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Formulating a Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of South Fork Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

This project addressed the lack of a communal covenant for the elders and ministers of South Fork Church of Christ. The purpose of the project was to formulate a covenant that would promote the spiritual discernment and leadership of the elders and ministers. For the theological framework, I relied upon Mark's portrait of Jesus. I looked at Jesus's lived example as well as his teachings to discern values and practices that defined his leadership and should therefore be normative for Christian leaders. These values and practices were analyzed according to three relational categories—relationship with God, with each other, and with the larger community. By way of contrast, I analyzed the values and practices demonstrated by the disciples in Mark's Gospel. I turned to Ruth Haley Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* to guide the process of formulating the communal covenant. I then used works by Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke to analyze the relational obstacles that kept the disciples from following Christ's example and would prove to be destructive in the present context. The intervention was conducted among the elders and ministers of South Fork by studying, reflecting on, and discussing the values and practices we saw in Mark's Jesus and proposing ways in which we might embody those values and practices as a leadership team. The resulting covenant described values and practices that we wished to adopt for ourselves in our relationships with God, with each other, and with the larger community. Finally, I evaluated the success of the project and reflected upon its implications for congregational leadership.

Formulating a Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of
South Fork Church of Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Drew Baker

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To my wife, Sarah, whose constant love, support, encouragement, and faith in me has made this possible. I truly could not have done this without her.

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To all elders and ministers and others who daily wrestle with questions of congregational leadership. May God bless you richly as you serve the body of Christ through the leading and power of the Spirit.

Thank you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

South Fork Church of Christ is a sixty-year-old congregation in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. For more than a decade it enjoyed the stability of having the same three ministers. Significant change in the eldership, a new vision statement, the loss of all three ministers, and the hiring of two young ministers have all combined to create a crisis of identity for the congregation. As the preacher, I am charged with a significant role in helping navigate this time of change in a healthy manner. Toward that end, this project seeks to promote greater spiritual vitality among the leadership through the formulation of a communal covenant.

The title of this project is “Formulating a Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of South Fork Church of Christ.” It is my hope that by creating a communal covenant, the elders will be better equipped to practice communal spiritual discernment as they lead South Fork through this vital time of transition.

Description of Ministry Context

South Fork Church of Christ was founded and constructed in its current location in 1957 and has enjoyed a relatively stable history since then. It is located in the western part of Winston-Salem near some of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods as well as some pockets of dilapidated and low-income housing. In my conversations and inquiries, there seemed to be only two major life events that stand out in its sixty-year history. The first was a split that occurred in the early 1980s resulting from many members deciding to

pattern themselves after what is commonly known as the Boston Movement.¹ The second major life event is the current identity crisis.

The auditorium has a seating capacity of nearly three hundred. Before the split, the Sunday morning attendance was near that mark before dipping below 150. Attendance slowly recovered over the following decade and has remained steady for roughly thirty years. For many years, membership at South Fork has been more racially diverse than most in the area. Most of this diversity is owed to African-American, Asian, and Hispanic members, though there are also some members who have immigrated from Africa and the Caribbean Isles as well. South Fork claims to value this racial diversity as well as the economic, ideological, and theological diversity very highly, but the ideological and theological tensions are proving to be the most difficult to navigate—a subject to which I will return in the section below.

Changes in Vision and Leadership

Until recently, the congregation as a whole enjoyed consistency and stability. In 2014–2015, a fairly new group of elders formulated a new vision statement for South Fork. The document begins with the statement, “In two to three years we believe South Fork will be a growing, dynamic congregation of 350-400 multicultural members who are actively engaged in the service of one another and our community in the name of Jesus Christ.” Throughout the remainder of the one-page document there are statements

1. What later became the International Churches of Christ.

about reaching out “to the lost and hurting in our community,” reaching out “to all ages, races, and cultures,” “being the good news” and “being led by the Spirit.”²

Shortly after the formulation of this document, the preaching minister who had served South Fork for over ten years announced that he would be moving to be closer to family. With this news, the vision statement was shelved until a replacement preaching minister could be found. As the congregation interviewed potential preaching minister candidates, the vision statement was produced, and the candidates were asked if they would be willing to lead the congregation in that direction. The candidate pool was doctrinally diverse within the scope of ministers affiliated with the Churches of Christ. From what I understand, the committee narrowed down the candidate pool to the two most progressive candidates. After the other candidate declined their offer, South Fork offered the position to me and I accepted.

I came to the congregation in April of 2016. Since that time, the two elders that were recognized as the most conservative³ of the seven have resigned. In July of 2017, the associate minister retired, and the youth minister relocated to the same congregation where the former preacher now serves. In September of 2017, we hired a new youth minister who was twenty-three years of age when he began his ministry with South Fork. In short, within the span of three years, the leadership has gone from three ministers who had all been here for more than a decade and seven elders to two new ministers and five

2. See appendix B for full text of “The Vision of South Fork.”

3. In this context, the label “conservative” refers primarily to a person’s aversion to change.

elders that are decidedly more progressive than previous elderships. These changes in leadership have led to what I would call an identity crisis.

Congregational Analyses

Since my arrival, I have engaged the congregation in three different analyses: appreciative inquiry, listening sessions with each of three adult age groups, and the Reveal survey and report. In the paragraphs that follow, I will report some related findings from each analysis.

Appreciative Inquiry

Immediately upon arrival, I began an appreciative inquiry exercise using Mark Lau Branson's *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*.⁴ I spent three weeks each with two adult classes and the youth class looking for what South Fork saw as the best of their history and identity. I asked the seven questions Branson lists in appendix J⁵ and carefully analyzed responses over the following months. A compilation of all coded responses showed 30% of responses pointed to relationships as having special importance. Serving the local community and serving within the congregation combined for another 28%. Regular, programmatic offerings such as worship services, Bible studies, and small groups combined for only 18%, while supporting or participating in foreign missions accounted for only 6% of responses. Taken as a whole, these findings

4. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

5. Branson, *Memories*, 146–47.

demonstrate how communal engagement and serving others have been very formative in the life of the congregation.

When looking to the future, South Fork envisioned an even greater emphasis on relationships (35% up from 30%) and serving the community (18% up from 16%). These figures indicated significant potential for the congregation's ownership of the vision statement. But as will become clear in the following analyses, there is more than just heliotropism⁶ at work here. It may be said that gravitropism⁷ and even skototropism⁸ may also be influencing the leanings of South Fork.

Listening Sessions

The three listening sessions took place according to three following age groups: twenty to forty years, forty to sixty, and over sixty years of age. Every age group mentioned various ways worship services should be improved, including the desire for greater intentionality and thematic planning for worship. The older two groups expressed a desire to increase attendance at Sunday evening and Wednesday evening gatherings that the youngest group did not express. The youngest group felt that worship services should be more casual while the oldest group passionately expressed the opposite concern.

6. Branson uses this metaphor to describe in botanical terms an organization's tendency to lean toward sources of energy (Branson, *Memories*, 35).

7. Following Branson's botanical metaphor above, I use the term "gravitropism" (the tendency for plants to move in the direction of the gravitational pull) to describe an organization's tendency to move toward that which is easy or comfortable.

8. The tendency for plants to move toward darkness. I use the term here to describe an organization's tendency to move toward that which is sinful or toxic—not unlike Paul's usage of επιθυμία σαρκός.

The sessions revealed that concern for becoming more effective in connecting with non-Christians in the community was strongly evident in the younger groups and only peripherally mentioned in the session with the oldest group. The concerns of the oldest group indicate a desire for stability, comfort, and fidelity to traditional understandings of Scripture and patterns of worship. These differences do not signify that some groups are trying to honor God while others are not but rather that these groups hold differing ideologies regarding how that end is best pursued. These sessions also illustrate a strong tension between the vision statement and concerns of the oldest group—a tension that is sharply felt at the present.

Reveal Survey

As I was on-boarding in the spring of 2016, South Fork participated in the Reveal for Church: Spiritual Life Survey at my request.⁹ The survey indicated that South Fork was an “average” church with a shadow archetype of “troubled.” The spiritual vitality index (SVI)¹⁰ is broken into three constituent parts: personal spiritual practices, faith in action, and church’s role. While personal spiritual practices and faith in action are average and above average, respectively, scores for church’s role were well below average. “Church’s Role” is the term used to describe the effectiveness of the official

9. This online survey is a product of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. The companion book that explains the process and findings is Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Say about Spiritual Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2015). We applied to take the beta version that was available free of charge during this short window and were able to do so.

10. This is Reveal’s term for grading a congregation in its effectiveness in fostering spiritual growth.

leadership and its supported programs in equipping members for spiritual growth. The most compelling statistics are shown in the graph below:

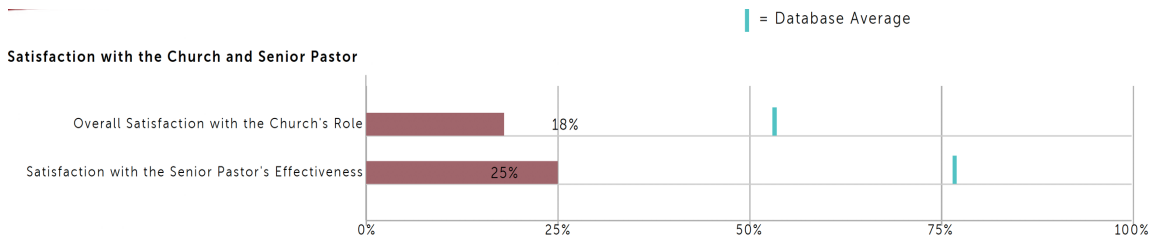


Figure 1. Satisfaction with Church and Senior Pastor. *Source:* Reveal Survey Executive Summary.

The database average is based on responses from over 500,000 congregants from 2,000 congregations. It is therefore quite shocking that the responses in these areas are roughly one-third of the database average. The results of the Reveal survey strongly indicate a significant gap between congregational needs and the perceived effectiveness of the leadership in meeting those needs. Given that this dissatisfaction with the leadership comes at a time of transition, I believe these findings also indicate that the congregation is struggling to trust the leadership and its decisions.

Congregational Analysis Summary

While these observational tools brought several concerns to light, three patterns emerged that are of particular concern for this project: 1) while South Fork has cognitively adopted the values expressed in the vision statement, it has a long way to go toward embodying the practices involved; 2) there is a significant dissatisfaction with the current leadership; and 3) the leadership is not perceived as being particularly effective in leading South Fork in a way that meets congregational expectations.

Statement of Problem

South Fork faces formidable and diverse challenges. There have been attempts to strengthen the quality of our worship services, and deacons were appointed to strengthen

other ministry areas. But these efforts are not effectively addressing what I consider to be the root concern: the elders and ministers of South Fork need to grow in their ability to lead the congregation into greater spiritual growth. Directly addressing congregational growth or member perception of the leadership is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, this project seeks to direct its efforts toward equipping the leadership to lead South Fork by way of practicing communal spiritual discernment.

In practice, there is little about our leadership meetings that would distinguish them from a common board meeting. Our meetings perfectly fit the description of the problem in Ruth Haley Barton's introduction to *Pursuing God's Will Together*.¹¹ There is normally a cursory prayer offered at the beginning of the meeting, but the meeting that follows is little different from a secular decision-making process. The agenda items are brought up and discussed, and opinions are offered until a solution is found. If the solution receives general nods of approval, the decision is made, and the group moves on to the next item on the agenda.

It is my belief that if South Fork is to succeed during this crucial time of transition, it will be of utmost importance for the leadership to be Spirit-led at every level. Greg Hawkins states it more specifically:

The first step to building a great, spiritually vital church is for [the church leadership] to follow Christ with your whole heart every day of your lives. To die to your own agendas and follow Christ, one day at a time. To declare that your relationship with Christ is the most important relationship in your life. To pursue intimacy with Christ with your entire mind, body, heart, soul, and strength. To allow nothing, absolutely nothing, to stop you from this one main thing.¹²

11. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2012), 9–10.

12. Hawkins, *Move*, Kindle edition, ch. 16, "Lead from a Christ-Centered Heart."

My efforts, therefore, focus on equipping the elders and ministers to be more Christ-centered, especially in our relationships as we lead South Fork. To aid us in this task, I look to Ruth Haley Barton's book *Pursuing God's Will Together*. Within the book's larger purpose of providing "a discernment practice for leadership groups" (the subtitle of the book), Barton encourages the leadership group to covenant together as a community.

She expresses the need for a communal covenant:

Because a written covenant makes our commitment real on a level that mere conversation does not. It provides a way for the group to claim shared ownership for their behavior because it contains detailed guidelines that help the group function together in agreed-upon ways. Without an actual covenant or written agreement, a group may not be clear about what they have agreed on, let alone what it means in the context of day-to-day life in leadership community. Something this important cannot be left up to chance or wishful thinking. Spiritual community is so tender and fragile that it requires some protective structures in order for it to survive. When we are tempted to revert to old, unredeemed patterns, our covenant can call us back to our best intentions.

My experience with South Fork has already provided several supporting examples for Barton's claim. I have seen several initiatives lose momentum and cease due to negligence and forgetfulness. If the leadership is going to provide the consistent leadership South Fork needs, we must be explicit and intentional in our commitment to communal spiritual discernment. For this, we need a communal covenant. Barton defines covenant as "an agreement two or more people make with each other about how they will behave in their relationships."¹³ Such a covenant is a crucial and foundational component in equipping the leadership in our task of communal spiritual discernment.

13. Barton, *Pursuing*, 154.

As such, the problem this project seeks to address is the lack of a communal covenant for the elders and ministers of South Fork. While the spiritual discernment process is the larger concern, we must start by articulating and committing to a common understanding of what it means to function as a community of spiritual discernment. It is my hope that such a covenant will encourage spiritual growth, equip the group for the practice of communal spiritual discernment, and ultimately result in empowering the leadership to lead South Fork toward embodying the values and practices expressed in the vision statement.

Statement of Purpose

In response to the discerned problem as stated above, the purpose of this project was to formulate a communal covenant for the elders and ministers of South Fork Church of Christ. Toward that end, I planned to facilitate a series of discernment sessions with the elders to draw on the Gospel of Mark as well as Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* along with selected literature relevant to spiritual leadership.

The project took place over a series of sessions spanning six weeks in early 2019. It began with a series of four ninety-minute sessions that took place in the church's conference room on consecutive Wednesday evenings. We sat around an oval table with coffee, water and various snacks while exploring the topics listed below.

Week 1 was a week of orientation to go over the goals and parameters of the project. I explained the concept of a communal covenant and my approach to the Gospel of Mark and Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* as it relates to this project. I also explained the process, fielded any questions from the group, and had the group fill out the Informed Consent forms. Week two explored Mark's portrayal of Jesus's relationship

with the Trinity. Week three focused on Jesus's relationship with his disciples. Week four focused on Jesus's relationship to the community. Throughout these four weeks, we worked through Barton's first three steps as outlined above.

After these four sessions, we gathered for a retreat lasting from Friday evening to Saturday evening or Saturday only depending on participant time restraints. We met at a conference building at a Carolina Bible Camp in Mocksville, NC. The retreat began with a time of guided prayer and solitude (a continuation of step three). We then gathered for the purpose of formulating a communal covenant based the values and practices that had arisen from our study of Mark, our experience with discerned spiritual practices and rhythms, and our cultural context—including the vision statement of South Fork Church of Christ. I recorded these values and practices as a preliminary draft of our communal covenant and provided copies to each of the team members for their evaluation (step 4).

The plan was to gather again on the following Wednesday to make final revisions based on input (step 5) and decide on a way to ratify the covenant through symbol and ritual (step 6). The project therefore proceeded according to the plan below.

- Week 1: Orientation
- Week 2: Relationship with God
- Week 3: Relationship with disciples
- Week 4: Relationship with world
- Week 5 Retreat: Spiritual formation practices and covenant formulation
- Week 6: Final revisions and ratification.

Basic Assumptions

The project proceeded the basis of the three following assumptions: the covenant is designed for mature Christians, Jesus serves as our primary model for Christian leadership, and the individuals on the leadership team are at different places in relation to engaging spiritual disciplines.

The first assumption is that the communal covenant is designed for mature, baptized believers. Since the project focused on the elders and ministers of South Fork, the participants have in common their having been born into Christ through baptism and their being recognized by the congregation as being spiritually mature. There are no new Christians on the leadership team, and each has been evaluated and approved by the congregation.

The second assumption is that Jesus serves as our primary model for Christian leadership. In every area of life, Christians are to follow the life and teachings of Jesus. We as Christians must look to his teachings, his actions, and his character if we are to live lives that are truly Christian. Texts such as 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4:11-13 indicate that following Christ takes many shapes, depending on one's calling and spiritual giftedness. The participants in this project each had their own unique spiritual gifts but shared the same calling to lead South Fork Church of Christ. As in every calling, the call to spiritual leadership looks to Jesus as our model. This project paid particular attention to the nature of Jesus's relationships as we developed the communal covenant.

Finally, this project assumed that the leadership has varied levels of commitment to individual spiritual disciplines but less commitment to communal spiritual disciplines. Each person on the leadership team regularly spends time in prayer and in reading Scripture. Some do so more than others, and the approaches to these disciplines vary. Beyond these, I am unaware of any other spiritual disciplines that are being regularly practiced by the leadership. But in regard to communal activities, we are primarily limited to facilitating and attending worship services, classes, and elder meetings. The participants do not typically describe these communal activities as spiritual disciplines.

Definitions

When using the terms “Christian leadership” or “Christian leaders,” I am referring to a broader theological conception of what it means to lead as a Christian. At its most basic, Christian leadership is the influence employed by a Christian to encourage others toward greater Christlikeness through the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God. Christian leaders can be male, female, young or old, and therefore pronouns connected with this discussion will be appropriately inclusive. When using phrases such as “the leadership” or “our leaders,” I am referring specifically to the five elders and two ministers, all of whom are male.¹⁴ As such, related pronouns will be male.

Delimitations

While it is my hope that other leadership groups will find this project useful in their own context, this project is designed for the elders and ministers at South Fork Church of Christ in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The eldership was chosen through a communal discernment process of nomination and affirmation that is common in our branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement.¹⁵ As such, the eldership is comprised of a narrow demographic that does not include women, single men, or young men. Though the selection of ministers is less formally restrictive, married men typically receive preferential treatment. Having hired a second minister as of September 2017, the

14. “Only a very few Christian Churches/Churches of Christ ordain women to eldership in local congregations, and there is no discernible widespread trend in that direction either in those churches or in Churches of Christ” (Peter M. Morgan, “Elders, Eldership,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnagant, and D. Newell Williams [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 298).

15. Morgan, “Elders, Eldership,” 297–99.

elder/minister team now consists of seven married White men ranging in age from twenty-three to sixty-five.

Limitations

Formulating a communal covenant does not guarantee significant commitment to the communal covenant by the participants nor even that the elders will adopt the covenant at all. Still further, participation in the communal covenant cannot guarantee the spiritual formation or increased vitality in the spiritual leadership of our elders. It is my firm belief that spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit and that humans can at best open themselves up to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit but cannot manipulate the Spirit nor guarantee the Spirit's work. To use a nautical metaphor, it could be said that, while sailing to the desired haven is of ultimate importance for South Fork, the scope of this project is restricted to committing the leadership toward greater attention to the wind and toward responsiveness with the appropriate adjustments to the sails.

The project was also limited by the difficulty of maintaining objectivity as a researcher. As a minister, I am an employee of South Fork and am under direct supervision of the elders. This power dynamic could limit the effectiveness of my leadership through this project. I also acknowledge the possibility that my contributions could be seen as self-serving or even passive aggressive.¹⁶ If I were to suggest something that could conceivably benefit me as an employee, the suggestion may not have as much credibility. If I were to suggest something that challenges the status quo of the eldership, it could be interpreted as passive aggressive. I could not rule out the possibility that I

16. By "passive aggressive," I refer to the potential temptation for a person in my position to present personal preferences as objective ideals or to criticize others under the cloak of empirical evidence.

could inadvertently interpret and report findings in ways that reflect my own biases. I hoped to mitigate this risk by meticulously eliciting feedback from the other participants throughout the process.

Conclusion

South Fork Church of Christ has taken several steps toward embracing the vision to which we believe God has called it. It is a congregation with a rich history of love and service. Over the past several years, the leadership has been convicted of the need for South Fork to become more effective in ministering to “the lost and hurting in our community.”¹⁷ While it is clear that we needed to change in order to embrace this vision, initiating sustainable changes in a congregation that has enjoyed decades of stability is particularly difficult.

Formulating a communal covenant for our leadership that provides a framework for how we function as a leadership team has the potential to help us lead faithfully during this time of crisis and transition. In the following chapter, I will describe the theological and theoretical constructs from which the project proceeded.

17. From Appendix B: Vision Statement

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Any discussion about Christian leadership must give careful consideration to the leadership of Christ himself—in this case, through the Gospel of Mark. While it is certainly irresponsible to treat Mark as a leadership manual with practical applications for every leadership situation, this project assumed that following Christ’s example takes precedence in any aspect of Christian living. In regard to Christian leadership, following Christ’s example becomes even more important. Since formulating a communal covenant¹ was the purpose of this project, we had to pay close attention to Christ’s relational behavior as well as his teachings on leadership.

Through Mark’s lens, the reader witnesses also the tension between the ideal set forth by Christ and the reality lived out by the disciples. Indeed, much of Jesus’s teaching under present consideration proceeds directly from the disciples’ missteps. A similar tension between theory and application arises in our present efforts to embrace Christian leadership. As such, the theological construct explored in this chapter will present both the thesis and antithesis of Christian leadership as seen through the Gospel of Mark.

After establishing this bifocal theological construct, I will turn my attention to a similarly framed theoretical construct. First, I will look to Ruth Haley Barton’s *Pursuing*

1. Barton, *Pursuing*, 154: “A Covenant is an agreement two or more people make with each other about how they will behave in their relationships.”

God's Will Together to lay a foundation for how we might embody Christlike leadership as a team at South Fork. I will then rely heavily on Edwin Friedman's *Failure of Nerve* and *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* by Peter Steinke to gain understanding of the dynamics that often cause leadership teams to emulate the disciples' dysfunction rather than the leadership of Christ.

This chapter, therefore, will follow an A₁-B₁-A₂-B₂ format. A₁ represents the relevant teachings and examples of Christ. B₁ represents the obstacles to effective Christian leadership as seen in the disciples. A₂ represents our discernment process of best practices for Christian leadership, and B₂ represents an analysis of obstacles to effective Christian leadership that may affect our present context.

Theological Construct

I first explain why Mark's portrayal of Jesus was chosen. I then consider examples of each of the following three categories of Jesus's relationships: with the other persons of the Trinity, with his disciples, and with the crowds. Finally, I examine Jesus's instructions on the unique quality of Christian leadership.² With Jesus's example serving as the backlight to each of these relational categories, the behavior and attitudes of the disciples come to the foreground by way of contrast. The disciples' silhouettes make it easier to discern the shape of the relational dysfunction that might otherwise go undetected.

2. The three discussions that begin with a passion prediction from Jesus (8:31–9:1; 9:30–41; 10:32–45) are of particular interest. These discussions begin with the pivotal moment at Caesarea Philippi and conclude before Jesus enters Jerusalem.

The Gospel of Mark

I selected the Gospel of Mark because of its particular emphasis on discipleship and how Christian leadership differs from secular leadership.³ Mark highlights core theological themes such as the Trinitarian shape of Christian leadership⁴ and the kenotic telos of Christlike leadership (8:34–35; 10:42–45). Jesus exemplifies a rhythm of engagement and retreat (1:35; 6:30–32, 45–46; 9:1–2; 14:32–41), humility (10:42–45), boldness (11:15–18), and a nonanxious presence in response to both praise (1:36–39) and rejection (14:55–62). In addition to these examples, much of Jesus’s teaching focuses on the peculiar relational quality of Christian leadership, especially during the journey to Jerusalem (8:34–10:45).

While specific texts related to Christian leadership appear in each of the four Gospels, I chose Mark for how the narrative itself unfolds. I agree with Richard B. Hayes that “The ethical significance of each Gospel must be discerned from the shape of the story as a whole. In order to grasp the moral vision of the evangelist, we must ask how Jesus’ life and ministry are portrayed in the story and how his call to discipleship reshapes the lives of the other characters.”⁵

The narrative provides a two-part revelation of Jesus’s identity. The first half of the Gospel reveals Jesus in all his power and glory. In part 1, Jesus performs exorcisms (1:21–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30), heals a man with leprosy (1:40–45), heals a paralyzed man

3. See discussion of discipleship in Mark in John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 29–34.

4. Most clearly in the baptism narrative (Mk 1:9–12) when Father, Son, and Spirit are all represented in the calling and affirming of Christ at the beginning of his ministry.

5. Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper One, 1996), 74.

(2:1–12), heals a man’s shriveled hand (3:1–6), calms a storm (4:35–41), heals a woman who had been menstruating for twelve years (5:25–34), raises a dead girl back to life (5:21–24; 35–43), feeds the five thousand (6:30–44), walks on water (6:45–52), heals a deaf and mute man (7:31–37), and feeds four thousand (8:1–10) before we come to the pivotal two-part healing of the blind man (8:22–26). These eight chapters are almost completely devoid of any clues that Jesus’s path leads to the cross. As Richard Hayes observes, “In the first half of the story, the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel looks very much like a Hellenistic wonder-worker or magician. He acts as a superhero who exercises the Power of God to subdue the forces of evil.”⁶ Up to this point in the Gospel, following Jesus primarily involves a trail of power, glory, and popularity with only brief foreshadowing of trouble to come.⁷

Then the story hinges on a two-part healing and a half-correct confession from Peter. After putting his hands on the blind man the first time, the man says he sees people, but they look like walking trees. After putting his hands on him the second time,

6. Hayes, *Moral Vision*, 75.

7. As pointed out in *Mark as Story*, there are five escalating conflicts with the religious authorities in the first eight chapters of Mark. (David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd Ed. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999], 85.) However, with only one exception in Mark 6, there is no indication that the religious authorities will prevail in this conflict against Jesus. Mark 6 tells us of Jesus’s rejection in Nazareth immediately before the “sending-John the Baptist-returning” intercalation. By virtue of placement, Mark is foreshadowing the suffering that must necessarily follow for Christ and his disciples who follow in the footsteps of the one who “prepared a way” for them. Apart from chapter 6, the first-time hearer is allowed to be carried through the first half of Mark, confident that the story could only end in Jesus’s triumph over the religious authorities. In *Mark as Story*, the author states, “The overall Gospel may be viewed as a two-step progression....In the first step, he serves with power; in the second, his service results in persecution and death. The First half of the Gospel emphasizes the coming of God’s rule in acts of power and mercy, and the second half emphasizes the persecution that results from living out God’s rule in this age.” (50).

the man is able to see clearly (8:22–25). The first step of the healing process mirrors the current state of the disciples’ spiritual insight, as voiced by Peter.

When Jesus asks whom the disciples believe him to be, Peter compulsively blurts out the correct answer. He may know what to say, but he has no idea what it means—a fact that becomes painfully clear when Jesus explains the kenotic shape of his mission. Peter is evidently able to accept Jesus as the Messiah according to his own human concerns, but not according to the concerns of God. He is able to accept Jesus’s power, but not his vocation as the suffering servant (8:27–33). As Hayes notes, “The central question of Mark’s Gospel is asked by Jesus himself in the conversation at Caesarea Philippi that stands at the hinge-point of the story: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ . . . Here at the climax of the story we find the goal toward which Mark’s narrative presses: Jesus can be known as ‘Son of God’ only when he is known as the crucified one.”⁸

With this two-part revelation of Jesus’s identity being the primary focus of Mark, one can reasonably claim discipleship to be a secondary focus of the Gospel. Throughout the first half of the Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples to follow him and to trust his leading. From the first calling (1:16–20), the disciples are challenged to come and go at Jesus’s word. To borrow the imagery from Ps 23, Jesus occasionally leads them to quiet waters (see 6:31) while at other times he leads them through the valley of the shadow of death (see 4:35–41). They enjoy Jesus’s company for most of their journeys, but their calling is not just to follow Jesus, but to be sent by Jesus to do his bidding (1:17; 3:14; 6:7–13). Through the first half of the Gospel, the disciples are learning that they can trust

8. Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision*, 75.

Jesus with their lives, but the second half will take them through another phase of their discipleship training.

In the second half of the Gospel, one can view Jesus's training of the disciples as putting his hands on their eyes a second time. Here, the narrative takes on a minor key with three passion predictions: the command for disciples to be cross-bearers, the description of Christian leadership as servanthood, and finally with the passion week itself. Throughout this half of the Gospel, the disciples are struggling and largely failing to embrace the kenotic nature of discipleship. The abrupt ending (16:8) leaves the question open as to whether they will succeed. I pay particular attention to the second half of the Gospel because of this kenotic, or cruciform, portrayal of Christ and Christian discipleship. This is likely the most crucial aspect of Christian leadership for us to grasp if we are to successfully embody a leadership team that can be accurately described as Christlike.

Christian Leadership as Seen in Mark's Jesus

As I analyze Mark's Gospel, I pay particular attention to Jesus's values and practices regarding three categories of relationships—with God (for Jesus, this means the other two persons of the Trinity), with his disciples, and with the greater community. I examine not only his teachings, but perhaps more importantly, at the peculiar way Jesus personally engaged those relationships.

Jesus and His Trinitarian Relationships

The Gospel of Mark is robustly Trinitarian from the very beginning. Matthew begins his story with Abraham (Matt 1:1). Luke's narrative begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5). John's story begins at creation (John 1:1–3). But when Mark

presents us with the beginning of the Gospel, he draws attention to Jesus's baptism. At that moment, a Trinitarian family reunion is clearly seen. Jesus comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, and the Father speaks his blessing from heaven (1:10–11). This divine *koinonia* is the foundation for all that follows.

Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrates his dependency on the Father through his habit of spending long periods of time in prayer. Jesus's relationship with the Father is not an abstract metaphor for Jesus but an experienced relationship of "warmth and intimacy."⁹ Prayer, for Jesus, "was a well from which he drew his strength and conviction."¹⁰ In 1:35, Jesus goes off alone to pray. In 6:46, Jesus spent the night alone in prayer. In 9:29, Jesus links prayer with the ability to cast out a particularly stubborn demon. The sandwich narrative of the fig tree and the clearing of the temple is couched in a discussion of prayer (11:17, 24–25). Then at Gethsemane Jesus agonizes in prayer three times before he is handed over to be crucified (14:32–41). Finally, in his last agonizing breaths, Jesus calls out in prayerful lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). Jürgen Moltmann sees in this forsakenness the most meaningful expression of the Trinity.

The content of the doctrine of the Trinity is the real cross of Christ himself. The form of the crucified Christ is the Trinity. In that case, what is salvation? Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life. The 'bifurcation' in God must contain the whole uproar of history within itself. Men must be able to recognize rejection, the curse and final nothingness in it. The

9. For more on this existential aspect of Jesus's relationship with the Father, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 37–40.

10. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 37.

cross stands between the Father and the Son in all the harshness of its forsakenness. If one describes the life of God within the Trinity as the ‘history of God’ (Hegel), this history of God contains within itself the whole abyss of godforsakenness, absolute death and the non-God.¹¹

From the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, the Holy Spirit actively directs the path Jesus’s ministry is going to take (1:12). Jesus warns against blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (3:29); he acknowledges the Spirit’s role in a prophesy about him (12:36) and promises the disciples that they will have the aid of Holy Spirit when they face persecution (13:11).

Clearly, Jesus’s ministry is not a solitary mission. The Son is sent from the Father, but not sent away from the Father. The Spirit launches his ministry and continues with Jesus along the way. Jesus’s relationship within the Trinity defines his identity and directs his mission.¹² It is the foundational relationship that shapes all other relationships. All other relationships are a reflection of that eternal community of love that we call Trinity. It is doubtful that anyone else in human history has ever experienced that intimate community of love more than the disciples. Yet their relationship with the Trinity takes on a very different shape from Jesus’s.

Jesus and His Relationships with His Disciples

For the three years of Jesus’s ministry, he was accompanied almost everywhere by his disciples. In 1:16–20, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John. Then in chapter 3, he appoints the rest of the twelve (3:13–19). The disciples walk with him through the

11. Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 363–64.

12. This idea is more fully articulated in Rhoads, *Mark as Story*, 105. “Like the prophets of Israel, he is not acting on his own but as agent of God. Because his authority comes from God, he is strong-willed and independent. Neither traditions nor laws nor public pressure nor fear of indictment prevent him from truthfully acting and teaching ‘God’s Way.’”

fields of grain (2:23), they eat with him (7:1–2), they witness his healings (5:25–34; 6:56; 7:32–37; 8:22–25), they listen to his teachings (4:1–34; 6:1–6, 34; 7:14–23; 10:1), they witness him calming the storm (4:39–41) and walking on the sea (6:47–52), they see him cast out demons (5:13; 9:25–27) and feed the multitudes (6:35–42; 8:1–9). Peter, James, and John are with him when he raises a young girl from the dead (5:37–43). They are with him on the mountain as he is transfigured before them (9:2–8). They are near him as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32–42). Several times, Jesus attempts to lead his disciples into places of solitude but is occasionally thwarted (6:30–33; 7:24; 9:30–32).

Even though Jesus spent a great amount of time with his disciples, he also sent them away on occasions or had them stay behind while he went away by himself. In 6:7–13 he sends them out in pairs to minister without him. In 6:45 Jesus “made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida.” In Jesus’s relationships with his disciples, there was intimacy as well as boundaries; there was instruction as well as sending. Throughout the gospel, service becomes the most prominent feature of Jesus’s relationship with his disciples. As Rhoads points out, “While faith and authority are the heart of Jesus’ relationship with God, serving defines his way of relating to other people”.¹³ For the purposes of this project, it is essential to note that Jesus serves from a position of strength and conviction, not weakness or insecurity. His service is always in

13. Rhoads, *Mark as Story*, 107.

line with God's mission.¹⁴ Even though Jesus spent a tremendous portion of his ministry focusing on the spiritual growth of the disciples, it was not to the exclusion of ministering to the crowds.

Jesus and His Relationship with the Crowds

Mark's Gospel provides a rich portrait of how Jesus related to the crowds. Throughout the first half of the gospel, crowds constantly surround and pursue Jesus. Early in Jesus' ministry, the first disciples track down Jesus to inform him that "everyone is looking for" him, and Jesus responds by going elsewhere (1:37–38). After healing the leper and warning him to keep quiet, word gets out and hysteria ensues to the extent that Jesus can no longer appear publicly in the towns (1:40–45). In chapter 2 we see him packed in a house that is so crowded that people have to dig a hole in the roof to get to him (2:1–4). The crowds surround him by the lake (2:13; 3:7–8; 4:1; 5:21), in the towns (3:19–20), and in the wilderness (6:32–33). And while Jesus frequently attempts to avoid the crowds (1:35; 6:31; 7:24, 31; 9:2), he also has compassion on them and ministers to them. He heals their sick, he teaches them, and he feeds them (6:56).

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus's relationship to the crowds in Mark's Gospel is what is called "the messianic secret."¹⁵ Throughout the first half of the gospel, Jesus seems to be trying hard to keep his identity a secret. He forbids the demon

14. Rhoads, *Mark as Story*, 108. "Jesus himself serves others with his power from a position of strength, not weakness. That is, his authority comes from God, not the pressures or desires of other people. Thus, Jesus' idea of service does not become a matter of doing what others want him to do, except insofar as that is consonant with the values of the rule of God. For example, he will heal those who request it, like Bartimaeus, but he will not grant the Pharisees a sign. His first allegiance is to God; then he loves the neighbor as self."

15. For more on the messianic secret, including Wilhelm Wrede's initial formulation of the concept, subsequent developments and challenges, and an argument for the validity and vitality of the 'secret' motif, see Tuckett, C. M., "Messianic Secret," *ABD* 4:797–800.

possessed man (1:25), the leper (1:44), the demons (3:11–12), the young girl’s family (5:43), and those who witness him heal the deaf man (7:36) from telling about him. He speaks in parables to keep some in the dark (4:11–12), and he warns his disciples not to tell who he is (8:30; 9:9). In fact, the only time Jesus seems to permit his identity to be proclaimed publicly is in the Gentile region of the Gerasenes—both by the demons and by the man who had been possessed by them (5:7, 19–20).

In summary, Mark’s portrait of Jesus’s lived relationships reveals 1) a profound relationship within the Trinity, 2) an intimate relationship with the disciples, and 3) a compassionately engaged if somewhat wary relationship with the crowds. Some of the major themes that emerge from Jesus’s human relationships include a rhythm of engagement and retreat, prayerfulness, a balance between intimacy and boundaries, and a commitment to teaching, nurturing, correcting, and sending his followers. Having described the way Jesus lived out his relationships, I now turn to three educational encounters with his disciples when he clarifies the nature of Christian leadership.

Jesus’s Teachings on Discipleship and Leadership

Concerning Jesus’s teachings on leadership, the following discussion will focus on the three passion predictions and the conversations that follow (8:31–9:1; 9:30–41; 10:32–45) as charted below by Hayes. I chose these three pericopes because of the structural and thematic weight Mark places on them.

PASSION PREDICTION	MISUNDERSTANDING	CORRECTIVE TEACHING
8:31	8:32–33	8:34–9:1
9:31	9:33–34	9:35–37 (–50?)
10:32–34	10:35–41	10:42–45

Figure 2. Passion Prediction Structure. *Source: Hayes, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, 81.*

Each of Jesus's passion predictions leads to the disciples' misunderstanding and subsequently to Jesus correction of those misunderstandings. Jesus teaches them that the first must be last (9:35), holds up children as ideal disciples (10:15), and describes greatness in terms of servitude (10:43–45). In doing so, he is drawing the direct connection between his own identity as crucified messiah and the disciples' identity as his disciples. As Hayes observes, "To be Jesus's follower is to share in his vocation of suffering servanthood, renouncing the world's lust for power."¹⁶

Mark 8:31–9:1

In this pericope, Jesus asks his disciples who others think he is. After repeating some of the ideas they have heard (8:28), Jesus asks more pointedly, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter responds boldly, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). What Mark's readers are told in the first sentence, Peter finally proclaims at the turning point of the Gospel. But when Jesus begins to describe the suffering nature of his Messiahship (8:31), Peter exposes his ignorance by rebuking Jesus (8:32). Jesus's harsh rebuke of Peter signifies that there is something tremendous at stake here.¹⁷ Jesus goes on to make the explicit connection between his own suffering and the inevitable suffering of any who

16. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 82.

17. "In this scene, Peter is functioning as tempter and adversary. Jesus has defined his identity and his vocation as Messiah in a way that contradicts all expectations and all normal canons of political efficacy. Peter's apparently reasonable objection is in fact nothing less than a suggestion that Jesus deny himself and his mission, thus capitulating to Satan. By uncompromisingly rejecting Peter's position, Jesus affirms that he is to be a suffering Messiah... But that is not all. He goes on to say that his vocation of suffering is not unique; all who follow him are summoned to a similar vocation... Those who are the Messiah's disciples are called to follow him in the way of suffering, rejection, and death" (Hayes, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 79).

dare to follow him (8:34–38). It is this connection between discipleship and death that Bonhoeffer so memorably describes:

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. . . In fact, every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life.¹⁸

Mark 9:31–37

A chapter later, Jesus begins to teach his disciples a second time that he will be betrayed, killed and rise after three days (9:31). Mark states that the disciples did not understand what he meant (9:32), then provides evidence that they certainly had not grasped the implications of his teaching. Jesus asks what they were talking about, and they are ashamed that they had been arguing over who was the greatest (9:33–34). Jesus tells them that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (9:35). Rather than jockey for higher positions, Jesus calls them to seek the lowest positions—the positions of servants.

Mark 10:32–45

This passion prediction contains the most detailed account of his suffering.¹⁹ Mark does not state explicitly that the disciples misunderstood Jesus this time, only demonstrates the misunderstanding. James and John come to Jesus and ask for prominent

18. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89–90.

19. Here we find out that not only will Jesus be handed over to the Jewish leaders but that he will subsequently be handed over to the gentiles. And though the first passion prediction speaks of “suffering” (8:31), the third gives the explicit details of mocking, spitting, and flogging (10:34).

positions of glory (10:35–37). After a gracious denial of their request (10:38–40), Jesus teaches all twelve disciples that they are not to wield power like the Gentiles, but they are to adopt Jesus’s example of service instead (10:42–45).

Theological Conclusions

Mark’s portrait of Jesus shows that Jesus is grounded in a deep, intimate relationship with the Father and Spirit. Jesus spends significant time in prayer. He follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit and works through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus spends vast amounts of time with his disciples—teaching, walking, eating, sending, correcting, and living with them for three years. This intimacy with the disciples is balanced by times when he withdraws from them for his own benefit as well as theirs. He is patient but direct in addressing their shortcomings and constantly calls them to a higher standard. Jesus serves the crowds, but his service is always consonant with the Father’s will, not with the whims of the people. Jesus teaches his disciples that to fulfill their calling as disciples and Christian leaders, they must be humble and willing to serve and suffer for Christ. I now turn attention to the disciples and the obstacles that keep them from fully embodying the kind of leadership Jesus exemplifies.

Obstacles to Effective Christian Leadership as Seen in the Disciples

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, he paints a sharp contrast between Jesus and his disciples. It would be an overstatement to describe this contrast as good versus evil. It is more akin to an Andy Griffith versus Barney Fife contrast. Both are well-meaning, but one is wise and patient while the other is constantly stumbling through life’s challenges. One responds with clear-minded intentionality and the other reacts with anxious energy. I want to make this distinction clear from the beginning so that when I begin the analysis

of our current leadership, no one is portrayed as evil. On our worst days, I would not describe any of us as villains—just bumbling Barneyes. The purpose of the present scrutiny is not to attribute labels to individuals but to identify the forces at work in and among leadership teams. With this in mind, I now turn attention to Mark’s portrait of the disciples.

Disciples in Mark

In the first chapter, the disciples attempt to fetch Jesus on behalf of the searching crowds (1:36–37). While it may seem innocuous, the disciples are absorbing some of the anxiety of the crowds. They evidently want to please the crowds and petition Jesus to pacify them. Rather than react to the crowds’ desires, Jesus responds by going elsewhere (1:38–39).

When caught in a storm in chapter 4, the disciples do not question Jesus’s ability to save them but instead question his character (4:38–41). They interpret his lack of action as a lack of concern for their lives. While the disciples are clearly anxious, Jesus is the quintessential nonanxious presence. It is interesting to note that when Jesus does act on their behalf to calm the storm, the disciples do not respond with relief or increased trust but with terror of the unknown entity before them.

A chapter later, when Jesus stops to ask who touched him, the disciples seem to think he is being ridiculous (5:31). Then when faced with the hungry crowd, they doubt Jesus’s ability to provide (6:35–37). A few verses later, Mark provides a fascinating account that is rich in the imagery of Old Testament theophany. The disciples are struggling to row through a storm on the Sea of Galilee as Jesus had commanded them

(6:48). Then, when Jesus comes treading upon the waters—as only God does²⁰—the disciples are quicker to entertain the idea that they are witnessing some pagan ghost apparition than the fact that God-in-the-Flesh is revealing his identity to them (6:49–50). Even after having seen Jesus feed 5,000, they continue to doubt Jesus’s ability to provide when faced with a hungry crowd of 4,000 (8:1–4). In an apt summary of the first eight chapters, Jesus expresses his frustration that the disciples still do not understand Jesus’s identity, “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember?” (8:14–18).

As the second half of the Gospel begins, Peter demonstrates that he, speaking for the disciples, finally understands that Jesus is the Messiah, though as stated before, his perception of Jesus is far from clear. Peter needs a second healing to cure his blindness (8:33). Shortly thereafter, Peter, James, and John witness the transfigured Jesus. Instead of being attentive to the exalted Lord, Peter anxiously wants to do something, even if it is pure foolishness (9:5). The text notes that Peter’s statement is more of an anxious reaction than a reasoned response: “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (9:6).

Later in chapter 9, the disciples attempt and fail to heal the boy with the mute spirit (9:14–29). When Jesus tells the father, “All things can be done for the one who

20. “The exclusive prerogative of God to walk on the sea recurs throughout the Jewish literature (Job 38:16; Ps 77:19; Isa 43:16; Hab 3:15, 33; Sir 24:5-6; Odes Sol 39:10), but Job 9 must be set forth above these other texts due to its multi-layered relationship to Mark 6:45-52” (Dane Ortlund, “The Old Testament Background and Eschatological Significance of Jesus Walking on the Sea [Mark 6:45-52],” *Neotestamentica* 46 [2012]: 325).

believes,” it seems likely that these words are meant for the disciples’ benefit—both the twelve and all who would follow (9:23). Jesus later explains to the stumped disciples that prayer was necessary, which seems to indicate that they had not tried that—a curious oversight that links prayer to belief (9:29). If all things are possible for the one who believes and prayer is necessary for this healing to be possible, then it would follow that the disciples’ lack of prayer is tethered to their lack of belief. While it is tempting to assume a unidirectional relationship where belief produces prayer, the father’s request of Jesus demonstrates a more complex relationship between prayer and belief. His request, which is essentially a prayer to Jesus, is both a statement of preexisting belief and a request for greater belief (9:24). It appears to be a self-amplifying cycle where belief leads to prayer, which leads to more belief, which leads to more prayer, and so on. Whichever the case, the disciples’ effectiveness is limited by both prayer and belief—a worthy subject for contemplation among contemporary leaders and leadership teams.

Immediately following this episode, Jesus gives the second of three passion predictions (9:31). This statement leads to one of the clearest examples of dysfunctional communication: “They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” (9:32) Instead of seeking clarification, the disciples allow fear to cause them to withdraw from healthy communication. It seems unlikely that they feared physical retribution from Jesus. Of what, then, were they afraid? Of looking foolish? Of Jesus’s disapproval? Of conflict? While it is difficult to know the exact nature of their fear, we can be fairly certain that their fear would fit under the umbrella of relational anxiety. This scene displays another self-amplifying cycle, but unlike the constructive belief-prayer cycle, the anxiety-withdrawal cycle is devastatingly destructive.

The next few verses continue the anxiety-withdrawal cycle with the disciples jockeying for position. Jesus initiates communication by inquiring about their argument. Even so, they remain silent (9:33–34). Had this been a purely human relationship, their gross misunderstanding of the nature of discipleship would have gone unchecked. Jesus’s insight allows him to overcome the broken communication and address the problem in a timely manner before it can spiral out of control (9:35–37). Deprived of his opportunity to prove himself superior to his fellow disciples, John assumes a superior attitude by drawing Jesus’s attention to an outsider who is doing the work that had previously been assigned solely to the disciples (9:38). Rather than affirm the exclusive attitude of the disciples, Jesus validates the ministry of the outsider (9:39–41).

Chapter 10 provides several additional examples of the disciples’ continued attempts at establishing a hierarchy. They assume children to be unworthy of Jesus’s attention (10:13) while falsely ascribing worthiness toward a man based on his wealth (10:23–27). James and John continue to jockey for position, to the consternation of the other ten (10:35, 41), and they fail to advocate for Bartimaeus, presumably because of his assumed social insignificance (10:46–48).

Chapter 14 provides several examples of the disciples’ failure to stand with Jesus through his persecution. Judas is the first to abandon Jesus (14:10); then the disciples fail to “keep watch” with Jesus in the garden (14:37, 40, 41); the disciples flee when Jesus is arrested (14:50); and finally, Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66–71).

While the text provides us with ample evidence of the disciples’ failure to embrace the kenotic nature of discipleship, the strongest evidence comes from what is absent in Mark’s Gospel. The narrative continues for another two chapters, but the

disciples are conspicuously absent. Here, at the crux of the entire Gospel, there is no sign of Jesus's disciples.

Women Disciples

Up to this point, we have been looking exclusively at the twelve men who were explicitly called and appointed by Jesus, but Jesus is not left without disciples. On the contrary, it is at this darkest hour when the true exemplars of discipleship are brought into the spotlight—the women. As Jesus hangs on the cross, we are introduced to three women by name (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome) who represent many who have followed him and provided for him since his ministry in Galilee (15:40–41). Two of these women are named as witnesses to Jesus's burial (15:47). Finally, the same three who witnessed the crucifixion are presented as the only witnesses to the empty tomb and the sole recipients and apostles of the gospel message (16:1–8). Couched in this final scene is the promised encounter with Jesus back in Galilee (16:7). “The ending of Mark points the readers to a new beginning—back to the beginning of the story, back to Galilee, to begin again the quest to follow Jesus faithfully.”²¹

With the reminder that the women had been with Jesus all along, this call to go back to the beginning draws our attention to the role women have played in the narrative as a whole. Upon doing so, it becomes clear that while the twelve are portrayed as constantly failing to live up to their call to discipleship, the women are portrayed as consistently exemplifying true discipleship. Peter's mother-in-law serves Jesus and the

21. Rhoads, *Mark as Story*, 142.

first disciples (1:29–31). A woman pursues Jesus through overwhelming opposition to find healing (5:27). The Syrophenician woman braves the crowds and bears humiliation to seek healing for her daughter from Jesus (7:24–30). The widow is singled out by Jesus as an exemplar of generosity (12:41–44). It is a woman who serves the priestly role of anointing the Anointed One without apparent regard for her own dignity or safety. Jesus publicly recognizes her as one whose service will be eternally tied to the Gospel story (14:3–9). Women are shown to have followed Christ to the cross after the male disciples had fled (15:40–41). Women attempt to perform a service for the buried Jesus (16:1–3). Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, three women are the only ones to receive an explicit commission to proclaim the resurrection and the only ones who receive the promise of future encounters with Jesus (16:7–8). After a survey of the exemplary roles women play throughout the Gospel of Mark, Holly J. Carey closes with this observation:

Female discipleship in Mark models what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the one who has brought the kingdom of God near. No longer does social status function as a primary determiner of a person’s role in the kingdom. It is rather her willingness to do as Jesus does—to actively respond to the message of the good news. This kind of discipleship is risky, as many of these women demonstrate in their interactions with Jesus and in their worship of God. Some have to resort to extreme measures. Some risk further ostracizing and physical danger. Some give all that they have. Each woman represents the cost of following Jesus. And nevertheless, she persisted.²²

Summative Observations Regarding Jesus’s Disciples

Since the women who followed Jesus offer little contrast to the way of Jesus, we must rely on the twelve men designated “disciples” for fruitful critique. While Jesus was grounded in a deep, intimate personal relationship with the Godhead, we have no direct

22. Holly J. Carey, “Women in Action: Models for Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 81 (2019): 448.

textual evidence that the disciples had any relationship with the Father or Spirit. Mark does not describe them as being empowered or led by the Spirit, nor does he show them praying. In fact, Mark gives two explicit examples when they failed to pray as they ought to have done.²³ Though Jesus exemplified a rhythm of engagement and retreat, we never see the disciples seeking solitude or willingly leaving Jesus's presence until he is arrested. Jesus served the crowds according to the will of the Father whereas the disciples often absorb the concerns of the crowds.²⁴ Jesus's lifestyle is one of radical humility, but the disciples demonstrate a desire to elevate themselves.²⁵

The manner in which the disciples handle fear and anxiety is particularly important to this project. As noted above, fear and anxiety cause the disciples to bend to the will of the crowds (1:36–37; 14:66–71), question Jesus's character (4:38–41), withdraw from communication (9:32), and eventually sever ties with Jesus (14:10, 50, 66–71).

Having portrayed the leadership of Christ as well as the disciples' failure to emulate such leadership, Mark's abrupt and unresolved ending raises questions for us in our present context, "What happens next? Will we as a leadership team choose to rise above the example of the disciples to faithfully follow Christ and embody Christlike

23. They fail to cast out the unclean spirit for lack of prayer (9:29), and when they are instructed to "keep awake and pray" (14:38) they are found sleeping instead.

24. The disciples react to the anxiety of the crowds by intruding on Jesus' solitude and prayer (1:38-39) they continue to embody cultural norms that are in direct opposition to the way of Jesus by excluding children (10:13), thinking more highly of the wealthy (10:23–27), and ignoring the infirm (10:46-48).

25. They argue about who is the greatest (9:33–34), assume superiority to the outsider (9:38), and request elevated status in the Kingdom (10:35).

leadership? If so, what steps can we take and what obstacles might we face?” It is to these questions we now turn in the next section.

Theoretical Construct

Keeping in mind Mark’s ideal portrait of Christian leadership and the obstacles that kept the disciples from attaining that ideal, we can now turn toward the theoretical framework of the project. We will begin with an exploration of how we as a leadership team can more faithfully embody Christlike leadership. This exploration sets the foundation for the primary objective of the intervention—to formulate a communal covenant with the leadership of South Fork.

The final sentence of South Fork’s vision statement reads “In all things, we will depend on God, follow Jesus and be led by the Spirit.” This sentence serves as the unifying goal the leadership has for the congregation. All the details of the vision statement are founded on the desire to depend on God, follow Jesus, and be led by the Spirit. But this goal cannot be realized unless the leadership commits itself to those same ideals. And since a major premise of this project is that spiritual growth is best understood in relational terms, our approach to spiritual growth will be especially attentive to the ways we behave in our relationships. We must therefore hold ourselves to the highest relational standards if South Fork is to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15). To help us clarify and formalize these standards, we now turn to Ruth Haley Barton’s book, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*.

Ruth Haley Barton on Communal Covenants

Ruth Haley Barton defines a covenant as “an agreement two or more people make with each other about how they will behave in their relationship.”²⁶ She explains that we need a written covenant because “a written covenant makes our commitment real on a level that mere conversation does not.”²⁷ It helps us give clarity to our commitment, remember and maintain our commitment, and keep from backsliding into old familiar habits.²⁸ She argues from a theological perspective that covenanting is God’s way of relating to humanity and that it is a spiritual practice that “opens us up to God’s transforming presence.”²⁹ Barton explains that there are two basic components of covenant-making. There is the content, and then there is the sign.³⁰ The content includes the values, practices, and rhythms to which we are committing ourselves, and the sign is a physical symbol that reminds the participants of the covenant they have made.

Barton provides a five-step process for formulating a communal covenant:

1. Identify and distill core values.
2. Identify practices that will help the group honor those values
3. Decide on realistic rhythms for these practices.
4. Refine into a final document
5. Ratify the covenant with a meaningful symbol

26 Barton, *Pursuing*, 154.

27. Barton, *Pursuing*, 153.

28. A very convincing list of how a leadership group may be tempted to backslide can be found in Barton, *Pursuing*, 157.

29. Barton, *Pursuing*, 156.

30. Barton, *Pursuing*, 159.

Our process was altered so that we could focus on a single category of relationships at a time. After the orientation meeting of week 1, we identified values and practices that are essential to our relationship with God in week 2. In week 3, we focused on our relationship with each other. At our fourth meeting, we identified values and practices that pertained to our relationship with the members of the congregation. On the following retreat, we employed Barton's discernment process to distill the values and practices and determine realistic rhythms of engagement. We paid particular attention to the prayer for indifference, when we, asked "God to make us indifferent to anything but the will of God relative to the matter we are gathered to discern."³¹ We will then formalize an initial draft of the document that will be reviewed and ratified at the final meeting. It is the goal of this project that the resulting covenant will empower the leadership of South Fork to embody the relational values and practices that Jesus taught and modeled. However lofty this aim may be, we must also pay careful attention to destructive forces that could potentially hamper progress toward our goal.

Anxiety and Leadership

We now turn our attention to the obstacles that frequently sabotage relationships. If we compare the theological conclusions drawn from the life and teachings of Mark's Jesus to the summative observations regarding Jesus's disciples, it is clear that there is a substantial divide between Jesus's ideal and the disciples' practice. To help understand how well-intended followers of Christ can exhibit such inconsistent behavior, I utilize *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* by Peter Steinke and *Failure of Nerve* by

31. Barton, *Pursuing*, 188.

Edwin Friedman. Both works rely heavily upon the Bowen Family Systems Theory, which is succinctly summarized in the following excerpt from the *Sage Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*:

Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human interaction that focuses on families as an emotional unit connected within and across generations....How well people cope with emotional anxiety and how much they are negatively influenced by the larger family is described by the concept of *differentiation of self*. . . [Bowen's theory] centers around two opposing forces: togetherness and individuality. In Bowenian terms, it can be viewed as the tension between fusion and differentiation.³²

Jesus and the Differentiated Self

In chapter 1, I gave the basic assumption that Jesus serves as our primary model for Christian leadership. Bowen, Friedman, and Steinke hold up the “differentiated self” as perhaps the most important standard for a leader. I argue that when viewed in this light, Jesus stands out as the archetypical self-differentiated leader.

Bowen describes the differentiated self as “one who can maintain emotional objectivity while in the midst of an emotional system in turmoil, yet at the same time actively relate to key people in the system.”³³ There can be little doubt that Jesus’s context is “an emotional system in turmoil.” In fact, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where emotional turmoil would be greater. Jesus is the focal point of incredibly strong and conflicting emotions. Jesus elicits people’s hope (1:40) and fear (4:41), their devotion (11:8–10) and their opposition (3:6), their faith (5:34) and their doubt (5:39–40), their

32. Shannon B. Dermer, "Bowen Family Systems Theory." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, eds. Jon Carlson, and Shannon Dermer (Sage Publications, 2016). http://ezproxy.acu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sagemfac/bowen_family_systems_theory/0?institutionId=4602.

33. Murray Bowen, *Family Theory in Clinical Practice* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1978), 485.

courage (2:3-5) and their dismay (10:22). Through all the emotional turbulence, Jesus's emotional objectivity allows him to navigate without deviating from his course. He understands what he needs to do and does not let the desires of the crowds dissuade him (1:37-38). Jesus clearly has the ability to stand apart from the emotional system surrounding him.

At the same time, Jesus could hardly be described as aloof or unconcerned. Unlike the Pharisees, he does not distinguish himself by his separateness but by his closeness. Aside from his regular times of solitary prayer, Jesus is consistently with his disciples and often with large crowds. He welcomes not only the Jews, men, leaders, healthy and wealthy, but also the Gentiles (e.g., 7:31-8:9), women (e.g., 14:3-9), outcasts (e.g., 2:15-17), sick (e.g., 6:56), and poor (e.g., 12:42). Jesus demonstrates tremendous compassion for the people (e.g., 8:2) while also challenging the status quo (e.g., 7:6-13). The following description of the self-differentiated leader from Edwin Friedman clearly describes what we see of Jesus in Mark's Gospel:

Someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected and, therefore, can maintain a modifying, nonanxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in response to the automatic reactivity of others and, therefore, be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.³⁴

34. Edwin Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 1999), Kindle edition, "Introduction: The Problem with Leadership."

Or as Steinke puts it, Jesus has the “capacity to take ‘I positions’ based on principles and to stay connected to others in a responsible way.”³⁵ Such leadership is rare for reasons discussed in the next section.

Anxiety and Undifferentiated Leadership

We often see people in leadership positions who exhibit characteristics that are indicative of an anxious, undifferentiated leader. Steinke lists the following characteristics of an undifferentiated leader versus those of a differentiated leader.³⁶

Undifferentiated	Differentiated
Accommodates	Takes a Stand
Focuses on Others’ Behaviors*	Focuses on Own Behaviors*
Connects Reactively*	Connects Responsively*
Sets Vague, Nebulous Goals	Sets Clear Goals
Seeks Security	Seeks Challenge

Figure 3. Undifferentiated versus Differentiated Leadership. *Source:* Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 28-30. (Asterisks denote my own wording not original to Steinke.)

By observing these characteristics, it becomes clear that the well-intentioned disciples do not successfully embrace the differentiated leadership of Jesus. The primary difference between differentiated leaders and undifferentiated ones is how they manage anxiety. Anxiety is always present to some degree but exponentially more so in complex

35. Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 27.

36. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 28–30. Phrases marked with an asterisk are my own paraphrase and not original to Steinke.

relational systems such as congregations. Steinke describes two kinds of anxiety: acute and chronic.

Acute anxiety is situational and time-based. It is a momentary loss of self-composure and poise. As the reactivity scales down, the “fever” quickly runs its course. People are back on track again. Chronic anxiety is a more powerful infectant. Chronic anxiety is perpetually present in someone or structured into a relationship.³⁷

It is worth noting that, as he provides examples of each, he points to the disciples in both cases. Examples of chronic anxiety include the Israelites, Pharisees, Hellenists, Jews and disciples, all of whom “prefigure the complainers in the contemporary church.”³⁸ As an example of acute anxiety, he points to Peter’s denial of Jesus.³⁹ Anxiety has the tendency to cause our thinking process to bypass the left prefrontal cortex (responsible for higher-level processing and thoughtful response) and give the reins to the amygdala (responsible for the reptilian fight-or-flight reactivity).⁴⁰ An undifferentiated leader is one who is in a state of chronic anxiety and whose behaviors flow from the reactivity of the amygdala more than the responsiveness of the left prefrontal cortex. While the amygdala serves a vital purpose in human survival, it will often “protect us not only from bodily harm but also from challenges to our world of insight and meaning.”⁴¹

37. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 10.

38. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 11–12.

39. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 10.

40. For more on how anxiety affects these two areas of the brain, see Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 50–64.

41. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 63–64.

When leaders are anxious, they lose their capacity to challenge the status quo and hence ability to lead in any meaningful way. More to the point of this project, and as demonstrated by the disciples, poorly managed anxiety corrodes each of the three categories of relationships under discussion—with God, with each other, and with the crowds. It is essential, therefore, that we are aware of the subtle yet detrimental effects anxiety can have on our present efforts.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 demonstrated the need for the leadership of South Fork to grow in our ability to lead the congregation into greater spiritual growth. Chapter 1 further demonstrated the need for a communal covenant to set the foundation for the desired spiritual growth. Chapter 2 described the theological construct of spiritual leadership as seen through the lens of Mark's Gospel. We looked at Jesus's relationship within the Trinity, with the disciples, and with the crowds for values and practices that serve as a model for our relationships with God, each other, and the congregation. We paid particular attention to Jesus's teachings on the unique qualities of Christian leadership that make it fundamentally different from other models of leadership. We observed how the disciples' behavior contrasted sharply with the ideal set forth by Jesus.

Chapter 2 also laid out the theoretical construct of the project intervention based on Ruth Haley Barton's work in *Pursuing God's Will Together*. We then turned to the works of Peter Steinke and Edwin Friedman to uncover some of the destructive relational forces that likely contributed to the disciples' failure and have the potential to adversely affect relationships in our present context. With the foundation of our project thus laid,

chapter 3 will describe the methodology employed to formulate the desired communal covenant.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In chapter 1, I described the South Fork Church of Christ context and made the case that its leadership would benefit from a communal covenant. In chapter 2, I laid the theological and theoretical foundations for the proposed intervention. In chapter 3, I describe the methodology and content of the intervention itself.

The purpose of the intervention was to formulate a communal covenant for the leadership of South Fork. The intervention was neither true participatory action research (PAR) nor wholly principal investigator research (PIR).¹ Rather, this project followed a modified PAR as described below by Karen Szala-Meneok and Lynne Lohfeld:

In the third model, researchers are not outside experts conducting a study. Rather, they are specialized team members, bringing skills that serve as catalysts that can help community members clarify problems and develop effective solutions. One of their jobs is to demystify the research process and put as much control as possible over a project into the hands of community partners.²

As researcher, I functioned as the “specialized team member” who brought knowledge, resources, and experience to bear on the ministry context. I worked with the other

1. “Participatory action research (cPAR) is a research strategy whereby the community under study defines the problem, analyzes it, and solves it. The people own the information and may contract the services of academic researchers to assist in this process. In classic principal investigator research (cPIR), the professional or academic researcher sets the research agenda, makes all decisions about the research question to be pursued, data collection, methods of analysis, and how and where to disseminate findings.” (Karen Szala-Meneok and Lynne Lohfeld, “The Charms and Challenges of an Academic Qualitative Researcher Doing Participatory Action Research,” in *Doing Ethnography: Studying Everyday Life*, ed. Dorothy Pawluch, William Shaffir and Charlene Miall [Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2005], 52).

2. Szala-Meneok, “The Charms and Challenges,” 56.

members of the team to clarify the problem and develop the solution as stated in previous chapters.

Overview of the Project Intervention

The project took place over a series of sessions from January 9 to February 25, 2019. It began with a series of four ninety-minute sessions that took place in the church's conference room on consecutive Wednesday evenings. After these four sessions, we gathered on Friday, February 8 for a full-day retreat at Carolina Bible Camp. We rented a lodge for the day where we were able to spend our time together practicing some guided spiritual disciplines before formulating the communal covenant. Due to scheduling concerns, the final meeting was scheduled two weeks later than originally planned, on February 27, when all participants could attend.

Description of the Participants

The participant pool is delimited to me as minister and investigator, the five elders who currently serve South Fork, and the youth and worship minister who joined the team in September of 2017. This is a particular type of purposive sampling that utilizes a participant group that has been chosen by someone else. In this case, the South Fork congregation has chosen the elders and has appointed committees to select the ministers. The elders gave final approval of the minister selection.³ With the selection processes already in place, the participant pool represents a regrettable lack of diversity in terms of gender and race. There is, however, a significant diversity among the participants in terms of age, wealth, education, and occupation. Our ages range from young twenties to

3. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 83–84.

upper sixties, and there are two ministers, two doctors, a plumber, a pilot, and an accountant—each with the education appropriate for their professions.

Description of the Project Sessions

Our first meeting was on January 9.⁴ The purpose of this session was to introduce the primary concepts of the intervention and to orient the participants to the process. I first explained the proposed schedule of the project. I then described the doctor of ministry program and the specific type of research involved in the project thesis. I gave a brief introduction to qualitative research and my role as the principle investigator/specialized team member.

After introduction of the general concept and process, I informed the participants that our purpose would be to formulate a communal covenant for the leadership of South Fork. I explained the concept of a communal covenant, why we would benefit from having one, the relational categories on which we would focus, the primary resources we would be using, and parameters of the project. I described my approach to the Gospel of Mark and Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* as it relates to this project. In discussing Barton's book, I spent several minutes describing the difference between spiritual discernment and a secular decision-making process. I also fielded questions posed by the group and had the group fill out the informed consent forms. Finally, I assigned homework for each participant to complete before the next meeting. Each of us was to read the Gospel of Mark while paying special attention to Jesus's relationship with

4. All participants but one were present for this meeting. Kyle was taking a graduate course in Abilene, but I was able to catch him up in the office before the next meeting.

the Father and the Holy Spirit. I listed several key verses and provided a few questions to stimulate their thinking.

We met for our second meeting on January 16.⁵ The primary focus of this meeting was to consider Jesus's relationship with the Father and the Spirit. We thoroughly discussed Jesus's baptism (1:9–11) and what that event revealed about the identity of Jesus and his relationship with the other two persons of the Trinity. We noted that Jesus was immediately sent by the Spirit into solitude and prayer before beginning his public ministry (1:12). We discussed Jesus's habit of prayer that seemed to intensify at key moments in his ministry. We also noticed that Jesus was particularly defensive of the Holy Spirit (3:28–30) and of his "Father's House" (11:17). I asked for the group's reflections on overall values and practices we see in Jesus regarding his relationship with the Father and the Spirit and what that might mean for our own values and practices. Before ending the meeting, I asked everyone to read Mark again, this time focusing on Jesus's relationship with the disciples.

Our third meeting took place on January 23.⁶ Our primary focus for this meeting was on Jesus's relationship with his disciples. I began the meeting by reviewing what had been discussed the previous meeting as well as the values and practices we deemed important for us to adopt for ourselves. After approving the minutes, we then turned our attention to significant moments in Jesus's interactions with the disciples. We had a prolonged discussion on the calling of the first disciples (1:16–20), the sending of the

5. All seven participants were present for session 2.

6. One elder was absent for this meeting.

disciples (6:7–13), the stormy crossing (6:45–52), and Peter’s confession of Christ and subsequent rebuke (8:27–9:1). We then discussed the values and practices we witnessed in Jesus’s relationship with the disciples and how that might inform our relationships with each other. For homework, I asked the group to read Mark a third time while focusing on Jesus’s relationship with the crowds.

At the beginning of our fourth meeting on January 30, I reviewed our discussion from the previous week.⁷ I reported my account of the values and practices we had discerned from Jesus’s relationship with his disciples and how we might honor these values and practices in our relationships with each other. After approving the notes from week 3, we began to explore Jesus’s relationship with the crowds. Having provided a thorough annotated list of relevant Scriptures for their consideration, I asked for their reflections on any verses that stood out to them as particularly helpful for our present undertaking. The majority of the discussion centered on the tensions between presence and distance, between compassion and confrontation, and between going with the crowds and staying true to his mission. We noted that our values and practices should also seek to balance those tensions. We must be connected but not enmeshed. And while we need to have compassion for others, we also need to stay focused on God’s calling for us as leaders of a church.

Throughout these four weeks, we worked through Barton’s first two steps as outlined in chapter 2 (identify and distill core values and identify practices that will help the group honor those values) with some preliminary discussion of step 3 (decide on

7. Two elders were absent for this meeting.

realistic rhythms for these practices). On Tuesday, February 5, I provided the elders with a compiled summary of what we had discussed thus far so we would all have plenty of time to reflect on the values and practices we would want to include in the communal covenant we would be formulating on February 8. Also included in my communications were two sample covenants as examples of the type of document we were looking to compose.

The retreat opened with an extended time of guided prayer and solitude (a continuation of step 3).⁸ At the conclusion of this time, we ate together with the encouragement to speak only what is useful for building up one another. We then reconvened for the purpose of formulating a communal covenant based on the values and practices that had arisen from our study of Mark, our experience with discerned spiritual practices and rhythms, and our cultural context. I recorded these values and practices as a preliminary draft of our communal covenant and provided copies to all of the team members for their evaluation later that afternoon. On Monday I sent a revised draft of the covenant based on the minimal feedback I had received on the original draft.

I had originally planned for us to have our final meeting on February 13, but was told that the date would need to be changed to February 27 due to a few of the elders' travel plans. That meeting never took place. Instead, I received a call on Monday morning, February 25, telling me that the elders wanted to meet with me that day. We met at 2:00 p.m. when I was told that I would no longer be working with South Fork,

8. All members were present at the retreat with the exception of one of the elders that had also been absent from session 4.

effective immediately. This development had a severe limiting effect on how the communal covenant would be lived out, if at all.

Evaluation Methodology

In this section I will describe the methodology employed to evaluate the content of the intervention and analyze the findings in comparison with the various sources described below. First, I will report the method of data collection, and then I will describe how the data were analyzed.

Data Collection

Evaluation of the project will utilize data triangulation from insiders, outsiders, and me as the researcher.⁹ The elders and ministers provided the insider evaluation during the weekend retreat. The unforeseen circumstance of being terminated prevented the final group interview from taking place. The outsider evaluation was provided by Phil Stapp, Carson Reed, and Jerry Taylor. These were chosen based on their expertise (each having a terminal degree in a relevant field), their relative familiarity with the ministry context under consideration, and their demonstrated commitment to the spiritual growth of congregations. Outsider evaluation utilized both a questionnaire and a follow-up conversation as needed.¹⁰ As the researcher, I provided the third source of data in the form of field notes taken throughout the six sessions. I followed the protocol described in

9. "The use of a variety of data sources in a study." Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 73.

10. See Appendix D for outsider evaluation questionnaire.

Qualitative Research in that I, as researcher, made initial brief field notes, expanded the field notes, and then converted to a narrative description for data analysis.¹¹

Data Analysis

The coding method I used is a modified version of Tesch's eight steps (Sensing, 204-5) that utilized color rather than an alpha-numerical system. I compiled a list of preliminary codes based on my anticipated outcomes from the theological and theoretical constructs. I used the three primary colors to represent the three major categories: relationship with the Trinity, relationship with each other, and relationship with the community. Secondary and tertiary colors were assigned to more nuanced subsets of data as themes emerge. Data was triangulated between the three evaluation sources looking for themes, slippages, and silences (Sensing, 197) among the various evaluators. I looked for the same criteria in comparing the theological and theoretical constructs articulated in chapter two and the covenant resulting from the intervention.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 described the context and identified the lack of a communal covenant for the leadership as the problem on which the intervention would focus. Chapter 2 laid the theological and theoretical framework for the intervention. In the present chapter, I described the intervention and the evaluation methodology that will be applied to the intervention. The following chapter will analyze and report the results of the intervention through the lenses of the three sources of evaluation.

11. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 182–83. The protocol I used is provided in appendix F.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

After analyzing the ministry context and specifying the problem of a lack of a communal covenant among the leadership of South Fork (chapter 1), establishing the theological and theoretical constructs from which the intervention proceeded (chapter 2), and describing the intervention process used by the participants to formulate the communal covenant (chapter 3), I now provide in chapter 4 the findings of the intervention as well as an assessment of the relevant relational dynamics. In the first section of this chapter, I report the findings of the intervention and analyze the covenant against the field notes, the retreat content, the theological and theoretical constructs, and the outside evaluators. In the second section I describe relational behaviors and patterns that adversely impacted the leadership team and limited the application of the covenant.

Evaluation of Findings

In this section, I describe the field notes from the three meetings when the respective relational categories were discussed. Next, I report the content of the weekend retreat in regard to the predetermined categories of relationship with God, relationship with each other, and relationship with the wider community as well as the unanticipated category of self-care. I then analyze the contents of the covenant in light of the field notes from the sessions and the content of the retreat. I next consider the document in light of the theological and theoretical constructs. Finally, I report the outside evaluators’

observations regarding the degree to which the covenant reflects the values and practices of Jesus in Mark, its potential usefulness for spiritual leadership groups, and the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention.

Field Notes

Relationship with God

The field notes from session 2 coincide well with the covenant. During that session, we discussed the values and practices we witnessed in Jesus's relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus's dependence on prayer and Scripture dominated the conversation with nearly twice as many mentions as any other value or practice. We recognized the way Jesus relied upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit in his mission and his intimacy with the Father. The notes also recounted a few comments regarding the way Jesus drew strength and power from his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Each of these values and practices were well represented in the final document.

Relationship with Each Other

Session 3 sought to describe the values and practices Jesus espoused in his relationship with his disciples. Although Jesus's power was mentioned more frequently than any other aspect, it would be misleading to suggest that the group as a whole recognized power as being more significant than the other themes. Only one elder of the seven team members brought up power in our discussion, but he did so eleven times. As such, I will treat it as the preoccupation of an individual rather than a communally discerned value.

Of greater importance to the group as a whole was the participatory aspect of Jesus's relationship with his disciples. We discussed at length how Jesus invited the

disciples to participate in every aspect of his ministry. We also noticed how Jesus trusted his disciples with meaningful ministry long before they understood the nature of Jesus's mission. Jesus's compassion for his disciples also became clear in our discussions.

Lastly, we noticed that Jesus sought to keep communication lines open even when the disciples held back because of shame or confusion. These communally discerned values and practices are evident in the covenant

Relationship with Community

The task of session 4 was to discern values and practices for us to adopt in our relationship with the community—meaning both the rest of the congregation and those not presently connected to South Fork. Two interconnected themes dominated our conversations: the rhythm of engagement and retreat and the posture of love and compassion. We recognized that while Jesus spent much time with the crowds, he had boundaries and would often withdraw from the crowds. We discussed the love and compassion Jesus had toward the crowds and individuals he encountered. These themes (rhythm of engagement and retreat and the posture of love and compassion) are expressed clearly in the covenant.

Retreat Content

Relationship with God

As we gathered to discern which of the observed values and practices we ought to adopt for ourselves, our discussions were almost entirely focused on two categories:

1) spending time in prayer and Scripture, and 2) relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's mission. It is striking that love for God was mentioned only once as was the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It seems that when we are merely

observing Christ, we are more open-minded toward the things that cannot be quantified. When our attention turns toward application, we focus more on things that are concrete.

Relationship with Each Other

The major difference between the field notes from session 3 and the retreat is the lack of any mention of power. This is likely due to the absence of the elder who had frequently mentioned power in session 3. We picked up the threads of participation, trust and compassion and reinforced the belief that those three values should be lived out in our community. While the theme of power disappeared between session 3 and the retreat, the desire for communal prayer coalesced.

Relationship with Community

The themes discussed in session 4 were well represented at the retreat. We talked a great deal about the need for love and compassion while also practicing a healthy rhythm of engagement and retreat. In addition to these we covered new territory by discussing the importance of clear, open, and regular communication with the congregation as a whole. This value and its relevant practices did not emerge directly from our study of Mark or of Barton. Rather, the value emerged from the experience and discernment of the leadership team.

Since the congregational context is nowhere evident in Mark's Gospel, it is natural that we would discern values and/or practices that are in line with Mark's Gospel though not explicitly stated therein. In the present case, the congregation is a category that shares qualities with both the disciples and the crowds. The congregation is comprised largely of people who have explicitly committed themselves to following Jesus (through baptism) and are partners in the ministry of Jesus. As such, the members

of South Fork who are not members of the leadership team are nonetheless deserving of the kind of communication values and practices we discussed at the retreat.¹

Care of Self

A separate “care of self” category emerged at the retreat that was not represented in the field notes from session 4. I see at least two possible reasons for this occurrence. The first reason is that many of the values and practices described in the three established categories (relationship with God, with each other, and with the community) are also important values and practices for self-care. Prayer, healthy relationships, engagement, retreat—these are all vital aspects of caring for self. The second reason is that our twenty-first-century context requires us to be mindful of distinct challenges. Our lifestyles are decidedly more sedentary than those of the average first-century Palestinian. As such, we must make more conscious efforts to exercise our bodies than did the first-century followers of Christ. Mark does not describe the disciples as needing to support a family² whereas each of us has a family that demands our emotional and financial support. We must therefore prioritize the care of our families through the management of our time, attention, and finances. The participant group therefore discerned the necessity of adding the category “care of self.”

1. This is in contrast with Jesus’ enigmatic communication with the crowds (4:34).

2. The minor exception is Peter’s mother-in-law (1:30–31).

Covenant

Relationship with God

The covenant expresses two primary values that are vital in our relationship with God. The first value is to foster a loving relationship with, and delighting in, God. This value is to be lived out through personal daily prayer, weekly times of silence and solitude, engaging Scripture on multiple levels, and minimizing distractions. The second value listed is a commitment to intentional reliance on God together as a group. Honoring this value includes focusing on spiritual growth and attending to the Spirit's leading, beginning each meeting with substantial time in prayer for discernment and guidance, quarterly meetings focused entirely on prayer and Scripture, and an annual retreat to review and renew our commitments.

Relationship with Each Other

In our relationships with each other, the covenant determines three values to be essential: loving one another as Christ loves us, accountability to one another, and respecting one another. We are to demonstrate love for each other by putting the needs of others ahead of our own, being patient and graceful, making time for one another, and listening attentively to each other. We commit to fostering accountability by maintaining a safe environment where each of us may be open and honest and encourage each other to live out our Christian commitments. We will show honor and respect through strong communication habits—attentive listening, honest speech, prompt responses, expressions of gratitude, and inviting various viewpoints. We will also show respect by handling conflict in a way that assumes the best in one another and avoids toxic triangulation.

Relationship with Community

The covenant embraces two primary values that are to guide our relationships with the congregation and community. First, we will prioritize the spiritual growth of members above other concerns. This value includes a commitment to leading by example in how we follow Christ and model spiritual discernment, an orientation toward service, and an effort to maintain a healthy rhythm of engaging and retreating. Second, we will do our best to strengthen our relationships with the congregation. This includes excellence in communication with particular emphases on listening and expressions of gratitude, implementation of regular formal communications, and meetings with the deacons individually to thank them, encourage them, and pray over them while entrusting them to do the ministry to which they have been called.

Care of Self

In addition to the three relational categories above, the covenant also expresses the need for the leadership team to practice self-care by pursuing a healthy lifestyle and maintaining healthy relationships outside of our roles as congregational leaders. The covenant lists healthy eating, exercise, sleep, and money management as part of a healthy lifestyle. Healthy relationships include a commitment to family and friends as well as a commitment to loving others as Christ loves us. These values and practices did not directly arise from our study of Mark's Gospel, but rather from the communal discernment that took place during the retreat that will be discussed more fully below.

Theological and Theoretical Constructs

When comparing the final document to the constructs described in chapter 2, I find the covenant to have a high level of integrity and authenticity. The covenant is

neither a facsimile of our observations in Mark nor an exact replication of Barton's process. Even so, I find that the covenant is a faithful application of the values and practices seen in Mark's Jesus and that it was formulated through a process consistent with Barton's contributions. For example, the communal practices described in the covenant are not readily apparent in the Gospel of Mark but are argued for in *Pursuing God's Will Together*.³ Likewise, the absolute authority we observe in Jesus and the perfect allegiance he demands from his disciples must be summarily rejected as a vastly inappropriate relational dynamic among members of any human leadership team. It is therefore necessary to refrain from a copy-and-paste transcription of our observations of Jesus in favor of a more nuanced adaptation that befits our present context. Additionally, I adapted Barton's covenant creation process to fit the goals of this intervention. Given these qualifications, I find that the intervention adhered well to the theoretical construct to formulate a covenant that faithfully represents Markan values and practices in a culturally appropriate manner.

Outsider Evaluations

I asked three individuals not currently associated with South Fork Church of Christ to evaluate the covenant. Each person was chosen for a number of reasons including a terminal degree in the field of ministry and relative familiarity with the ministry context. Carson Reed, DMin; Jerry Taylor, DMin; and Phil Stapp, DMin; all agreed to contribute their expertise by evaluating the covenant as to 1) its faithfulness to

3. E.g., Barton, *Pursuing*, 187–200.

Mark's Jesus, 2) its potential as a guiding document for church leaders, and 3) specific strengths and weaknesses of the covenant.

Each of these outside evaluators has obtained a terminal degree in ministry and has decades of full-time ministry experience. Carson Reed preached for thirty years before coming to work with Abilene Christian University. He is the director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Abilene Christian University and the executive director of the Siburt Institute for Church Ministry, through which he also serves as a church health consultant. Both Jerry Taylor and Phil Stapp have ministry experience in the North Carolina Piedmont where South Fork is situated, and Phil has an intimate knowledge of the South Fork Church of Christ. Jerry Taylor is also the director of the Carl Spain Center on Race Studies and Spiritual Action.

Faithfulness to Mark's Jesus

All three evaluators recognized values and practices in the covenant that reflect the example of Mark's Jesus. While Carson Reed lamented the difficulty in comparing Mark's Jesus to a contemporary covenant, he acknowledges the value of looking for normative values in Mark's Jesus and seeking to reflect those values in our contemporary context. He affirms that both the covenant and Mark's Jesus take seriously 1) silence, prayer, and times of disengagement, 2) relationships, and 3) the call for servant leadership. Phil Stapp sees a three-part cycle of self-care (in which he includes private prayer), developing relationships with his ministry team, and public ministry well represented in both Mark's Jesus and in the covenant. This cycle is always in service of Jesus' mission both in Mark and in the covenant. Jerry Taylor recognizes that "The values expressed in the covenant are the values that reside at the core of genuine

Christian community.” He goes on to emphasize the importance of being intentional about living out the practices described therein.

Usefulness for the Spiritual Leadership of Churches

This intervention aims to provide a resource that will be useful for church leadership groups. More specifically, the covenant is designed by and for the elders and ministers of South Fork Church of Christ. When I was terminated near the conclusion of the intervention, the potential usefulness of the covenant for its primary context was severely diminished. With this in mind, I asked the outside evaluators to analyze the covenant’s usefulness for church leadership groups in general. Each evaluator affirmed that the covenant would be useful for such purposes to various degrees.

Carson Reed cautions that such a covenant requires an act of the will and can only be useful to the extent that they are practiced. Should a leadership team commit fully to the values and practices contained in the covenant, Reed agrees that it would indeed be beneficial for spiritual leadership. In our follow up conversation, Reed acknowledged the lamentable reality that not only did the leadership of South Fork not commit to the covenant; they precluded the possibility of ever doing so.

Jerry Taylor asserts that “adherence to this covenant will empower church leaders for the task of spiritual leadership.” He goes on to note the unfortunate tendency for church leadership to embody the values and practices of the corporate world rather than those befitting spiritual leadership as described in the covenant. Taylor even goes so far to say that “Christian leadership can only be qualified as Christian if it is totally dedicated to the values stated in the covenant that aim at strengthening relationships between leaders, lay people, and God.”

Phil Stapp affirms that the covenant will be able to keep leaders attuned to the spiritual health of the congregation rather than getting bogged down in simple decision making. Then, as decisions are inevitably called for, the covenant will help them do so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Strengths

The evaluators recognized numerous strengths inherent in the covenant. Even more encouraging was Jerry Taylor's insistence that "every church leadership that claims to be serious about rooting their followers in God's life will see the potential strengths in this covenant." Taylor contends that the covenant's emphasis on love and community is especially pertinent in our culture of rugged individualism. Such individualism stands at odds with the kind of Christian spirituality required for church leadership. The covenant reminds leaders that they are a part of a "robust Christian community" and that effective leadership is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Phil Stapp admires the focus on the spiritual and servant nature of leadership and the goal to model and empower others to do the same. Carson Reed appreciates the covenant's structure and its inclusivity of persons from "various styles and backgrounds," by which he means that the covenant is intended to extend well beyond its initial participants.

Weaknesses

The three evaluators combined to describe a total of three potential weaknesses of the covenant. Phil Stapp cautions that, given our predilection for checklists in the Churches of Christ, this covenant could easily be treated as just another checklist if approached from a worldly point of view. Carson Reed argues that the covenant would benefit from concretization and increased specificity when it comes to the practices

described therein. Jerry Taylor's critique relates to the process rather than the content. He believes that the process operated on the false assumption that Christian leaders are spiritually mature just because they hold positional titles. The process could be improved by first equipping leaders with the language of spiritual formation and, more importantly, by guiding them through spiritual formation practices.

Summative Evaluation

I find that the intervention was highly successful in accomplishing the purpose for which it was designed—to formulate a communal covenant for the elders and ministers of South Fork Church of Christ. The resulting covenant is a faithful representation of our observations in the Gospel of Mark, an authentic product of the kind of communal discernment proposed by Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together*, and a valuable resource for congregational leadership teams. The outside experts have found the covenant to have tremendous value with minimal weaknesses. Even so, the covenant is not likely to be a valuable resource for its intended participants. In the next section, I will explore the relational dynamics that contributed to this regrettable outcome.

Relational Dynamics

In the first part of this chapter, I showed that the communal covenant is faithful to our understanding of Christian leadership as seen through Mark's Jesus, is an authentic product of the team's contributions, resulting from following Ruth Haley Barton's guidance in *Pursuing God's Will Together*, and is a valuable tool to aid leadership groups as they seek to lead congregations in the way of Christ. I cannot, however, provide any evidence that the covenant will fulfill its intended purpose at South Fork Church of Christ. My dismissal two days before the scheduled ratification of the covenant precluded

my participation with the leadership team and makes it highly unlikely that they would use this covenant to structure their relationship with the new preaching minister. Like the disciples in Mark, congregational leadership teams continue to be limited in their ability to follow Christ's example. I found that South Fork is no exception.

The second part of this chapter explores the observed behaviors that, when viewed through the interpretive frameworks provided by Friedman and Steinke, can be shown to have a severely negative impact on the leaders' interpersonal relationships. While this exploration involves some inherent conjecture, it is founded on specific observed behaviors and well-established leadership principles to posit some plausible hypotheses regarding the relational dynamics at work. Since Steinke and Friedman's work is focused largely on the leader's ability to cope with anxiety, I first present observations that indicate the likelihood that the leaders of South Fork had been exposed to extreme levels of anxiety during my tenure and the year preceding my arrival at South Fork. I then describe observed behaviors that reveal the negative effects brought about this elevated anxiety.

Evidence of Heightened Anxiety

Keeping in mind Steinke and Friedman's focus on the role anxiety plays in relational dysfunction, I describe the anxiety triggers to which South Fork, both leaders and as a whole, have been exposed. Steinke lists thirteen "triggers of anxiety for congregations."⁴ Of these thirteen triggers, South Fork has been subjected to nine during my three-year tenure. I list below the relevant triggers provided by Steinke.

4. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 15–18.

1. Money: South Fork has incurred a budget deficit each year since 2016. This shortage has been exacerbated by several expensive maintenance issues. Roof leaks, treacherously loose carpet, and HVAC failures have been consistent drains on South Fork's meager budget.
2. Pastor's leadership style: There were some families who left before I arrived because they believed the elders hired a minister too young for the congregation. There were many who wanted each of my public prayers to end with the words, "In Jesus' name, amen." Several expected the preacher to explicitly mention all five elements of an invitation.⁵ Some wanted a preacher that would openly support Republican candidates.⁶ Some wanted an extroverted minister and others simply preferred the previous minister. My leadership style did not fulfill these expectations.
3. Growth/survival: Attendance decreased by roughly one-third over the three years I was the pulpit minister. While a decrease in membership was expected due to the changes in staff and changes in direction, such a sharp decline was deeply unsettling for many.
4. Trauma, transition: Having enjoyed two decades of relative stability, South Fork has undergone multiple significant changes in the space of three years. The appointing of new elders, the resignation of the preacher, the resignation

5. Many South Fork members expect the preacher to recite "Hear, believe, confess, repent, and be baptized for the remission of sins" as part of the invitation to be offered after every sermon.

6. This was never stated as such, but people expressed their desire for me to be more vocal about opposing abortion laws and more supportive of Donald Trump and other Republican candidates.

of two elders, the hiring of a new pulpit minister, the firing of the associate minister, the resignation of the youth minister, and the hiring of a new youth minister combined to produce an exceptionally high level of anxiety.

5. Staff conflict/resignation: When the associate minister was fired, it was presented to the congregation as the minister's choice to retire. This event was both the result of conflict within the leadership team and the cause of conflict within the membership of South Fork. The conflict among members was exacerbated by their perception of miscommunication from the leaders.
6. Old and new: The preaching minister and the youth minister were hired as part of a desire to bring about the changes outlined in South Fork's vision statement.⁷ While these changes were deemed important by the elders, the listening sessions revealed that a significant portion of the membership was not of the same mind.
7. Contemporary and traditional worship: The youth minister was also charged with taking a major role in leading worship. He brought with him a wide variety of new songs as well as a worship style that was uncomfortable for more traditional members.
8. Gap between the ideal and the real: As indicated by the appreciative inquiry, there is a significant desire at South Fork to serve the community and bring people to Christ as stated in the vision statement. The listening sessions,

7. See *appendix B*.

however, revealed a stronger investment in maintaining traditional patterns and modes of worship.⁸

9. Building, construction, space and territory: The church facilities are over sixty years old and are constantly in need of repair. The desire for new facilities is far greater than the financial means to accomplish that desire.

Along with these nine congregation-wide anxiety triggers, there have been several personal anxiety triggers among the individuals that comprise the leadership team and their close relatives. These include death, birth, divorce, mental health issues, and retirement. With so many potential sources of anxiety, it is clear that the leadership team's ability to lead well would depend greatly on whether it could manage its anxiety in a healthy manner. It is my belief that the leadership team was not able to effectively manage its anxiety and was therefore limited in its ability to lead well. In the next section, I discuss the observations that contribute to this assessment.

Effects of Anxiety on the Leadership Team

If the purpose of this section were to describe all the ways the elders demonstrated Christlikeness, I could provide a lengthy list. I truly believed, and still believe, that the elders at South Fork genuinely strive to follow Christ and are largely successful in that endeavor. I have been particularly impressed with their consistent care for members in need. Whether the need is physical, mental, financial, emotional, or legal, the elders at South Fork have repeatedly proven that they are willing to help members regardless of

8. The maintenance of the traditional schedule (Sunday morning worship and class, Sunday evening worship, Wednesday night class) and the arguments against celebrating Christmas and Easter consistently encumbered efforts to reach out through small groups, special holiday celebrations, recovery groups, etc.

their perceived potential to reciprocate. I am also grateful for and impressed by their willingness to participate in the intervention. Throughout the project, I perceived a genuine openness and willingness to grow in their spiritual leadership.

That being said, the purpose of this present inquiry is to indicate anxiety-induced relational behaviors that limited the effectiveness of the intervention. As such, I describe below various behaviors and behavioral patterns among both elders and ministers that I perceived to be unhealthy. Peter Steinke indicates three categories of negative effects that anxiety can have on behavior: the repressive, the infectious, and the reactive.⁹ When considering the observed behaviors at South Fork, I find too much overlap for these categories to be of much use.¹⁰ I find it more helpful in my present analysis to discuss behaviors under three categorical headings: 1) constancy, 2) communication, and 3) personal responsibility.

Constancy

South Fork entrusts the leadership team with the task of charting a course for the congregation. The “Vision for South Fork” detailed the course chosen by the elders. Heightened anxiety in a congregation makes constancy in supporting such a course more difficult for leaders who fail to differentiate themselves from the emotional processes of the congregation. In such circumstances, Steinke encourages leaders to embody a nonanxious presence through the following two practices (among others):

9. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 7.

10. For example, let’s say the elders decide to make a change. A small group of people then expresses their anxiety regarding the decision. The elders are infected by their anxiety and react by retracting their decision. Consequently, imaginative thinking regarding future possibilities is repressed.

Taking stands with courage (defining where you stand and what you believe in the face of disapproval, refusing to give in for the sake of harmony when it is a matter of principle, and standing firm in the face of strong reactions) and staying on course (resolving to follow through, in spite of reactive opposition or sabotage, exercising emotional and spiritual stamina to follow a vision, and not allowing reactive forces to change your course).¹¹

It is my observation that, in many regards, both Jesus's disciples and the leadership of South Fork do not demonstrate such constancy in leadership. It is my perception that both groups struggle to regulate their own anxiety and thus fail to take stands with courage and stay on course. I previously noted how anxiety seems to cause the disciples to bend to the will of the crowds (e.g., 1:36–37; 14:66–71). I also perceive that opposition from South Fork members often sidetracked the leaders' commitments to small groups, renovating space for community service programs, and expanding roles for women in the public assembly.

One of the longest running examples of a lack of constancy centers on the Sunday night schedule. It had been clear to the elders well before I arrived that offering Sunday night worship services in the auditorium was neither sustainable nor in line with the vision of South Fork. The entire leadership team agreed to promote small group participation during that time in lieu of the traditional worship services attended by roughly a dozen members.

Early in the interview process, I communicated with the elders that rather than preaching on Sunday nights, I would focus on promoting small groups. It was important enough to me that I insisted on getting that agreement in writing. Even so, the pressure to

11. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 44-46.

preach on Sunday nights continued to resurface. While the work of building up small group participation ensued, complaints from the few members who wanted to keep Sunday night worship services kept the elders wavering in their support of small groups.

One Wednesday night in late summer, I was told that the elders had developed a plan to launch a program called “Sunday Nights Together” in the fall. The plan was to encourage the entire church to meet together at the building every Sunday night. I immediately recognized the “herding”¹² mentality at work. After stating that I could not support such a plan, we worked toward a compromise that reserved first and third Sunday afternoon/evenings for small groups. Second Sundays would be reserved for youth activities, and we would encourage everyone to meet together on fourth Sundays and the quarterly fifth Sundays.

Even after everyone committed to this clearly articulated plan, there were frequent lapses when leaders (both ministers and elders) would propose the scheduling of a church-wide activity on a first or third Sunday. It seemed to me that each leader, to varying degrees, was “perpetually eyeing the ‘scope’ to see where others” were instead of “charting [our] own way by means of [our] own internal guidance system.”¹³

Communication

The second category of anxiety-induced behaviors I examine is communication. While communication certainly overlaps with the other two categories, the apparent

12. Friedman defines “Herding” as, “a process through which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members.” Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, ch. 2, “Society in Regression.”

13. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, ch. 5, “Autocracy vs. Integrity.”

profusion of harmful communication behaviors and patterns warrants a distinct category for analysis. Steinke observes that systems in conflict reach a turning point when the conflict can take either a positive or negative path.¹⁴ He then describes nine actions that can help direct conflict in a positive direction. Three of these nine actions describe components of effective communication: seeking clarity (against misinformation and rumors), forthright communication of accurate information, and reframing the situation.¹⁵ Unfortunately, I observed several behaviors that directly obstruct the aforementioned components of effective communication: triangulation, misinformation, and withdrawal.

The first obstacle to effective communication is triangulation.¹⁶ Using Friedman's metaphor, if triangles are the plaque in the arteries of communication,¹⁷ I observed that the flow of communication at South Fork is greatly constricted. I rarely received direct guidance from the elders regarding sermon series or classes. Instead, they would convey anonymous complaints from members. I often asked the elders to encourage direct communication between me and the person with the complaint. I have no way of knowing how much effort was made in this regard, but I did not perceive much change in the communication patterns throughout my tenure at South Fork.

14. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 108.

15. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 108–11.

16. Steinke describes triangles as “the use of a third party to reduce tension between a twosome.” This is inevitable and, in healthy systems, beneficial. Triangulation “happens when the third party allows the original dyad to escape responsibility for its actions by assuming their anxiety and taking responsibility for them” (Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 116).

17. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, “editors’ preface.”

Misinformation, including the withholding of vital information as well as the misrepresentation of the truth, is the second obstruction to effective communication I observed at South Fork. Upon my arrival at South Fork, the then-youth minister informed me of a strategy being employed by the more progressive members of the leadership team when seeking approval for a desired outcome. This youth minister was instructed by an elder to prepare a few leaders who were more likely to be of the same mind. The idea was to get a small consensus so that when the item was broached at the meeting, the supporters would be unified while potential opponents to the proposal would be caught off-guard.

Much later, I was invited to a meeting with the elders with the stated purpose that we would be discussing plans for the coming year. Upon arriving, however, I discovered that the real agenda item was a personal reprimand for an incident involving one of my children. I expressed my disappointment at the inappropriateness of the meeting and the false pretense under which I was invited to the meeting. I viewed the deception as a serious breach of trust.

I also perceived misinformation in certain communications to the congregation. One example is the manner in which staffing decisions were presented. When the associate minister was discharged, the leaders continued to perpetuate the notion that he had decided to retire. Then again, on the day when I was terminated, the elders immediately sent an email to the deacons informing them that I was “stepping down to pursue other opportunities.”

The third obstruction to effective communication I observed is withdrawal. This behavior is exemplified by the disciples when they keep silent after Jesus’s second

passion statement and then when they argue about who is the greatest (9:32, 34). Left to their own devices, they would have allowed fear to obstruct communication between them and Jesus.

At South Fork, I perceived leaders occasionally withdrawing from contact when faced with conflict. Early one fall, I had noticed a growing distance between another leader and me. I asked if there was a reason behind it and he claimed that it was not intentional, but that he had been busy over the summer. A few more months passed by, and I felt the gap between us widening further. Once again, I asked him about it and he finally admitted that I had offended him by contradicting him in a meeting the previous spring. He told me that after that incident, he had said to himself, “Why bother? Drew’s always going to tell me I’m wrong.”¹⁸ So rather than working through the issue with me in the spring, this person withdrew from me for roughly nine months before making me aware of how I had hurt our relationship.

Personal Responsibility

I labeled the third and final category of observed behaviors “personal responsibility.” By this designation, I am referring to the level to which one takes responsibility for one’s own feelings and failings. The failure to take responsibility for one’s own emotions expresses itself in passive aggressive behavior. The distancing behavior I described in the previous paragraph is one such example.

18. I believe this statement to be a valid critique of the way I handled myself in arguments. I often prioritized what I believed to be the right decision or stance over encouraging right relationships. Such behavior on my part does not welcome openness and honesty from my interlocutors.

Another example is from a leadership meeting when a team member was communicating disagreement with his facial expression. When asked to speak his mind, he replied, “If you can’t say anything nice. . .” After some coaxing and insisting that we should be able to respectfully and constructively disagree, he finally voiced his dissenting opinion. Such passive aggressive behavior was quite common.

In addition to passive aggression, I perceived a reluctance among leaders (including me) to take responsibility for our own faults. It is my observation that the ministers demonstrated marked growth in this area, but whether due to my own biases or because of the inherent power dynamics, I did not perceive such growth in the elders.

Summative Observations

I had envisioned a long working relationship at South Fork and was never tempted to resign. Until the day of my termination, the elders had never given me reason to think that there were irreconcilable differences that would warrant my departure. I recognize that my own behaviors contributed to the conflict with the elders. If the purpose of this inquiry were to discover ways for me to grow and mature as a minister and as a follower of Christ, there would be no dearth of information.¹⁹ However, since both my career and the intervention were suddenly aborted, it has been necessary to include an exploration of the relational dynamics that I believe contributed to the undesirable outcome of this intervention.

19. The following examples provide a glimpse of what such an account could include. I believe that I possessed an unhealthy level of pride and confidence that led me to treat other team members disrespectfully. I acknowledge that my heart was not always in the right place. I know that I was occasionally abrasive when expressing a divergent opinion in meetings. Perhaps most importantly, my prayer life had been flagging toward the end of my tenure.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have described the ministry context (chapter 1), provided the theological and theoretical frameworks (chapter 2), and described in detail the intervention (chapter 3). In this chapter, I began by presenting the data derived from the field notes, the inside evaluation, the outsider evaluations, and from a comparison with the constructs of chapter 2. In the second part of this chapter, I outlined the observed anxiety behaviors in the leadership of South Fork that limited the usefulness of the communal covenant. In the next chapter, I present some final conclusions and implications of the intervention.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In chapter 1, I described the ministry context of South Fork Church of Christ and identified the problem which this project sought to address. In chapter 2, I laid out the theological and theoretical frameworks for the intervention. I then described the methodology of the intervention in chapter 3. In chapter 4, I presented the data from the intervention as well as my observations regarding the relevant relational behavior among the leadership of South Fork. In this chapter I offer some interpretive comments, provide personal reflection, and describe potential implications for the future.

Interpretations

This project built upon the assumption that congregational leadership should strive to emulate the example of Christ as they seek to lead the local body of Christ. Through the context analysis described in chapter 1, I identified the problem that there is no formal document or commitment that could guide the leadership of South Fork in our efforts to become more like Christ. Using Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together*, I asked the elders and the other minister of South Fork to join me in formulating a communal covenant to address the identified problem. With this purpose in mind, we spent several weeks in careful study of the Gospel of Mark. Throughout Mark's Gospel, we observed Jesus walking alongside his disciples and patiently preparing them to take up the mantle of Christian leadership. We recognized that Jesus's teachings and actions

placed a priority on relationships. We discerned three categories of behaviors that provided us with a framework for interpreting the relationships observed in Mark and for structuring a covenant for our present application. Based on these observations, we fulfilled the stated purpose of this project by formulating a communal covenant for the elders and ministers of South Fork.

The covenant was intended to serve the greater purpose of equipping the ministers and elders of South Fork to embody a leadership that is more robustly Christlike in all our relationships. The evaluations described in chapter 4 have determined that the values and practices of the covenant would greatly assist in that effort. And while I have hope that the intervention will have long-lasting effects on the current leadership of South Fork, my dismissal from the leadership team indicates that the covenant will not be providing direct guidance toward that end.

Trustworthiness

Both the intervention process and the resultant covenant can be relied upon to be trustworthy resources. First, I believe that the process can be easily applied to other congregational contexts (applicability) and that leadership groups can depend upon the process to yield similar results (dependability). I also consider both the process and the resultant covenant to be highly credible (credibility). Finally, I trust that my personal influence on the outcome was reasonable and well accounted for (reflexivity).

Applicability and Dependability

While congregational contexts vary widely, it is difficult to imagine a Christian congregation whose leaders would not affirm that following Christ is of utmost importance, especially when it comes to congregational leadership. As such, the decision

to base our values and practices on the example of Jesus should be easily adopted by any congregation wishing to formulate such a covenant. While this project makes a solid case for focusing on Mark's Jesus, other leadership teams may choose to use another Gospel or a comprehensive study of all four Gospels and arrive at similar results. The decision to focus on Jesus's relationships might not be as readily accepted by other leadership teams, but I believe this decision will be found to be both well-grounded and useful as an interpretive framework.

Leadership groups at other congregations may not initially see the need for a communal covenant but are likely familiar with codes of conduct and other contractual agreements. I do not believe, therefore, that it would be difficult for most congregational leadership groups to become convinced of the benefit of having such a communal covenant. The process we employed to construct the covenant is also easily adaptable for any congregational leadership team that meets regularly. Each of the outside evaluators affirmed that the process and the resultant covenant could be depended upon by other congregational contexts.

Credibility

The credibility of qualitative research relies upon the utilization of standard qualitative research procedures and data triangulation. The methodology I employed as described in chapter 3 adheres to qualitative research procedures. The methods of data collection and the three triangulated sources reinforce the credibility of the intervention and the validity of the resulting covenant. The resulting covenant proved to be consistent with the theological and theoretical frameworks described in chapter 2. The covenant also demonstrated consistency with the contents of the meetings and the retreat. When

scrutinized by the outside evaluators, the covenant was found to have a high level of authenticity and potential usefulness for congregational leadership groups.

Reflexivity

My personal influence on this project, while significant, was both reasonable and well accounted for. My own research and discernment were responsible for identifying the problem and designing the subsequent intervention. My personal motivations affected the decisions to focus on Mark's Gospel and to utilize Barton's *Pursuing God's Will*. The other members of the leadership team welcomed these decisions without objection. Throughout the intervention, I was primarily responsible for setting the agenda, facilitating the conversations, and collecting and interpreting data.

In order to mitigate my personal influence, I was careful to invite divergent opinions and encourage team members to expound upon their unique perspectives. When asserting my own opinions, I asked for feedback to see if others were in agreement or disagreement. After each session, I sent my summary to the other participants. When we gathered again, I asked the participants if my summary was a faithful representation of the previous meeting's discussion. I was affirmed each time that my notes were an accurate and thorough account of the previous meeting. At the final retreat, we began our discernment process by praying for God to reveal to us potential obstacles to our being open to the Spirit's leading. We shared these findings with the other members of the group and then prayed that God would make us indifferent to everything except the desire to follow God's will. In making my own potential biases known, I helped minimize the impact those biases would have on the outcome.

Significance and Implications

This project is intrinsically significant as it represents a substantial effort to actively embrace the leading of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Regardless of if or how the covenant may be used, I believe each participant gained some tools and language that will aid us as we each strive to follow the Spirit's leading. Beyond the covenant, I believe the intervention process surfaced several relational behaviors and patterns that provided opportunities to grow and mature as Christians and as Christian leaders.

Sustainability

The covenant itself is inherently sustainable in that it is designed to be renewed annually. It is not intended to be a once-for-all-time rule of life for the elders and ministers of South Fork. Nor does it rely upon having the same team members. It is intended to be adapted according to the perceived needs of the leadership team in an ever-evolving ministry context. However, in light of my dismissal before the covenant could be formally adopted, I do not believe it will provide the intended explicit guidance for the elders and ministers of South Fork. Should the current leaders of South Fork or leaders of another congregation commit themselves to the values and practices of this covenant, I trust that they will be strengthened in their capacity for spiritual leadership.

Personal Significance

The project was significant for me personally and professionally. As I reflect on the effects the project has produced in my life, several key aspects come to mind. This project has given me ample opportunity to become more perseverant, to have a broader understanding of effective Christian leadership, to be more centered, and to be humbled.

Perseverance

I have generally been able to sustain hard work for long periods of time. However, when faced with obstacles, delays, the need to repeat a task I had considered completed, or the lack of apparent progress, I have found it very difficult to persevere. This project has provided all of the following opportunities to develop perseverance: starting over in a new context, falling out of step with my cohort, dealing with scheduling delays, and the most formidable obstacle of all—being terminated during the final steps of the intervention. Some of these obstacles were more disheartening than others, but each one induced varying degrees of despondency and hopelessness while challenging my ability to persevere. Having come through these challenges, I feel that my capacity to persevere through opposition has been greatly strengthened—largely due to the support I have been given by peers, mentors, and advisors.

Effective Christian Leadership

This project has also given me a deeper understanding of effective Christian leadership. I now realize that prior to my engagement with this project, my idea of Christlikeness (both personally and as it relates to leadership) primarily concerned the individual and the qualities that person possesses. I thought that in order to be an effective Christian leader, one must be a self-contained package of specific virtues, knowledge, skills, and disciplines. I was therefore preoccupied with looking within my own vessel and striving to possess all that I needed to be like Christ. This project helped me gaze outwardly as well—not at other individuals, but rather at the mysterious and complex space between each of us that we call “relationship.” Through this project, I

have undergone a necessary shift toward a more communal and less individualistic understanding of my role as a Christian leader.

Throughout the study of Mark's Jesus, we focused on the way Jesus related to God, to his disciples, and to the crowds. In doing so, we were challenged to become more Christlike in our own relationships (with God, with team members, and with others in our various, overlapping emotional fields). By viewing Jesus's relationships through the lens provided by Bowen, Friedman, and Steinke, I gradually became more aware of the importance of attending to my relationships. In fact, I do not think I truly appreciated the importance of these relationships until months after my termination. It seems to me now that I was much more concerned with communicating the importance of healthy relationships than with actually building healthy relationships.

In striving to become a well differentiated leader, I perceive that I tended to err on the side of distance while I criticized others for erring on the side of connectedness. A focus on Christ, especially on his eternal relationships within the Trinity, offers a corrective to both extremes. Jesus is God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Yet, Jesus is not the Father nor is he the Spirit. In the same way, Jesus is fully human (connected to humanity) and fully divine (distinct from humanity). To be like Christ in our relationships precludes enmeshment and remoteness.

Centeredness

A major premise of Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* is that each person must first be in pursuit of God's will individually as a prerequisite of communal spiritual

discernment.¹ As we journeyed through this process together, I became more consistent in my personal practice of spiritual disciplines. As was noted in chapter 2, Jesus' ministry flows from his fundamental relationships within the Trinity. This bond allowed him to serve without regard to self-interest. This project has heightened my awareness of the need to remain attentive to my relationship with the Trinity. I must let this connection empower me to selflessly engage others in Christlike interactions.

Humility

Humility as an academic exercise is one thing; public humiliation is quite another. Throughout the project, I felt safe discussing Christian humility because I regarded humility primarily in terms of an inward disposition. I had been picturing a long and respected tenure at South Fork. In this fantastic scenario, humility would demand that I deflect all the praise and glory to God that would inevitably result from all the good that had been accomplished at South Fork. In other words, I was prepared for a "first half of Mark" discipleship. Crowds, displays of power, upward momentum, while giving all the credit to God—that is the kind of humility I could handle.

But then, after less than three years, I felt tossed aside like yesterday's trash. I found myself rejected by the religious leaders, cast outside of the community I had been trying to serve, powerless, and publicly disgraced. It has been a humiliating and lonely experience and not one I would have chosen for myself. It is quite remarkable that,

1. Barton states this most succinctly in the following excerpt: "Groups determined to pursue God's will together must begin by focusing on the dynamic of spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals who comprise the group." (Barton, *Pursuing*, 38.)

through all my studies of Mark's Jesus and the *via dolorosa* on which he leads his disciples, I could not imagine such a humiliating ending to my career at South Fork.

As I reflect on all that has transpired, I recognize the need for me to hear Jesus' words afresh, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). I realize now that my attitude has been more reflective of James and John (10:35–40) than it has been of Jesus (14:36). I need to spend more time meditating on Hayes's astute observation that "to be Jesus's follower is to share in his vocation of suffering servanthood; renouncing the world's lust for power."² I have been humiliated; I am still trying to learn humility. Meanwhile, I take comfort in Moltmann's description of salvation. "What is salvation? Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life."³

Significance for My Future in Ministry

I do not yet know in what contexts I will minister in the future or in what capacity. I may spend several decades in full-time congregational ministry or, as much as it pains me to consider, I may never serve in that capacity again. Having briefly experienced a deeper level of communal spiritual discernment, I long to be part of such a team again. I am fairly confident that I will again be a part of a spiritual leadership team. When that day comes, I will be better equipped to promote the communal spiritual

2. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 82.

3. Jurgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 363.

discernment of that team. I entered the Doctor of Ministry program with the goal of becoming a more faithful and effective minister for the kingdom. Participating in this project has certainly helped me toward that goal. But first, I need to continue to recommit to the personal spiritual disciplines that had sharply declined in the months following my termination.

Unanswered Questions

While the future is always uncertain even in the most stable of environments, my awareness of that uncertainty is more acute as of late. The impact this intervention will have on South Fork is a question that will largely go unanswered for me. My curiosity about whether and to what extent this work will be utilized by other congregational leaderships is not likely to be satisfied. I am still uncertain about much, but I have come to see this uncertainty as a holy mystery that inspires hope and curiosity rather than fear and confusion.

The primary unanswered question I have regarding the project itself has to do with timing and preparation. I believe that such an intervention would be much more productive if completed earlier in the life of a leadership team. I propose that this intervention would be more useful if it were part of the process of welcoming a new minister or of installing new elders. I would like to see future research that makes formulating a communal covenant a foundational process for newly formed (or reformed) congregational leadership groups.

Conclusion

Formulating a communal covenant is a challenging but worthwhile process for congregational leadership teams. The process requires participants to give explicit

attention to aspects of our relationships with God and others that often go unaddressed. It is vital for congregational leadership teams to focus on the example of Christ and discern together how to best honor the values and practices of Jesus in their unique context. I pray that this project will encourage others to commit themselves to a similar project and that congregational leaders will be better equipped to pursue God's will as they strive to follow Christ and lead others to do the same.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Exemption Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

Drew Baker

130 Tullyries Ln

Lewisville, NC 27023



Dear Drew,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
Formulating a Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of South Fork Church of Christ

(IRB# 18-012) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:
Non-research, and
Non-human research

Based on:

The activity does not involve a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. [45
CFR 46.102(d)]

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine
whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

South Fork Vision Statement

In two to three years we believe South Fork will be a growing, dynamic congregation of 350 to 400 multi-cultural members who are actively engaged in the service of one another and our community in the name of Jesus Christ

How will we accomplish this vision? By fixing our eyes on Jesus and living as he did.

We will put our focus on reaching out to the lost and hurting in our community. Like Jesus we will be the good news as well as proclaim the good news.

Our leaders will teach, prepare, equip, and mentor our members to do works of service.

Our teaching will be biblical while also being culturally relevant and will encourage, train, and equip us to live like Jesus in our community. Our worship will be biblical, relevant, and inspiring, encouraging us to “go out” and be the good news.

Our time together will be encouraging, supportive, healing, and intimate.

Our outreach and mission work will be focused and “on purpose.” We will, through our service, be seen as light and salt in our community.

We will reach out to all ages, races, and cultures.

We will teach and train our children and youth to live like Jesus, preparing them to be the servant leaders of the future.

Our church family will seek peace, love, and unity in Jesus Christ. We will show the world that we belong to Him by our love for one another.

In all things, we will depend on God, follow Jesus and be led by the Spirit.

APPENDIX C

A Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of South Fork Church of Christ

February 13, 2019

Premise: We, the elders and ministers of South Fork Church of Christ, acknowledge that following Christ is the first and highest calling we have. Within that calling, we have been charged with the responsibility of leading South Fork in the footsteps of Jesus. We affirm Jesus' teaching that the greatest commands are to love God and to love one another. We therefore seek to embody the love of Christ in all our relationships, especially as they pertain to our roles as spiritual leaders. We endeavor to bring our relationships with God, with each other, and with the congregation into greater alignment with the example and instruction of Jesus Christ. In doing so we hope to further God's Kingdom in our community and world. Knowing that we will be held to higher standards before God, we seek to hold ourselves to the highest standards as well. In support of this aim, we commit to hold ourselves and each other to this communal covenant. We acknowledge that no covenant or practice can guarantee spiritual growth, and that such growth is only possible through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It is our prayer and desire that adherence to the values and practices outlined in this covenant will help us be more open and receptive to the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Our relationships with God:

- Value: We commit to personally fostering a loving relationship with God
- Practices:
 - We will spend time daily in prayer for guidance, for specific needs, and delighting in God's presence.
 - We will engage in weekly periods of silence and solitude
 - We will reflect on God's Word daily
 - We will regularly engage in deep study of scripture
 - We will minimize distractions that keep us from pursuing the above commitments.
- Value: We commit to *intentionally* relying on God together as a leadership group.
- Practices:
 - We will prioritize spiritual growth and following the leading of the Spirit above other goals.

- We will begin each meeting with significant time in prayer for discernment and guidance.
- We will meet quarterly for the sole purpose of spending time communing with God—in prayer and in scripture.
- We will meet annually for a retreat to review and renew our commitments and discern the Spirit’s leading for the coming year.
- We will minimize distractions that keep us from pursuing the above commitments

Our relationships with each other:

- Value: We will love one another as Christ loves us.
- Practices:
 - Our love will be sacrificial—putting the needs of others before our own.
 - We will be patient with one another—bearing one another’s burdens with grace and compassion
 - We will make time for fellowship with one another.
 - We will make efforts to speak each other’s love languages
 - In our discussions, we will listen patiently, without interrupting, without formulating our responses while others are talking.
- Value: We will be accountable to one another—acknowledging that as members of one body, we belong to one another.
- Practices:
 - We will be open and honest with one another
 - We will foster a safe environment of trust and respect.
 - We will encourage one another to live out our Christian faith in general and the commitments of this covenant in particular.
- Value: We will demonstrate honor and respect for one another.
- Practices:
 - We will practice strong communication with each other--listening well, speaking honestly, and responding to one another in a timely manner.
 - We will assume the best in one another while seeking to understand where others are coming from.
 - We will share the work load with each other.
 - We will express our gratitude for one another.
 - We will invite the expression of alternative viewpoints openly and lovingly.
 - We will discuss alternative viewpoints with respect.
 - Use “I” statements when engaging in conflict.
 - We will encourage direct communication and resist getting “triangulated.”
 - We will promote healthy boundaries by maintaining a strong sense of self that is not dependent on the roles we fulfill as leaders, etc.

Our relationships with the congregation and community:

- Value: We will prioritize the spiritual growth of the congregation above other desires.
- Practices:
 - We will lead by first following Christ’s example

- We will model Spiritual discernment
- We will seek to serve, not to be served
- We will balance acceptance and accountability, pushing and pastoring as we call the congregation to become more like Christ.
- We will maintain healthy connections with the congregation.
 - This involves a rhythm of engaging and retreating
 - This involves a balance of compassion and emotional boundaries.
 - This involves prioritizing Christ’s mission over personal feelings.
- Value: We will strengthen our relationships with the congregation
- Practices:
 - We will listen well.
 - We will communicate thankfulness regularly.
 - We will meet weekly with different deacons to pray over them, thank them, bless them, and encourage them in their work.
 - We will entrust deacons and other members with meaningful work.
 - We will be more intentional about communicating thoroughly and regularly.
 - We will do this through quarterly communications: class-time meetings in fall and spring, written communications in summer and winter.
 - We will post the content of each quarter’s communications on bulletin board, Facebook group, and email.
 - We will make opportunities to meet with members in more intimate settings.
 - We will be welcoming in our assemblies—both when up front, and in the midst.

Self-Care:

- Value: We will pursue a healthy lifestyle
- Practices:
 - We will be mindful of what we consume
 - We will be intentional about exercising our bodies
 - We will do our best to get adequate sleep.
 - We will be faithful stewards of both time and money.
- Value: We will maintain healthy relationships outside of our leadership roles at South Fork.
- Practices:
 - We will nurture healthy family relationships
 - We will pursue strong friendships
 - We will love all others as Christ loves us

APPENDIX D

Outsider Evaluation Interview Protocol

1. In what ways are the values expressed in this covenant consistent with your understanding of Christian leadership as expressed by Mark's Jesus?
2. In what ways are the practices expressed in this covenant consistent with the practices of Mark's Jesus?
3. To what extent do you believe adherence to this covenant will empower church leaders for the task of spiritual leadership?
4. What are some potential strengths you see in this covenant?
5. What are some potential weaknesses you see in this covenant?

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent for Participation in the Project Thesis Titled “Formulating a Communal Covenant for the Elders and Ministers of South Fork Church of Christ”

This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

Also, please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. This contact information may be found at the end of this form.

Purpose and Procedures

Purpose of the Research-- The purpose of this study is to formulate a communal covenant for the elders and ministers at South Fork Church of Christ. The purpose of the project is to evaluate current leadership within South Fork and the information gained through the project is to be implemented for the improvement of the leadership within the South Fork congregation. The data is not intended to contribute to the greater body of generalizable, scientific knowledge. This project falls completely within the scope of my role as the lead minister. Participants will be limited to our five elders and two ministers.

Expected Duration of participation-- If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend five visits with the study group over the course of five weeks. Each visit is expected to take sixty minutes. In addition, you will be asked to attend one local Saturday retreat that could be broken down into two shorter retreats.

Description of the procedures-- Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

Study Procedures—The initial meeting will orient the participants to the goal and process of the project. The following three weeks will be spent looking at the leadership of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, specifically his relationships with 1) the Father and Spirit, 2) his disciples, and 3) his wider community. The retreat will focus on the formulation of a communal covenant modeled after the leadership principles discerned from the life of Jesus. A final sixty-minute meeting will review the communal covenant and consider any final revisions.

Risks and Discomforts

The risks involved in taking part in this research study are minimal and no more than the risks already encountered in daily life and ministry. The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

Provision for Confidentiality

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by saving all personal information gathered in a password protected file.

Contacts

You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact Drew Baker at (210) 571-9083 or drew.baker@southforkcofc.org.

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. David Wray, by email at wrayd@acu.edu

If you have concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885

megan.roth@acu.edu

320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103

Abilene, TX 79699

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent

Signature of Person Obtaining
Consent

Date

APPENDIX F

Field Note Protocol

Date/Time/Location/Attendees

Shorthand Notes	Initial Observations	Narrative Description

BRIEF VITA

I was born in Abilene, Texas, in the final weeks of the 1970s. I graduated from ACU with a BS in youth ministry in May of 2002 and married my wife Sarah (Owens) Baker on March 1, 2003. We spent the following year teaching and ministering in South Korea before entering full-time youth ministry in West Tennessee. While there we had our son, Jude (2007), and my wife earned her BSN. In 2009 we moved back to Abilene so I could pursue a Master of Divinity, and our daughter Rowan was born the same year. Upon completing the M.Div. (2012), we spent a year in Austin before accepting a position at Northwest Church of Christ in San Antonio. While in San Antonio, I entered the Doctor of Ministry program at ACU. In 2016 we moved to North Carolina so I could preach at South Fork Church of Christ. While here, my wife earned her master's as a pediatric nurse practitioner and currently serves in that capacity. I am currently narrating audiobooks, homeschooling, and occasionally preaching when given the chance.