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# Crafting a Congregational Narrative for the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California

Jason W. Locke  
[jlockeca@gmail.com](mailto:jlockeca@gmail.com)

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CRAFTING A CONGREGATIONAL NARRATIVE FOR THE  
COLLEGE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Jason W. Locke

April 20, 2011

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

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Dean of the Graduate School

Date

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Thesis Committee

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Chair

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis describes a ministry project in the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California. In this project I led the congregation through a narrative crafting process in order to clarify the church's identity and increase its capacity for mission. In recent decades, the College Church moved away from some of its founding characteristics yet failed to clarify a new sense of identity. It subsequently had difficulty acting with a unified sense of purpose and instead moved increasingly toward fragmentation.

Data for crafting the new narrative came from three weeks of group interviews. My research team conducted these interviews in the church's six adult classes, called shepherding groups. Well over half of all adults in the church responded during the sessions. The interviews consisted of a form of questioning called appreciative inquiry to elicit and build upon the positive memories and feelings about the past. I inserted the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8 into the process in hopes that the resulting narrative and congregational identity would be consonant with God's unveiling plans for the world. I chose this passage as a significant representation of Paul's theology and a crucial tool for shaping the church's view of eschatology—two needed elements in this process. Repeating themes appeared in the group interviews, and I used these to assemble the narrative. In so doing, we reinterpreted the congregation's history and injected a new appreciation for the mission of God. This thesis describes the project, shares the resultant narrative, and explains the results and potential implications of the project.

To Julie, my beloved wife. And to my two sons—great men in the making.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge a number of individuals without whose help this project would have been impossible to either imagine or carry out. First, I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Johnson, my primary advisor, for his prodding to do a project bigger and more meaningful than what I could have envisioned. I deeply appreciate his help and expertise in shaping this project to have a potential impact beyond my own life and ministry.

Second, I am grateful to countless individuals at the College Church. The elders had the courage to undertake a project this massive because they deeply desire a greater partnership with the mission of God. Their hearts are unswervingly committed to the Lord and to their flock of believers. These eight men—Lee Smith, Gene Sue, Terry Hutchison, Arthur Wint, Aaron Watson, Dale Drury, Michael Rodriguez, and Lynn Button—are amazing partners in discerning the missional call of God.

My fellow ministers, Doug Baker and Sandra Henderson, have also helped with this project in ways too many to enumerate. Not only have they been a constant source of encouragement; they have willingly shared their wealth of insights about this congregation. They have helped interpret the ways in which God has worked through times of struggle and success. I look forward to living this project out in the community of the congregation, just as I already enjoy living it out in the community of our ministry staff.

I am also grateful for those College Church members who assisted me in this research project. The six research assistants did an amazing amount of work and showed great patience. These are Arrolene Burrell, Ashley Henderson, Estela Sue, Lee Adams, Robert Gonzales, and Shane Mason. Others helped either with transcription or with editing. Where possible, I have tried to list these in the appropriate footnotes.

Finally, I need to acknowledge two additional individuals who pushed me to the completion of this project and doctoral degree. Dr. Charles Siburt, the director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Abilene Christian University, is a great encourager and advocate for those of us in ministry. I cannot thank him enough for his support. Last of all, my secondary advisor, Dr. Chris Flanders, continually pushes me beyond complacency in my personal and professional life. With regard to this project, I greatly appreciate his voice of experience and academic acumen in refining its finer details—both in its execution and reporting.

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis describes a ministry project completed in the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California.<sup>1</sup> The project involved the crafting of a congregational narrative. The intent of crafting such a narrative was to move the congregation toward a clearer sense of its identity<sup>2</sup> and subsequently increase its capacity for mission.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis contains five chapters. Chapter 1 describes the overall project and the context in which the College Church finds itself. Chapter 2 lays out the theological foundations for this project. Chapter 3 describes the methodological strategy I employed for the project and how I evaluated the project's results. Chapter 4 reveals the results of the project, including the finished narrative. Chapter 5 explores some implications and conclusions of my project.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter referred to as "College Church."

<sup>2</sup> By using the word "identity," I mean a congregation's unique contextualization as a concrete manifestation of the universal church. Lesslie Newbigin defined the congregation as the "hermeneutic of the gospel." In doing so, he attempted to locate Christian identity as belonging to a body of believers rather than as solo Christians. Newbigin was also keen to make a correlating claim about the congregation rather than the individual as the source of Christian mission. The church would do well, he stated, to remember its identity as rooted in the personhood and message of Jesus Christ, who carried out his mission in the context of community. Newbigin claimed that the church's identity is by its very nature "missional" in the sense that it proclaims the truth of God's reign made visible in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Newbigin said, "[The church] exists in him and for him. He is the center of its life. Its character is given to it, when it is true to its nature, not by the characters of its members but by his character." *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227. He admitted that congregational life in his context of Great Britain was far from ideal, and he was aware that his contemporaries were often embarrassed by key aspects of the church, namely its humanity. Thus his intent was to redirect attention to the congregational level as the place where Christians find their identity and then live out their mission.

<sup>3</sup> I use the word "mission" in its broader sense, not in reference to the global missionary effort.

The need for crafting a congregational narrative stemmed from the unique situation of the College Church. The congregation began with a seemingly clear understanding of its story. This funded a sense of identity and mission as the College Church grew to become the largest Church of Christ on the West Coast. The church's narrative eventually began to erode, and its identity changed. With this loss, the College Church began to fragment, and a gradual decline ensued and continued up to the time of this project. In this opening chapter, I describe factors that led to the fragmentation and erosion of the College Church's original defining narrative. I lay out this background in order to establish the need for crafting a new story for the present-day College Church.

#### Title of the Project

The title of this project is “Crafting a Congregational Narrative for the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California.” Narrative functions not only as a tool for comprehending one's past; it also creates capacity for future action. An aging congregation such as the College Church needs to understand its current identity clearly before it can effectively work to shape a new future.<sup>4</sup> When a narrative accurately retells the crucial elements of a group's shared journey, it can help clarify that group's identity.

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<sup>4</sup> A congregation gains its identity not through the members' skills or cleverness but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As I will explain in Chapter 2, the characteristics of a congregation's members make a difference—not that this humanness negates or dulls the power of Jesus (Newbigin's concern). Rather, this blend of humanity and divinity creates a hermeneutic that is unique to each particular congregation as a contextualized manifestation of the universal church in that particular place and time. As a result, it is uniquely able to speak God's truth to its distinct corner of the world. George Hunsberger goes on to argue that most congregations suffer an identity crisis. They have lost their place in society and no longer know their role. Building on Newbigin's work, he argues that churches need to rediscover their identity within the locus of God's mission to the world. George R. Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 16.

Identity and mission are not ancillary pursuits. A healthy self-awareness feeds missional activity and is crucial to the effectiveness and health of the congregation. God calls the church to join in God's ongoing and continually unfolding story, but this participation should stem from a clear understanding of what God has done and how that shapes a group of believers today. My aim in this project was to help the College Church gain some appreciation for the scope of their ongoing work and shared life in Fresno, California.

### Ministry Context

I am a relative newcomer to Fresno, California, and the College Church. I moved to Fresno from Morgantown, West Virginia, in January 2009, and took on the role of preaching minister for this group of believers. As a new actor on the scene, I fell into an ongoing saga filled with vibrant characters and interweaving elements.

Years ago, my initial seminary training focused on preparation for cross-cultural mission work.<sup>5</sup> Because of this background I brought missiological leanings into my new role in Fresno, and I tried to observe and study my new surroundings as a missionary might research a new cross-cultural context.<sup>6</sup> This exploration allowed me to grow in love and respect for the institution and the people of the College Church. I look forward to going deeper in this process over the years to come.

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<sup>5</sup> My first ministry position was in Prague, in Central Europe. After completing my master's degrees, I did church work there for seven years.

<sup>6</sup> One key missionary task is to constantly assess one's "host" culture. For the foreign missions endeavor, the need for cultural study and adaptation has been generally accepted by church leaders and practitioners over the past century. Most churches in the West, however, have tended to ignore the need for such rigorous examination of their own "home" contexts. David Bosch posits that many church leaders tended to assume that Christianity and Western culture were so deeply enmeshed that no cultural study was necessary. He argues in favor of contextual study and adaptation in the West much as we have seen in foreign mission works. See David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1995), 58.

At the time of this project, the College Church was a four-hundred-member congregation. The church building sits in close proximity to the campus of California State University, Fresno (commonly known as Fresno State University). This congregation, which had previously been the largest Church of Christ on the West Coast, had experienced major changes over its last fifteen years. It had shifted from a congregation made up mostly of first- and second-generation white transplants from Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas who saw the world in similar ways to a multi-ethnic congregation with diverse beliefs, backgrounds, lifestyles, and socio-economic levels. During this time of change, the congregation's membership halved from eight hundred to four hundred.

As I look at the College Church's forty-six-year history, I see it as symbolically divided into two halves. The first half of the church's existence was marked by rapid growth, fueled by what seems to have been a clear sense of identity, grounded in a somewhat sectarian mindset. Its location, facilities, and strong leadership allowed the church to capitalize on opportunities for growth. From the personal interviews I have done within the College Church about that era, I believe the congregation's narrative produced a dogmatic, perhaps elitist, mindset common in Churches of Christ of that day.<sup>7</sup>

The second half of the church's history was a time of stagnation and then decline, at least from a numerical perspective. The congregation gradually cut itself loose from its

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<sup>7</sup> The sectarianism prevalent in Churches of Christ stemmed, oddly enough, from an initial desire to bring unity to all denominations. By vocally pursuing unity, Churches of Christ chose an anti-sectarian approach. In the process of fighting sectarianism, however, they created their own firm boundaries that excluded all who did not practice their version of anti-sectarianism. For a good overview of sectarianism in Churches of Christ, see Gary Holloway, Douglas A. Foster, *Renewing God's People: A Concise History of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), 108-9. For more on this, see Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris, *Seeking a Lasting City: The Church's Journey in the Story of God* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2005), 138-39.

former sectarianism and embraced a more grace-centered stance.<sup>8</sup> The church became more diverse and experimented with new practices. While many current members regarded the transition away from sectarianism as necessary, the church did not grab hold of a new, life-giving story to propel it into a period of renewed mission.<sup>9</sup>

In launching this project, I sensed that the College Church would like to believe in a glorious future, but the reality of recent fragmentation and decline tempered that hope. The College Church needed a new injection of hope, but this hope could not simply come from within its own denomination since contemporary Churches of Christ were not hope-filled places.<sup>10</sup> I had no naïve dream of recreating via this project the type of growth seen in the church's early days. The goal of crafting a new narrative was to clarify the church's identity so that its capacity for participation in God's mission could increase. How that would play out was not fully dependent on the College Church itself but on its context and on God's plans for both.

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<sup>8</sup> This stance of a community shaped by God is not foreign to the DNA of Churches of Christ. In spite of a tendency to be judgmental of those whose church structures or biblical interpretations differed, Churches of Christ maintained an underlying focus on a community of faith made holy by the work of God. This focus on God's grace as a defining force may have been temporarily buried, but it resurfaced in congregations such as the College Church. Love, Foster, and Harris, 150-52.

<sup>9</sup> Holloway and Foster note that Churches of Christ moved in two separate directions in recent decades: (1) toward a sectarian conservatism; and (2) toward a more open progressivism. They also note that the long-term pattern of spectacular growth in Churches of Christ ended in the 1980s. This trend precisely mirrored the history of the College Church, demonstrating that the College Church's actions and beliefs throughout its early history were funded by a deeper narrative that ran across the spectrum of Churches of Christ.

<sup>10</sup> Stagnation and decline were apparent hallmarks of many churches in North America at the outset of the third millennium. A unique struggle for Churches of Christ lay in the fact that almost all were strongly sectarian and believed they were the "only true Christians." Some congregations left this mentality behind, but many were subsequently unsure how to relate to the broader Christian world and were ambivalent about many of their own unique traits and practices. The College Church clearly fit within the larger milieu of churches that moved away from rigid sectarianism but had yet to find a clear, new identity. This project's purpose did not seek to comment on broader issues or the scope of sociological changes within Churches of Christ and mainstream North American Christianity. See Holloway and Foster, 123-31, for a brief synopsis of the presenting issues.

## Early History<sup>11</sup>

The 1960s seem like a time of upheaval and uncertainty in American history, but they were exciting years for Churches of Christ in California. On one level, social unrest and global tension dominated public thought throughout those years. On another level, however, the 1960s was an era when the country explored new horizons and broke through old boundaries. Churches of Christ in California experienced the 1960s as years of optimism, unity, and growth. Older congregations intentionally planted new ones all across California as church rolls grew in conjunction with the desire to evangelize.

This fervor to launch new churches led to the calculated launch of the College Church. As a response to their city's growth, members of the Palm Avenue Church of Christ in Fresno decided to start a new congregation on what was the northernmost edge of Fresno, close to the Fresno State University campus. With the blessing of the Palm Avenue Church leadership, they purchased land on Bullard Avenue and broke ground in February 1964. Raising enough money for a building was a challenge, but they donated their own skilled labor as they scrambled to arrange the final pieces of financing. These former members of the Palm Avenue Church became the driving force of the new congregation.

The new church opened its doors on December 6, 1964. This was a proud moment for the founders of the College Church and vindicated their sacrifice and hard work. The

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<sup>11</sup> To produce this historical and subsequent theological snapshot of the College Church, I combed through the College Church's archival material, which mostly consisted of bulletins and a scrapbook from the church's founding. I supplemented these source data with interviews of charter members, elders, and staff members. I was not able to interview everyone with valid perspectives since some of the earliest members were no longer living while others had departed the College Church. Some of the following information also came from a focus group that I led in the summer of 2009. I used this group to discover as much as possible the College Church. I refer to the material from this focus group in subsequent footnotes. See fn. 21 for information about this feedback group.



dedication service highlighted a strong sense of cooperation between Churches of Christ all over the region. The College Church enjoyed rapid evangelistic success and assumed a leading role in the region. Optimism reigned supreme.

The church enjoyed steady growth and seeming success in its first decade. Its first preacher, John Banks, was a charismatic individual who also produced a popular western radio show. College Church's location and new facilities were attractive to a wide range of people, some who had a background in Churches of Christ and others whom they converted (proselytized) from other denominations.

The 1970s were years of continued growth and increasing prestige. The College Church took a major role in the Yosemite Family Encampment, an annual gathering of Churches of Christ from across the West. Members recounted how the church sent groups to Abilene, Texas, and Malibu, California, for Bible lectures and teacher workshops. The church also sponsored an increasing numbers of international missionary efforts, including the sending of its own members as missionaries. The church's campus ministry at Fresno State University flourished and produced active young-adult members of College Church and other congregations. In the 1970s and on through the 1980s, the church reached a peak of about eight hundred people in weekly attendance.

The College Church's narrative during these early years was similar to the defining story of many other Churches of Christ back then—a story that funded a mostly sectarian stance toward other denominations and the world. Members strongly believed that God demanded obedience to a strict protocol for conversion (baptism by immersion for the remission of sins), church organization (male leadership in the form of elders and deacons), and worship (a cappella singing, weekly Lord's Supper, and giving). Messages

from the pulpit tended to reiterate what members already believed about these issues and to decry incorrect practices in the “unscriptural” churches. Members saw the need to evangelize anyone who was not part of a “scriptural” church or who had not been converted in the “scriptural” manner. These clear, sectarian attributes, combined with the unique success of the church’s initial years, provided a durable structure for the College Church’s original narrative. If any members were of a different mindset or opinion, they tended to keep such views to themselves.<sup>12</sup>

### Trauma and Decline

Toward the end of the 1970s, trauma befell the College Church. Two tragedies exemplify the heartache of this chapter in the church’s history. The tragic death of a fairly new minister, Wayne Anderson, was a shock not only to local members but to sister churches in the entire region. In his short tenure Anderson brought fresh ideas and energy to the church. He launched small groups and brought short-term workers from Texas to help with outreach to the community. He died, however, in a motorcycle accident at the Yosemite Family Encampment, leaving behind a young pregnant widow.

A second tragedy soon occurred, and this one depleted the College Church’s appetite for new adventures. Following Anderson’s tragic death, the church continued to seek innovation by sending large groups of members to workshops and seminars to learn

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<sup>12</sup> An unofficial “creed” of the College Church appeared on the cover of every Sunday bulletin for the first fifteen years of the church’s existence. This statement provides insight into the narrational structure that fed the College Church’s identity in those early years: “Christians are devoted to the restoration of New Testament Christianity. It is not our mission to be another denomination, but rather to urge all religious people to return to the simple plan of God. It is our plea that this is a solution to the problems that confront a divided Christendom. We desire that ultimately the church for which Christ died may supersede all the movements of men, and that his people may be one in every sense of the word.” I do not know who penned these words or authorized their use in the church bulletin. Since they appeared on the cover for such a lengthy period of time, I can only assume that they express a viewpoint widely accepted by the church leadership and broadly heard throughout the congregation. College Church of Christ Bulletin Archives (College Church of Christ Library, Fresno, CA), particular quotation lifted from Jan 1, 1967, edition.

about the latest ideas and strategies employed elsewhere. These trips ended a few short years later, however, when a bus returning from Abilene, Texas, crashed on an icy road in the Texas Panhandle. One member died in the accident, and the church was subsequently reluctant to sponsor similar trips.

An even darker shadow fell over the congregation in the 1980s and into the 1990s. At least five ministers left or were dismissed under inauspicious circumstances. This series of leadership crises tempered the growth and enthusiasm of the congregation.

None was more damaging than the Murray Isaac saga in the early 1980s. Isaac was regarded as one of the country's top youth ministers, and many viewed his hire as a coup for the College Church—proof that it was a major player on the national scene. He succeeded in energizing teens and families, and the church grew in regional prominence. This came to a crashing halt, however, when church leaders began to uncover improprieties about Isaac. Isaac hurriedly took a job at another congregation before church leaders fully understood what had taken place under his tenure.<sup>13</sup> They eventually learned that he had sexually molested one or more children.

Four subsequent ministers—this time preachers—left under pressure or because of personal problems. One was seemingly urged to move on, and the second was asked to resign. The third had to step down in 1990 after an affair with a church member. The fourth firing stemmed from what was probably the greatest crisis for the College Church leadership. This preacher, Bill Such, marshaled the congregation through a series of rapid changes both in its system of corporate beliefs and its forms of worship. Previous preachers had begun to whittle away, but Such apparently mounted a direct assault on the

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<sup>13</sup> Isaac was subsequently hired as a youth minister at a Los Angeles church. After repeating his immoral behavior at his next congregation, Isaac committed suicide on the Los Angeles church property.

old, dying narrative of the congregation. By this time the groundwork had been laid for a transition, and many leaders were publicly supportive of this move, at least initially.

As the church's old narrative came under direct attack, some members abandoned College Church as they became increasingly uncomfortable with the church's direction and unsure of how much more change lay ahead. Others left because they deemed it to be a sinking ship. Members heard sermons at odds with traditional lessons. They saw new forms of worship (a praise team, more contemporary music, and an increased role for women). Little to no public dialogue seems to have occurred about these changes, and Such avoided dialogue with dissenting voices. Though the elders generally supported the changes, they fired Such in 1997 because they saw him as a lightning rod for ongoing conflict and tension. At the time of this project, some members were still sympathetic toward Such, but others could not separate his leadership from the turmoil that led to the departure of many long-time members.

In 1999, the College Church still averaged well over 600 people in attendance. By 2009 that number dropped to approximately 350 per week. Some members referred to this period as the "wilderness wandering" mainly because of what they perceived to have been poor leadership. The congregation had no preaching minister from Such's firing in 1997 until my hiring in 2009. Various men of the church rotated in the pulpit as the elders opted for a style of public teaching sometimes referred to as "mutual edification" where the church does not have a "located" preacher.<sup>14</sup> During these years without a preacher, the College Church continued to disconnect from the sectarian mindset that marked the

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<sup>14</sup> This system of "mutual edification" was more prevalent in Churches of Christ before the 1950s.

church's first decades. Many viewed this as a healthy development out of an otherwise rudderless period in the church's history.<sup>15</sup>

God did positive things in the College Church during this era, but its identity shifted—a change the church had not fully understood. The congregation became more diverse as it learned to accept people from diverse backgrounds. It moved away from dogmatism and gradually accepted a more ecumenical stance. The leadership increasingly emphasized spiritual healing and welcome, and these focal points were a blessing to many who stayed with the church or who came during that time. The defining narrative of the past progressively slipped away. New narratives arose in its wake, but no new overarching narrative arrived that could clarify the College Church's identity and create capacity for a new sense of mission.

#### Many Divergent Narratives

During the years without strong central leadership, the College Church went through major changes. The most obvious change was the numerical decline to half its previous size. Perhaps an even more profound change, however, was the congregation's fragmentation. This cemented the loss of its original narrative and resulted not in a new defining story but rather in divergent and sometimes competing narratives.<sup>16</sup> I could see

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<sup>15</sup> Prior to this narrative project, I relied almost exclusively upon personal interviews to reconstruct the mentality of this period. I also led a task force—as explained below—to examine the church's life cycle. I have not been able to interview more than one or two individuals who left during this period. Written accounts of this era are largely nonexistent. All church bulletins from the 1990s have been lost—either through flooding caused by the sprinkler system or through some sort of document purge.

<sup>16</sup> The following quotation captures the dynamic I am trying to describe and reveals that the College Church's loss of identity is not unique among North American congregations. "Whatever the reasons, it is certain that our numerical stagnation was in part the result of tensions within the fellowship of Churches of Christ. These tensions led to a greater diversity among our congregations and a crisis of identity in our movement." Holloway and Foster, 124.

this movement away from an original story toward fragmented stories in at least three areas: church structure, church theology, and church leadership.<sup>17</sup>

### Church Structure

The College Church met together for weekly worship, but the church's individual shepherding groups had become the engine behind the church's fellowship, ministry and outreach. Shepherding groups at College Church were equivalent to adult Bible classes, meeting each Sunday after worship. Each shepherding group had an elder as the official leader.<sup>18</sup> The personalities and leanings of each elder shaped the style and functioning of the groups. Some worked to recruit new members and had busy slates of activities and service projects. Others focused on sustaining long-time relationships. Each group had its own theological or ideological bent. Some leaned toward one political party or the other. A few openly promoted an increased role for women while others were more conservative. Even the curriculum of study was up to the discretion of each individual group.

These shepherding groups grew in significance during the years without a preaching minister. Without a centralizing or unifying force, the shepherding groups were the primary vessels for shaping narratives within the College Church. They became more important than other gatherings, at least in terms of functionality. Sunday night assemblies were scrapped two decades ago. Wednesday night Bible classes ceased to be an important event with less than a fourth of church members in attendance. Weekly

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<sup>17</sup> I describe these three areas as they seemed to be in the months after my arrival in January 2009. This depiction gives a window into how the church has evolved over the past fifteen or more years.

<sup>18</sup> There were eight official shepherding groups including the teen and college-age groups. The college group was actually led by the associate minister and the teen group by the youth minister. The official shepherds for those two groups had only a minimal impact on their groups' overall directions.

worship had the potential to unify the church, but the twelve-year system of rotating preachers seemed to work against that.

### Church Theology

Each congregation is a concrete expression of collective faith. A congregation's theology reveals how it views its relationship with God.<sup>19</sup> Every church has a theology, even if poorly formulated or misunderstood. Having theological clarity can allow a congregation to navigate change in a healthy manner while remaining faithful to its core beliefs. On the other hand, if theology is not clearly comprehended and communicated, then pragmatic or utilitarian actions can take over in times of anxiety and conflict. Without a clear grasp of a church's identity, leaders may push an incoherent theological vision or misjudge a brewing conflict. I asked questions about the College Church's apparent theology in order to gain insights about the congregation's identity and the coherence of its narrative.

One can observe a congregation's theological framework on two basic levels.<sup>20</sup> First, corporate aspects of faith are evident in the voices of official leaders and the words placed before the congregation. Sometimes, these publicly spoken words reflect the true nature of the congregation. At other times, the stated beliefs can be wishful thinking or an idealized goal to help move the church in one direction or another.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Schreier, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 24.

<sup>20</sup> With only minor semantic modification, I employ here Robert Schreier's basic categories for faith expressed in the congregation as discussed in "Theology in the Congregation," *Studying Congregations*, 30-32.

Second, individual or implicit aspects of faith define how a church actually puts theology into practice. These are the theological beliefs people actually take home with them at night. Although they may never be stated in front of the congregation, they hold sway over the lives of members who maintain them.

When the stated and unstated theologies are in unison, the congregation demonstrates the unifying nature of its defining narrative. When members of the congregation seem to internalize and live out their faith in ways that differ from the congregation's public profession of faith, they expose a lack of agreement or clarity about the congregation's narrative. A gap between stated and unstated theology can also indicate that leaders are either out of touch with the congregation's belief system or wish to change the theology at work in the pews.

### *Corporate Theology*<sup>21</sup>

The College Church upheld many practices in keeping with its heritage in Churches of Christ, but the language about these practices was no longer exclusivistic. It used only a cappella singing, though no one publicly claimed it as a salvation issue or taught why they did it. The church had a weekly observance of the Lord's Supper and a weekly collection, though the public words about these differed as varying lay members got up to introduce the communion and the collection each week.

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<sup>21</sup> As previously mentioned (fn. 11), my observations about the College Church stemmed from multiple sources. One primary source was a series of interviews I conducted with a feedback group in the summer of 2009. I led what was in essence a focus group made up of nine College Church members chosen by me as a cross-section of the church. Following the group sessions, I then shared my subsequent observations with three other groups for additional feedback. These were (1) the elders, (2) the staff, and (3) another *ad hoc* group representing a cross-section of the congregation. They gave me a window into some of the beliefs and practices of the congregation. With the primary feedback group, I used two tools to guide the conversations and assess the College Church: (1) Nancy Ammerman, et al., eds., *Studying Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998); and (2) George W. Bullard, Jr., "Recognizing the Life Cycle and Stages of Your Congregation's Development," in *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005).



Church leaders did not provide a unified voice about salvation or the role of baptism. Members heard mention of baptism and saw occasional public baptisms, but many leaders seemed averse to using language that hinted at the church's sectarian past. Public statements tended to reinforce this stance since the church no longer condemned those who did not practice its traditional understanding of baptism.<sup>22</sup> When practiced corporately, however, the way in which it was administered might have been confusing to those who observed.<sup>23</sup>

The College Church publicly emphasized a personal relationship with God and Jesus.<sup>24</sup> Teachers and preachers tended to portray God as loving, compassionate, merciful and ready to forgive. Public words unambiguously stated that salvation is through grace

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<sup>22</sup> Nearly all members of the College Church would have said that baptism is important on some level, but many did not hold a dogmatic view on how it should happen or when a person enters the kingdom, i.e., at the moment of belief or at the moment of immersion. For example, the church website contained a list of beliefs and values. These were written by the elders prior to my arrival. One value stated, "We value baptism upon accepting Jesus as Savior." A preceding belief statement reads, "Salvation is a free gift from God; it is not deserved nor can it be earned. We believe that we are saved by God's grace by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. Because we believe in Jesus, we respond in faith through repentance, confession of Christ as Lord, baptism by immersion, and living an obedient life led by the Holy Spirit." While these statements might leave open the possibility that the College Church still placed a high emphasis on believers' baptism, a hallmark of Churches of Christ, my observation of church practice led me to believe the opposite. Cf. fn. 23 for observations about how individual views about baptism spill over into the corporate experience.

<sup>23</sup> I did not conduct any interviews or do research specifically on this one topic. I can only comment on what I personally witnessed. In the College Church, lay members were permitted to baptize. During one baptism, the lay officiate asked the baptismal candidate (his son) if he had already accepted Jesus into his heart. The question itself is at odds with the traditional Church of Christ understanding of baptism as necessary for salvation. On a subsequent Sunday, two baptisms occurred, both performed by different lay members. One asked the candidate (his daughter) four questions about her belief in Jesus. The second asked the candidate (his niece) two slightly different questions about her belief in Jesus. A baptism the following week was performed by a boy's father and grandfather. The grandfather asked a single question about belief in Jesus and pronounced the words of baptism, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. . ." The father did the baptism but said nothing. I could list additional varying examples about baptism. These instances may simply reveal the church's casual approach to acts such as baptism, or they may speak to the existence of multiple, competing narratives that fund differing theological perspectives and hence differing public acts.

<sup>24</sup> As an example, the church's website (<http://www.collegecofc.com>) said that it was "a refuge where you can find care during hardship. Our Shepherding Groups are vital in tending to the needs of each person. We don't want anyone to get lost in the crowd!"

rather than via works and that God is an approachable being who loves all people. His holiness and discipline were things rarely spoken of—or at least poorly remembered by those who listened. Not much was said about hell or about the things people should avoid. Leaders publicly encouraged members to stand with sinners but said little about avoiding sin. The Holy Spirit was a common part of public discourse.

Overall, I detected a clear corporate shift away from the old sectarian belief system, but no clear theological picture replaced it. The College Church expressed a corporate theology largely in unison with most Christian churches, not just Churches of Christ (e.g., confessing Jesus as the Son of God, hope in heaven and a belief that God loves us). The church stopped talking about items that once were central to the common self-understanding of Churches of Christ.

### *Individual Theology*

Members of the College Church seemed to hold a broad range of strongly held beliefs, some contradicting each other.<sup>25</sup> Some of these views differed from the publicly stated positions of faith. While all would have acknowledged a basic belief in Jesus as God's Son and the Bible as God's inspired word, not all agreed that baptism was essential or that a cappella singing was a practice worth preserving.

At the time of this project, almost all members of the College Church no longer saw sectarian divides between Christian faith traditions. Many members viewed College Church as an evangelical church that wore the name "Church of Christ." They seemed to view baptism as a flexible issue, probably even optional. Some members were active in

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<sup>25</sup> Schreiter, "Theology," 32. According to Schreiter most churches do not have a single, coherent theology that binds them together. People come to faith from different perspectives and backgrounds in addition to being at different places and positions in society. These all affect our way of interpreting faith and shape how we live it out.

ecumenical organizations or ministries where they partnered with Christians from Assemblies of God, Baptist Churches, Christian Churches, Evangelical Free Churches, and other mostly evangelical congregations. This “cross-breeding” leveled the playing field in the minds of many people who no longer saw the Church of Christ heritage as anything unique and may have even viewed their sectarian past as a dark stain best left behind.

Not all bought into the idea that every Christian church is equal. They privately expressed confusion or even concern that College Church no longer emphasized a distinct message. All would likely have said, however, that God would be the final arbiter. They hoped he would either help them understand why they were wrong or that he would show mercy to those whose understanding was incomplete.

The private lives of many members indicated that they counted on God’s grace and trusted he would allow them a few indiscretions. Some privately expressed the belief that God wanted them to be happy. They seemed to believe that God does not place many demands upon them. The primary requirement of their Christian walk, according to some, was that they have a personal relationship with God, however nebulous that might sound.<sup>26</sup>

### *Summary*

Generally speaking, the corporate and individual theologies of the College Church demonstrated an overall rejection of past views. While a rejection of the past was evident,

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<sup>26</sup> When I asked my focus group (fn. 21) to describe church members’ views about sin, one member commented that many seem to think that sin is unavoidable and okay. Another followed by saying that the church shows great compassion to those who admit struggling with sin but does little to help them understand the dangers or consequences of sin.

the church also demonstrated a lack of consensus about some current theological beliefs as evidenced through conflicting stances on seemingly key components of what the College Church believed and even practiced. Some members, perhaps even leaders, hoped that certain positions were broadly accepted because they composed a few statements and publicly read them or posted them on the church website. In truth, however, there were conflicting pockets of theological belief, perhaps fed by potentially competing narratives present in the congregation. Little cross-pollination existed between these groups and individuals.<sup>27</sup> As shown in the following section, even the church's leadership structure sometimes made it difficult for leaders to listen to feedback that might have opened them to this reality.

### Church Leadership

Jackson Carroll proposes that the function of church leadership is threefold: (1) to help the congregation gain a realistic understanding of itself and its situation, (2) to assist members in developing a vision that is faithful to God and to God's unique calling to their congregation, and (3) to help enact that vision corporately.<sup>28</sup> To this definition I might add that the leaders are the primary story-tellers of a congregation.<sup>29</sup> Those who

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<sup>27</sup> The College Church did not intentionally discourage this kind of communication, but the structure seemed to promote what Anderson and Foley describe as "secret keeping." Some of this secret keeping might have been caused by the traumatic events of the past. Regardless of the cause, they argue that such a practice causes the community to "remain stuck in fixed patterns of interaction, roles are rigidly defined, and stories are closely monitored in order to keep the secret safe. Such secret-keeping is deceptively mythic: prematurely announcing that reconciliation is possible without allowing participants in the story to name that which needs to be reconciled. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, "Leadership and the Study of the Congregation," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 170.

<sup>29</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 100.

lead can play a key role in discerning and giving language to the evolving narrative in the life of a congregation.<sup>30</sup>

The College Church, like other congregations, had both formal leaders who were officially recognized by the congregation and informal leaders who exercised authority without official titles. In Churches of Christ, a congregation's formal leadership followed a typical pattern. Elders had the primary authority, but preachers had the public voice. The role of preachers was to carry out in the public arena the consensus or majority will of the elders. If the central leadership was strong and effective, unofficial leaders either acted in support of the official leaders or had minor influence over the congregation.

During the early years of growth, the College Church's official leadership tended to manage the congregation successfully. The elders were usually strong leaders, and the ministers typically walked in step with the expectations of the congregation and its leaders. As trauma and stress befell the church, however, leaders sometimes acted at cross purposes or in ways that ostracized members. The fracturing of church leadership gave space for unofficial or minor leaders to increasingly exercise their influence over large portions of the church.

In congregations, formal leaders have to recognize the limits of their authority. Those in leadership can be most successful by utilizing not only their own leadership abilities but also the skills and influence of informal leaders who have circles of influence. By tapping into these unofficial circles, leaders can unleash the power latent in

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<sup>30</sup> Gil Rendle, "Narrative Leadership and Renewed Congregational Identity," in *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*, ed. Larry A. Golemon (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 38; Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 237-40; Pat Taylor Ellison, "Word Dwelling, Deep Listening, and Faith-Based Moral Conversations in Congregations: A Nested Vision for Learning New Habits," in *Testing the Spirits: How Theology Informs the Study of Congregations*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 106-8.

the congregation to help propel it forward. Strong congregational leadership generally must flow from up out of the congregation. When those in authority fail to recognize the power of informal leaders and assume that members should follow purely because of official titles worn by the leaders, they set up an inevitable clash with those who exercise leadership outside official structures.

In the years without a preacher, the College Church's paid ministers often felt unsure how much authority they had. Many church members viewed the paid ministers as the ones who actually got things done, but some thought the elders should be the ones who held the reins of power. This sometimes created confusion about who was really in charge.

As long-time members began to leave the church, pressure mounted on leaders to "take control." A number of people grew frustrated with the perceived leadership vacuum and tended to "free-lance" via their own areas of influence. Sometimes they got permission from an elder. Sometimes they worked through a minister. Sometimes they did neither. Some used their clout to help the elders and ministers with what they perceived to be the direction of the church. Some pushed hard in directions they wished the elders and ministers would go.

The transition away from the old, prevailing narrative was painful for the College Church. The difficulty of discerning a new narrative made the task of leadership an even more overwhelming responsibility. The wounds of the past weighed heavily upon the congregation, and the College Church leadership had to endure great travail in order to survive. The fact that the church displayed many healthy attributes after these struggles was a great testimony not only to the congregation but to the willingness of the leaders to

bear the pain of the people. In spite of this praiseworthy survival, College Church leaders needed to learn new forms of leadership to allow a life-giving narrative to arise from within the congregation. Rather than being defensive, they needed to grant permission for the church to move forward. This project required a reframing of past power struggles in order to bravely claim the positive elements of the College Church's unique heritage and move forward into God's glorious future.

### Summary

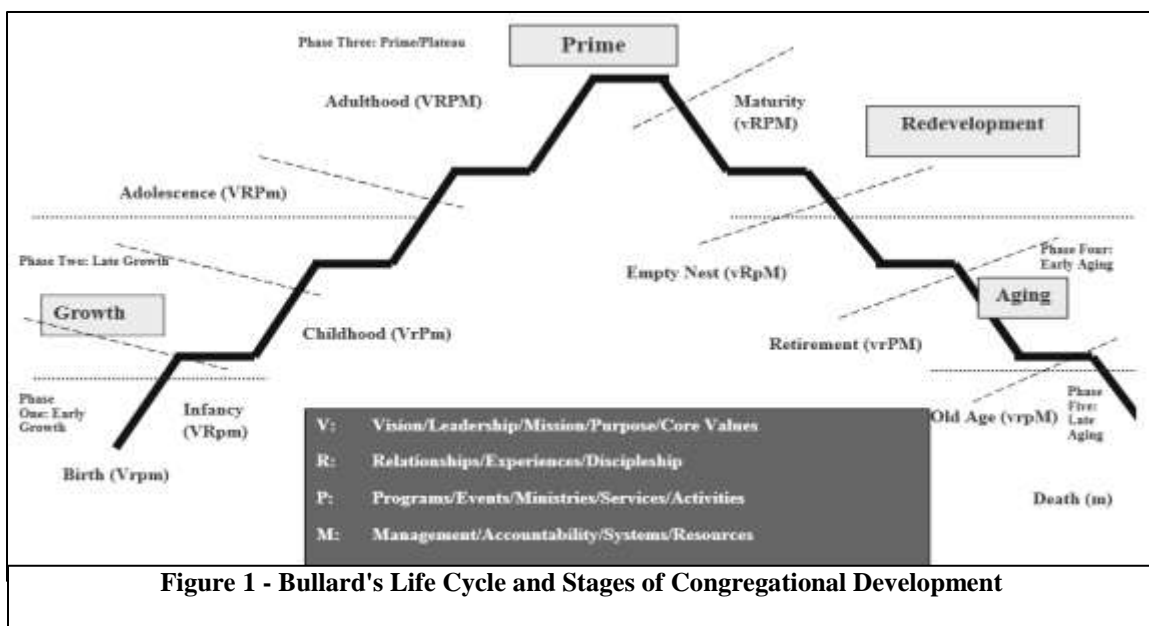
A quick glance at structure, theology and leadership of the College Church revealed two important pieces of information for this project. First, it had moved away from acting as a unified whole and instead functioned as a cluster of miniature congregations all meeting under the official name of the College Church. This was a convenient arrangement for those who wanted freedom to act without having to worry about the entire congregation. This made it impossible, however, for the church to act as a unified whole or to convey a consistent message. Second, the congregation freed itself from some of the theological and structural constraints of the past, and this freedom gave it the possibility of innovation. If the congregation could imagine itself as one body, then it could have the potential to live out the mission of God in a multiplicity of ways that might all fit within a shared identity.

### Bullard's Life Cycles and Stages

George Bullard's "Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development" provided another lens for understanding the College Church's loss of narrative. This gave a new way for speaking about the need for a new narrative. Bullard's material provided a fairly intuitive assessment that allows a congregation to understand itself in comparison

with the life cycle of most North American congregations.<sup>31</sup> This framed the College Church's fragmentation in terms of a natural pattern that many churches follow.

Bullard uses four components to identify a congregation's particular stage of development. These four components are vision (V), relationships (R), programs (P), and management (M). Bullard's model determines a congregation's stage according to the configuration of these four factors. If one factor is strong and highly functional, it is



represented by a capital letter. If the component is weak or non-functional, then it is represented with a small letter. Bullard suggests there are ten stages of development: birth (Vrpm), infancy (VRpm), childhood (VrPm), adolescence (VRPm), adulthood (VRPM), maturity (vRPM), empty Nest (vRpM), retirement (vrPM), old age (vrpM), and death (m).<sup>32</sup> When a congregation is on the growth side of the graph, vision and relationships

<sup>31</sup> Bullard, 75-96.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 79. Bullard groups these ten stages into five primary phases of development, but these phases are not helpful for our purposes.



tend to be the dominant components. When a congregation is on the downward slope, programs and management tend to take control. Adulthood is the prime of a church's life when all four components are fully functional. Bullard says that between seventy-five percent and eighty percent of North American churches are on the downward side of the chart.<sup>33</sup>

The College Church seemed to be in the retirement (vrPM) stage of the life cycle.<sup>34</sup> Retirement is on the aging, or downward, side of the chart. It is perhaps the last stage when a congregation can realistically experience renewal or revitalization. The continued downward progression toward death is not inevitable, as Bullard notes in his material. If left unaddressed, however, this stage can end in further decline or even a split, causing one or both groups to end up in old age, a stage that provides little hope for renewal.

Bullard describes retirement as a stage marked by both hope and despair. He says that some of the despair is due to weariness from the battles of the previous phase, empty nest. Long-term members have grown tired and just want to live out their days in relative peace. Bullard says that this group typically lacks energy for a new impetus while thinking that the quality of the church is in decline. They therefore become hesitant in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>34</sup> In the summer of 2009, I used a feedback group to make an initial assessment of the College Church. See fn. 21 above for details about this feedback group. I then presented this to the College Church elders, to the staff, and to an additional *ad hoc* group of eight diverse church members. They all agreed in their assessment of the congregation as being in the retirement stage. Only one elder seemed unsure if this was an accurate assessment. Bullard himself writes that he no longer analyzes a church to determine its developmental stage. He instead presents the life cycle to a congregation's leadership team and allows them to decide where their congregation is. "If a congregational leadership group is presented with a report that says where they are on the life cycle, they are likely to question it. When the same group hears a presentation of the life cycle and stages of congregational development and is asked to suggest where they are on the life cycle, they not only believe it, but they are incredibly accurate. Thus, it has face value for them, and they are motivated to take action based on it." Ibid., 76.

their ministry to outsiders. He posits that the longstanding members would love to see a return to the glory days but are not sure if they personally have the energy to push for it anymore.

Bullard then suggests that some newer members see this as a time for fresh hope. They think the battles of the previous stage are finished and the church can once again become healthy and proactive. Some of these members free-lance without official approval. They launch new efforts in hopes of resurrecting the church's growth. At this stage these new efforts may be at odds with existing ministries since they tend to be tacked onto the congregation without any deep evaluation of the overall picture.

According to Bullard, most in a retirement-stage congregation would love to welcome in new people, but they reluctantly admit that new people would probably not want to attend. The newer optimistic members step in with some bold ideas to rejuvenate the church. The stakeholders finally grant permission for some sort of dramatic change. Bullard says this apparent desire for renewal often becomes the basis for an appeal to a new pastor. They tell the new pastor that they would support fresh ideas and want to see positive changes.

Bullard goes on to say that the stakeholders often do not realize what they have unleashed. They want growth that values and honors the heritage of the congregation. They do not realize that some of the necessary changes may distance the church even further from the past. Sometimes, the new pastor feels empowered and emboldened by the newer members who push him forward in new directions, believing this is the only path to save the church. The stakeholders are willing to accept some change, but their fear is that too many changes will jeopardize a congregation already on the downward

slope. After changes over a couple of years, the stakeholders will often discover that the program of transformation has gone further than they would like. They either block any further change or discredit the newer members and the pastor who are bringing the changes. This can end in a split that moves the church closer to death.<sup>35</sup>

The retirement phase seemed to accurately describe the College Church's present status and was aptly fitting for a congregation with a fractured narrative. Even though most College Church members appreciated much about their congregation and about what God had done over recent years, they realized the church lacked the energy and vibrancy of previous days. Some made their own individual pushes to rectify what they deemed to be wrong. Ironically, their actions did not help but actually further fragmented the corporate story. From my perspective, retirement in the College Church was like a phase where competing forces agreed to a truce in order to see if a new dominant story could emerge.

One of the hallmarks of the retirement phase is that vision and relationships no longer drive the church, and this seemed accurate in the College Church. Management and programs had become dominant. Even though some criticized leadership as ineffective or the programs as out of touch, leadership and programs grew entrenched and prevented the flexibility necessary for congregational innovation. They were unintentionally blocking the kind of impulse necessary for a retirement church that might want to rediscover a meaningful role within in the mission of God. To restart the life cycle, the College Church needed to find ways to fire the relational synapses in the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 85. This description of the retirement phase was striking both to my feedback group and to the church's leadership team because it so closely resembled the College Church's journey.

congregation and allow a new communal vision to form. This vision could come from the top but needed to flow from within the congregation itself—a requirement that lended itself to this type of narrative-crafting project.

#### A Demographic Snapshot of Fresno<sup>36</sup>

Fresno is a place where divergent people and their stories intersect. It is a city of regional importance and a focal point for a large portion of the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno has the San Joaquin Valley's flagship institution of higher learning, Fresno State University. The city has the region's leading hospitals and most government offices. Fresno attracts people from across the region because of premier shopping, dining, and entertainment opportunities. Although most Valley residents drive long distances to work, shop, or recreate, Fresnans have easy access to the full array of employment, retail, and recreational options. Some opt to live close to Fresno in outlying towns or neighboring Madera County because real estate is less expensive, yet they drive into Fresno to work or to take advantage of Fresno's amenities. Fresno has grown into a major city even though few non-Fresnans think of it in the same breath as the metropolises along the California coast.

Fresno is a melting pot of ethnicities and socio-economic levels. Many immigrated to this region because the city lies in the center of a great and productive

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<sup>36</sup> This region was made famous by writings of William Soroyan and John Steinbeck. Fresno is in the San Joaquin Valley, which is part of California's Central Valley. The Central Valley is a broad swath of land running south-north from Bakersfield to Sacramento. Sitting between two mountain ranges, it is flat, arid land with rich soil and a lengthy growing season. Farmers depend on irrigation to grow grapes, almonds, pistachios, lettuce, strawberries, apricots, pomegranates, plums, cherries, avocados, figs, and nectarines plus a large number of citrus products. The southern part of the Central Valley is known as the San Joaquin Valley. The northern part is called the Sacramento Valley. Fresno is approximately in the center of the entire Central Valley. The following demographic information is publicly available at City of Fresno, "Demographic Summary, 2009," <http://www.fresno.gov/NR/rdonlyres/99EEC85C-73A0-4DAF-B6B0-79C6A1718282/0/demographicsummary09.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2010); U. S. Census Bureau, "Fresno (City) QuickFacts," under "State and County QuickFacts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0627000.html> (accessed July 17, 2009).

agricultural region. The majority are whites who trickled into the Valley starting in the 1870s and 1880s because of cheap land. They came west in larger numbers during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s to escape economic hardship and to carve out a better future in fertile Central California. Tens of thousands of Armenians moved to the San Joaquin Valley to escape Turkish persecution in the period around World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Their winemaking skills led them to plant expansive vineyards. Mexican immigrants and other Hispanics moved to the region around Fresno to work in the fields. Hmong immigrants from Laos, refugees from the Vietnam War, became another inexpensive layer of the workforce. Dozens of other ethnic groups added to the diversity of the Central Valley's population.

Area statistics showed more than seventy distinct ethnic groups in Fresno County, though the number of languages spoken at home might actually have been higher. The population of Fresno was about forty percent Latino. Twenty percent of Fresnoans were foreign born. Some of the leading nationalities in the region included Mexicans, Hmongs, Armenians, Russians, Japanese, Chinese, Laotians, Filipinos, Indians, Iranians and Arabs. Over thirty-nine percent of Fresnoans spoke a language other than English at home.<sup>37</sup>

The population of Fresno was just under 500,000, making it the fifth-largest city in California ahead of Long Beach and Sacramento. Neighboring Clovis had 95,000. The Fresno-Clovis metropolitan area had over a million people. Fresno grew by almost nine percent from 2000 to 2006 while the state of California grew by just seven percent in that same time period. Thirty-three percent of Fresnoans were under the age of eighteen.

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<sup>37</sup> At the time of this project, my wife taught a pre-kindergarten class at a public Fresno school. Among her twenty-three students were children whose foreign-born parents originated from Korea, Vietnam, Ukraine, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Philippines, Jordan, and Armenia.

The education and income level of Fresno was lower than the rest of the state, though perhaps better than other parts of the San Joaquin Valley. Only nineteen percent had a bachelor's degree. The median household income in Fresno was \$32,000 while the state income level was \$47,000. Twenty-six percent lived below the poverty level in Fresno as opposed to fourteen percent statewide. The ratio of high school and college graduates was eight percentage points lower in Fresno than the rest of the state. In 2000, the median value of an owner-occupied housing unit in Fresno was just under \$100,000 compared to the statewide average of \$211,000.

The College Church bore some resemblance to the above mentioned cultural situations within Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley. There was no monolithic culture for the College Church just as there was no hard, fixed culture for all Fresnoans. I saw patterns in the congregation that reflected the unique cultural situations of this region. The congregation contained multiple ethnicities and socio-economic levels. In other words, the College Church was not an anomaly or an island within the Central Valley "culture" but rather mirrored the diversity of its community.

The surrounding narratives of the San Joaquin Valley have increasingly shaped the College Church's corporate identity, albeit in divergent and competing ways and without critical dialogue about the impact of these narratives. The loss of a sense of shared social identity in the congregation allowed members to freely form smaller cells of identity within the larger body. To further complicate the situation, outside narratives of ethnicity and socio-economic hardship or privilege also shaped College Church members on an individual level. These outside narratives created a complex landscape within the

congregation since it lacked a shared corporate identity to order and make sense of these many influences.

### A Religious Snapshot of Fresno<sup>38</sup>

At the time of this project, one of the narrative themes prevalent in Fresno dealt with the Christian faith. Conservative values and behaviors typified some people's approach to money, politics, and religion. Many evangelical Christians in Fresno were politically conservative (Republican) and directly connected their faith to these values. These individuals comprised a vocal group that railed against "liberal politicians" in the state government and in the current federal government. This area (along with Orange County) was typically the "red" section of a mostly "blue" state. Support for Proposition 8, a 2008 ballot initiative to ban gay marriage, was high in Fresno County. These opinions obviously did not represent every self-professed Christian, but those who were vocally conservative seemed to expect others to support their views.

The religious scene in Fresno was diverse, but evangelicals had a strong, vocal presence. More than a quarter million people claimed Roman Catholicism. This far outnumbered all other Christian groups in Fresno County. Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God each had about 25,000 members, though their congregations sometimes used names that did not advertise their affiliation.<sup>39</sup> Churches of Christ

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<sup>38</sup> Statistical information in this section came from Association of Religion Data Archives, "County Reports," under "U.S. Congregational Membership," <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/selectCounty.asp?state=06&county=01001> (accessed July 15, 2009). Other information came from a *Christianity Today* article that portrays Fresno's religious scene. Tim Stafford, "Taking Back Fresno: Working Together, Churches Are Breathing New Life into a Decaying California City," *Christianity Today* 44 (Mar 6, 2000): 48-51. I added additional information based upon conversations with area pastors at area pastor meetings.

<sup>39</sup> For example, the largest congregation in Fresno, People's Church, was affiliated with Assemblies of God, a fact that few people realized.

claimed about 4,000 members. Many other denominations and faiths were represented in the greater Fresno area, including non-Christian religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Baha'i and Sikhism.

The northeast side of Fresno (north and east of the College Church building) contained many newer church buildings at that time. These congregations tended toward either the model of evangelical megachurch or community church. Many who attended these churches seemed to associate Christian commitment with political conservatism. While there was a spirit of cooperation between some of the smaller churches, among the megachurches there was sometimes great competition for members. They often projected a consumerist view of church, trying to provide the best children's programs, the best divorce-recovery programs, the best worship, and so forth. Commitment to a given faith community at times appeared fickle or even non-existent, subject to change based on one's tastes and preferences.

When talking with Fresnans, a person could sometimes get the feeling that church was part of everyone's life. Strangers rarely exhibited hostility or even apathy when the topic of religion would arise. When sharing my profession as a pastor/minister with someone, I met with seeming admiration rather than bewilderment or fear. Professing faith was ostensibly accepted and expected.<sup>40</sup> Many Fresnans either were openly religious or had grown adept at faking it.

I saw many signs of this pro-church sentiment, anecdotal perhaps, but signs nonetheless. Both the mayor and chief of police were open about their faith and active in

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<sup>40</sup> In the first six months living in Fresno, my wife and I were invited to perhaps a dozen different churches by people who seem to invite as soon as they meet a person.



local congregations. The mayor and her husband spoke about their desire to plant a new church. The area's major newspaper, *The Fresno Bee*, gave prime coverage to churches and religious issues. These and other signs pointed toward the acceptability of faith as part of public life.<sup>41</sup>

As one might guess, however, there were many Fresnoans who did not attend church or have an active Christian faith. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, the adherence rate of Fresno County was 55% of the population. When comparing these data with other counties in California, this was actually not a high adherence rate. Even the so-called "liberal" counties along the coast had many churchgoers intermingled with those who seemed antagonistic toward faith.<sup>42</sup>

With the fragmentation of its own narrative, the College Church found itself uncritically shaped by outside narratives found in the broader religious community. In the absence of its old shared identity, some members felt attracted to the seemingly successful stories of varying bodies of faith. As stated before, the loss of a sense of shared social identity in the congregation allowed members to freely form smaller cells of identity within the larger body, some sympathetic to one particular narrative over another. No congregation is ever one homogeneous or unified culture,<sup>43</sup> but the heterogeneity of the College Church was accelerated by the disintegration of the old unifying narrative.

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<sup>41</sup> Those who have claimed the U.S. to be a post-Christian nation should perhaps have visited Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley before making that declaration.

<sup>42</sup> According to the ARDA data, Los Angeles County had an adherence rate of almost 70%. Even San Francisco County had a 49% adherence rate. Of course, the ARDA data rely on self-reporting from religious bodies. Many denominations claim large numbers of people whose actual adherence to their faith can be debated, so exact numbers may be difficult to accurately procure.

### A Snapshot of the College Church's Immediate Environs

The College Church gathers at 1284 East Bullard Avenue in Fresno. At the time of this project, very few members lived in the building's vicinity. Some could walk to worship services, but almost all members had to drive five minutes or more to reach the building. A few worked in the building's vicinity. Most members drove from across Fresno, Clovis, and the region to attend services.

What was the context of the College Church? Was it the physical location where the church worshiped? Or was it the places where members lived, worked, went to school, and recreated? The simple answer is "yes." The real context of the College Church was the place where its people worshiped along with the places where they lived and worked. The place of gathering was crucial, however, because the congregation could practice its shared missional life by living it out in the specific environs of 1284 East Bullard Avenue. As the church learned to live out God's mission locally, it could also live out the kingdom of God wherever its members lived and worked.

The church property was on Bullard Avenue, an east-west cross-street that runs the entire width of Fresno. Though not the widest or busiest cross-street, it was a four-lane thoroughfare used by thousands of motorists every day. Just a couple of hundred yards to the west was First Street, a major north-south road that traversed almost the entire city.

When looking beyond the physical plant of the College Church, I saw a changing neighborhood. The building, when constructed in 1964, was on the northern edge of the

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<sup>43</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 80.

city. The city had since expanded northward. Most of the affluent and upwardly mobile lived to the north and east of the building or on the northwest side of Fresno. The immediate neighborhoods had become less desirable than they once were. The inner city was still far away, but low-income apartment complexes were within walking distance of the building. Homeless individuals sometimes wandered across the church property.

A junior high school was just behind the building. A high school was down the block. A number of elementary schools were a short drive away. Two of the city's leading hospitals were less than a five-minute drive from the church building. Professional offices were close by. The nearby intersection of First and Bullard Avenues had numerous shops including a supermarket, several restaurants, two pharmacies, a Hmong community center, a dollar store and a service station. Some stores vacant just a few years ago had recently been renovated and were occupied.

A prominent part of the neighborhood was Fresno State University, with an enrollment of over twenty thousand students. Only a few students lived in dormitories on campus, but there were many student apartments and houses close by. The campus was only a mile or so from the College Church building, and the 40,000-seat football stadium was within a short walk of the property.

#### College Church's Interaction with Its Environs

In a previous age when churches played a dominant role in society, the need for studying a congregation's environs or ecology seemed irrelevant. Churches were strong social constructs deeply embedded in the social classes that defined them.<sup>44</sup> Some churches and church leaders have gained awareness of culture and the need for dialogue

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<sup>44</sup> Wilbert Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1985), 63-64.

about the gospel's interaction with it. This prompts a church to pay attention to its surroundings and seek out intentional and thoughtful interaction with it. A church would be unwise to assume it reflects or even knows the community in which it exists.<sup>45</sup> Understanding and dealing with the cultural landscape may cause conflict in a congregation, but growing churches tend to acknowledge and responsibly deal with the cultural and physical diversity of those around them since these are the people who might actually come in.<sup>46</sup> In the following paragraphs I explore how the College Church tried to interact with its context but how this was largely a one-way street that tried to meet the needs of the surrounding community with no reciprocity and without any real dialogue about the theological aims of such interaction.

The College Church typically paid attention to holidays in the surrounding culture. The congregation marked events of the Christian calendar such as Christmas and Easter. It also had a history of dedicating space during worship services for honoring veterans, mothers, fathers, and the United States of America in accordance with the secular calendar. Even though the membership became increasingly diverse, the College Church typically took note of only Anglo holidays and not Cinco de Mayo or Martin Luther King Day.

The College Church organized a number of activities for various segments of its membership: teen events, women's studies and retreats, occasional men's activities, Yosemite Bible Camp, college-age events, short-term mission trips, and special events

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<sup>45</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland and R. Stephen Warner, "Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. They write, "The only sure way for a congregation to die is for it to close itself off from its context."

for children such as Vacation Bible School. Some church members helped feed the homeless downtown one Saturday each month. Shepherding groups scheduled some activities for themselves such as “Girls Night Out,” Sunday potlucks, group vacations, and poker nights. Church-wide fellowship events were infrequent. In the past, the worship minister organized concerts at the church building, either for Christmas or for the Fourth of July.

Many members tended to view the church’s annual car show (Sunday Spring Classic) as the highlight of the calendar. This was a Sunday afternoon event that was started by one shepherding group and had grown to incorporate individuals from other shepherding groups. Members of the community even volunteered to judge or purchase prizes for the entrants. The car show occurred the first Sunday of May and was a major production for many people in the congregation. As the largest free car show in the area with more than two thousand in attendance, this was an event when many church members felt the greatest sense of pride about their church.

A church-sponsored school called Mountain View Christian also used the facility. Started in 1978 as a cooperative effort between area Churches of Christ, it had lost all church sponsors except the College Church. Its backers described it as a great ministry for the community. A few church members taught in it or served on its board. The school had been struggling in recent years and had only fifty-five elementary students at the time of this project.

Another ministry that had spun off into a non-profit organization was Families in Transition. It used the church building to provide space for court-appointed meetings between parents and their children who are in protective custody. A church member was

the paid director. Due to privacy issues, church members were not allowed in that part of the building during its afternoon operating hours. Its primary advocates within the church thought of it as a way to fill a needed role in the community. Due to cuts in the Fresno County budget, this program ended at the close of 2010.

The church employed four ministers. Eight elders served the congregation. Two women worked part-time as administrative help. One full-time janitor maintained the property. A number of members would come through the building during the week to assist with ongoing ministries.

The most noticeable physical artifact of the College Church was the church building.<sup>47</sup> Completed in 1964 and expanded in 1989, the building sat on a large plot of land surrounded by urban sprawl. In spite of the adjoining development, the property felt secluded. Large trees encircled the building and parking areas. The primary parking lot was behind the church building and invisible from the main street. Fences in the back blocked off the view of neighboring houses. The interior felt like a traditional worship space with stage, pulpit, and baptistry at the front. Large audio speakers and projection equipment clearly revealed the church's embrace of technology as part of its worship environment. Some members voiced concerns about the state of the outside lighting, the HVAC system, the deterioration of the original structure, and the need for resurfacing the parking lot. The building had been vandalized on occasion with the greatest damage coming from arson that resulted in massive damage to the new wing. In spite of the building's weaknesses, the facility was home to the church.

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<sup>47</sup> This is the case for most congregations. Ammerman, 91.

Adding special touches to the building, artistic projects held a sentimental value to members. Designed by a founding member, a mosaic over the baptistry had special meaning to those who had helped build the facility. The mosaic was unseen every week because of the giant projection screen that hung in front of it. Stonework on the façade of the sanctuary provided another beautiful artifact. The stones created the image of a cross, an artistic touch that was clearly visible in the church's early years. As the trees in front of the sanctuary matured, they were traditionally pruned back to keep the cross in full view. In recent years, however, the cross had become hidden as the trees were neglected and allowed to cover the building's façade. Passers-by tended to miss the cross not only because of the trees but also because of the aging marquee in front of the building.

To get a preliminary idea about the College Church's impact on its surroundings, I selected a group of eight church members to conduct interviews with non-members who lived or worked in the church's immediate vicinity. We intentionally selected interviewees from different walks of life, but this was not a scientific sampling or study. The goal was to gain a preliminary impression of how some non-members who lived or worked near the church property viewed the College Church.<sup>48</sup>

The outsiders who were interviewed had little to no impression of the College Church. When asked to describe a time when the church was helpful to the community, most replied, "What church?" or "No impression." One person referred to the annual car

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<sup>48</sup> They used a simplified form of ethnographic inquiry in asking questions to a cross-section of people who live and work near the College Church building. They interviewed ten non-members including two store managers, an employee, the manager of an apartment complex, a high school coach, a college student and a university professor. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. They also interviewed approximately twenty-five fringe church members. See appendix F for the interview outline.

show held on the property, but their overall answers revealed the church's lack of a meaningful footprint in the environs.

The group's interviews with outsiders in the church's immediate vicinity painted a picture that was at once hopeful and discouraging. The interviews were hopeful because some College Church leaders seemed to pride themselves on many of the principles that these outsiders would have liked to see in a church. Their answers were discouraging, however, because the College Church was totally invisible to them. Despite the congregation's expansive, physical plant, College Church had made little to no lasting impact on those interviewed.

Without a prominent, life-giving narrative to shape it, the College Church was unable to find a clear path to proactive engagement with its surrounding community. Trapped as it was by fragmented and disjointed narratives, the congregation looked to the surrounding world with no clear purpose in mind. Certain pockets of the church shared a sense of identity that shaped their actions, but the College Church as a whole had no shared understanding of itself and therefore no common view of how to relate to outsiders. The church was fortunate to have a large campus in a key location, but its undiscovered identity helped ensure that the facility was likewise invisible as well.

#### Statement of the Problem

The problem that this project sought to address was the College Church's lack of a congregational narrative that would clearly define the church's identity. Groups tend to function out of some sense of shared identity. This identity results in group behavior that influences and orders the behavior of individuals within the group. The goal of this



project, as stated below, was not to change group behavior but rather to change the underlying factors that shape the College Church's shared social identity.<sup>49</sup>

At its outset in 1964, the congregation seemed to possess a strong sense of what it was, funded by what was likely a clear narrative. The deaths of two ministers and the firings of others produced stress and trauma that brought strain on the previous narrative. Even greater pressure came as the church leaders, in apparent conflict with many members, sought distance from their sectarian heritage. Large numbers of members eventually departed, sometimes due to conflict or frustration with the leaders, at other times for seemingly selfish or petty reasons. New people entered, and many of these did not fit the mold of the previous era. Under the weight of these forces, the binding narrative of the early years fractured and disintegrated. No single, life-giving narrative arose to replace it.

At the time of this project, various segments of the College Church actually demonstrated competing views of the church's story. Though not wishing for the sectarian thinking that marked it in its early years, some seemed to wish for a return to the glory days when the membership was double its current size. Others seemed to idolize the style of Fresno's many evangelical megachurches. Still other story-lines existed, some that stemmed from the social and economic locations of the various members. A few individuals were shaped by a quasi-nationalistic form of religion that blended worship of God and country. The College Church's structure and a general lack of interaction with its surroundings perhaps facilitated this narrational disintegration.

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<sup>49</sup> For more on social identity theory and the power of a shared identity over behavior, see Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, Anthony S. R. Manstead and Miles Hewstone, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 555-60.

From the outset, I realized that some in the College Church might not see the need for a shared story. They might view themselves as members of mini-churches within a loose confederation, and this structure might suit their aims. A key concern of this project was to lift the vision of church members to a new level so they could dream about a shared identity and mission. While no single narrative could possibly encompass every aspect of the congregation's life, a new life-giving narrative was needed to help shape a new shared sense of identity and—hopefully and ultimately—new forms of behavior that would propel it forward into a new season of partnership in the mission of God.

### Consequences of the Problem

The College Church had lost its shared sense of identity. The external, success-driven narrative of the past was still strong for many of the remaining stakeholders. Other narratives from the outside dominated various pockets of the church and at times led them in competing directions from one another. Without strong central leadership and shared dialogue about God's call for the College Church, no new communal story emerged. The loss of shared identity may have birthed multiple, unhealthy trends in the congregation. The most important consequence in terms of this project was the church's inability to move toward the world with clarity and intentionality. God calls the church to participate in the mission of redemption, but the College Church no longer had a corporate sense of identity that would propel it toward a deep partnership with God's mission both in its universal sense and in its unique local incarnation.

### Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this project was to craft a congregational narrative that would be faithful to the College Church's heritage while propelling it toward God's unveiling

future. I employed group discussions that required interaction among College Church members. In this project I attempted to listen to the divergent stories of the congregation and blend them into a life-giving narrative. After hearing the church's stories, I crafted a narrative that both reminded the congregation about what God had done in its midst and opened them to new possibilities of God's work in and through the College Church. If constructed in a manner faithful to God's calling for the College Church, this narrative could be repeatedly used as a touchstone for the church in future months and years. This type of narrative had the potential to clarify the church's identity and increasingly foster a renewed capacity for mission within the kingdom of God.

Many church consultants and church renewal experts write about the need for something similar to this project: crafting a new congregational narrative. Robert Dale speaks about tapping into the "theological roots" of a congregation in order to restore the church's dream for the future.<sup>50</sup> James Hopewell writes that "narrative can be a means by which a congregation apprehends its vocation."<sup>51</sup> Diana Butler Bass builds on Hopewell's work by stating that congregations can embody the stories they tell.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the key description of this process comes from Mary Clark Moschella. She describes this intervention's process as a way of "co-authoring the future" and subsequently finding

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Dale, *To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981), 131.

<sup>51</sup> James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 193.

<sup>52</sup> Bass, 100. Many others use a similar language. Gil Rendle discusses the need to move a congregation out of the safe, weak stories in which many are allowed to operate. The goal is to move from shared monologue to shared dialogue out of which a new story emerges. Rendle, 31. George Hunsberger writes about a congregation's need to discern its "missional vocation," a calling that is unique to each particular church in its context. The process he describes has some similarities to the task of forming a congregational narrative. Hunsberger, "Discerning Missional Vocation," in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38. George Bullard describes the need to write a congregation's "future story" based on what God has done in the past and what a church's leaders perceive about their future. Bullard, 133.

new ways for a congregation to think and act together. She says that “no one composes a life story alone.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, my intent was not to compose the College Church’s story but to discern its own story, shaped and discerned by the members themselves. This project’s goal was not just to write a story, but to help the church see God’s future possibilities as they emanated from what God had already done in its midst. This would allow me to help them co-author a new future for the College Church, one that would renew hope and create the possibility of partnership in the mission of God.

#### Basic Assumptions

Several assumptions supported this project. First, I assumed that I would be able to craft a narrative that I could define as life-giving in accordance with the theology fleshed out below in Chapter 2.<sup>54</sup> I had no desire to foster or perpetuate the “false” narratives of nationalism, individualism, or consumerism. If I had discerned through this project a dominant communal narrative that was not life-giving, then that story would have stood in opposition to the purpose of this project. I believed, however, that a life-giving narrative would be discernible, even if it was temporarily masked by other false stories.

Second, while a church (or any group) can have a defining narrative that shapes identity and subsequently mission, multiple, smaller narratives constantly pull at, influence, and speak into the lives of a church’s members. A congregational narrative

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<sup>53</sup> Moschella, 238.

<sup>54</sup> I cannot overemphasize my desire to see a “life-giving” narrative emerge. In Chapter 2 I clarify the type of narrational components necessary to point in this direction. The “life” envisioned by my theological section is not an insular, pat-each-other-on-the-back, feel-good life but rather a life shaped by what God did for the church through Jesus and through the gift of the Spirit and by what God calls the church to be and do.

does not necessarily replace or displace those smaller narratives.<sup>55</sup> It can, however, order and bestow meaning to the smaller narratives, limiting their power and demarcating the extent of their influence.

Finally, no single narrative could possibly encompass the lives and realities of all members of the College Church at all times. Every group has multiple narratives at work within it. I assumed, however, that it would be possible to find a story that could be significantly owned by most church members.

#### Definitions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Crafting was the process of discerning and composing a congregational narrative. By crafting, I mean that I was not creating a narrative from scratch. Rather, it was a two-part process of discerning the narrative already extant in the church and composing it in a manner that seemed faithful to God's purposes and to the church's spiritual legacy.

This project was delimited by the fact that I examined only the congregational narrative of the College Church. The narrative for another church would not be the same because the data from the interviews would be a completely different and unique set of information. This project can therefore claim to speak only for the College Church.

The nature of group interviews limited this project. The interaction of the respondents could have had undesirable effects on the process by causing respondents to relate their answers to previous comments rather than making independent observations. Also, a dominant person might have inadvertently shut down the responses of some timid respondents.

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<sup>55</sup> Hopewell, 147.

The timeframe for this project limited the analysis of the data. I had to process data from eighteen group interviews, each approximately forty-five minutes in length. The last set of interviews took place on October 3, 2010, but the data analysis had to be complete several days before October 24, 2010, so that the final narrative could be crafted. This allowed less than three weeks for complete data analysis.

My own biases naturally affected the group interview process. Although I used a team of interviewers, I was their primary influence. I may have unknowingly steered them in one direction or another. The interviewers themselves also undoubtedly injected their own biases into the process. They may have unwittingly signaled what types of responses were most desirable. These were unavoidable limitations on the entire project.

### Conclusion

The College Church had a rich history and once enjoyed the defining presence of a strong congregational narrative. This early narrative helped propel the congregation to a place of prominence among Churches of Christ on the West Coast. A series of tragedies shook the congregation's confidence. A subsequent shift away from traditional views led to the weakening and eventual dissolution of the congregation's original story. The congregation had since fragmented and been without a clear corporate sense of identity and purpose. After several years without clear direction, the College Church was in a prime position to discern God's call for it in a new era. This call could take the form of a life-giving narrative that might help propel it forward in step with God's call.

CHAPTER 2  
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The goal for this project was to craft a congregational narrative for the College Church. Its narrative in 2010 would not be the same as the College Church's story forty years ago. Its narrative also would not match that of other churches in other locales or even of other churches in Fresno. It would be unique to this particular group of believers in this particular place and time.

The need to speak intelligently about God and the things of God comes into focus when sitting in a hospital waiting room with a grieving parent or when sharing a meal with curious skeptics. I have never doubted the complexity of understanding God and communicating God to others, and I would never dream of intentionally oversimplifying or "dumbing down" the mystery of God's sovereignty. I have had the good fortune of inheriting some components of a well-rounded theology from a father and grandfather who were well-rounded preachers before me. They were both unusually open-minded given our denominational mindset at the time of their preaching careers. My father and grandfather both knew the importance of rational discourse and academic pursuits. They could respect differences of opinion in key theological and ecclesiological matters. I am grateful for this legacy.

This flexibility with regard to historical practices and beliefs did not mean, however, that they understood the importance of each congregation's local contextuality.

From the first half of the twentieth century on into the 1960s, Churches of Christ—including those led by my father and grandfather—gravitated toward near identical forms of church life. Although the Restoration Movement began in the early 1800s with a desire for flexibility in applying Scripture, Churches of Christ mostly lost this ability to show grace toward differing contextual understandings of ecclesial practice. Church polity within Churches of Christ during these decades crystallized ecclesiology into its “primitive” form and “restored” this distilled version among churches everywhere. Ecclesiology had become something seen as universal, context-less and static.

Beginning in the 1970s, many forward-thinking church leaders thought that structures and practices in Churches of Christ had become overly rigid and heavily tied to cultural assumptions of the previous era. They saw the need for flexibility and believed that broad cultural shifts demanded the need for corresponding changes in church practice. As one example, women of a previous generation had worn long skirts and hats to Church of Christ worship services, a practice mirrored broadly by the habits of women in North America. As clothing styles changed in the broader society, however, conflict arose over whether women should continue to wear hats and skirts to church assemblies. Over time, the conflict subsided as hats and long skirts became optional and increasingly infrequent. This example illustrates that the discussion about needed ecclesiological changes tended to focus on the desire for universal change rather than the freedom of a congregation to differ from others. In other words, if one church shifted its practice to meet societal changes, church leaders tended to assume that all other congregations should follow suit.



The need for a robust and contextualized ecclesiology on a congregational level was neither discussed nor understood. In this project, I assumed the College Church had a unique narrative that could shape congregational identity and mission. The underlying assumption is that ecclesiology and theology have particular elements to them. There may be universal aspects to both, but they are experienced and fleshed out in distinct settings. If we take seriously both the world and the incarnation, then we must admit the need to allow our forms and teachings to meet the context in which they need to take on flesh. As Douglas John Hall writes, “Contextualization, . . . , is the *sine qua non* of all genuine theological thought, and always has been.”<sup>1</sup> Hall is talking about theology, but his words are equally relevant for ecclesiology. Stephen Bevans expounds upon this idea: “Pluralism in theology, as well as on *every level of Christian life*, must not only be tolerated; it must be positively encouraged and cultivated.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the main non-negotiable aspect of church is the necessity of recognizing its contextual existence.<sup>3</sup> A church’s forms and practices are always shaped by its context. While biblical teachings and church tradition are factors that should help shape a congregation’s forms and practices, a congregation should not be overly worried about

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989; Fortress edition, 1991) 21.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 15 (italics mine). He also makes this point in the same paragraph: “Contextualization, therefore, is not something on the fringes of the theological enterprise. It is at the very center of what it means to do theology in today’s world. Contextualization, in other words, is a theological imperative.” I would add that contextualization is also at the very center of the church’s mission. Christian congregations must learn to contextualize, not as a fringe part of its existence, but as central to its very purpose.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1986, rep. 2001), 3. He says that the faith communities of Scripture “are in every age an aspect of the community of faith’s response to the *living God*” (italics author’s). He goes on to say (ibid., 468) that “we miss the spirit of the biblical message, therefore, if we seek to extrapolate from our study one ecclesiastical form as the supposedly definitive one for all places and all time.”

copying structures and forms as if they were rigid.<sup>4</sup> The true community of faith is a “pilgrim people,” viewing its forms and structures as temporal and imperfect.<sup>5</sup> Even my father and grandfather are now among the growing number of leaders within Churches of Christ who recognize the need for such ecclesiological flexibility and diversity.

My understanding of church has clearly changed, and the same is thankfully true for many other church leaders. This project would be nonsensical if ecclesiology were independent of time and place. The College Church could then simply borrow the narrative of another church.

My intention in this project had nothing to do with bringing an outside story to the College Church. My vision of church, even if finely nuanced, was not the pivot point. The College Church’s narrative undoubtedly would have points of similarity to the narratives of other churches, but the complete story was one that could not possibly be matched or reproduced elsewhere.

The focus of this project, therefore, was not universal but particular, even though universal elements affected this local story. God’s narrative is hastening toward a universal end, but Christians work toward that end from their particular settings. My goal was to listen and discern how the ongoing story of God’s redemption (universal) distinctively intersected with the College Church in its contemporary setting (local). The plot of this church’s unique narrative was therefore framed by this movement from local to universal.

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<sup>4</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 12. He notes that faith is “still addressed to individuals for personal appropriation.” He warns against efforts to pigeonhole people into categories that force them to get to Jesus only through the institutional church.

<sup>5</sup> Hanson, 493.

### Why a Congregational Narrative

God works with concrete individuals in specific life situations. God takes people (individuals and groups such as churches) and works with them, regardless of who they are, what they have done, and where they are. Jesus may have become the ideal human being, but God does not expect to find others in this ideal state. In fact, the stories found in the Bible tell about God's interaction with real communities in very different life situations. In all these, God worked with what was there and shaped it as part of the people's response to God's own living nature.<sup>6</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann argues that, in the raising of Jesus from the dead, God demonstrates movement toward perfection and redemption. God does not simply allow the imperfect human condition to be the end of the story. God is in the process of moving the narrative toward an ending of God's choosing. By redemption, Moltmann does not mean some pie-in-the-sky, your-sins-are-forgiven type of scenario. He means that God took a Jewish man, born in first-century Palestine, who was fully human and God worked through him to move all humanity closer to God's desired end for the whole world. In other words, God started with the concrete (a Jewish man named Jesus) and worked toward the universal (redemption for all creation). Moltmann argues that this is how God works—starting with the real life situation and moving gradually toward the universal

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<sup>6</sup> Hanson, 3. This paragraph summarizes the entire trajectory of Hanson's tome. He argues that not only is it wrong to think that certain community characteristics are definitive marks of God's people, but more so that this "fails to grasp the most profound biblical insight into ancient community structures—namely, that they are in every age an aspect of the community of faith's response to a *living* God" (italics author's).

eschatological horizon. In so doing God moves humanity closer toward its ultimate redemption.<sup>7</sup>

Created in the image of God, humans alone among all created beings bear God's likeness. While some have argued that human sinfulness and imperfection separate them from their original or ideal state, Moltmann states that humans possess the likeness of God even in their defectiveness. For the image of God is not an anthropological construct dependent on human achievement but rather a divine decision to intertwine with humanity. Humans possess the possibility of undergoing transformation, and that in due course reveals God's image with clarity. Jesus revealed this eschatological hope by revealing what humans were made to become.<sup>8</sup>

Being participants in this redemptive story does not make humans flat or even helpless. Humans are God's work of redemption, and they also share in God's work. People have a choice. They can either work toward what they perceive to be the coming end of God's story, or they can work at cross purposes with God's end. Of course, some can unwittingly work at cross purposes with God's end if they misread the story and assume the wrong ending. Understanding the end or at least its apparent trajectory, therefore, is a crucial part of being a participant in God's unfolding narrative. Moltmann claims that God calls the church to empty itself into the world rather than to cut itself off from the world.

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<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, translated by James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 141-42.

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 215-43.

God did not call the College Church to become perfect by its power. Nor did God ask it to point out the imperfection extant in the world around it. Rather, the College Church faced the God-given challenge of being what it was—an imperfect community of faith living in an imperfect world working toward God’s perfect end. Through solidarity with the world while looking toward the hope of God’s coming future, the College Church could help the world around it share in the hope to which God calls it.

The church is in the business of bringing hope. This cannot be a false hope that stems from the futility of human striving. It is a hope that stretches back to creation and to the very nature of God while simultaneously looking forward to God’s glorious end. As Moltmann wrote, the church is to be the “source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.”<sup>9</sup>

Some argue that narrative is the most basic mode of human existence, and this may be true.<sup>10</sup> The theological starting place for this project, however, was not purely in the human condition. The unique condition of the College Church might seem to have been the logical starting place. The actual launching point, however, was in a God who chooses to move from the particular situations of people toward the ideal scenario God has worked out for them. The reason for thinking in narrational terms, therefore, is not anthropological but rather theological. God makes the choice to work through imperfect humans.

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<sup>9</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971), 291. His groundbreaking work specifically argues that “the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.”

Recognizing that God has entered the human story allows people to fully experience their humanity with all their idiosyncrasies and particularities. God works through those particularities in order to move the world closer to the eschaton. By expressing the uniqueness of what has happened in the past, a narrative creates the symbolic language that allows God to move the church toward what it can become.<sup>11</sup>

A congregational narrative, therefore, presented the possibility for opening the College Church's eyes to its unique situation. It is like no other community that has ever existed. This type of uniqueness is what God chooses to work with, but God does not leave a church as it is. Rather, God invites a church to participate in bringing God's plan for the world closer to being reality. Just as the ancient Scriptures function to remind the people of their past and point them toward new possibilities of divine partnership, so too a congregational narrative could bring together the unique pieces of the College Church and propel them into God's unfolding vision for the future.

#### The Book of Romans: Joining God's Story

In view of Moltmann's observation about the movement from the concrete to the universal, I used the book of Romans, particularly chapter 8, as a tool for expressing the eschatological trajectory to which God calls the College Church. The book of Romans provides a wonderful example of how to move from the particularity of the human experience toward the unfolding future of God's eschaton. Humanity in and of itself is not the answer. Humanity moving toward God's end, however, offers hope to a

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<sup>11</sup> Compare this with the words of Anderson and Foley, 7: "Weaving together the human and the divine enables us to hear our own stories retold with clarity and new possibility. And when our own stories are retold, our lives are transformed in the telling."

despairing world. I therefore offer Romans 8 as a key building block for understanding how to move toward God's end.

The future is important for the church. The destination shapes the journey. Going somewhere with intention seems healthier than blindly going in an unknown direction. Without clearly defining the church's destination, Christians risk being blown about by the winds of contemporary culture. By focusing on the future, I am not implying that the narrational task starts with the universal or that we simply extrapolate back into the local. God starts with the concrete event—the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—and moves to the universal via the eschatological horizon it anticipates. Eschatology, therefore, becomes the vehicle for moving from local to universal, not vice versa.

When Jesus entrusted the spiritual formation and evangelization of the world to his followers, he envisioned this mission lived out in the context of a communal life. This is the church, meant to be a dynamic, nimble community that could quickly bring the gospel's power into the lives of diverse people all over the world. The power of the church is found not just in its otherworldliness but in its human contextuality. Each congregation has a real story with failures, successes and dreams.

The book of Romans, particularly chapter 8, served as an excellent text to inform eschatology and shape the College Church's narrative. As all roads lead to Rome, so too, says Tom Wright, do "all roads in biblical exegesis lead to Romans sooner or later."<sup>12</sup> John Calvin extolled the importance of Romans, writing that "when anyone understands this epistle, the way is open before him to an understanding of the whole of Scripture."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 177.

The particular question applicable for this project was this: What life-giving narrative in 2010 might be most appropriate for the College Church in Fresno, California? The quest for an answer could not only be about culture or history or my own personal preferences and biases. Even though College Church's narrative was naturally to be unique and ideally was to reflect the particularity of the people and the context of that faith community, the story could not be purely anthropocentric. The story had to move from the local to the eschatological inbreaking of God into the world. The eschatological component injects hope into the futile story of human striving.<sup>14</sup>

A narrative that could shape the ecclesiology of the College Church should reflect the clearest possible understanding of the future. In order to approach ecclesiology from the eschatological viewpoint, the church had to identify what it perceived as the ultimate aim of the Christian life. This assumes one can actually name an end that is faithful to God's intention for the world—or at least to the best understanding of God's intention.<sup>15</sup>

Stories have beginnings and endings. For this project, the beginning was found in the College Church's past and present. The future, however, was still unwritten and could

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, "Epistle to Simon Grynaeus," in *Calvin: Commentaries*, translated by Joseph Haroutunian, vol. 23 of *The Library of Christian Classics*, eds. John Baillie, John McNeill, and Henry Van Dusen (Philadelphia: Westminster, n.d.), 74.

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Is it possible to make the same mistake with eschatology that Churches of Christ used to make with ecclesiology? Is there really a definitive "end" for all Christians in all places and all times? Or should we view eschatology as something to be contextualized? Our understanding of eschatology is undoubtedly far from perfect, and contemporary scholars seem to be in search of the single eschatology envisioned by God. Some note that different religions have divergent yet related eschatologies. According to Mark Heim, interreligious discourse might improve by comparing the respective ends of various religions rather than only discussing differences in belief and practice. See Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 1-11.



be shaped and determined by the trajectory of God's unfolding eschaton as explored in Romans 8.

Past and present naturally inform and influence the future. The ending, however, is not fatalistically tied to what has been. A healthy eschatological stance can fill a congregation with the necessary mindset for partnering with God in God's mission to redeem creation.<sup>16</sup> Through the rest of this chapter, I explore the theological framework for a narrativel trajectory that could be both life-giving and ostensibly true to God's purposes for the College Church.

#### An Eschatological Choice: Death or Life

In Rom 8:18-27, Paul anticipates the future. He speaks of (a) the "glory about to be revealed" in 8:18; (b) creation's "longing for the revealing of God's children" in 8:19; and (c) the future "adoption, the redemption of our bodies" in 8:23. Paul also writes in 8:24 about the unseen hope for which "we were saved," and he looks forward in 8:20 to the freedom all creation will one day experience. This is a section about the future. Paul's words literally groan for the day when God will redeem and glorify creation.

In the book of Romans Paul clearly defines and demarcates two separate paths. He speaks of the future, but the Roman correspondence is less description of the future than prescription for how to participate in the path toward God's eschaton. Paul is like the wisdom writers of old who were able to clearly spell out the choices. We see these two choices in full color in the first seventeen verses of Romans 8.

The editors of the Psalter placed a similar contrast at the opening of their book of worship. As Clinton McCann points out, the placement of Ps 1 can hardly have been

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<sup>16</sup> Michael W. DeLashmutt, "Paul Ricoeur at the Foot of the Cross: Narrative Identity and the Resurrection of the Body," *Modern Theology* 25:4 (2009): 609.

coincidence. The Psalter's structure reveals that its formation came about through thoughtful intentionality. The editors grouped and ordered psalms into five books. They ended each book with similar refrains and closed the entire Psalter with a crescendo of praise, "Let all the breath praise the Lord."

McCann argues that the placement of Ps 1 is equally intentional and that this position is crucial to reading the Psalter.<sup>17</sup> How and to whom one listens make all the difference. Those who listen to the Lord and his teachings can approach the psalms appropriately because they are firmly rooted like great trees. Those who listen to the world, however, are on the path to destruction and will be blown about like chaff in the wind. The two paths could not be more clearly demarcated.

Paul knows his Hebrew Scripture and is well schooled in midrash. Just like the author of Ps 1, he separates the path of the righteous from the path of the wicked. Throughout the Roman letter, he appeals to key narratives and principles that form the core of Israel's faith. In the first chapter, Paul brings the narrative of creation to mind as he describes the unspeakable acts of those whose minds are darkened by sin. In chapter 3, he quotes the books of Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah while detailing the sinful state of all people, Jew and Gentile alike. In chapter 4, Paul implements his midrashic skills to explain the primacy of faith over circumcision. He goes on to contrast the nature of the Adamic person (flesh, sin, death) versus the person remade in Christ-like fashion (justification, free gift, life). Christ sets people free from sin and enslaves them to a new master: God, who puts people to work within the scope of God's just plan for humanity and all creation.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 25, 40.

While freedom from sin has been won on the macro level, the battle for control on the micro level is not so straightforward. Each person struggles to lose the old constraints and tendencies while trying to take on the new person of faith in Christ Jesus. This is the concrete human situation with which God chooses to work. In 8:1-11, Paul describes this new person of faith as one whose life is “in the Spirit.” The Spirit helps God’s people in their weakness and gradually transforms them in preparation for the coming eschaton. One who lives in the Spirit contrasts with the person who lives in the flesh.

Not all choose to be transformed by God’s Spirit and therefore refuse to move toward God’s perfect future. The book of Romans presents, in actuality, two variant eschatological frameworks.<sup>18</sup> Paul paints a stark contrast between the two possible choices. Each pushes ecclesiology in drastically differing directions. Only one would produce a life-giving narrative.

The first eschatology is of the flesh. This can be viewed either as a path of carnal indulgence that is blind to God or a path of legalistic self-achievement that denies God’s power to save. Though the latter seems religious while the former clearly irreligious, both are actually subsumed under a fleshly eschatology. The marks of this eschatological outlook are legalism, self-centeredness and death. Death is the end for those who follow the way of flesh. Whether they strive to abide by the Mosaic legal code or simply give themselves over to fleshly lusts and cravings, they can never attain freedom from death.

The second eschatological framework is formed by the Spirit. Its traits are grace, faithfulness and life. The Spirit serves as the basis for an inclusive, universalizing

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 275.

eschatology.<sup>19</sup> Paul goes to great lengths to describe how this new framework is an extension of God's single, universal plan. God's faithfulness and justice are at stake, Paul writes, and a Spirit-ual framework completes God's design for humanity. The result is an ecclesiology of life: a people shaped by God's grace, focused on the mission of God and carrying God's light to the nations.<sup>20</sup> As N. T. Wright puts it, this is return-from-exile theology through the lens of Ezekiel.<sup>21</sup> Nothing about this is new, but Christians are now able to comprehend it because of Jesus who came in the flesh and revealed it to them.

Paul's discussion in chapter 8 is not a contrast between competing sets of rules and regulations.<sup>22</sup> He aims to distinguish narrational frameworks with dissimilar ends. The competing poles are flesh/death versus Spirit/life.<sup>23</sup> The eschatological path of flesh is hostile to God (8:7), and those who live according to it have no capacity to listen to God's direction or follow the way of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> Paul clearly advocates an eschatology shaped by the narrative reality of God's Spirit, but the narrative of the flesh is powerful and unwilling to relinquish its hold on those who are shaped by it. Even among those who have turned to the Spirit, the flesh's pull is still strong.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Paul W. Meyer, *The Word in This World: Essays in New Testament Exegesis and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 121.

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, 486.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, 197.

<sup>22</sup> John B. Cobb Jr. and David J. Lull, *Romans*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 115.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary Series (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 507-8.

<sup>24</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 239.

<sup>25</sup> Paul describes this struggle elsewhere, e.g., Gal 5:17.

The Holy Spirit, therefore, becomes the *sine qua non* for the Christian life framed by the proper eschatological stance. The Spirit sets free, gives life, and inspires actions such as prayer, prophecy, and proclamation. It helps Christians in their weakness (8:26). The Holy Spirit not only conveys God's salvation; it enacts the salvific power of God in the lives of Jesus' followers.<sup>26</sup> The Spirit brings a new outlook, a new story with a hopeful ending. It also releases people from the death-bound narrative by removing the striving of the flesh and freeing them to live in the grace of Jesus Christ. The Spirit's work in the believer's life sounds eerily akin to the first step in Alcoholics Anonymous, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol."<sup>27</sup> The eschatology shaped by the Spirit is one of radical dependence on God, not legalistic efforts to free oneself from death.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus Christ is the starting point for Paul's new eschatology, not because God abrogated the old plan but because through Jesus God is faithful to the original plan. Paul's key ideas are expressed in the framework of salvation history.<sup>29</sup> What has changed is not the plan but the end. Through Jesus Christ believers have access to life in the Spirit and to the freedom of an end shaped by God's unveiling righteousness. Because of Jesus believers are reoriented toward new narrative possibilities shaped by the Holy Spirit, which grants them access to power over the flesh and subsequently over death itself.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 219. See also Byrne, 250, who writes, "What believers have received is a Spirit that goes with or attests to the fact that they enjoy the filial privileges pertaining to the eschatological people of God."

<sup>27</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), 59.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Moo, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Cobb and Lull, 116.

## Eschatological Dimensions to Ecclesiology

This new eschatological framework directly shapes ecclesiology in multiple ways. First, there is an ethical dimension to life in the Spirit.<sup>31</sup> In 8:12-13, Paul instructs those in the Spirit to live in ways that reflect this Spirit-guided reality (much like in Gal 5:16-26, where he contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the works of the flesh). This is not a new legalism but rather a faithful response to God. God is faithful, and the faithfulness of believers is made manifest not in works of the flesh but in life according to the Spirit. Good works follow, but they are a by-product of a Spirit-filled life, not a precursor to it. “Do not be conformed,” Paul writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (12:2). This demands a deep and abiding commitment to the spiritual life. Paul’s ethics are not about legalistic obedience even though he prohibits certain behaviors. His ethical teaching seems primarily affected by a view of the end that is increasingly shaped and transformed by God’s Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Right living flows out of right orientation, and for Paul the right orientation is based on Christ and Spirit-filled.<sup>33</sup>

Second, the eschatology of Romans 8 (and beyond) points the church toward potential suffering on the path to the coming and already present re-creation of all things. This anticipation of what is to come tempers the angst about momentary suffering by

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<sup>31</sup> Lohfink argues—and I agree—that the ethical dimension is communal in nature, not individualistic. One of the struggles of Western Christianity is the rampant individualism that detaches believers from the power of Jesus’ eschatological community. The Spirit is present in the individual believer, but the Spirit’s work is most clearly seen in the collection of believers known as the church. See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. by John P. Galvin (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984), 72. Cf. Hanson, 510; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 94

<sup>32</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Meyer, 190.

turning the focus toward the hope of things to come.<sup>34</sup> Rather than focusing on the story's opening chapters, believers become increasingly fixated upon God's power to reshape the future. Rather than an attitude of fearful escapism, Christians are filled with courage and go into a world that is hopeless, despairing, and suffering.<sup>35</sup> Believers know that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (8:38-39), so they go to those "of the flesh" in order to bring God's salvation. This future hope allows Christians to probe deeper into the pain and anguish of the human condition—not because they can fix everything or because they love to suffer, but because God has power and they are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices (12:1) that proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all creation.<sup>36</sup>

God chooses to be present in the midst of this suffering world. Those who are God's adopted children also live in the midst of hurting people.<sup>37</sup> As Paul writes in 10:14, "For how are they to believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim to them?" Christians do not fear interaction with the way of death, for even death cannot separate them from God.

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<sup>34</sup> A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 82; Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Loving Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 187. Powell denounces overly pietistic denial as gnostic. We do not reach the world by separating ourselves from the world. He writes, "Spirituality is not to be achieved by negating the world or renouncing what life has to offer us; rather, true spirituality is experienced through recognizing the world as God's world and embracing all that life has to offer us." He offers four ways of doing this (188-89): (1) Enjoy the world as Jesus enjoyed it; (2) live in the world as Jesus lived in it; (3) care for the world as Jesus cared for it; and (4) suffer for the world as Jesus suffered for it.

<sup>36</sup> Hanson, 500; Camp, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Grieb, 80; R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 194.

Third and finally, Paul's eschatological outlook is one of radical dependence on God. The same God who gave life to a crucified Jesus promises to give life to all who belong to Christ (3:22; 10:13). The path of flesh is one of futility since human striving cannot save humanity or the world. As people of the Spirit, Christians enjoy adoption and the provision that comes with belonging to a great Father (8:15). The Spirit now bears witness on their behalf and provides for them from start to finish. They are to trust God and be grateful instead of relying on their own abilities and virtues.

An ecclesiology shaped by the Pauline eschatology of Romans 8 might seem like a consensus choice for Christians. One might instinctively say, "Of course. We follow Paul's view of the end. Of course that shapes church." Who would quarrel with Romans?

A hopeful eschatology shaped by Romans 8, however, might be easily compromised by modern assumptions and foregone conclusions. The result is that many churches seem to live with a very different end in mind. The difference seems subtle, yet the implications are major. Instead of an ethics shaped by the Spirit's work in their lives,<sup>38</sup> many preach an ethics based on what sounds like a righteousness of works.<sup>39</sup> "Yes, God saves by grace," they would say, "but if we do not act right, then our actions nullify God's gift." Rather than an ethics shaped by a view of the end, this is an ethics shaped in order to get to the end. It is an eschaton dependent largely on human deeds. Human actions trigger God's response. This is the flesh/death paradigm Paul sought to eradicate.

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<sup>38</sup> The poignant words of Hanson, 491, speak clearly to this frequent omission: ". . . the common neglect of the Holy Spirit is a worrisome sign, perhaps even an indication of the retreat away from the challenges and surprises inevitably occurring where a people is open to God's presence into the false security of human institutions."

<sup>39</sup> Wright, 186-87.



Coming out of the “Century of the Self,”<sup>40</sup> North Americans have tended to gravitate toward anything they can accomplish on their own. Human ingenuity and a can-do spirit have been hallmarks of the United States, and this has left an indelible handprint not only on society but upon religious life as well. People are viewed as mature if they say, “I am doing just fine on my own, thank you.” Such an attitude has led to a proliferation of people who want self-help, self-righteousness, and self-fulfillment. The supposed end of such a life is happiness—a goal that ironically slips right through the fingers of people who seem to have everything anyone could want.<sup>41</sup>

This human-focused eschatology is ultimately narcissistic rather than theocentric and focuses on humans as consumers of commodities acquired to make them happy.<sup>42</sup> Some wrap a cloak of religiosity around a self-centered story of human striving, but this is only a reheated eschatology of death.<sup>43</sup> It is still dependent on their legalistic success.<sup>44</sup> A Christianized form of legalism does not readily manifest itself in the abject depravity described in Romans 1, but neither did Jewish pride in observing the law. Paul made it clear, however, that all people who follow the way of flesh are on the same sinking ship (2:1-11). Rather than partnering with God in the re-creation of all things—as the Spirit

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<sup>40</sup> Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983), 12.

<sup>41</sup> McCann, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 131.

<sup>43</sup> See Meyer’s discussion (133-48) in “The Spirit and the Letter,” where he points out that Augustine’s reading of Paul seriously erodes the eschatology of Spirit. He notes (147) that Augustine’s conclusions end up moralizing the cross and the resurrection, leading to the type of self-justification Paul was fighting desperately against. Meyer points to Paul’s christological focus as a way of returning to the life in the Spirit as envisioned by Romans.

<sup>44</sup> Hanson, 512.

re-creates them—this view of the end relies on human ingenuity and projects a future made in the image not of God but of people.<sup>45</sup>

Paul's view of the end is just the opposite. Rather than self-reliance, followers of Christ become reliant on the Spirit as they commit themselves to denying the ways of the flesh that used to dominate their own thoughts and actions.<sup>46</sup> Rather than focusing on fleshly happiness as the desired end, believers accept the inevitability of human travail as they learn to focus on God's power to recreate them.<sup>47</sup> They remind themselves that nothing they suffer or endure can separate them from God's love. The frameworks of the two eschatologies are not just slightly different. They are totally at odds with each other.

God's action triggers the human response. God's future eschaton is not some giant mystery waiting to unfold once people unlock the secret codes. The future is already in motion with an end that is secure.<sup>48</sup> Christians live with a faithfulness that responds to God's work.<sup>49</sup> They proclaim a glorious future of God's re-creation, not the futile despair of hopelessness or the false triumph of self-promoters.<sup>50</sup> This is the

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<sup>45</sup> Samuel M. Powell, *Participating in God: Creation and Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 184.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Barth rightly warns against moving too quickly from suffering to hope. "All our answers, all our attempts at consolation, are but deceitful short-circuits, for from this vast ambiguity we ourselves emerge; we cannot escape from it, not even if we invoke in our imaginings an infinite divine harmony beyond this world of ours." He argues that believers move from pain to glory only through the Spirit. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford, 1957), 302-6.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, 215.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>50</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 338.

eschatology of life shaped by God's Spirit. Assurance of salvation goes hand in hand with the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

### Toward a Contextualized Ecclesiology for the College Church

I believed that the trajectory of Romans 8 had the potential to shape the narrative of the College Church. This could help produce a contextualized, missional ecclesiology in at least three major ways that flow out of the eschatological framework sketched above. In the following paragraphs I bring them into dialogue with the College Church's unique setting.

First, the College Church would need to complete the transition away from human striving toward reliance on God for salvation. Christians do not earn their own redemption. They do not produce their own fruits of righteousness. God does not give them a supernatural, life-giving pattern to follow. Even the most mature, sincere Christians cannot measure up to God's high standards. Spiritual growth before the eschaton is always an imperfect journey, a work in process.

Fortunately, the College Church had already rejected the path of legalistic striving for salvation. It spoke a language of forgiveness and brokenness. Many members constantly referred to the Spirit as the source of both unity and transformation. If one were to have listened to the language in the main assembly or in the shepherding groups, one would likely have learned about broken people in the church and heard words of God's love and forgiveness.

Those unwilling to see their own imperfection might have been uncomfortable in the College Church. One visitor had been church-hopping and came to the College

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 237.

Church in hopes of finding “God’s people.” When she went to one of the shepherding groups for prayer and study, she heard the teacher talk about how people can at times approach but never reach God’s standards of perfection. She became emotionally disturbed and ended up leaving the class shouting, “I am not a sinner!”

This approach to church does not (or at least should not) downplay the ethical demands of following Jesus. Christians belong to God and cannot live their lives in any manner they choose. They now are “in the Spirit” and are to honor God with their actions, words, and thoughts. Moving toward a future shaped by God’s redemption means participating with God in God’s work here and now. Christians should not just selfishly do whatever they please while hoping that God will overlook their actions and one day ask them to reside in heaven.

Faith is the critical component in this ecclesiological framework. Faith is not a key that earns merit badges. Faith is the way people respond to God’s mercy. Just as God is faithful to God’s promises, Christians display faithfulness to God when they allow the Holy Spirit to transform them from one degree of glory to another. Right living is the fruit that comes from turning one’s life over to God.

Each congregation is full of imperfect and broken people. God through grace transforms the members more and more into the likeness of Jesus. This happens not because they are clever or hard-working people. This transformation takes place because they have found the real source of hope and power, and the life of Jesus reveals this source to them. Human transformation now finds power in the indwelling of God’s Spirit in their lives.

The College Church knew what it had left behind but did not yet understand what lay ahead. While leaders often spoke the language of dependence on God, the new framework had not been fully named. They had successfully deconstructed the old, but they had not yet allowed God to build the new.

A key facet of ecclesiology for the College Church, therefore, was that it not base its ethics on the legalism of the past but on the hope of God's future. In some ways the standards of the new reality are greater than the old, but the power for transformation comes from God rather than human strength. Some members of the College Church realized that a loss of legalism did not mean a loss of ethical standards and that the Spirit still had expectations of God's people. The source of such morality would need to come from a sense of gratitude for God's provision rather than human striving for perfection.

Second, Romans 8 seemed to call the College Church to embrace the suffering of the world as it waits for God's redemption. The College Church's previous narrative appeared to prop up a success-driven mentality in which the goal of life was a beautiful family, nice cars, and plenty of money. Failure was not welcome in the previous era. As the congregation changed, however, it grew to incorporate members who were both successful and unsuccessful, according to the world's view, and included many who felt that they were rejected or abused by their peers or even by other churches. The trajectory of Romans 8 pointed the College Church to live in the anguish of the world instead of trying to escape from it.

Life is not all bad. But as one pays attention to the world, it seems impossible to ignore the immense suffering in all places and all walks of life. God created the world to be good, and God will once again recreate this world in a manner that restores the

harmony and peace that once was. In the meantime, however, people live with problems caused by their own mistakes, by the mistakes of others, and by seemingly random events that create havoc and pain in the lives of those affected. People cannot fully understand suffering, but they know it exists because they experience it in various ways.

A life in Jesus does not mean escape from the problems of this world. God does not beam people up to an otherworldly plane once they accept Jesus. Following Jesus does not free people from the suffering of this world. In fact, following Jesus should lead to a greater embrace of the world's misery and pain.<sup>52</sup>

Jesus modeled the kind of engagement with the world that he expects from his followers. Acts such as baptism and communion are powerful rituals and symbols that invite Christians to participate in the life of Jesus. One does not enjoy the resurrected life of Jesus without also sharing in his sufferings. Jesus bids his followers live among suffering people as he did, knowing that the task of calling people to him will cost them dearly. Suffering, therefore, is not the goal of discipleship. It is a necessary burden that his followers must bear as they carry the good news of Jesus' salvation to a hurting world.<sup>53</sup>

The witness of the College Church, therefore, could have the potential to be authentic if it accepted a role of identification with Jesus' and the world's sufferings. A return to the "good old days" of success should not be an option for College Church.

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<sup>52</sup> Hall, 183.

<sup>53</sup> Hall states, "It is not the *suffering* of the impulsive disciple that is held up here as the goal that we should all emulate, but the indelible connectedness of this faith with responsibility in and for the city of Earth—*civitas terrena*—God's world. The risen Christ, in his eternal reign as in his historical sojourn, is always going toward this world, this world's rejection notwithstanding, and discipleship, when it is authentically so, is always a matter of being taken up into this world-directedness, despite one's own preference for security and peace" (italics author's). *Ibid.*, 54.

Everything has changed. A new story, one better shaped by the nature of God's inbreaking future, needed to emerge and carry this new reality. This reality could influence a mission in which College Church members could share in the suffering of others while God's transformative Spirit was at work in and through them.<sup>54</sup>

Third, the eschatological outlook of Romans 8 seemed to compel the College Church to increasingly live in radical dependence on God. A willingness to depend or not depend on God has been the historical dividing line between faithfulness and rebellion. The Hebrew prophets excoriated kings for making human pacts rather than relying on God. Jesus blasted the religious leaders for leaning on their own version of righteousness instead of seeking God's righteousness.

Doing what is within the capabilities of a group testifies only to a group's prudence and planning skills. Doing what only God is capable of testifies that a group has access to a source of power beyond itself. This is not some prayer-of-Jabez spirituality of expansion and conquest. Rather, this is the essence of discipleship: recognizing the need for and depending on God.

If radical dependence on God was to become a key facet of the College Church's unique ecclesiology, then the subsequent choices might not have "made sense" in the congregation's previous narrational framework. For example, a previous mindset in the College Church might have emphasized appearance over substance since practically all members of the church occupied the same social stratum. This does not mean that substance was unimportant to the previous generation, but the substance that mattered most was one of doctrinal purity rather than a true extension of God's grace and welcome

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 58.

to the broken and needy. God had opened the College Church's doors, however, to a new wave of imperfect people who could not hide their own suffering and pain. The inclusion of these broken individuals gave the College Church the chance to both admit its own imperfection—even though it had been reluctant to do so in the previous mindset—and give voice to these new members who did not fit the previous mold. Following through was easier in speech than in deed, and the congregation needed to recommit itself to hearing the call of God that would ask them to increasingly depend on the Spirit's power rather than on its own ability.

The College Church's building showed a similar inadequacy. The block of land where its building rested was no longer prime real estate. Additionally, the property and church facility had major deficiencies. Some could be corrected with minor investment. Others would have required a costly makeover of the overall structure. Romans 8 seemed to point the College Church toward a contextualized ecclesiology, however, in which God did not call College Church to succeed via a first-class building or location. A congregation shaped by the unique context of the College Church and the eschatological concerns of Romans 8 would demonstrate faithfulness by its radical reliance on God, even in the face of physical limitations.

### Conclusion

According to one of its members, the College Church of Christ had a few knuckleheads. It also had some legalists, some nationalists, some prejudiced and ignorant people, some individuals with addictions, some with successful business careers, some with criminal records, some self-sufficient and generous members, and some other very needy folks. This church was a hodgepodge of people.



The College Church had many characteristics of Churches of Christ and continued to see itself as part of that heritage, albeit loosely. The church jettisoned much of the sectarianism of its past and embraced a more ecumenical stance. With an increasing diversity and openness to change, however, the church lacked a clear understanding of its identity. Its ecclesiological self-understanding had become muddled.

Some College Church members felt attracted to the seemingly successful years of the church's past when prosperity, growth, and prestige reigned supreme. Still others simply wanted to see a church defined by activity and involvement or by their own visions of what the church's mission should be. At the outset of this project, there was no clear consensus for what defined the College Church or what propelled it forward.

As I guided the College Church toward assessing its future and direction, I recognized that God had already done some amazing things in this group of believers. In the College Church's imperfection, God's image was still visible. The potential for sharing in the glory of the resurrection was still there. The ecclesiological pieces were largely in place. They simply needed to be ordered and given language. Thanks to a rejection of its past sectarianism, the College Church had an excellent chance of owning the eschatological horizon of Romans 8 if the church could see itself as God's partner in the unfolding redemption of humankind.

The transformative power of God's Spirit seemed to be uniquely at work in the College Church. The narrative trajectory of the College Church would be determined by the end to which it was working. If the desired end was one of human striving, it would result in a lifeless narrative unable to renew the College Church or to use the College Church as a missional vessel for God's hope. If the desired end, however, was a re-

created life made possible through God's Spirit, then the capacity for renewed mission would be more than a pipe dream.

Ultimately, the College Church would not be asked to root out the world's flaws. God was not asking it to become successful in the manner of its so-called banner days. God's Spirit would beckon the College Church to be faithful to the trajectory set by its own unique character and by the ecclesiological possibilities of God's unveiling future.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter details the methods, format, participants, and evaluative tools I used to craft a congregational narrative for the College Church. In the first chapter I described some of the congregation's unique circumstances and why a new congregational narrative might be helpful at this time. In the second chapter I described an eschatological perspective based on Romans 8 that I chose because of its potential to insert a Spirit-filled focus into this discernment process.

The narrative produced through this process is only a tool, not a magic bullet. It is inert and may actually be counterproductive if not utilized to build the church's capacity for mission. This utilization will need to happen in the months and years following the project's completion. In the absence of a life-giving narrative (or some similar unifying device), the church cannot move with intentionality or unity toward the mission of God. Through the renewal of narrative project, the College Church can open new possibilities for the future. Without this renewal, I believe the congregation will continue to fracture and decline.

The leaders of the College Church wish to enter a hopeful period. They understand the need to seek partnership with God in carrying out his mission in the world. This project aimed at moving the church in that direction by creating a narrative based on the discernment of God's movement in the congregation.

### Strategy

My ministry project involved the collection of memories and feelings from members of the College Church through group interviews. That information was the basis for identifying the current congregational narrative. These data (memories and feelings) were collected by means of group interviews. I organized the data in accordance with recurring themes and concepts found in the data themselves. This analytical process led to the congregational narrative that I crafted for the College Church.

I chose group interviews as my primary research tool since my project called for the knowledge, experiences, interpretations, and interactions of the College Church membership. This type of research is qualitative in nature, but it is not without objectivity. As explained below, I implemented methods developed in an approach called appreciative inquiry as described in separate works by Mark Lau Branson and Mary Clark Moschella.<sup>1</sup> The specific questions for the interviews came from John Savage's work in *Listening and Caring Skills*.

Group interviews of the College Church members were crucial to this project. I had more than a hundred pages of single-space transcripts that needed to be organized and analyzed. After I studied, coded, and organized the group interview data, I utilized these responses to identify and construct the congregational narrative. I outline the

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Mason explores the reasons for using qualitative interviews in research. The interviews for this project fall under the rubric of her discussion. Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 63-67. While Mason provides the theoretical backdrop for this data-collection process, the concept for this particular project stems directly from the works of Mary Clark Moschella and Mark Lau Branson. Both describe church settings where they implement the types of interviews and data collection used in this intervention. Moschella focuses more on the ethnographic nature of this research. Lau Branson views this data collection as a form of appreciative inquiry. Moschella, 116-20; Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 72-76.

collection and analysis of the interview data below. This allowed me to form the narrative within the matrix of the congregation's memories and feelings.

At the beginning of each session, the groups read Rom 8:1-6; 18-25. These verses highlighted the two eschatological choices of death versus life and sketched the trajectory of what God is doing and will do with his creation. During the opening combined session in the auditorium, I briefly explained to all participants the need to be shaped by God's future and why they would be repeatedly hearing this passage. I also preached from this passage in worship during the project. The use of Romans 8 did not miraculously guarantee a narrative that is life-giving, but it pointed the process toward a possible future shaped by God's inbreaking eschaton.<sup>2</sup> I then used the ecclesiological framework in Chapter 2 as a means of post-narrative assessment to determine if the narrative had the potential to positively shape and channel new life into the College Church.

#### Description of Ministry Project

This project would not have been possible without the sanction and blessing of the College Church elders. They carefully weighed the need for clarifying the church's identity and decided to dedicate a major portion of the church calendar to it. As outlined below, the project necessitated setting aside seven consecutive Sunday class sessions. It required the participation of most adult church members. In the College Church, worship takes place each Sunday at 9:00 a.m. A one-hour class-session follows at 10:30. Children,

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<sup>2</sup> Ellison, 92. Ellison notes that most church members cannot articulate what God is doing or what he wants the congregation to be doing. This type of process at least exposes church members to the language of Scripture as they begin to share and listen to one another, thereby raising the possibility that they might find new, theological language for their shared experiences.

including teens, have Sunday school classes taught by adults. More than seventy-five percent of those who attend worship stay for class each week.

Six adult classes or shepherding groups are currently in operation.<sup>3</sup> I chose to use the shepherding group setting because many members feel most at ease in the confines of their separate shepherding groups. As the primary leaders of the shepherding groups, the elders played a crucial role in clearly stating the case for this process in their groups. To a few people, groups are even more important than the main assembly. A small number of church members occasionally skip worship and arrive in time for class. Some express dismay whenever temporary changes are made to the shepherding group format. The elders, therefore, used their influence to allay any fears and create positive anticipation as possible before the seven-week process began.

As I planned for this narrative-formation process, I anticipated that some church members who did not typically stay for shepherding groups would choose to stay for these project sessions. I did not expect people to opt out of shepherding groups because of some fear about this process, but I admitted the possibility that some might not comprehend what was about to happen. Some adults teach children's classes and were therefore unable to participate, but I worked to keep this number to a minimum.

#### Description of the Seven-Week Process

As mentioned above, the project took place over a seven-week period during the weekly time allotted for shepherding groups (adult Bible classes). The first week introduced the process. Weeks 2 through 4 were when data collection took place. Weeks

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<sup>3</sup> A seventh group is for college students and college-age young adults. The teens are treated as an eighth shepherding group. For this project I included only the six adult groups, though we would have welcomed any from the teen or college groups to join an adult shepherding group for these three sessions.

5 and 6 functioned as “filler” weeks while the data was analyzed and crafted into a narrative. The congregational narrative was presented in week 7. To conduct these interviews, I utilized six church members who functioned as research assistants. They led the group interviews and collected data from the shepherding groups. I served as the lead researcher and had primary responsibility for analyzing the data and crafting the narrative.

#### Week 1: Introduction

I began this project on September 12, 2010. The first week was an introduction to the entire process. After worship the congregation enjoyed a time of coffee and donuts in the lobby and on the outside breezeway. The congregation does not typically have combined refreshments on Sunday mornings. Most adults typically head directly to their shepherding groups, where they visit over coffee and snacks until class begins. Since this kind of intermingling among the six shepherding groups was uncommon, many adults were slow to break off their conversations and return to the auditorium for the class time.

Eventually, though, the adults broke off from the conversations and assembled in the auditorium. Approximately 175 people attended this forty-five minute session to introduce the narrative-crafting project. This number is comparable to the typical total adult attendance on any given Sunday. They sat in rows facing the front just as they do during worship. I stood at the front behind a small podium as I spoke. Those who spoke to me before and after seemed curious in a good way about the project’s purpose.

At the beginning of this session, I described the nature of this project as both a doctoral project for me and an identity-clarification project for our congregation. I explained that the College Church elders chose this particular project over others that

would have dealt with niche areas of the congregation. Had we chosen another option, I explained, it likely would have been invisible to most church members. This project was chosen, I said, because it seemed to fit one of College Church's most pressing needs. They would be able to participate and gain the blessings of the endeavor.

I then explained the need for participants to sign the informed consent forms in keeping with Abilene Christian University's policy on human research.<sup>4</sup> Ushers passed them out, and most quickly signed and passed them in. A few kept the forms to read over later. Most of these individuals turned them in the following week. One person mailed hers to the church office. Others who missed week 1 filled out consent forms when they participated in one of the following weeks. I collected a total of 220 signed forms.

I know of four individuals who chose not to sign the consent forms. One elderly couple worried about an official-looking document that they did not fully comprehend and chose not to sign. Another married couple did not sign and then did not attend the sessions. Perhaps other individuals quietly declined participation.

After the consent forms—a confusing detour for some—I reassured church members that they need not worry about helping me on the path toward degree completion. My project would take care of itself. I expressed the conviction that this project was crucial to our congregation. The goal of our seven-week process, I said, was to clarify the College Church's identity. They needed to understand that the church could expand its capacity for mission once we better understood how God was forming and calling them.

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<sup>4</sup> A copy of the consent form is in appendix E.



I moved then to the major portion of this first class, in which I talked about the eventual, desired end of this project—greater partnership in God’s mission. Not wanting to prejudice the upcoming interview sessions, I avoided speaking about the College Church’s current identity or about my guesses as to what kind of narrative this project would produce. I instead described a missional end consonant with the Romans 8 picture of God’s eschatological trajectory. By doing this, I hoped to inject the life-giving story of God’s redemptive work into the congregation’s thinking.

In describing mission, I talked about a seemingly false dichotomy in many churches between mission and evangelism. I described my own experience with and passion for overseas mission work. I explained that even the College Church’s neighborhood, however, has become a mission field, and that the congregation would do well to think of itself as a missionary church.

I briefly described the typical sense of identity that had shaped the mission of most Churches of Christ in a previous generation. I read the unofficial “creed” from College Church’s original bulletins (see p. 8) and explained the College Church used to be driven by a sense of obligation to “convert” Christians who were deemed “unscriptural.” Since the College Church had since rejected this sectarian stance toward churches outside of its heritage, I noted that this change left the congregation vulnerable to confusion about its core identity. I went on to ask what it would look like if the College Church were driven by the mission of God.

To close the first session, I communicated the plan for the six upcoming sessions. I explained that their classes would become like focus groups. I calmed some worries by stating that these were not to be gripe sessions. Although the College Church has

weaknesses, they needed to know that this project's strategy was to elicit the positive memories and feelings about the congregation. Through these positive concepts, I argued, they would be listening together for the Spirit's formative work in their midst, and I would craft a congregational narrative based on that shared discernment.

#### Weeks 2 through 4: Group Interviews

For three consecutive weeks (Sept. 19, Sept. 26, and Oct. 3), all adults met in their normal shepherding groups. The elders led off each class session with a shortened version of announcements and prayer requests. They then turned the class over to my research assistants, who followed the weekly protocol and led the group interviews. These interviews produced the data that led to the crafting of the College Church's congregational narrative. The interviews had the serendipity of producing a natural cross-breeding of concepts and ideas. As individuals shared and heard one another, they were exposed to ideas similar to and different from their own feelings and memories. Many seem to have learned new information about each other and about the church.

#### *The Group Interviews*

I used six research assistants to conduct group interviews for the collection of data. These assistants asked a series of questions to the adult shepherding group members. These questions aimed to uncover positive memories and feelings about God's work in the College Church. They interviewed people one at a time in the hearing of all other group members. The group interview sessions were like modified focus groups with standardized interview protocols.

Some researchers criticize the use of focus groups as a research method. These critics say that the data produced in focus groups is too subjective and idiosyncratic. They

sometimes suggest that this approach is too easily manipulated by the researcher.<sup>5</sup> Other researchers believe that focus groups can provide excellent data for certain types of research questions. When focus groups are used in a manner consistent with the research goals, the data from them can be extremely valuable.<sup>6</sup>

As is the case with all such endeavors, my project was not devoid of bias or subjectivity. All types of research have unique sets of limitations. Researchers likewise can never be totally objective. Different research methods might produce different results, just as different researchers might guide the process in slightly different directions. These inherent inadequacies do not cause an *a priori* negation of a research method's effectiveness but rather necessitate care in using the right tool for each research question. My goal is to be as honest as possible about my assumptions and clearly outline my methods so that others can examine the validity of my work.

For my style of questioning, I borrowed heavily from a tool called appreciative inquiry. Rather than focusing on negative aspects that need fixed, appreciative inquiry tries to tease the good and healthy traits out of an organization such as a congregation. Appreciative inquiry is especially useful for a volunteer organization such as a church because it allows leaders to build on an organization's positive elements rather than try to

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<sup>5</sup> David W. Stewart and Prem N. Shandasani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 15. They summarize seven common uses for focus groups in social science research, two of which are of particular interest for this project. First, focus groups help obtain "general background information about a topic of interest." Second, they "stimulat[e] new ideas and creative concepts."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

identify its flaws and correct them.<sup>7</sup> Thus, my questions for the interview sessions sought to “appreciatively” capture some of the strengths of College Church.

Appreciative inquiry uses a style of questioning that has the additional benefit of being intergenerational and interactive. It seeks input from as many sources and players as possible.<sup>8</sup> According to Mark Lau Branson, the five basic processes of appreciative inquiry are to (1) choose the positive as the focus of inquiry, (2) inquire into stories of life-giving forces, (3) locate themes that appear in the stories, (4) create shared images for a preferred future, and (5) find innovative ways to create that future.<sup>9</sup> In my project, I focused on the first four of these processes. Innovation and implementation would hopefully flow out of this project, but they were not within the confines of it. I hint at future steps toward this in Chapter 5.

These group interview sessions were designed to elicit positive experiences or stories within the shared life of the church’s forty-six year existence. This is the equivalent of Lau Branson’s second process: “inquire into the stories of life-giving forces.” My research assistants used group interviews to draw out these positive stories.

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<sup>7</sup> Appreciative inquiry is a way for people of an organization “to know, to communicate, to discern and to imagine.” See Lau Branson, 19. It differs from problem solving. Rather than focusing on what is wrong, appreciative inquiry attempts to bring what is positive from the past into the future. The intent is not to focus on what is wrong or broken with College Church but to extract healthy sources of life from the church’s history. Appreciative inquiry assumes that good already exists in every system. Its goal is to bring out those good aspects and build upon them. Appreciative inquiry is collaborative and based upon conversations.

<sup>8</sup> Paul C. Chaffee, “Claiming the Light: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Transformation,” *www.congregations.org: A Guide to Resources for Building Congregational Vitality*, ed. Richard Bass (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Lau Branson, 28. He also delineates a 4-I model that works through the five processes. The four I’s are initiate, inquire, imagine and innovate. For all practical purposes, this intervention was concerned only with the first three I’s. The fourth I, innovate, will be the task of the church after this project’s completion.

These positive memories and feelings had the potential to reveal more than church members' reflections on the past. They also could provide a glimpse into the expectations about the future since past experience tends to shape how one looks ahead.

With this in mind, I was less interested in the details of actual historical events than in the feelings and perceptions attached to those events. This was a discernment process designed to find out how God has worked to shape the College Church into the unique congregation it is today. As a community of faith, the College Church believes that God has been at work in its midst. Understanding how a church interprets its past can provide the framework for telling a narrative that redefines and renews future possibilities, and that was the goal of this project.

For my group interview template, I borrowed a questioning framework from John Savage's *Listening and Caring Skills*. He lists four levels of "story listening": (a) data back then, (b) feelings back then, (c) feelings now, and (d) self-disclosure, or the "Aha!" moment.<sup>10</sup> In weeks 2 through 4, the interview team helped the groups discuss and listen to the first three levels of story as laid out by Savage. The interviews from those three weeks were recorded and provided the data for crafting the College Church's congregational narrative. In weeks 5 and 6, the groups met to talk about any enlightening moments they had experienced in the interview sessions—the equivalent of Savage's fourth level. Weeks 5 and 6 provided some interesting anecdotal material but did not feed into the process of narrative-crafting.

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<sup>10</sup> John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 79-81.

Interviewers followed an exact protocol for each of the three group interviews.<sup>11</sup>

The interviewers digitally recorded the group sessions. As respondents answered the questions, the interviewers also made brief written observations about the respondents on field note observation forms.<sup>12</sup>

*Questions for Weeks 2 and 3 (Sept. 19, Sept. 26)*

The specific questions for weeks 2 and 3 sought to bring out data and feelings from “back then.” I posted a large, paper timeline on the front wall of each shepherding group’s room. Interviewers used this timeline as a tool for eliciting positive stories, memories and feelings from back then. The questions for weeks 2 and 3 of this process were the following:

- (a) Using the timeline behind me, show where you entered the College Church.
- (b) Describe your memory of what the College Church was like when you first joined.
- (c) What did you appreciate about the College Church back then?
- (d) Can you think of any other time in the College Church’s past when you felt the church was thriving? If so, what did you appreciate about that time?

Respondents answered one at a time in front of the entire shepherding group. The goal was to allow as many different people as possible in each group to share their recollections. I allowed the interviewers to continue with this same set of questions over two weeks (weeks 2 and 3). This allowed almost all members of the shepherding groups to share. If we had limited this set of questions to one week, more than half would not

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<sup>11</sup> A copy of the protocol for each group interview session is in appendix D.

<sup>12</sup> A copy of this protocol for making observations is in appendix B. See below for information about data collection.

have been able to speak. This provided us with the widest possible range of input. Interviewers encouraged participants to be forthright but not long-winded.

During these two weeks of interviews, 127 individuals responded to the questions and placed their names on the timeline. Many stayed within the parameters of the questioning. A few slipped some negative comments into their answers. Some others went off on tangents about their personal faith journeys. Some offered their assessment about the congregation's current status. Overall, the respondents shared a broad range of positive memories and feelings about the College Church's past.

*Questions for Week 4 (Oct. 3)*

Questions for week 4 worked to uncover "feelings now" about those past memories and feelings. Having shared positive memories and feelings about the church during the previous weeks' sessions, the interviewers tried to elicit how the participants felt at the time of the interviews as they were reflecting on their vibrant memories of the College Church's history. The goal was to allow as many people as possible to share their existing feelings as they looked back over the timeline and their own involvement in the College Church. For those who had a short tenure in the congregation, they were still able to share their own feelings and hopes about the congregation, especially in light of what they had heard and observed in weeks 2 and 3. The questions for week four were the following:

- (a) As you think back over the healthy times in the College Church's past, what hopes and feelings come to your mind right now?
- (b) If you could recreate today a healthy feeling from the College Church's past, what would that be and what would it look like?

(c) As you reflect on the life-giving nature of God's Spirit, what stands out to you about the College Church today?

(d) Reflect on what you have heard these last few weeks. You have heard many things about God's work in the College Church over the years. What positive thing stands out to you about the College Church?

Ninety-six individuals shared response during week 4's group session. Most of these had shared memories and feelings during one of the previous two weeks. Those who had not yet signed the timeline placed their names at the point they had entered the College Church's saga.

The group interviews for week 4 typically proceeded in a different manner from the previous two weeks. Instead of coming up one at a time to answer the questions, the respondents generally stayed seated and shared their answers in a more free-flowing manner. The interviewers had more leeway to probe and use these questions as tools for digging into the present-day feelings about the past.

#### *Data Collection*

I equipped the six interviewers with digital voice recorders produced by Sony. They recorded all group interviews from start to finish. The quality of these recordings was surprisingly good, and every recording took place without a flaw. I transferred these recordings from the recorders onto my computer and produced an audio file and a backup CD of each session.

As respondents answered the questions, the interviewers made brief written observations about any particularly noteworthy aspects of the response using the field



observation form as shown in appendix C.<sup>13</sup> In taking these field observations, they followed the protocol set out in appendix B. After each group interview ended, the interviewers added any additional comments of their own to the observation forms. As I read through them later, I added a few of my own observations to some of these forms.

While this type of data collection can be considered a form of ethnographic research, the interviewers were not merely observing the church “at work.” Rather, their task was to actively inquire about how College Church members perceived God’s past movement in the church. The responses of the participants, therefore, were the windows into those past events. The researchers were not the windows. The individual participants provided the data with their responses. The interviewers, therefore, needed to exercise care to avoid summarizing responses or pointing their groups toward quick conclusions. Instead, their goal was to elicit a broad range of responses pertinent to this project.

Taking the audio files of the interview sessions, I then made word-for-word transcriptions of the eighteen group interview sessions. Several church members volunteered to help with the transcription work, saving me countless hours of work.<sup>14</sup> I personally transcribed eight of the recordings and listened to every group interview session in order to check the transcriptions for accuracy.

### *Data Organization*

Perhaps the most tedious and crucial step in this project was the organization of the data. The data available to me came in the form of interview transcripts and field

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<sup>13</sup> I based my field-note methodology a forthcoming guide for doctor of ministry projects. Tim Sensing, “Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach for Doctor of Ministry Projects” (unpublished manuscript, Abilene, TX, 2010), 116-17.

<sup>14</sup> I wish to thank the following individuals for their transcription work: Sandra Henderson (three sessions), Dawn Frame (three sessions), Mandy Oehlschlaeger (three sessions), and Ashley Henderson (one session).

notes. These were qualitative data that had to be coded and organized before I could craft the College Church's congregational narrative. Ideally, I would have had months to comb through the data, but the nature of this project provided less than three weeks to sort, code, and analyze the information.

I began by organizing the data according to the dates of the group interviews. I read and reread the data from oldest to newest.<sup>15</sup> This involved three layers of reading the data: literal, interpretive, and reflexive.<sup>16</sup>

First, I used a literal reading of the data. As I became familiar with the interviews and the field notes, I paid attention to words, concepts, and events that appeared repeatedly in the responses. In order for me to consider these as significant, these repeating themes had to appear in multiple group sessions and be affirmed by multiple respondents within a group. I tagged or coded the responses and organized the responses that had correlating codes. The data itself created the coding system once I was able to ascertain which feelings and perceptions were most prominent. Some interviews naturally touched on multiple, prominent themes.

After the data was read and coded, I then utilized an interpretive reading of the interview data. I looked beyond the data for tacit meanings and shared assumptions that underlay the experiences and feelings of the participants. I used my inside knowledge of the College Church's history and context. I used the interview data to move beyond the surface answers and shed light on the significance of repeating refrains and key points in

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<sup>15</sup> My guide for organizing the data comes from Moschella, whose model comes from Mason. Moschella describes this as a "spiral-like learning process," where the researcher gradually circles the data and goes into deeper layers of immersion and understanding. Mason, 147-50; Moschella, 167.

<sup>16</sup> Mason says that many qualitative researchers make use of all three levels of reading the data. Mason, 149. See also Moschella, 172-73.

the church's past. At this stage I also listened for the echoes of a life-giving eschatology. I tried to discern the Spirit's movement from the concrete, present reality of the College Church toward a destination in keeping with Romans 8.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, I did a reflexive reading of the data. I figuratively took a step back and wondered aloud if I might have been reading too much into the data. I asked if my own involvement in the process might have steered the information too strongly in one direction or another. I reexamined my own coding methods in addition to my observations, comments, and reactions to the interviews.

### *Narrative Crafting*

The congregational narrative had to be in completed form by week seven. I had to complete all the steps necessary for the narrative's production: data had to be analyzed and organized, the narrative had to be drafted and finished, and it had to be recorded and edited for viewing. Only three weeks separated the last interview session from the deadline.

Moving toward completion required not only rigor but speed. The guiding principles for writing this kind of narrative came from Moschella.<sup>18</sup> The exact movement of the narrative, however, depended on the data themselves. I was the writer for the narrative-crafting process.

Once completed, the narrative had to be read and recorded for rebroadcast. My focus was on the oral aspect of the congregational narrative. I asked three church

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<sup>17</sup> As evidenced in Chapter 1 of this thesis, I had already made preliminary readings of the church's situation. While I was open to new ways of understanding the College Church, I was not new to this ethnographic context and had the advantage of having previously conducted multiples interviews and having read source data from the church's archival material.

<sup>18</sup> Moschella, 191-213.

members with excellent voices and good reading skills to perform the narrative. I asked our visual arts team at the College Church to put the narrative in video form, using historical pictures to illustrate the story.<sup>19</sup> The vocal performance of the narrative ran behind the pictures. College Church's visual arts team provided the logistical details for recording and reproducing the narrative. I did so with trepidation, knowing that the pictures have the potential of distracting listeners from the story or limiting their ability to imagine its implications.

#### Week 5: Conversations in Shepherding Groups

On October 10, all adults met again in their shepherding groups, this time without the guidance of the interviewers. The College Church elders led their own groups in a debriefing session about the previous three weeks. I, in essence, allowed the shepherding groups to explore Savage's fourth level of story listening. The elders who led these groups asked church members to share aha moments they had experienced over the previous three weeks. Church members talked about what had surprised them or what they had learned during the interview sessions.

The class sessions for week 5 had no bearing on the narrative-crafting process and therefore no measureable effect on this project. I believe this week's discussion might have increased the church's capacity for effectively using the narrative in the future because church members were asked to process what they had heard, therefore preparing them for the narrative. For the goals of this specific project, however, weeks 5 and week

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<sup>19</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to the College Church members who helped with this final phase in producing the congregational narrative. Jon Frame leads the visual arts ministry at the College Church. He assembled the audio tracks and produced the narrative in video form. The narrators for the story were Carlotta Wint, Lee Smith, and Steve Ocheltree. Several individuals also helped edit the narrative or made suggestions to my initial draft. For this, I express my appreciation to Julie Locke, Kathy Wagner, Carolotta Wint, and Arrolene Burrell.

6 filled a necessary gap between the end of data collection (week 4) and the unveiling of the congregational narrative (week 7). My main focus was on analyzing the data and moving toward narrative-crafting.

#### Week 6: Conversations in the Whole Congregation

On October 17, all adults assembled in the auditorium seated in small circles. By this time I had finished analyzing the data and was already crafting the narrative. This class session had no bearing on the narrative-crafting process and was principally meant to fill the space needed until the narrative's unveiling in week 7. The day's session was still able to play a helpful role, however, as church members continued Savage's fourth level of listening from the previous week.

Week 6 had the added benefit of "cross-pollination" between the shepherding groups. I intentionally divided these circles so as to mix individuals from different groups. We used fifteen circles with seven to ten people per circle. I asked them to introduce themselves and to share in their circles what they had learned about God's work in the College Church. This allowed members to hear each other across the lines of shepherding groups. At the conclusion of the discussions, one representative from each group reported what had been discussed in that circle.

#### Week 7: Listening to the Narrative

On October 24, all adults assembled one final time in the auditorium. During worship prior to class, one of the elders reminded the congregation of the project and of how this project might shape the church. Following the worship and a time of fellowship over coffee and donuts, nearly two hundred people came back for this final project session. Our worship team sang a song before I stepped before the group. I introduced

that week's session by reminding them of what had transpired over the previous six weeks. I thanked the individuals who had helped with the process and I thanked all of them for participating in the narrative project. I explained that the College Church's story may seem like a human one because it is filled with the marks and flaws of humanness. The story can have a divine trajectory, I said, only if the church can understand God's redemptive and transformative work in its midst.

I then showed the video, which was twenty minutes in length. Photographs and images illustrated the story, but the narration was to be the dominant feature of the presentation. The auditorium was silent during the viewing. With only a few closing words and a prayer, I dismissed everyone without discussion or commentary. The visual arts team promised to make DVD copies of the narrative available to College Church members the following week. Although the project officially ended at this point, the actual implementation of this narrative was only just beginning.

#### Description of the Research Assistants

As an informed insider at the College Church, I selected six church members for my research team. I chose people who did not belong to the official church leadership. One was the daughter-in-law of an elder. Another was the daughter of a staff member. All were generally active in church life and seemed committed to the College Church. I chose individuals who did not seem to be open to guidance. These six were all by and large good listeners who were also outgoing and well respected.

The six research assistants represented different segments of the congregation. They were part of different shepherding groups and had been part of College Church for different lengths of time. Some had been in the congregation since birth. The least

tenured member from my group had been part of College Church for approximately ten years. From my vantage point as preaching minister for the College Church, I viewed this group of assistants as fairly representative of the overall makeup of the congregation. The following is a description of my research team. I depict them at the time of the research.

#### The Six Research Assistants

Lee Adams was a 55-year-old, married teacher. She was a long-time member of the College Church and had two grown children, one of whom also attended with her family. She was of European descent.

Estela Sue was a 35-year-old, married homemaker. She was part of a blended family with a step-son, step-daughter, and one of her own children. Her husband's father was an elder. Estela had been a member of College Church for about ten years. She was of Hispanic and Native American descent.

Ashley Henderson was a 22-year-old, recent college graduate. She was born into this congregation. Her mother was the College Church's worship minister. Ashley was Caucasian.

Arrolene Burrell was a 60-year-old retired administrator for the Department of Veterans Affairs. She and her husband had one grown child. Arrolene had been a member of College Church for almost twenty years. She was African-American.

Robert Gonzales was a 60-year-old retired administrator. He worked for a major recruiting service to scout high school athletes. He had many extended family members who attend College Church. Robert was of Hispanic descent.

Shane Mason was a 30-year-old school teacher and coach. He and his wife had one small child and were expecting their second. Shane was a product of the College

Church's college ministry and had been in the congregation for ten years. He was of European descent.

#### Training the Research Assistants

Certain traits are desirable in individuals who conduct this type of group interviews. These include attributes such as flexibility, an animated and expressive personality, insight into human nature, and a willingness to recognize one's own biases.<sup>20</sup> I tried to select individuals who fit most of these in the hopes that my selection of these six would enhance the interview process.

These skills and affinities were no doubt helpful, but my training of these research assistants was absolutely essential to the execution of this project. The assistants needed to understand key aspects of this ministry project. They also need familiarity with the basics of certain group dynamics that could have arisen in the interview sessions.<sup>21</sup>

In a three-hour training session prior to the first group interviews, I met with the research team to explain the project and clarify my research objectives. The assistants needed to know that we were primarily looking for positive themes, memories and feelings that could help stitch together the general trajectory of God's work in the College Church. To this end, the researchers needed some flexibility to probe further if respondents gave vague or short answers without explaining why an event or a particular period was important and what feelings were evoked by that. They also needed to know when to redirect a respondent who might drift off into issues unrelated to the College

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<sup>20</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see the discussion by Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook, 72. A similar section of material is in Thomas L. Greenbaum, *Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 29-33.

<sup>21</sup> Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 81.



Church's narrative. By helping them understand the overall research project, I hoped they would be better equipped to guide their respective groups. I cautioned them, however, against trying to force their group into a particular set of answers or into a pre-determined narrative.

For training on group dynamics, I used chapter 6, "Conducting the Focus Groups," in *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* by Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook.<sup>22</sup> This chapter explains both the logistics of leading a group and the potential problems that can arise in group settings. In that same training session, I explained how to manage some difficult scenarios that could have arisen. Group interaction and dynamics are typically hard to predict, but we discussed problems and diversions that could have derailed a specific interview session. With our combined knowledge of the individual groups, we envisioned situations specific to each group that could have been hazardous. I suggested that the size of the groups would undoubtedly play a factor since they ranged in total membership from twenty to sixty.<sup>23</sup>

### Evaluation

Just as my research was qualitative in nature, so too was the means for assessing my ministry project qualitative. Rather than a quantitative approach, doctor of ministry candidates generally employ a qualitative approach to their research projects. The tools for assessing these projects must be appropriate for these types of project. The key to qualitative evaluation is not the specific assessment tool but the set of techniques that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 89-106.

<sup>23</sup> The size of these groups makes it clear that they were not strictly focus groups. Focus groups are typically eight to twelve people. Also, the length of time used for this project differs. This project utilized three sessions of approximately forty-five minutes, whereas the typical focus group session is from one and a half to two and a half hours in length. Ibid., 60.

focus on the question “Did this project accomplish its stated purpose?”<sup>24</sup> For this particular project, the purpose was to craft a narrative that has the potential over future months and years to clarify the College Church’s identity and increasingly foster a renewed capacity for mission. Evaluating the full efficacy of this narrative will require years. To meet the requirements of this project, however, I simply needed to assess whether the narrative crafted through this project seemed to possess that potential.

No one tool can adequately answer whether such a narrative has been crafted. As is typical for most doctor of ministry projects, I employed post-project evaluative triangulation.<sup>25</sup> This evaluative process has the strength of shedding light on a given project’s results from multiple points of view. It generally relies on feedback from an informed insider (or group), an informed outside evaluator, and the lead researcher. I chose this approach to evaluate whether this project produced a congregational narrative that, if used in a manner that allows God to bless the congregation, can help bring new life to the College Church.

#### My Own Post-Narrative Evaluation

As a first means of assessment, I used my own observations and field notes. I reassessed the crafted narrative based on this reexamination of the group-interview process. Since I was the lead researcher, I had access to all the data gathered through the group interviews. I also intimately understand and appreciate the congregation and want it to thrive again. In evaluating the narrative, I also utilized my informed position as lead minister for the College Church and one who has tried to research its development—

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<sup>24</sup> Sensing, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 55.

observations that I made clear in Chapter 1 of this project thesis. As I evaluated the congregational narrative, I reflected carefully on my knowledge of the College Church. I also brought to bear the theology section of this paper—Romans 8 in particular. I listened once again to the primary trajectory revealed by the group interviews and then reflected in the congregational narrative.

With these pieces in place, I then assessed the narrative on two levels. First, did the narrative accurately reflect what God had done in the College Church? In other words, I looked to discover if this process had generated a narrative that was real and true for the College Church. Second, did the narrative have the potential to give life to the College Church in keeping with the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8? In other words, I asked whether this narrative seemed to be in keeping with God's intentions for all creation and for his people. If I could answer both questions affirmatively, then I would be able to predict that this congregational narrative had the potential to give life to the College Church.

#### Post-Narrative Interview of Research Assistants

The six research assistants assembled at one of their homes following the project for the purpose of post-project evaluation. In addition to giving them the well-deserved reward of a steak dinner, I asked them to assess whether the narrative seemed to adequately capture the results of their group interviews. I then asked them to reflect on the goals of the project and to compare the final narrative with the stated goals. They were to express their honest opinions about the narrative's potential for bringing renewed life to the College Church if adequately used in following months and years.

### Outside Expert's Assessment

Once the narrative had been completed, John York served as an outside evaluator for the project. He is a professor of New Testament at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee, and has done work with appreciative inquiry in various church settings. York made annual visits to the College Church over the decade leading up to the project and consulted the church leadership on multiple aspects. He had never lived in Fresno and had never been part of the College Church. His outside expertise and familiarity with the congregation enabled him to give a valuable assessment. I provided him with the completed narrative and the following questions: (1) Does the narrative accurately reflect what God has done in the College Church? (2) Does the narrative have the potential to give life to the College Church in keeping with the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8?

He then provided a brief, written evaluation that gave his assessment of the narrative's faithfulness to the unique character of the College Church and to the possibilities of God's inbreaking future. To clarify his answers, I asked him questions about how the narrative might differ from his understanding of the College Church. I also asked him how the narrative might point toward greater partnership in God's mission. His answers provided a meaningful third means for evaluating this project's potential effectiveness.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS: THE CONGREGATIONAL NARRATIVE

The purpose of this project was to produce a congregational narrative for the College Church. In this chapter I describe how the data from a seven-week process of group interviews and conversations coalesced into eight concrete themes. I then explain the intersection of the interview data with the unique history of this congregation and with the theological horizons imagined by Romans 8. After sharing what went into the narrative crafting process, I present the narrative as recited to the College Church. I then talk about the three-fold evaluation of the narrative. This assessment tried to examine the narrative's faithfulness in describing what God has done in the College Church and hypothesize about the narrative's apparent potential for directing the congregation toward greater participation in the mission of God.

#### The Results of Appreciative Inquiry

I cannot overemphasize the significance of the shepherding groups to most College Church members. As I explained earlier, the shepherding group system both sustained the congregation and led to its fragmentation. Shepherding groups became the *de facto* torchbearers of identity within the College Church. The price of this development was that some individual groups had seemingly competing identities. Other spheres of influence with their own self-propagating stories existed within the congregation, but the shepherding groups were most clearly identifiable. The fact that

these groups were the locus for this project means that a unifying narrative, if discerned, could bode well for the College Church's future as an integrated body of believers.

The group interviews exposed church members to a variety of memories and feelings, but some basic similarities between the groups floated to the surface from the outset. Diversity of tenure was common to all groups. Every shepherding group contained individuals who were part of the College Church in its earliest days. These all spoke up enthusiastically within their groups about the early days and other vibrant times in the church's past. Each group also had new members who started attending within the last five years. Those who spoke up had something positive to share about an attitude or spirit they sensed in the church.

This diversity was not limited to the length of time spent in the congregation. Some individuals spoke adamantly about particular events or activities that were important to them. Others shared strong feelings for individual leaders or ministers, and these sometimes varied widely even within the same shepherding group. As an example, one person spoke about how much he had enjoyed the period when different men from the congregation filled the pulpit, a reference to the time without a preaching minister from 1997 to 2009. A subsequent respondent said she appreciated the work done by the rotating speakers but that having a regular pulpit minister was making a major difference to the congregation.

The interviews were transcribed and resulted in 112 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Nearly 150 different church members shared in at least one of the interview sessions. I consider this a significant representation of a congregation that numbers about four hundred including one hundred children aged eighteen or younger.

As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I carefully looked for themes and words that surfaced often throughout the interview process. I was careful to focus on concepts that popped up in multiple groups and among various respondents. Only when a theme had this kind of broad support did I add it to my preliminary list of seemingly significant items.

Some concepts prominent in one group or another did not make their way into the vocabulary of other groups. For example, the word “diverse” or “diversity” appeared nine times in the transcripts. Based on my knowledge of the College Church and the changes that have taken place over the years, I might have expected diversity to be something the College Church would value about itself. I almost expected the church to appreciate God’s work in diversifying the congregation. As I took a closer look at this concept within the group interviews, I discovered that this theme was exclusively limited to a single shepherding group. Moreover, the very first respondent in this group had mentioned diversity as the thing most impressive to her when she came to the College Church less than two years ago. Though seemingly significant to one shepherding group, this lack of discussion in others eliminated “diverse” as a major concept for my research.

After sorting through the transcripts multiple times, I discovered eight major themes, or ideas, that repeatedly appeared throughout the interviews. By including all eight themes in one list, I do not mean that all eight were of equal importance. Themes 1 through 4 were the most significant, occurring over and over again in interview after interview. Themes 5 through 8 appeared throughout the interview sessions but with less regularity. These were evident across the spectrum of shepherding groups. They provided

the skeletal structure for the congregational narrative and gave me a way of assessing the veracity of the narrative.

### Theme 1: Acceptance and Welcome

One of the most prominent concepts was that of acceptance.<sup>1</sup> Some used similar words such as welcome or friendliness. They seemed to be focusing on the initial reception extended by the College Church. Many members spoke of feeling personally accepted when they first attended the College Church. One described what made the College Church such a blessing to him: “Well, it’s not necessarily about numbers. It’s about being a [shepherding group] of losers that were accepted here in this church.” Others felt they had witnessed or had personally been offered acceptance, even though some of these individuals felt a lack of welcome at other Christian churches.

### Theme 2: Family

A related notion that often appeared in the interview transcripts was the feeling of belonging to a family.<sup>2</sup> This connoted an ongoing feeling that arose over years of church membership. Many individuals described the intimacy they felt in various congregational settings. In explaining his affection for the church, one person said, “It’s just different people. I feel close to them like they’re my friends and my family. And that’s pretty much all after that. It’s like my family here.” Many respondents believed the church provided them with friends and meaningful relationships, and these relationships helped them feel loved. Some said the College Church had become their family.

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<sup>1</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: acceptance (as in an initial sense), welcome, and friendly.

<sup>2</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: family (as in “they made me feel like family”), knowing, loving, fellowship, and relationships.



### Theme 3: Openness and Authenticity

A third theme appreciated by project participants was openness.<sup>3</sup> This was a key word in many group interviews. One person experienced the church as a collection of authentic individuals who did not mind being honest about their struggles: “People wear their tennis shoes, their shorts. There are all different classes of people. There’s recovering addicts. There’s, . . . well, we’re all sinners.” Church members at times seemed surprised that some people were honest about their weaknesses and struggles. They spoke of the comfort they felt at hearing others who were transparent and authentic, knowing that they too had permission to be honest about their own difficulties.

### Theme 4: Grace and Forgiveness

A fourth common idea was that individuals discovered grace and forgiveness at the College Church.<sup>4</sup> Grace had not been a hallmark of Churches of Christ, but its entry into the church vocabulary provided a positive memory for some. One member talked of how she did not know the language of grace until coming to the College Church: “It was like two weeks into the time we had started here, and [the preacher] was doing a class on grace. And I didn’t really know what grace was until then. It was like, okay, what an awesome thing. I’m forgiven for what I’ve done in my past, and I can start over.” Others shared that they had felt condemnation at another church before experiencing God’s forgiveness within the confines of the College Church.

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<sup>3</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: open, authentic, transparent, and accepting (as in “of me for who I was”).

<sup>4</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: grace, forgiveness, and resilience.

### Theme 5: Spiritual Healing

A related theme throughout the data was spiritual healing.<sup>5</sup> Some told about prayers that had been offered on their behalf. One new person described how a member had helped her through a difficult time: “I was telling her like probably the week before how I was feeling inside, so she came and she sat down and she listened to me cry. She said a prayer over me.” Others related how they felt beaten up and spiritually empty before arriving at the College Church. The congregation not only accepted them but also provided the care and nurture necessary for a new sense of hope and purpose in their Christian life.

### Theme 6: Involvement and Inclusion

Many defined their greatest memories as the times when they were heavily involved in the life of the church.<sup>6</sup> Meaningful involvement, therefore, seemed to be a prominent idea. One person commented on her experience: “There [were] singing groups and drama groups, and it was easy to get involved in that. If you didn’t have something to do, you could find something to do.” They spoke of activities, some seemingly social in nature, that gave them a sense of belonging and importance. Many respondents felt active when they were doing some specific job within the congregation.

### Theme 7: Youth and College Ministry

The importance of youth was another recurring theme. Specifically, respondents spoke of how they appreciated the youth and college ministries. Some individuals

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<sup>5</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: healing, prayer, concern, and caring (in more than a superficial sense).

<sup>6</sup> For this category, I marked all instances where a respondent used some form of the following words: involvement, inclusion, and active. Additionally, I highlighted instances where the respondent described a memory of being active or involved without using one of those exact words.

recounted how the teen or the college group had been instrumental in their own faith development. Others simply described the excitement of their teen years at the College Church. One person described his first Sunday at the College Church as a teen: “I walked into the youth room, and there [were] like 45 kids in there for Sunday morning youth. There [were] like more kids in there than in the whole church in my other place.” Other respondents shared their appreciation for the time and effort currently being invested in their children. For some, these memories also extended to their time in the college group.

#### Theme 8: Worship

A final concept was the importance of singing, worship, and music. This was the least mentioned of the eight themes but still a significant area for many respondents. Some talked about the difference of the worship when compared with Churches of Christ that they had grown up in. For some this difference came as a shock. For others the College Church’s worship was a breath of fresh air—reminiscent perhaps of how some received the messages about grace and forgiveness. A number of church members spoke of the beauty of the College Church’s worship and how that impacted their decision to stay. One man said, “But having come to church here and hearing the singing, we felt like we were singing with the angels and all.”

#### The Formation of the Congregational Narrative

Left to stand alone, these eight themes were not sufficient to generate the desired goal of this project: a life-giving narrative to help renew the College Church and launch it forward into a new season of partnership in the mission of God. I believe the narrative as shared below ties deeply into the Lord’s work in the College Church, but I sense that most people did not know how to describe the Lord’s work in the interviews—if they

were able to perceive it at all. Many saw and described only the things that made them feel good—even though those things in truth might not have been life-giving. For example, Murray Isaac was an incredibly talented and beloved youth minister whose work focused on choral groups and major productions. His tenure ended with great moral failing. I am amazed at the number of long-time members who describe those years as the most exciting time ever because either they or their children were active. But if one looks at the fruit produced by that era, one unearths family after family whose children are not in any kind of church today and all manner of people who have deep personal and spiritual problems. Church members want to interpret those as good days, but the results of that era were not good. This dissonance is hard to rectify.

Another apparently popular era in the College Church's past was the late 1980s. In the group interviews, respondents often described the preaching minister at that time as an incredibly dynamic speaker who could motivate and inspire. Person after person spoke of those years as the greatest in the College Church's history. Yet that same preacher was unfaithful to his wife and displayed attitudes and actions not always fitting in a life-giving narrative. Even more incriminating, perhaps, is the fact that rapid collapse and fragmentation followed shortly after his tenure—a sign that deeper problems might have been present. Many people viewed that as the church's high point. Again, how does one rectify the fact that the "high point" had many aspects that were not actually life-giving?

That to me was the beauty of this process. Through the narrative-crafting process I could say, "Okay, you value these things. Thank you for sharing." Even though their memories or feelings may not actually be life-giving, I was able to reframe them and give them a new trajectory. Some of the key traits valued by the College Church (acceptance,

healing, grace) could actually be self-serving and produce a spirit of back-slapping and navel-gazing. People can say, “I am so glad this church loves me and accepts me. We really do accept people.” Looking around the circle and saying that is a far cry from going out and accepting someone who is unknown. This process gave me the chance to hear these appreciated attributes, speak with affirmation, and then add, “If we value these things, then what would the mission of God lead us to do?” I see amazing promise out of this process.

To craft the narrative, therefore, I had to take the eight themes and move beyond them. Appreciative inquiry was a great tool for teasing the eight commonalities out of the fragmented pockets of the College Church. Pulling these up to a meta-level gave the shepherding groups the imaginative framework that may allow them to identify with the overall movement of God’s Spirit in the congregation. For the narrative to be life-giving, however, I had to read the data on an interpretive level that integrated my knowledge of the congregation with the data. I listened for the resonant tones of two additional impulses: (1) whispers of the College Church’s unique narrative and (2) hopeful undertones of the eschatological leanings of Scripture—Romans 8—for this project.

#### Intersecting with the College Church’s Setting

Throughout the interview process, I shared the data with my two fellow staff members, ministers who have been part of the College Church for decades—one since birth and the other since 1982. My main goal was to give them insight into the congregation’s positive feelings and memories. I then listened to their feedback as they reacted to the memories and feelings most valued by the congregation. While they shared an appreciation for many of these same attributes, they also revealed an occasional

feeling of distaste for what seemed to be sentimentality and romanticizing by church members of earlier periods. As long-tenured insiders, they had the “disadvantage” of sometimes knowing too much. Their occasional visceral reaction was to reject the memories and feelings of respondents because their responses showed ignorance or avoidance of major flaws and problems. I sympathize with my co-workers’ disposition.

My task was not to reject the feelings and memories of the past but rather to find how God used the idiosyncrasies and even failings of the College Church. The discovery that the College Church is flawed is more than a tragic discovery. It is an unavoidable necessity and provides grounds for celebration that God can use flawed vessels for God’s good purposes.

As I listened to and reread the interview data, I laid that knowledge over my knowledge of the College Church, just as one might place tracing paper over a drawing or sketch. In doing so, I began to realize that God used the tragedies of the 1980s to begin the rewrite of the College Church’s narrative. I saw that the flaws and the problems became the backdrop in which God was able to transform the congregation.

One particular response provided illumination for me, and I have quoted this in the narrative. In her interview, the aged respondent talks about the youth minister, Murray Isaac, who was spoken of so highly by others. Other respondents only mentioned the “exciting” aspects of his ministry and the joy of seeing their children active in church. She saw a whole new level. She said, “That youth minister was a tragic young man. He took his own life! That was such a horrible time for all of us because everyone cared for him. Everyone. He was so deeply troubled, but the congregation raised itself and got past

that.” Without being negative, she plainly recounted the unvarnished truth and revealed what to her was a positive result.

This discovery was a primary key in unlocking a potentially life-giving narrative. God taught the College Church to love broken people by using the brokenness of its own church and its leaders. This was a concept that clearly flowed from both the interview data and the church’s history. I was able to use this woman’s response not just as a narrative tool but as a lens for describing the unique way in which God’s kingdom had taken on flesh in this particular congregation. In reading the narrative below, one will likely notice how the narrative turns on the tragedies that have so deeply written themselves on the church.

#### Intersecting with the Eschatology of Romans 8

A more difficult task was to infuse the narrative with the undertones of a life-giving eschatological perspective. I tried to listen for aspects of the appreciative inquiry that might point the College Church in a healthy direction, one that would be consonant with Romans 8. The interview questions did not overtly seek these kinds of data, so I had to interpret not only the interview data but the overall flow of the congregation’s apparent narrative. Assuming that the College Church’s narrative should mesh with the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8, I saw, within the interviews, themes that clearly lent themselves to this end and others that would need help to do so.

In Chapter 2 of this project thesis, I described three eschatological dimensions of ecclesiology according to Romans 8 and then went to explore how they might develop in the specific context of the College Church. First, I described a movement away from legalism-based ethics to an ethics based on a shared future hope. A perceived strength of

the College Church is its discovery of grace. This same strength, however, became a weakness in that the accountability of the church's old legalistic system had never been replaced with a new standard of ethical conduct. The church had found forgiveness but no longer knew how to hold people to the high standards of Christian discipleship. This aspect is clearly missing from the interview data and the narrative.

Second, I talked about the need to embrace and comfort the suffering of the world while understanding that God's complete redemption is in the future. Acknowledging this need points the College Church away from the success-driven narratives of neighboring churches toward the struggles of real people. Both the group sessions and the narrative bear out this direction as a hopeful aspect of the congregation's spiritual journey. The caveat, of course, is the human tendency to find personal healing and comfort for one's own pain and then lack the will to seek out others who need similar healing and comfort. Describing the College Church as a healing church does not ensure a missional impulse toward the world. In the narrative, I try to point the church in this direction. I believe this to be a legitimate interpretation of the church's strengths and desires.

Third, I said that the church needs to live increasingly in radical dependence on God. Again, the eight positive themes in the group interviews point in hopeful directions, but some of these might also be key characteristics of groups that have no focus on God. Being accepted or feeling part of a family could refer to a healthy workplace or a sports team. If I had simply included these in the narrative without an eye toward the work of God in the congregation or the world, then the narrative might simply be no different from any other human story. I tried to describe the College Church's journey, however, in a manner that would open it to new possibilities of the Spirit's leadership and toward a



world that has needs far more challenging than what a small group of Christians can meet or even affect.

The narrative is in appendix A. Although we played a recording of the narrative on the project's final week, I have included only the text of the narrative in this thesis. A large part of the congregation heard the narrative's performance. In it, one can hear both hopeful, positive themes from the interviews and the unvarnished truth about the College Church as a collection of imperfect people.

#### Evaluation of the Congregational Narrative

The congregation first listened to the narrative in late October 2010. Only a month had passed as I sat down to write an evaluation of the project. Evaluating the congregational narrative after such a brief interval has inherent problems. This narrative can be adequately assessed only several years down the road—if it finds a foothold in further shaping the College Church's conversation about its identity and mission.

I explained the process of evaluation in Chapter 3. As is common in many doctor of ministry projects, I employed post-project evaluative triangulation. The three points of evaluation included my own assessment, a post-project interview of the research assistants, and the assessment of an outside expert.

#### My Own Post-Narrative Evaluation

As a first means of assessment, I reviewed the narrative through the lens of my own observations and field notes. In the preamble to the narrative, I laid out some of my rationale for choosing to highlight certain portions of the church's history. As I reflected on the eight themes that arose from the group interviews, I came to believe that certain events had a greater impact on the church's current mentality than others. The series of

tragedies in the 1980s and subsequent numerical decline and fragmentation seem to have led to the formation of many of the eight identifying traits.

I looked through the interview transcripts again to see if I might have erred in my analysis of the data and subsequent crafting of the narrative. Major sections of the transcripts are covered with the color-coded notations of my data organization. This reveals that the eight themes flow through a vast majority of the interviews.

There are long sections, however, without much marking. These respondents seem not to have mentioned material that fits into one of the eight themes. I reexamined these passages to see what I might have missed. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that these unmarked responses contain lengthy tangents and personal reflections that have nothing to do with the questions of appreciative inquiry. While the shepherding groups may have found these responses interesting or enlightening, they had nothing to say in support of or conflict with the eight themes.

One individual, whose protracted response had little relevant data, spoke about the dangers of technology and how cell phones and computers keep people from being involved in each other's lives. The research assistant gently tried several times to redirect his response, but he went on until he had made his point. Another person spoke passionately, angrily perhaps, in defense of the shepherding group system. He had come to believe that this process was a precursor to a dismantling of the groups, and he used his response time to speak about his perceived fear. Others chose to speak about their own personal faith journeys—interesting perhaps, but irrelevant to this project.

I therefore am quite certain that I correctly chose these eight themes from the interview data. Whether I framed them properly in the narrative is a different and more

difficult question to answer. One church member wanted to know why I said nothing about the church's first preacher. Others suggested I should have talked more about other important figures or events in the College Church's past. Interestingly, though, no one argued with the narrative itself, only with some of the story elements. On the contrary, many individuals said that the narrative captured the essence of the College Church. Many shed tears during the narrative, indicating that it connected on some deep emotional level. I therefore conclude that the church generally accepted the narrative as true.

My biggest critique of the narrative is its recorded visual form. I put great care into the interviews and the narrative-crafting process. Because of time constraints, I had to trust my visual arts ministry leader to put the narrative into video form, and he had only five days from start to finish. While the visual images throughout the narrative kept listeners engaged in the twenty-minute oration, the choice of certain pictures had the unfortunate effect of limiting the congregation's imagination. None of the pictures were wrong or poorly chosen. The use of these images, however, had the side effect of distracting the listeners from the story. For the narrative to be effective, it will need to be heard again and again.

#### Post-Narrative Interview of Research Assistants

The six research assistants assembled three weeks following the project for the purpose of post-project evaluation. I asked them to express their honest opinions of the narrative. They were insiders in the process who had heard group sessions, but each had heard only one-sixth of the interviews. None of them had had the benefit of seeing the whole picture, but each saw an important part of it. Their reflections from watching the

video served as an important check to the truthfulness of the narrative. One assistant was unable to attend the evaluation session, but I spoke with him individually at a later time.

I asked two questions, one at a time, and took notes as they spoke. First, I inquired about the truth of the narrative. In other words, I wanted them to tell me if the narrative seemed to agree with the responses they heard. Interestingly, some of them initially responded that the narrative contradicted their interviews. They had been heavily invested in seeking positive responses and memories from their group members. They were therefore surprised that the narrative mentioned dark moments in the church's past. One said that her interview group had been much more optimistic than the narrative. Another interviewer remarked that the narrative did indeed capture the strengths mentioned by church members while also containing some of the church's struggles. Yet another said that her group expressed great excitement, but she did not see that excitement in the video.

Other critical remarks dealt with less significant aspects of the narrative—that the narration was too difficult to hear at one point or that the pictures limited their experience of the story. Another person wished I had included more anecdotal material from the church's last twenty years. One person wondered if the three readers were the best choices for the project.

In listening to their evaluative comments, I could see the struggle of moving from appreciative inquiry to a life-giving narrative consonant with Romans 8. With my second question, I asked about a possible life-giving trajectory. I reminded them that the goal of this project was not merely to listen but also to inject the hope of Romans 8 into the church's narrative. The attributes derived from the interview sessions were not life-giving

on their own. Although they helped create a common language of shared experience among seemingly disparate shepherding groups, shared language is not necessarily sufficient to move a congregation toward greater partnership with the mission of God. They could see what I was inferring, but they had a hard time evaluating the narrative's effectiveness in that vein.

Even my own research assistants had trouble understanding why this process would need to move beyond the positive themes that came out of the interviews. After I ended my assessment session with the team of interviewers, I shared more of the process with them. I then asked them to share, given this purpose for the narrative, whether we had pointed the church in a direction that was both true and potentially life-giving. They all agreed that they saw that potential in what happened. They were curious, of course, what would happen next and asked a number of clarifying questions. In different ways they all went on to say that they understood how that particular narrative might move the College Church in the right direction. The proof, however, will only be evident in the future.

#### Outside Expert's Assessment

I asked John York to serve as an outside evaluator for the project. He is a professor of New Testament at Lipscomb University in Nashville and has had occasional contact with the College Church over the past decade. He has done work in appreciative inquiry and is increasingly working as a consultant with congregations in Middle Tennessee. He seemed to be a good choice to provide an outside assessment of the narrative.

I sent him a copy of my project proposal along with all the transcript data. I included the narrative, both as a DVD and in written form. He looked over the project goals and then browsed through the interview transcripts. His responses came to me in the form of emails. I asked him to address both the veracity of the narrative as a representation of the College Church and its potential life-giving nature in view of the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8.

York believed that the interviews and the narrative both accurately depict the College Church's story. His one proviso was that the "trauma period" (his words) when the church went through and released four or five ministers leading into the twelve years without a lead minister seems a bit short-changed in terms of its impact. He said that the narrative was also telling in the lack of references to God's activity in the church's midst. York admitted that this may have been due to the way in which the shepherding groups themselves came to see and discuss the questions. He noted, however, that the responses focused on relationships of acceptance and forgiveness—certainly a reflection of their experience of God's grace—but not on actually receiving God's grace.

York further noted that while the College Church seems to use the language of God and the Holy Spirit, perhaps many members have become too focused on the human feelings rather than on listening to or talking about what God and the Holy Spirit are doing in their lives. He suggested that the narrative played the role of helping move the congregation toward greater God-awareness and greater identity with God's mission in the world. At this point he spoke of the shepherding groups as a potential for developing this further, yet he also remarked that the groups might actually sustain a human focus since that was where many felt their primary relational identity within the congregation.

His assessment mirrored my observations about the need to move beyond the eight themes to craft a life-giving narrative. While these concepts may be positive, most of them could also be interpreted as humanistic or even self-serving rather than missionally focused on the kingdom of God. York wrote, “The great difficulty in our fellowship has been the movement to grace with complete loss of accountability. So you have the odd/difficult circumstance of an ‘accepting’ church whose visible leadership [has been] morally irresponsible (and thus unacceptable), leading to a long period of distrust for a ‘preaching minister,’ all the while billing itself as grace-oriented. Yes, the neighborhood changed, and yes the move to a more creative music style impacted some. But there is a deeper issue—while there is much talk of relationships, are they Christian? Or [are they] just good support groups?”

York’s evaluation moved beyond my narrative to a broader assessment of the congregation. He believed that the narrative could be helpful in moving the congregation toward greater participation in the mission of God, and he found that the traces of Romans 8 were helpful in this regard. The difficulty, he suggested, would be in moving beyond the self-congratulating tendencies of the past toward a greater understanding of what it means to follow God and be led by God’s Spirit.

#### Concluding Remarks

The congregational narrative produced in this project seems to fairly well represent the actual history of the College Church. It also does a good job of reflecting the positive memories and feelings cherished by church members about that history. A different researcher might have chosen to include different elements in this story or leave out others. I believe, however, that the results of the appreciative inquiry were fairly

conclusive in describing the congregation's self-assessment. The challenge, not just for this research project but also for discerning the congregation's future missional vocation, is to move beyond positive feelings that may or may not be Spirit-filled. The trajectory of a passage such as Romans 8 provides a helpful lens for contrasting the Pauline view of identity and mission with the College Church's apparent view.

The real assessment of this project will come years down the road. If the College Church has a better understanding of itself as a unified group of believers living under the reign of God and moves with greater intentionality toward the world around it, then one might suggest that this project has been effective. If by contrast the congregation remains fragmented with competing visions about ministry and stuck with a longing for self-gratifying feelings, then one will be able to propose that this narrative project was unsuccessful. For now, though, the possibilities are promising.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Through this project I crafted a congregational narrative for the College Church. The initial assessment suggests that the narrative has the potential to clarify the congregation's identity and perhaps increase its capacity for mission. The real evaluation will come years down the road as the church either moves with clarity toward missional engagement or remains mired in fragmentation without a clear sense of purpose.

This final chapter discusses some potential implications of my project. I also explore the trustworthiness and significance of my research. Finally, I talk about any future steps I may aim for as the narrative hopefully takes wings within the broader discourse of the College Church and its discernment of God's purposes.

#### Trustworthiness

While I believe that the results of this project are promising and may be valid for the College Church in 2010, other researchers should pay careful attention to the unique circumstances in this project. These factors affect the project's applicability to other settings, along with its dependability and credibility. I made choices and assumptions along the way that clearly had an effect on the process.

A project of this magnitude would ideally take place after a trial run in a smaller setting. I did not have this luxury. Others who wish to undertake a similar narrative-crafting project can learn from my efforts. They should also realize, however, that not everything in this process is transferable to another setting. Also, the conclusions and

resultant narrative are valid, I believe, given the framework and style of research. But another researcher or a different research method might have produced a different narrative. Had I used different instruments for understanding my congregation or had I chosen different methodological and theological tools, I might have crafted a different narrative. In this section I explore the trustworthiness of my research. I also talk about several areas that may help other researchers assess whether they can borrow pieces of the theoretical framework and methodology used in the College Church.

### Applicability

This project may or may not be applicable to another congregational leader in a different setting. Some of the lessons learned through this process may be beneficial for others, but they should carefully ponder its unique aspects. Several distinct factors had an enormous impact on the process and its outcome.

First, the College Church itself is a unique congregation. No two churches are exactly alike. The ministry context as described in Chapter 1 might contain elements that resonate with other churches in other times and places, but the entire picture is of a church that is irreproducible and therefore unlike any other.

If I were to perform this research with another congregation, I would undoubtedly garner vastly different results. Even if I were to redo this same project in the College Church ten years from now, the unique set of circumstances would have changed and the project would produce a different narrative. Those who seek to apply this project to their own setting would be wise to realize that their own version should have its own unique layers and nuances.

Second, my choice of research assistants left an indelible imprint on the project. The six interviewers came from different segments of the congregation and seemed to be good fits for their interview groups. My outside evaluator commented that I chose some of the best possible individuals for this task.

While these six research assistants followed interview protocols that resulted in compatible data, each had a style that impacted the flow of the group and the individual responses. Their impact may have been subtle at times, but I would be unwise to ignore it. Sometimes the research assistants tried to redirect a respondent who was not answering the questions. At other times, they allowed a respondent to wander far off course and perhaps distract or even perturb others in the interview group. During week 4's interview session, one of the assistants went beyond asking questions and started offering his own commentary. Some of his interludes between questions were as long as, or longer than, the responses of the actual interviewees.

These particular assistants therefore shaped the process in their own unique way. Had I chosen different interviewers, they might have guided the interview sessions differently or even stirred different emotions within some of the respondents. I have no way of knowing. The choice of these six interviewers further limits the applicability of my study and findings to other locales.

Even though the findings and implications of this study may not have universal applications, they meet the perceived needs of the College Church. This congregation needed to enter a new period of conversation about its identity. My hope was to open new possibilities for mission by helping the church rise above its fragmented existence. This project seems to have helped in that regard.

## Dependability

A reader of this study might wonder if this project is actually trustworthy. Although I have tried to address concerns about methodology, other questions may persist about the potential bias of the lead researcher or about the viability of the evaluation process. One might also question my choice of Romans 8 as a theological framework and whether it had more than a figurative influence on the narrative.

I have not tried to hide my biases about the College Church. In Chapter 1, I am honest about what I see as the human failings of the congregation. I speak as one who did not live through the church's successes or failures. I have no interest in defending particular aspects of the past just as I have nothing to gain from unduly critiquing other pieces. My personal interest in the church's past stems from my desire to understand current trends and limitations. I know that I may have misunderstood, misinterpreted, or misrepresented parts of my ministry setting, but I have tried to explain my assumptions and conclusions as clearly as possible so that others can judge for themselves.

An outside evaluator has a disadvantage in assessing a project such as this. Even though my outside expert has personal knowledge of the College Church, his knowledge is partial at best. Since he has some knowledge of the congregation, he might have assumed that he knows it better than he actually does. His evaluation, therefore, might have been skewed by his relationships within the church or even with me. He did, however, have full access to the interview transcripts. I did not share the interviewers' field notes with him, but the field notes were completely unhelpful and counter-productive both for the interviewers and for the data collection process. His access to data, therefore, was no different from the access I had.

In spite of this potential for presumptive judgment, I believe that some familiarity with the congregation was helpful. Since this project involved findings in the highly personal form of a narrative, inside knowledge helped the hearer identify with the movement of the story. My evaluator's experience with the College Church drew him into the story. He remarked about pieces that had been foreign to him and were of interest because they represented gaps in his knowledge. This personal interest in the story made a trained theologian and church consultant such as my outside expert a potentially good fit for assessing the narrative.

As to the dependability of this study's theological underpinnings, I will defer to those who read this completed thesis. As I look over the narrative, I am concerned that it may contain insufficient space for a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit. In describing the church's past, I tried to reflect the language used in the interview sessions. Respondents rarely spoke of God's work in their midst, even though they may have assumed it. The narrative fairly well echoes this silence. Still, I tried to point toward a future movement of God's Spirit and open the church to new movements of the divine in its midst. I personally believe this is but one way the narrative mirrors the eschatological trajectory of Romans 8.

### Credibility

I do not doubt that this project details a credible way to craft a congregation's story. One might ask, however, if my methodology provides the best way to construct a congregational narrative. I tried to carefully document the methods used in this project. One can review those steps and the reasoning for them in Chapter 3.

I admit that the experiences of this congregational study have taught me much about the component pieces used. If I were ever again to craft a congregational narrative for this or a different church, I would do some things otherwise. These improvements might streamline or even better the congregation's experience and perhaps even the final narrative.

One key upgrade would be the elimination of the field note observation forms. These were an unnecessary distraction for the research assistants. Instead of focusing fully on guiding the interviewees, they were compelled as per my instructions to make some type of written observation about each respondent. I describe this as unnecessary because the forms truly provided no helpful data. By fully recording the interviews and producing word-for-word transcripts, I had more than enough information to process. Reading data such as body language is too subjective and did not even provide workable data for a narrative-crafting project such as this one.

The observation forms were a distraction for the respondents as well. Some asked to see what was being written about them. Others felt nervous responding in the first place, and the presence of a "scribe" who not only asked questions but also jotted notes seemed to intimidate a few people. Although I cannot say that the data produced through the group interviews would have been significantly different if I had skipped the written observations, I would suggest that the recordings alone provide sufficient credibility for this project.

Triangulation is a commonly used method for evaluating this kind of project. The three sources all gave differing perspectives on the narrative. They did not simply affirm the project or gloss over problem areas. They each pointed out particular weaknesses of

the project while also pointing to its potential power in guiding the College Church toward greater participation in God's mission.

### Reflexivity

From the beginning I tried to downplay the academic side of this project. Church members knew that the seven-week process was somehow tied to my doctoral work, and I did not hide that fact. The most obvious reminder of the project's academic nature was the signing of the informed consent forms. Some individuals were a bit rattled by having to sign what amounted to a waiver.

Once the forms had been negotiated, I explained that the narrative project had been chosen by the elders because of the congregation's specific needs. I said that they need not worry about my doctoral project. Their answers, I said, would neither hurt nor help the completion of my degree. That was my concern. Their primary focus, I alleged, was to share openly and honestly so that the congregation could have a chance of better understanding what God might be calling it to be and do. I was careful to avoid telling them what kinds of responses (other than positive memories and feelings, of course) I was hoping to get.

My desire was to minimize the likelihood that either the respondents or my researchers would try to "help" the project by saying what was supposedly expected rather than what they honestly felt. Throughout all the interviews, I had no reason to believe that anyone was steering remarks in my direction. In fact, their lack of interface with me during the sessions probably helped them all relax and speak without fear of being identified or singled out. I think this allowed respondents to speak as freely as possible.

My own emotions and biases certainly played into the project. I am not an objective outsider. Being an insider, however, is a crucial point of view for directing this kind of project. The flipside is that this insider status opens up the possibility that I may have hoped for too much or read too much into the data. I want to see the College Church successfully navigate toward a greater missional identity. My optimism can at times blind me to challenging realities.

Several factors in this project protected me from unduly warping the College Church narrative. First, my method of evaluation allowed others to critique the narrative and the crafting process. The research group expressed the opinion that I produced too negative a narrative and thereby devalued the positive responses from their group interviews. The outside expert wrote, on the contrary, that I had glossed over other difficult periods and trusted the respondents too much. The combination of these two perspectives suggests that my narrative indeed tried to weave the results of appreciative inquiry with the real history of the College Church.

Also, the narrational themes came out of a rigorous examination of the interview transcripts. Anyone who wishes to authenticate these themes could potentially read the interviews word for word. If anyone were to suspect that the transcripts had been doctored, they could request to listen to the actual interviews. Beyond the empirical data of the transcripts and the recordings, the interviewers provide an additional layer of accountability, as do all those who responded during the process.

### Significance

This project initiated a number of conversations and furthered discussion about renewing the College Church's focus. God has richly blessed this group of believers. It



has much to be thankful for. God calls believers everywhere to move in ever-increasing partnership with God and the unveiling plan for redeeming the world. To accomplish this purpose, God needs all kinds of churches, just as the body needs a variety of gifts and activities. God can use each unique body of believers in distinct ways as the good news of Jesus Christ is not only proclaimed but lived. In this section I expound upon several aspects of my project's significance.

### Sustainability

The congregational narrative can have significance if the church sustains what was started. The conversations in the shepherding groups and then in mixed groups gave church members the chance to hear one another and listen for the Spirit's work in their midst. They heard similarities throughout the congregation and were pleased to note that many commonalities bind this congregation together.

The Spirit can build upon this foundation to bring a sense of shared identity and possibly shared mission. To do so, the College Church will need to realize that its working environment has changed. Leaders will have to think in corporate rather than territorial terms. Giving permission to a seven-week process is a good sign, but leaders will have to continue in the mode of listening and discerning rather than defending themselves or their own areas of influence. The current eldership mostly demonstrates great promise in this regard. If leaders become defensive or start to fear uncertainty, then the narrative will end up on the trash heap with past failed experiments.

To sustain this project, the College Church will need to find ways to use the narrative in the weeks and months to come. Ministry groups may want to watch the narrative together and then discuss its implications for their areas of ministry. The

shepherding groups may need to watch it during their class session and further discuss how this impacts their group and the whole church. New members will need to see the narrative and explore how they might fit into a congregation with this kind of unfolding story. Leaders will want to continually revisit the narrative so that they can help the church explore what God might be calling it to be and do.

The temptation will be to forget the narrational trajectory and merely do what comes naturally. For the College Church, what comes naturally has been a tendency toward fragmented visions and a focus on activities directed by various leaders. God may in truth be calling the College Church to a new set of activities, to a new way of interacting with its context. God is certainly calling the congregation to a more unified mission. Moving more and more in that direction is absolutely critical to the sustainability of this project.

#### Personal Significance

This ministry project provided opportunities for personal growth, especially in terms of my leadership in the congregation. Challenges inevitably arise during any major undertaking, and those difficulties are already rearing their heads in response to some of the implications of the narrative process. While these are rarely pleasant, I have often experienced personal growth through these moments. I am grateful for the opportunity to work through the challenges presented by a major undertaking of this kind.

My appreciation for the College Church has grown during these weeks of conversation and narrative-crafting. As I heard the stories of individual after individual, I grew in my love for the people of this congregation. I can also say that my respect deepened for this church and its leaders, who have weathered some dark and foreboding

storms. The leaders would not claim to have handled every struggle with the greatest aplomb, but they did their best and kept forging ahead. None would be able to blame them if some lost their courage in the process. My ministry to the College Church members will ultimately be richer because of what I have learned.

Seeing hope blossom once again, after so many years of struggle and decline, is a joyous experience. Many want to see the College Church succeed, even though they may tend to define success in ways that run contrary to the implications of this study. Hope exists, however, and I am overjoyed to see young adults along with many others rejuvenated and exploring conversations that might have seemed inconceivable or out of place just a few months ago. I am personally gratified by this.

I cannot foresee all the personal ramifications of this learning experience. Perhaps I can help sustain this process at the College Church for many years to come. Perhaps I will eventually live out this project's fullest implications elsewhere. Regardless, I am grateful for what I have learned and experienced through crafting this congregational narrative.

### Ecclesial Significance

The congregational narrative has already moved the congregation toward a better understanding of its identity, but this movement has been relatively small in comparison with the distance needed to travel. The College Church still needs to understand the theological import of its calling. Many of the key characteristics that surfaced through appreciative inquiry are helpful for building a narrative but need to be infused with a deeper understanding of the mission of God. The narrative may create the space for learning more about Christian identity and calling.

Another benefit of the process was the cross-breeding of shepherding groups. In Chapter 1 I spoke about the fragmentation present in the College Church and the need to forge a corporate identity. Using a process that focused on massive participation and conversation stimulated interest in reaching across previously fixed boundaries. A few individuals showed resentment about this and worried that their comfort zones would be dismantled. As the church continues to converse about and discern God's call, these individuals will need reassurance that old relationships need not be destroyed if they are essential to spiritual health and growth. They will also need loving encouragement to trust the Lord's provision rather than be content with what is visible and known.

The College Church leaders were generally enthusiastic about the process. The elders felt a sense of relief that the process did not veer off into criticism of them or of their past. They felt great comfort in hearing church members' positive memories and feelings. The elders' normal tendency during shepherding groups is to be proactive in both teaching and guiding. This process encouraged them to listen and observe, and they were deeply encouraged by what they heard. Then, as they heard the results from conversations in other groups, they saw connecting points and expressed confidence in being able to move forward together on a congregational level. My co-ministers felt a similar enthusiasm about the results of the process, although the process itself was somewhat discouraging to them. They were disappointed that some respondents focused on seemingly trivial and surface matters. Their inside knowledge made it difficult to listen approvingly to some parts of the conversation.

On the whole, however, the church leaders saw an emerging conversation about how to build on the church's identity as clarified through the narrative. With my

guidance, they have grown to believe in the need for continued conversation about what God is doing in the College Church and where God is leading this unique group. These conversations were only beginning as I wrote these final words.

I cannot predict how much vitality, if any, may return to the College Church as a result of this narrative process. I believe that this project broke the inertia and moved the congregation toward some necessary steps for renewal. I pray that God continues to reveal the path ahead as the church, led by its elders and staff, seeks to pour itself out on behalf of the kingdom of God.

### Theological Significance

The theological ramifications of this project affect our understanding both of ecclesiological contextuality and church leadership. The typical stance of leaders, especially in a previous era, was to assert control and demand obedience. Leaders of various churches have sometimes seen themselves as people set apart from the congregation. They therefore met in secret on behalf of the church to decide key questions that they later announced to their congregants. This style of leadership stands in opposition to the style that seeks to empower a congregation from the bottom up and listen for the Spirit's guidance.

This project demonstrated the power of leaders who sit among church members and listen carefully to their stories and feelings. Those in the College Church leadership team who participated in this project felt a sense of unanimity about how God was pulling the disparate parts of this congregation together. The one elder who participated in just one week of interviews—due to work and other commitments—is the one who is now least connected to the product and most disturbed by the resultant conversations.

This project highlights the importance of leadership flowing up from within the congregation rather than set off as separate from the church. If College Church leaders can continue to dwell among the members, then they have a great chance of partnering with them to discern how God is directing the church. Overall, I am favorable about the likelihood that this will happen.

This project also affirms that a congregation should seek its unique identity within the mission of God. Several individuals have expressed relief to me since the completion of the narrative project. They seem relieved that the College Church no longer has to try to be like other churches in order to find its place. Many thought this had been the only path and sensed pressure to be something they were not. This narrative project relieved them of that burden because they sensed God calling the College Church to be something unique, something that distinctly fits what has happened within this Christian community.

#### Concluding Remarks

The church is not just an important priority for those who follow Jesus. It is the means through which believers learn how to follow Jesus and live out their Christian lives. The ethical demands of following Jesus are intended for those living in community. The suffering witness of Christians to the living Lord and to the hope of the resurrection is meant to be shared within the setting of community. Radical dependency on God is best learned in the context of Christian community. As Hauerwas and Willimon write in reference to the church, “We are not called to help people. We are called to follow Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose for the church is to follow Jesus, and following Jesus is meant to occur as part of a community.

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<sup>1</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, 121.

The struggle for most congregations today is to reclaim their simple and singular purpose. In the Western world, church has come to symbolize much more than discipleship. Because following Jesus has become one of several priorities, believers have developed expectations of church that may have little or nothing to do with God's expectations. This confusion also blinds outsiders to the benefits of Christian community by convincing them that churches are concerned mostly about things that matter little. The church is to be the bearer of hope in the world. Meanwhile, the world is in grave need of the very thing the church is supposed to carry to it.

One way of returning to the simple mission of the church is also to return to the incarnational uniqueness of each faithful community. God does not call the church to compete or copy or be all things to all people. The particularity of each congregation's story allows God to use that group of people in ways unlike those of any other group. The church has a great role to play in God's kingdom, but it can find that role only when it discerns its special place in the mission of God.

The College Church will hopefully build on the headway gained through this narrative project. The leaders seem determined to continue this conversation because they want to find their special niche in the kingdom. Most members seem hungry to experience a sense of purpose. They need to learn how to listen to each other and to God as they increasingly participate in the mission of God. Even though the future is yet to be written, God's Spirit is moving over the group of believers that meets at 1284 East Bullard Avenue in Fresno, California. Maybe God has used me to lead the College Church to a state of increased preparedness as it seeks to follow the Spirit toward God's mission.

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## APPENDIX A

## THE CONGREGATIONAL NARRATIVE

If one observes the sprawling complex at 1284 East Bullard Avenue, one may recognize this property as home to one of Fresno's many Christian congregations. If a person pauses to briefly examine it, that person will see a row of mature bottle brush trees covering what appears to be the façade of the building's main structure. And if the wind is blowing through the tree branches and if one gazes intently through the branches of those trees, one just might see the outline of a stone cross, a rough-hewn cross—somewhat concealed and neglected, but a cross nonetheless. When someone spots that cross, then that person has found the home for the College Church of Christ.

The building belonging to the College Church rests in the midst of a bustling metropolis, on the northeast side of California's fifth-largest city. When one looks beyond the physical plant of the College Church, one sees a changing neighborhood. The city has expanded northward. The immediate neighborhoods are less desirable than they once were. The inner city is still far away, but low-income apartment complexes are within walking distance of the building. Homeless individuals sometimes wander across the church property.

A junior high school is just behind the building. A high school is down the block. A number of elementary schools are a short drive away. Two of the city's leading hospitals are a couple of miles from the church building. Professional offices are close by. The nearby intersection of First and Bullard Avenues has numerous shops including supermarkets, several restaurants, two pharmacies, a Hmong community center, a dollar

store and a service station. Some stores, vacant just a few years ago, have now been renovated and are occupied.

A prominent part of the neighborhood is Fresno State University, with an enrollment of over twenty thousand students. Only a few students live in dormitories on campus, but there are many student apartments and houses close by. The campus is only a mile or so from the College Church building, and the forty-thousand-seat football stadium is within a short walk of the property.

If one backs up to 1964, the year when the College Church was founded, one would find a far different landscape. The building, constructed in 1964, was on the northern edge of Fresno. Farmland surrounded the new edifice as it rose from the dirt. Bullard Avenue was but a small road. The houses and businesses that now dot the landscape were nonexistent. Fresno was just beginning to expand.

When the College Church began, its original members were people on a mission. They were sent out by their home congregation on Palm Avenue to expand the family of God to the ends of Fresno. A unique hope seems to have propelled them—hope and a sense of calling. Those charter members had a clear sense of the hope that drew them together and the calling that led them to start this new congregation. They had a desire to honor God and expand the community of faith.

All their efforts were focused on that singular purpose to create a strong Christian family into which they could welcome new individuals. They cherished their tradition of singing, a craft that one visitor to this church likened to hearing the voice of angels. They welcomed the young, especially students from Fresno State. They loved one another and shared this love with new people. Visitors were literally greeted with open arms.

A church member described her family's first Sunday at the College Church. "We came here to College, and we walked in the door down what is Mountain View's end now. I didn't get down to the end of that hall. Two women took my son out of my hands and put him in the two-year-old class, and another lady took my daughter. They just snatched those kids right out of our hands! And there they were sitting down. We never even went to another church to see if we liked it because we loved College from that very first Sunday."

From this humble beginning, the College Church would eventually grow into the largest Church of Christ on the West Coast. Members made space for more and more people, loving them into their family. But it wasn't just love that sustained them. Hard work became the hallmark of that congregation. Children scavenged the grounds to find rocks for the mosaic in the baptistry. Those with green thumbs began to shape the bare land surrounding the building. Others finished the building and made furniture to fill it. Countless individuals cooked, hosted, taught, organized, and cleaned. There were always jobs to be done, and the Lord provided more and more people to do them. Those who came found not only acceptance and love but also a meaningful role to play in the College Church family.

As expected, not everyone thought positively about the College Church. Some thought of it as "different"—even in the early days. Before visiting the congregation, some received warnings from naysayers on the outside: "Watch out. That College Church isn't quite normal." Perhaps College was distinctive, but its real difference would not become totally clear until much later.

Not all people experienced the College Church as a welcoming family. Some found it cliquish or too mono-cultural. The College Church is an imperfect church, but healthy components of its DNA were in place from the outset. It was a place of inclusion and acceptance for the sake of honoring God and welcoming new individuals into the family of God. Trauma and tragedy would soon leave a lasting impact on the congregation, and the College Church would be challenged to grow in new ways as the Lord wrote new chapters in its history.

The 1970s were years of continued growth and increasing prestige. The College Church took a major role in the Yosemite Family Encampment, an annual gathering of Churches of Christ from across the West. The church also sponsored increasing numbers of international missionary efforts, which included sending its own members. The church's campus ministry at Fresno State flourished and produced active young-adult members who became part of the College Church and other congregations. In the 1970s and on through the 1980s, the church reached a peak of about eight hundred in weekly attendance.

During those early days, the College Church's narrative would have been similar to the defining story of many other Churches of Christ back then—a story of confidence in their own practices and suspicion about all who did not practice their form of Christianity. Members believed that God demanded obedience to a strict plan for conversion, church organization, and worship. Messages from the pulpit tended to reiterate what members already accepted. They were often uncompromising toward the beliefs of so-called “denominational” churches. Members saw the need to evangelize anyone who was not part of a “scriptural” church or who had not been converted in the



“scriptural” manner. This hardnosed approach may seem foreign today, but it provided a durable mechanism for the College Church’s original narrative. This attitude was all-encompassing and may have contributed to the church’s early growth. If any members were of a different mindset or opinion, they normally kept such views to themselves.

Then the first of several tragedies struck the congregation. Wayne Anderson was a new minister who landed in the fertile soil of the College Church with ideas that were bold and fresh. He began the church’s first small group program and invited campaign groups of students from Texas to help with outreach. He died, however, less than a year into his ministry at the College Church. A tragic motorcycle accident ended his life at the Yosemite Family Encampment, leaving behind a young pregnant widow.

An even darker shadow fell over the congregation in the 1980s and into the 1990s. None was more damaging than the Murray Isaac saga at the start of the ’80s. He was regarded as one of the country’s top youth ministers, and many viewed Murray’s hire as a major coup for the College Church—proof that it was a prominent church. He succeeded in energizing teens and families, and the church grew in regional importance. Some still speak of his youth ministry as one of the most exciting times in their own lives and in the College Church’s past.

The excitement came to a crashing halt, however, when church leaders began to uncover some of Murray’s moral failings. They eventually discovered that he had had inappropriate contact with one or more children in the youth group. Murray hurriedly took a job at another congregation before church leaders fully unearthed what had taken place. Less than a year later, he killed himself.

One member recently reflected on this tragedy: “That youth minister was a tragic young man. He took his own life! That was such a horrible time for all of us because everyone cared for him. Everyone. He was so deeply troubled, but the congregation raised itself and got past that.”

At least four subsequent ministers left or were dismissed under less than happy circumstances. Following the last departure, the College Church entered a twelve-year period without a preaching minister. This series of leadership crises tempered the growth and enthusiasm of the congregation. Some accused the leadership of various shortcomings. The pain of those days was great, yet seeds were being sown for an even greater change—one that would rewrite the church’s defining story. Some churches might have buckled under the strain of such grief and calamity. Instead, God was developing the College Church for a new season.

New, prominent features sprang up within the College Church, themes that blended with some of its earliest traits. Of these changes, none was more important than the church’s discovery of grace. Many members talk about how they first discovered grace here in the College Church. Whether in the clear messages of Clifford Reeves, through the great spirit of Rusty Bolton, in the dynamic sermons of Randy Gray, or through the unique style of Bill Such, many learned that God loves them in spite of their weaknesses. The College Church learned that no one can earn salvation. It moved away from legalism and accepted the grace available in Jesus Christ. Instead of passing judgment, the College Church learned how to receive and offer forgiveness. The College Church now saw itself as broken and learned to extend God’s grace to other broken sinners.

“Even when we know their past,” said one person, “we accept them. Even if they are guilty!” Someone else said, “We don’t interrogate people or give them the third degree. When somebody says they want to be part of our congregation or come here and worship, we accept them with open arms.”

One member described her first encounter with the College Church: “Because of our failed marriages and other mistakes, our family, friends and co-workers weren’t happy with us. So when we came here and talked to a member, we expected to hear the same thing. But when he said, ‘So what?!’ we asked him if he was sure, if he really wanted us to come to this church. He just wrapped his arms around us, and we cried.” Another individual said, “I was a divorced alcoholic when I came, but this church didn’t kick me out the doors. This church was supportive and helped me along the way.”

The human tendency is to spit on the sinner and to beat up the broken. The College Church has never fancied itself as exclusivist and has always tried to welcome anyone who walked through the doors. In reality, though, the congregation for years had been well-heeled and well to do. For those who didn’t match the pattern, fitting in might have seemed like a daunting task. The DNA of the congregation, however, was capable of more. With its string of tragedies, the College Church suddenly found itself in the odd position of being the broken, of having leaders who were far from perfect, of no longer matching the pattern of sister churches in its own heritage. In the span of a few years, College Church went from elite to outcast, from proud to broken, from a church certain of its own goodness to a church in need of God’s forgiveness and grace.

Some long-time members weren’t sure how to handle this newfound grace. The church’s original story seemed to be changing, and change is never easy. Many long-time

members left, sometimes with angry words on their lips. And other Churches of Christ, even the church that helped launch College, began to think of the College Church as really different—different and liberal, no longer a “scriptural” church.

The pain of losing dear friends was an added wound that the College Church had to bear. But for some, even angry departures provided an opportunity to show forgiveness. “If people leave mad and later come back,” said one long-time member, “we never bring that up to them. We just say, ‘Welcome, we’re so glad to see you.’ If you left and came back, I don’t think you would be made to feel bad.” The College Church doesn’t throw people’s mistakes back in their faces, because the church has intimately learned what the Lord’s mercy feels like.

This attitude may be visible in the story of one person’s first visit to the College Church. It was a Sunday night, and she was accompanying a gentleman who had been a member at College. He was afraid to return because he feared he would be condemned and rejected. With this fearful person in tow, she entered the front door for the first time. When people saw her friend, they ran to him, threw their arms around him and hugged him. As she watched this warm reunion, she said to herself, “I’ve been going to church after church after church, and I have arrived. This is where I belong.”

The College Church seems to have become a healing church, a congregation where those who are hurt can openly confess their struggles and problems in order to receive prayer and feel God’s forgiveness. One family related how they had been beaten up, even abused by their previous church. With their faith in God still intact but their trust in churches diminished, they showed up at College Church one Sunday with great trepidation. A member approached them and said something that might have seemed

incredibly odd. To this family, however, her words were like a soothing balm: “Welcome to College Church. This is God’s safe house.”

This is the College Church today. This is our congregation, our home, a safe house for individuals of all backgrounds with all kinds of burdens and sorrows. Those who come to us can be honest about their past and receive the healing of God’s Spirit. This openness can sometimes be shocking to those who have been conditioned to think that church is the last place to admit weakness. One person told of her first visit to College and how stunned she was by the honesty during the prayer time. Someone expressed thanks for prayers because he had been off cigarettes for the last ten days. Surprised by this admission, she leaned to her husband and whispered in amazement, “Why did he even tell them he smoked?”

The Lord has indeed provided healing—healing for the individual and healing for our church, a Christian community that has learned what pain feels like. In this new season the Lord is providing not only healing but also hope for the future, the belief that we can once again feel the power of a new movement of God’s Spirit, in this place, in this people, at this time. God has a job for us to do. What might be our new calling in this new day? What legacy will we leave for those who follow us? What new individuals are waiting to be embraced with God’s love?

Our story is not completely new. God has been moving in this people called the College Church throughout its history. But a new chapter is being written. New themes are replacing some of the old. One can find welcome in this place—welcome and love. Forgiveness is here, too, along with the possibility of healing and finding one’s role in the body of Christ. The winds of God’s Spirit are blowing anew among us.

If one steps beyond the church property out onto Bullard Avenue, and glances up at the façade of the auditorium, one might notice that the wind is blowing. The wind is blowing the branches of a group of bottle brush trees. If someone pauses just long enough and gazes intently through the blowing branches of those trees, that person just might see the outline of a stone cross, a rough-hewn cross—somewhat concealed and neglected, but a cross nonetheless. Maybe, just maybe, that cross will become a dominant feature once again—for those of us who are the College Church, even in this new day.

## APPENDIX B

### Protocol for Taking Field Notes

#### General Instructions:

1. Use field note forms provided for this ministry intervention.
2. Avoid making judgments. Do not assign motives or attempt to read minds. If the respondents are vague, a clarifying question may be appropriate.
3. Avoid generalizations that describe more than what a participant has shared.
4. Do not add personal commentary. Even if you respondents evoke personal memories within you, remain focus on the responses of those being interviewed.
5. Keep all observations anonymous. Describe the respondents in general terms (e.g., white older male; young Hispanic female).

#### Protocol for Recording Group Interviews:

1. As soon as you are ready to begin the group interview, turn on the digital voice recorder and press the record button.
2. Once a respondent begins to answer a question, number the respondents to maintain anonymity.
3. Write down any information that seems to be especially important. Make note of any visible emotions or any responses that seem odd or awkward.
4. At the end of each person's time of response, quietly turn to a new page in preparation for the next respondent.
5. At the close of the session, give the binder of forms to the lead researcher.

## APPENDIX C

## FIELD NOTE OBSERVATION FORM

Description of Respondent	Notes about Respondent's Answers	Observations of Group Interviewer
Observations of Lead Researcher		



## APPENDIX D

## Protocol for Group Interviews

First Session

In order to ensure that each interview is conducted in a consistent manner regardless of the shepherding group or the interviewer, we will use the following protocol.

10:40 Following a brief greeting and personal introduction, the interviewer should begin with the following opening paragraph:

We are exploring the story of God's interaction with the College Church of Christ. Our church has a rich legacy. Through the good and the bad, God has been at work in this place. Many of us have shared in this church's story for years. Others of us are relatively new to this story.

Jason talked about this process last week in the auditorium. Over the next three weeks, we will be gathering information from you. God's story is written on your hearts. Even though we are fellow members of the College Church of Christ, we can't assume that we share the same story. We have to listen carefully to one another as we hear the events of the past. As we listen to each other, we will all learn some new things.

This week, we are looking for your past experiences in the College Church. We are not looking to dig the skeletons out of the closet. Instead, we want to learn about times when you perceived the church to be doing well. One by one, as you are willing, please volunteer to answer our four questions for today. Be mindful that many other people are here who will want to share. So be honest but be as brief as you can. Each person's memories are vital, whether you have been here forty years or only five.

Before we begin, I will read Romans 8:1-6, 18-25.

[Read the passage.]

Questions for today (first session):

- (a) Using the timeline behind me, show where you entered the College Church.
- (b) Describe your memory of what the College Church was like when you first joined.
- (c) What did you appreciate about the College Church back then?
- (d) Can you think of any other time in the College Church's past when you felt that the church was thriving? If so, what did you appreciate about that time?

11:25 Thank everyone for their participation and pass the baton to the elder in charge.

### Second Session

In order to ensure that each interview is conducted in a consistent manner regardless of the shepherding group or the interviewer, we will use the following protocol.

10:40 Following a brief greeting and personal introduction, the interviewer should begin with the following opening paragraph:

We are exploring the story of God’s interaction with the College Church of Christ. Our church has a rich legacy. Through the good and the bad, God has been at work in this place. Many of us have shared in this church’s story for years. Others of us are relatively new to this story.

Two weeks ago, Jason talked about this process in the auditorium. We are gathering information from you about how God has written his story on your hearts. Even though we are fellow members of the College Church of Christ, we can’t assume that we share the same story. We have to listen carefully to one another as we hear the events of the past. As we listen to each other, we will all learn some new things.

This week, we are looking for your past feelings about the things you experienced in the College Church—not how you feel today, but how you felt back then. Just like last week, we are not looking to dig the skeletons out of the closet. Instead, we want to learn about times when you perceived the church to be doing well. One by one, as you are willing, please volunteer to answer our four questions for today. If you did not get to answer last week, we want to hear from you first before others add to last week. Be honest but be as brief as you can. Each person’s memories are vital, whether you have been here forty years or only five months.

Before we begin, I will read Romans 8:1-6, 18-25.

[Read the passage.]

Questions for today (second session):

- (a) Using the timeline behind me, show where you entered the College Church.
- (b) Describe your memory of what the College Church was like when you first joined.
- (c) What did you appreciate about the College Church back then?
- (d) Can you think of any other time in the College Church’s past when you felt that the church was thriving? If so, what did you appreciate about that time?

11:25 Thank everyone for their participation and pass the baton to the elder in charge.

### Third Session

In order to ensure that each interview is conducted in a consistent manner regardless of the shepherding group or the interviewer, we will use the following protocol.

10:40 Following a brief greeting and personal introduction, the interviewer should begin with the following opening paragraph:

We are exploring the story of God’s interaction with the College Church of Christ. Our church has a rich legacy. Through the good and the bad, God has been at work in this place. Many of us have shared in this church’s story for years. Others of us are relatively new to this story.

This is our final week of data collection. We are gathering information from you about how God has written his story on your hearts. Even though we are fellow members of the College Church of Christ, we can’t assume that we share the same story. We have to listen carefully to one another as we hear the events of the past. As we listen to each other, we will all learn some new things.

This week, we are looking for your current feelings about the past you experienced in the College Church—not how you felt back then, but how you feel today. Just like last week, we are not looking to dig the skeletons out of the closet. Instead, we want to learn about times when you perceived the church to be doing well. One by one, as you are willing, please volunteer to answer our four questions for today. Be mindful that many other people are here who will want to share. So be honest but be as brief as you can. Each person’s memories are vital, whether you have been here forty years or only five.

Before we begin, I will read Romans 8:1-6, 18-25.

[Read the passage.]

Questions for today (third session):

- (a) As you think back over the healthy times in the College Church’s past, what hopes and feelings come to your mind right now?
- (b) If you could recreate today a healthy feeling from the College Church’s past, what would that be and what would it look like?
- (c) As you reflect on the life-giving nature of God’s Spirit, what stands out to you about the College Church today?
- (d) Reflect on what you have heard these last few weeks. You have heard many things about God’s work in the College Church over the years. What positive thing stands out to you about the College Church?

11:25 Thank everyone for their participation and pass the baton to the elder in charge.

## APPENDIX E

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project:** Crafting a Congregational Narrative for the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California

**Principal Investigator:** Jason W. Locke, Abilene Christian University

**Advisors:**

Dr. Stephen Johnson, Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University

Dr. Chris Flanders, Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University

**Introduction:** I understand that I have been asked to participate in a research project to craft a congregational narrative for the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California (College Church).

**Purpose:** The purpose of this project is to craft a congregational narrative that will be faithful to the College Church's heritage while propelling it toward God's unveiling future. I will employ group discussions that require interaction among College Church members. This project will attempt to meld some of the divergent stories of the congregation into a narrative. This process will hopefully craft a narrative that fits the congregation as it is and as God might choose to use it in the future. The project will be deemed successful if the ensuing narrative seems to have the potential to clarify the College Church's identity and increasingly foster a renewed capacity for mission.

**Procedures:** This project will involve group interviews with a large portion of the congregation. Six church members will serve as the interviewers. They will ask questions in all adult classes over a three-week period: Sept 19, Sept 26 and Oct 3, 2010. Questions will focus on eliciting memories and feelings associated with "vibrant" days in the church's past. Each session will be recorded and then transcribed. Interview questions are based on principles of appreciative inquiry. Analysis of the data will be qualitative and based on standard ethnographic practices for this type of research.

**Potential Risks:** There are no identifiable risks to participants in this research study. All published participant quotations will remain anonymous.

**Potential Benefits:** By participating in this project, you may 1) More clearly understand what God has done in the College Church; 2) Deepen your relationships within the church; and 3) Help improve the College Church's sense of what God may be calling it to do.

**Compensation:** There is no compensation for your participation in this research.

**Rights of Research Participants:** I have read the above statements. I understand the nature of this project and my role in it. Any potential risks have been explained to me.

I understand that I do not have to participate in this research and can withdraw from it at any time.

I understand that all of the information I provide will remain confidential.

If I have any questions or concerns, I can contact Jason Locke by telephone at 559.260.0825 or by email, jlockeca@gmail.com.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

## ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS FROM SPRING, 2010

Our congregation likes to think of itself as innovative and diverse. We like to think of ourselves as a progressive church that welcomes those who are broken and hurting. Along these same lines, our congregation thinks of itself as diverse, containing people from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds. These assumptions form the foundation of psyche that can shape a missional impulse. Unfortunately, some of these assumptions may not be as true as accurate in reality as they believe. This study will allow us to assess our diversity and innovation.

Our context is the place where we worship & the places where we live & work. We practice or imagine our missional life by living it out in the place where our church has chosen to meet so that we can also live out the Kingdom of God wherever we live and work. How to be neighborly in all of our contexts?

Below are several questions that may facilitate a better understanding of who we are, how we are perceived and what story emerges from those. These questions can unearth what God has done to shape us and how we might engage our context in the months and years to come. Some questions are just for church members (those with an “a”). Some are just for outsiders (those with a “b”). Those without letters are for both.

Questions:

- 1a. What innovations have helped us better reach our neighborhood (accomplish our mission)?
- 1b. Many churches see themselves as innovative. What innovations in church would make a difference in our world (in this neighborhood)?
2. What does a diverse church look like?
3. Do differences between people matter?
- 4a. How much are the other people in this church similar to you? Describe a time when (or a context where) you felt known by others in the church.
- 4b. How well should people in a church know one another?
5. Describe a time when this church was helpful to the surrounding neighborhood?