stefan Pass, “Mission Among Individual Consumers,” in *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions*, ed. Ryan K. Bolger (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2012) 151.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 161.

is the hope of this project that a podcast could provide one such tool to enable meaningful participation in the community of Christ which acknowledges the fundamental shifts in work, rest, and social rhythms that have occurred in our cultural context.

CHAPTER 3:  
A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ROOTING AN APPROACH TO  
CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN EDUCATION, TESTIMONY, AND SPIRITUALLY  
FORMATIVE DISCIPLINES

One of the principle objectives of this project is to determine how a congregational podcast can empower personal and communal spiritual growth in the life of a Christian disciple in the context of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn. It is important to keep that primary objective in view consistently as the podcast is launched and evaluated, as this goal differs from the aims of many podcasts. In order to be effective, this podcast must do something more than find a faithful listening audience or generate fascinating content for consumption. An effective congregational podcast will point away from itself to the intersection of the listener's relationship with Jesus Christ and serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth and commitment to the discipleship journey, as well as deeper personal engagement in the Christian community. If such a lofty goal is to be met, some exploration is necessitated into the theology of the Holy Spirit's work in

the Christ-follower and the role of education, testimony and spiritually formative disciplines in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Dallas Willard wrote: “The revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit...his is a revolution of *character*, which proceeds by changing people from the inside through ongoing relationship to God in Christ and to one another.”<sup>1</sup> In order to understand how God changes people through the Holy Spirit, there is a need to comprehend the role of the Spirit in intersection with the mind and heart of the Christian disciple. It is the role of this chapter to create a better understanding of how the Holy Spirit works through education, testimony and spiritual disciplines to shape the inside contours of the human heart, grounded in a theology of God actively working in the individual and community, even as the individual and community are actively at work.

### **A Paradigm of Partnership with the Holy Spirit**

The Apostle Paul writes to the Christian community in Philippians chapter two: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13). This has long been a difficult passage for interpreters for a number of reasons. First, Paul seems to point to two different actors; God through the

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 2002), 15.

Holy Spirit and the human actor, both the individual and the community. Second, and this has been a subject of bitterness between Protestants and Roman Catholics, a question is raised regarding the role of grace and free will in the working out of salvation. Paul seems to point simultaneously to the work of human agency and the work of Divine agency in the matter of continuing the work of salvation.

New Testament commentator Gordon Fee sees in this passage a continuation of a broader thematic element in the letter to the Philippians; “the three-way bond that holds the letter together: between him, them, and Christ and the gospel (salvation).”<sup>2</sup> Arguing that Paul’s intention is to show that the Christian life lies not just in the willing, but also in a Spirit-empowered doing, Fee continues, “without the Spirit, he goes on, ‘carrying out the (*katergazesthai*) the good’ does not happen. As a believer, Paul will have none of that (i.e., of their not being able to carry out the good that they will); hence he urges the Philippians to ‘work it out’ precisely because God (by his Spirit, is implied) is present with them both to will and to do ‘the good.’”<sup>3</sup>

This passage points to an understanding of the Holy Spirit functioning to grant the Christians in the community, both individually and corporately in their shared life together, a God-empowered obedience to Christ. More than seeing merely a dual-action of Spirit and person, an accurate reading will find a three-fold agency of the individual, through Spirit-empowered action, the Christian community, through Spirit-empowered action, and the sovereign work of God, through the same Spirit. Rather than pointing the

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1995), 238.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 239.

individual to a sense of self-given pride about the human role in working toward transformation, the passage serves to remind the reader whose project salvation is. Dallas Willard writes, “Therefore we do not ‘work out’ the salvation we have. The word here, *katergazesthe*, has the sense of developing or elaborating something, bringing it to the fullness of what in its nature it is meant to be. But we do not do this as if the new life were simply *our* project. It isn’t, God also is at work in us...Hence we do what we do- and what will not be done *for* us- ‘with fear and trembling’ because we know who else is involved.”<sup>4</sup>

There is an urging and an assurance present in this passage. Paul is making a plea to the community, both as individuals and all of them together, to pay serious attention to the health and well-being of their spiritual condition. And, concurrently, there is an assurance that this responsibility is not undertaken in isolation from the ongoing work of God in them. F.F. Bruce observes, “God, he tells them, is always at work in you – not only in you individually but in you collectively. By his indwelling Spirit he supplies the willing and the working- both the desire to obey his own purpose and the will to carry it out. This is part of Paul’s teaching about the Holy Spirit, even if the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned here.”<sup>5</sup>

When this paradigm is applied to the podcast concept, the pastor or podcast recording participant rightly sees himself or herself as a tool of the Holy Spirit in the life of the listener and in the life of the congregational community. The responsibility of

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<sup>4</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 346.

<sup>5</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Philippians: A Good News Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc, 1983), 57.

transformation lies in the agency of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the disciple and the discipleship community, not in the development of the podcast curriculum. The podcast, at its best, serves as a Spirit-empowered catalyst for the individual and the Christian community to work toward partnership with the Holy Spirit in making the Christian community what the Spirit desires it to be. How best to utilize the podcast content in order to partner with the Spirit in the work of transformation will now be explored, considering the roles of education, testimony and spiritually formative disciplines.

### **The Role of Education in Christian Discipleship**

Whatever else Christian discipleship can be said to encompass, it always is comprised of thinking and understanding. In the commission given to the eleven disciples at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, Jesus ties the work of making disciples to the work of teaching obedience to his commands (Mt 28:19-20). The Apostle Paul prays that the church would grow in its knowledge of Christ and know the hope of his calling, prays that it would be able to comprehend with all the saints the extent of God's love that surpasses knowledge, prays that the church's love would abound in knowledge and insight, and prays that God would fill the church with knowledge of his will in spiritual wisdom and understanding (Eph 1:17-18), (Eph 3:18), (Phil 1:9-10), (Col 1:9-10). The church is initiated by a teaching Savior who has come to transform hearts, minds and lives; and the message of that Savior is carried into and through the world through ideas, words, and thoughts, in addition to actions, miracles and signs.



Education in the most basic sense of the word as conveying a systematic introduction to concepts and ideas, is both a fundamental starting point of, and a continuous source of refinement for the Christian journey of discipleship. Richard Foster notes, “Jesus made it unmistakably clear that the knowledge of the truth will set us free. ‘You will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:32). Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting ‘high on Jesus’ will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”<sup>6</sup> For the authors of the New Testament and for the Messiah himself, helping the disciples individually and the church as a community to see new insights, to grow in an understanding and appreciation for what it means to live as a disciple, and to engage in correct thinking about themselves and about God, is a priority of mission and ministry.

The Apostle Paul’s approach to pastoral ministry is often a thinking-oriented approach. In his letters to the church Paul seeks to help the church think correctly about their savior, themselves, the world, the church, ethics, divisions, Israel, the doctrine of grace, and a myriad of other practical and theological matters (Eph 1:7, 1 Cor 13, Gal 5, Rom 9-11, 2 Cor 11:16-33, are a few examples among many). Paul is convinced that, if he can help the church think rightly about these matters, their lives and conduct will follow to right living. For the Apostle-Pastor, right thinking leads to right living. Not only can this conviction be seen in the content of the Pauline epistles, but the very existence of the letters themselves, and the continuing correspondence with the churches, demonstrates that Paul is attempting to influence Christian thinking in an effort to support

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: A Pathway to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 63.

Christian living. As ideas are communicated through the letters to the church, Paul is endeavoring to help these communities in their individual and corporate efforts to live into the calling to which they have been called (Eph 1:4).

The weight of this approach to discipleship empowerment can be missed through assumption, but it is worthy of consideration. Other influences on the disciple are also operative through the Holy Spirit; the Apostle seeks to influence the churches through the model of his own example (1 Cor 11:1), through the Spirit's power (1 Cor 2), through his personal sufferings (2 Cor 11), and a variety of other appeals. But the primary way in which Paul works in partnership with the Holy Spirit to empower Christlike living is through education; the introduction of concepts and ideas to his audience.

The implications of Paul's pastoral approach for the current project are profound. A congregational podcast can be many things; it can be a unifying force for the community who finds a sense of group cohesion through the shared experience of participation, it can be a tool for sharing information about the events in the life of the congregation, it can be an opportunity for lay ministry participation and a vehicle for the initiation of staff initiatives. But for all the things a podcast could be, this section points to one thing an effective podcast must be in order to be faithful to the intended purpose; it must provide a means of education for the purpose of Christian discipleship. In order to follow the model set forth in the New Testament itself, the podcast content should reflect a reason for existing that appreciates the cognitive element of discipleship and comes alongside the listener in his or her thinking about himself or herself as a follower of Jesus Christ and a part of the Christian community.

Just as the Apostle Paul's letters were penned to a community of Christians, so the podcast episodes are created and distributed to an interconnected community of Christ-followers in the congregation. The cognitive engagement prompted by the podcasts is directed at the corporate we of the community of Christ and designed to be received and appropriated by individuals who are a part of the greater whole of the body of Christ at First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn. Reshaping the thinking and living of a community in interconnected relationship has the power to bring transformation when the recipient sees himself or herself as an active and necessary part of the larger Christian community, whose thoughts and actions impact not only himself or herself, but the community in which the Christian is rooted.

### **Empowering the Christian Disciple to Swim Against the Current of Culture**

Just as the Apostle Paul sought to teach Christian living to a group of Jesus followers who lived in a predominantly non-Christian culture, so the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn lives in a culture which models and esteems values and ethics that run counter to the Christian life. As Newbigin so aptly assessed the reality of living the Gospel in his pluralist context, and as Patrick sought to reach a Pagan culture in Fifth Century A.D. Ireland, so this congregation is planted in a culture that perceives the message of the Gospel as counter to much of its priorities and values. If the community of Christ is going to live in a manner that is particularly Christian, it will need to think, act and live differently than the majority culture.

As the Apostle Paul brings the concept of Spirit-led education to the reality of living in a non-Christian world, he writes in Romans chapter 12: "Therefore, I urge

you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:1-2). Perhaps no passage better represents Paul’s conviction that education, manifest through Spirit-enlightened thinking, has the power to lead the disciple to a life pleasing to God. This God-pleasing life is held in opposition to the model of thinking and living exhibited in the surrounding culture, referred to here as “the pattern of the world.” Paul is pointing to no less than a reshaping of the Christian disciple’s cognitive map in order to empower the living of a Jesus led life.

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin, the founding theological father of the Presbyterian faith, contrasts the philosophy and philosophers of this world with the Christ-centered thinking the disciple is invited to embrace. Commenting on Romans 12:1-2 in Book III, Calvin writes:

... all philosophers were ignorant of this transformation, which Paul calls “renewal of the mind”. For they set up reason alone as the ruling principle of man, and think that it alone should be listened to; to it alone, in short, they entrust the conduct of life. But the Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him.<sup>7</sup>

For Calvin, to belong to God means a surrender of our reason and our will to the reason and will of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ and through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian disciple, set down in a culture that follows the path of what seems

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book III, CH. VII, I (3.7.1) p. 690.

reasonable to it through its own reason, must be renewed in thinking by the infusion of the Spirit, in order to pursue this sort of surrendered devotion to God; what the Apostle calls our “living sacrifice.”

In order to live differently from the manner in which the rest of the world lives, the Christian must come to think differently from the manner in which the rest of the world thinks. Having the mind awakened to the realities of life as Christ describes them, empowers the Christian to act in a way that is surrendered to the will of Christ. The church, then, is a group of Christ-followers who are willing to have their thinking corrected along biblical lines in order to act in accordance with the will of God. Christian thinking is one origin point of Christian living.

Again, the same sort of Spirit-led partnership with the work of Holy Spirit that Paul references in Philippians chapter two is found here. Colin Kruse notes in his commentary on Romans 12:2: “Stated positively, spiritual worship of God involves transformation. Paul urges his audience: *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. The use of the passive imperative, “be transformed” suggests both that the transformation is effected by God, and that believers must cooperate in order that it take place.”<sup>8</sup> The theology of partnership with the Holy Spirit is always a Spirit-initiated partnership, begun by and made complete through God’s sovereign work.

This Spirit-infused thinking within a people belonging to Christ, who are set in a broader social context that does not, by and large, live in accordance with the teachings of Christ, forms the basis of the ecclesiology for the podcast. This particular church, that

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<sup>8</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 464.

is the community of Christ at First Presbyterian Glen Ellyn, is a group of disciples called to a way of personal and communal life ordered by the life and teachings of its Master; not one ordered by the values and pursuits of the surrounding community. In order to live differently in its context, the church must first think differently about itself, the world, the purpose of its life, and the material and spiritual world. To effectively realize an individual and corporate life modeled on the way of Jesus, the podcast assists the listener in reshaping his or her cognitive map based upon lines of Christian thought.

Of course this pursuit is not unique to the podcast as a component of Christian ministry in the congregation. The preaching life of the church, the educational ministries of the church, the small group ministry, the mission ministries, and many other ministries and programs also share in this work. But the podcast is well positioned to help the listener interpret his or her context through a lens of Christian understanding because it is most often engaged while the listener is swimming in the waters of the culture. Unlike ministries which take place on the church campus, the podcast reaches the listener while he or she is in the world. The ability of the podcast to affect the thinking of the Christian disciple during his or her morning commute, while at the gym, in the midst of a carpool run, while surrounded by the very people who live according to a different set of priorities, makes it especially well situated to help a Christian disciple think differently about his or her context.

### **The Role of Testimony in Christian Discipleship**

While education is a primary vehicle for Spirit-led empowerment of Christian discipleship in the podcast, it is not the exclusive instrument. Christian testimony will be

another prong upon which the substance of the podcast content rests. Testimony is a powerful component of Christian ministry and one that has its basis in biblical representations.

The topic of testimony in the New Testament writings is somewhat complex. There are examples of testimony being invalid or insufficient to bear witness to God's truth because that testimony is of human origin, is given by a person about himself, or is inconsistent with other testimony (Jn 5:34, Jn 2:25, Jn 8:14, Jn 5:31). But there are also many examples of testimony being a crucial part of witnessing to the Christian faith (Acts 23:11, Matthew 10:18, 1 Tim 2:6, Jn 19:35, Rv 22:16). In the section below three positive examples of testimony will be explored to uncover the importance of bearing witness to the work of Jesus through the telling of personal story.

In John chapter nine, Jesus encounters a man born blind. After being questioned by his disciples about the reason for the man's infirmity, Jesus healed the man, giving him sight for the first time. As the man's community witnessed his transformation, they questioned him about how it was that he had been healed. Having been brought before the Jewish religious leaders, the man and his parents were examined about their beliefs concerning Jesus; being asked if they acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. It is clear that the Jewish examiners bring with them previously formed notions of Jesus' identity, calling him "a sinner" and standing ready to "put out of the synagogue" anyone who accepted that Jesus was the Messiah (Jn 9:22, Jn 9:24).

The testimony of the man born blind in response to the questions of non-believers was simple. He articulated in this moment of inquiry his own experience of what Jesus had done for him; something not possible for a man who had not come from God (Jn

9:33). While the testimony of the man born blind was not fruitful in terms of convincing the Jewish religious leaders about the identity of Jesus, it is a positive example of an individual who has been transformed by an encounter with Jesus, faithfully sharing the difference the work of Jesus has made in his life.

Testimony in the podcast will seek to follow the example of the man born blind; not overstepping its limits to place upon the listener a burden of what he or she should do or believe, but a simple articulation of how an encounter with Jesus has impacted the lives of these members of the Christian community. A podcast is well-suited to this sort of sharing as the opportunity for conversation is well-defined. Often, when the Christian community gathers, it is listening to a single individual speaking; be that a pastor, teacher or other church leader. The podcast format presents an opportunity for interpersonal exchange, opening the door for individuals to bear witness to the work of Jesus in their lives. This is not to suggest that personal testimony is without operative theology or educational elements, but the primary makeup of testimony is to simply articulate the experience of an encounter with Jesus Christ.

A second biblical example of personal testimony to Jesus Christ occurs in the trials of Jesus' disciples before the Sanhedrin in Acts chapters four through six. In three separate events, followers of Jesus were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin to give an accounting of their actions; Peter and John in chapter four, "the apostles" in chapter five, and Stephen in chapter six (Acts 4-6). While the testimonies given in each case differ, the constant is that the Holy Spirit is described by Luke as being at work in the words that are expressed.



Testimony given while on trial before a First Century Jewish Council is different from testimony offered as a personal witness to the working of Jesus in the modern context. Jesus actually specifically promised his disciples that when they were arrested and brought before governors and kings “as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles,” it would not be they who would be speaking but the “Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Mt 10:18-20). However, different as the circumstances may be, a historical association can be established between the public testimony to the work of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit through the giving of testimony. There remains mystery in the work of the Holy Spirit and disciples cannot summon the Spirit to be at work by their own will or intention. Yet, in the offering of personal witness through testimony, fertile ground for the Spirit’s work is laid in both the telling and the hearing of the stories of Jesus’ followers.

Out of a framework of ongoing partnership with the Holy Spirit, testimonies in a congregational podcast serve to give the community an opportunity to hear and to celebrate the work of Jesus Christ in the lives of its members. By sharing what he or she is learning from Christ, seeing done by Christ, and discovering as Christ leads, members of the community are able to bear witness to the ongoing work of Christ as well as the reasons they have for faith in him. Just as the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to share their stories of faith with believers and non-believers alike, so podcast guests seek to partner with the Spirit in pointing listeners to the work of Christ in the world, in the church community, and in their own lives.

A third example of biblical witness arises in the Apostle Paul’s witness to the church as he invites them to follow his own life example (1 Cor 11:1, 1 Thes 1:6, 1 Thes

2:1-12, Phil 3:17). This kind of witness is a personal testimony through modeling a Christlike life. In these passages Paul points to the example of his life shared in fellowship with the church as a model for them to imitate as they follow Jesus Christ in their own lives. Paul invites the church to take note of how he treated them, how he related to God, how he endured suffering, how he proclaimed the Gospel, how he lived with humility, and how he labored in ministry.

While Paul's invitation to observe and imitate his life is explicit in these passages, an effective Christian witness through modeling need not necessarily be given through direct invitation or command to emulate a behavior. Perhaps, in the contemporary context, an even more effective method of modeling is simply to allow the example to stand on its own and speak for itself, letting those who find something worthy of emulation to be compelled by what they see or hear. In this regard the podcast will seek to follow Paul's example of being an example, without telling the listener to consider adopting the behaviors, thought patterns and activities of those sharing their experience. The mere act of articulating how they are living the Christian life, struggling with the challenges of discipleship, and putting into practice the teachings of Christ will serve as a latent example for the listener who is welcome to adopt whatever he or she finds helpful and compelling. Here again, there is much that is up to the work of the Spirit as the listener digests and interacts with what he or she is exposed to in the podcast content.

### **The Role of Spiritually Formative Disciplines in Christian Discipleship**

The topic of disciplines in spiritual formation as a comprehensive category clearly lies outside the scope of this project, but what is most important is an establishment of a

working understanding of what a spiritual discipline is and why it is crucial that the podcast curriculum invite personal and communal participation in them. In articulating an intentionally broad definition of spiritual disciplines, Dallas Willard writes, “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.”<sup>9</sup> While the questions of method, cadence and duration remain, it is enough by way of introduction to name the importance of a purposeful initiation of physical and mental activities with the intention of deepening the readiness and ability to interact with God on a growing, personal, and communal basis.

In Matthew chapter eleven Jesus instructs his disciples to “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Mt 11:29). This action of learning from Jesus involves active participation in undertakings of mind and body that assist the Christ follower in practicing the kind of life that Jesus himself lived. The yoke of Jesus involves participation in the life of Jesus, arranging our lives around the teachings and practices of the “author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

Participation with the Holy Spirit is facilitated through spiritual disciplines as the disciple engages in activities that sharpen the conscious connection with God. There is again mystery here in the Spirit’s work, but there is reason to be confident in the consistency of the Spirit to make use of the practice of disciplines. Donald Whitney writes on this concept:

The Bible doesn’t explain the mechanics of the mystery of the Spirit’s ministry to us. How prayer (or the practice of any other spiritual discipline) is prompted and

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<sup>9</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc, 1988), 68.

produced by Him on the one hand, and yet on the other hand is our responsibility, is unfathomable. But these two things are clear: (1) He will be ever faithful to help each of God's elect to persevere to the end in those things which will make us like Christ, and (2) we must not harden our hearts, but instead respond to His promptings if we would be Godly.<sup>10</sup>

For the podcast to be truly effective, it needs to do more than educate, encourage and model; it should prompt the listener to some form of active engagement in activities that are undertaken in order to deepen his or her cooperation with the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual, the Christian community, and the world.

Spiritual disciplines are a component of the pursuit of the work of sanctification in the life of the disciple. In the Presbyterian tradition sanctification is understood to be a work of the Holy Spirit that leads to a new way of life for the Christian which is in conformity to the will of God and exhibited in holiness. As the Holy Spirit takes increasing charge of the will and personality of the disciple, he or she becomes a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit and his or her life a product of the Spirit's work, showing forth the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Spiritual disciplines are a tool of the Spirit realized in partnership with the individual and community of faith to order life around the Spirit's desires for us. Hauerwas and Willimon observe this perspective in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, "He urged the Thessalonians to live lives pleasing to God. Such lives, lives of sanctification, meant that they were to abstain from fornication because followers of Christ must know how to control their own bodies. It is not so much that Christians

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<sup>10</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, (Colorado Springs: CO, NavPress 1991), 239.

must control their passions but rather that the passions have become ordered to ends that the Holy Spirit makes available.”<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual disciplines are not in and of themselves holiness or righteousness, rather, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, the disciplines are activities and abstentions that allow the believers’ thoughts, passions, and desires to be reordered in accordance with God’s will. This is how the Holy Spirit uses spiritual disciplines to bring about transformation. The opportunities for the podcast to invite and model participation in spiritual disciplines are profound. Certainly, direct education about the value of and mechanics of engaging in spiritual disciplines is one possibility. But perhaps more attractive is the opportunity presented by the fact that the podcast listener is participating in the podcast in a time and place where he or she is likely to be able to stop listening at any point in time and engage in direct conversation with God through prayer and reflection. An exploration should be made regarding how a podcast can take advantage of the opportunity for the listener to pause the podcast at any point in time and step out of a passive listening role, into an active engagement with a spiritual discipline.

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Holy Spirit* (Nashville: TN, Abingdon Press, 2015), 72.

PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE

A PODCAST FOR CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

CHAPTER 4:  
MINISTRY OUTCOMES

**Building a Podcast Infrastructure**

When the moment arrived to move from concept to practice on this project, it quickly became apparent that it would not be possible to merely commence. Establishing and maintaining a timeline for the project would be subject to making determinations about how to proceed through the steps of recording and publishing a podcast. There had not previously been a church podcast created for the congregation of First Presbyterian Glen Ellyn, and there were no staff members who had a familiarity with what a podcast ought to be or how to bring it to fruition. As is often the case in the church, the answer to this ministry question would be found in the pews. A number of members of the congregation were contacted who had some level of professional familiarity with the genre of podcasts to glean information about what we would need to do in order to move into podcast creation and production. Each conversation led to more questions rather than to clear answers. Decisions needed to be made regarding the kind of equipment that would be used, the service that would host the podcast, how to connect the podcast to the existing communications outlets in the church, the directories the podcast would be listed

on, the software that would be used to capture and edit the podcast audio, podcast artwork, and innumerable other odds and ends indigenous to the podcast realm. For every question, there seemed to be a multitude of possible correct answers, but each decision would need to be based upon the preferences of the individual producing the podcast. We had no producer and therefore we had no preferences, so making decisions about how to proceed were not evident during this phase of development.

It seemed wise to create a space on the church campus which could be dedicated to the podcast. A room was built in what we believed to be a relatively quiet corner of the campus to serve as a podcast studio, and the appropriate electrical, internet and other technical wiring was run. The Lord provided in an amazing way when it came to the audio recording equipment. A member of the congregation who had been consulted for informational help about the podcast project informed me that one of the businesses his employer owned was being shuttered. This particular business had, as a part of its inventory, several podcast studios. He had inquired of his employer as to whether they would be willing to donate the contents of one of the podcast studios to the church. They agreed and we soon had top of the line microphones, headphones, a mixer and the cables needed. Some furniture for the podcast studio was purchased, a MacBook repurposed, and we soon had all the hardware required. What we did not have was any idea how to use it to create a podcast.

The issue of training was an enduring challenge for the project, pushing the initiation of the timeline back repeatedly. In order to create the podcast vehicle, it would be necessary to either hire an individual with the technical expertise to produce the product or find someone to train church staff how to do so. Interestingly, this was one of



the most difficult aspects of the project. A search commenced for a skilled individual to take a few members of the staff by hand and train the group to record and publish a podcast. The staff worked our relational networks, we inquired of local colleges, we followed up on potential leads, and the number of emails, coffee meetings and internet postings grew ever higher without success. On one occasion I believed we had found our person, and I had received a training proposal from him that would suffice to educate our group on what we needed to know. One week before the training was to commence, he was transferred to Nashville by his employer, effective immediately. While the physical space was ready for recording, we were no closer to commencing the podcast than we had been eight months prior, as we continued to search for a suitable individual to train us for the project.

In the end, an ideal individual was located through a connection in the congregation and our expert patiently trained four of the church staff on the basics of podcast creation, recording, editing, publishing and studio management. Our trainer made recommendations for software, webhost, and podcast brand strategy. He came to understand the purpose of our podcast project, and then over five ninety-minute sessions, gave us the tools and information needed to begin learning on our own. I did not expect the technical training component of the project to be the most difficult; but for whatever reason this element caused a massive delay in the launch of the podcast.

The amount of learning required in order to be able to get up and running on the podcast was daunting. The number of decisions, options, and implications for each decision were so vast that it was paralyzing. In the end, with the patient guidance of our podcast consultant, the decision was made to utilize the podcast hosting service called

Buzzsprout, which has a manageable monthly subscription fee, is relatively easy to use once oriented to the technical logistics, and will automatically publish the podcast on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and the web; allowing ease of access and, eventually subscription services for the end user, making the podcast widely available to the congregation regardless of their particular brand of handheld device or listening preference. One of the important elements of the research survey for participants in the podcast pilot project will be evaluating the technical decisions that were made and the ease of use for the participants.

Many options exist for how to complete the audio editing of the podcast recordings. The quickest method would be to do no editing at all and to simply upload the rough recording to the podcast host site. The problem with such an approach is that it creates an essentially live broadcast with no ability to edit for time, remove less compelling sections of the conversation, or adjust volume levels of the different presenters participating in the podcast. Because the podcast is designed to use members of the congregation as the presenters, this would not be wise. In order to create a podcast product that is worth listening to, there is a need to adjust the volume of the various presenters, accommodating those who are quiet speakers and those who are louder, as well as compensating for less than ideal use of the recording microphones by these novice podcast recording participants. There is also significant work to be done in post-production to remove sections of the conversation, take out coughs, sneezes, and other ambient noises, and to shape the conversation into a tighter presentation. Unlike an adult education class where the presenter has worked to refine the presentation, fit it into the allotted time, and is likely accustomed to speaking in front of groups, the podcast

recording is an inherently messy conversation where only the producer is attentive to how best to shape the recording into a quality finished product. Once the need to make use of an audio editing application became clear, research was required to determine which product to use. Ultimately, we purchased Adobe Audition editing software and received extensive training on how to use this exceedingly beefy and complicated digital editing software.

Another element of the podcast that needed to be addressed was the branding, verbiage and artwork that would be published on the various podcast directories. Again, Buzzsprout was helpful as a podcasting host; once these elements are uploaded to the Buzzsprout site, the various podcast directories all pull the information from Buzzsprout and display the information in their particular formats. A member of the congregation with design and technical skill was recruited to create a logo for the More Than Sunday Podcast consistent with the church's brand colors, font and website layout, and a More Than Sunday Podcast button was created for the church website.<sup>1</sup> A podcast description to appear in the various podcast directories was created, aligning with the goals of the podcast and description of the target audience. The description reads, "The More Than Sunday Podcast is a production of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn and is designed to help you live as a follower of Jesus Christ right where you are. Tune in to hear interviews, helpful conversation and engaging teaching intended to empower you to partner with the Holy Spirit in anchoring your life in Jesus Christ."

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<sup>1</sup> The More Than Sunday Podcast artwork appears in Appendix B.

## **Goals for the Podcast Pilot Project Curriculum**

In time it is my hope and expectation that the podcast will become a key part of the ministry model of the congregation. It seems that the potential is high for broad empowerment of Christian living through the work of the Holy Spirit in partnership with the individual disciple through a podcast vehicle. For this initial foray into the podcast space however, it is important to see the pilot project as a tool for study and refinement of the podcast instrument, not an attempt to reach a wide audience with an impactful podcast. Therefore, this first podcast season will not be publicized to the congregation or community and will not be linked to the church website or other ministry resources. A select cross-section of participants will be recruited to listen to the podcasts and provide feedback about their experience. An intentional diversity of the group will be engineered such that there is an age spectrum, some who are new to podcasts entirely while others are regular podcast listeners, some who are listening to the podcasts alone and others whose spouse is also participating, some who are relatively new to the church and some who have been a part of the congregation for an extended period of time, and a roughly equal number of male and female participants.

A primary ministry goal of this project is to discover how the podcast can be most successful and what will make it ready to be widely disseminated and publicized. Participants in this podcast research project were recruited with the articulated purpose of helping to improve the podcast by listening and then commenting on their experience. Advance notice was not given as to what would be on the survey at the end of the project, nor what the metrics of evaluation would be for the desired impact of the podcast experience. Provision was made for educating those who were entirely new to podcasts

and who needed help accessing the podcast on either their handheld devices or another preferred means.

Drawing upon the theological conclusions of the previous chapter, the articulated goals for the podcast curriculum are as follows:

1. Catalyze intentional reflection upon where the participant is in his or her journey of discipleship in partnership with the Holy Spirit.
2. Grow the sense of connection between participants and the community of Christ at First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn.
3. Prompt action steps for participants to grow in their journey of faith through personal participation in spiritual disciplines, mission, or other Spirit-led undertakings.
4. Discover if the podcast vehicle could be an effective means of engagement for the congregation of First Presbyterian across age and faith-development demographics.

In order to be viewed as a success, the podcast and its content will need to instigate the sort of revolution of character referenced above and a working out of one's salvation through the work of the Spirit in the individual listener and in his or her community of Christ. This approach distinguishes the More Than Sunday Podcast from many podcasts popular in the broader milieu. Most podcasts are seeking an audience and view success by a broadening of that audience for purposes of marketization or influence. The More Than Sunday Podcast of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn will be evaluated on its ability to move the listener in the direction of engagement with the Holy Spirit rather than on its popularity. Podcast listeners should be impacted by the content to think differently

about themselves, the church and their personal ministry. Inclusive in the goals is an objective that the podcast listeners come to see the Holy Spirit as an active part of growing their commitment to Christian discipleship. In order to create such an impact, the matter of podcast content must now be considered.

### **The Podcast Curriculum**

The new ministry strategy of a podcast could include quite traditional content that is common in Christian adult education settings. Yet to simply broadcast through the podcast vehicle the same sort of content one would consume in an on-campus setting would be to miss an opportunity. Often when the church gathers for worship or education, the participants are listening to a single individual speak. Be it a preacher, a liturgist, or an adult education presenter. The most common format for theological education is what might be described as a lecture setting. The podcast format is uniquely able to offer a window into a conversation as its method for teaching and inspiring. In addition to being a compelling means for presentation, this arrangement also creates the opportunity for the Spirit to work through a variety of participants in a single setting. The podcast studio constructed at First Presbyterian has been engineered accordingly, with four microphones and a digital mixer rather than a single presentation arrangement. The first specific component of the podcast curriculum is that it will be a series of conversations wherein the listener is eavesdropping on a group of Christians engaging in a dialog regarding their own partnering with the Holy Spirit in working out their faith in the context of their journey of discipleship. Some element of teaching will precede the

conversation in each episode but will be intentionally very brief and serve as a framework upon which the conversation will be built.

A subsidiary goal of presenting a dialog format in the podcasts is to model the importance of Christian community to the discipleship journey. The podcast listener is invited into an experience of the community of Christ as gathered disciples share their perspectives and experience, sharpening and strengthening one another through dialog and relationship formation. If the strategy is effective, it will prompt the listener to long for participation in the kind of Christian community he or she is seeing exemplified in the podcast recordings, or to reflect appreciatively on the Christ-centered relationships he or she is currently experiencing in his or her own journey. Every effort will be made to exhibit the communal nature of the Christian experience through an exhibition of the importance of shared relationship and mutual support within the episodes.

The content strategy for the podcast will align with the mission and ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn by following the Building Blocks document adopted as a part of the vision for the congregation.<sup>2</sup> Initially five podcast episodes were planned for the pilot project; one to introduce the podcast itself and four episodes aligning with each of the four Building Blocks. Once I entered into the podcast recording endeavor, it became clear that an episode on the Families Building Block was going to be problematic for a number of reasons. First, the topic was both too wide and too narrow for inclusion in this series. It was too narrow because a focus on young families would be irrelevant to a significant portion of the test group. And it was too wide because the

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.

questions related to living as sons, daughters, husbands, wives, parents, brothers and sisters in the context of family are so massive that there really was no clear place to enter into the subject and be helpful in a single, forty-minute, podcast episode. While there is great potential for future podcasts episodes and podcast series specifically related to the Families Building Block, the decision was made not to include the subject in this test curriculum and to move forward with a four-episode series.

In order to maximize the relatability of the podcast episodes, a diverse group of speaker participants was recruited, each with an important content-specific contribution to make to the conversation topics. For the episode on mission, three participants were recruited to participate who each had compelling stories of how the Holy Spirit has moved them into missional engagement. For the episode on relationships, two very senior members of the congregation were recruited to speak to how they personally have worked to overcome disappointment with the Christian community. Attention was given in the process of inviting participants to take part in recording to include male and female, young and old, and differing personality types. It is the hope that in each episode a variety of listeners will be able to hear something that they find relatable to their current journey of Christian discipleship. As is the case in other vehicles of equipping, the podcast listener must ultimately own his or her journey of faith and appropriate what he or she hears in the podcast into action. No single disciple-equipping vehicle can be successful in producing transformation apart from the engagement of the participant. Podcast episodes will be shaped in such a way as to endeavor to drive the listener to further action steps of investment and participation in the Christian community, the mission of God in the world, and personal spiritual disciplines. Similar to a small group



experience where a participant can either take information in as purely cognitive in nature, or can appropriate and internalize the experience into life-changing truth, the podcast participants will be given an opportunity to experience personally, relationally and missionally what they are hearing, or to experience the episode as mere information. The podcast episodes will place next action steps and invitations to accountability in front of the listener and encourage him or her to move forward in engagement with the Christian community and the mission of God in the world experientially.

A word on the context of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn community as it relates to podcast curriculum construction would be helpful here. In a broad sense, the most effective contextualization for the curriculum will be provided by aligning the podcast pilot series content with the Building Blocks document that is a part of the mission and vision framework of the congregation. The Building Blocks themselves were developed along with the other accompanying documents in the mission and vision framework over a period of months, using a collaborative process of discernment, designed to discover the particular ministry that God is setting before the congregation of First Presbyterian Glen Ellyn. By utilizing the insights and conclusions of this vision development process as the basis for the podcast pilot project curriculum, there is a high chance that the curriculum will be able to effectively reach the audience of the congregation. While the Building Blocks framework gets the podcast strategy close to a curriculum that should prove useful for this congregational environment, a few matters are worthy of further consideration.

Given that the congregation consists of very seasoned Christian disciples, those at more embryonic stages of faith development, and most points in between, care will need

to be taken that the conversations in the podcast do not feel intimidating to the neophyte nor elementary to the more mature Christian. In the adult education sphere, a curriculum might most frequently be designed for an individual at a certain stage of faith development, and the opportunity given for participants to self-select their desire to participate based on the intended audience. In the case of this podcast pilot curriculum, much like the sermon in a Sunday morning gathering, effort will be made to make at least parts of the episodes accessible and relevant to the entire congregation, regardless of the maturity of one's Christian experience. In order to meet such a goal, it will be important to include participation in the podcast conversations from a diversity of voices along the spectrum of Christian maturity; those seen as mature examples to emulate, and those who are earlier in their learning process. In the longer term, podcast series can be developed which target a particular end of the congregational pool in this regard, but the pilot project will attempt to bring along as many as possible in the experience.

Similar attention to variety needs to be paid to the pool of speaker participants when it comes to the matters of theological diversity. The congregation consists of individuals from conservative theological backgrounds and others from much more liberal perspectives. The relative theological diversity of the congregation is actually one of the strengths of the fellowship. The shared love in this community of Christ in spite of a lack of theological homogeneity is itself a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit to make the church one in Christ, just as Jesus prayed it would be (Jn 17:20-23). In order to reflect this strength, to deepen it, and to create greater opportunity to appeal to the broadest portion of the congregation, the pilot podcast curriculum will commence with an invitation to participate in the recording sessions to a group of participants whom, I

believe, represent the theological diversity of the congregation while holding the most central tenants. The creation of a theologically diverse pool of podcast recording participants is a further opportunity to model for the listener the importance of the Christian community in the journey of discipleship and to demonstrate the ability of Christians of differing persuasions to live in harmony together.

CHAPTER 5:  
IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

**The Podcast Recording Sessions**

A pilot podcast curriculum brief was developed summarizing an outline of the four episodes with themes focusing on being the church, on living a missional lifestyle, on overcoming disappointment with the Christian community, and on pursuing cognitive growth through the study of scripture. Each episode in the brief included a segment on the central teaching concept for the episode, a list of potential interview participants, a series of interview questions, and an invitation to action for the listener.<sup>1</sup> Invitations were extended to particular members of the congregation asking them to participate in a recorded conversation, a form of which would be used as the curriculum for the podcast pilot project. The response to the invitation was unanimously and enthusiastically positive with all respondents expressing an interest to be a part of the project. Aligning schedules to get the desired participants together in the podcast studio proved to be a much greater challenge than generating interest to contribute. In keeping with the realities

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<sup>1</sup> An outline of the podcast series curriculum can be found in Appendix C.

described in chapter one of the project, the members of the community were navigating very crowded schedules, travel, and limited availability.

Once an acceptable, if not ideal, group of podcast participants was arranged, I provided each participant with the relevant section of the curriculum brief and invited them to give some thought to the topic. The recording sessions were an adventure in and of themselves. I had done a significant amount of prep work before the first session to become reoriented to the technical logistics of producing a good recording but serving as both host and producer of the podcast was a challenge. I oriented each participant to the microphones and the plan for the conversation, attempting to put them at ease. A large monitor showing the audio levels was set up in the podcast studio so each participant could monitor his or her own decibel levels as he or she spoke. The curriculum brief document outlined approximate times for each section of an episode; the teaching time, the conversation itself, and the homework for listeners, inviting a next action step related to the content. In general, I was able to keep the sessions roughly in line with the projected length, although some significant editing in post-production was required in one episode. I found that three conversation participants and a host is probably about the maximum desired number of participants for a thirty-minute to forty-minute episode. The episode in which there were only two other speaker participants generated plenty of content.

After recording each episode, a digital file was created for later editing and, ultimately, publication. The editing process went smoothly once I became more familiar with the audio editing software. As I learned how the software worked, what could and could not be done in post-production, I found myself wishing that I had done a better job

working the sound board during the recording sessions. The end result was acceptable audio for the purposes of the pilot project but could be improved somewhat in future recordings. It would be preferable but not essential that someone other than the podcast host serve as the recording sound engineer, working the sound board and coaching conversation participants, in subsequent podcast seasons.

A number of unforeseen issues emerged that needed to be addressed. Perhaps the most comical of these was the ambient noise factor. The recording studio was constructed in a location on the church campus that sees little traffic and recording sessions were scheduled for times when there were not large numbers of people slotted to be in adjacent rooms. Sound dampening tiles and plush carpet were also installed to help establish a quality room tone in the podcast studio. During the first recording session the sound of musicians and instrumentalists rehearsing in the sanctuary could be heard very clearly. Turns out the air vent in the podcast studio is directly connected to the air vent in the sanctuary, creating a very effective intercom system between the two spaces!

Prior to recording the episodes, a group of nineteen selected congregation members was recruited to listen to the pilot project and provide feedback through a survey which would be provided at the end of the experience. The pool of nineteen survey participants consisted of a cross-section of the congregation comprised of male and female, a spectrum of ages, a variety of time in the congregation, and various levels of Christian maturity. In some cases, both a husband and wife were invited to participate in the project, and in other cases, a single individual in the family was invited to take part.

Participants did not know the topics they would be asked to comment on in the survey after listening to the podcast.<sup>2</sup>

### **Evaluation Tools**

In order to understand the effectiveness of the podcast pilot project, a survey was constructed to solicit data from listener participants. The survey sought information on when and how the listener participated in the podcast, the technical effectiveness of the podcast delivery vehicle, the perceived ideal length of a podcast episode, the impact of the series curriculum content, the consequence of consuming the podcast in isolation or with a conversation partner, the effectiveness of the participant homework assignments in the podcasts, the ability of the podcast to prompt further personal action in partnership with the Holy Spirit, the ability of the podcast to overcome the challenges of busyness that often preclude participation in traditional forms of congregational ministry offerings, and the interest level of the participants in further podcast episodes.<sup>3</sup> The survey was distributed through the Survey Monkey web application via email to the group of nineteen listener participants. Eighteen respondents completed the survey. Summaries of their comments to each of the research target areas are below.

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<sup>2</sup> Podcast episodes can be accessed on iTunes, Google Podcasts, Spotify, or at the following websites:

Episode 1-

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/641785/2498662-episode-1-of-d-min-project>

Episode 2-

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/641785/2499496-d-min-podcast-episode-2>

Episode 3-

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/641785/2501926-episode-3-d-min-series>

Episode 4-

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/641785/2506228-episode-4-of-d-min-project>

<sup>3</sup> Survey questions appear in Appendix D.

## The Results

### Podcast Participation

One of the potential risks of the podcast vehicle is that listener participants' attention may be significantly encumbered because the environment in which the listener participates in the podcast curriculum is entirely up to the listener. Unlike an adult education environment on campus where the presenter can control the room atmosphere, has the primary attention of the participant, and can gauge the effectiveness of the material through real time interactions with the class, the podcast content is received by individuals who are experiencing unrelated visual and physical stimuli. The likelihood that the listener participant is multi-tasking while engaging the podcast episodes is incredibly high. Whether driving, commuting by train, cleaning the house, working out, or engaging in some other relatively mindless activity, it is likely that the podcast listener is somehow otherwise occupied.

The cadence of podcast participation is also up to the podcast listener. In my invitation to listener participants in the podcast pilot project, I boundaried the time period between publication of the podcasts and the distribution of the survey at two weeks. However, some respondents didn't reply to the survey for up to an additional twelve days. In a non-research environment, where the episodes and podcast series are published and then sit in the various podcast directories, the time span for consumption of the episodes is limitless. This means that, unlike an Adult Education setting where the presenter can set the pace of the course to his or her liking and preferences, the podcast listener can binge listen or go weeks or months in between episodes. Understanding when



and how the podcast listener participants participated in the podcasts should inform the manner in which future episodes are shaped and the amount of interconnection of content attempted between episodes.

The research indicates that the variety of time spans in which the podcast listeners received the content is literally as diverse as mathematically possible. One listener consumed all four episodes in a single sitting, while many took the full two-week time span. Some respondents listened to one episode and then didn't listen to another episode for over a week, and then listened to the final three episodes in rapid succession. Some respondents found a consistent time of day or location to listen; in the evening after everyone went to bed, or in the morning over breakfast, or on an airplane. One individual reported that he broke the episodes up over his commute and work travel but could see himself making this a part of his daily morning ritual.

Listeners likewise reported a variety of settings in which they engaged the content. On the train, on the treadmill, on the plane, and in the car were the most popular answers. Others listened in a more focused environment; during their morning quiet time, sitting by the fire, in the living room with my wife, laying down on the couch, and while taking a walk, were all specified as listening environments. Connection will be made in the conclusions as to whether any correlation can be drawn between what the respondents were physically doing while listening to the podcasts and the impact of the episodes on their inclination to partner with the Holy Spirit in taking a next step on the path of discipleship.

The means of accessing the podcasts was less varied. All but one participant listened to the episodes through his or her handheld mobile device. Some accessed the

content through the web, but the significant majority used iTunes or Spotify. One of the intentions of the podcast pilot project is to get the church community onto the congregation members' handheld devices and, in doing so, to accompany them throughout their weeks. It appears that the success rate for this goal is exceedingly high.

### Technical Effectiveness

As reported above, the technical challenges of getting the podcast launched were among the most problematic aspects of the entire endeavor. Fortunately, the listener participants had little difficulty with the technology component and even shared compliments on the quality of the recordings. There were some user connectivity issues reported that clearly had to do with the user's device or network access, which will continue to be an inherent factor for any podcast, but zero issues were evident on the More Than Sunday podcast production side. Users reported being surprised at how easy the podcast was to access and use and commented that the recordings sounded very clean and not distracting.

### Episode Length

One of the components of the pilot project that involved the most guess work was setting a range for episode length. Popular podcasts vary significantly in their length dependent upon the content of the podcast, the host, the topic, and the target audience. The decision was made to target somewhere in the window of thirty to forty minutes, with a bit of variance based upon the topic and the way the conversation flowed. The episodes were published with lengths of thirty-three, forty-seven, thirty-six, and thirty-

four minutes respectively. Respondents affirmed the length of the podcasts in general, with some specific comments about individual episodes. A number commented that the forty-seven episode was too long, with a general consensus that a shorter episode would have been more effective. A number of respondents offered their sense of what the ideal length of a podcast would be, with the median and mean of those figures being thirty minutes. Interestingly, the comments about length often were connected to what the listener was doing while he or she listened to the podcast. For example, if the train commute was about forty minutes long, then the respondent thought forty minutes was about the right length. If the respondent was on the treadmill, forty minutes seemed quite a bit longer to listen.

### Episode Content and its Impact

Survey participants were asked an open-ended question regarding the content in the podcasts that made the greatest impact on them or had the most lasting effect. Their responses carry insights about both the topics of the podcast and the format of the episodes. The first conclusion is that vulnerability in the podcast conversation is more compelling than information. This is a very encouraging insight as the podcast format is, as stated above, an opportunity to present a different format of education than what the church has traditionally utilized. In conversation individuals are able to tell their stories, share their struggles, and express their own failings in a way not as commonly present in a lecture format. It is heartening to find that these sorts of vulnerable windows are exactly the kinds of places that respondents found most helpful and persuasive. The episode on overcoming disappointment with the Christian community was often named as a

powerful part of the podcast listening experience as respondents expressed an appreciation for hearing the authentic struggles of these senior members of the community with an issue that many listeners articulated having personal experience themselves. The humility and honesty of the presenters made an impact upon the listeners.

Also compelling to the listener respondents was the sharing of personal stories and the testimony of how presenters have worked to overcome challenges to live missionally or study the Bible with intentionality. One respondent indicated that she could listen to people like this talk all day about how they integrate faith and life and that she was taking away tips and insights that she would like to apply in her own life around personal spiritual disciplines of prayer and study. The respondents overwhelmingly expressed appreciation for the how-to kinds of insights shared by the podcast speakers and discovered in the conversations suggestions for taking a first step in deepening missional participation, prayer, and study. One respondent said that the telling of the stories by the participants made her really want to have the sort of experience these speakers had had, and to share that feeling and experience with her family.

In addition to the conversational format being impactful, the content of the episodes was also reported to be on target. In particular, the episode centered on missional living and the episode focused on overcoming disappointment with the church were named as highlights of the pilot project podcast series, touching places of resonance with the listeners. Respondents frequently quoted in the survey particular statements made in the podcast episodes as being helpful to them and prompting further consideration or immediate action. While there was a diversity of episode content named

as being most impactful, the number of clearly articulated take-aways from the curriculum is affirming that the content was able to find a place of relevance to the living of Christian discipleship in the home, workplace, and Christian community. One respondent expressed a desire for more disagreement and varying perspectives in the conversation, feeling that the conversation could have been stronger if there were a wider variety of views presented.

### Listening Alone or Having a Conversation Partner

One of the questions I anticipated the podcast pilot project experience would create relates to whether or not it was helpful for listeners to have another person with whom to process the content of the podcast. The podcast format is highly accessible because each individual has a handheld device and has control of his or her calendar, wherein he or she is able to find a time to listen to and engage the material. But, I wondered, there could be a significantly lessened amount of impact if the podcast content is processed individually as opposed to what would happen if the content were experienced in a community environment like a small group or adult education setting. Four of the eighteen respondents reported listening to the podcast with his or her spouse. 61 percent of respondents indicated that they discussed the podcast content with another person. All individuals who discussed the podcast material with another person were asked of the impact of having a conversation partner with whom to discuss the podcast.

Nearly all of the respondents who shared their experience discussing the podcast content with another person reported significant positive impacts from doing so. A few mentioned that discussing the podcast with their spouse caused them both to grow in

learning about the other's experience of the faith journey, drawing them closer together in an area that they do not typically discuss. One respondent who listened along with his spouse reported that listening to the podcast together was more impactful than reading something separately and then discussing the reading. Another shared that verbalizing what she was learning stirred deeper thought in her and helped root in her mind the things she took away from the experience. 67 percent of respondents indicated that they would be inclined to share one or more of the podcast episodes with a friend or fellow member of the First Presbyterian Community.

#### Moving the Podcast Listener to Partnership with the Holy Spirit

The impact of the listener participant homework section of the four episodes was less robust. Only 55 percent of respondents reported completing any of the homework. The reported impact for the group who did take the time to invest in the personal work following the podcast discussion recounted some clear growth. In addition to a deeper felt connection to the material presented in the podcast, those who completed the homework responded that it had generated intentions to expand their local mission service, to read the Bible and pray more consistently, and to take action steps to express gratitude to or pursue reconciliation with a member of the community.

While the homework exercises were pursued by only a slight majority of podcast listeners, 89 percent of respondents reported that they discovered a desire to learn more or to do more because of what they heard in the podcast. Most encouraging is the number of respondents who indicated a greater commitment to engaging in the spiritual disciplines of service through mission, Bible study, prayer, and meaningful participation

in the Christian community as a result of participating in the podcast pilot curriculum. Multiple respondents indicated a new commitment to pray for someone in their lives who is currently frustrating them or with whom they are in conflict. The podcast demonstrated a clear ability to prompt further action in partnership with the Holy Spirit through the pursuit of engagement in personal spiritual disciplines or other Spirit-led actions.

### Overcoming the Barrier of Unavailability

This ministry initiative was launched on the theory that technology could be used to overcome some of the barriers to participation in the ministry of the congregation presented by busyness, travel, and perceived unavailability to physically partake when the congregation's ministries are offered. In order to be successful at overcoming these impediments, the podcast must demonstrate that it is readily accessible by both current podcast listeners and those who are uninitiated to the podcast medium, must demonstrate that the podcast vehicle is a viable means of Christian education as a catalyst for Spirit-led growth, and must establish that those who participated in the podcast pilot project have a desire for further episodes and podcast series. The data collected from the respondents in the pilot project in this regard is clear and unequivocal.

Only eight of the eighteen respondents in the survey indicated that they were previously regular podcast listeners. Four members of the pool indicated that they had listened to podcasts previously but did not do so as a part of their regular practice. The balance of respondents indicated that they were not previously podcast listeners. None of the participants in the study had trouble accessing the podcast or participating in the pilot project, indicating a high likelihood that the podcast vehicle could be appropriated by the

vast proportion of the community with little challenge. As might be expected, those who were previously podcast listeners tended to be younger and those for whom this was their first podcast listening experience tended to be older. The age range of the study extended from thirty-three to seventy-two years old. Given the wide age span of the congregation, it was essential that those uninitiated to podcasts and those who are less digitally literate be able to take part in the end product. Multiple respondents who had not previously listened to podcasts expressed excitement that they were now a part of the podcast listening realm, with one respondent expressing that “he is hooked” and that future More Than Sunday Podcasts would be his reason for being a podcast listener.

The universal willingness amongst invitees to participate in the study and the 95 percent response rate indicate that finding time to listen to the podcast material is possible for our community. Given that respondents indicated their consumption took place during work commutes, exercise times, and other routine activities, the podcast vehicle achieved the desired outcome of making Christian education material available during times when congregants would otherwise be inaccessible. The pilot project demonstrates that it is literally more challenging to arrange a time for four individuals to align schedules to record a podcast episode than it is for a group five times larger to listen to and engage the material. If the church had launched a course that saw eighteen participants spend three and a half hours on campus over the course of two weeks, it would be viewed as a smashing success. This project achieved those participation levels without ever being publicized or circulated to the broader church community.

The research question in the exit survey inquiring as to the propensity of the podcast pilot project participants to listen to subsequent podcast content is also



encouraging. Eleven of the eighteen respondents expressed that they would be “very likely” to listen to more podcast episodes. Four indicated that they would be “likely” to listen to subsequent podcast and only three participants indicated less enthusiastic responses. The extent of interest in more podcast episodes revealed by the survey is quite high.

### Additional Insights from Respondents

The survey invited any additional comments about the experience as a listener participant in the pilot podcast project. Some only added a sentence or two of affirmation about the experience and their appreciation for the opportunity to engage in reflection on spiritual growth as they engaged in other tasks concurrently, others were more verbose in their observations. I will note the themes that emerged in the comments section of the survey as well as a few particularly helpful individual comments that beg reflection on next steps with the ministry initiative, to be built upon in the concluding section of the paper.

Interestingly, a number of respondents wanted more comments from the pastor in the podcast episodes. While an appreciation was expressed for the stories and insights offered by the congregation members who participated in the podcast recordings, an additional request was made by a few listener participants for the pastor to contribute more extensively to the discussion. Another unsolicited theme that emerged in the comments section was the opportunity to expand the target audience beyond the congregation to the community. If the congregation is the target audience, the respondents who commented thought this podcast series would be successful in gaining a

loyal listening audience. If the target audience is to be broader than the congregation and reach those who do not yet belong to the church community, some suggestions were made about how to accomplish that. The congregation's drive to grow, which was noted in section one of the paper, is evident here as a number of respondents are wondering why the church would create a podcast just for the church. I found these comments to be a great affirmation of the congregation's conviction that the church exists for the world and not for its own end.

A final theme that emerged in the comments section was the need for the podcast episodes be relevant and compelling. With great honesty the respondents noted that their future participation would be conditional on the host continuing to be effective and engaging in his or her role of facilitation, that the conversations needed to be something more than a sales pitch but offer real learnings, and that the discussion needed to be authentic; longing for a diversity of views and convictions on any given topic. Listening to the podcast in the future is not something these respondents would do as a favor to the church or simply because the church published them and they are members of the church, but the podcast episodes and series must actually deliver worthwhile, relevant material to the listener.

In addition to these themes that appeared in a variety of forms from respondents, a few individual comments are worth noting. One listener participant found the repetitive structure of the four episodes to be formulaic which impacted her expectations of how exciting or compelling a next podcast might be. This was mind blowing to me, as I created a repetitive structure for the series in order to generate some organization for the podcast conversations, which I believed would be helpful to the listener. She may be in

the minority in her views about the structure, but her comment points to a desire that is likely more widely shared that the conversations feel authentic and dynamic rather than rigid and formulaic. No one wants to sit through an infomercial and likewise, no one wants to listen to a podcast that is clearly a tool to manipulate a response.

One listener, a young working mom, longed for more voices of working mothers. As I recounted the participant diversity that was engineered in the podcast speakers, I noted a glaring lack of this group. Of the four episodes, only one speaker was a working mom with young children in the home. I am not sure I would do anything differently in the participants I solicited, although I might, but the comment causes me to focus even more intentionally on the truth that people need to find themselves in the conversation in order to make a connection to it.

### **Assessment of the Evaluation Responses**

There is a qualifying factor present in this group of respondents in that they were personally asked by the Senior Pastor of the church to participate in a research experience. There is no way to quantify whom among this group would have participated in listening to the podcast series had it been publicized through traditional communication vehicles such as the bulletin, website, social media and weekly email blast, without such a personal invitation. The participants also knew they would be asked to comment on a research survey at the conclusion of the experience. My suspicion is that these factors elevated the willingness of participants in a positive way to listen to the podcast. That influence named, the feedback provided in the assessment tool indicates an

extremely high level of success and ongoing opportunity to expand the ministry initiative in the context of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn.

While there are some remaining questions and issues to address, which will be attended to in the section below, the opportunity to develop a meaningful and impactful ministry in the congregation through the podcast vehicle is strong. A significant percentage in the congregation are accustomed to connecting with personalities and institutions important to them through the podcast vehicle and would easily accommodate a congregational podcast into their normative patterns. Those who are not yet familiar with the podcast sphere demonstrated a willingness to venture into the medium in order to participate in a ministry offering of their congregation. Both those who did not previously listen to podcasts and those who did reported a significant positive impact from the experience of listening to fellow members of the congregation talk through their own journeys of faith and the lessons they have learned about relevant subjects.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

The More Than Sunday Podcast pilot project was an attempt to find a workable solution to the challenges presented by busyness and travel in the context of the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn by utilizing technology to change the definition of what it means to be present. It was an endeavor to get the congregation's people, theology, and voice onto the handheld devices of its membership; entering into the sphere of the modern-day marketplace where goods are purchased, ideas exchanged, and social connections are made. Rather than simply using the podcast vehicle to export current content presented in an on-campus setting, such as preaching or adult education, the pilot podcast was an effort to create a ministry specifically fitting to the podcast medium that would be effective at catalyzing spiritual growth in partnership with the Holy Spirit amongst listener participants.

After reviewing the results of the evaluation tool, there is reason to be encouraged. The outcomes of the pilot project met the stated goals. While launching the podcast was a challenge, expanding and refining it going forward should be a less burdensome process and be can easily be one that incorporates direct feedback from listener participants.

### **Listener Participant Experience and Outcomes**

There was a high degree of confidence before we began the podcast pilot project that we would be able to get something created and out our participants. Whether or not it would be readily accessible to them, would be compelling in its content, or effective in

producing the desired results was much more of an unknown. I was very pleased by the experience of the listener participants who were not previously active in the podcast medium. Whenever a congregation is attempting to introduce something that is entirely foreign and new to its membership, there is uncertainty as to whether or not the group will come along for the experience and appropriate it into their lives. The relatively high number of listener participants who indicated that they would not have been listening to any podcasts at all had they not been asked to take part in the pilot project, and that they had a positive experience with the curriculum, gives reason to believe this is a tool that could be effectively used in ministry to the vast majority of the congregation. Even some speaker participants who took part in creating the podcast content had never listened to a podcast before this project. In one case, a speaker participant was shown on his iPhone, while in the podcast studio preparing to record an episode, how to use the podcast app on his phone by another speaker participant. It took about two minutes for this eighty-year-old to be shown by a thirty-something how to make use of the technology that lay dormant in his pocket.

Of course, being able to access the podcast and being interested in listening to subsequent podcasts are very different things. The true indicator to pay attention to in this regard is how many podcast neophytes expressed a high likeliness to continue to listen after their experience in this pilot project. So long as the content continues to be substantive and well-crafted, the evaluation indicates that there is a near universal interest in participation going forward. This qualifier is worth noting, because it represents a subtle difference between the podcast medium and some other ministries at the church. In general, those who were not initiated to podcasts are older members of the community. In

the main, the older members of the community are the most resilient in terms of worship and adult education participation, regardless of the quality of the experience. If the comments received in the evaluation are widely true, the church could expect that older, more consistent church and adult education attenders, would be less likely to consistently participate in podcast listening than they would worship and adult education, if the content of the former were to be lacking. In other words; preach a lousy sermon and the older generation will still see you next Sunday, record a lousy podcast and you are not likely to get them to tune in again.

The relationship between what the listener participants were doing and the impact the experience had upon them and their willingness to take a next personal step was an area of interest in this project. As was stated above, the inability of the presenter or educator to control the environment in which the curriculum is received could potentially be a major liability of the podcast medium. At least for this pilot project, the responses to the evaluation tool indicate that there was not a correlation between the environment of consumption and the level of impact. Undoubtedly this will not be true for all circumstances going forward. In subsequent podcast seasons and episodes, as the podcast is expanded to the entire congregation, there will almost certainly be individuals who listen to the podcast in settings wholly un conducive to an impactful experience. But for this group, it did not matter if they were commuting, working out, cleaning, on an airplane, or eating a meal while they listened. That group reported every bit as much of a positive experience and a willingness to take direct next steps in partnership with the Holy Spirit as those who listened while taking a walk, sitting by the fireplace, or in other more focused settings. This is an encouraging result because it indicates that, while the

variety of settings in which the podcast is able to be impactful upon the listener is certainly not infinite, the range is expansive enough that there is reason to have a general confidence in the ability of the podcast to be effective.

### **Insights Gained**

A qualifying condition for this project mentioned above is worthy of further reflection. The listener participants for the podcast pilot project were informed when they were recruited that they would be asked to complete an exit survey about their podcast experience. In this sense, they began the experience knowing that there would be a test at the end! While not quantifiable without a control group who did not receive such an preface to the experience, there is reason to believe that knowing they would be contributing to this Doctor of Ministry Focus Paper through their responses to the evaluation tool impacted the level of attention and priority the listener participants gave to the podcast during the pilot project. I would love to figure out a way to create that same sort of commitment during subsequent episodes. The way to make this a reality needs to be explored and isn't currently evident. Respondents in the evaluation tool demonstrated almost no interest in making use of a Comments Section in a podcast directory as a means of further engagement. Perhaps there could be a registration requirement for participation, or something interactive that is a component of the final episode in a podcast series and teased throughout the series. I am not content with any of the ideas, and golden stars on the Sunday School attendance board seems an unlikely solution.



Those who listened with another person or who processed their experience with a conversation partner reported that doing so was highly impactful. While the podcast medium provides great flexibility for location and time of individual participation, it is quite possible that something is lost in individualizing the education experience. Perhaps opportunities should be sought to integrate into the podcast episodes an invitation to talk about the podcast with another member of the community, or invitation should be made for the recruitment of a podcast listening partner, when the podcast series are communicated to the community. Going forward it will be worth attempting to find ways to leverage the readiness of the podcast curriculum whenever the listener wants to participate, with the weight that comes from having another individual with whom to discuss the content.

It was interesting to note that speaker participants in the podcast naturally spoke to the sort of middle issues of life explored in chapter two of this paper. Without attempting to focus on such topics, the speaker participants instinctively gravitated towards the kind of topics that, as noted above, Hunter encourages the church to invest in exploring. Although subsequent episodes could choose to focus on more existential or metaphysical subjects if some rationale to do so were to emerge, my sense is that a podcast ministry that makes use of speaker participants from the congregation will not have to work hard to find itself engaging in middle issue topics.

Another idea present in the literature review that surfaced in the podcast recording sessions without prompting was the growing hesitancy of the emerging generation to commit to belonging or membership in a congregational context. A young mother speaker participant in episode one expressed the sense of reluctance that she and her

peers feel about being identified with a particular congregation or organization. I thought it was affirming of the research reading completed ahead of the commencement of the pilot project that multiple themes in the literature review section surfaced during the recording phase of the project.

### **Next Steps**

The next steps for the podcast ministry at First Presbyterian can be immediate and significant. The podcast medium and the More Than Sunday brand need to belong to the staff and not to the senior pastor. Accordingly, I plan to take specific steps to expand the creative team to include the staff. Prior to the annual all-staff retreat in early June, I will ask the staff to listen to a significant portion of the four episodes in the pilot podcast curriculum in order to gain a feel for the point of origin and what was attempted in this experience. Together at the retreat we will process what they heard, liked, did not like, and hoped for more of in these podcast episodes. Then we will work collaboratively to explore what sort of podcast series and episodes might be most helpful and impactful for our congregation and the broader community. A creative calendar will be built that outlines a series of podcast series for the year, integrating where possible the content of these series with other ministries and teaching themes that are planned for the congregation in the coming year. During the ministry year the podcast ministry will be utilized to; expand the participation of the congregation in becoming familiar with the More Than Sunday Podcast, create interviews and curriculum that would not be possible in a Sunday morning or adult education format, experiment with call-in podcast guests and hosting experts from outside the congregation in the podcast studio. I am super

excited about what the staff will come up with and the opportunity this embryonic ministry has to become a regular and central part of the strategy for discipleship formation in the congregation.

### **Implications for the Broader Church**

Given the generational divide between those who are digitally literate and those for whom podcasts are a new or ignored medium, my suspicion is that in the long term, podcast ministry will come to be seen as normative. The proliferation and prevalence of podcasts will, likely, eventually make this ministry format as typical as a worship bulletin or church website. But for the shorter term, I believe the experience of this pilot project suggests that the time to engage podcast ministries in the congregational context is not the future but the present. The willingness of all generations to participate, the results reported from participants, and the flexibility afforded through the podcast medium more than offset the liabilities presented. The research in this project and the experience of creating the podcast at First Presbyterian indicate that initiating a congregational podcast is doable and needed, but it needs to be done well. Congregations and their leaders need to become students of how the culture is using technology to access information and curricula, create mediums that participate effectively in those means, and hone their craft on an ongoing basis. Just as ministers are trained in how to read the scriptures well and how to deliver effective sermons, ministers would do well to study how to create compelling and transformational experiences for deployment in digital platforms.

## APPENDIX A

### MISSION AND VISION DOCUMENTS OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GLEN ELLYN

#### **The Tagline:**

Our outwardly-facing, easy-to-remember, aspirational statement of who we are (Primary Audience: Those Outside the Church)

#### **More than Sunday.**

First Presbyterian is committed to help people live out their faith anywhere, everywhere. We are an active community with ministries, missions, small groups and other opportunities for experiencing Christ-centered community every day, all the time.

#### **The Mission Statement:**

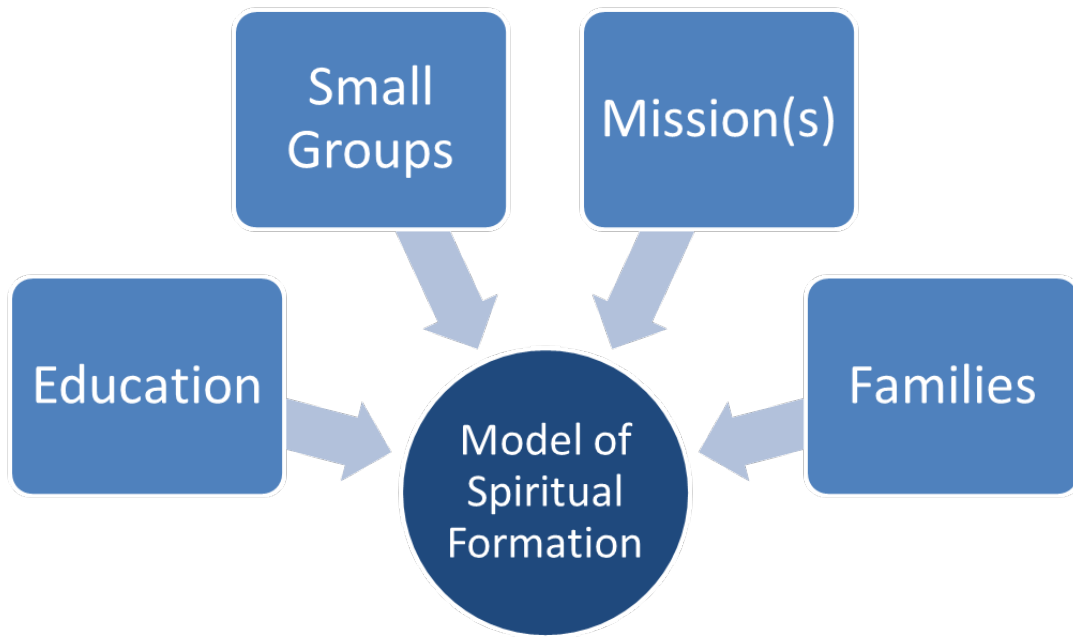
A statement that clearly defines the mission of our church (Primary Audience: The Congregation)

First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn is an externally focused community of unique and ordinary people, seeking to prioritize the life of discipleship as together with Christ we

- Participate in God's transforming work in our own lives and families
- Bless our community with an invitation to a reordered life, guided by God's written word
- Make known the love of Christ through words and works of justice, compassion, kindness, mercy and worship, and
- Exhibit and proclaim the Gospel by living in relationship with Jesus and sharing the Good News with others.

#### **The Building Blocks:**

A statement that defines our strategy for spiritual formation (Primary Audiences: Church Leadership and Congregation)



## Our Building Blocks for Spiritual Formation

The Session of First Presbyterian has identified the Building Blocks as key distinctives in the life of our church, as a body of Christ in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. We simply must do these things well. They not only reflect who we have been historically as a community of Christ, they represent the ways the Holy Spirit works in us to shape us in the image of Christ.

- **Education:** As we study God’s word, discover through study what it means to live out our faith in the complex contexts of our lives and grow in a Christ-centered view of the world, the Holy Spirit shapes our hearts and our minds.
- **Small Groups:** Think of this as more than just a weekly Bible study. Think of it as a statement about the importance of Christ-centered relationships in our lives. Recall the way Christ has worked in your life to develop faith through relationships and you’ll get some sense of what this Building Block is all about.
- **Mission(s):** As we give ourselves away in personal ministry to the world Christ loves, our spirits are shaped by God and we are met in the act of service by Jesus who himself came not to be served but to serve.
- **Families:** Our location in downtown Glen Ellyn and our history as a congregation with strong preschool, Children’s, Youth, Family and intergenerational ministries makes this Building Block a way that God can uniquely use our congregation in ministry.

### **Our Strategic Pivot:**

The overarching, strategic priority of our church at this time (Primary Audience: Church Leadership)

### **Strategic Pivot: Becoming a New Breed of Church**

In this season of our life together at Glen Ellyn Presbyterian Church, we sense God calling us to live into a new way of being church, one congruent with the new realities facing individuals and families today. As we make this strategic shift, we hope to re-appropriate words like “gathering,” “community,” “local,” and “corporate” in order to make room for the new expression of church that the Spirit of God is unfolding.

Recognizing the dis-integrative pressures currently placed on almost every household by the overwhelming options and demands on their time, we are convinced that a new way of being church must emerge. The exact shape of this new way is not yet clear. What is clear is that we are being called into a season of innovation, incubation, and exploration.

Anchored in Christ as our center, we will invest in new approaches and schedules for worship, including connective options for those not physically present. We will seek to make accessible practices and disciplines that can help reorient us around an alternative, restorative, connected pace of life.

Leveraging relationships, technology, ministry programs, innovation, and experimentation, we will lead our people to engage regularly in:

Prayer – A dedicated effort to keep the lines of communication with God open.

Bible Study – Coming to see myself and the world through the lens of God’s written word to us.

Worship – the simple experiencing of noticing the presence of God in each moment and the sacrificial discipline of gathering regularly with God’s people.

Sabbath – Carving out space for holy rest and holy play.

Service – Engaging personally and sacrificially with Christ in God’s mission in the world.

Intentional Relationships – Taking ownership of the quest to create spiritually formative community in my life that offers encouragement, accountability, fellowship and instruction to my discipleship journey.

### **The 2020 Goals:**

A set of measurable objectives to keep us on course in the near-term and the short-term (Primary Audience: the Staff) To be completed by December 31, 2020.

- **Worship:** In 2020, 436 people participated in worship at FPGE more than 17 times.
- **Community:** In 2020, 350 members of the FPGE community met in person with another Christ-follower or Christ-followers more than once a month to pray specifically for each other, for First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, and for the world.
- **Mission:** In 2020, 200 members and friends of FPCGE have engaged in relational mission work that includes an ongoing, reciprocal, mission-partner relationship with those being served.
- **First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn Podcast:** By December 31, 2020 an FPCGE podcast will be published weekly covering topics of faith, family, theology, and culture, with 500 subscribers and an average weekly listening audience of 150.
- **Student Ministries:** In 2020, at least 30% of those confirmed in 2017, 40% of those confirmed in 2018, and 50% of those confirmed in 2019 participated regularly in the life of FPCGE.
- **Diversity:** By 2020, 75 members and friends of FPGE have deliberately sought out one or more persons from a different race, socio-economic status, or faith expression, and engaged with that/those person(s) through a conversation or a meal.

### **Our Values:**

A set of statements that clarifies the kind of culture our church aspires to and guides us in the ways we experience life together (Primary Audiences: Church Leadership, Staff and Congregation)

### **Relying on God's grace, as individuals and as a church, we seek to live by these equally important values:**

1. **Transformation:** With gratitude for Christ's work in our own lives, we pursue continuing transformation for ourselves and for all those impacted by First Presbyterian Church, of Glen Ellyn.
2. **Scripture:** Our life together is anchored in the study of God's word revealed in Scripture.
3. **Unity:** Through our shared experience of Christian faith, community, and worship, we are part of a movement grounded in a unity that embraces and celebrates extraordinary variety; one body with many parts.

4. **Visible Faith:** In our families, our schools, our workplaces, our community, and our world, we seek to personally experience and publicly express the way of Jesus.
5. **Compassion:** Responding to Christ's call and the needs around us, we seek to serve and love in his name by expressing justice and mercy, locally, regionally and globally.
6. **Witness:** We count it a privilege to share the good news of the gospel and to invite others into the abundant life in Jesus Christ.
7. **Relationships:** Recognizing that healthy relationships are no accident, we work intentionally to cultivate Christ-centered relationships, strong marriages, healthy families, and transformative friendships.



APPENDIX B

MORE THAN SUNDAY PODCAST WEB ARTWORK



## APPENDIX C

### PILOT PODCAST SERIES CURRICULUM OUTLINE

#### **Episode 1: On Being the Church**

This episode will explore what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in a contemporary congregational community.

Teaching Concept: What the church is (a movement of people; not a building, an institution or a worship service) – Maybe 7-10 minutes?

Acts 2:42 - (Fellowship, Worship, Prayer, Evangelism/Invitation, Bible Study, Generosity)

#### **Testimony Theme: What does “belonging” to a church body mean to you?**

Possible conversation partners:

- Kelly Phillips
- Dan Branda
- Rob Merrell

Interview questions: Maybe 20-25 minutes?

- What does it mean to you to “belong” to a church?
  - o F/u Q: Is membership a thing to you?
- What have you found to be most helpful to you in being the kind of member of this community you aspire to be?
- What are the things that derail you or challenge your ability to be the kind of participant in the Christian community you desire to be?
- As you think about the Christian community, what we call “church” what things are most important to you?
- How has the church helped you to grow in Fellowship, Worship, Prayer, Evangelism/Invitation, Bible Study, or Generosity.

Invitation to action:

As you drive along, or sit in your living room chair, or walk on the treadmill, or sit in the bleachers of your kids’ game, or wherever you are listening to this podcast, I want to invite you to come with answers to these two questions:

- Of the marks of the New Testament Church described in this episode (Fellowship, Worship, Prayer, Evangelism/Invitation, Bible Study, Generosity); with which do I feel the most confident? With which do I need to most help or growth?
- What are my next steps in helping First Pres Glen Ellyn to become the kind of Jesus community I think the Lord would have us be?

## **Episode 2: Mission**

This episode will explore how the community of First Pres serves as a catalyst to individuals and groups to participate in God's mission in the world.

Teaching Concept: The Missional God. The Christian community as a sending center. – Maybe 7-10 minutes? Acts 13, Paul and Barnabus sent by the church.

### **Testimony Theme: How did you move into missions?**

Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation describes the incarnation as God moving into the neighborhood. Jesus calls his followers to be salt and light; by which means being close to areas of darkness and decay. How have you done that given that you live in a community like Glen Ellyn?

Possible conversation partners:

- Mary Clauss
- Lou Simon -
- Gary Alcock

Interview questions: Maybe 20-25 minutes?

- How did God make a connection for you between your faith and missions?
- What role has the congregation played in deepening your commitment to mission work as a part of your faith journey?
- What would you say to an individual who is not involved in a mission in the world for Christ and doesn't see a pathway to making that happen?
- How has being involved in Mission work deepened or grown your faith?

Invitation to Action:

- What thing or things are in your life, only because you are a follower of Jesus Christ?
- Who in the world needs the salt and light that you can offer as a follower of Jesus Christ who has been blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others?
- Is there a phone call you'd like to make, or an email you'd like to send based upon your answers above and your conversation with God about this?

## **Episode 3: The Christian Community**

This episode will explore the reality of disillusionment with the Christian community and how to overcome it.

Teaching Concept: Being disappointed with people is a part of being in relationship with people; and the church is not immune. I've often been disappointed with myself; and it's only natural that I'll be disappointed with others. – Maybe 7-10 minutes?  
Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* the Wish Dream of Christian community.

**Testimony Theme: How do we move past disappointment with what the Christian community is and isn't?**

Possible Conversation Partners:

- Ruth Bamford
- Hassell Bullock
- Em Grffin

Interview Questions:

- Do you expect to be disappointed by the Christian community or by individuals in the community?
- How have you responded to or dealt with the death of what Bonhoeffer calls the "Wish Dream" of Christian community?
- How has moving through and even moving past the death of your ideal for the Christian community drawn you closer to Christ?

Invitation to Action:

- Are you currently licking any wounds pertaining to the First Pres Community? Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile or to have a conversation?
- What elements of the Christian community are you currently disillusioned with? Are you able to thank God for those things, and to pray about them?

**Episode 4: Cognitive Growth**

This episode will explore how growing in our knowledge of Scripture deepens our intimacy with God.

Teaching Concept: A short summary of Dallas Willard's comments on the Spiritual Discipline of study. It is important to do more than just long for spiritual growth and progress in wholeness, but to have a plan for practicing disciplines in our lives that lead us in that direction, in partnership with the Holy Spirit. In union with these activities, God restores the soul and grows us. Maybe 10-15 minutes

Possible Interview Participants:

- Cinda
- Tom Schwanda

- Kerri Andersen
- Dave Fahey
- Ryan Schiff

Interview questions: Maybe 20-25 minutes?

- What connection have you seen in your life between engaging in regular Bible Study and how you live as a Jesus follower?
- What has been most helpful to you in your efforts to incorporate study into your journey of faith?
- Other than time, what sorts of obstacles do you find interrupt your commitment to study as a component of your spiritual growth?
- What encouragement would you offer to a Christian brother or sister who feels “stuck” in relationship with God? How can engaging in a disciplined practice of study be helpful to him or her?

Invitation to Action:

- Reflect on what you have heard in the Podcast today. What ideas were new to you?
- Make a meaningful commitment to incorporate a course of study into your life over the next X number of weeks. Put a note in the Podcast comments section of what you have decided to do.

APPENDIX D

## Griggs D.Min Podcast Outcomes Survey

**Question Title**

\*1. When did you listen to the four podcast episodes? Over how long of a timespan did you consume them?

**Question Title**

\*2. What were you physically doing while you listened to the podcasts?

**Question Title**

\*3. How did you listen to the podcasts (ie – app, browser, mobile device, desktop, etc.)?

**Question Title**

\*4. What content in the podcasts made the greatest impact or had the most lasting effect on you?

**Question Title**

\*5. Did you find the podcast length too brief, too cumbersome or about right for you?

**Question Title**

6. If you and your spouse are a part of this experience, did you listen to the podcasts together or individually?

**Question Title**

\*7. Did you discuss the podcast or its content with anyone else?

Yes

No

**Question Title**

8. If you answered “yes” to the question above, what was the impact of having a conversation partner for the podcast?

**Question Title**

\*9. Did you complete any of the homework or invited exercises at the conclusion of each episode?

Yes

No

**Question Title**

10. If you answered “yes” to the question above, what was the outcome of participating in the homework/application invitations?

**Question Title**

\*11. Did you discover yourself wanting to learn more, hear more or do more because of what you heard in the podcast episodes?

Yes

No

**Question Title**

12. If you answered “yes” to the question above, what action steps did you take or consider taking?

**Question Title**

\*13. Did you find yourself interested in sharing one or more of the podcast episodes with a friend or fellow community member?

**Question Title**

\*14. If there were a “comments section” for the podcast, would you have been interested in posting a question or a comment about what you heard?

**Question Title**

\*15. Did you experience any audio or technical issues listening to the podcasts?

**Question Title**

\*16. Prior to this experience, were you a podcast listener?

**Question Title**

\*17. How likely would you be to listen to subsequent podcast content from First Presbyterian?

Very likely

Likely

Neither likely nor unlikely

Unlikely

Very unlikely

**Question Title**

\*18. Is there anything else you would like to share about the podcast listening experience?

**Question Title**

19. Please enter your age for research purposes.

DONE



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