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Seattle Dinner Church Movement: Participatory Motives of Nonfounding Members

Will F. Haag
Seattle University
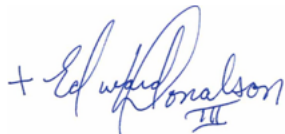
SEATTLE DINNER CHURCH MOVEMENT:

PARTICIPATORY MOTIVES OF NONFOUNDING MEMBERS

BY

WILL FREDERICK HAAG

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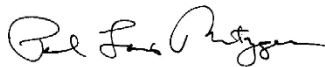
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Approval Signatures:

May 23, 2023
_____
Committee Chair. Edward Donalson III, DMin   Date

May 16, 2023
_____
Committee Member. Paul Louis Metzger, PhD   Date

May 18, 2023
_____
Committee Member. Jeney Park-Hearn, PhD   Date

May 23, 2023
_____
Program Director, Edward Donalson III, DMin   Date

DEDICATION

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

—1 Corinthians 10:31 (English Standard Bible)

ABSTRACT

SEATTLE DINNER CHURCH MOVEMENT:

PARTICIPATORY MOTIVES OF NONFOUNDING MEMBERS

Haag, Will F., DMin, Seattle University, 2023. 101 pages.
Chair: Edward Donalson III, DMin

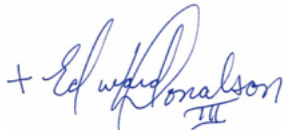This research project explores the reasons people choose to participate in the Seattle Dinner Church Movement. Dinner churches are a relatively new and unique form of ecclesiology in the United States, and this model may harbor potential for bolstering the health of evangelical Protestantism across the nation. Discerning the participatory motives of nonfounding members in the Seattle Dinner Church Movement will help illuminate the connection between this ecclesial modality and overall missiological and ecclesiological health. Qualitative data were collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups within a grounded theory framework of research. Theories generated from the data include emphases on inclusion and relationship(s), and all findings from the project will be offered to leaders within the Seattle-based movement to encourage transparency of perspective(s) and practical application of ecclesial convictions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Seattle Dinner Church Movement (SDCM) found its genesis in an

evangelical church desperately trying to honor its theological and missiological

convictions in the face of rapid decline. The leaders of this Seattle congregation adopted

a nontraditional approach to ecclesiology by hosting free community meals in

nonecclesial settings while honoring their core convictions and missional pursuits. After

months of study and experimentation, these leaders discovered, or rediscovered, the idea

of sharing a meal as a form of communion and communal worship (Fosner 2017a, 14).

Even more, the leaders believed Jesus promoted a dinner-centric form of the Lord's

Table[1] and instructed his followers to use the dinner table as a primary strategy for

ministry and evangelism (Fosner 2017a, 18, 23). SDCM leaders were also confident that

breaking bread with non-Christians is one of the most effective methods for reaching

people with the Good News of Christ while simultaneously maturing his followers

(Fosner 2017a, 3).

Leaders of the movement continue to be convinced that many modern seculars

have little to no interest in traditional churches but still harbor interest in the life and

ministry of Jesus (Fosner 2017a, 1). My research project examined this movement

through the eyes and perspectives of movement leaders and nonfounding dinner church

participants. More specifically, my project explored these questions:

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[1] Multiple terms are used to describe the Lord's Table throughout Christendom. For example, Communion, Holy Sacrament, Last Supper and Eucharist are all used to describe what the dinner church movement sometimes refers to as agape feasts.

- What do nonfounding participants have to say for themselves regarding their own motives and experiences?

- Do the perspectives of nonfounding participants correlate with the aims and strategies of leaders within the movement?

- Is it fair and accurate to connect ecclesial modality to the recent growth and success of the SDCM?

As an unaffiliated dinner church pastor serving in Central Washington,[2] I am deeply committed to the potential benefits of the dinner church movement, and I am wholeheartedly interested in why people choose to affiliate with local dinner churches. This project examined these questions from an insider-outsider point of view—insider in the sense that I am a dinner church pastor and outsider in the sense that I am not directly affiliated with the SDCM. To provide readers with a holistic understanding, I will provide a brief overview of the SDCM history and a historical recap of the dinner church movement in the United States. Furthermore, I will offer an introduction to the sociological and evangelical trends that created fertile soil for the dinner church movement to grow in Seattle and across the United States. This project also engages theological considerations related to the topic and summarizes methodological strategies before offering research findings and overall conclusions. I consider myself a practical

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[2] Unaffiliated in the sense that I am not part of the SDCM. I pastor a dinner church in Central Washington in hybrid partnership with a traditional evangelical congregation.

theologian[3] and I rely mainly on biblical and canonical methodologies in my

hermeneutical practices.[4]

Statement of the Problem

The Protestant church in the United States has been declining quantitatively and

qualitatively for decades (Gorski and Perry 2022, 2).[5] George Hunter (2009, 1) argues

that the United States is now comprised of 180 million functional secularists. Alan Hirsch

and David Ferguson (2011, 26, 29) partly blame the Europeanization of the United States

for this trend and propound ecclesial innovation as part of the solution. Furthermore,

certain aspects of culture have crept into and corrupted the integrity of many churches.

Consumerism, for example, influences too many attitudes, decisions, and priorities in the

Church today (Harper and Metzger 2009, 13). At its inception, leaders of the SDCM

proposed dinner churches as a remedy to these challenges. They assert outdated ecclesial

modalities are part of the problem and suggest a meal-centered model as part of the

solution. However, the assertions reported by the SDCM regarding the connection

between ecclesial modality and missiological effectiveness have not been verified by an

outside party. Preliminary research has been done on the larger dinner church movement,

but almost no formal research has been conducted on the SDCM. Leaders of the Seattle

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[3] Richard Osmer (2008) authored an excellent primer on practical theology. His work identifies four tasks of practical theology: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. This project loosely follows his format with special emphasis on the latter two stages. Osmer describes the normative task as "using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from 'good practice.'" He explains the normative task as, "determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the 'talk back' emerging when they are enacted'" (Osmer 2008, 4, 131, 176).

[4] See section on theological methods in chapter 2 for an explanation of these terms.

[5] See also Michael Lipka (2015).

movement have made observations and subsequent conclusions pertaining to the reasons

people stay involved with Seattle dinner churches, but what would the participants say for

themselves during a formal research project? Understanding perspectives of the

participants will help illuminate the relationship between ecclesial modality and

missional effectiveness.

Purpose and Significance

The specific purpose of my research was to examine and clarify participatory

motives of people regularly involved with the SDCM.[6] My project focused on

nonfounding participants to ascertain their motives and reasons for regularly engaging

with dinner churches in their local context. My broader purpose was to begin an

investigation into the missiological effectiveness of the ecclesial modality of dinner

church in the Seattle context. Starting with participatory motives will lay the groundwork

for further research in missiology, discipleship, and soteriology. If it is true that the

United States is an increasingly post-Christian nation (Gorski and Perry 2022, 103;

Kimball 2007, 15), and 85 percent of churches in the country are stalled or declining

(Fosner 2017a, 168; Masci 2015), then it behooves church leaders to embrace conviction-

driven adaptation(s) that may include changes in ecclesial modalities.

According to Reggie McNeal (2003):

> We are witnessing the emergence of a new world. . . . The phenomenon has been
> noted by many who tag the emerging culture as post-Christian, pre-Christian, or
> postmodern. The point is, the world is profoundly different than it was at the
> middle of the last century, and everyone knows it. But knowing it and acting on it
> are two different things. So far, the North American church largely has responded
> with heavy infusions of denial, believing the culture will come to its senses and
> come back around to the church. (2)

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[6] Regular involvement is an arbitrary rubric devised by the author for the sake of reference.
Specifically, this term denotes involvement with a minimum of two dinner church gatherings per month.

Longtime researcher and professor Thomas Rainer (2001, 33) would agree with McNeal as he followed the trend of increasingly unchurched Americans in each successive generation. Similarly, Professor Leonard Sweet (2014, 51) highlights the plummeting retention rates of nearly all Protestant denominations after their children leave home. Not only have the numbers of churches and self-identified Protestant Christians steadily decreased, but the quality of the self-identified US Christian is increasingly brought into question. Sweet (2014, 39) notes the hamstrung nature of US Christianity by comparing it to taking a vacation cruise but not availing ourselves to the free food on board the ship. In other words, too many US Protestants embrace orthodoxy without requisite orthopraxy (Wilkens and Thorsen 2010, 19). Dan Kimball (2007, 32) captures the common sentiment of unchurched Americans who see Christians as, "scary, angry, judgmental, right-wing finger-pointers with political agendas."

Professor and theologian Paul Louis Metzger (2007) is another voice among many decrying the current state of US evangelicalism. In his book, *Consuming Jesus*, Metzger (2007, 2, 65) bemoans insidious consumerism and ubiquitous individualism running rampant in the church, resulting in division instead of unity and civil distress instead of societal blessing. Metzger (2007, 3) also highlights the "mean-spirited" nature of many evangelicals and their propensity to take interest in the "privileged few— upwardly mobile, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, heterosexual males and their families." All these factors denote a need for change, and, as entrepreneurial church-planters Hugh Halter and Matt Smay (2008, 28) write, "We know if we keep doing church like we're doing it, it will probably only grow more irrelevant to today's culture." Fifteen years ago, the SDCM decided to do something different.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis (2012, 19) describe the United States as a post-Christian and post-Christendom nation, and sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry (2022, 6) argue this country was never a *Christian* nation in the first place. As investigative journalist Katherine Stewart (2022, 275) highlights, the founders of the United States never intended an explicitly Christian country. However, one assesses the genesis of the United States, evangelicals like Verlon Fosner felt compelled to do something about our shifting sociological landscape by adopting an ecclesial model centered around dinner tables. Leaders of the SDCM claim this model was a return to the original example and instruction given by Jesus at the Last Super described in the Gospel according to Luke (Fosner 2017a, 17).[7]

Instead of ignoring those described by Edward Donalson (2021, 49) as marginalized and disenfranchised, this model prioritizes overlooked members of society (Fosner 2017a, 49). As professor Randall Balmer (2006, x) laments, too many evangelicals have forgotten our call to care for the "least of these." If the SDCM provides a model worth replicating, reengaging these priorities harbors potential to reinvigorate any church. The direct beneficiaries of my work are Seattle dinner churches and their leadership. However, if the project has its intended effect, my findings should also prove helpful to any Protestant church leaders wrestling with the reasons people do, or do not, participate in the life of a local church and how they can better relate to culture without compromising doctrinal convictions. This project could serve as a catalyst for ecclesial self-assessment, reprioritization of emphases and resources, and perhaps even a call to ecclesial reform. Undoubtedly, my research will prove most useful to evangelicals and

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[7] See Luke, chapter 22.

other congregations that prioritize personal evangelism and discipleship, but this project

could ultimately benefit any church interested in ecclesiology, missiology, and

discipleship.

This project would be incomplete without mentioning the insidious mutation of

certain elements commandeering the evangelical movement. I am referring to Christian

nationalism (Wolfe 2022), right-wing evangelicalism (Hendricks 2021), white Christian

nationalism (Gorski and Perry 2022), or any other perversion of the original tenets of the

evangelical movement. Balmer (2006, ix) is correct when he claims the term *evangelical*

has been highjacked by these other submovements. Nearly forty years ago, historian

David Bebbington (1989) described the main characteristics of evangelicalism:

> There are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion:
> conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression
> of the gospel in effort; Biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may
> be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. (2)

Sadly, these foundational pillars are often deprioritized, or absent altogether, in the

perversions listed above.

Professor Obrey Hendricks is correct when he claims the use of *evangelical* no

longer conveys its original meaning (Hendricks 2021, 160). Hendricks goes even further

by decrying US Christianity a "travesty" in the light of right-wing evangelical influence

(Hendricks 2021, xi). I do not disagree with his assessment as long as we separate

nationalistic and power-seeking right-wing evangelicals from the rest of conservative

evangelicalism. As Katherine Stewart denotes, religious nationalism in the United States

includes some, but not all, evangelicals (Stewart 2022, 5). Similarly, white Christian

nationalism is not synonymous with evangelicalism (Gorski and Perry 2022, 9). Professor

Kristin Kobes Du Mez rightly ascertains the dominance of pop culture definition(s) over

historical and theological explanations of evangelicalism (Kobes Du Mez 2021). As a white, male, evangelical, delineating these factions—and distancing myself from them—is essential to the integrity and clarity of this project. As Gorski and Perry (2022, 10) admit, there is a significant group of white evangelicals trying to resist these other expressions of evangelicalism, and I am one of them.

Research Question(s)

Felice Billups (2021, 16) illuminates the connection between research inquiry and design when she describes research purposes as begetting research questions, which then direct project design and the selection of data collection tools. Accordingly, great care was employed while composing the following research question: Why do nonfounding participants stay regularly involved with Seattle dinner churches? The following general inquiries helped guide specific survey and interview questions:

- How do people hear about dinner churches in Seattle neighborhoods?
- Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?
- Why do nonfounding members regularly participate in the SDCM?
- What makes people feel comfortable/uncomfortable at dinner church gatherings?
- What role does free food play in participatory motives of dinner church attendees?
- Do nonfounding participants and SDCM leadership report similar perspectives on the participatory motives of nonfounding participants?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Started in 2007, the dinner church movement in Seattle is relatively young. Accordingly, the amount of extant research material on the SDCM is extremely limited. Verlon Fosner, founder of the movement, has published training materials and two seminal books about the SDCM: *Welcome to Dinner Church* and *Dinner Church: Building Bridges and Breaking Bread*. Additionally, authors such as Christopher James

(2018, 129), Mike Graves (2017, 121), and Kendall Vanderslice (2019, 106) have mentioned the SDCM in their published works. However, very little research has been conducted on the Seattle movement proper.

   After providing historical overviews of pertinent cultural and ecclesial milestones, with the help of Phyllis Tickle (2012) and Thomas Rainer (1993), this project builds upon the work of Patricia Killen and Mark Silk (2004), which focuses on the Pacific Northwest and the Seattle-specific research of Christopher James (2018). The work of James, who studied more than one hundred church plants in Seattle, will provide additional framework for positioning and referencing the SDCM in its context. The classic work of H. Richard Niebuhr (1951, 190), *Christ and Culture,* also facilitates an understanding of missional ethics in terms of cultural engagement. Neibuhr's typology of Christ transforming culture, as opposed to Christ above or against culture, is a helpful lens for understanding missional motives and priorities of the SDCM.

   This research project also leans upon the work of theologians, researchers, and practitioners who have studied the evangelical movement and have documented the shift(s) in evangelical theology and practices over the last few decades from which the dinner church movement emerged. For example, theologian and professor Paul Louis Metzger (2007, 179) propounds a theology of cultural engagement that critically appraises evangelicalism often defaulting toward cultural retreat. Authors who have written about dinner church movements in other geographical locations also aided in the shaping and development of context for this research. The work of Emily Scott (2020) chronicles one of the first dinner churches in the United States and proved helpful for understanding the larger dinner church movement. Contributions from George Barna,

Thomas Rainer, and other researchers also provided invaluable insights into recent sociological and religious trends across the American landscape.

As mentioned earlier, scant efforts have been made to study the dinner church movement, but even less research has been conducted on the SDCM. Specifically, no studies have attempted to capture the views and perspectives of the participants within the SDCM. My project highlights the history, identity, and overall assertions of the movement, but it predominantly highlights and emphasizes the experiences and perspectives of people who discovered a local dinner church and decided to regularly attend and participate in the Seattle movement. I believe my education and experience as a dinner church pastor outside the Seattle area uniquely situates and equips me to research the topic by providing enough distance to safeguard SDCM-specific objectivity while providing enough proximity to provide subject matter familiarity.

Background and Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research acknowledges and incorporates the background and social location of the researcher in the research project (Sensing 2011, 41). All researchers operate with lenses and perspectives shaped by their experiences and perceptions. Accordingly, I hope to provide the reader, and the project, with an awareness of the nuances and influences my background brought to the research process. In support of this aim, I will briefly share some of my history, education, and social location.

I was not raised in a Christian home, and I did not have a Christ-based salvific experience until my mid-twenties. My conversion was wrought out of desperation for truth and greater proximity to God. Stated another way, my presuppositions and worldview could not withstand the pressures and realities of life as I knew it, and I turned

to God in Jesus for answers, forgiveness, and life. When I finally surrendered and submitted my will to God, a radical transformation took place in my heart and soul. It is important to highlight my experience considering the evangelical claim(s) that all true conversions necessitate a spiritual birth that is immediate and not dependent on official church structures. This is often referred to as being *born again* (Elwell 2001, 1000).[8] The SDCM is evangelical at its core; therefore, considerations of conversion and soteriology are pertinent to my research.

My conversion to Christianity brought with it an insatiable hunger to understand and grow in faith. It was this hunger that propelled me to pursue my first graduate degree in theological studies at Liberty University. At the time, I harbored no ministerial or pastoral aspirations. Five years later, however, I felt the call of God toward pastoral ministry. To better prepare myself for future pastoral service, I completed a master's in divinity at Multnomah University. Both universities are conservative institutions founded upon evangelical principles and theology. In an attempt to provide balance to my education and better equip myself for pastoral ministry, I began a doctor of ministry program at a more theologically liberal institution— Jesuit-founded Seattle University.

My social location as a middle-class, middle-aged, white male undoubtedly influenced the conduct and analysis of this project, but qualitative research acknowledges and accounts for this influence. I have never been homeless, have rarely experienced racial discrimination, and have accessed above average levels of education throughout my adult life. Some may call this privilege. Others prefer the term blessing. But, either way, the fact remains that I have generally enjoyed the socioeconomic benefits of safety,

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[8] See the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel according to John.

provision, margin, choice, voice, and empowerment. At the same time, my theological convictions compel me to consider the wellbeing of all people, including those with less material and social wealth. Maybe this explains my aversion to Christian nationalism and other abhorrent manifestations of evangelicalism. Or perhaps my decade spent in the military serving among people from a myriad of ethnicities and sociological backgrounds inoculated me against white Christian nationalism and right-wing evangelicalism. One way or another, my perspectives have been shaped by my experiences, which inevitably influenced the conduct of my research. High degrees of specificity, clarity, and redundancy were all employed during this project to mitigate potentially unbalanced influence.

My personal history and conversion to Christianity produced an insatiable hunger to practice what I preach. Professors Steve Wilkins and Don Thorsen (2010, 19) highlight an evangelical aspiration to incorporate orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy simultaneously. Ideally, Christians should embrace what they purport to believe by living out those convictions with passion and holy motives. Even though I greatly appreciate my years as an evangelical Christian, I have long-harbored a simmering critique of the orthopraxy and orthopathy of the evangelical movement. So, when I finally learned about the dinner church movement through a pastor overseeing a local church in my community, I jumped at the opportunity to get involved. After identifying a core group of people to start a dinner church in our area, my leadership team and I underwent specific training geared toward dinner church ministry. We were fortunate to have Verlon Fosner, founder of the SDCM, as our instructor in an intimate setting of only a dozen people. His

instruction and mentoring inevitably affect the way I perceive and minister within the larger dinner church movement.

Limitations and Delimitations

Currently, there are five dinner churches under the direct leadership of Verlon and his team with an additional twelve Seattle dinner churches affiliated with the overall Seattle movement. Researching the entirety of a population that size was outside the scope of this project and, therefore, required specificity in sampling and delimitations. I was able to collect data from at least four of the five dinner churches within the SDCM proper. This was accomplished by surveying six nonfounding participants— three of whom agreed to follow up interviews— who have been regularly involved in their local context for more than two years. *Regularly involved* was defined as attending a dinner church gathering at least twice a month for a minimum of two years. I also interviewed four pastoral leaders inside the SDCM and conducted two focus groups with their leadership team. Delimitations of this nature may have excluded some people from the research, but interreacting with those from four of the five dinner churches and the entirety of their leadership group provided adequate data for the overall project.[9]

Careful selection of data collection instruments and consideration of researcher bias provided a sufficient quantity and quality of information for this project. Although the tools employed granted access to a sufficient pool of participants, excluding other instruments could have negated opportunities I might have otherwise captured. For example, I did not collect SDCM marketing artifacts, incorporate pastoral training materials, or access video recordings of Verlon speaking about the dinner church

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[9] Only four of eleven members of the current leadership team were founding members of the SDCM. Dr. Fosner is the only founding pastor, as the other three pastors joined the movements years later.

movement at national conferences.[10] However, employing the use of interviews and focus groups procured sufficient data for comparison and confirmation of information collected from surveys and observations. My background, training, and current role within the larger dinner church movement may have influenced my processing and assessment of the data, but careful construction of research questions and survey materials should have sufficiently negated this limitation.

History and Context

Cultures and societies change. According to Phyllis Tickle (2012, 17) western history follows a roughly 500-year pattern of ubiquitous upheaval and massive transition. While this semimillennial cycle unfolds in all areas of culture—including politics, science, and economics—I will highlight the religious aspects of the cycle for the purposes of this project. In so doing, it may be helpful to start our calendar with the cataclysmic and paradigmatic shifting life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Bennett 2023, 186). Approximately 500 years later, the Roman empire fell. The Great Schism of Christianity occurred in 1054, and Martin Luther then helped usher in the Protestant Reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century. More recently, the attacks on the World Trade Centers may serve as the benchmark by which we identify the latest cultural transition and subsequent upheaval in religious practices (Tickle 2012, 21). Either way, the 500-year cycle is bearing down upon the Western world and the Bebbington-defined evangelical movement will not survive the transition with its missional priority intact without embracing ecclesial transformation and adaptation.

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[10] Dr. Fosner speaks regularly about the dinner church movement in cities across America. In these endeavors, he partners with the Fresh Expressions network (https://freshexpressions.com).

Mark Noll (2002), a historian of the evangelical movement, highlights the same four basic tenets of evangelicalism identified by David Bebbington: conversion, crucicentrism, biblicism, and evangelism. Stated another way, evangelicals believe in personal conversion, salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the inspired revelation of the Bible, and a missiological call to share the faith. For the purposes of this project, the term *evangelical* refers to this transdenominational movement united by core convictions and shared doctrines that elevate Biblical inerrancy and sufficiency, personal conversion and relationship with Christ, missiological evangelism (Elwell 2001, 405), and cultural engagement in "an intellectually and socially credible manner."[11]

Religious nationalism manifesting as a power-hungry political movement (Stewart 2022, 3) is not the form of evangelicalism referred to in this project. Nor is the white evangelical "perversion of the faith" that serves as a degenerative force seeking to destroy those different from themselves (Delay 2019, 2). The right-wing evangelical quest for social dominance (Hendricks 2021, 2) should not be confused with the term *evangelical* employed throughout this project. While modern evangelicalism is at times associated with these far-right political views, attempts at collecting or consolidating societal power structures, or even white-nationalist agendas, these mutations do not align with the movement in its original and classic forms (Metzger, 2022).

Evangelicals have been well known for what they believe but have become increasingly recognized for what they do not believe (Hendricks 2021, 1). Instead of

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[11] For more information on the difference between evangelicalism, neo-evangelicalism, and fundamentalism, see Metzger (2022).

finding a way to share their convictions with society in an appealing manner, evangelicals

appear destined to repeat the mistakes of their fundamentalist counterparts from the early

twentieth century. The 1920's Scopes trial regarding evolutionary theory taught in

schools served as an early fissure between fundamentalists and the wider culture (Killen

and Silk 2004, 84). Although the fundamentalist movement may have won their day in

court, they arguably lost touch with culture through that victory (Metzger, 2022). As

George Marsden notes, fundamentalism lost its "nationally influential coalition" after the

Scopes trial concluded (Marsden 2022, 5).

Eventually, evangelicals began distancing themselves from fundamentalists due to

their overly dogmatic and sometimes harsh positions. Billy Graham, and others like him,

serve as a benchmark for the arrival of what many refer to as neo-evangelicalism (Killen

and Silk 2004, 85). Starting in the middle of the twentieth century, and up to the present

time, this period of evangelicalism is marked by a broader acceptance of ecumenical

cooperation coupled with a more open posture toward modern culture, advanced

education, and public involvement. This missiological priority often manifests in a

variety of forms including music style, informal liturgy, pastor-centric preaching, and

other attractional considerations. These well-meaning intentions certainly garnered some

success in building the evangelical church, but, at times, these gains fostered

individualism, division, homogeneous congregations, and an attitude of consumerism.

The evangelical movement is obviously not immune from making mistakes as it

periodically elevates different priorities at the cost of discipleship, service, and love for

humanity. The church growth movement is a classic example of good intentions

sometimes gone array. During the latter half of the twentieth century and beginning of the

twenty-first century, the church growth movement too often focused on numerical growth to the detriment of qualitative maturation of individuals and local congregations (Rainer 1993, 46). Even worse, this hyper-focus on quantitative growth promoted insidious forms of cheap grace and easy believe-ism (Bonhoeffer 1959, 43). Similarly, a propensity to overemphasize a one-time decision for Christ diluted the integrity and efficacy of the evangelical movement. Whether intentional or unintentional, trying to convince someone that he or she has been made right with God by simply walking an aisle, raising a hand, or praying a prayer can be dangerous and misleading according to the professed tenets of evangelicalism.

Thomas Rainer (1993, 21) defines the church growth movement as the resources, institutions, and people dedicated to expounding the concepts and practices of church growth based on the 1955 foundational work of Donald McGavran. McGavran was a missionary to India in the early 1900's who, upon his return to the United States, began a career of promoting tactics, techniques, and building institutions devoted to the idea of church growth. While it may not be possible or fruitful to discern the original motivations of McGavran and other proponents of the church growth movement, the fact remains that these efforts had some unintended consequences for evangelicalism. For example, Rainer (1993, 46) highlights an overemphasis on numerical growth, buildings, programs, and other commodifiable religious *products*. Similarly, Peter Wagner (1988) bemoans an overreliance on techniques, programs, event production, and passive participation. The culture(s) of postmodernism are less and less interested in religious commodities; rather, there is a growing longing for community, meaning, and purpose. Pastor and church planter Tim Chester said it well when he cautioned, "We cannot rely on business as

usual. It cannot mean more of the same. It must involve qualitative change rather than simply quantitative change" (Chester and Timmis 2012, 27).

If evangelicals offer modern culture orthodoxy without orthopraxy, the movement may have little positive impact on society. For example, modern evangelicals often unwittingly create homogenous subcultures, and Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000, 170) note how this tendency worsens racial division even when evangelicals try to improve racial disparities. Similarly, Tad Delay (2019, 5) may be correct in his assessment of a disproportionately high level of political influence by white evangelicals, but political influence by itself does not denote healthy orthopraxy. According to longtime researcher George Barna (2005, 42), postmodernists are increasingly hungry for genuine relationships, personal authenticity, and true meaning. Unchecked, however, these societal proclivities often give birth to an inflated sense of tolerance, hyper individualism, and unbridled self-expression. So, as the number of unchurched people in the United States continues to rise, Christians have an opportunity to present a holy and holistic alternative to the potentially secular trajectory of the country. As Barna (2005, 48) suggests, "The more you can anticipate some of the transitions resulting from these trends, the greater will be your ability to help shape the world in ways that are likely to honor God and advance your spiritual maturity."

Few places in United States are experiencing these trends and transitions faster than the Pacific Northwest with Seattle at its epicenter. Editors of a *Religion by Region* series, Patricia Killen and Mark Silk (2004) help detail the unique history and religious composition of the Pacific Northwest. Their work depicts a majority of Pacific Northwest residents as unchurched or as having no religious affiliation (Killen and Silk 2004, 9).

Even more, they chronicle this lack of affiliation as longstanding throughout the history of this region. While this may sound bleak to some Christians and evangelicals, Killen and Silk (2004, 10) paint a picture of a perpetual frontiersman attitude, trailblazing entrepreneurialism, and rugged individualism that makes space for individual beliefs and practices. Stated another way, the Pacific Northwest region may consist predominately of a religiously unaffiliated population, but there simultaneously exists a high tolerance for spiritualism and genuine expressions of faith. Seattle native and pastor Christopher James (2018, 2) is one who recognizes the rapid decline of the church is this region, but he also views the first two decades of the twenty-first century as, "a vibrant season of ecclesial renewal and rebirth."

In his book, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil,* Christopher James (2018) details four societal trends extant in Seattle that he believes serve as an example of what to expect across the country as the twenth-first century unfolds. James (2018, 13) recognizes the fact that urbanization, a culture of technology, progressive social values, and post-Christian views already exist on a national level, but he positions Seattle at the head of this tsunami of change. Ten years ago, James studied more than one hundred Seattle church plants that started between the years of 2001 and 2014. During his research of a population where more than one-third claim no religious affiliation, James (2018, 1) discovered four dynamic models of church that will prove valuable for understanding the cultural soil in which the SDCM started and continues to grow. James (2018, 125) labeled these four models as the Great Commission team, household of the spirit, new community, and neighborhood incarnation. The neighborhood incarnation

model includes the SDCM[12] and undoubtedly helped create fertile soil for its original genesis.

In 2004, Seattle-based Westminster Community Church leaders realized their church was declining at a rate of 14 percent per year (Fosner 2017b, 3). The leaders knew they would not survive as a traditional Sunday community church.[13] After accepting this reality and appreciating the facts that they were not well known in their own neighborhood and their past proclivity of catering primarily to people who already knew Jesus, they decided to put everything on the proverbial chopping block and try something new. After much prayer, Bible study, trial and error, and grief, the Westminster leaders stumbled upon apostolic-age agape feasts (Fosner 2017a, 15). Fosner and his team decided to return to the first century practice of meeting and worshipping around dinner tables while sharing a full meal. Surprisingly, they were not the only people in the United States experiencing a similar Copernican revolution inside the church.

Professor Mike Graves (2017) studies the dinner church movement and chronicles its background in his book, *Table Talk*. Graves believes the dinner church movement is here to stay and notes the curious phenomenon of separate dinner churches starting in all four corners of the United States at relatively the same time that Westminster Community Church made their transition to the dinner church model (Graves, 2022). Pastor Emily

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[12]Christopher James describes the neighborhood incarnation model as "a strong place-based identity, a commitment to contribute to their neighborhoods and make a socially embodied witness, and a spirituality that is both mission centered and community centered." James uses the SDCM as an example of neighborhood incarnation in his book, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil.*

[13]Longstanding modalities of church services in North America typically meet on Sunday mornings in buildings easily recognizable as religious institutions. For the purposes of this project, *traditional church* simply refers to culturally familiar forms of Christian worship modalities. As defined by author.

Scott in New York, for example, is often credited with starting the first dinner church in the United States. Whether or not she is the mother of the movement is not pertinent to this project. What is important is the fact that Scott (2020, 27) became disillusioned by traditional church models and started a worship service centered around a meal. Born out of isolation and a feeling of being alone, Scott's church plant (St. Lydia's) was one of these dinner churches that started within a couple years of the SDCM and dinner churches in Florida and California. According to Graves (2022), there are now more than one thousand dinner churches in the United States, and the movement has spread internationally.

Definition of Terms

The following terms require definition for ubiquitous comprehension of the research.

Christian nationalism is "the belief that the United States is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such" (Kobes Du Mez 2021, 4). Christian nationalism is a political ideology that promotes a myth about the United States being founded as a Christian nation, supports governmental adherence to specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage, and promulgates a fear that the United States has strayed from Christian truths that once made the country great (Stewart 2022, 4).

Dinner churches, in contrast to traditional churches, center their gatherings around a meal typically hosted in a nonecclesial setting at a time other than Sunday mornings. These church services often include worship music, artistic expressions of the Gospel, and the sharing of a message about Jesus (Fosner 2017a).

Evangelicalism is a movement in modern Christianity that transcends denominational boundaries and emphasizes conformity to basic tenets of the faith, orthodoxy, and compassionate missionary outreach (Elwell 2001, 405). Evangelicalism also stresses Biblical inerrancy and sufficiency, personal conversion, and evangelism.[14]

Gospel is the Good News of Jesus (*euangelion*) and the proclamation of salvation (*kerygma*) through faith and trust in Jesus Christ. The notion of being *born again* is foundational to the evangelical understanding of salvation and paramount for personal conversion to Christianity (Bennett 2023, 187).

Lord's table primarily refers to the liturgical ordinance regularly observed across Christendom. While it appears in a variety of forms and names, this term generally encompasses the practice of remembering or reenacting the instructions of Jesus given at the Last Supper to remember his sacrificial death. Other names referring to the same practice include Eucharist, Communion, Lord's Supper, Mass, Sacrament and Oblation (D. Smith 2003, 4–6; Metzger 2007, 53).

Nonfounding members are people who join a pre-existing dinner church and are considered nonfounding members or participants. This project focuses on those who have not received special training or detailed explanation regarding the dinner church movement before deciding to participate in a local gathering.[15]

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[14]For more information on the difference between Christian and evangelical Christian, see blog post by Paul Metzger (2022).

[15]This is an arbitrary rubric devised by the author for the sake of reference. Specifically, this term denotes initial involvement after the original founding of the SDCM.

Religious right is "a movement of politically conservative evangelicals who, since the late 1970's, have sought to exert their influence in political, cultural, and legal matters" (Balmer 2006, xxvii).

Right-wing evangelicalism is a political movement loosely anchored in evangelical beliefs with an inextricable substratum of Christian nationalism (Hendricks 2021, 3).

Traditional church refers to longstanding modalities of church services in North America where congregants typically meet on Sunday mornings in buildings easily recognizable as religious institutions. For the purposes of this project, *traditional church* simply refers to culturally familiar forms of Christian worship modalities.[16]

Summary

Dinner church as an ecclesial modality is relatively young within evangelicalism, but it harbors great potential for reinvigorating the movement if nontraditional modalities are appreciated as biblically grounded and missionally effective. In this project, I took a first step toward investigating the connection(s) between ecclesiological modality and missiological impact by researching the participatory motives of nonfounding members within the SDCM. In many ways, Seattle serves as a forward-leaning representation of various socioreligious trends in the United States and, therefore, provides an ideal test population for discerning missiological adjustments that may prove helpful for the future health and vitality of Bebbington-defined evangelicalism.[17] This project can serve as a

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[16]This is an arbitrary term devised by the author for the sake of reference.

[17]David Bebbington (1989) defined evangelicalism as having four qualities that have been the special marks of evangelical religion: (a) conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; (b)

wakeup call against harmful factions birthed out of evangelicalism while research

findings simultaneously offer a partial remedy to qualitative and quantitative problems

currently plaguing originally intended form(s) of the evangelical movement. The results

of this project will be shared with SDCM leaders as a way of equipping them for future

ministry within their local contexts.

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activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; (c) Biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and (d) what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

It may be time for another reformation of Protestant ecclesiology in general and evangelical missiology in particular. In my estimation, there are [at least] three fundamental assaults laying siege to the foundations of Bebbington-defined evangelicalism (Bebbington, 1989). The first manifests in various forms of easy believe-ism; the second is a knowledge-based approach to Christianity; and the third is an insatiably consumeristic approach to the faith. The first often emphasizes personal salvation at the cost of progressive sanctification[18] and discipleship as well as neglecting collective service to humanity. The second tends to eviscerate a personal relationship with God and often promotes various forms of religious legalism and institutional hypocrisy. The third often reduces the supernatural into the mundane, sacred into ordinary, and members of humanity into projects to be fixed through commodification and consumption of religious goods and services in lieu of spiritual encounters with the divine.

Evangelicals are known for promoting tenants of personal salvation, service to humanity, and ecclesial structures that support these priorities. However, an overemphasis on knowledge, behavior, or consumable programs can dilute or pollute these structures and priorities. My project was designed with these considerations in mind as I researched the relationship between ecclesiology and missiology by investigating the participatory motives of members inside the Seattle Dinner Church Movement (SDCM).

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[18]Progressive sanctification is the ongoing process of consecration and transformation to God in Christ (Elwell 2001, 1051).

In other words, I studied the modality of ecclesiology in relation to the missiological effectiveness of SDCM through the perspective of nonfounding participants in terms of their participatory motives.

Theological Foundations and Pastoral Challenge

Leaders of the SDCM highlight ecclesiological modality as central to their missiology and to their efforts of sharing the message of salvation through Jesus Christ (Fosner 2017b, 3). They further present the dinner church model as a return to first-century forms and functions prescribed by Jesus[19] and given to his followers for the sake of ecclesial health and effective evangelism (Fosner 2017a, 23). If true, these assertions raise important issues of ecclesiology and missiology that demand attention from ministers and leaders throughout the collective church. As a pastor, I am passionate about these issues and, therefore, grapple with the ideas of missional adherence and ecclesial effectiveness. If Jesus told his followers what to do (i.e., missiology), and how to do it (i.e., ecclesiology), it would behoove us to connect these fundamentals to the reason he told us to do it (i.e., soteriology). Researching the motives of SDCM participants holds the potential to illuminate the relationship between these theological categories within the dinner church movement. While collecting self-reported motives of participants will not answer all these questions, these insights can provide data from which to draw helpful conclusions and build healthy foundations for additional research.

Gospel

Personal and eternal relationship with God through Christ is a fundamental pillar of evangelical Christianity. As such, providing opportunities for people to meet Jesus

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[19]For example, the SDCM specifically references the Last Super in Luke 22 as justification for their ecclesial modality.

with the least number of obstacles possible is a guiding and underlying motive of the SDCM. Evangelical views on salvation direct missional convictions which then drive our understanding of the church. While I appreciate at least some tenets from differing views on salvation,[20] I agree with evangelical convictions that resist any system of theology that deviates from an emphasis on relationship with God through the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ.[21] At the same time, I would like to avoid the type of puritanism that threatens social and racial equality as described by Edward Donalson III (2021, 9). This overly moralistic approach promotes legalism and inevitably ends in hypocrisy.

Ultimately, evangelicalism would not accept the assertions often espoused by proponents of the prosperity gospel, social gospel or certain forms of liberation gospel when they elevate secondary issues above personal and collective relationship with God through Jesus. James Cone (2018, 66), the father of black liberation theology, posits a nonhamartiological interpretation of liberation as the heart of Christian theology. Although evangelicals would share his convictions regarding the familial connection between all humanity, many of his Gospel emphases would prove untenable by evangelicalism (Cone 2018, 143). Theological views that promote anything or anyone above personal, eternal, redemptive, and familial relationship with God through Christ are seen as incomplete at best and antithetical to the message of Jesus at worst.

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[20] I concur that the Gospel includes elements of liberation, justice, and social welfare; however, these are penultimate benefits are secondary to spiritual salvation and restored relationship with God through Christ.

[21] See 1 Peter 3:18 and 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Evangelicals insist on viewing the entire Bible as a collection of stories comprised under one larger story. Namely, the Bible is about the one and only God choosing to show divine glory to a people [Israel and the Church] in order that this glory might be shown to the rest of the world through those people. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news because it brings us into right relationship with creation and the creator of all things. Stated another way, the Bible details the account of creation, the fall of humanity [sin], the rescue, and the ultimate plan of reconciliation with God. This process can be referred to as the progressive, redemptive work of God in human history. The Bible breathes good news because it tells humanity that we can have a personal, eternal, ultrasatisfying relationship with the creator of the universe through transformative faith in the death, burial, resurrection, and supremacy of Jesus Christ.

Soteriological concerns[22] are forefront in the minds of evangelicals and SDCM leaders. This is especially true when addressing methods for introducing someone to God through Christ. SDCM leaders adopt a less pressured and more patient approach while many evangelicals pressure non-Christians toward a decision point. Despite some church growth efforts that unintentionally reduce faith to single moments of decision, true salvation requires more than simply believing a list of facts. Truth is a necessary requirement, but one must appreciate, embrace, and submit to that truth. Specifically, a person must hear the truth, be convicted by the truth, embrace the God behind the truth, and gladly submit to and follow the Savior of that truth.

The following list is a summative overview of evangelical views regarding soteriological convictions. It is worth highlighting the relational-centric themes,

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[22] For example, evangelicals emphasize personal and unmediated access to God through Christ. Salvation does not require a formal church institution or professional clergy.

especially considering the convergence of SDCM theological and missiological

convictions around an ecclesial dinner table.

- There is one, eternal, holy, perfect God.
- God always exists as three persons in one being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- God created the universe, the earth, humanity, and everything else in existence.
- The first people on earth sinned thereby fracturing the relationship between created and creator.
- All people have sinned against God.
- The penalty for sinning against God is physical and spiritual death.
- God sent the son, Jesus Christ, to pay for the sins of the world.
- Jesus Christ was born of a virgin woman.
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life in perfect submission to the will of the Father.
- Jesus Christ was crucified as a spotless sacrifice for the sins of the world.
- Jesus Christ died and was and buried.
- Jesus Christ rose to life victoriously three days later, conquering sin, Satan, and death.
- Jesus Christ soon thereafter ascended into heaven where He is alive, ruling, and reigning.
- Jesus Christ will again return to the earth to judge the living and the dead.
- Jesus Christ is the one and only way to heaven, salvation, and relationship with God.
- Those who love and serve Jesus Christ will live forever in relationship with Him.
- Those who refuse God will suffer eternally in hell.

Many Christians realize that the gospel is great for those who have never heard

about Jesus, but, once converted, the Good News can end up relegated to Sunday

mornings and evangelistic outreaches. This tragedy of self-defeating neglect is one of the

trends that might prove positively affected by a change in ecclesial modality. The gospel

is as essential to spiritual maturation in the life of a Christian as it was to his or her

original salvation.[23] Christians immediately hamstring themselves whenever they believe

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[23] See appendix A for an example of practical application of the Gospel.

in the work of Christ for redemption but then transition to some form of self-sanctification after the fact. According to leaders of the SDCM, regularly sharing meals with sinners and saints keeps the Good News of Jesus in the forefront of their evangelistic efforts. Sadly, there is a tendency in evangelicalism to focus primarily on what we must *do* after acknowledging what Jesus has *done*. In reality, people grow the most while digging deeper into what Christ has already done and the implications of his sacrificial ministry. This concept may provide the simplest definition of Christian discipleship—growing in the Good News of Jesus.

Discipleship

Discipleship is the process by which people grow closer to God. The Bible clearly states that all people are born spiritually dead and that a redemptive encounter with God through Christ brings about new life.[24] Jesus told his followers that he came to give abundant life,[25] and the apostle Paul repeatedly challenged his listeners to live out their lives as new creations with new minds.[26] Furthermore, Christians are encouraged to live lives empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit[27] for the glory of God,[28] the good of other people[29], and for their own joy all the while.[30] Discipleship is the journey of helping non-Christians meet Jesus and the process by which Christians grow in Christ. Many

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[24] See Colossians 1:13–14, 2:13–14.

[25] See John 10:10.

[26] See Romans 12, Galatians 6, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3.

[27] See Romans 8, Galatians 5, Ephesians 4, and James 4.

[28] See 1 Corinthians 10:13 and Colossians 3:17.

[29] See Matthew 5:16, Acts 13:47, 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, and 1 Peter 2:9–10.

[30] See Psalm 16:11, Psalm 32:11, Psalm 63:3, Psalm 70:4, Philippians 3:1, 4:4, and 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

evangelical leaders agree with pastor and church-planter Jim Putnam (2010, 48) who passionately believes this type of learning is best caught not taught.

Evangelicalism does not suffer from a lack of discipleship knowledge nearly as much as it suffers from consistent and ubiquitous application thereof. As Putnam (2010, 27) highlights in his definition of disciples, these are people who follow Jesus at head, heart, and hand levels. In other words, disciples put into practice that which they love and understand. Evangelicals too often display strong orthodoxy coupled with weak orthopraxy. As Harper and Metzger (2009, 269) remind us, "The gospel of the kingdom, on the other hand, encourages us to journey with Jesus by becoming outwardly and downwardly mobile and reaching out to those who look, act, think, and smell differently from us." This *us* versus *them* is not the mentality of those who are worthy versus the undeserving as referenced by Gorski and Perry (2022, 5), rather it is a humble willingness to engage people outside our homogenous comfort zone.

The breakdown between faith and practice highlights why Putnam (2010, 47) and others bemoan any discipleship program that relies primarily on the Sunday lecture model to holistically change lives for Christ. Missiologist Alan Hirsch (2010, 23) concurs and insists discipleship is meant to be caught while living missionally alongside other Jesus followers. The ability to integrate mission, evangelism, and discipleship in an ecclesial modality explains why the SDCM exalts the dinner church model (Dodson 2012, 41). Instead of judging and fleeing from society as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2015, 149) warns against, SDCM congregations claim to make disciples while engaging neighborhoods through a shared meal and an evangelistic message (Fosner, 2017). In

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their esteeming of the dinner church modality, SDCM leaders are promoting more than an ecclesial model; they are promoting a sacrament.

Communion

SDCM leaders regard their dinner church gatherings as communion on a sacramental level (Fosner, 2022). Although most evangelicals harbor a collection of slightly varying views, SDCM leaders are not alone in their position. Deceased theologian John Yoder (2001, 16), for instance, understood the command of Jesus in Luke chapter 22 to "do this in remembrance of me" to be a full, shared, communal meal. Professor Craig Blomberg (2005, 165) believes these communion meals quickly devolved into an abbreviated version of the Lord's Supper more akin to the sacrament practices extant today. The work of Dr. Alan Streett (2013, 196) surveys a variety of interesting theories regarding these meals, but resists offering definitive evidence for or against their sacramental nature. And Dr. Peter Dehaan (2020, 63) suggests a shared meal can or cannot serve as sacramental communion depending on the underlying motives associated with any communal meal. Clarifying the question of communion was not a core aim of this research project, but the centrality of its role in the SDCM model necessitates a brief mention of various views and subsequent connections to ecclesial modality.

The altercation between my theological convictions and what I see as missteps by evangelicals compels me to speak up concerning the potentially unhealthy direction of the evangelical movement. If there is a need for reformation in ecclesial modality, then I want to trumpet these findings for the betterment of the dinner church movement, evangelicalism, and Christendom as a whole. As Hirsch and Ferguson (2011, 29, 33)

suggest, the evangelical paradigm steeped in institutionalism must go if we hope to reach

60 percent of the population that will not engage the traditional church. One way or the

other, I support a return to core convictions within the evangelical movement while

embracing new forms of church and new methods of discipleship that humbly engage and

serve culture without compromising fundamentals of the faith or falling prey to

Eurocentric systems of theology (Donalson 2021, 76). Ethno-traditionalist impulses, for

example, can promote theological systems devised by white people while ignoring input

from other ethnicities and cultures (Gorski and Perry 2022, 7). Bible-based theological

systems should include, not exclude, people from all ethnicities and cultures as equal and

holy image bearers of God. Overall, the goal has not changed (i.e., soteriology), the

means have not changed (i.e., ecclesiology), but the methods must continually adapt

without compromising existential facets of the faith (i.e., missiology). To that end,

through this research project, I seek to illuminate the position of the SDCM on that

spectrum.

Areas and Sources of Theological Influence

I am a Bebbington-defined evangelical Protestant researching an ecclesial

movement within a specific population of the evangelical church (Bebbington, 1989).

The overall dinner church movement exists inside and outside the evangelical church, but

the scope of my project was purposefully limited to the evangelical movement in general

and the SDCM in particular. This is a strategic decision meant to help ascertain relevant

insights into missiology and ecclesiology for application primarily inside the SDCM even

if the research produces beneficial material for application across the larger dinner church

movement, throughout evangelicalism, or across Protestant denominations. I am not only

a Protestant evangelical, but I am also Reformed in my soteriology. I embrace the priesthood of all believers,[31] and I believe every disciple of Christ has a part to play in the family and work of God.[32] Furthermore, I agree with Christopher Wright (2006) who posits God having a church for the mission of God not a mission for the church of God. Stated another way, I believe God is sovereign in the plan to save and restore people by using people inside the church to demonstrate divine love, character, and service to all of humanity. C. S. Lewis (2001, 199) said it well when he quipped, "The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time." God matures and grows followers of Jesus by including them in this plan. God lovingly designed the system to make Christians their best through active participation in the divine plan to reconcile all things to God in Christ.[33]

Roger Olson (2013) and Steve Frame (2015) authored lengthy surveys detailing the history and trends of theological progression over the last two centuries. The works of these theologian-professors were referenced throughout my project and should be credited for aiding my attempt to provide context and perspective to the reader. Similarly, the work of theologians like H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) and Paul Louis Metzger (2007) provided access to varying schools of thought regarding the mission of the church and its engagement with society. Other practicing missiologists within the evangelical movement, such as Alan Hirsch (2010) and Hugh Halter and Matt Smay (2008) in the

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[31] See 1 Peter 2:9.

[32] See 2 Corinthians 5:14–21.

[33] See Colossians 1:20.

house church movement, provided additional insights into parallel philosophies and methodologies for fulfilling the imperatives of Jesus. I also interacted with experts in evangelical ecclesiology as a way of assessing biblical support for the mediums and modalities embraced by the SDCM. Here, once again, the work of Paul Louis Metzger and Brad Harper (2009) proved helpful by providing an ecclesiological framework for the project, and the works of evangelical leaders and researchers such as Ed Stetzer and Tom Rainer (2010) provided numerical and statistical reference in support of my research.

Guiding Theological Methods

Many evangelicals are discipled in theological methods steeped in systematic approaches to understanding the Bible. Wayne Grudem (1994), Millard Erickson (1998) , and other theologians have authored seminal textbooks premised in very rational and linear systems of thinking. Systematic theology, as defined by Thomas Rainer (1993, 73), is "the organization of facts about God and his Word. The process of organization is usually by major biblical doctrines." Systematic theology is not necessarily a problem; rather, the tendency of evangelicals to focus on knowledge at the cost of relationship(s) could be a devastating trend within the movement. Though this method of theology has proved helpful in my personal development as a Christian, my convictions compel me toward methods of biblical theology. Rainer (1993, 73) states, "Biblical theology examines each book or group of books in the Bible within their historical context to discern doctrines and God's progressive revelation from Genesis to Revelation." I am passionate about letting the Bible speak for itself, and I believe the Bible contains unwavering and eternal truths perennially pertinent to all cultures with careful and faithful application in a variety of contexts.

In terms of hermeneutics, I also deviate slightly from the evangelical norm due to my preference for canonical-grammatical exegesis over the historical-grammatical approach so often used and taught in evangelicalism. I am convinced the Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible and provides sufficient historical context for modern hermeneutics and exegesis. Once again, gaining an understanding of ancient culture(s) and history from extra-canonical sources is not necessarily insidious; however, relying on texts found outside the Bible is an unhealthy hermeneutical underpinning in my opinion and experience. Professor and pastor Raymond Lubeck (2005) offers an illuminating perspective and detailed explanation of the canonical-grammatical method in which he champions authorial intent as the fundamental guiding rod for understanding and applying the text. In his work, Lubeck highlights the importance of genre appreciation, identification of literary features,[34] and cross-referencing biblical texts for historical context.[35] I concur and embrace this standard, and this hermeneutical paradigm provided the foundation upon which this research project was conceived, conducted, and concluded.

Lastly, I am a practical theologian[36] committed to applying what I believe and teach from the Bible. Like Metzger (2007, 179), I embrace a "theology of cultural engagement" (Metzger 2007, 179) where the good news of Jesus compels us to live sacrificially as servants of humanity. Fosner (2017a, 73) claims the church in the United

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[34] For example, identifying chiasms in poetry in support of hermeneutical clarity.

[35] Dr. Ray Lubeck, BIB509 Biblical Interpretation, Portland, September, 2015.

[36] Christopher James defines practical theology as the "use of theological methods that include theological description, interpretation, evaluation, and proposals that arise from and are addressed to concrete contemporary situations and practices relevant to the church" (James 2018, 7).

States has lost this type of sacrificial theology, and this is perhaps due in part to a diminishing appreciation for practical theology. Christopher James (2018, 7) says, "Practical theology proceeds by use of theological methods that include theological description, interpretation, evaluation, and proposals that arise from and are addressed to concrete contemporary situations and practices relevant to the church." My passion for practically applying the good news of Jesus to all areas of life fuels my theology of cultural engagement and quest to share the most effective methods of ecclesial engagement in the twenty-first century.

Growth in Researcher Theology

My theology underwent a redistribution of emphasis during this project. I am familiar with the evangelical tendency toward an overemphasis on information because I sometimes fall prey to this exact misstep. Furthermore, I can prioritize projects and commodify people when I allow productivity and visible results to run rough shod over the often silent and invisible work of God in people. Working with individuals and churches in the SDCM reminded me that I have room to grow in terms of accepting different perspectives on ecclesiology and missiology. My soteriology did not change as a result of the research process, but my understanding of how we participate in the divine plan of human engagement did experience a softening. As one SDCM pastor (identified only as Pastor 02Q in this study) quipped about rigid and pressured presentations of the Gospel message, "I am so done with that!" I appreciate his patient posture and that of the other SDCM pastors regarding the spiritual curiosity and journey of others. The official view of the SDCM regarding communion, as well as their patient approach toward early

discipleship, are two examples of theological considerations that will continue to challenge my perception of missiology long after the completion of this project.

Finally, I must confess some ignorance regarding the prominence of evangelical participation in Christian nationalism and right-wing political movements. My deeply negative opinions of these movements did not change significantly, but my awareness of their prevalence increased dramatically. I do not believe I was blinded by ill-guided expectations of what God should be doing (Butcher 2017, 211), but I was somewhat shielded from the flagrant and reprehensible work of men like Stephen Wolfe (2022, 5, 24, 27) who unashamedly promote Christian nationalism, denounce immigration, and support pro-homogeneous policies in the name of Jesus. I lament deplorable manifestations and mutations of the evangelical movement like these, and their existence makes me question the continued usefulness of the term *evangelical*.

Theological Impact on Others

Interrogatives are some of our best teachers, and asking questions during my site surveys and interviews undoubtedly created catalysts for theological challenge inside the SDCM. Many of the fruits from these catalysts may manifest well after the research project, but theological unity surrounding the topic of communion surfaced as one potential area of growth for the leaders of SDCM. An absence of mutual clarity regarding this subject became obvious early in the research process. Conversations with SDCM leaders unearthed a previously unrecognized difference in perspectives regarding the theological nature of meals served during dinner church gatherings. Some said the meal was a sacramental expression of communion, though some leaders claimed it was not and others admitted never giving the topic enough reflection to develop a deep conviction on

the matter. It should be noted that a high level of unity was witnessed among the leadership, and the previous observation was only offered to highlight one potential area of theological growth instigated by the research project.

Summary

Personal salvation is a core conviction and a driving aspiration of evangelicalism. To that end, leaders of the SDCM purposefully adopted an ecclesial modality centered around the dinner table where all are welcome to sit at the supper table of Jesus. Even more, the movement promotes this type of church as *the* model Jesus gave his followers for the purposes of evangelism and ecclesiological health (Fosner, 2022). Accordingly, I investigated the connection between missiology and ecclesiology within an evangelical framework. Using an evangelical lens, I collected and codified motivational and experiential trends of SDCM participants to begin the process of assessing missional effectiveness and soteriological impact within this expression of the local dinner church. The movement credits the dinner table modality as a major factor to these ends, and, for that reason, I delved into these specific areas during the design and evaluation of research. It is against this backdrop that I investigated the participatory motives of nonfounding members of the SDCM.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

At its core, my research project aims to discern the reasons people choose to engage and regularly participate in the Seattle Dinner Church Movement (SDCM). More specifically, I generated a theory as to why nonfounding members choose to engage and participate in local dinner churches within the movement. My goal in this effort was to discover potential correlations between ecclesial modality and missional effectiveness. Grounded theory methodology, under the larger umbrella of qualitative research, enabled me to achieve the desired objectives of this project and build a foundation from which to conduct further research. Qualitative research situates a researcher in the field of study and uses a set of interpretive tools and practices that make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning people assign (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 3). As its name suggests, grounded theory grounds the theories it generates in the field data, interactions, and social processes of the people included in the research (Creswell and Poth 2018, 82). Through my overall project, and methodology in particular, I examined the experiences and motives of people—from their own perspectives—to generate an overall theory rooted in the data.

Purpose in Research

As a practical theologian who focuses on orthopraxy as well as orthodoxy, my underlying motivation for this project is direct application of relevant findings and conclusions. This includes the SDCM, the larger dinner church movement, and evangelicalism as a whole. As a pastoral practitioner, the conclusions birthed out of this research will also impact my own ministry and missiological clarity amid a rapidly

changing society. My proclivities for practical application often manifest in the form of prophetic exhortation, and my passion for congruence between belief and behavior surfaced throughout the research and conduct of this project.

I also believe medium and modality play a pivotal role in missiological effectiveness. So, if certain ecclesial forms increase missional impact while simultaneously fostering fertile soil for discipleship, I want the Church to know. Considering the decades-long trend of declining Protestant and evangelical populations in the United States (Lipka, 2015), the church would do well to consider the declining efficacy of traditional Sunday morning services that inevitably highlight pastors, preaching, buildings, and knowledge acquisition. Modern society and cultural transitions in modern America require a revolution in missiology, and the dinner church movement offers a compelling modality of ecclesiology that deserves our attention.

Despite evangelicalism now representing less than one-quarter of the US populace (Masci and Smith 2018), the SDCM is undeniably growing and expanding numerically both in terms of locations and participants. Founders and leaders of the movement attribute this numerical growth, and transformative growth on an individual level, to the missiological priorities and ecclesial modality of the dinner church movement (Fosner 2017). This research project was designed to begin the process of verifying these claims by capturing and articulating motivational trends of the participants from the perspectives of the participants.

After participatory motives are clarified and recorded, future research will be able to focus on soteriological transformation of participants and discipleship maturation of Christian disciples involved with the movement. My research goals were not meant as

antagonistic or confrontational toward the SDCM in any way. Contrarily, many of my

pastoral aspirations and assumptions align with the published opinions of leaders within

the movement. As a fellow dinner church pastor in a different location and context, I am

interested and passionate about researching and sharing these participatory motives to

better equip movement leaders with the knowledge and tools needed to best achieve their

ministerial objectives.

Research Methodology and Rationale

Qualitative research includes five main methods of inquiry including narrative,

phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell and Poth 2018,

67). Phenomenology and grounded theory were the only two methods potentially suited

for this project, and the desire to produce a theory regarding motivational trends

outweighed the benefits of "describing the essence of a lived phenomenon" offered by a

phenomenological approach (Creswell and Poth 2018, 67). Using grounded theory

methodology, my project employed surveys, interviews, and focus groups to assess the

participatory motives of people regularly involved in the SDCM. A set of survey

questions was constructed for nonfounding participants who joined a preexisting dinner

church. Focus groups were held with SDCM pastors and leaders to ascertain their

perspective on the participatory motives of nonfounding members. Interviews with

individuals from both populations were conducted for further analysis, comparison, and

triangulation.

The surveys and interviews solicited primary source data, and the focus group

was used to asked pastors and leaders to share their opinions and observations of

nonfounding members. Identifying congruence or divergence in opinion between these

groups was important for providing clear and actionable findings to the SDCM leaders at the end of the project and in terms of validating the content of their training and influence outside the SDCM.[37] Comparing these perspectives alongside written materials authored by the movement produced sufficient data from which to draw insight regarding participatory motives and convergence in viewpoints regarding the same.

Research Design and Rationale

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups served as the backbone of my data collection and research design. As Tim Sensing (2011, 79) suggests, theses and conclusions require the support of data collected from research tools and methods. To that end, John and David Creswell (2018, 147) describe survey-supported research as providing a "description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population, or tests for associations among variables of a population, by studying a sample of that population." Tim Sensing (2011, 115) further posits, "The purpose of a survey is to describe characteristics or understandings of a larger group of people." My desire to understand the attitudes, opinions, and participatory trends of the Seattle dinner church population guided my design process and explains why I chose this tool as the primary means for gathering the desired data.

Using surveys as a data collection tool had advantages and disadvantages. Surveys promote economy of design and enable rapid data collection (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 149). In the context of my research, using surveys also enabled me to engage a larger sample group than conducting one-on-one interviews or focus groups alone. Regarding disadvantages, surveys need to be self-explanatory as they negate the

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[37] Dr. Fosner speaks regularly about the dinner church movement in cities across America. In these endeavors, he partners with the Fresh Expressions network found at https://freshexpressions.com.

opportunity for clarification or secondary questions unless subsequent interviews are scheduled with the participants (Sensing 2011, 115). To help counteract these disadvantages, I employed the Ladder of Abstraction method of question development authored by S.I. Hayakawa in the late 1930s (Hayakawa and Hayakawa 1990). Following the methodology of Hayakawa helped ensure specificity and criteria reliability in my creation of surveys and the development of specific questions. Similarly, clarity and high interrogative specificity during the focus groups and interviews aided in the solicitation and capturing of relevant data.

Interviewing leaders and lay participants within the SDCM provided invaluable depth and clarity to the data collected during this project. As Michael Patton (1987, 278) posits, "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions." With this in mind, I conducted semistructed interviews that combined the benefits of structure and planning with the freedoms associated with a free-flowing interview that fosters deeper exploration into topics initiated by the interviewees (Sensing 2011, 107). This approach still required preplanned protocols and guidelines to ensure order, direction, and consistency throughout all interviews conducted during this project (Sensing 2011, 108). To that end, interview consent forms were collected from each person interviewed during my research project (Sensing 2011, 235).

In total, I distributed forty surveys, interviewed three nonfounding members and four pastoral leaders, facilitated two focus groups, and conducted one site visit. Artifacts, observations, and researcher notes collected during the project provided tertiary sources of data (Sensing 2011, 181). Documents and training materials from the SDCM also

provided an additional perspective on the underlying research question(s) (Sensing 2011, 124). All the tools and criteria were carefully considered and purposefully employed with the intention of collecting and verifying the data required for this project.

Sample and Setting

My first steps following institutional review board (IRB) approval included contacting Verlon Fosner to finalize site selection, recruitment strategy, and overall level of SDCM leadership participation. We discussed the age, demographic makeup, and current margin of specific dinner churches and their pastoral leaders. This provided pivotal information regarding the structure and organization of the movement, which then enabled me to hone the focus of my research. I was informed, for example, that the SDCM consists of five dinner churches operating under the name Community Dinners while simultaneously providing training and logistical support to an additional twelve dinner churches that are affiliated with the movement but not part of the Community Dinner network directly overseen by the SDCM pastors.

After I became familiar with the SDCM structure and organization, I concentrated the focus of my research on the five Community Dinner churches led by pastors on staff with SDCM. This decision was intended to promote validity in findings by researching dinner church congregations most proximate to the origin and intentions of SDCM founders and leaders. Interviewing participants from the other twelve dinner churches would certainly prove interesting and valuable during future research, but the scope of this project was intentionally limited to the five congregations under the direct tutelage of Dr. Fosner and his leadership team. According to one of the participant pastors (I identify as Pastor 61F), these five dinner churches range in size from twenty to 150 weekly

participants and meet in a variety of locations ranging from parking garages, public

parks, and residential community centers. As Dr. Fosner (2022) pointed out, most dinner

church participants are experiencing some form of isolation whether economic, relational,

spiritual, or social. Kendall Vanderslice (2019, 107) confirms this assertion by describing

90 percent of SDCM participants as unstable in terms of food and housing security.

Statistics like this support the emphasis of SDCM to target the "lower third of the

population" as articulated by Fosner (2017a, 49). In short, the SDCM is primarily focused

on the segments of society often overlooked by more established and traditional forms of

church.

Data Collection and Procedures

To access as many facets of the SDCM as possible, my site and sample selection

strategies included in-person focus groups conducted with movement leaders, a site visit

to one of the Community Dinner gatherings, online interviews with leaders and

participants, and written surveys disseminated to the five dinner church congregations.

The first step in my data collection phase began when Fosner and I scheduled a time for

me to attend a SDCM leadership meeting in Seattle. He graciously allotted more than two

hours to the conduct of back-to-back focus group discussions. The first hour was spent

with Fosner and two additional pastoral leaders. The second hour included the pastors,

SDCM board members, and administrative staff. Before we began each session, I

informed the group about the purpose of my research, the voluntary nature of their

participation, and the freedom to withdraw at any time (see appendix B). Approximately

ten questions were asked during these single purpose focus group sessions that served as

catalysts for deeper discussion regarding research topics (Billups 2021, 99). Krueger and

Casey (2015, 2) define a focus group as "a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment." As Felice Billups (2021, 96) notes, "Focus groups remain an ideal strategy for obtaining in-depth feedback regarding participants' attitudes, opinion, perceptions, motivations, and behaviors."

At the conclusion of the focus group sessions, I further explained the design of my research process and verbally solicited pastoral leaders who would be willing to engage in additional phases of the project. This included an option to be interviewed one-on-one and an opportunity to assist in the dissemination and collection of written surveys to their respective congregations. All three of the pastoral leaders agreed to be interviewed, and I secured permission to engage their five congregations[38] with surveys, interviews, and site visits. I eventually received surveys and conducted interviews with participants from at least three of the five dinner churches,[39] and conducted one site visit to a local Community Dinner.

After receiving a warm welcome and positive response to my research, I furnished each pastor with a pre-assembled packet of survey and interview materials. Each packet contained twenty written surveys, twenty self-addressed return envelopes, twenty research consent forms, and researcher contact information (see appendix C). Additionally, I gave instructions on how to protect the integrity and confidentiality of the survey and interview recruitment processes. I asked these leaders to first read the research

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[38] Two of the SDCM pastors currently lead two separate dinner churches.

[39] Some of the surveys were returned anonymously which prevented identification with a specific congregation.

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consent forms to their congregations and to stress the voluntary and confidential nature of participation in the project. They were advised to avoid coercion or undue influence toward participation in the research and to provide clear instructions on how people could return their surveys through the mail. Each written survey included a consent form to participate in an online interview, so every survey taker had an opportunity to sign and return the form if he or she wished to schedule an interview. Research consent forms also contained information regarding the confidentially and safe handling of personal information. Before departing on the evening of the focus group sessions, I made tentative plans to follow up with each pastoral leader to answer any questions and to schedule online interviews.

A designated note taker and I transcribed our written notes from the focus group sessions within one week of meeting with the SDCM leadership team. I made clarifying annotations from that evening in a field notebook and updated a communications log that I started after my first contact with Fosner during the proposal phase of my project. Telephone and email communications proved necessary to the construct and execution of this research, and I attempted to capture any potentially helpful data during these encounters. Field notes and observations were also collected when appropriate, but these tools comprised a small minority of the data.

During the subsequent six months, I conducted interviews with Dr. Fosner and all three SDCM pastoral leaders. I also received six completed surveys and interviewed three of these SDCM participants. I arranged and conducted interviews online through the

Zoom platform for use as an additional rubric of measuring and discerning true participant motives as opposed to aspirational motives.[40]

All interviews were conducted in compliance with instructions listed in the research consent forms. This included reiteration of the volunteer nature of participation with each interviewee, the right to stop the interview at any point, and the assurance of confidentiality unless written authorization was obtained denoting otherwise. Each interview session also began with an opportunity for questions to be asked of the researcher, as well as an expression of gratitude for participation in this phase of the research project. Each interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes, and no visible areas of concern or question of interviewee well-being were witnessed. A list of the interview questions can be found in appendix E.

Data Analysis

After the surveys, interviews, and focus group were completed, they were codified and analyzed in support of documenting findings and formulating conclusions. Organization and accessibility of the collected data was the first step in the coding process. This required transcribing and printing all interviews in their entirety. Most interviews were forty to sixty pages in length, but the online Zoom platform has an automated transcription feature that facilitated this step of the process. After all materials were collected in written form, they were organized and labeled in folders by type. This included interview transcripts, written surveys, focus group notes, field notes, communications log, and site visit observations. Once organized, each type of data was kept separate from the others for at least two rounds of coding. After that, each type of

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[40] Dr. Edward Donalson III, "STMD 6810 Doctoral Project Seminar" (lecture, Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle, January 12, 2021).

data received its own location in a code book before undergoing subsequent rounds of coding.

Coding comprised a large portion of the data analysis process as I attempted to collect and identify themes in support of findings and subsequent conclusions (Sensing 2011, 202). As Johnny Saldaña (2021, 5) summarizes, "A code in qualitative analysis is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." Developing codes aided in the consolidation of meaning and creation of categories, which then formed themes and eventually theories (Saldaña 2021, 13). Coding was an arduous but essential process that required strict attention to detail, disciplined organization, and multiple rounds of systematic categorization. My coding was done manually (as opposed to the use of electronic software), and a detailed code book proved instrumental throughout the process (Saldaña 2021, 41).

Recognizing the influence of researcher identity during the coding process led me to adopt an *in vivo* method during my first round of coding (Saldaña 2021, 10). Capturing exact language from each research participant was essential for maintaining the integrity of SDCM participatory motives. As Lincoln and Guba (1985, 347) posit, researchers use intuition to determine similarities in data during codification and categorization, but engaging in descriptive coding too early in my analysis might have provoked unintended loss of specificity. I eventually employed descriptive coding after each type of data was recorded and organized in a code book (Saldaña 2021, 11). At that point, I began categorizing the codes in terms of explicit data before trying to discover more "subtle and tacit" themes (Rossman 2003, 268). Inductive coding was used in a "learn as you go"

approach so the data could create its own plausible categories and themes (Saldaña 2021, 41). In the end, this process produced roughly forty codes, four categories and two themes (see appendix F). A surprising level of overlap and consistency in the overall data greatly reduced the potential complexity and difficulty of analysis.

Ethical Issues

All researchers have an ethical responsibility to safeguard project participants and their research findings. Pastors and clergy must be especially mindful of their role and influence when assuming the role of researcher. If Tim Sensing (2011, 31) is correct, ministerial leaders serve as catalysts of social-religious change in the lives of their congregations and research participants. This influence is a sacred trust that must be recognized, appreciated, and protected. All researchers should account for the potential impact of their research, but pastoral researchers must account for special ethical considerations such as their implied positions of power and authority in ecclesial settings.

Tim Sensing (2011, 33) summarizes four principles of ethical research that encapsulate most of the concerns associated with this project: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, (c) justice, and (d) respect for communities. Following his lead in these areas proved instrumental in addressing ethical considerations throughout my research. Adherence to interview consent and proper research protocols also helped mitigate these ethical considerations. A copy of my CITI training certificate can be found in appendix G.

Summary

Methodology matters, and I carefully selected my data collection methods in support of research goals, target audience, and a passion for practical theology. The

employment of grounded theory was intentional as I developed a theory explaining the motives and experiences of research participants. Similarly, surveys, interviews, and the focus groups provided breadth and depth during the data collection phase of my project. Strict adherence to proper research protocols alleviated ethical concerns and protected research participants during and after project completion. In summary, my methodology worked in tandem with my theology as I studied the participatory motives of nonfounding SDCM members to offer insights into the interconnectivity and congruence of ecclesiology and missiology.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Positive evangelical impact in the United States is declining and nontraditional modalities of church life harbor great promise for restoring beneficial influence. This project is not primarily concerned with political persuasion or other forms of cultural power; rather, the research was intended to address potential departures from biblical mandates to sacrificially serve society while making humble disciples of Jesus Christ. Leaders of the Seattle Dinner Church Movement (SDCM) believe a meal-centered approach to ecclesiology improves the efficacy of evangelism and discipleship simultaneously.[41] The leaders also believe a shared meal promotes inclusion, equality, and relationships, and the findings from this research support those claims.[42]

These claims deserve more substantiation than this project can provide, especially in light of the agape feasts recorded in the eleventh chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. As commentator Gordon Fee (2014, 592) highlights, these first century meals shared by Christians sometimes included the abuse of those less privileged. Nevertheless, all data sources included in this project lend evidentiary weight to the assertions made by the SDCM leaders regarding inclusion, equality, and relationships. I used surveys, focus groups, and interviews to ascertain the participatory motives of nonfounding members, and the data overwhelmingly supports the SDCM presuppositions in this regard. This chapter illuminates project findings drawn from the data before highlighting potential areas of additional research.

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[41] Pastor 02Q, focus group with author, Seattle, September 14, 2022.

[42] Pastors 61F, 02Q, focus group with author, Seattle, September 14, 2022.

Data and Results

In this research project, I collected data regarding participatory motives of nonfounding members of the SDCM from four primary sources. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and field observations provided a wealth of overlapping and confirming information from which clear findings were easily drawn. The results from each area were so similar, in fact, that, if it were not for the need to validate and triangulate the data, these same results could have been derived from studying any one of the primary sources in isolation. Stated another way, the level of harmony and agreement among data sources was persistent and obvious. In the following sections, I describe specific findings from each data collection tool.

Focus Groups

On September 14, 2022, a designated notetaker and I traveled to Seattle to meet with Dr. Verlon Fosner and his leadership team. We first met for ninety minutes with Dr. Fosner and two of three members of his initiative leader team[43] who serve as pastoral leaders within the movement. The second phase of the focus group lasted sixty minutes and included nine additional members of the SDCM leadership team—board members, advisors, and logistical coordinators. The overall group was comprised of three women and nine men, ten Caucasian and two non-Caucasian, and mostly middle-class individuals ranging in age from thirty-five to seventy years old. I assigned a descriptive code name to each participant and will use those code names in reporting interview and focus group results.

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[43] The initiative leader team can accurately be compared to an executive level leadership team.

We received a very warm and accommodating welcome, and participant comments seemed honest and genuine. Love for their ministry and calling was evident, and participants exuded a love for the people of Seattle. They exhibited no negativity toward traditional churches and displayed healthy camaraderie toward one another. All three of the pastoral leaders were white, educated, middle class, males between the ages of 35 and 60. The absent pastoral leader, who was subsequently interviewed, is a non-Caucasian, middle age, middle-class male. Questions ranging from opinions on participatory motives of nonfounding members to theological interpretations of the Lord's Table were used to guide the conversation,[44] and a sampling of key responses are listed below.

Intentionality and Focus

All three pastoral leaders agreed on the importance of intentional targeting and welcoming of the poor. Their use of the term *poor* includes economically impoverished as well as those who are relationally, socially, physically, or otherwise ill-advantaged. Dr. Fosner articulated an understanding of poverty that manifests in all kinds and levels of isolation. He further connected this perspective to their motivation behind the targeting of *sore* neighborhoods. In other words, the SDCM strategically locates their dinner churches in areas of Seattle with the greatest levels of poverty. Although findings from this project support healthy SDCM intentions, further research will confirm if this focus on the poor is primarily intended to include the poor, fix them, partner with them in community development as championed by John Perkins (1993, 120–122), or offer them liberation through cooperative and dialogical pedagogy as prescribed by Paulo Freire (2015, 48).

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[44] See appendix C for a full list of focus group questions.

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Sociographics and Demographics

The initiative leader team described an emphasis on sociographics over demographics. They commented on the importance of appreciating a wider interpretation of poverty as a means of embracing a more holistic view of those marginalized, disenfranchised, overlooked, or rejected by society. For example, people bankrupt of social support networks and second-life singles[45] represent a needy portion of the population often overlooked by traditional understanding of poverty. Nonetheless, these leaders agreed that more than 75 percent of SDCM participants are economically challenged in addition to these other categories of poverty.

Relationships

Hospitality, fellowship, and relationships are central and vital to the success of dinner churches, according to the leadership team. Giving and sharing is key as it expresses and fosters equality around the dinner table. One respondent suggested dinner church provides connection, family, and a place to be known and valued as a human being. Similarly, these relationships are mutually transparent as existing members share their stories and their lives during dinner conversations. Over 70 percent of participants attend two or more gatherings per month, sharing a meal that often was described as a natural way to build relationships with built-in fellowship. As Pastor 61F commented, "We can get closer to each other in six months than a traditional church will in ten years." Feelings of acceptance and belonging garnered from these relationships were listed as the most important factors influencing long term participation of nonfounding members.

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[45] Second-life singles were explained as divorcees, widows, widowers, and other mid to late-life singles.

Ecclesiology

When asked about the efficacy and primacy of the dinner church modality, multiple leaders expressed strident opinions in support of the model. Pastor 61F called dinner church the most effective modality for proclaiming the Gospel, saying this model "works better, is cheaper, logistically easier, more accessible, streamlined, and practical." Stopping short of claiming dinner church as the only legitimate modality, Pastor 02Q suggested it is "more complete, and very difficult to see a more complete modality." Dr. Fosner offered additional perspective by highlighting social setting as an important consideration. For example, Fosner believes a traditional proclamation model can be effective for Judeo-Christian background populations, but dinner churches prove much more effective in secular settings. Fosner further posited dinner church as the model exampled and intended by Jesus for his followers to emulate.

Surveys

Forty surveys were distributed to four separate dinner church congregations through their local pastors. Six of these surveys were completed and returned. All respondents were males between the ages of 20 and 65, four were Caucasian, one was of mixed ethnicity, one did not list race or ethnicity, and three were homeless or living in government subsidized housing. All but one of the survey respondents have been involved with the SDCM for two or more years and participate in two or more dinner church gatherings per month.[46] The survey consisted of 26 questions related to participatory motives, preferences, and experiences (see appendix D). Notable answers to specific questions are noted in the following sections.

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[46] The remaining respondent has been involved with the SDCM since April, 2021.

Survey 1

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "I was new to the state and didn't know anyone." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "Friendly people, feeling like I belong, welcoming atmosphere, can talk or not, can stay or go." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Yes, made several friends." When asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church, he wrote, "Met impactful, caring people, felt like I belong."

Survey 2

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "I was invited by someone I already knew. I also liked the idea of food and getting together with people." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "Opportunity to share, comfortable, storytelling." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Yes." When asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church, he wrote, "Honesty."

Survey 3

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "I decided to check it out because I was hungry for dinner and it looked like a community event." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "Currently, the food; these meals often have more vegetables in them than any other meal that I eat throughout the week. I welcome

gathering together for extended fellowship where we have tables to sit and eat." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Yes." When asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church, he wrote, "No."

Survey 4

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "I wanted to get involved in a dinner church." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "Community, open and welcoming to new people." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Yes." When asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church, he wrote, "Acceptance of those who aren't there yet, love the sinner hate the sin."

Survey 5

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "I felt called." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "Invitational, especially to folks normally overlooked. Meals are leveling, connection, intimate. Humanizing. People are valued." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Acquaintances, it's hard for me to make friends." When asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church, he wrote, "Dinner church reshaped me and challenge what it means to be a Christian. Heart over head."

Survey 6

In response to the question "Why did you initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person said, "We are complex social animals that eat together." When asked "What do you like best about dinner church?" he responded, "People are heartfelt and happiest with good social networks. Modeling better behavior." In answer to the question "Have you become friends with anyone through dinner church?" this person stated, "Yes, Pastor and family is healthy." He offered no response when asked about exposure to meaningful or impactful experiences through dinner church.

Interviews

I interviewed six people between September and November of 2022. Three of these individuals were nonfounding participants who regularly attend dinner church gatherings and previously completed a survey. The other three were local dinner church pastors, most of whom were present during the focus groups conducted in September. Each interviewee signed a consent form (see appendix B) and agreed to a sixty- to ninety-minute interview conducted online via the Zoom platform. The three nonpastoral participants ranged in age from 23 to 30. All three were white men, and at least one of them lived in government subsidized housing. All three were very punctual, cordial, and articulate. Likewise, all three pastors appeared agreeable to the interview process and each displayed genuine transparency, thoughtfulness, and a profound passion for their ministries. Two of the pastors were Caucasian, one was mixed ethnicity, and they ranged in age from 35 to 45. A sample of thematic material from each interview is listed below.

Layman Interview 1

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person mentioned the opportunity for fellowship, isolated people to meet, safety, familial feel, and the humanizing effect of shared meals. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he referred to a sense of belonging and ownership that people experience. He also mentioned the leveling effect food has on people in terms of equality and acceptance. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this person highlighted the homeless participants who often see each other during the week. Otherwise, he was unsure about the level of interaction among participants.

Layman Interview 2

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person mentioned a personal invitation and free food as common reasons. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he referred to a general sense of acceptance and freedom from judgment and mentioned the power of empathy and willingness to invite anyone to dinner. He also highlighted a high degree of involvement if people are allowed the time and space to develop relationships. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this person said he was unsure about the level of interaction among participants.

Layman Interview 3

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this person mentioned free food, fellowship, and the opportunity to

socialize. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he referred to a sense of inclusion where everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this person said it takes a while for people to get acquainted with one another, but eventually "you get to be sort of friends with them." He said he does not think a lot of participants see each other outside even though he has become friends with the pastor and volunteers.

Pastoral Interview 1

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this pastor unequivocally credited the food, but also stated, "The food like creates the context in the venue so I don't know how, it would be hard to get people to come hang out, like what would be the shared activity other than that." He repeatedly highlighted the food as an agent of hospitality that creates an invitational space for people from all walks of life to feel accepted. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he paraphrased a comment from Walter Brigham that claims God is going to show up when you care for the poor and marginalized. In other words, people experience the presence of God even if they are not interpreting their experiences through spiritual lenses. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this pastor said a lot of his participants see each other throughout the week because they often share the same challenges in life.[47]

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[47] This pastor ministers to a demographic with high percentages of homelessness, mental health issues, and discrimination.

Pastoral Interview 2

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this pastor said he did not have much to add to what he shared during the focus group. He did mention the centralized nature of their meeting location as a possible draw for first-time attenders. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he highlighted high degrees of acceptance and inclusion. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this pastor said probably not as much as other gatherings due to the location [busy section of Seattle] and demographics of his congregation [smaller homeless contingent that would naturally bump into each other during the week].

Pastoral Interview 3

In response to the question "Why do people initially decide to attend a dinner church gathering?" this pastor said it is a safe space, a place to be known, and a family feel with no strings attached. When asked "What do people like best about dinner church?" he mentioned a general feeling of being loved without pressure to go deep. Expectations are not placed on people, and, if they feel like going deeper [in conversations or spiritual matters], they are welcome to do so. He said the dinner church gatherings feel like home to a lot of people. In answer to the question "Do participants spend any time together outside of dinner church gatherings?" this pastor shared multiple anecdotal stories of dinner church participants helping one another throughout the week.

Field Observations

On October 18, 2022, I conducted a site survey to one of the SDCM local dinner gatherings in Seattle. The building was easy to find, clear signage pointed toward the

appropriate entrance, and the facility itself was warm and clean. Arriving fifteen minutes

prior to the designated start time of 5:00 p.m. on a Tuesday evening, I counted a total of

sixteen participants. By the time dinner was served shortly after 5:00, two dozen people

had gathered. Approximately 20 percent of those in attendance were apparently homeless

or verbally affirmed as much. Two participants were female, and two others appeared to

have physical or mental disabilities. Most people in attendance appeared to be Caucasian,

though at least three were mixed ethnicity or non-Caucasian. Before the meal started, the

pastor welcomed everyone and said a short prayer. The delicious and ample food was

served by kind and gregarious volunteers. People ate together around circular tables, and

conversations exuded a sense of friendliness and familiarity. At approximately 5:30 p.m.,

the pastor read a story about Jesus from the Gospels and shared a few related remarks. He

spoke for just under ten minutes before once again offering a prayer. There was no formal

ending to the gathering that evening. Instead, people lingered for an additional twenty to

thirty minutes either engaged in conversation, helping clean, or praying for each other.

What appeared to be a core group of individuals stood in a circle and prayed out loud

before most of them departed for the evening. I departed the gathering after thanking the

pastor and a few volunteers for graciously allowing me to visit their dinner church.

Analysis

Every analyzed source of data produced results that could be categorized into four

areas: (a) invitation, (b) acceptance, (c) equality, and (d) relationship(s). Codes taken

from the survey data generated these four categories. Likewise, codes harvested from the

interviews and focus groups produced the same. Sometimes, the codes were identical

across all sources, but, even when they were not, they were similar if not blatantly

synonymous (see appendix F). This phenomenon may be partly due to a high degree of specificity in research focus. Studying participatory motives of nonfounding members is very specific and this decision was highly intentional. However, even if specificity played a role in the extreme degree of harmony among findings, it cannot be the only explanation. Participants, for example, could have easily highlighted free food as a main motive for regular participation. Though food was mentioned as a reason for participation, it was most often mentioned in the context of providing a leveling catalyst that promotes equality and interaction around the dinner table. The specificity of research questions may be one reason for redundancy in the results, but a profound aspect of the human condition is a much more pertinent factor.

People need people, and it is extremely difficult to be a healthy individual outside the communal experience. This is not a trite or pithy insight; rather, it is the combination of two themes developed from the results of this study. Stated plainly, nonfounding members of the SDCM stay regularly involved because local dinner church gatherings foster an authentic sense of personal value through communal experiences of invitation, acceptance, and belonging. Individual dignity and value are intrinsically linked to communal experience. Vibrant and healthy humans are nourished by accepting and relational communities, and vice versa. As professor and church growth expert George Hunter (2009, 46) reminds us, people are emotional beings, and effective churches incorporate this factor into their missional efforts. The SDCM intentionally promotes ubiquitous inclusion and acceptance in hopes that people will be more open to receiving the love and acceptance of God after experiencing their dinner church gatherings. For the

SDCM, this is a prime example of orthodoxy promoting healthy orthopraxy and heartfelt orthopathy.

Considering the research conducted over the last few decades, I was not surprised by the promotion of inclusion, acceptance, equality, and relationship in the results of this study. Longtime evangelical researcher, Thomas Rainer (2001, 78), reported twenty years ago on the vital importance of relationships when trying to reach the unchurched. In that same research, Rainer (2001, 19) classifies relationships as one of the top factors for unchurched people deciding to visit an ecclesial gathering. Similarly, the on-going research of George Barna (2005, 42) highlights an increasing importance of authenticity and equality in relationships for younger generations in the United States. Perhaps this explains why founder and pastor of St. Lydia's Dinner Church in New York, Emily Scott (2020, 19, 36), had such a positive response to her efforts to heal "aloneness" by creating a "space to be known." Perhaps this is what Dr. Fosner (2017a, 21) means when he highlights the winsome nature of the dinner church model where the goal is to include all people as equals. If true, these assertions, and the findings of this research project, align well with the theological assumptions highlighted earlier and warrant revisiting for the sake of incorporating these results into our theological framework.

Jesus Christ defines eternal life in terms of relationship and repeatedly refers to the Church as a communal body.[48] In the Bible, independence from God and others routinely denotes a lack of health and sinful separation in lieu of community and holistic relationships. The Biblical metanarrative tells story after story bemoaning the willful separation of humanity from God contrasted with the beauty of penitent return with a

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[48] See John 17:3 and 1 Corinthians 12.

promise of permanent relationship with a gracious and loving, intrinsically communal God. One could say the Good News of Jesus is good due to its invitation, acceptance, equality, and promise of perfect relationship(s). Maybe these qualities are interwoven into the DNA of humanity, and perhaps this explains why the responses from our research participants listed these motives for staying regularly involved in an ecclesial modality centered on an inclusive, leveling, communal, and relationship-promoting meal. Is it possible that evangelicalism held the key to reversing its own decline all these years but failed to apply that knowledge effectively and consistently across the movement? The vibrant success of the SDCM coupled with the results of this research project harbor a plausible answer to such a difficult question.

Further Research

As previously stated, this project was structured with the intent of building a preliminary foundation in support of further research. This goal pertains to both the SDCM and the question of ecclesial modality throughout evangelicalism. Discerning the missional effectiveness of the dinner church model in Seattle, along with subsequent ecclesiological impacts, is too grand a pursuit for one research project. Clarifying and confirming participatory motives was a necessary step to ensure congruence with other non-SDCM specific research, but it represents one building block among many.

In addition to expanding this project to include the other twelve Seattle-based dinner churches trained and supported by the SDCM, inquiries into spiritual growth of nonconfessing Christians and discipleship among self-identifying Christians would prove instrumental for uncovering influential connections between modality and quantifiable

missional effectiveness. Studies in these areas would likely benefit from additional work using quantitative or mixed methods research designs.

Researchers interested in exploring other facets of the dinner church movement may consider aspects of geography, liturgy, or community impact. The Pacific Northwest has a unique socioreligious history that may or may not respond uniquely to the invitation, acceptance, equality, and relationship motifs illuminated by this research project. Perhaps other regions of the nation and different international cultures would harbor dissimilar or competing participatory motives related to the dinner church model. Investigating what was not said by participants in this project may also prove fruitful. The absence of easily recognizable sacraments and liturgy may create an informal setting which seems more inviting and inclusive to dinner church participants. Stated another way, what if participants are subconsciously attracted to ecclesial models without traditional liturgy, sacraments, and singing?

Service to society is another evangelical priority that warrants additional research. The scope of the current project did not include social engagement, but studying the influence of ecclesial modality on community impact in terms of justice, caring for the poor, and cooperation with non-faith-based organizations would prove justifiable and enlightening. Finally, research specifically focused on the presence [or absence] of diversity within the SDCM would help confirm or deny the existence of homogenous-driven growth.

Summary

The impact and influence of modality upon missiology and ecclesiology have remained curiously absent from evangelical conversations in the twenty-first century. For

too long, evangelicals in the United States have taken the Protestant Reformation, proclamation-driven model for granted. An overreliance on buildings, budgets, pulpits, pastors, and traditional worship services may be the undoing of Bebbington-defined evangelicalism in its modern form (Bebbington, 1989). Although the essence of the movement will live on, it may do so under a new name with less institutionalization, compartmentalization, isolation, and consumerism.

Dinner church may be an antidote to many of these ailments, and this project may serve as a catalyst to that end. This project began the process of verifying the missional veracity of the dinner church modality by collecting surveys, conducting interviews, and hosting focus groups. Each of these data collection tools, along with a site survey, produced similar findings highlighting themes of personal value experienced through communal expressions of inclusion, equality, and relationships. These findings serve as the framework upon which conclusions for this project were drawn.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this project complement socioreligious research from the past few

decades and support the missiological claims asserted by the Seattle Dinner Church

Movement (SDCM) in terms of ecclesial modality. Combined, these results warrant a call

for reformation of evangelical ecclesiology. Healthy expressions of evangelicalism are

not declining due to a lack of information or knowledge; rather, application and response

to that information are the proverbial Achilleas heel affecting movement decline.

Theology and missiology—or lack thereof—drive ecclesiology, or at least should do so.

Whether a church posits liberation, prosperity, salvation, or social justice as the ultimate

Gospel good, ministers and leaders in the Church are compelled to address why their

congregations gather and what they are trying to accomplish when they do.

If the Church gathers and works without a high degree of theologically driven

intentionality centered in Jesus, people inevitably drift toward comfort and familiarity

instead of missional and holy community (Metzger 2007, 179). Familiar and comfortable

may be good for a sabbath, but portions of evangelicalism have been too comfortable for

too long. Though steeped in biblical knowledge and an abundance of moral emphases,

these all-too comfortable churches and worship gatherings inside evangelicalism often

come at the cost of diversity, unity, mutual accountability, and community engagement. It

is my prayer that this project will rattle the foundations of evangelicalism enough to

engender genuine humility and honest assessment. In this chapter, I summarize overall

conclusions and highlights three issues addressed throughout this research project: (a)

ecclesial modality, (b) mutation(s) of the evangelical movement, and (c) the Lord's

Table.

Issues Addressed in This Study

Three separate issues are addressed in detail as part of the conclusion of this

study: (a) ecclesial modality, (b) mutations of the evangelical movement, and (c) intrinsic

value of communion.

Ecclesial Modality

Bebbington-defined evangelical tenets include biblical inerrancy, personal

conversion, and evangelism, but evangelicals are not investing requisite energy into all

these priorities (Beggington, 1989). It would be hard to argue that evangelicals fail to

promote and preach the Bible with consistent passion. Likewise, personal conversion

leading to individual and corporate relationship with God through Jesus are main stays of

the movement. However, one could easily argue that missional efforts have weakened in

the twenty-first century, and this research project would suggest that ecclesial modality is

part of the problem.

Gone are the days when most Americans attended a Christian church service on

Sunday mornings (Lipka, 2015). Gone are the days when unchurched citizens

customarily turn to traditional churches for answers to difficult life-questions (Fosner

2017, 102; G. Smith, 2021). Gone, too, are the days when the younger generations of

Americans settle for passive, relationally weak, information-driven religious services.[49]

Americans are generally starving for authenticity, purpose, genuine relationships, and

true meaning (Barna 2005, 42). If it is true that the Church of God supports the mission

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[49] Evangelical megachurches may be an exception to this trend.

of God, then the time has come for evangelicalism to free itself from building-dependent, pastor-centric, Sunday service-reliant fundamentals in favor of more invitational, participatory, and relationship-promoting modalities of ecclesiology.

Many of the flaws currently plaguing the evangelical movement could benefit greatly from a transition toward dinner church movement methods and modalities. Although this project does not suggest all traditional churches in the evangelical movement must adopt this change, it would behoove all churches in the movement to conduct an honest self-assessment of their self-professed priorities of mission, discipleship, and social benevolence. Some traditional Sunday-churches enjoy vibrant and healthy impacts in these areas. Sadly, there are many more that do not and should, thus, consider a change in model. Neither does this project suggest dinner church as the one and only modality of choice.

Other efforts, such as evangelical house churches and gospel communities (Chester and Timmis 2012), serve as shining examples of models that intrinsically promote evangelism, service to society, discipleship, equality, diversity, and community. Therein lies one key emanating from this project; sharing a meal in the name of Jesus is an invitation to experience God through natural bread, supernatural bread, and communal inclusion. This medium promotes the message of invitation, acceptance, equality, and relationship, whereas the traditional Sunday proclamation model too often falls prey to the commodification of religious services. Dinner church may not be *the* way, but the findings of this research project certainly suggest it is a very healthy and helpful way of *being* the church instead of *going* to church.

The findings of this project clearly denote the efficacy of the SDCM to create an ecclesial setting that fosters inclusion, equality, and relationship(s). However, the SDCM must identify and adopt safeguards against homogeneity, unintentional inequities, and the various forms of Christian nationalism. Additionally, the movement cannot rest on its laurels and would undoubtedly benefit from a reevaluation of its own theological unity, missional impact, and discipleship effectiveness. Although these suggestions are not rooted in the research findings directly related to participatory motives of nonfounding members, they do originate from data collected during the research project. These recommendations are not meant to suggest a deficiency or fault on behalf of the SDCM; rather, they are designed to support further health, growth, and missional impact.

Mutation of Evangelical Movement

Detrimental effects associated with the church growth movement pale in comparison to the dangerous and damaging ramifications of right-wing evangelicalism, Christian nationalism, and the movement identified as white evangelicalism. I do not agree with all the assertions of scholars such as Katherine Stewart, Obery Hendricks, Jr., Tad Delay, and Philip Gorski, but I cannot dismiss their critiques of modern evangelicalism outright. It is unwise to ignore their warnings when prominent evangelical leaders publicly endorse immoral politicians, when evangelicals are increasingly known for what they despise instead of what they love (Hendricks 2021, 1), and self-identified evangelical professors write books like *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Wolfe 2022).

If Tad Delay (2019, 5) is correct that evangelicalism is a theological imposter premised upon white supremacy, then I want nothing to do with the movement. If, on the

other hand, Obrey Hendricks, Jr. (2021, 164) is correct in his assertion that many evangelicals harbor sincerity in faith but ignorance in application, then I retain hope for the evangelical movement. Either way, I am afraid the useful lifespan of the term *evangelical* may have come to an end. Like Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry (2022, 107) surmise, that term no longer means what it once meant. I admire the optimism of evangelical professor Matthew Bennett (2023, 197) who posits hope for movement restoration through implementation of healthy missiology, but I am inclined to agree with evangelical pastor James Butcher (2017, 2) who says the only way forward is through repentance for evangelical blindness, hypocrisy, and potential pharisaical application of the Bible.

Communion Matters

An absence of common understanding and shared conviction(s) regarding the sacrament of communion was the most notable disconnect among SDCM leaders in terms of theological coherence. This is not to suggest that uniformity in conviction is required. However, some leaders admitted an absence of conviction altogether. Specifically, when asked whether the dinner church meal was communion in a sacramental sense, different leaders offered a variety of responses. Some (e.g., Pastor 02Q) adamantly affirmed the meal to be the Lord's table, but others (e.g., Pastor 74J) suggested it was obviously not. The point here is not to malign the leaders or the movement in any way, but when the founder of the SDCM adamantly believes the meal to be communion (Foster 2022) it would behoove their leadership team to address the question of what Jesus meant when he said "do this in remembrance of me."[50]

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[50] See Luke 22:19.

The larger dinner church and wider evangelical movement would also be well served by a reconsideration of their own beliefs on the subject. Although the goals of this project did not include providing an opinion on that topic, it must be stated that any church practicing or considering the dinner church modality should think and pray long and hard on this question. Understanding and incorporating these instructions from Jesus given at the Last Supper is more than a mere matter of liturgy; answering this question harbors the potential to unlock a long-overlooked reservoir of supernatural presence and power in evangelical gatherings.[51]

In addition to the importance and centrality of sacraments in evangelicalism, congregations considering the dinner church model should wrestle with their missional convictions regarding the purpose of church gatherings. Although many evangelical leaders believe the customary weekly gathering of the church is meant first and foremost for Christians to worship, fellowship, sit under biblical teaching, and experience the presence of God, Dr. Fosner (2017, 105) strongly believes church gatherings are meant to be missional and evangelistic meals geared toward the inclusion of non-Christians. The former creates gatherings for saints where sinners are welcome; the latter hosts gatherings designed for sinners where saints are welcome (Fosner 2017).

Evangelical professor Mathew Bennett agrees with Fosner by quoting a missiology expert, Leslie Newbigin (1988, 28), who emphatically states, "the Church does not exist for its members." Again, although definitive resolutions on this topic are outside the purview of this project, the interconnectivity and influence of the matter should not go unstated. In summation, modality matters, but motive(s) will fuel or starve

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[51] For more insight on the sacramental nature of communion, refer to chapters 3 and 7 of *Exploring Ecclesiology* by Brad Harper and Paul Metzger (2009).

any ecclesial modality adopted by followers of Jesus. This is true for the SDCM, the wider dinner church movement, evangelicalism, and all followers who gather in the name of Christ.

Summary

Evangelical ministers and leaders champion personal salvation as the essence of the Good News of Jesus (Bebbington 1989). This conviction fuels a passion for sharing the Gospel with nonfollowers of Jesus, but Christian leaders sometimes distill their efforts to the transference and acceptance of information. Similarly, we often equate discipleship with knowledge acquisition in lieu of holistic maturation as followers of Christ. Too many of us have somehow forgotten the exhortation to live considering what we believe with sacrificial service toward others to such a degree that our works speak as loudly as our words.[52] Evangelicals want to help people believe in Christ, teach disciples how to follow Christ, and encourage all Christians to serve like Christ. The dinner church movement offers compelling evidence that modality can influence these areas simultaneously. Even if ministers do not adopt the dinner church model in their local context, the lessons articulated in this study still apply.

Cultures and societies change (Tickle 2012, 12), and researchers have noted a seemingly ever-increasing rate of transformation (Barna 2005, 45). Gospel ministers are responsible for tracking cultural trends if they hope to retain missiological influence and serve as transformative agents in society without compromising their core convictions (Niebuhr 1951, 190). This is how to avoid the assimilation of harmful elements of culture that have crept into the Church. Consumerism, for example, and a preference for being

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[52] See the book of James for commentary on the relationship between faith and works.

served instead of serving others (Harper and Metzger 2009, 155) are unwelcome acids capable of disintegrating the foundations of our faith community.

Evangelical Christians must recalibrate their posture of *going to* church in favor of *being* the Church. It could be argued that evangelicals have raised a generation [or two] of passive attenders instead of active participants. It is relatively easy to sit unchallenged in the pews of a traditional church service year after year. By contrast, it is quite difficult to avoid active participation while sitting at a table full of hungry souls. As demonstrated by the SDCM, dinner church congregations have tangible reminders built into their ecclesial modality that help buffet these temptations. Leonard Sweet (2014, 19) recommends Christians *be* the Church by intentionally providing opportunities for inclusion, belonging, and sacramental love. Sweet (2014, 19) agrees with the SDCM that the best way to accomplish this is to "bring back the table!"

Evangelicals are struggling to embrace their own priorities of evangelism and discipleship amid our rapidly changing culture. Clinging to an outdated model of church may be part of the problem, and the dinner church modality harbors great promise for improvement on both fronts. Data and findings chronicled while researching the participatory motives of nonfounding members of the SDCM offer practical and promising evidence that ecclesial modality matters. The scope of this qualitative research project was limited and did not compare dinner church with other nontraditional models such as house churches and Gospel communities (Chester and Timmis 2012). Neither does the study offer conclusive evidence regarding the efficacy of discipleship or the level of community impact in relation to modality. However, the project provides a solid

foundation from which to conduct additional research focused on these and other related topics.

At the same time, the ubiquitous commonality of data collected from multiple sources in this project should give pause to evangelical leaders and engender reflection upon the impact of ecclesial modality on their own missional efforts. If a church finds itself lacking in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, or service to community, it may be time to consider a new expression of *being* the Church. Lest we revisit the pitfalls of the church growth movement [or worse], ministers should remember the goal is not to improve a church for the sake of numerical growth; rather, the goal is to bless and serve each other and the community as we are blessed by God.

The SDCM claims a meal-centered model best supports these aims, and the results of this project lend credibility to that assumption in terms of participatory motives. Stated succinctly, nonfounding members of the SDCM stay regularly involved because local dinner church gatherings foster an authentic sense of personal value through communal experiences of invitation, acceptance, and belonging. If coffee tables and political aspirations have indeed replaced the Lord's Table in evangelicalism,[53] it may be time to replace coffee tables with dinner tables.

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[53] See the introduction and conclusion of Paul Louis Metzger's (2007) book, *Consuming Jesus,* for his use of the coffee table metaphor.

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APPENDIX A

Gospel Application Process

Gospel Application Process

(1) Feel conviction or awareness of Holy Spirit prompting you.
(2) Give God thanks and praise for the conviction.
(3) Be 100% convinced that what you're convicted about is sin.
(4) Identify the desires that led to the sin (heart not just deed).
(7) Confess the deed and heart sin (desire) to God and others.
(5) Confess enjoying these desires and sins more than what God offers.
(6) Connect the sin to God's glory (how does the sin belittle God's glory).
(7) Spend more time repenting of the desires than for the deeds.
(8) Admit that you cannot fix or change on your own (and ask God for help).
(9) Ask God for help through the same power that raised Christ from the grave.
(10) Ask God specifically for new heart, desires, conviction, control, & sober mindedness.
(11) Preach the gospel to yourself.

> This sin(s) is part of what Christ died for—It's paid for!
> I have been given Christ's righteousness.
> I have been crucified and raised with Him to new life.
> The power of God and the Holy Spirit dwell in me.
> I am a new creation learning to be what I already am.
> God will not love me less for what I've done, nor any more for getting it "right."

(12) Thank God & Christ in prayer for the cross, the gospel, and for your new life.
(13) Rejoice in any and all victories.
(14) Come back to God and praise and thank Him for any victories.
(15) Share victories with those praying for you, in your community, and local church.

** Recite and pray with applicable verses at every step.
** Above all else, seek relationship and unity with Christ throughout the process.
** Combating sin is one benefit of applying the gospel. The idea is Relationship w/ God.

APPENDIX B

Research Consent Form

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE:	"Seattle Dinner Church Movement: Participatory Motives of nonfounding Members."
INVESTIGATOR:	Will Haag, Doctor of Ministry student in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University
ADVISOR:	Bishop Edward Donalson, III, DMin., Director of Doctor of Ministry and Assistant Clinical Professor; email address: donalso1@seattleu.edu, phone number: 206.296.6357
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate reasons nonfounding members participate in Seattle Dinner Churches.
SOURCE OF SUPPORT:	This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Seattle University.
RISKS:	There are no known risks associated with this study. However, the topics explored may prove difficult to discuss at times.
BENEFITS:	Participation in this research project will provide clarity and information to Dinner Church leaders so that they can better shepherd their congregations.
INCENTIVES:	You will receive no gifts/incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	Your name will not be recorded with the data. Any other identifying information collected will be provided under your own discretion and will be omitted from the report if requested at the time of the interview. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All research materials and consent forms will be stored on a personal computer

under appropriate security measures. Human subjects research regulations require that data be kept for a <u>minimum</u> of three (3) years. When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request, and will be made available upon request after the research is completed and submitted in June 2023. Requests to receive final research documents can be made to Will Haag via email at haagwill@seattleu.edu or over the phone at (509) 656-4531

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may call Will Haag, who is asking me to participate, at (509) 656-4531. If I have any concerns that my rights are being violated, I may contact Dr. Michael Spinetta, Chair of the Seattle University Institutional Review Board at (206) 296-2585.

_____

Participant's Signature   Date

_____

Researcher's Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Questions and Consent

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

Dinner Church Focus Group

INTRODUCTION:	Thank you for considering participation in this focus group! Your participation is completely optional, and your name and any identifying information will not be shared with anyone without your express permission. Handwritten notes will be taken, but no other recording device will be used during our time together.
	Your participation will demonstrate your consent, and you are free to stop participating at any time. For those of you who are willing to participate in either the written survey or online interview portions of this project, your name and contact information will be collected to facilitate further communication and coordination. Those phases of the research will have their own consent forms and protocols.
INVESTIGATOR:	My name is Will Haag, and I am a Doctor of Ministry candidate in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.
PURPOSE:	The purpose of my project is to discern the participatory motives of nonfounding members within your Dinner Church(es). In particular, this focus group session will ask questions regarding how people hear about Dinner Church and why they choose to stay and regularly participate (or not). Additional questions will cover related topics of ecclesial modality and theology.
SURVEY:	This focus group consists of roughly 10 questions to help guide our conversation today. This will require approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

Question # 1: Name of your Dinner Church?　　　　_____

Question # 2: How do you think most people first hear about Dinner Church?

Question # 3: Why did you think people initially decide to attend a Dinner Church gathering?

Question # 4: What are the key elements that keep people regularly involved in D.C.?

Question # 5:   Does your congregation interact with each other outside of regularly scheduled Dinner Church gatherings?

Question # 6:   Do you feel like people grow closer to God through Dinner Church? If yes, how?

Question # 7:   How have you seen peoples' lives changed through Dinner Church?

Question # 8:   Do you feel like people better know Jesus because of Dinner Church?

Question # 9:   How essential is the meal for introducing people to Jesus? Do you think people would participate in your Dinner Church if there was no meal served?

Question # 10:   Do you believe Dinner Church meals are synonymous with the Lord's Table (also known as Communion) as demonstrated and intended by Jesus in Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11? If yes, is this act of remembrance intended for believers and nonbelievers of Jesus?

Question # 11:   Is Dinner Church the "right" form of ecclesial modality, or one among multiple faithful modalities?

APPENDIX D

Dinner Church Survey

Dinner Church Survey

INTRODUCTION: Thank you again for taking the time to complete this survey! Your participation is optional, and your name and any identifying information will not be shared with anyone without your express permission.

INVESTIGATOR: My name is Will Haag, and I am a Doctor of Ministry candidate in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.

SURVEY: This survey contains 26 questions and should take about 20 minutes to complete.

Name of your Dinner Church(es)? _____
Age? _____
Gender? _____
Marital Status? _____
How many children (under 18) live with you?_____
Highest level of education completed? _____

Question # 1:   How did you first hear about Dinner Church?

Question # 2:   Why did you initially decide to attend a Dinner Church gathering?

Question # 3:   How many times did you participate in Dinner Church in the last 60 days?

Question # 4:   To the best of your knowledge, what month and year did you start participating in Dinner Church?

Question # 5:   What do you like best about Dinner Church?

Question # 6:   What do you like least about Dinner Church?

Question # 7:   What would you change about Dinner Church?

Question # 8:   Do you like the food at Dinner Church?
                Yes/ No/ Sometimes

Question # 9:   Would you participate in Dinner Church if no food was served?
Yes/ No/ Maybe

Question # 10:   Would you participate in Dinner Church if no music was played?
Yes/ No/ Maybe

Question # 11:   Would you participate in Dinner Church without a Bible message?
Yes/ No/ Maybe

Question # 12:   Have you attended a Christian church other than Dinner Church in the
last 6 months? If yes, how many times in the last 6 months?

Question # 13:   Are you comfortable attending Christian churches other than Dinner
Church?

Question # 14:   Do you find anything encouraging at Dinner Church gatherings?
If yes, who or what encourages you the most?

Question # 15:   Do you feel like you can be yourself at Dinner Church gatherings?
Yes/ No/ Sometimes

Question # 16:   Have you become friends with anyone through Dinner Church?

Question # 17:   Have you interacted with people from your Dinner Church other than
dinner gatherings in the last 90 days? If yes, how many times.

Question # 18:   Do you feel like you can rely on the people in your Dinner Church to
help you during difficult times? Yes /No /Maybe/ ?

Question # 19:   Do you feel like your relationship with God has improved through Dinner
Church?

Question # 20:   Do you feel like you better understand who Jesus is because of Dinner
Church?

Question # 21:   How often do you understand the Bible messages at Dinner Church?
Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Question # 22:   Have you learned or experienced anything through Dinner Church that
impacted you deeply or changed your life?

Question # 23:   Describe the best Dinner Church gathering you've ever attended?

Question # 24:   How many times have you read or studied the Bible outside Dinner
Church gatherings in the last 7 days?

Question # 25: How often do you pray outside of Dinner Church gatherings?
Less than once per week/ Weekly/ Daily/ Multiple times per day

Question # 26: Have you listened to any sermons outside of Dinner Church gatherings?
If yes, how many in the last 30 days?

Question: (optional) If you would be willing to participate in a follow up interview related to these topics, please provide your name and contact information below. Additionally, please sign and return the attached Interview Consent form along with this survey.

Thank You for taking the time to complete this survey! The information you provided will be very helpful and very much appreciated. Please make sure your efforts are included in this project by returning your survey in the self-addressed envelope provided free of charge.

_____   _____ _____
Name   Phone Number   Email

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

1. Why do you think other people come for the 1st time?

2. Why do you think other people stay?

3. How many people participate 2 or more times per month?

4. Describe a prepandemic, in-person dinner.

5. How would you categorize a Community Dinner?
   Soup Kitchen, church, social club…

6. What percentage of participants experience food or housing insecurity?

7. Do people make friends through Community Dinner?

8. Do folks see or spend any time with people from Community Dinner outside of the dinner gathering?

APPENDIX F

Codes and Categories

Data Analysis Codes & Categories

INVITATION
  Inviting
  Invitational
  Welcoming
  Warm
  Assessable

ACCEPTANCE
  Humanizing
  Accepting
  Inclusion
  No judgment
  Generosity

EQUALITY
  Equal Footing
  Equality
  Dignity
  Leveling
  Authenticity
  Diversity

RELATIONSHIP
  Fellowship
  Connection
  Belonging
  Friendship
  Social interaction
  Shared experiences
  Family
  Relational
  Ownership

APPENDIX G

CITI Program Certificate

CITI Program Certificate

Completion Date 13-May-2022
Expiration Date 12-May-2026
Record ID 48914881

This is to certify that:

Will Haag

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Subjects Research for IRB (Faculty, Staff, and Student)
(Curriculum Group)
Human Subjects Research for IRB (Faculty, Staff, and Student)
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Seattle University

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w0de8cfaa-f54b-4922-a6f7-39033533d431-48914881