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Evaluating "GRIT" (Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied) Groups at the Highland Church of Christ: An Intergenerational Enhancement of Small Group Community Life

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ABSTRACT

This project, *Evaluating “GRIT” (Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied) at the Highland Church of Christ: An Intergenerational Enhancement of Small Group Community Life* is a response to the request for intergenerational partnership in worship, fellowship, and ministry by the university students at Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas. The church’s robust small group life was a logical place to create a vehicle in which intergenerational partners could ride for a determined period in pursuit of their common goals of furthering Highland’s mission and vision. The “Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied” or GRIT groups were formed by combining existing small groups which were joined with university discipleship groups consisting of students, student leaders, and adult spiritual mentors from the congregation who regularly volunteer in university ministry. Founded on the key principles of perichoresis and kenosis within trinitarian doctrinal theology embedded in Phil 2:2–11 and the Fuller Institute’s *Growing Young* theoretical principles of “key chain leadership” and “fueling warm community,” these six partnerships gathered throughout the fall 2022 semester. Equipped with a familiar curriculum modeled after the typical “Discipleship in Groups” (DIG), GRIT groups explored the themes of *koinonia* fellowship, generational theory, and the value of intergenerationality within a church. Along the way many discovered commonalities, shared interests, and engaged in Christian service and informal fellowship, fostering varying depths of community life outside of but inspired by the frame of the project. Focus groups convened in spring 2023 to lend insight for the future

enhancement of Highland's communal life, based on their GRIT experiences. These groups' engagement in the pastoral cycle of observation, action, and reflection in examining and cataloging their shared experiences and key learning about Highland's high value of intergenerationality will inform both the future of university ministry at the church and the body life of the congregation. Churches interested in university students becoming deeply integrated and experiencing mutuality in church relationships and ministries during their college years will benefit from examining this project. The church and innumerable future congregations stand to benefit from the rich learning students experience in the concentration of their university years when embedded in the diverse fellowship that is possible within a local church.

Evaluating “GRIT” (Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied) Groups
at the Highland Church of Christ: An Intergenerational Enhancement
of Small Group Community Life

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

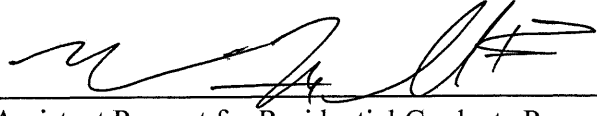
By

Beth Ann Fisher

May 2024

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Beth Ann Fisher, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

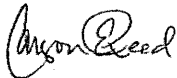


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March 18, 2024

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To Craig,

you are my beautiful person.

To Riley and Owen,

you are my best teachers.

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God, you are the giver of good gifts and one of those is faith. You exemplify faith in your people in giving them your ministry to do in the world, and for this and for them I am truly grateful. You imprint your faithfulness on people knowing we are incapable of your brand of faithfulness. You do it anyway and teach us more in that act about your way of community than we could learn by word alone. To you I give thanks.

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writing. I hope to pass this on too, and it started with you. I look forward to more projects together.

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Chinese food. Remember you share more theology from your hip pocket than I can after an afternoon in the books. Riley, thank you for the Sonic drinks. Owen, for the flowers.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Always be ready to answer everyone who asks you to explain about the hope you have.”
(1 Pet 3:15)

Ministry Context

“Here at Highland, we are all about our stories,” reflected a member of fifty or more years one Sunday after church, “and our groups are where we join one another’s stories.” This is true. The DNA of the Highland Church of Christ is story. Highland’s story is one of God’s faithfulness to His people, which is evident in the history. Highland began with a group of Christians who joined their lives and created a community of faith in the 1930s. In the 1970s, fledgling small groups began to form. Since the 1980s, Highland has experienced Christian community life together in small groups and through small group ministries of various types.

From the beginning, this robust life together as a church has included students from three area universities. In 2021, a group of these students expressed a desire to connect more deeply with the lives of Highland members. GRIT groups, an acronym for “Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied,” were forged. This project created a space for an intergenerational partnership as well as an opportunity to reflect on the joining of small groups made up of different generations and ministries within the church, the university ministry and the Highland small group ministry. At the students’ request, church leaders provided an opportunity for their increased sense of belonging to the body

of the church as well as an understanding of the value Highland members place on both the congregational and small group aspects of their faith lives. What follows are their stories.

Through the small group fellowship connection of a church, ordinary life comes into view through a theological lens and a communal viewfinder which is the presence and action of the Trinity. God is a mutually indwelling community: Father, Son, and Spirit. In the church, people belong not only to themselves, but are a part of a body that is Christ's, the church. People belong together. In this way, humans exemplify the diverse presence of God in the world. Together they live concretely as residents in the kingdom of God while still at home in the world. Often this kingdom pathway finds its footing in small groups, and people hear the gospel through not only the shared words of scripture, but in the living-color message of one another's lives. Here they "practice prayer, gain new outlooks on the world, and attend to the ongoing work of God."¹

One of the earliest small groups to form at Highland, and one of the first to say "yes" to this project was the "Sunday Sisters," who began in 1977 with women who were, at the time, both experiencing divorce and finding it difficult to locate community at church because of their life circumstances. These women exemplify some of the best of what has gone and is going on in small groups at Highland. The group began because of the invitation of a friend. One woman, who felt the support of Lynn Anderson, the preaching minister at the time, invited another friend to church, confident in the fellowship and community they would both find at Highland. Coming to church as a part

1. Carson E Reed and Shelby Coble, "Leadership in a Secular Age: Divine Action, The Early Church, and Relational Leadership Theory in Conversation," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 22.2 (2023): 118-43.

of anything other than a traditional family can be difficult and even more so as a divorced woman in the 1970s. At that time, those who held the power of the majority and made the leadership decisions had the support of Highland's public opinion and used this to leverage space, place, and connection for what would have otherwise been a marginalized group. These women took the name "Sunday Sisters" and found a place to call "home" in Christian fellowship. Women who initially faced a challenging time in locating church community and connection have had a home at Highland and have drawn others into their group now for forty-five years. University students represent some of the lives these women have touched.

These women exist to serve. They dip, perichoretically, into one another's lives as they reflect the trinitarian image they bear in the church and in the community. They know how it is to need somebody, and they have been "somebody" to many people in Abilene, including the students, in ways that have changed their lives, as the story shows. Their very existence exemplifies the functionality of the body of Christ at its best. Their lives are about ministry, about becoming aware of something that is happening and "getting in line with it." The "Sunday Sisters" are some of the strongest leaders of the church because of their encouragement and building up of others around them, both within and outside of Highland. Often those who find themselves in their ministry crosshairs are those who feel just as overlooked as the "Sunday Sisters" once did.

A brief story of the "Sunday Sisters" offering encouragement throughout one of Highland's many transitions exemplifies this point. During this project Highland underwent a change in the leadership paradigm by incorporating women into the eldership. At one GRIT gathering that the "Sisters" attended, conversation arose on this

topic. The older women expressed to their university partners and associated spiritual mentors their lack of understanding of the need for this change. I was then a newly appointed female elder of Highland, and around this same time I received a card from the “Sunday Sisters” in which they had each written a note of encouragement. Through this relationship and interaction, the “Sunday Sisters” taught me how to handle future decisions made by church leaders, especially those which I may not understand. Their instinct was to encourage, a lesson I will never forget.

The story of the “Sunday Sisters” exemplifies many elements central to Highland. These include sacrificial fellowship and the utilization of social capital and positive regard to create space for those whose experience of church is less accommodating as well as for those who are uncertain whether God has a plan for their lives that involves church.²

Small Group Context

Some Highland small groups contain a wealth of ministry resources, both monetary and relational. One longstanding Highland small group whose ages, habits, and preferences coincide with the typology of the Baby Boomer generation functions in active commitment to the Restoration Vision, “The restoration of Highland, Abilene, and the world.”³ Before COVID altered the landscape of their Sunday morning Bible class, they had the habit of “passing the hat” on a weekly basis, taking an offering for the

2. “Social capital refers to social networks and the reciprocity, trustworthiness, and mutual assistance provided by them.” Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1251185&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>.

3. “Highland Church of Christ – Restore Highland | Restore Abilene | Restore the World,” 2012, <http://www.highlandchurch.org/>.

purposes of this church's vision. On average, every six weeks the group would accumulate a sizable amount. The class treasurer would guide the class in determining where the vision's deep need matched their giving joy. This class had expressed a desire to hear from younger generations of Highland members regarding ways in which they might partner. While this project created an opportunity for this connection, after COVID, this class was much smaller than before. The depletion in size changed the group's own priorities and needs. As a small group themselves as well as a Bible class, they did not choose to be a part of the project.

As previously noted, small groups at Highland officially began in the mid-1980s, just prior to the congregation's formation of the purpose and mission statements in the mid-1990s. Over time and in varying degrees, different small groups have sought to incorporate the purpose and mission of Highland into how they spend their time together. The purpose statement states as follows: "The purpose of the Highland Church of Christ is to call all people to God. The God we call people to is most perfectly seen in Jesus Christ. Our task is to imitate Him. We commit ourselves through the power of the Holy Spirit to be God's living expression of Himself on earth" (a paraphrase of Eph 5:1-2).⁴ The mission of the Highland church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ who prayerfully join together in missions, ministry, and worship. Seeking to fulfill our purpose, as a community of believers we are engaging in "A Restoration Movement." The "Restoration Vision" for Highland is to join God in restoring all things: "Highland, Abilene, and the World."⁵

4. "Vision," *Highland Church of Christ*, February 3, 2024, <https://www.highlandchurch.org/vision/>.

5. "Vision."

Additionally, Highland follows our “Pathway Model,” a description of different aspects of joining the body of Christ at Highland, that were developed and put in place in 2018. A deeply influential element of the church’s DNA has always been the voice of the preaching minister, and Jonathan Storment paved the way for the development of this model during his time at Highland from 2010 through 2018. Jonathan began work that Zane Witcher, the university minister who joined the staff in 2016, solidified. Witcher articulated and launched the Pathway with the Highland staff in the summer 2018. His vision for the cohesive, holistic development of the church beyond the bounds of university ministry proved ideal. Witcher was a primary exemplar who was influential in the students’ interest in the larger congregational fellowship. The students looked up to him and were interested in his interests, and Witcher’s interest was the church. Since then, the church has displayed symbols of the “Know and Be Known Pathway” on the wall in the worship center which depicts the steps along the way: “Worship, Baptism, Table, and Cross.”⁶ The “Table” and “Cross” represent key aspects of this project in which space was created to host both the presence of one another and the presence of Christ in the small group fellowship of Christian community. The give and take of the group members and their desire to engage in burden-sharing and mutual service both internal and external to the group exemplifies key aspects of “Cross” and are reflective of Christ’s own nature. Sharing both the familiar as well as the mountaintop experiences of life together has been a priority at Highland since the 1980s when small groups officially began.

6. “Know And Be Known Pathway,” *Highland Church of Christ*, Spring 2018, <http://highlandchurch.org/pathway/>.

Soon after joining the staff in 2016, and drawing on the work of Mark Scandrette's book, *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*, Witcher and a team of Highland ministers and volunteers developed a small group model specifically designed for university students called "Discipleship in Groups" or "DIG."⁷ Crafted around intentional conversation, discipleship commitments, and service, Ben Siburt, Highland's executive minister at the time called it "a really good model."⁸ DIG groups for college students began in 2016 and continue to have weekly meetings in 2024 in which they explore Scripture and questions designed to direct the members toward concrete and intentional faith practices. They pray together. Members check in with each other at meetings and follow up on their commitments with intention. Groups utilizing this model have found traction for growing in spiritually formative community.

COVID's interruption of American life in spring 2020 created a crisis, which eventually led to the rich ministerial nurture that was poured into the university demographic of Highland the following fall. The Sunday morning university class/worship moved to a home near ACU's campus with a wrap-around porch, a beautiful expanse of yard, and a name: The Acre. The Acre felt safe for students both physically and spiritually as they brought camping chairs, spread out their blankets, and were led in worship from the porch. The university ministry remained at this off-site location until mid-fall 2021, a time that proved fruitful in unexpected ways.

Henri Nouwen writes, "Jesus established the true order for spiritual work," and describes this order as containing solitude, community, and ministry based on Jesus' own

7. Ben Siburt, "Small Groups at Highland," 15 September 2021.

8. Siburt, "Small Groups at Highland."

example in Luke 6:12–19.⁹ Jesus spent his night alone praying with God. The next morning, he called his following community of disciples, and then together they descended the mountain where they then “stood on level ground” with Jesus while he ministered to the sick (v. 17). The COVID pandemic provided the university students plenty of solitude throughout the spring and summer of 2020. During the 2020–21 school year, students received the intense nurture of communal discipleship, excellent teaching, and worship together at The Acre, and by fall 2021, they confessed a readiness for ministry. They had experienced a progression like that to which Nouwen refers and were budding for increased community. They asked to rejoin the life of the Highland body meeting at the building and partnered this request with a question about how they might become a deeper and more integrated part of this congregational life.

In preparing the ground for this intervention during fall 2021, I conducted two focus groups for small group leaders at Highland during which stakeholders explored together questions about their group’s connection to the mission and vision of Highland. The members of the “Oversight Team,” three couples tasked by Witcher to oversee the transition between ministers at his time of departure, had become aware of the students’ desire to be more deeply involved in the life of the church and their specific request for intergenerational partners. This communication came through a student leadership team that Witcher had selected, the “Point Team.” The “Oversight Team” and the “Point Team” met together once a month during the ministry transition, creating space for these conversations to take place. In these fall 2021 focus groups, the leaders shared details such as how their group sets up the logistics of their meetings: when they meet, how

⁹ Henri J M Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry: Jesus Established the True Order for Spiritual Work,” *Leadership* 16.2 (1995): 81–87.

often, and approximate plans for most meetings. In these conversations, especially regarding how each group spends their time and their comfortable levels of sharing and vulnerability, it became clear that many of the trends evident in generational typological research matched the lived experience Highland's small group members. These details are expanded below. Together the group studied the church's mission and vision statements and discussed the degree of intentionality of each group in fleshing out this connection. These conversations clearly revealed the diverse expressions of the Christian small group community in the church, all of which are, in fact, healthy and beneficial for those involved. Though different, each in its own way meets the needs of those who are a part of the group. We explained the purpose of DIG, which provides an opportunity for university students to have their own small groups. Now, however, these students wished to be actively engaged with Highland members of all ages beyond weekly worship. The conversation about Highland's mission and vision progressed to a discussion of the ways in which including students would be restorative for Highland; some small group leaders expressed interest in participation in the plan.

During this preliminary research, my goal was to increase my own awareness of the history of Highland small groups as well as to understand what was currently taking place. In these early focus groups, small group leaders expressed varying levels of connection and disconnection to the church's mission and vision statements in their conversations but refrained from judging these differences. Connection or disconnection was not seen as a necessarily good or a bad thing. The groups' experiences were simply different and had largely to do with the time when they were first formed. If they were a longstanding Highland group, formed before the creation of the mission vision statements

and well before the “Pathway,” they adhered to goals and a premise that they set together at the time they began and have been living life together accordingly ever since. Newer groups were more likely to demonstrate intentionality toward the churchwide mission and vision and to purposefully include “Pathway” elements in the way they used their time together. Teresa Latini regularizes this by saying, “different kinds of small groups—home groups, study groups, ministry teams, seeker groups, and recovery groups—help the congregation reach its mission.”¹⁰ This is exactly what I learned was happening at Highland during fall 2021.

During this same set of fall 2021 preliminary focus groups, one young adult member capitalized on Highland’s DNA of “story” with his comment: “I think it’s cool to hear everyone’s stories and the impact God has had in the church over the years. God’s changed lives for thirty years; God’s changed lives for thousands of years, and that is still happening in this building and through this church.”¹¹ This is a church where young adults, like the one who made this comment, desire to find intergenerational community. They seek mentors and partners on whom they can rely. In these partnerships, young adults seek to know those whose lives demonstrate consistency and a life of faith in the modern world. He says that any time people are added to a group represents is the most exciting, greatest “Spirit-synced moment” in small group life, and he unpacks the reason why this is so invigorating this way:

Being a young adult in Abilene and at Highland is isolating because people think all of you moved, and you’re still here. People just don’t get how that happened. Even for people who are a bit more understanding that you’re a person, the

10. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 48.

11. Lyle, “Who Are We, at Highland, in Terms of Our Small Groups?” 29 September 2021.

question still comes. “Why are you still here? Did Abilene trap you?” The whole expectation is, “I shouldn’t build a relationship because you will leave.”¹²

His comment points to the need for intergenerational connection at Highland. Small groups are one place where people can experience this link, and he concludes, “When we can bring people in and provide community and connection between people and God, it’s exciting to be a part of a group providing that place of community.”¹³ Young adults especially need to be able to locate this entry point into intergenerational small group community life easily and to feel that it is a place for them to belong at Highland. Having an experience with a small group outside of university ministry and within a church could give them the confidence they need to take this step on their own in the future. They will have done it before.

Clarification of Presenting Problem and Timeline of Discovery

This project addresses a particular problem at Highland by bringing two distinct factors together. First, at Highland, young adults yearn for and would benefit from intergenerational community. Second, as noted above, Highland possesses a long and diversity history of small group life. As reported by the “Point Team” in spring 2022, not only had intergenerational fellowship remained a priority for the students, but they also wanted to witness the impact Christian community has on the lives of young adults on the cusp of making decisions about their future priorities. They wanted both Christian community and a greater understanding of its importance. Highland small group members had been reawakened and reminded about important statements the church has

12 “Focus Group 2, Small Groups at Highland,” 29 September 2021.

13. “Focus Group 2, Small Groups at Highland.”

made as a body, commitments to restoration within the congregation and beyond. This project provided activation of the purpose and the mission of the church for all stakeholders.

At the time the students first expressed their desire for more vibrant, diverse, intergenerational Christian community, they were separated from the congregation due to COVID restrictions. What might have been as easy as bringing their gathering times and spaces back to 425 Highland Avenue began to seem just as isolating as meeting offsite. They had no vehicle by which to integrate into the life and body of the congregation. This project both created this ride and evaluated the road trip of the fall 2022 semester.

Further complicating the summer of 2021, the university ministry at Highland was undergoing a staff transition. Witcher, the university minister, made a vocational change to preaching ministry, and moved to the Round Rock Church of Christ in Austin, Texas. Under the oversight of Witcher, the university ministry had been student-led at several levels, one of which was a small group of students called the “Point Team,” mentioned above. These students demonstrated the principle of critical mass in their communication with both the church staff leadership and the broader body of students involved in the ministry. The “Point Team” members were a go-between group of students, a way of connecting students to the adult staff members and volunteers involved with the ministry. Also mentioned above, Witcher had created a team consisting of three adult couples who served as an “Oversight Team.” These adults were already in close relationship and communication with both the students and the staff, were active volunteers, present at university ministry worship, classes, and activities. During spring 2021, Witcher had given the students a survey in which they expressed their desire to return to the church

building for their activities rather than continue in the off-site location. Despite all Witcher's best efforts at patching together communication during his transition, this survey information was lost in the shuffle of summer 2021, and students' wishes went unnoticed until fall 2021 when they began once again voicing them to the Point Team and to the Oversight Team.

Students expressed the desire to not just worship at the same location on Sunday mornings but to also partner intentionally with the greater Highland membership. Students wanted to be ministry partners with the varied others within the body at Highland. Highland's students wanted to "know and be known" by the body whom they had joined on the "Pathway"; they wanted to see the difference faith makes in the lives of Highland members beyond Sunday mornings.¹⁴ The university students involved in DIG knew discipleship well, and they were ready to add depth and complexity to what they had been learning. They wanted to understand more about and serve alongside those lives within the church body of which they were a part. It was a unique request birthed out of an exceptional set of circumstances. Mentorship and partnership from the older members, requested by the younger generation, took place in fall 2022 under the acronym GRIT.

14. "Know And Be Known Pathway."

Here is a timeline of the project from inception to completion:

Spring 2020	COVID hit	Highland University Ministry small groups (DIG) went online.
Fall 2020–Spring 2021	COVID precautions	Highland University Ministry worshipped at The Acre, 1725 Austin Street. DIG meets at church building, groups separated into classrooms.
Fall 2021	COVID precautions	Highland University Ministry worshipped at The Acre, 1725 Austin Street. Students wanted to return to building for worship.
Fall 2021	Initial Focus Groups examined small group life at Highland for Ministry Context Analysis Project in preparation for the DMin project thesis intervention.	Many diverse expressions of healthy small group life, various levels of connection with church mission and vision. Relational space was created to open conversation with Highland small group leaders about what is happening in university ministry.
Spring 2021	HUM Survey	Students wanted to return to building for worship. “Point Team” confirms intergenerationality remains a priority for students.
Summer 2022	Highland Small Group Leaders surveyed for interest in GRIT pilot.	Six matches created between Highland small groups and DIG groups.
Fall 2022	GRIT	Four scheduled meetings
Spring 2023	GRIT/DIG Focus Groups	The triangulated perspectives of: 1. DIG Leaders (both student “Go-To” leaders and adult spiritual mentors) 2. “Point Team” student leaders 3. Highland small group leaders were gathered to evaluate GRIT.

The underlying question for university students as they considered returning and joining the Highland body for worship focused on why they wished to do this. As they considered their return they asked, “what difference would gathering as a body for worship make?” Through the language of GRIT, students wondered if faith is real, and hoped that people would demonstrate its existence through their actions. Ten small

groups volunteered to partner with a university small group, a DIG group, for the purpose of exploring what God might be up to in their individual lives and what kind of communal life they could create together. Since the group was smaller in fall 2022, the DIG ministry was able to offer six student groups to partner with six of the willing groups of Highland members, and they piloted six GRIT groups to explore intergenerational connection, partnership in ministry, and discipleship within the diverse demographics of the church. GRIT groups at Highland, formed for the purpose of understanding actualizing practicalities of faith, met four times during the fall semester of the 2022–23 school year.

The intergenerational passing along of faith has to do with sharing what difference it has made and is making in persons' lives. The story of the sons of Eli, the priest in First Samuel, has always been puzzling: "Now Eli's sons were evil men; they did not care about the Lord" (1 Sam 2:12). Why? While it is impossible to know why, the boy Samuel was different. "He will belong to the Lord all his life," said his mother, Hannah, and he stayed at Shiloh with Eli, serving alongside him (1 Sam 1:28). The apostle Peter writes in 1 Pet 3: "Always be ready to answer everyone who asks you to explain about the hope you have" (v. 15). For hope to be made visible, the lives of Christians must be open to one another. When the Lord shines God's light into the world of a person's life, all is illuminated. Beauty and dust alike come into view, and all is laid bare. The parts of life of which people feel both proud and regretful live in the light. In this way, those coming along behind witness both the power of the Lord and the communal wisdom available to them. The younger ones desire to be instructed through the example of their elders. Allowing them access to relationship and to vulnerability

about both human strengths and weaknesses testifies to what God can do in and through a life. The college years are brief and pass quickly, and this group asked for deep communal engagement. Highland capitalized on this request and responded, creating and evaluating an intergenerational partnership.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this project is that the students of Highland University Ministry were separated and isolated from the congregation and therefore unable to form and be formed by the people of Highland and their ministries in ways that the students believed their connection to the larger body would facilitate. They wanted to see Jesus with skin on, to know him more personally through his body, the church. They saw intergenerational fellowship as a remedy, a vehicle that would carry them deeply into the lives of Highland members. They desired to find relationships with people who demonstrate dependence on God and one another. They wanted to see faith and Christian community in action in their church. As a side benefit to this university ministry-focused project, Highland's small groups had the opportunity to actively engage in the vision of restoration to which the body ascribes within their small group community. The Highland university ministry had in place a set of guardians for the university students, their spiritual mentors in DIG, but lacked a process for university students and Highland members to join their lives in discipleship and ministry beyond these few, familiar relationships. University students wanted to see real people with real lives of all different ages associated with the congregation. They wanted to not only see them, but get into their lives, into their days and weeks, and have a look around. They wanted to see the difference faith makes, to see their hope, to see where they might be tempted in similar

ways, and how they may respond. They desired intentionality, for a focused period, that they had possibly not experienced even with their spiritual mentors. They wanted to meet with older people, the ages of their grandparents, and younger people, the ages of the siblings they left behind back home. They wanted to visit homes with dogs and with fire pits. They wanted to venture out into the world to places they would not find or would be uncomfortable visiting on their own. Students have a short span of time to be involved, so the fruit of discipleship and ministry needed to be both experienced and assessed with this project in order to continue to provide pathways forward and offer further enhancement to the ministries and membership of Highland.

DIG has a robust history of discipleship ministry from which Highland members could benefit and be challenged. Mutually beneficial, GRIT could add missing aspects of wisdom and experience to DIG, as well as a greater number of adult relationships at a church from which the students could learn. Highland members have historic ministry connections both within and outside the church in which university students desired to participate. Students wanted to see faith expressed in life beyond Sunday morning. Students also knew they wanted to bring themselves back to “church” with the rest of the Highland congregants. Was it so deeply ingrained that “going to church” meant meeting at a building? The “Point Team” articulated this question, “What difference does being a church member make in one’s life?”

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project was to determine if the students cultivated the expressed values of ministry and discipleship in an intergenerationally enhanced way. In creating space for, living into, and reflecting upon the pilot GRIT, groups grafted

between the DIG and Highland small group ministries, and students were given opportunity to examine their high value of intergenerationality after living into it for a time. Latini describes a congregation in which “each of the small groups uses an assessment tool to discern whether and how it is achieving (their) overall mission.”¹⁵ In this case two large groups at Highland, the small group members and the university students, experienced intergenerationality in a new way. They were then able to reflect on how it went and what key learning took place. For both groups, an opportunity was created to grow in awareness of the mission and vision of the church and ways this was expressed in the lives of Highland members of all ages. Participants wished to form one another and be formed by one another further into the likeness of the triune God, whose image they reflect. This project acted as a tool for increasing the awareness of a potential impact in one another’s lives and together upon the community.

This process included taking field notes and using a focus group methodology described by David L. Morgan. This experience will provide a hearty assessment tool for Highland as well.¹⁶ In spring 2023, three focus groups offered their data. These groups were comprised of different aspects of GRIT which included the DIG leadership (adult spiritual mentors and student leaders, which are called “Go-To” leaders in the DIG model), leaders of Highland small groups, and student leaders of the Highland University Ministry, the “Point Team.” Further enhancements will be considered for implementation based on data gathered at the beginning of the 2023 spring semester from the triangulated

15. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 48.

16. David L. (Sociologist) Morgan, “Introducing Focus Groups” in *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*, Sage Research Methods Core, (SAGE 2019), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781071814307.n1>, 3–16.

perspective of the three focus groups and field notes from each GRIT meeting held in the fall.

GRIT Groups were provided with original, written curriculum for four meetings and an expansion option for up to six meetings. Each meeting curriculum included a purpose and a plan organized around the typical structure for DIG groups. This material is available in Appendix E. In fall 2022, the four meetings scheduled by the “Point Team” and new university minister, David Sessions, GRIT groups:

- had opportunity to craft mission statements for themselves,
- determined the intentionality with which they desired to connect their mission as an intergenerational small group to that of Highland, and
- discerned measurable markers that enabled both each group and the university ministry to reflect and plan a path forward after living into one semester of GRIT.

As the field notes and focus groups reveal, each group was successful in their own way. Because the preliminary focus groups from fall 2021 revealed such diverse expressions of both small group life and connection to mission and vision of Highland, this was an anticipated result. University students who came in touch with all different types of small groups yielded vastly different experiences. The desire for students to see authenticity in the lives of the Christians at Highland was built into the project, and this is what they saw. Each group’s expression of personal mission for the semester was defined as differently as individuals are from one another. Some took the time to articulate and craft with intentionality, some took a “let’s see what happens” approach, and interestingly, the group with the most long-lasting connection to date did not do much documenting at all.

The group in which the members became most involved in the lives of one another outside of GRIT meetings, going for coffee with the “gals,” finding a “running buddy,” and other casual expressions of life together did cement relationships beyond the project. Another long-lasting fruit has been ministry partnership. Younger people have demonstrated their commitment to becoming integral contributors to ministry in new ways. This will be described in greater detail below.

Basic Assumptions

University students asked for meaningful membership as a part of the greater body of the Highland Church of Christ. This included meeting at the church building for worship and Bible class activities as well as facilitating further opportunity for relational and ministerial service connections through small groups. This project proceeded under some basic assumptions. First, I assumed that the student leadership of Highland University Ministry, the designated “Point Team,” was well informed regarding the interests and desires of the ministry, including those involved in DIG groups who may not be a part of worship or attend Bible class. At a spring 2022 meeting, the “Point Team” listed intergenerational ministry relationships as a salient priority among their peers. I assumed they spoke well for the students they represented. Secondly, I assumed that the members of Highland who are involved in small groups would also have areas in their lives outside of church that are devoted to ministry, and that they would be willing to make space for involving a college student or two from their GRIT group alongside them in these endeavors. Third, I assumed that all parties wished to grow relationally and spiritually, not only with God and one another, but that they also had an interest in

extending the reach of ministry to those possibly not yet involved, for the sake of growth in the kingdom of God.

Definitions

The terms *generation* and *generational theory* were defined according to what Gary L. McIntosh calls a *generation*, which is “a group of people who are connected by their place in time, with common boundaries and a common character.”¹⁷ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross say, “Generational theory spans all ages and suggests that there are differences in age-related groups of people due to a cyclical pattern driven by changing values and attitudes of each new generation.”¹⁸ Additionally, there are certain generalities, according to Peter Menconi, that sprout from generational soil.¹⁹

As generational groups age, their perspectives and values do not necessarily mirror those of previous generations. The passing of certain milestones is different for each generation, as is the experience of the same age. It is difficult to begin a sentence with “when I was your age...” and say anything that is true for the hearer’s experience. Times are changing quickly.

An important aspect of this project was to examine the different experiences of each distinct generation as well as their common characteristics in order to understand their viewpoints on contemporary life. During the initial focus groups for the Ministry

17. Gary McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 11.

18. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 144.

19. Peter Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to Wwww.Com* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage Publishing, 2010).

Context Analysis Project in fall 2021, Highland small group leaders were asked about the ages of those within their small groups, the ways they spend their time together, as well as their priorities for this time. When surveyed with this questionnaire, the generations at the Highland Church of Christ defined their priorities in the frames that follow, which align with the findings of McIntosh, Catterton Allen, Lawton Ross, and Menconi.

Members coordinating with “The Silent Generation,” those born from 1925–1945, ranked Bible study and prayer as priority activities in their small group meetings, usually followed by sharing a meal together.²⁰ These members shared the high value they place on taking time together to experience unhurried discussions, to process their thoughts, and to value one another’s contributions. This generation claims they do not “do” vulnerability; traversing depths of emotion in small group community spaces is not typical.

Highland members born in the Baby Boomer years, 1946–1964, and those within “Generation X,” born from 1965–1980 value Bible study and prayer to a great degree, like the generations ahead of them.²¹ They enjoy sharing their thoughts along with a meal and taking care of one another’s physical needs. These are resourceful generations. Many have retired and have both financial means and time to take care of physical needs of others outside their group, even beyond the membership of the church. They find life doing this type of ministry together.

Highland folk coinciding with “Generations Y,” otherwise known as the Millennials, and “Z,” those born between 1981–1996 and 1997–2012, have quite a

20. “Generation Names Explained – The Daily Free Press,” <https://dailyfreepress.com/2021/03/15/generation-names-explained/>.

21. “Generation Names Explained – The Daily Free Press.”

different take on vulnerability and community than the generations prior.²² To the high value they place on discipleship, devotional, and Bible study, young adults add the practice of vulnerably sharing their spiritual testimonies. These people, too, are generous with their means and appreciate fellowship opportunities that includes service to others. In having conversations with members within generations “Y” and “Z,” often they express appreciation for the structure their leadership does provide but a desire for their own training and experience to be recognized and honored alongside the desire to feel trusted to take ministry as they see it and run with it. These are non-judgmental, markedly grace-filled generations who do not shy away from hard topics but also seek mentors with whom they may explore connections between scripture and the contemporary world. Often assumptions about younger people suggest that they are only interested in their own generational likeness; however, in truth they are hungry for a look into the lives of older people who demonstrate congruence of faith and living. Like those of “The Silent Generation,” this “younger set” appreciates quiet spaces and unhurried conversation in their processing together.

Members whose ages fall within “Generation Alpha,” those born between 2013 and 2025, are a large part of the small groups at Highland, even a majority in some groups of young families.²³ The expressed priority of their small groups asks that children of all ages be included in all aspects of small group life so that they experience the modeling and spiritual imprinting that can only take place in a small group.

22. “Generation Names Explained – The Daily Free Press.”

23. “Generation Names Explained – The Daily Free Press.”

These results reveal some similarities and tensions. The oldest and the youngest adult responders both value taking the time to listen to one another and be heard. These two groups also express a ready awareness of the fact that life changes and display the grace to remain in community with one another throughout these ups and downs. Like the “Sunday Sisters,” these groups each value intentional discipleship but interpret the vulnerability required differently. Generations “Y,” “Z” and those younger value explicitly expressed practices of vulnerability and community that demonstrate congruence between faith and life, while those older show these attributes through their actions rather than their words. These generational values are similar though they are fleshed out in different ways; the people speak different dialects of the language of community.

Vulnerability and intimacy are essential elements of discipleship experienced and expressed distinctly among the different generations. Regardless of generational preferences, *koinonia*, is a model of fellowship for people within scripture and serves as a pathway to knowing God.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them. (John 17:20–23, 25–26)

The unity of human fellowship demonstrates that of the Trinity. In embracing differences, we are one. Here people represent the image by which Jesus says the world will know the Father. Because humans are different, to be one people need to know each

other. They need a space in which to do this intentionally; it does not happen automatically or by default.

People exist in faith not as dry mustard seeds within the same container, bumping up next to one another and jostling around until they are sown into a field where they grow into individual plants. Christians within faith communities are trees with dendritic roots, interconnected as members of one another and able to signal to one another viscerally when experiencing stress or when strengthened by shared nutrients. In writing a guest post on his wife Jennifer Dukes Lee's blog, Scott Lee examines the roots of aspen trees and helps readers notice how two trees can often appear as one because over time their roots have grown together.²⁴ Underground they are inseparable. Just like the aspen trees and the old married people, Christians grow stronger because their roots are tied deeply together. Christians share with one another where they are on the journey of life and faith, constantly testifying to the ways their lives have been resurrected and the hope this provides. Latini writes, "This security—this trust—marked by reciprocal self-disclosure, mutual freedom, and openness that takes the form of pure relationships, may be the one thing that is needful in speech and action."²⁵ This feels incredibly risky but Latini continues, "in the context of *koinonia*, [people] can risk self-disclosure and authenticity."²⁶ Intimacy in Christ, joined with the Father and the Spirit, has limitless restorative power.

24. Dukes Lee, "The Tale of Two Trees - #TellHisStory (Guest Post by Scott Lee!)," *Jennifer Dukes Lee*, 1 March 2016, <https://jenniferdukeslee.com/the-tale-of-two-trees-tellhisstory-guest-post-by-scott-lee/>.

25. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 94.

26. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 96.

Delimitations and Limitations

This project was delimited to the community of small groups within the Highland Church of Christ. Additionally, special care was taken to delimit this project to those small groups choosing to participate in GRIT partnerships with DIG groups within the university ministry of Highland.

One limitation of this project included the acknowledgement of the strengths and sensitivities of generational differences. Included among the DIG groups' strengths are the aspects of vulnerability and community. Young adults are "all in" and overt when it comes to mutual discipleship. Among the generations at Highland, focus group participants expressed varied levels of comfort with this difference. These varying levels correspond directly to generational trends.

Another limitation concerned individual perspectives. Carl G. Eeman includes information provided by Neil Howe and William Strauss suggesting that generational change can be appreciated "precisely to the extent that your work requires you to take a broad view of the people around you...to understand the memories of the old and the dreams of the young."²⁷ Howe and Strauss also note that those who have been required to take in many other perspectives will appreciate generational differences more readily than those who have remained relatively siloed with likeminded others.²⁸

Incorporating the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe, Carl G. Eeman describes four generational types: Idealist, Adaptive, Civic, and Nomad.²⁹ These types

27. Carl G. Eeman, *Generations of Faith* (Alban Institute, 2002), vii.

28. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, vii.

29. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xii.

are cyclical; often grandparents and their grandchildren are of the same type as they were reared by parents of the same type.³⁰ Even so, history shapes generations, and generations' reactions to history reflect their views toward and interactions with younger generations.³¹ Individuals within the small group community of the Highland Church of Christ find themselves in each of Eeman's categories and demonstrate characteristics inherent to each generational type. The dynamic nature of these generational organizers and their tendencies was a limitation of this project, one which GRIT groups had opportunity to study and explore in a session of GRIT curriculum.

As noted earlier, story is the heart of Highland's DNA. A great deal of the passing on of faith has to do with sharing people's stories, yet there are generational differences in the ways folk both offer their own stories and receive those of others, taking them to heart. A generation, usually younger and accustomed to use technology to share and receive stories Instagram on the iPhone, for example, has accustomed people to expect short, episodic bursts of information, and for the most part, the interpretation rests with the recipient. This group will nimbly switch attention among several streams of consciousness with a great deal of tolerance for the changes. A group more accustomed to a narrative communication of their stories may display an ability to listen and attend to the storyteller for long stretches, awaiting a conclusive demonstration of meaning-making delivered by the teller at story's end. A third limitation of this project was the ability of both groups to remain neutral when observing the different story-telling styles among different groups. Technologically based communication has largely not been legitimized

30. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 22.

31. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 2.

by the church, but as Makoto Fujimura notes, “people would lose a great deal if they heard the Good News delivered only as linear, propositional information.”³² Conversely, there is room to strengthen the attentiveness people offer a narrative. Each group has opportunity to learn from the perspective of the other.

The Hawthorne Effect is one more limitation to this project. Dr. Tim Sensing describes, “The Hawthorne Effect is a theory that questions research dependability when subjects know they are being studied.”³³ Experiencing the Hawthorne Effect was likely and realized since the students as stakeholders had requested intergenerational small groups. Sensing applies this theory saying, “participants are chosen because they believe in the project.”³⁴ The people involved wanted the project to be successful because they:

- had expectations that they desired be met, and
- they appreciated the tightness of the timeline.

Time passes quickly in the life of a college student quickly, and it is important that their church attend to their requests. These factors may have made it easier to lose sight of the objectivity required for research participation, and in some instances it likely did.

This project demonstrated the opportunity to truly welcome the presence of another person to, in the words of English poet Humbert Wolfe, “heap up the fire and sit hunched by the flame together and make a friend of it.”³⁵ Some groups literally included

32. Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale, 2020), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIACO210614001270&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>, 6.

33. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 82.

34. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*.

35. Dan Zadra and Steve Potter, *Welcome* (Compendium, 2006).

the fire in their meetings and discovered that, nowadays, few people actually know how to roast a hot dog outside. All these groups created intentional space to bear witness to the fire of the Spirit in one another's lives and to make a new friend. This project fundamentally examined relationships: God within God's self, between God and people, among people who have known one another half their lives, those who met for the first time during this project, and everything in between.

The truth of the Trinity reveals an all-powerful God who chooses continually to move toward people in a transcendent way. As Shelby Coble and Carson Reed describe in their work examining Christian relational leadership through the lens of trinitarian theology, God did this first in the wilderness, and then in the life of the person of Jesus Christ, and then chose to move even closer, dwelling within people and communities of Christians.³⁶ This project demonstrates a time and place in which people, full of the Spirit, created a space in which they could give to and receive from one another, exemplifying in one of the most human ways possible the perichoretic sharing among the Father, Son, and Spirit. They opened themselves to one another while simultaneously receiving something irreplicable in human, interpersonal exchange.

The "Sunday Sisters" exemplify this experience, one that required a person's physical presence to fully grasp. The time they shared with GRIT has now passed, but the kenotic way they poured into the students and the community will live on indefinitely, as does the Trinity after which this self-emptying life is patterned. As college students move on with their lives, so have some of the "Sisters." One has moved away to be in a care facility near family, and one has transitioned to her heavenly home. Contributions from

36. Reed and Coble, "Leadership in a Secular Age: Divine Action, The Early Church, and Relational Leadership Theory in Conversation," 121.

each live on in the lives of many into whom they poured themselves, including a small group of college students from Highland Church of Christ. In the next chapter, I will examine the trinitarian theological foundation for the project more fully, alongside the theory advanced by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin for Fuller Youth Institute’s *Growing Young* work, associated with passing the keys of ministry to a succeeding generation and “fueling warm community.”³⁷

37. Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1530202&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

“...so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ (Acts 17:27–8)

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.” (1 Tim. 4:12)

Trinitarian Ways of Relating Translate to Church Life

In kindness, God presents God’s self as relational and good from the very beginning. This shows God’s concern for people’s understanding of God. God is beyond that which can be imagined or described in human frames, yet God reveals God’s presence at the outset of Scripture in multiple frames: God, Word, and Spirit (Gen 1:1–2, 26; John 1:1–3). Catherine Mowry LaCugna says, “The doctrine of the Trinity is practical, yet it contains radical consequences for the Christian life.”¹ Further, trinitarian doctrine demonstrates a teaching about God’s simultaneous immanence and economy designed to imprint upon human hearts a map for life with one another.² Experience points out what words fail to describe. David S. Cunningham expands, “The Trinity is a mystery that God (chooses) to reveal in relational synergy between God and humans and

1. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 1.

2. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 1.

from person to person.”³ Participation in a small group is one means by which Christians experience this grace of God through one another.

After Jesus’ resurrection, he sent his followers about the business of forming Christian community, saying with all the power of heaven and earth, “Go and make followers of all the people in the world. Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything that I have taught you” (Matt 28:19). The idea that Christian community can be formed bearing the name of the Trinity, in the Father, Son, and Spirit is a radical one. That the creator of the universe chooses to relate to people at all is magnificent, and that God’s presence is magnified when two or more are gathered elaborates this divine mystery in which people are invited to participate.⁴

Jesus explains to his followers his relationship to his Father and the coming of the Spirit in John 16. This care in elucidation demonstrates what Leonardo Boff expresses: “The Trinity was first an experience rather than a doctrine worked out by human intelligence.”⁵ However, Cunningham adds the fact that doctrines are intended to have an effect on the practices of the Christian community.⁶ What is demonstrated in relationship is reflected in experience. This example is one which people have opportunity to uptake as a model for practice. This project represents obedience to Jesus’ command to go and

3. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 8.

4. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 8.

5. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Theology and Liberation Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 43.

6. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 15.

draw community together in the name of the Holy Trinity and is a demonstration itself of trinitarian theology.

The life of the small group is another way the presence of God is reflected in the body life of the church. In *The Irrational Season*, Madeline L'Engle poetically writes, "What one of us can understand a love so great that we would willingly limit our unlimitedness, put the flesh of mortality over our immortality, accept all the pain and grief of humanity, submit to betrayal by that humanity, be killed by it, and die on a common cross between two thieves?"⁷ Cunningham reminds that successfully unlocking the mystery of the immanence of God, relative to God's continually choosing to come and dwell among and within people and demonstrate active involvement in the present matters of life, may have a good deal to do with our connections to community, to other people.⁸ Further, Cunningham says that this difference, at various points in life, may be made by people who demonstrate the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity "is not just something Christians think, it is also something that they do."⁹ People remain distinct from one another yet are also members of one another: "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

In congregational life, small groups function as sacramental spaces, a means of experiencing the grace of God. Henri Nouwen says, "If we create space in which God can act and speak, something surprising will happen."¹⁰ Christian small group communities

7. Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 18.

8. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 3.

9. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, ix.

10. Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry."

anticipate God's action in the created relational space. Nouwen highlights Jesus' moves from solitude with God, to gathering his community of disciples, to ministry in which healing occurs. Drawing near to God in solitude, Jesus "went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).¹¹ Jesus chose a time of day when human flesh would have preferred sleep to engage in a solitary experience with God. This choice reflects Jesus' priority, while fully human, to dwell with God in body and Spirit, but not to the detriment of other human relationships. Jesus chose a time uncontested by his community whom he calls at daybreak, and with whom he ministers "on a level place" (Luke 6:17).

Jesus and his group of disciples are members of one another in their ministry to God as reflected in the absence of hierarchy. As the members of the Trinity function perichoretically, Jesus follows this ministry model with his disciples. Their lives dip in and out of one another's in service to the gospel. It only follows that the lives of Christians do the same. A model that demonstrates domination, patterned after that of the Trinity would be impossible to construct given the kenotic partners' continual pouring into and receiving from one another. The nature of the Trinity demonstrates a level ground, communal participation in one another's lives. This is common footing on which there is no room for domination. Christians gather on a consistent basis for this very reason. In so doing, persons of faith offer one another irreplicable engagement with a fellowshiping community that contains both the spirits of the people and that of God.

Within Christian community, people experience the presence of God differently than they do when alone. People are created for community, by community just as the

11. Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry."

three persons of the Trinity live, move, and have their being within one another (Acts 17:28). All of this reflection and modeling serves as a guide for intergenerational small groups. It is often easy in churches to defer to those with the most experience in life, and as a result, those who are older lead the various activities in which folk participate. The Gospel writer of Luke intentionally includes the detail about level ground to emphasize the way of fellowship and ministry Jesus shares with his followers as one that had no hierarchy. Paul repeats this familiar idea to his hearers in Philippians 2:

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (v. 1–11)

If Jesus' own life exemplifies any type of hierarchy regarding those who share his ministry, it is Jesus continually placing himself in the lowest position, modeling servitude and giving others opportunity to lead by following his example of service. Cultivating and enriching the soil of Highland toward continued growth and long-term fertility and development of this type of community has been the focus of this project.

God's own trinitarian nature is the vital starting point for understanding folks' own nature as those created in God's image. At creation God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion" desiring that people live in God's created world as a reflection and imprint of God (Gen 1:26, Heb

1:3). While God extends this great and loving privilege to humans, people must remain cognizant that God is greater than any human reflection, apparent action, or descriptive word. God exists and interacts in both the heavenly and earthly realms in three distinct expressions or persons. Karen Kilby explicates the orthodox description “persons,” quoting both Karl Barth and Karl Rahner’s applications of the alternative “mode(s) of being” theory with reference to the three distinct substances that make up the oneness of God.¹² Quoting Richard N. Fragomeni’s work *Come Into the Light: An Invitation to Baptism and Confirmation*, Kathleen A. Cahalan says that, in Christian community, “We vow to surrender ourselves and our own identities to a Christlikeness...to make an unconditional commitment of availability to God and one another.”¹³ People submit themselves to Christ’s model of submission to the work of God in the world, and we have the empowering indwelling of the Spirit’s presence who helps people to know what this is and to do it. Trinitarian doctrine provides important direction to Christian communities that seek to orient their lives around this distinctive nature of God, moving people away from visions of community that are hierarchical and authoritarian toward visions rooted in mutuality, self-giving love, and a recognition of distinctiveness among those who share a common purpose.

Trinitarian Orthodoxy and the Free Church Tradition

Generations of Christian who may not have given the presence and differentiation of the Trinity much thought may exist within Churches of Christ and other Free Church

12. Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81.956 (2000): 432–45.

13 Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1706743&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>, 25.

traditions. The tendency among restoration churches has leaned toward *sola scriptura*, and while the doctrine of the Trinity is evident in scripture, it is not explicitly named. John's Gospel is an exemplar of this doctrine's footprint in scripture. The writers of John place the identity of Christ in relation to God in the primary position in this Gospel message, and seven statements, including Jesus' own words, "I am," help achieve this purpose. Jesus connects the minds of all hearers of this message both to the God who created and delivered the people and to the Spirit when he says, "I am the bread of life," in John 6:35 and, "Before Abraham was, I am," in John 8:58, as well as in five other metaphorical instances. John calls back to mind Exodus and God's meeting with Moses at a curious burning bush in, on fire yet not consumed. Here Moses inquires of the Lord, who is Moses is to tell the Israelites has sent him on his mission of freedom from Pharaoh's harsh treatment and the Egyptian captivity? To what power should he attribute the authority of his mission? YHWH, whose very name crossed Hebrew lips as only a reverent breath, answers Moses this way, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod 3:14). Further, He says, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exod 3:14). Interested in communicating the creating and restoring power of God, Jesus, and the Spirit, John's Gospel foregrounds the Spirit's coming presence in a way that hearkens back to the very life-giving breath of God which vivified humans in Eden's Garden. The writers of John expressly emphasize Jesus' interest in creating an understanding that God exists in triune form. The life of the Spirit is in the breath Jesus breathed on his apostles in John 20: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (v. 21-2). The Gospel writer of John assists further as he shares Jesus' own

words about the coming of the Spirit. After explaining and helping the disciples anticipate his physical departure, Jesus says this regarding the coming of the Spirit:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

While the Trinity, as a doctrine, may not be specifically explicated in scripture, the presence and action of Father, Son, and Spirit are undeniable.

A Trinitarian Challenge to Monotheistic Instincts

Language about the Trinity expressed as a Christian doctrine was formed out of a need to address a historical problem. The examination of history scaffolds scriptural reflection on to the development of this doctrine. The words of the ancient people of God recorded in Deuteronomy 6, represent a monotheistic outcry with which they admonished one another to listen and to and hear the movement of God among them: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4). The students at Highland have answered this cry with the question, “How does this look?” This project conveys the university students’ desire to see the oneness of the diverse persons of the Trinity in both Christian community and Christian life.

Once Jesus came into the life and world of the Jewish people, the monotheistic view of God of their ancestors had to be reapplied according to their new experience of God in Christ. Jesus’ life demonstrated the presence of God incarnate and led to the indwelling of the Spirit in and among God’s people. This was difficult for Jewish Christians to reconcile with their traditional roots in the Torah, which expresses, as Cunningham describes this tension, “only YHWH is God; and yet, somehow, YHWH

was made manifest in a human being, even while continuing to dwell in light inaccessible.”¹⁴ At this moment in ancient history, the temptation to define the identity and nature of God by the human experience of God first came into play. With Jesus, like never before, and then with the coming of the Spirit, people engaged in relationship with God in a way they could understand afresh because God expressed God’s self in human terms, in an actual human body.

God’s connection with humans on human terms birthed a relationship that was newly accessible to people, but that also advanced a new temptation. Persons may find it easy to reduce God’s immanent identity relative to their personal experience of God. Groups and communities of faith often have this same economic tendency. Even during different seasons of life people can attribute God’s presence and action in the world to the degree they are graced with or personally aware of this truth. But trinitarian theology is more than a summary of the human experience of God, even more than a question of how the gift of salvation correlates to what LaCugna describes as the “eternal being of God.”¹⁵ Christian community is a vital and consistent reminder that the presence and action of God in the world is always greater than a person’s experience of the same. Christians provide evidence to one another of God’s activity both through their daily lives and in storied reminders to one another about God’s history of faithfulness. These are vital elements to the growing faith that students sought in an intergenerational community. In this communal space, a diverse array of experiences, longevity of years, and many stories of God’s trustworthy track record were shared.

14. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 21.

15. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 4.

The gift of Christ created a new opportunity for people to have a relationship with the person of Christ, who was simultaneously God in every respect, and facilitated a new understanding of God through the life of Christ. Before his arrest, as recorded in John, Jesus prayed, “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them” (John 17:25–6). This mutual indwelling represents the trinitarian model for fellowship.

Functionality in Christian Worship

Despite a human level of understanding, persons have always desired communion with God. Doxology, or worshipping the majesty and mystery of God, provides the vehicle for entering space with God. In worship, people may not only join with God in fellowship, but also may participate in God’s redeeming action in the world. Although conceptually defining and understanding both this differentiation and unification of God has weathered exploration, worship has always remained the bottom line. This is what the students wanted to see: a combination of professed belief in the immanence of God combined with a lived expression of this truth and the impact it could make on people in close community.

God’s immanence, *theologia*, and God’s action, *oikonomia*, represent a relationship that theologians have attempted to describe in certain terms since the earliest centuries of the church. LaCugna reminds, “Christian theologians answered this by the end of the fourth century in the doctrine of the Trinity: God exists eternally as Father, Son, Spirit, and this eternal triune life is what is given in the economy of redemption.”¹⁶

16. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 23.

An essential connection exists between this processive pattern of God’s revelation in salvation history and the eternal being and identity of God.

Significant Ecumenical Councils

Conversations relevant to the tension presented by Deut 6—how the “three-ness” equals the oneness of God long expressed in the *shema*—are bookended in history by two grand ecumenical councils. Khaled Anatolios helps readers understand that in developing the doctrine of the Trinity, the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381 are main players, as are key individuals.¹⁷ Anatolios describes the fact that fifth-century Greek Christian church historian Socrates Scholasticus of Constantinople created a rendering of the doctrine’s history conveyed by the main voices of the fourth-century councils.¹⁸ Anatolios explicates how in Nicaea an Egyptian presbyter named Arius took issue with the preaching of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, who voiced commitment to the three expressions of God in Father, Son, and Spirit while embracing this unity as a holy mystery.¹⁹ God’s singularity was Arius’ conviction. God the Father, for Arius, was the first expression of God and the only expression of God that was truly and fully God, as Anatolios represents.²⁰ In Arius’ line of thinking, although the procession of the Son Christ from Father God was a demonstration of a created being. Endowed with the highest graces offered by God, Christ was similar in function to God, but not of the same substances as God. As a created being, Jesus was secondary to God in

17. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 15.

18. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 17.

19. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 17.

20. Anatolios *Retrieving Nicaea*, 17 .

Arius's view, and thus he struggled with scripture such as Phil 2:6–8. If Christ Jesus existed in the form of God and could be exalted by God, how could he be God's equal? The idea of procession helped him reconcile the existence of Jesus while maintaining the monotheistic view in the Torah's *shema*, so important to the people and to him.

While this conversation was taking place between Arius and Alexander, who believed the presence of God was triune and equally expressed in the three persons Father, Son, and Spirit, Emperor Constantine was ruler over the location of the council, Nicaea, an Egyptian province of the Roman Empire. Constantine summoned the two bishops to end this dispute over the Holy Trinity. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, with both Arius and Alexander in attendance, the group rejected Arius' notion of differentiated substance and crafted a beginning draft of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things came into being, those on heaven and on earth; who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, and is coming to judge the living and the dead.²¹

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, "there was once when he was not," and "before being begotten he was not," and that "he came into being from non-being," or who declare that the Son of God is of another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or alterable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.²²

This language, in comparison with modern iterations of the Nicene Creed, demonstrates the preliminary tensions within interpretation of trinitarian doctrine. Knowing who God

21 Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 18.

22. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 18.

fully is and what God fully does is beyond human experience and understanding and is a topic which belies human certainty when they rely on knowledge and experience. Rather, as Constantine and Alexander implored the first council, they must rely on faith in the mystery of God.

As can be the case even in contemporary times, a council which appears to have settled and articulated a statement actually birthed new controversy and hatched more nuance. This was the case with Nicaea. Five figures surfaced who foregrounded these nuances: Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, Asterius, Marcellus, and Athanasius. These men cared deeply about the subject at hand. Anatolios further explains how Eusebius of Nicomedia held fast to the monotheistic application of the substance of God to one singular and primary expression.²³ He was firmly in camp with Arius. Eusebius of Caesarea accepted Nicaea's argument that the Father and the Son shared the same substance, including the language of *homoousios*, but maintained the preeminence of one over the other, Father over Son, according to Anatolios.²⁴ Again, his view was more closely aligned with Arius. A third important voice Anatolios' account includes following Nicaea, that of Asterius, continued to maintain the notion that the Son is so different in essence from the Father that he is non-integral to the divine nature and continually produced by God's own will.²⁵ Marcellus, bishop of Ancyra, and Athanasius, who had been in attendance as Alexander's deacon at Nicaea furthered the controversy

23. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 18.

24. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 19.

25. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 19.

that Anatolios recounts.²⁶ Marcellus, according to Anatolios, held to the conviction that God's single being encompassed that of Christ, who only differentiated from God in his act of incarnation, and in this way, Christ was not subordinate as the being of God and Christ are one.²⁷ Marcellus' insubordinate view of Christ was viewed as an affront to the Empire and set in motion a chain of events in which he met and joined Athanasius, Alexander's successor and later bishop of Alexandria. Both men were deposed to Rome. As described by Anatolios, following great political turmoil, the doctrine that subordinated the divinity of the Son came to be called "Arianism" and continued in varying degrees.²⁸ The Holy Spirit was viewed in a similar way, subordinate to Christ the Son. Throughout this time, both religious and political discussions polarized differing views of the members and action of the Trinity. As Anatolios further explains, after the deaths of Constantine and several successors who held views sympathetic to Nicaea but also continued to subordinate Christ, Theodosius "issued an edict in 380 that announced the single divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit to be the official doctrine of the empire, setting the stage for the Council of Constantinople in 381."²⁹

A Helpful Homily from Basil the Great

The preaching of Basil the Great is helpful to this project for three reasons. First, Basil was a master homiletician and rhetorician. According to Mark DelCogliano, Basil preached with an awareness that people can only take in so much information at once

26. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 19.

27. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 21.

28. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 21.

29. Anatolios, *Retreiving Nicaea*, 26.

without feeling overwhelmed.³⁰ Second and closely tied to the first, DelCogliano emphasizes that Basil preached in such a way and with the hope that his hearers would take something immediately applicable into their lives as Christians from his words.³¹ Third and again according to DelCogliano, Basil was committed to the application of the doctrine of the Trinity to Christian living with the caveat the people remember that though a model Christians can look to, it is not reflexive. From Basil's words and DelCogliano's explanation of Basil's priorities, Christians can draw the conclusion that it was a priority of Basil's for people to recognize that while people are image bearers of God, God's unknowability must always remain a primary consideration. The immanent experience of God within persons or a community must not overwhelm the transcendent nature of God that exceeds all human categories. This was the frame from which Basil spoke as interpreted by DelCogliano for the modern reader.

Basil the Great preached in the mid-to-late 370s and is also known as Basil of Caesarea. As the bishop in Cappadocia during the intermittent time between rulers Constantine and Theodosius, Basil's view carried the emphases of Nicaea toward the further expression of the Council of Constantinople. His homily "On Not Three Gods Against Those Who Calumniate us, Claiming That We Say That There Are Three Gods," took place around 370, approximately forty years after Nicaea and ten years before Constantinople. Facing opposition from his mentor Athanasius and being accused of being both polytheistic and of conflating the doctrine of the Trinity into various expressions of the single being of God, Basil had enough and preached a sermon saying

30. DelCogliano, Mark, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, Popular Patristics Series 47 (Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 19.

31. DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 19.

as much. Basil's "Homily on Not Three Gods" stands as both a lightning rod in pushing back and a link to why such doctrine is important to an intergenerational project within congregational small groups as is explained below.

The specificity of the three distinctions, modes, or persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was crucial for Basil when contrasted with the notion that they were simply shifting expressions of the same substance. Basil emphasized the differences between the three persons of the Godhead within the Trinity but also maintained that they are of the same substance and all equally divine. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit have simultaneously been present throughout all time. Those prior to Basil had ascribed to a derivation of substance, a formula among the members of the Trinity, as well as successive subordination as described above: from God the Father processed the Son, and then and the most ontologically distant, the Holy Spirit. Rather than taking the Gospel writer of John's words as instructive, descriptive, and accurate saying that God the Father and Christ the Son are one and are continually present in the world through the Spirit (John 16 and 17) in his "Homily on Not Three Gods," Basil directs the attention of his hearers to John 1:1, John 1:14, and the ordering of the verbs therein. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Basil simply took the text at its word and conveyed what he surmised in the Spirit saying, "Do not examine what has not always existed to learn about what always exists."³²

Emphasizing the identity of Jesus, Basil calls the hearer of his message back to the very beginning of the Torah: "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen 1:26). Harkening

32. DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 274.

divine community, the writer of John reminds the reader that the presence of the Word was with God in the beginning, as the Spirit hovered over the deep. The divinity of the Word, the Son, is unchanged regardless of the order of the events in the economy of human experience of the incarnate. Basil implores,

Indeed, we ought to know about what we can speak and about what we must keep silent. Not all words can be uttered by the tongue, for fear that our intellect, like an eye that wants to take in the whole of the sun, will lose even the light that it has. For knowledge is a question of knowing that you do not fully comprehend. So then, that begetting which is ineffable, let us revere it in silence. For that ineffable begetting is awesome because of its nature, but this nature is hard to explain because of its otherness.³³

In this homily, Basil emphasizes to his hearers the importance not only of human assent to the presence of a communal God in three distinct roles but also to the existence of this immanent presence from the beginning. The triune God is communal creator and sustainer of all. Most important to note is the inclusion of people in category of “all.” The existence of humans exemplifies that, though people desire to understand and specify the ontology of human origin, the universe, and the Trinity, persons are subject ultimately to the limits of human understanding and divine revelation of these things. Further, regardless the order of appearance of the trinitarian members in Scripture, the divinity of each remains eternal and unchanged. The action of each in the economy of human experience does not dictate or impact what is true about each. Because human comprehension is limited, Basil implores his audience in his homily repeated by DelCogliano “that begetting, which is ineffable, let us revere it in silence.”³⁴

33. DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 275.

34. DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 275.

Basil's work reminds the church that the purpose of the gathering of the body is the "mutual exchange of love" both as Christ's body and as a communion fellowship of saints. Paul warns the Galatian church, "If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal 5:15). The same experience was taking place in Basil's day as the people tore at one another's understanding of the Trinity.

The Trinity and the people of God are like grains of sand. When compacted together, they build a great dwelling, encompassing and housing the presence of God. They remain distinct from one another in identity and function, yet they constantly pour into and receive from one another in perichoresis. Throughout his preaching, Basil emphasized the body of peace and the love that unifies not only the Trinity but also the Church. This same model strikes directly to the heart of intergenerational small groups. Folk come together for the exchange of the goods of Christian community, reciprocity, mutuality, and vulnerability, which is the same perichoretic fullness of love as that which DelCogliano quotes Basil as saying has been "established by our fathers."³⁵ Basil's homily demonstrates the history, both divine and human, of this mutual reception. It is because of the unity of the Trinity, the bedrock for the unity within diverse, intergenerational expressions of church, that ancient and modern Christians find reason to gather. It is here that the love of God, which is both the root and the fruit of the mission of God, finds its truest human expression. The Trinity and its reflection in intergenerational communities of faith is prescient reminder of both what awaits people and has always been most true, reflecting the proclamation of the Psalmist: God has

35. DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 271.

hemmed people in behind and before, and participants feel the comforting, magnificent weight of God's hand (Ps 139:5).

Recounting the Presence of the Trinity in Scripture

First, Genesis 1 affirms the initial presence of both God and the Spirit: "In the beginning when God created...a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (1:2). John's Gospel locates Christ's presence at creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John further names the Word "light," a light whose purpose was to "shine in the darkness" and not be overcome, a light by which the hearts of everyone might be enlightened (John 1:5, 9; Eph 1:18).

The Genesis 18 account of the Lord's appearance to Abraham demonstrates the first human experience of the Trinity to which creation refers: "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him" (Gen 18:1-2).³⁶ Abraham was introduced to the one Lord who is three.

Second, Jesus entered the world as God incarnate. He was the very imprint of God expressed in human form. The fourth century Council of Nicaea agreed he was the very presence of God, equal to God in every way, rather than acting in subordination as a created being (Heb 1:3). Cahalan highlights that Jesus, present with God and "of the same substance, *homoousios*, as God," entered the world and presented himself as a living sacrifice "at the right time" (Rom 5:6).³⁷ With Christ's coming as the light, creation was

36. Russian painter Andrei Rublev's famous depiction of this scene is housed in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

37. Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010),

reiterated. God's first move in partnership with the "wind from God" was to reveal the light and served as a foreshadowing of redemption to come, which was Jesus' very presence lighting the world. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," and now sits at God's right side praying for the Church (John 8:12, Rom 8:34).

Third, John shares Jesus' promise of the arrival of the Advocate, "the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father," through and alongside whom Christians testify to the life of Christ (John 15:26–7). This promise comes to fruition both when Jesus breathes his Spirit onto his followers in John 20 and in Jerusalem at Pentecost in Acts 2. The followers "were all together in one place. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:2, 4). Paul's account of his visitation while traveling to Damascus further concretizes the role of the Spirit in the life of the church: "Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:3–5). The Spirit who met Paul, the Spirit of the ascended Christ, inhabited the apostles and continues to indwell followers, testifying through their words and actions to Jesus Christ.

Social Trinitarian Aspects

One difference between cultural perspectives in the Eastern hemisphere and in the West involves the human tendency to move through the world with either a naturally

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1706743&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>, 151.

communal or an innately individual bend. The Eastern brothers and sisters of the Orthodox tradition help those in the West envision the *imago Dei* as inherently relational. Easterners view themselves in terms of their relationship to their community, looking through this relational frame when considering community life in the church. This view helps when considering intergenerational community. In *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Holly Catterton Allen emphasizes that rather than downplaying or diminishing individual differences, individual thriving is exponentially increased in a diverse relational context.³⁸ Partnering with this notion in her book *Decolonizing Preaching*, Sarah Travis systematically describes the tendency all people have toward centering and elevating their own perspectives.³⁹ Paul reminds early Christians in Phil 2:5–8 of the self-giving relationships based upon deference, service, and the raising up and glorification of Christ in one another that have long been a part of Christian tradition.

This is a different kind of community, one formed by God. Because this fellowship is formed by the Spirit of the trinitarian God, it is communal by nature and is marked by the fruits of the Spirit of God. Catterton Allen furthers the dividing walls of exclusion being replaced with the gifts of peace and unity amid diversity.⁴⁰ In intergenerational community; authority and the ability to have a good idea is not reserved for only those of a certain age. The voices of all people are attended to, heard, and

38. Holly Catterton Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Second edition., ed. Christine Marie Lawton and Cory Seibel (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 78.

39. Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space*, Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

40. Catterton Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 85.

considered. The gift of doing the work of Christ is assigned according to the equipping by the Spirit for each task and not simply given to the older generation by default. Catterton Allen says generations “dance” together in fellowship that involves “give and take.”⁴¹ It is the “best way of all” that Paul describes and Jesus exemplifies in his life, the essentially communal way in which the Holy Spirit leads people, the way of love that supersedes the gifts of individuals (1 Cor 12:31).

Travis contends that an understanding of “God’s inner being and nature” must influence how people understand their own.⁴² People’s understandings of themselves have always been reflected their view of God. In seeing God’s communal nature clearly, people see this image reflected in the Christian community. The prophet Isaiah references this rich and diverse community: “The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa 11:6). Pulling back the veil of earthly circumstances and apocalyptically pointing to divine reality, the revelator says, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev 21:3). Living in close Christian community with intergenerational, divine image bearers is a way of claiming God’s eternal promises in daily life.

Bending toward humanity, the Trinity exemplified in the life of Christ emphasizes the commonality of the people Jesus chose as companions and through whom he intends for God’s mission in the world to continue. Time and again in his letters, Paul deemphasizes the differences in people that demonstrate representative distinctions of

41. Catterton Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 88.

42. Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching*, 54.

worldly power. Our differences are a strength. The intergenerational diversity that exists in small group community only offers an opportunity for persons to learn from one another in mutuality what it means to believe and have faith in the presence of Christ in their midst, which Paul says is the only thing that matters (Col 3:11). People are not “qualified” for fellowship with God or service to God or the church based on any other bit of data. None are worthy but all are invited to the fellowship table of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the entire world (John 1:29). Our interactions with one another as we fellowship in intergenerational Christian community bear the priceless opportunity to magnify the impact of this truth.

Homogeneity and the flattening out of differences is not the mission of the kingdom of God. Travis says, “Self-giving does not involve loss of self. Rather, as the self gives something of itself, it limits itself in order to be expanded by the other.”⁴³ God continually chooses to join human community, indwelling in Spirit. Human diversity is created by God, and God exemplifies the value with which God holds these differences within the three persons of the Trinity. Though all members have been present in immanence since the beginning, according to John’s Gospel, each continually serves a differently nuanced function that diversifies the economy of God. Humans have a glimpse of the activity of God because of the life of Jesus and have the possibility to reason with the mind of Christ because of the indwelling leading and empowering nature of the Spirit. (2 Cor 2:16). Travis concludes, “We are who we are not because we are separate from the others who are next to us, but because we are *both* separate *and* connected, *both* distinct *and* related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both

43. Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching*, 66.

barriers and bridges.”⁴⁴ People are both separated from and connected to one another, expanding the image of God in the church and in the world.

Application

A robust understanding of the Trinity shapes a healthy vision of the church. Each member has a specific function unique to that person, but in the church, persons remain part of one body. Simply, Robert A. Muthiah in *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* states this: “As the Trinity is constituted by relationships, so the church is constituted by relationships.”⁴⁵ All parts are recognized, named, and celebrated. It is within this context that the gifts God has provided the community of faith are openly received. Joining lives in service to God both within and outside Christian community is essential to the church and has been since the earliest days in Jerusalem and Antioch. The instinct of a self-reflective, trinitarian God is to seek out what Cahalan names the “deepest possible communion” with all creatures.⁴⁶ Perichoretically, Christians reflect this mutuality and reciprocity. Ecclesiologically, Christians live life together, each bearing the image of God before one another. This life bears a different witness to a wanting world, to a drifting college student (or a very busy one!), and to anyone looking to belong.

44. Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching*, 70.

45. Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 57.

46. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 149.

In a way that is reflective of the trinitarian persons, membership within a church creates a dynamic membership of one another. It is an active, circular, and cyclical membership of forming one another as disciples and ministering to the glory of God for the sake of people. God participates in relationship, and our existential, baptismal connection to one another means people minister most effectively when they serve their unique roles and relate to one another in a body of fellowship. The Spirit's habitation of each member, as Muthiah reminds is accepted by each person in baptism, is the single most unifying factor.⁴⁷ Believers live perichoretically with one another, unified by and filled with the Spirit of Christ. Continuing, Muthiah says, "If a person is in the Spirit, and the Spirit is in another person, then a form of person-to-person indwelling does exist."⁴⁸ This demonstrates the combined essence and activity of humanity and divinity. God's metaphysical presence proves active in the lives of people. Intergenerational small groups have added an additional expression of identity to both DIG groups and Highland small groups. This mode of being in GRIT has created a time and a space for God to do something new in the gathered lives of people.

Community is essential for the passing on of faith. The passing on of faith is an art, an expression of beauty in which Christians place themselves and their lives in the hand of God as the master artist. Human lives are God's brush from which flow the colors of life made beautiful with divine elements and skill. Artist Makoto Fujimura writes about *Kintsugi*, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with lacquer, sealing

47. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 67.

48. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 66.

the cracks with pure gold. Fujimura explains: “The Japanese *kin* stands for ‘gold’ and *tsugi* means ‘to reconnect.’ *Tsugi* carries the spirit of generational connectivity.”⁴⁹

Peter challenges Christians to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Earlier in his letter, Peter reminds the hearers of their living hope that exists because of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection. When Christians give an account for their hope, they explain instances in their lives when their own suffering and weakness has been redeemed by Christ’s resurrection and has proven their faith. Faith proves itself in redemption God alone offers yet which the hands and feet of Christian brothers and sisters can vivify and bear to one another. In submitting to intergenerational community Christians avail themselves of opportunities to testify to the difference their faith has made, and for faith to be passed on intergenerationally. Fujimura says this: faith “must grow and be sown into the soils of culture, be fed by spring rains of love to be cultivated into multiple generations.”⁵⁰ Intergenerational small group connections provide the cultural field in which this cultivation and growth takes place.

While balancing appropriate mystery, as Basil admonished Christians to do in his homily, intergenerational communities of faith demonstrate the incarnation of the Trinity through their reflection of the *imago Dei* and the empowering of the Spirit. These social aspects of the Trinity assist Highland members in seeking intergenerational partnerships with university students and vice versa. As Catterton Allen emphasizes, relationships and

49. Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale, 2020), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIACO210614001270&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>, 44.

50. Fujimura, *Art and Faith*, 72.

partnerships in the church reflect those of the persons of the Trinity and function in mutuality, equity and reciprocity in their diversity.⁵¹ God’s ability to be distinctly three but also one gives hope. A knowable God who desires to not only be with people but also be within them elevates diversity, creating an energizing balance of humility and confidence in both trinitarian reflections and human relationships in the church.

Theoretical Foundations

The *Growing Young* model, developed by Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin in conjunction with Fuller Youth Institute and adopted by the Highland Church of Christ, offers six core commitments to which the executive leadership team of Highland adhere. These *Growing Young* commitments include: “Keychain Leadership, Empathy, Taking Jesus’ Message Seriously, Fueling Warm Community, Prioritizing Young People and Their Families Everywhere, and Being the Best Neighbors.”⁵² The team at the time, Suzetta Nutt, Ben Siburt, Carin Ezzell, Zane Witcher, and David Sessions, suggested steppingstones by which individuals and groups can create a path that includes the *Highland Restoration Vision* as well as participate in activities which coincide with these six tenets. Highland continually cultivates Fuller’s concepts of “Keychain Leadership” and “Fueling a Warm Community” as well as nurturing additional seedlings of an emended restoration vision. As explicated by preaching minister Shane Hughes in a 2022 sermon, this vision “Re|Storation: A 2025

51. Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 87.

52. Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1530202&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>.

vision for the Highland Church of Christ” was cultivated in and fertilized by this project in ways that particularly applied to small groups of all ages.⁵³

Fuller Youth Institute’s concept of “Keychain Leadership” translates, in the 2025 Highland vision, to “Re|New.” Highland is committed to remaining what Powell, Mulder, and Griffin describe as an “entrepreneurial incubator” for ideas relative to how to “hand the keys” of church leadership over to people of all generations, including young adults.⁵⁴ In the driving metaphor, this involves a great deal more than switching places and allowing a different driver into the front seat, possibly throwing them into the deep end. Some might look at the key and the ignition and say, “How do I turn this thing on?” (As I did!). Cars are different these days, and travel begins with the push of a button. Churches are different these days, too. Intergenerational small groups provide needed partnership in discipleship and ministry in such ways that adversarial ideas that folk must “go it alone” dissipate, and people can draw upon the strengths of one another.

The “Re|New” aspect of Highland’s 2025 vision involves what Powell, Mulder, and Griffin highlight: “sharing power with the right people at the right time.”⁵⁵ The right people include the next generation, and the right time is the present. Fuller asked pastoral leaders to account for the success they were having with young people, and the most consistent response expressed by 48 percent of leaders included handing the keys of church leadership to young people. In intergenerational small groups, these ideas do not flow unilaterally; there is a bilateral exchange of trust and power. Powell, Mulder, and

53. Shane Hughes, *Vision Sermon 2* (Highland Church of Christ, 2022).

54. Hughes, *Vision Sermon 2*.

55. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 50.

Griffin refer to sixteenth-century German theologian Martin Luther’s reformed notion of church leadership which Peter expressed in 1 Pet 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”⁵⁶ All Christians are priests and are called by God to serve in meaningful ways. In this model, leadership exists in a different frame, not one in which some watch passively while a few dominate. All believers have voice and responsibility, as well as spiritual gifts to contribute in order for church life to exist in its fullest expression. In Powell, Mulder, and Griffin’s research for *Growing Young*, “Many of the teenagers and emerging adults interviewed wish they had more connection with those in older generations.”⁵⁷ It’s all about transparency: sharing feelings, confessing mistakes, bringing brokenness into the light, and finding common ground. Peter admonishes Christians to explain the living hope that they have, and this requires their confession of the difference that faith in God’s strength and greatness has made in real life (1 Pet 3:15). One parent surveyed by Fuller Youth Institute acclaimed those “investing in our kids not for any other type of outcome than simply to get to know them and learn who they are. That seems to resonate with them. They are just loved on.”⁵⁸ This blade cuts both ways. Both younger and older folk desire relationship for its own sake. In the church, persons who are about helping one another realize and articulate the essentiality of one another’s presence.

56. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 56.

57. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 59.

58. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 64.

God’s people, especially God’s successful leaders, have always functioned in relationship with wise others, those both older and younger. Jethro, father-in-law of Moses said, “This is too much work for you; you can’t do it by yourself” (Ex 18:18). Moses’ successor Joshua was told by God, “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you” (Josh 1:5). Young Samuel mediated between the Lord and people in God’s appointment of a human king to lead them in 1 Sam 8:22. God called and commissioned Jeremiah as prophet to the priests even before his birth (Jer 1:4–5). Jesus as Lord and Teacher served his followers, tasking them as messengers to carry the truth of the story of his life among them and to remain spiritually fruit-bearing (John 15:16). Paul emphasized to the Corinthian and Ephesian churches that all parts of the body of Christ are essential (1 Cor 12:12; Eph 1:12). In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul provides the trinitarian crown jewel of this scriptural discussion, Christ giving up his right to heaven so humans might have eternal hope and so the world could see God (Phil 2:7). Community can be difficult because community is people and people are different, but the Spirit directs people according to the will of God, giving them both the desire and the ability to do what pleases God (Phil 2:13).⁵⁹ Community is a difference maker in advancing the mission of God.

Fuller Youth Institute’s concept of “Fueling a Warm Community” translates, in the 2025 Highland vision, to “Re|Kindle.”⁶⁰ Feelings of warmth, authenticity, familiarity, and belonging form what many describe as a “family atmosphere” in churches. Space is created for relationships in churches experiencing warm community. Powell, Mulder, and

59. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 74.

60. Hughes, *Vision Sermon 2*.

Griffin emphasize the intentionality warm community requires saying:

“Deprogramming,” eliminating unnecessary busyness and creating space for relationship allows the flexibility for shared meals, shared service in the community, shared transportation, and shared lives.⁶¹ Additionally, the authors of *Growing Young* quote theologian Christine Pohl as she describes “a willingness to make one’s life visible to others.”⁶² Because an authentic relationship is full of human ups and downs, this visibility brings unparalleled clarity demonstrating the hope that Christians have.

Fuller Youth Institute reports that 45 percent of people ages nineteen to twenty-three say they stay connected and involved in a church because of personal relationships.⁶³ Personal relationships, like families, are messy. Yet young people want this from a congregation. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin say, “They desire not only to share their own messiness but also to walk alongside the authentic messiness of others.”⁶⁴ Truthfully most people including these authors would agree that most folk like things nice and tidy, but when people trust the Lord with the uncertainties of life, Powell, Mulder, and Griffin suggest that God’s creative energy emerges.⁶⁵ It becomes clear when people enter the messiness of one another they are not alone. The difficulties of life and even those of community are ancient challenges, but as Daniel prophesied to the king of

61. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 167.

62. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 170.

63. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 167.

64. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 170.

65. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.380668&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>.

Babylon, people share community and a faithful God who specializes in untangling the hard knots of life (Dan 5:12).

Young people are not the only ones who desire and need reciprocal warmth, yet as the limitations show, different generations typically have differing levels of comfort with warmth and intimacy in Christian community. Regardless, as Powell, Mulder, and Griffin have observed, “reciprocal authenticity”— or the sharing of both successes and failures rather than feigned immunity to the bumps and bruises of life—”warms up the whole church.”⁶⁶ Intergenerational relationships develop best when initiated intentionally and nurtured organically. “Churches with close intergenerational relationships show higher faith maturity and vibrancy.”⁶⁷ For this vibrant expression to occur in the life of a church, rows must be created for relational seeds to be sown. Intergenerational small groups create such rows. Relationships cultivated here join the fruit of wisdom and experience with that fresh perspective and eager willingness to try new things. These two frames of reference join to water the seeds of faith present in the lives of all the members, of varying ages, involved. The two nurturing perspectives merge in the growing of faith-seeds. Each member becomes a part of the life and faith of all the others. As Paul describes in his letter to the church in Rome, “We who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom 12:5).

Again, it is in joining that Christians find strength. As unfair as it would be to hand a new driver fresh with a permit from the DMV the keys and expect them to make all the right turns, congregants cannot expect the young generation to innately “know” the

66. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 173.

67. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 173.

things they had to learn themselves. Especially if they have never even started the car before, they need a partner from which to learn, someone who will generously take the time to model and explain. In our post-modern era, an information era in which people feel pressure to know every bit of information to which they have access, partnership is even more vital.

Students in this project desired a de-centering point of reference to a locus outside themselves and offering something greater of which to be a part. The best part of life together is the nitty-gritty, the moments, the conversations, and the silences that make up the days, the weeks, and the months. This project was no different. The teacher in Ecclesiastes reminds of the trinitarian reflection, “A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (4:12). People share life with a God who shares life.⁶⁸ The participants recorded the unfolding of life together in intergenerational small groups, GRIT, and together desire the reader feel welcomed to the tables, to the living rooms, and to the fire pits around which life took place in fall 2022.

68. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age: Divine Action, The Early Church, and Relational Leadership Theory in Conversation,” 120.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

“When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others.” (Phil 2:4)

This project intervention is to evaluate the GRIT initiative by utilizing focus group methodology. After a four-month project partnership between Highland small groups and DIG groups organized through Highland University Ministry, three sets of focus groups convened and offered what the researcher and the observer triangulated into an informative data set. The focus groups reflected on key learning as well as activity outside of the official group meetings. Aspects of key learning within this project include experiences of spiritual growth, intergenerational discipleship, and various group perspectives on what Powell, Mulder, and Griffin describe as “passing the keys of leadership” and “fueling a warm community.”¹ Leaders made choices that influenced the group’s experience of mutuality, diversity, reciprocity, and equality, and influenced dynamics of authority which changed the experiences in the different groups. They shared about all of this in the focus groups as the reader will see in the following two chapters. Groups included: 1. Highland small group leaders, 2. student and adult DIG leaders, and 3. “Point Team” student leaders. Additionally, field notes from the GRIT meetings offered a preliminary perspective on what took place during the group times. Demonstrating the multi-methods, narrative, experiential, and introspective nature of

1. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

qualitative research, these field notes are documented in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 recounts the focus groups. Data were gathered from the field in a way that correlate appropriately with the present short lifespan of the GRIT groups being assessed and provides feedback that will inform the sort of further ministry evaluation and augmentation David L. Morgan forecasts based on his research in the area of focus group methodology.² This project adheres to Tim Sensing’s quote of Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln’s definition of *qualitative research*: “Qualitative research locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible.”³ Dr. Tim Sensing admonishes that qualitative research is a multi-methods approach.⁴ Denzin and Lincoln elaborate:

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. . . . Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interviews; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and interconnected interpretive practices hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand.⁵

This qualitative research project intervention finds its footing in the diagnostics of practical theology. In this qualitative research project, theory and practice come together in the observation of context toward theological ends utilizing Richard Osmer’s description of the four-fold model of the tasks of practical theology: the empirical, the

2. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

3. Tim Sensing, “What in the World Is Research?” *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 8.1 (2022): Article 1, 2.

4. Sensing, “What in the World Is Research?,” 3.

5. Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Third edition. Sage Publications, Inc., 2005, 3–4.

analytical, the interpretive, and the pragmatic.⁶ While simultaneously engaging in and observing their GRIT groups, participants asked themselves, “What is going on here?” and invited all stakeholders to do the same. The observation and conversation notes represented below reflect how participants in the project aligned themselves, creating a merger between two different small groups as they birthed and articulated a mutual telos.

This project represents an engagement in evaluative research. As Dr. Tim Sensing describes, “The evaluation methodology will produce the data to answer the questions that fulfill the objectives” of the project.⁷ This project provides needed information for continued modification, innovation, and transformation in two Highland ministries, small groups and the university ministry. The people sought wisdom while sharing their experiences which were contained within the time and space of the project, as Sensing mentions, acknowledging that all practices, including those of the various small groups at Highland, have history and a larger context.⁸ This project developed a community of theological exploration within the body of Highland and generated knowledge for application within the church body. The groups described below represent present-tense partnerships seeking greater understanding of both their faith and the necessity of intergenerational relationships in spiritual growth. Members collaborated on such activities as writing vision statements and connecting ministerial and mutually discipling

6. Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008., 2008), 11.

7. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 93.

8. Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 20.

aspects of their lives over the course of the semester.⁹ This engagement within a community of research provided the idiographic knowledge John Swinton and Harriet Mowat recognize, discovered and interpreted within the unique, non-replicable, lived experiences of the group's life together.¹⁰

In this project, the adage attributed to Heraclitus, "No [person] ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and [they are] not the same [person]" holds true.¹¹ Consistent with the qualitative research model Swinton and Mowat describe, the task was delimited to the "lived [experience] of the individuals and groups" at one particular time and in a particular context of the Highland Church of Christ.¹² Research was not conducted upon individuals; rather, participants made a communal commitment to notice what the Lord was doing within and through them differently than when they might have approached ministry and discipleship alone or with a generationally homogenous group.

Ecology is an effective metaphor for this project. Organic formation is part of the DNA of this church. Given the organic history of Highland small groups, for intergenerational small groups to be sustainable, community and ministry opportunities must couple with room to grow. The fall 2022 semester provided a good launch pad.

9. Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 24.

10. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Second edition. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 41.

11. "Heraclitus Quotes," *BrainyQuote*, 15 April 2024, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/heraclitus_107157.

12. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 43.

This project intervention is itself an evaluation. Through the research a model for intergenerational small groups was created, implemented, and evaluated. Though different from Participatory Action Research, this communal evaluation of a group intervention retains many of the same elements; therefore, the PAR Ecology Map suggested by MIT CoLab provides guidance for this project and context.¹³ Because of the diverse expressions of small group community that have emerged over Highland's forty-year history of small group ministry, groups need space to organically express the ways in which they perceive the Spirit to be leading them. This project originated out of relationships with stakeholders built on trust, an aspect inherent to the project. The ecology metaphor, and guidance from the PAR Ecology Map, lends itself to this organic development and assessment of intergenerational small groups in community, which is a good fit for the two vibrant ministries within the Highland church.

The focus group methodology incorporated in this project relies on group discussions to generate data; group interactions represent the core of this research, as Morgan describes.¹⁴ The interaction of the group creates data that, without the engagement of the group, would be less accessible. In the focus group, "the researcher gains more data than one person's perspective or the answer to a question from a single participant. Additional data is generated as participants respond to one another in an organic and authentic way no researcher could dictate," as emphasized by Morgan.¹⁵ The emphasis on interaction strengthens the theological foundations of this project, weighing

13. "Participatory Action Research Maps," *MIT CoLab*, <https://www.colab.mit.edu/resources-1/2019/6/14/participatory-action-research-maps>.

14. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

15. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

responses to one another and mutuality as salvific for the life of intergenerational small groups. This life points to the future life of the church.

Following Morgan's suggestion, the role of the researcher was to maintain balance and consistency within each focus group, developing a protocol or interview guide for the group.¹⁶ This intentional design made it possible for the group to discuss with minimal influence or direction from either the researcher or the observer. The observer aided in retaining objectivity regarding recording and reporting data that truly reflected the interaction of the focus group. Mary Clark Moschella emphasizes that "participant observation involves being there."¹⁷ Shelby Coble, the participant observer for this project, is familiar with the context of Highland. She has spent time "hanging out with the students" and has "clues to the *habitus* and the main themes in this particular congregation," all important elements to which Mary Clark Moschella recommends the researcher attend.¹⁸ Together as researcher and participant observer, Coble and I balanced what Moschella describes as "breadth and depth of inquiry, sticking to the plan."¹⁹ The two of us were open to what came up in the life of the group.

The data from field notes²⁰ and focus groups allowed the research to take a mixed-methods approach to making recommendations for further iterations of GRIT extending beyond the fall of 2022. Focus groups, combined with field notes "serve to

16. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

17. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 70.

18. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 70.

19. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 71.

20. See Appendix B, "Protocol for Notetaking During Focus Groups."

uncover quantitative variables, develop existing information, and prescribe enhancements” as recommended by Morgan, for emendations to GRIT based on the coding protocol outlined below.²¹ The qualitative methodology in this intervention included purposive sampling. Swinton and Mowat describe aspects of purposive sampling to which I adhered in this project saying, “Purposive sampling is where the sample is specifically chosen because it offers the best chance of answering the question. The sample is usually taken at one point in time.”²² Focus groups convened in 2023 on January 25 (Highland small group leaders), January 26 (Point Team student leadership team members), February 5 (DIG leaders, both spiritual mentor adults and student go-to leaders), and March 5 (one inadvertently overlooked Highland small group leader). The three groups offered a triangulated, interactive, focused perspective including: 1. DIG student leaders and spiritual mentors, 2. Point Team/Oversight Team leadership of Highland University Ministry, and 3. Highland small group leaders. This triangulated perspective gets at the heart of what took place in the GRIT groups because GRIT groups contained representation from all three of these groups and from both of the standpoints of leadership and membership.

There were six discipleship groups in the fall 2022 DIG ministry and six Highland small groups participating together with DIG groups in GRIT. My role was both as a spiritual mentor representing Highland University Ministry as well as the leader of the project. I was a “collaborative partner,” a role the researcher plays in their own research

21. David L. (Sociologist) Morgan, “Uses for Focus Groups” in *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*, Sage Research Methods Core, (SAGE 2019), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781071814307.n2>, 17–26.

22. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 65.

as described by Sensing.²³ Participants described connection not only between their group's living out of their agreed-upon mission but also observed ties between the life of their GRIT groups, the Highland Pathway model, and the "2025 Highland Restoration Vision."

Additionally, the Highland staff and eldership were represented in the purposive sample. Two elders were involved in GRIT groups as well as one Highland staff member. No leader chose to opt out of project participation due to their leadership role.

The GRIT meetings themselves, scheduled for October 2, 16, November 13, and December 4, were key opportunities for gathering field notes. DIG spiritual mentor pairs were equipped with a notetaking protocol for these meetings.²⁴ Per Sensing's directions regarding qualitative research, notetakers did pay particular attention to demographics of the group, the physical settings of the meetings, the content of the events, the interactional patterns between participants, and the explicit verbal and written content of the meeting along with any associated implied meaning.²⁵ Notes were collected after each GRIT meeting as well as at the end of the semester. In evaluating the protocol after the first GRIT meeting in October, I chose to let the groups run as they needed.²⁶ People are people and need opportunity to experiment and engage without feeling a heavy burden to

23. Sensing quotes Merriam's *Qualitative Research*. "The defining characteristic of this stance is that the investigator and the participants are equal partners in the research process," Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 94.

24. See Appendix D, "Field Notes Protocol for GRIT Group Meetings."

25. Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 393–96.

26. Appendix D.

document and report. The evaluative information came in the triangulated focus group conversations. As noted below, Group Number Six took no notes at all on their meetings.

Fall GRIT meetings were foundational for the establishment and evaluation of intergenerational small groups at Highland. In addition to completing the necessary paperwork (including an informed consent form),²⁷ participants were asked to explore core aspects which included: agreeing upon a mission statement for their GRIT group, an overview of the vitality of multigenerational church, the theological and theoretical foundations of intergenerational small groups, as well as an exploration of generational types. For each of the four GRIT meetings, both DIG and Highland small group leaders received a leader guide for the week as well as a guide for their participants.²⁸

The Intervention

GRIT groups met four times throughout the 2022 fall semester. Six Highland small groups partnered with university small groups to form the GRIT groups described above. Some groups adjusted their meeting dates to suit their needs, which they were free to do. The member lists for each group are in Appendix G.

Groups were provided with a curriculum, located in Appendix E. Each meeting contained a leader guide and a participant guide, so if each person felt more comfortable holding a piece of paper and knowing exactly where the discussion was going, this was available. Some groups clearly felt more comfortable knowing there was a roadmap to follow and followed it the whole time. Others found their footing at the first meeting and went their own way after this cohesive launch. The first gathering directed each group to

27. See Appendix F for the Informed Consent.

28. See Appendix E for GRIT curricular “RoadMap.”

discuss their mission in joining their Highland small group with DIG for the semester and set a trajectory that matched their motivation. The second session of curriculum created space to examine generational theory and the idea that, while it can be impossible to assume one person's experience at a certain age is the same as another's, generations do tend to mirror one another, though not consecutively. The third session centered on an exploration of how the fellowship of the Trinity is reflected in the *koinonia* of Christian life, and the fourth addressed the question of the relevance of intergenerationality in church. At times churches can attract a single generation or demographic, and this last planned session created a space to discuss why this is so alongside the benefits of diversity of all types. Each one included a short teaching, some discussion questions, scripture, prayer, and an "I Will" statement, an aspect the students were already familiar with. This statement gave each group member an opportunity to self-select and publicly commit to completing an action item; this commitment was recorded by the group. Whomever led each succeeding meeting habitually opened the time with a check-in on how everyone's "I Will" statements went. This offered accountability and something to "do" rather than merely discuss and proved to be an element many Highland small groups liked. Some continued to utilize the "I Will" even after the conclusion of the GRIT project. After the first meeting, groups were free to pursue their joint vision and utilize the curriculum to the degree that they wished or found helpful.

The First GRIT Meeting

Most groups spent their time simply getting to know each other with lots of snacks and informal visiting. The notes reflect this as well as the fact that they asked each other to answer questions such as how long they had been attending Highland at the time,

what they do for a living, where they go to school, how they are classified, and even something that had brought them joy in the preceding week. Some groups disclosed their ages. Others talked about what they love about DIG or small group. To conclude their first meeting, group number one followed the structure of DIG, which was familiar to the university students, and asked each member of the group to commit to an action, or an “I Will” statement for the coming week. They agreed to “send a note or text of appreciation to a member of my GRIT group who represent a different generational stage than myself this week.”²⁹

At their first meeting, Group Number Two reported that “Community” and “Life Together with a Group” were the themes that threaded through their conversation.³⁰ In crafting³¹ their own personal group vision for the semester, they reflected together on the mission and vision of Highland, and how GRIT relates to this overall. Some of their reflections were as follows:

- Both Highland and GRIT call all people to God as see in Jesus.
- We are calling each other to the imitation of Christ.
- We are prayerfully joining together.
- We are ministering together as a small group and inviting university students to join in this ministry.
- As college students, we are interested in joining. I remember college kids volunteering when I was young, and I’m excited to join other aspects of the church.³²

The college students in this group were familiar with how it “feels” to be a part of a small group at church. The students expressed the importance of seeing people they know at

29 Rainey H., “GRIT Group #1,” October 2022.

30. Mary Ann H., “GRIT Group #2,” October 2022.

31. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

32. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

church. One student recalled their parent emphasizing to them, as they “went off” to college, to connect with the wisdom of older people at church. The group queried rhetorically why they have not “worked together” in Highland-related ministry prior to this time, and the reason became clear. “We don’t work together because we don’t know each other.”³³

Group Number Two set as their mission for the semester to “Get to know each other in intergenerational relationships in order to make Highland smaller for everyone in this group.”³⁴ The Highland members intentionally shared where they could easily be located during worship services: “We sit on the left, usually.”³⁵ They made plans to serve together at the coming Fall Festival and created a contact list so they could easily communicate in between meetings.

The notes from the first meeting of Group Number Three indicate a different dynamic than the groups mentioned above. The students and the Highland small group members shared some personal information, their jobs, their major studies, their hobbies, but the balance of the time was didactic, with an adult teaching and the young adult students mostly listening. The adult taking notes owned the home in which they were meeting, and one of the spiritual mentors from DIG led the conversation for the most part. During a later meeting a student notetaker mentioned this dynamic as being “pretty formal” and “not necessarily bad, just different than normal small group meetings.”³⁶ The group listened to the leader discuss a history of Highland small groups, and the purpose

33. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

34. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

35. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

36. Christine G., “GRIT Group #3,” October 2022.

and mission for which they were developed in the mid-1980s. They shared about the “Restoration Vision,” including Highland, Abilene, and the world, as well as the “Know and Be Known Pathway,” containing “Worship, Baptism, Table, and Cross.” The group experienced a light-hearted moment of gratitude for the table fellowship facilitated by GRIT, and the leader proceeded to unpack the “Re|New” and “Re|Kindle” aspects of the Highland vision. Again, the notetaker for the first meeting referenced how the students mostly listened as the adult leader talked to them about “growing as a team” and “being flexible.”³⁷ The mission connection of Highland was noted as not appearing to resonate with the students as much as did the purpose of small groups.

The dynamics of Group Number Four’s first meeting were different than any thus far since this Highland small group was made up of families with children ranging in ages from kindergarten all the way up to a high school freshman. The meeting took place before a meal, and most of the kids sat, with their shoes off, on the floor in the middle of a combined circle of adults and students. This being the first time, the group discussed briefly how to integrate the natural rhythms of the two types of small groups. The group agreed to follow the regular Highland small group’s rhythm for a meeting in someone’s home and talk for about forty-five minutes before dinner. The entire group really engaged in the time, including the children, and the conversation went on for over an hour.

For this group, the university student leaders, called “Go-To” leaders in the DIG model, led the discussion, which was the regular rhythm for this university small group. They shared the importance for the younger generation of Christians at Highland to receive the “keys” of leadership from the older folks while also being taught about the

37. Lexi L., “GRIT Group #3,” October 2022.

metaphorical “car” that is the church and learning its quirks. One small group member shared about how easy it can be for students to feel siloed and disconnected from the larger body of the church. One spiritual mentor, an adult member of the DIG group, said, “We can’t do ministry without eighteen to twenty-two-year-olds.”³⁸ A college student shared the background behind the desire of the students to be a part of the church right now, and a part of the ministry lives of the members of the church, and described both the blessing and the challenge of meeting off-site during the height of the COVID pandemic. The group continued to discuss the obstacles to community in a church the size of Highland and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to see and reconnect with different people in this merger of small groups. One Highland member shared about the growth he has seen over several years and noted how the church had gained traction in becoming more welcoming and intentional. It is easy for college students to be overlooked, the value they can add be dismissed because of the relatively short time they will be a part of the church, but this group expressed how they see and hold this value. They shared how important this time in life is for students as they build a framework that incorporates intergenerational partnerships and relationships in church that they will take with them wherever they go in life. They described this opportunity as a mutually teachable moment for the “purpose of nurturing intergenerational, lifelong relationships and communication between generations.”³⁹ One student reiterated the fact that the

38. Ella H., “GRIT Group #4,” October 2022.

39. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

university students do not desire a designated “spot” that is separate from the life and work of the body of the church.⁴⁰

Before dismissing to eat together, the group talked about the “I Will” statements that the students are used to engaging at the conclusion of their small group meeting times. The students expressed how they like to leave their time together with an intention set, and a specific way to check in with one another. The group agreed that one member would begin to build a mission statement for the semester and bring a draft for group feedback at the next meeting. There was a “freestyle” option, which many chose, sharing how they would personally design their action commitment for the time in between GRIT gatherings and creating a challenge for themselves. This group closed this portion of their meeting with a prayer for the group and for their meal and then dismissed to eat and engage in small talk, getting to know one another better. In this group, this was the time when conversations about majors and jobs took place. Noted themes from this meeting included welcoming and relationships.⁴¹

The university students in Group Number Five had the luxury of drawing on the experiences of some of the most elderly, yet active, Christian women at Highland. Their small group partner has a name and are the “Sunday Sisters” referred to in chapter one. The “Sunday Sisters” have met continually for over forty years. Accordingly, their first meeting took place in a comfortable living room after a meal, and they sat around and told stories. The students asked the “Sunday Sisters,” “What group is the best you have ever been a part of?” Several of the “Sisters” reflected, touching on different aspects of

40. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

41. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

welcome and belonging. One remembered being a part of a group centered around, as she recalled, not giving up on people and making sure everyone felt welcome. One member of the “Sunday Sisters” described her second marriage as one of the best “groups” of which she had ever been a part, as well as what made it so. Lynn Anderson, former preacher at Highland at the inception of this unique Highland small group, had told her and her husband to make time to spend together without their children. This advice impacted their personal relationship. During the 1970s, as she recalled, Anderson also shared wisdom from his preaching pulpit that made a difference between “legalism and love” for this group of women and their view of belonging at Highland.⁴²

The “Sunday Sisters” then asked the university students to articulate the “small acts of service” into which they have felt called.⁴³ Several students offered different ideas that included making intentional space for time with their youth groups growing up, having intentional conversations with friends, participating in action-oriented chapel opportunities such as the Human Collective at ACU, teaching piano lessons to kids, helping a friend out with a class, and working at Rainbow Bible School with the two-year-olds.

Themes from this group’s first meeting include exploration and identity. They took advantage of their generational differences and examined the lesson in the curriculum entitled “Generational Theory” and asked the question, “Are grandparents really like their grandkids?” Answers fell toward both sides, yes and no. The group discussed generational influences: war and conflict. The seriousness of this turn in the

42. Leah Jarvis, “GRIT Group #5,” October 2022.

43. Jarvis, “GRIT Group #5.”

discussion quieted the university students, and the group turned to their next planned activity for their gathering, an art project, making cards to send as a service to a group the “Sunday Sisters” had targeted for this blessing.

Group Number Six took no notes at their GRIT meetings, but their experiences were reflected in the focus group notes. The Highland small group leader attached to their group was especially helpful in sharing about their experiences together.

Successive GRIT Meetings

Over the balance of the fall 2022 semester, the GRIT group meetings diversified relative to the needs of each group and their differing missions. Group Number One stayed true to the form of their first meeting, and their times together remained structured and directed. In one later meeting, Group Number One characterized their faith at different stages in life with descriptive words from the generational theory curriculum.

This group described their faith at different ages in the following ways:

University Students in Their Youth (prior to age 22)

- Influenced
- Doubting
- Experimental
- Foundational

Highland Small Group Members in Their Youth (prior to age 22)

- Learning
- Experiences were limited by exposure
- Influencer, even to those older than me
- Confirmational

University Students as Young Adults

- Teaching
- Mentoring

Highland Small Group Members as Adults

- Tested
- Exploration
- Hopeful
- Anticipation
- Verifiable

The adults in the group shared what the transition to the next phase of life involves in terms of their faith, suggesting the following:

- Always waiting for stability, the next milestone or goal.
- Remaining mindful that God is “not finished with me yet.”⁴⁴
- Faithfully living into my heritage.
- Growing in knowledge and relationship with God.
- Taking time to “stop and smell the roses” while remaining goal oriented.⁴⁵
- Cultivating a grateful, thankful heart.
- Praying the simple prayer, “Thank you, Lord,” daily.⁴⁶

The students and the adults reflected on things they would have done differently in prior stages of life if they had known then what they know now. Student comments include:

- I’d have been a better friend and remembered to pray.
- “When I felt like giving up friends advised, ‘wait for it’ (in prayer). I never understood why they wouldn’t give me the answer. There is a reason why we are here.”⁴⁷
- Sometimes those people in my life on whom my faith is founded are afraid of learning new things about the life of faith because then they might have to change in some ways.

The adult small group members shared:

44. H., “GRIT Group #1.”

45. H., “GRIT Group #1.”

46. H., “GRIT Group #1.”

47. H., “GRIT Group #1.”

- “If we put all our problems in a pile, we’d probably pick the same ones up again. Hard problems bring blessings.”⁴⁸
- Change is constant throughout generations.

Some members of Group Number One made a practice of either writing a note or a text to another member of a different generation throughout the week. Others committed to pray daily for someone of a different generation in their GRIT group, with the intent to tell them about this rhythm at their next meeting, after it had been taking place for some time. Some chose to reflectively journal about the generational similarities and differences in their own lives, thinking of their children and grandchildren. This group habitually prayed together at the close of their meetings.

A successive meeting in Group Number Two revealed similar themes as the adults shared about their own, personal early influences in faith. One Highland member said that she had professors who believed in her and even invited her to small group meetings when she was in college. This gave her confidence. Another shared about working in the ACU Office of Student Life during college and how they felt valued by the other adult employees of the university working in that space. One named a colleague who was particularly influential in the area of spiritual disciplines and shared his own fire and fervor for Christ by teaching his co-workers about these important life rhythms.⁴⁹ Another member mentioned someone who taught them how to actually see people as humans rather than someone purely in need of conversion and how to love people as

48. H., “GRIT Group #1.”

49. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

people.⁵⁰ An additional influencer for some of the adults in this small group was described as someone who had helped define, lead, and partner in “domestic missions.”⁵¹ The Highland members in Group Number Two mentioned dorm directors, ACU summer camps, and countless friends and peers who had all been great partners on their road of faith.

At this meeting, Group Number Two asked their university students what they were looking forward to, or what they might be anxious about, when considering the next five years. Student responses included stability, adventure, advanced education including master’s-level and doctoral work, and hopes to be happy and content with a good job and good friends.

The continued meetings of Group Number Three created notes that reflected in a great amount of detail. Meeting number two consisted of more generational mixing from the get-go as the members of the two groups sat intermingled. The university students were quiet at the beginning. It took them awhile to speak, but rather than an uncomfortable feeling, they described a relaxed sense. The student notetaker expressed excitement about the two groups “being the image of Jesus to one another in some new ways” other than they have experienced in life to this point.⁵²

This group shared in a conversation like Group Number One and characterized their faith, in conversation with one another, during a youthful stage of life.

50. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

51. H., “GRIT Group #2.”

52. G., “GRIT Group #3.”

University Students in Their Youth (prior to age 22)

- Learning
- Influenced
- Experimental
- Doubting

Highland Small Group Members in Their Youth (prior to age 22)

- Respectful of older people
- Informational
- Influenced
- Foundational
- Affirmed/Desolate at intervals
- Exploration
- Hopeful
- Mentoring
- Anticipation a new heaven
- Authentic
- Verifiable

The Highland small group members continued to muse about their life-stage saying the following:

- They imagined more certainty at this point in life.
- They feel they are simultaneously maturing and embracing maturity.
- There are transitions all through life.
- Having children and a family is a busy life stage, but so is “empty nest.”⁵³

Members reflected on the fact that there is always another stage, and there are always future goals. Similar to Group Number One, one member shared the conviction that “God is not done with me yet” no matter what age a person might be.⁵⁴ Over the course of their lives, the Highland members in this GRIT group have found the common thread of daily growing in knowledge, in understanding, in love, and in relationship with God. They

53. Jackie C., “GRIT Group #3,” November 2022.

54. C., “GRIT Group #3.”

mentioned stopping to “smell the roses” and having a grateful heart while living in the present moment.

The university students of Group Number Three shared things they would have done differently if they had known at an earlier age and stage in life what they now know.

Here are their comments:

- I’d be a better friend.
- I’d be more patient to wait for answers in life, especially when advised by my mentors to do so.
- I’d be aware that there is much that goes on “behind the scenes.”⁵⁵
- I’d be willing and open to change, such as exploring new biblical translations. Often people are leery of these types of change.

The Highland members affirmed and reiterated that “we can learn from one another no matter what stage of life we are in. In every generation, things are going to change.”⁵⁶

This group also said, “My ninety-seven-year-old grandma says that if we took all our problems and put them in a pile, we’d probably go back and pick out our own same problems.”⁵⁷ As a group “I Will” statement, the members of this GRIT group chose both to send a text or a note during the weeks in between meetings to another member, and to pray for another member of the group.

Meeting number three found Group Number Three back at one of the Highland member’s homes, seated around a long table, considering questions posed by the DIG spiritual mentor. They explored different aspects of God and the ways these differences

55. C., “GRIT Group #3.”

56. C., “GRIT Group #3.”

57. C., “GRIT Group #3.”

are reflected in the specific community gathered around the table, requiring both flexibility and for individuals to prioritize understanding others over seeking to be understood. It was noted that this type of community also required vulnerability.

At a later meeting, Group Number Three also discussed the importance of service as well as some of the difficulties inherent in coordinating this for a group. Being judged by others creates apprehension as does the possibility of getting close to someone. In a church and ministry partnership, people sometimes move away. This has been hard. The group mentioned the importance of savoring relationships in college, and how small groups are a great way to do that. To trust human relationships faith is needed, both in people and in God.

One Highland member brought a mission statement to the second meeting of Group Number Four for the group's review and feedback. The proposed statement said, "We seek to create and promote a community of intergenerational Christ-seekers; an environment where both lost and found can find refuge. Based on a foundation of Christ's love and our own intentionality, we will equip His saints for the building up of the body of Christ." The group liked the following suggests in the first draft:

- As "Christ-seekers" we're here for a reason.
- "Lost and found" reminded the group that anyone of us can be lost and found.
- "Christ's love and our own intentionality" is a needed synergy.
- "Refuge" is critical because the world makes us tired.
- The "Body of Christ" means all and recognizes no particular age.

Other priorities for Group Number Two included welcoming, relationships, intentionality, and the call of the leaders to build up the members in the spirit of Eph

4:12: “Christ gave those gifts to prepare God’s holy people for the work of serving, to make the body of Christ stronger.” This group sees their role as instrumental in this process, and this vision was reflected in the crafting of their mission statement during their second meeting. “Any length of time we spend getting to know one another is time well spent.”⁵⁸

During the third meeting of Group Number Four, the group focused on the topic of community. The Highland members shared their experiences with faith in life to this point; one has several atheists in his family, and this has strengthened his faith. Both Highland members and university students took turns sharing aspects of their personal stories, telling what church has meant to them. These included the church functioning as an extended family, the way the college ministry at Texas A&M capitalized on the years they had with the students there, and the importance of attributes such as mutual acceptance, trust, empathy, and the way life wears us all thin. We need community; we need church, and we need each other. “It is nice to have a lot of people we enjoy being around,” one student said.⁵⁹ Students reflected and shared on their home churches, their high school youth groups, and about the blessing that all of this really has been in their lives. Children in the group reminded everyone that people are “anointed,” and it is important to let them serve. The take-away and the challenge from this meeting was for each member to find someone, unlike themselves in some way, to learn from, and to engage the opportunity. “You need them.”⁶⁰ One Highland family shared their intention

58. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

59. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

60. H., “GRIT Group #4.”

to serve in the city at Thanksgiving and Christmas and invited anyone in the group to join them in this, as well as to join them in their home for the Thanksgiving meal. Belonging is what this group is all about, and this was expressed in their meeting notes.

Group Number Four also gathered to play games in the homes of two different Highland families, two different times. Once, they played a “get-to-know-you” guessing game called “Gossip,” in which the group members were instructed to share an embarrassing story on a note card, which were then turned over to a spokesperson to read them out to the group, who then tried to guess whose story it was. The group was divided into two different teams, and the team with the most correct guesses won. By playing this game, the group learned a lot about one another at this meeting. Who would have ever known that one group member has no belly button, one can recite “Pi” to unnumerable decimal places from memory, and one once broke her thumb break dancing?

At another time closer to Christmas, the group had a meeting that was intentionally focused on the inclusion of the group’s many children. They played a game that the children especially liked and drew pictures on paper pieces that were placed on the backs of the university students while the drawing was taking place. The students had to simultaneously draw what was being drawn on their back on paper they had in front of them, while not being able to see what was being drawn on their backs. The students and the children had a good time comparing their drawings and did several turns each.

Group Number Five dedicated their meeting time to activities as well. Near Christmas, they held a mid-afternoon meeting at a group home near the Highland church building. I was invited to attend this meeting, which I did, and we danced the “chicken dance,” played BINGO with Christmas symbols, and ate cookies with the residents there

Resources

Time: Schedules and Calendars

This project took place during the fall 2022 semester and concluded at the close of the 2022–23 school year. GRIT groups met October through December 2022, and focus groups met January through March 2023. Additional meetings between DIG and Highland small group members, inspired by relationships formed in GRIT, have continued taking place at the discretion of the participants.

Finances and Materials: Preliminary Budget

There was an informational onboarding lunch on August 21 for Highland small group leaders participating in GRIT cost around \$200 and was paid by Highland Small Group Ministry. Beyond routine expenses to provide hospitality in the form of refreshments at GRIT meetings which Highland University Ministry and I shared. In spring 2023, I paid \$100 to Coble to cover the notetaking expense.

Human: Availability of Staff, Participants, and Outside Consultants

Participants determined where to hold GRIT meetings. Space at the church building was always an option. The totality of human resources included participants in intergenerational small groups. They were available, suitable, and voluntary.

Some preliminary observations include the clearly different ways the notetakers for each group expressed themselves and different levels of detail they included. When combined, this overall detail provides a comprehensive view of GRIT, a space was created and scaffolded so that genuine, intergenerationally tied relationships, based on Christian fellowship were able to take place. The notes chronicling the experiences of the five groups who turned in field notes reveal two things: persons are more alike than they

realize, yet they also need freedom to experience small group differently. The comments from two of these groups are remarkably similar. Two of the other groups functioned more like classes, with an adult mentor or leader facilitating the conversation. Characteristically, the constitution of the Highland groups, especially in cases where the group contained several children, mattered in terms of how they chose to spend their time and the ways the time facilitated the meaning making.

When describing Relational Leadership Theory, Carson Reed and Shelby Coble say, “hospitable spaces of meaning making often turn into moments of reciprocal engagement when both persons allow themselves to be vulnerable and “cared for.”⁶¹ Each group invites the other to be “at home” with them, as well as the presence of God to be acknowledged among them.⁶² All groups met in homes, and over time, the difference in connection was evident between groups who were led in a more hierarchical style, one in which “power relations can distort (or stunt) communication,” and those whose leadership emphasized more empathetic connection.⁶³

61. Carson Reed and Shelby Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age: Divine Action, The Early Church, and Relational Leadership Theory in Conversation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 22 (2023): 135.

62. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age,” 127.

63. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age,” 135

Chapter four continues the story in an even more revelatory fashion as the different leaders and stakeholders unpack their experiences. The focus groups clearly express the suggestions made in the field notes, reflecting both the positive and negative aspects created by the pilot experience. This next bit of material contains reflections of three groups, which together form a clearly triangulated perspective on what took place. DIG leaders, both adult spiritual mentors and student “Go-To” leaders share their reflections, as well as many of the Highland small group leaders who chose to partner with DIG groups to create GRIT, and the student ministry leaders themselves, the “Point Team.”

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

“Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me.” (John 17:21)

Evaluation

Procedures for Data Collection

As Dr. Tim Sensing and I discussed the research protocol for this project in its initial stages, and we agreed that it is unique since the only included perspectives for the needed triangulation required by Participatory Action Research were groups of people. Because each “point of the research triangle” contains multiple views, I coded the focus group data thematically in three sets. In this chapter I explain the themes that arose while coding the three sets of focus group data from: 1. Highland small groups leaders, 2. both student and adult DIG leaders, and 3. the student leaders of the Highland University Ministry, the “Point Team.” In the next chapter I collect and connect the themes from the three groups, demonstrating the key learning, evaluating, and pointing out how this project propels intergenerational small group ministry forward in the life of the Highland Church of Christ.

Sensing quotes Michael Quinn Patton who offers “principles for participatory and collaborative inquiry. Participation is real, not token.”¹ Summarily, the inquiry process involved the participants at every level. As Sensing describes, all aspects of the

1. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 58.

exploration were “undertaken in ways...meaningful to the participants, and the inquiry facilitator work(ed) to help participants recognize and value their own and each other’s expertise.”² This project represented “pastoral leadership that leads through incarnational and cruciform practices,” according to Sensing’s *Qualitative Research*.³

The project itself was an evaluation. Yet to have a reliable assessment and for continued transformation to take place, it was necessary to involve more perspectives. Mary Clark Moschella says, “If you look at two or more pieces of data related to the same phenomenon, you are likely to get a better reading.”⁴ The related points of view that assisted in data collection included the three different focus group perspectives: DIG student leaders and spiritual mentors, “Point Team/Oversight Team” leadership of Highland University Ministry, and Highland small group leaders. Notes from Coble and me, as participant observer and researcher, respectively, combined with the field notes from the various notetakers at each of four GRIT meetings among the six different groups offer the multiple perspectives necessary for a valid assessment.⁵ In chapter five, I offer the researcher evaluation myself based on the field notes Coble and I put together and my own immersion “in the daily activities of the life of the congregation being studied,” an important aspect according to Sensing.⁶

2. Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (2011), 59.

3. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 59.

4. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 26.

5. Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (2011), 75.

6. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 93n.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Data for analysis came from the three main focus group sources: the DIG leaders, the student leaders that comprised the “Point Team,” and the Highland small group leaders. Focus group notes⁷ were color coded and indexed according to leading themes and the frequency with which these themes occurred as stated above. These facilitated observable patterns and trends that assisted in determining priorities in the data. In focus group protocols and in first-order data coding, connections to trinitarian theology, *koinonia* fellowship, and the theoretical themes of both keychain leadership and warmth in community remained priority observations in group interactions. These themes are reflected in the tone of the group interviews and conversations. In addition to these anticipated themes, others as well as sub-themes surfaced when examining the notes for data and are described below.

Sensing reminds the researcher that “the participants have voice,” and this project places high value on this voice.⁸ For this reason, as a researcher, I wanted to serve as a gracious host for this voice: “What people say allows them to co-author the interpretation with the researcher. Such hospitality...will give great weight to the findings of the project, while at the same time enhancing validity and reliability.”⁹ Data codes emerged from the data itself and were coded in similar fashion to the first-order theological and theoretical themes. These secondary themes came from the focus group

7. See both focus the group and the GRIT group field note taking protocols, Appendix B and Appendix D.

8. Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (2011), 76.

9. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 76.

interviews after which the data were allowed to “speak” and reveal some additional key learning from the project.

While triangulation of perspectives offers what Sensing calls a saturated point of trustworthiness, those involved in this project must not and have not made hasty judgements on the success or failure of intergenerational small groups.¹⁰ While it may be tempting to do so, it was important for these judgments to remain withheld as many of them were based on assumptions revealed by further listening and comparison between focus groups. As a part of the Highland congregational system, it is important that intergenerational small groups remain a part of the pastoral cycle of action and reflection. This provides opportunity for later evaluators or other congregations who choose to engage in intergenerational partnerships and follow the pattern Highland has set forth in the project to add their “insights and understandings that will substantiate, modify, or reject [our] interpretations,” an element of qualitative research Sensing emphasizes in congregations.¹¹ This project facilitated a congregational change, but that which has been perceived as positive and successful cannot be assumed to remain static. Conversely, that which is perceived as failure might prove to be a step in the direction of a positive outcome.

Description of Findings

That one of the groups involved asked for this project conveys investment and also communicates that university students had hopes and dreams about how this intervention might go. Either the project would prove itself to align with their

10. Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (2011), 76.

11. Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (2011), 76.

expectations, or it would not. Regardless, the effort is successful as it demonstrates an enhancement of the congregational life of the Highland Church, with both the addition and evaluation of intergenerational small groups. One group has continued to meet consistently. The findings reveal the effectiveness of the means of evaluating small groups put forth in this intervention.

Two focus groups, the Highland small group leaders, met on Wednesday night, January 25, 2023, at 6:00 and 7:00 in the evening. Another, student leaders on the Highland University Ministry “Point Team,” took place the next day, on January 26 during the ACU chapel hour. The third focus group, DIG spiritual mentors, completed the triangulation of perspective, and their group met in my home during lunch after church on Sunday, February 5. Shelby Coble took notes for the focus groups in fall 2021 and agreed to take notes for these sessions as a participant observer. She has been part of the project since the beginning and is involved in the university ministry at Highland. She was equipped with an observation protocol,¹² delineating “the exact details of what is to be observed,” as Sensing describes.¹³ The note-taker utilized a three-column method of notetaking. The first column was for names of participants and coding, the second was for the main ideas and key details presented in each session, and the third was color coded for Coble’s and my own reflections.¹⁴ I recorded the sessions, with permission from the group, using the voice memo app on my iPhone to fill in any gaps in our notes after each meeting. The emphasis on interaction in focus group methodology prescribes a

12. Appendix B.

13. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 96.

14. Appendix B.

detailed notetaking protocol. The protocol for recording and coding the group interactions follows a protocol suggested by Sage Research Methods and is included in Appendix G. I underestimated the space required for this task, especially the color coding to reveal themes and main ideas and wound up transcribing the focus groups from the recording and color coding an entirely separate document. This I created in Microsoft OneNote with a digital notebook for GRIT and a page in the notebook for each separate focus group. I printed them and coded them with colored pencils.

Once the focus group interactions elicited the “co-constructed meaning” listed below, the researcher and the participant observer’s notes were combined to formulate modifications for GRIT groups.¹⁵ The “co-constructed meaning includes the following”

- enhancing disclosure,
- providing access to participants’ own language and concepts
- enabling participants to follow their own agendas
- encouraging the production of elaborated accounts, and
- providing an opportunity to observe the construction of meaning in action,

These findings will be made available to the university minister, although he did not participate in the project, relating key learning and recommendations in summer 2024 called “DIG Deeper Into the GRIT.” The record of this intervention contains information from which plans for future action and continued cultivation of relationships may be made that foreground ministry, discipleship, and intergenerational connections.

Focus Group One: Highland Small Group Leaders January 25, 2023

Highland small group leaders Julie, Allison, and Daniel gathered with Shelby Coble and me at 6:00, before the Bible class hour on Wednesday night, January 25, to

15. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

listen and share reflections on the three different GRIT groups of which the small groups leaders were a part. As an opening, the group reviewed the questions in the focus group guide, located in Appendix C. We also opened with the simple question, “What have you experienced?”

Julie opened the group with her reflections.

We had intergenerational experience pre-GRIT at Highland just through our small group. We have three young families in our small group, and then three couples in their sixties. It has been extremely impactful to have the college students join. Our group has absolutely loved the experience. We have kids who also participate in the discussion, adults in their late thirties to early forties, adults in their late sixties, and college students in their early twenties. We are all understanding, learning, and responding to each other about how we are experiencing the kingdom of God. We’ve asked the students for help knowing what it looks like to parent through screens in a way that honors the kingdom of God. The students have asked us what it looks like to be a Christian in your sixties when your kids are grown and out of the house. College students can mentor the kids. And we have met outside of these groups as well for coffee. My husband went on runs with those who are exercisers. We serve together, and the students came and just joined us. It helped that a lot of our group members did things like this outside of GRIT.¹⁶

When asked further about serving together, Julie described working with “Care Pack,” and packing food for students in the Abilene Independent School District who do not have food on the weekends. “Then we’d go to Rosa’s or whatever after.”¹⁷

Daniel spoke up next and described the small group he helps lead. Their members are mostly in their fifties and sixties. They do not have any young families in their group, and they have been together for twenty years or more. One couple in their group has been a spiritual mentor couple for DIG for several years.

16 Julie T., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1,” 25 January 2023.

17. T., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

Their small group typically does a lot of service, and the students had opportunity to go to Breakfast on Beech Street, BOBS, on Friday mornings. Daniel also mentioned his small group's involvement in the Christmas Store and Meals on Wheels, but the small group members did not take on student partnership in these endeavors. The focus group was not clear about whether this small group understood that this would have been a goal, serving together as much as possible, if that was the focus of the small group's time. This lack of clarity surfaced again in a later conversation. Daniel remarked, "We all enjoyed having them there, but attendance was not good."¹⁸

There was a spiritual mentor, Bria, and a student, Rainey, who were there every time. Rainey is a music major and connected with my wife, Molly, as they are involved in the same department at ACU. With them we discovered lots of family and church connections through conversation and commonality. One member of our small group, Chad, does BOBS, and one student went. Chad is into *Growing Young* (the theoretical foundation for the project) and tried to get guys involved. I wish there would have been more of them making commitments to come, but we just couldn't get them there. The calendar was hard. We went to Rosa's several times because you need that kind of talk too (referencing an informal atmosphere). You need more than just questions and someone writing down answers to those questions.¹⁹

Daniel referenced attendance at three different meetings his small group held as GRIT meetings. At one there were four college students and one "sponsor" (spiritual mentor for DIG). At a second, there were two college students and two "sponsors" (both spiritual mentors for the DIG group), and at a third, only one student and one "sponsor," who happen to be best friends and do many things together both in and outside of church activities.

Allison opened her comments saying,

18. Daniel A., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1," 25 January 2023.

19. A., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1."

This hit at an odd time in the life of our small group. We have met “consistently inconsistently” this fall. There has been lots of travel and conflict on Sunday nights. We have mainly gone with “whoever shows up, whatever!” This fit pretty good within the model. We have five to six students, two DIG leaders (spiritual mentors) in our group, and everyone came the first time. Then it was smatterings of those people. The second time was homecoming weekend! Our rhythm included a time of snacks, eating and visiting. We had chili at our second meeting. We had a big service project, cooking for the Fall Festival, and we sent out word to have them help. None of the students came to help. Brian and Mary Ann came; our group had a good connection with the mentors of the DIG group. It could have been a good time to connect together in service. We could have used many more hands. We invited students to say “Hello!” when we see each other at church; we literally now just know who each other are. We have not gone much past this, but this is where it starts in one semester and four intended meetings. We did not have any preconceived notions about how this would affect us. In our lives of mutual discipleship, we are now firmly in “square one.”²⁰

As an encouragement to the group and an affirmation of their comments to this point, I offered the reminder that one priority of *Growing Young* is “fueling warm community,” at which each group excelled in different ways, in their own ways.²¹ The Highland Re|Storation Vision begins with restoring Highland, and this begins in our Highland community with individuals in big and small ways. The students are able to say about our church, “I know people here; I’ve been to their house.” In a place as big as Highland that is huge.

Daniel explained their group created and used a phone tree, which was successful for communication. “Most would respond however their plans led them, coming or not.”²² Allison said,

We had a group text message but we didn’t really use it. The things we did were maybe not a part of the curriculum, but we asked the adults “What do you like about your small group, why do you come to small group?” This was a sweet thing to articulate in community and allow the students to hear. It was a good

20. Allison C., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1,” 25 January 2023.

21. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

22. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

connecting question for what a small group might look like later in life, and it was good for us (as members) to hear each other. At our last meeting, we asked each other, “where are you seeing hope in this season?” Everybody answered at their own level and shared, students and small group members. It was a good window into each person and their season of life. The answers were all really different and appropriate to where everybody was. The really broad questions were my favorite, that way everybody could answer.²³

Julie piped in,

Everyone can answer all the way down to the six-year-olds! I came away from the last night realizing how much we really all need each other in order to appreciate the full image of God, and that was what was reflected in everybody’s responses from five to sixty-five. Everybody said something very similar. That was a special time for everyone. One student, Angie, said she was experiencing in a group for the first time the fact that she could be a leader and she was important in the kingdom of God, not just to her peers but to people both older and younger. This was something she was reflecting on thorough her experience in GRIT. What facilitated this? At coffee one morning, we asked each other, “What was your faith like growing up? Your church experiences? Coming to college? What are your own faith commitments to church and God?” I asked them advice too. (This was after a time of relationship building had taken place.) We had coffee together three times, one with all the women in the group who had made an “I Will” for this to get together, with someone from the group from a different generation. My daughter, in sixth grade (she’s eleven) totally loved this. They came to our “service thing,” and that seemed to open up good conversation at dinner after. We did a lot of texting, checking in on, following up on tests, prayer requests, etc. Greg and Patrick ran. Patrick came over for dinner a few times with his girlfriend who was not a part of our group. They are our son’s huddle leaders as well, a cool unplanned connection.²⁴

Daniel remarked, “I think they saw us as grandparents, which is fine. I think they saw us a little different.”²⁵ Allison added,

I do think that’s worth considering. In our small group, the students are the ages of our own children. We’re all kind of in the stage of letting go of our kids, which may make it harder to dive in and connect. We had life circumstances going on in our group, and I don’t know that anybody had a great deal of margin for this. When we “throw it out,” and nobody comes, it is harder to “throw it out” again. We tended to be a “big event” focused group, rather than a group that remained

23. C., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

24. T., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

25. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

consistent over time. We went around and told them, “This is what we’re involved in, you are welcome to join.” There was a lot of interest, but follow-through was more difficult. We were just “throwing some seeds out to see what might grow.”²⁶

Here I interjected an encouragement once more, “Everyone gave their best effort based upon the season that they were in.”

Daniel said, “I think this was encouraging to the leaders too, the spiritual mentors, and Bria specifically.”²⁷ “Spiritual mentors in our small group facilitated the discussion, even though our group was full of people much older than them and full of people who were used to leading themselves, the two systems mixed well because they took this role.”²⁸

Summarily, Daniel recalled.

When I was a college kid, we went to John Willis’ house. And it was important that you go. Intergenerational sharing in community is what it is all about. Our best moments were our “I Will” statements. The first time was with the majority of the group. We were thrilled to have people make these statements and take them seriously. We texted and held each other accountable; it was strong to hear this and make these commitments to each other. Our small group did this with DIG; everyone in the small group took an “I Will” statement. This is something we need to do more often. This is a way we can show more accountability. We’ve been a small group for twenty years and we have not done this. We did this through our group message.²⁹

I added, *Growing Young* and the imprints of “keychain leadership” have taken hold as evidenced in these stories.³⁰

26. C., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

27. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

28. C., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

29. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

30. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

Focus Group Two: Highland Small Group Leaders January 25, 2023

Highland small group leaders Sheryl, Betsy, Belle, and Santhi gathered with Shelby Coble and I at seven o'clock, during the Bible class hour on Wednesday night, January 25, to listen and share reflections on the two different GRIT groups of which these small groups leaders were a part. Coble and I reminded the group of the focus interview questions in Appendix C, and then settled in to listen to a group made of mostly of the leaders of the "Sunday Sisters" share, true to form, their stories.

Belle and Sheryl began reflecting on their own small group experiences, which the experience of working alongside the university students had brought to mind. "This is something I did not have as a young person. We attended church but did not have that many connections as I remember. As an adult, I had wonderful friendships from earlier church groups and congregations, but I was never embedded in a church until Highland. We were at Baker Heights when we first moved here. They are very family oriented but not exactly orthodox."³¹

I've always been involved with youth. We started a group of elementary girls, the FROG Girls. I was the principal at Alta Vista Elementary. It began as tutoring and morphed into coming to church. It ran for twenty years. We started knocking doors at the apartments and asking if they wanted prayer. This yielded some great stories and a taught many of us "don't give up" (on people). Don't look at people and think you know what their future is. I'm thrilled with these GRIT kids.³²

Carolyn reflected on the time knocking doors with Nell: "Do they know how privileged they are, these kids who have been in our group? How would they interact with someone

31. Sheryl D., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.

32. Belle S., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.

who hardly had a home to go to? At our first meeting, they approached us as if they were our grandkids.”³³

Then Santhi spoke up and began sharing about the group she helps lead.

For the first meeting I would say I was nervous. I went to the interest meeting and brought information back to our small group, and from that point on I felt like the “middle man.” If the students were not getting out of it what they wanted, I felt it was my responsibility, if our small group was not getting what they wanted, it was my responsibility. The first time we met it was at our house, and I didn’t know what to expect and I don’t know if they did either. It brought me great comfort that you (Fisher) were in our group and would carry that discussion. I still don’t know if everyone got “what they wanted.” Our numbers were at extremes, and when they didn’t come it felt like they were just being nice to join because we had prepared food, etc. I didn’t know what y’all had discussed in your DIG group. You had told us at the meeting that they wanted this (the students), but then it just seemed lacking on the part of the students. “It was kind of confusing,” is what my group also said.³⁴

Belle responded, “Well, it was an artificial group being placed together. I’ve thought a lot about the unexpected friendships, the ones that don’t make sense. There’s no reason they would intersect otherwise.”³⁵

Our husbands participated in this (GRIT)! There were lots of stories they enjoyed sharing back and forth. Our husbands joining the group was new as well as the students. It was fun to listen to and hear conversations, so much table talk. Students were straining to hear what an older person thought about the different topics that came up. Frank brought a “Frank Deli Special” to share for one of our meals, four ingredients he brought to share with the group. Students had offered to bring dessert.³⁶

Belle reminded, “Some things did not work out: the logistics of going out to prison with Rachel. The rest of the group was wishful that the students could have

33. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

34. Santhi K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2,” 25 January 2023.

35. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

36. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

participated in what was perceived by us as a life-changing event.”³⁷ ”But they went to Highland House, where they were able to see what a part of our community is, rather than simply driving by for years and never being curious about what or who this is. It is so important to notice.”³⁸

“We didn’t invite them to Grace Fellowship, but this overlaps with Highland House.”³⁹ In the minds of the “Sunday Sisters” their ministry at Grace Fellowship is a separate thing from GRIT and their small group. To them it is church, and the students already go to church. “We had so much else going on! And we only had four meetings.”⁴⁰

At this point, Santhi began to make some important connections.

You (directed to the researcher) had mentioned getting the group involved in things that “y’all naturally, already do,” and my mind automatically went to “jobs.” Would they be interested in joining in on...we’ve got an electrician in our group, and the three other men work at universities. I didn’t even think about how as a group we’ve gone and sung at Wisteria Place, and we’ve gone and helped at the food pantry. I didn’t even dawn on me to maybe organize that, because it’s always presented from the platform (in worship at Highland) that there’s opportunities to do that, and I’ve always thought if college students were interested in doing that they would on their own. But sometimes they need somebody to come alongside.⁴¹

Betsy responded, “I’ve heard so many statements like that! Well, the opportunity has been presented...but people need a lot more, a lot of times, and when they get what

37. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

38. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

39. Betsy W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2,” 25 January 2023.

40. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

41. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

they need, it opens a whole other world for the people involved.”⁴² ”I admire y’all for doing that!”⁴³

Partly we do this for ourselves. Grace Fellowship, Highland House, it’s the same type of thing that we get out of it. I’m my best self when I’m in those situations. The children, Highland House, Grace Fellowship, those people are so real. They are REAL. There’s not a lot of “normal life,” in our way of thinking, in those places it is such a different world. It just brings you down to the important things if you let it, the simple things, and you get to be part of listening to the things they say that just knock your socks off. I could talk for hours on that. All the stories between all those places, the things I’ve gotten to sit and hear them say. Its inspiring and keeps me a little bit more where I need to be. You have to be there regularly to get those moments. You can predict them and they don’t happen a lot.⁴⁴

Belle said, “There is an established trust.”⁴⁵

That’s not what I would expect them to get from it. When I was a college student a lot of us were coming from a very “homey” situation, and then you go to college. There, you “go to church” and you “leave church,” and it is not like *church* because you are there and then you’re not and nobody said a word to you. Unless you make these kinds of GRIT connections, they may not continue to come. There’s not anything more important than helping these college students keep connected to church. To me this is a huge opportunity for us that we can’t miss for a student that loses something, or stops coming, because they haven’t found a connection in a big church.⁴⁶

“And I think part of our goal was to say, “If you want to be a part of a church, go attach yourself to something that is going on.”⁴⁷ Betsy reminded us, “That’s hard! This is a way that helps them a little bit. I’ve told a lot of people to go do this or that, and they need a

42. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

43. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

44. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

45. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

46. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

47. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

lot of “handholding.”⁴⁸ Sheryl mused, “There are so few. What’d we have, five or six at the most? And a different bunch each time? I can’t help but just love ’em. That’s the first step. I want them to know that I love them. I don’t have to have a “one-on-one,” really, because we’re serving and laughing. Our time with each one is so rare.”⁴⁹

“And limited. Their time is limited.”⁵⁰

“We’ve got to get them out of there and on their way. I’d love to talk to them about the prayer ministry and things that mean so much to me.”⁵¹

“Then why don’t you do that?”⁵²

“It’s not appropriate. It’s not an appropriate setting. It would be okay for all of us to talk about what is near and dear to our heart, but I hadn’t thought about it. That is so central, the prayer life.”⁵³

“Seems to me over the years at Highland, if people want to do something they have to just start it and do it. It’s not coming top down. There are announcements about this and that or something else, but you don’t know anybody that’s doing it, you don’t know a thing about it.”⁵⁴

“It has got to be relational.”⁵⁵

48. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

49. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

50. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

51. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

52. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

53. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

54. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

55. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

Then Betsy said,

Some of us just jump in, but there's so many people that need so much more than that little contact. My mind has gone back so much to the things that were meaningful to me in college. Everybody went to Highland because Lynn Anderson was there, but I was different. I had been in Abilene since I was 10, and my parents had gone to Central, the building that burned down across from Grace Fellowship. When I came to college here, I didn't go to Highland, even though that sounded fun. I went to Central because they remembered my family. There was a couple, a really old couple, that took me out to lunch every single Sunday. They gave me a bridal shower when we got engaged, just like a family. It was home. I wish more college students had that.⁵⁶

Santhi offered,

I do want to piggy-back on that. I put myself in their shoes and I can understand if they think, "What's the use of me getting involved in this church for four years and then leave?" And in a way, I remember thinking that way when I went off to college and I wanted to be a part of "Aggies for Christ." I got very involved, and the church that it was affiliated with transformed me, and I made my faith my own. To this day, in my heart, that's my home church. It's because I was taught that even if I was not going to live in College Station my entire life, what I invest in the church was invested in the "big Church overall." What you have done here, in the lives of the students you've touched, you never know what that person is going to do somewhere else. And whatever we're all taught and have acquired from the people around us, we take with us wherever we go. And they will become involved in a church wherever they go. It creates a situation in which a person can't "not be in one."⁵⁷

"Oh, that's great."⁵⁸

Santhi continued, "So when we leave here...we're impacting much more than us."⁵⁹

56. W., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2."

57. K., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2."

58. S., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2."

59. K., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2."

Belle responded, “And that’s really the goal, you want to take what you had and multiply it, like the loaves and the fishes.”⁶⁰

Sheryl piped in, “It’s just a little bit like Jesus, isn’t it?”⁶¹

“Just a little bit!”⁶²

I then interjected into the conversation the fact that for university students their weeks, semesters, and years in college can seem so long, but then go by so fast. To the students, the four-or-so years is long, but a lot happens. A lot of life happens during college, so many “firsts.”

The Bible talks about the “cloud of witnesses.” If they could see, for one evening, all the people who have come into their life for this stretch just to say, “I care about you; I love you. Your life is important. I don’t know very much about you but I want you to know my good feelings and wishes for you go with you.” I don’t think young people get that enough. It’s not happening, and they need to know it; they need to hear it. “There are people out there that care and want to see me succeed.”⁶³

Sheryl reminded, “If we are controlled by the Holy Spirit, there’s not much measuring what can come from the loaves and the fishes. It sounds “whoowie, woowie-woowie.”⁶⁴

“We can’t undermine the Spirit can do.”⁶⁵

Santhi turned the conversation more directly back to GRIT and mentioned, “I really liked the action, the ‘I Will’ statements. I really enjoyed those, and the reporting

60. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

61. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

62. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

63. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

64. D., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

65. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

back on the actions we had taken. In the curriculum each week you could choose.”⁶⁶ Sheryl then mentioned that their Bible class has taken up the practice of recording action statements each week, based upon the model they learned in GRIT, in order to be intentional.

Betsy noticed that, within their small group, they had their own set of triangulated data. “Having the three groups, the husbands, us, and the college students, it’s been fun watching the husbands enjoy the time. They enjoyed talking to the students, and really make some connections with them. I just really enjoyed that.”⁶⁷

“They loved being with these guys.”⁶⁸

Santhi closed out this focus group meeting with a final comment and an invitation. “You’re not doing it on your own, and not doing it under your own strength. Food and fellowship meetings are still available to share with GRIT.”⁶⁹ Even though the semester and the project have concluded, there are groups who would still like to continue the intentional fellowship.

Themes and Key Learning from Highland Small Group Leaders

Trinitarian Theology and *Koinonia* Fellowship

Experiencing the Kingdom

“The Bible talks about the ‘cloud of witnesses.’ If they could see, for one evening, all the people who have come into their life for this stretch just to say, ‘I care about you; I love you. Your life is important. I want you to know my good feelings and wishes for you go with you.’ ~Belle⁷⁰

66. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

67. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

68. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

69. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

70. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

Enhancement of Highland members' experiences of the kingdom of God in daily life together was a priority of this project. Actualization of this resonated in the data. One small group leader described that, overall, her small group was intergenerational to begin with, but that the addition of the university students added a missing aspect, young adult perspective. This group was "understanding, learning, and responding to each other about how they were experiencing the kingdom of God," from the perspectives of those ranging in age from six years old to group members in their late sixties.⁷¹ Holly Catterton Allen quotes social scientist Margaret Mead in *Intergenerational Christian Formation* saying, "the continuity of all cultures depends on the living presence of at least three generations."⁷² This leader expressed what a difference it makes to have the perspectives of different ages and how this translated, for their group, into a greater appreciation of the fullness of the *imago Dei*. The sense I got from her was that she was in awe of this fact, and this new awareness and reverence for God was facilitated by the presence and participation of different kinds of people. One student expressed that she was experiencing in a group, for the first time, the ability to lead not only her peers but those both older and younger than her, and that because of this she "was important in the kingdom of God."⁷³

After some time had gone by in the project and they had a few meetings and outside gatherings under their belt, they explored mutual discipleship and mentoring in their relationships, asking one another practical questions about life. "How do you parent

71. T., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1."

72. Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 133.

73. T., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1."

through screens?” and “What does it look like to be a Christian in your sixties with your kids grown and out of the house?”⁷⁴ These important elements signal growth in understanding what it means to live eternal life in a kingdom of love in a daily way while here on earth, a priority of this project.

Church

“There’s not anything more important than helping these college students keep connected to church. To me this is a huge opportunity for us that we can’t miss, to lose a student because they haven’t found connection in a big church.” ~Betsy⁷⁵

This project began with students noticing that they wished to meet with the larger body of the Highland congregation, and so along the way it became important to highlight when any participant shared insight into how and why they have attended church as well as which church they have chosen to attend. One small group leader described why, in college, she chose the church she did, a choice that was not popular among her peers. Many students in her university day attended Highland because of the dynamic preaching of Lynn Anderson, but she chose another church in Abilene because they knew her family. The church she attended cared for her as family. “When you go to college and you go to church, you go into church and you leave church and it’s not like church because nobody knows you. Nobody said a word to you.”⁷⁶ This comment reflects the same sentiment of another student who is now an adult at the congregation, “Why are you (still) here?”⁷⁷ University students can easily be viewed as a transient population in

74. T., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

75. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

76. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

77. B., “Who Are We, at Highland, in Terms of Our Small Groups?”

churches, one with whom members are hesitant to engage because of the brevity of their time. Some other assumptions feed into this dynamic which I will address further in Chapter 5.

Keychain Leadership

Service

“It’s always been presented from the platform, and I’ve always thought if college students were interested they would do it on their own, but sometimes they need somebody to come alongside.” ~Santhi⁷⁸

One hope for this project was that the relationships created in GRIT would spill over into the lives of the participants, and that the Highland small group leaders would bring the younger generation alongside of them in their service during the week or the month. Participants were encouraged to engage in ways that were usual for them, but to include their new intergenerational partners. Four out of the six Highland small groups involved in the project were stand-outs in terms of the service in which they participate regularly and in which they involved their university students. Groups in Abilene with which they partner regularly include but are not limited to Highland House, Harmony Family Services, Breakfast on Beech Street, “Care Pack” with the Abilene Independent School District, and Wisteria Place. They also serve in the ministries of Highland which facilitate worship on Sundays.

One group took an approach to service that made the students aware. “This is what we are involved in; you are welcome to join.”⁷⁹ Another group shared this sentiment slightly differently, “If you want to be a part of a church, go attach yourself to something

78. K., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

79. C., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

that is going on.”⁸⁰ After an initial expression of interest, the students did not follow through and participate.

Another group leader processed her experience with this aspect in real-time, during the focus group. She explained that she had always thought that college students would do what they wanted to do, and that they would join in with opportunities of which they were aware. Through the intervention, she learned that sometimes they need somebody to come alongside. This was echoed in the reflections of another leader who said, “Sometimes we assume if an idea has been presented then it will get done, but people need a lot more a lot of times.”⁸¹ It is hard for many people to do what feels like launching out on their own after being told to go sign up for something or do something. People need a bit of “handholding.” Not knowing about a ministry from experience, or not knowing someone who will be there and be involved makes it difficult to show up. People need more than a little contact.

In passing on leadership in the church, the younger generation needs partnership beyond merely being handed the keys. They need somebody with whom they have relationship, who has been there before, to ride alongside them until they can find their way on their own.

Communication

“We had a conversation about listening to music on a radio. He didn’t understand the concept of a radio.” ~Belle⁸²

80. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

81. W., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

82. S., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 2.”

Coordinating groups that speak different generational dialects can be hilarious at times. Nothing is truer than that it is impossible to over-communicate. The groups that created relationships in which the keys of different aspects of church leadership could be passed did so outside the context of their meetings. This looked different ways. Some communicated and got to know one another's interests in person, going on runs together, getting coffee. Some shared meals, Rosa's was a popular choice, and discovered common interests like playing the oboe or made family connections. Some Highland leaders cooked for students in their homes and talked in greater depth about their backgrounds in church growing up. Even texting was an important way of staying in touch. Those who created and used a group message found great benefit from it. It was not merely for meeting information, but it was also for checking in on the commitments the group had made at their meeting relative to the group challenge they had selected as an "I Will" action. They found a way to hold themselves accountable successfully by texting.

As a researcher, the main way I could maintain some level of partnership in what the groups were doing during the intervention was through the curriculum which I supplied to the groups. After the initial meeting, groups were encouraged to tailor their time to their own needs, but it is clear in reflecting on the intervention that those groups who used the curriculum as a guide rather than abandoning it completely and "doing their own thing" did grow in spiritual depth, in intergenerational relationship, as well as in greater awareness of the ministry present in the lives of the Highland members. These were priorities of the project. In this way, the curriculum served as an important layer in communication.

Warmth in Community

Intergenerational Aspects

“When I was a college kid, we went to John Willis’ house, and it was important. Intergenerational sharing in community is what it is all about.”
~Daniel⁸³

The intergenerational relational spaces created by GRIT groups extended beyond those between university students and Highland members toward which the intervention was directed. New intergenerational bridges between Highland members, in leadership tasks and ministry engagement, were among some of the most heartwarming reports from this focus group. One group described what it was like to “sit at the feet” of DIG spiritual mentors, twenty years younger than most of the members of the Highland small group and be led. This small group consisted of people accustomed to not only leading their small group themselves, but who are campus leaders at ACU and leaders in other aspects of the Highland church beyond their small group. For them to be led, and so effectively led, was monumental for them.

Another intergenerational story is my own as the researcher. Periodically, my husband and I join with another couple and prepare, serve, and eat dinner with children at a local emergency shelter. Because of an “I Will” commitment that I made our first week of GRIT, I asked a high school girl in our partnering small group to engage this ministry with us one time, and we continued for over a year. I typically picked her up from school on “Harmony” days, and together we shopped for and prepared part of the meal. Then we would have dinner with the young people at the shelter. As we did this once every six weeks, we were surprised by the number of students she knew from school who were

83. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

spending time at the shelter. She ended up creating relational connections that would not have been possible for any of the adults in the group. She invited some of them to church, and they came. She became a noticeable natural, serving her peers and ministering to them in many ways that extended past the reach of one hour on Wednesdays because she was from their same generation.

Many of the members at Highland have had good models of people who made the important reach between generations over the years. Continually prioritizing this in the congregation at the small group level will keep that muscle strong.

Meeting Outside of GRIT

“We went to Rosa’s several times because you need that kind of talk too.”
~Daniel⁸⁴

Meetings with small group leaders to scaffold and launch the GRIT project were important in two different aspects. First, the preliminary meeting with small group leaders who had shown interest in participating in GRIT was more important than I realized at the time. It was here that I shared with those on board with the project how much the students wanted to join their lives and how desperately they wanted to be taught and mentored by the older members and families at the church. This was difficult for some of the people in the meeting to wrap their minds around because it was so different from their assumptions about college students. I will share more about this in Chapter 5. Also, at the time I was not aware of clarification that was needed. When I emphasized that students wanted to be involved in things that the members of Highland naturally did, one group leader interpreted this as their vocations, their jobs, rather than spiritual formation activities or ministry during the week. This led to confusion that was not

84. A., “Small Group Leaders’ Focus Group 1.”

clarified until the focus group when this leader heard from the other leaders some of the things they had been doing.

Other important meetings outside of GRIT took place between small group members and college students. The time a group spent engaged in areas of common interest made a difference in their ability to impact spiritual growth. Members who ran together, had coffee together, and met for dinner outside of regular meeting times uncovered connections that the formal context of group meetings might not have provided opportunity to realize. These extra engagements did not always involve the entire group; most often they were even smaller gatherings of a portion of each group connected through GRIT, but they proved integral to the fabric of GRIT and what they were able to accomplish when they did meet as a full group.

This next section tells the story of the experiences of the “Point Team” student leaders with their GRIT groups. Following are highlights of the themes and key learning reflected in their comments.

**Highland “Point Team” (Student Leaders) Focus Group
January 2, 2023**

Highland University Ministry (HUM) has been student-led since 2016, as long as I have been a part of it. The Highland staff university minister relies heavily on paid interns and a host of volunteer leaders that comprise the “Point Team.” The “Point Team” serving HUM during the 2022–23 academic year included eight students; their classifications ranged from first-year college students to seniors. David Sessions was the university minister at the time. Sessions met with the “Point Team” weekly on Thursdays at ACU during chapel. This particular meeting was dedicated to conducting a focus group on the previous semester in GRIT. Students were provided with the same focus group

interview questions, located in Appendix C, as the other focus groups. They were also encouraged to comment about their own most pertinent viewpoints, which the questions suggested. Shelby Coble took notes as in the other sessions.

Madison made the opening comment and recalled missing the first meeting. His DIG group included him in the communications with GRIT, which led to a “big group chat with a bunch of older people and random phone numbers that I didn’t know. The first thing I realized was how excited all the older members were to be in a group with all of us college students. Highland is already really good at being intergenerational, but then we practice what we preach through stuff like GRIT.”⁸⁵ Madison was involved with the group Daniel led. (See Daniel’s comments in Focus Group One above.) Madison continued, “I had kind of an understanding what GRIT was but wasn’t expecting that level of energy directed into my phone from all the small group members. It’s been a blessing.”⁸⁶

Tucker spoke up, “I share that feeling and was surprised at how much they wanted to get to know us. I was super-curious if they wanted to actually get to know us. They would invite us to stuff, we’re going to ‘Care-Pack,’ we’d like to get coffee, etc.”⁸⁷ Tucker was with Julie and her group referenced above in Focus Group 1 as well.

Ella spoke up next. She was the notetaker for the group of which I was a part, and I remember sitting by her at GRIT the night she said the following for the first time.

This is what everyone has been wanting and has not known how to ask for it. My first year of University Ministry was the Acre year where we were off by ourselves, so honestly getting plugged into the larger body of Highland has been

85. Madison H., “Point Team Focus Group,” 26 January 2023.

86. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

87. Tucker H., “Point Team Focus Group,” 26 January 2023.

kind of difficult for me. That first year we were not at the building. For the first time in GRIT, I was able to express this is something I really want and to hear that the “adult” members felt that same way. It was not a one-sided thing.⁸⁸

Clay spoke up with a unique experience in mind.

I had a bit of an interesting experiencing with GRIT because lots of the members of our group were much older members of Highland. This group had also lost some members through the COVID and leadership discernment transitions of our church. Overall, this is a group of people who had been together for a long time and were used to being a community together. It was a little more difficult to enter a space, as a college student, where people had done life together for so long. Along the same line, it was touching to get to share intentional community, life, and meals with people who were so tightly knit. The fact that they let us in at all was huge. I want to be somebody, later on in life, who draws people in, somebody who is asking people to go get coffee. There’s something incredibly valuable in asking and also in simply seeing other people do life the way that they do life.⁸⁹

Clay was a part of the group, referenced in the focus group notes from the DIG leaders below, in which Jerry and Jackie serve as spiritual mentors.

Jean, a member of the group referenced by Allison in the focus group notes from small group leaders above said, “I only got to go to one gathering for GRIT. It’s definitely something I wish I would have taken more advantage of. I do want to get to know more people outside of only University Ministry. The scheduling was difficult for me.”⁹⁰

Sessions then spoke in from the unique multiple perspectives of the university minister, a “Point Team” member, and a member of a small group which decided to take part in GRIT.

Our group contains six families. There are two diverse generational groups within our small group, and the college students filled in a missing generational gap. The

88. Ella H., “Point Team Focus Group,” 26 January 2023.

89. Clay S., “Point Team Focus Group,” 26 January 2023.

90. Jean L., “Point Team Focus Group,” 26 January 2023.

kids loved it. They now had not only spiritual parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, but also spiritual siblings, a role which the college students filled. I remember the meeting where we were trying to convince adult life groups that college students actually want this, and then I remember the meeting where we were trying to convince college students that adult life groups actually want this. There's that element of breaking down some trust and some suspicion. It really does take equal commitment on both parts, that of the vulnerable group and that of the group that has the more established position, but it is incumbent on the established group to go out of their way to make the invite, to lay down their preferences to accommodate those whom they are inviting. The inviting group gets most of the blessing, even though they are the ones going out of their way to make their rhythms and their habits different to be welcoming. In our experience, it was the existing small group that was doing the inviting, and the DIG group was bringing content. They were invited to do so, which creates a power dynamic, but our group was delighted when the invitees continued to accept the invitation. While not an unpleasant one you're onto something when acknowledging there is a power dynamic.⁹¹

Jean reflected, "We were invited into a small group's rhythm, space, rather than inviting those people into DIG."⁹²

Ella continued, "We felt we were invited into the small group member's home, but it felt more like, 'this is how we do DIG, welcome.'⁹³

Clay shared, "I wish we'd had more time to do it. We've talked about the difficulties of scheduling and bringing two groups together. In four meetings you can only do a certain level of diving. After only meeting three or four times, I'm not going to trust somebody with a deep spiritual thing."⁹⁴

Madison spoke up again.

I was out of town for three out of the four meetings. But when I was there, my GRIT group got together and served at the Highland Food Pantry. That was one of the most fulfilling times we had. Just the ability we all had to serve and not

91. David Sessions, "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

92. L., "Point Team Focus Group."

93. H., "Point Team Focus Group."

94. Clark Sullivan, "Point Team Focus Group."

have an agenda other than spreading the love of Jesus, I loved that so much. I think that could be something I'd encourage other groups to do, to laugh and get to know one another while serving. Even though I wasn't able to be a part of many of our more guided conversations, me personally, I took a whole lot more away from that than any guided conversation we had.⁹⁵

Paige added, "Beautiful ministry happens among intergenerational groups when both partners feel humility, and suspend prior judgment, and can learn and be open to one another. The learning flows both directions."⁹⁶ Paige was on study abroad during the fall semester of 2022 but was a part of the team of students who had, back in spring 2022, maintained that this was a priority of the ministry moving forward.

Christine spoke up, "Outside of the four meetings, I cherish the fact that these people want to create relationship. There such an equal playing field at Highland that makes me feel honored and respected. GRIT was another level for this."⁹⁷

Tucker said, "I felt like an equal. Subconsciously the power dynamic was there because they are older than me. Someone in our group said something, and an older member said, 'Wow, I've never thought about it that way. Thank you for that,' during one of our group discussions. No one was in authority. It made me feel super-comfortable. I always felt refreshed after GRIT."⁹⁸

"One of my favorite moments was in the Lott's back yard. Before we started eating together, Dee was telling us all about the things he had built for his yard and his kids/grandkids. He was sharing something he was very proud of and was important to

95. H., "Point Team Focus Group."

96. Paige D., "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

97. Christine G., "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

98. H., "Point Team Focus Group."

him. This was him entering into community with us because he was sharing something vulnerable with us.”⁹⁹

“Yeah, we went to Rosa’s after our service project and had quality conversations about life: how I got to ACU, how I got to Highland; I felt genuinely cared for and appreciated because they wanted to hear my story. I can share this with other college students, but this was sharing with adults who want to know, and who may have walked the same path.”¹⁰⁰

Sessions reminded the group about his own GRIT experience with his own small group.

Everything we were doing, our group was invited to do with us this semester. Tuesday nights, Love and Care Ministry, Care Packs, Rosa’s... The people that came to that were the ones that really are, in the minds of the life group, the ones who really committed back to us. You kind of inch into this. There’s such a long process of dipping our toes in the water: from “generational generosity” conversations at Highland years ago, to *Growing Young*, to students at “The Acre” asking, “can we come back?” There’s this inching forward towards each other but eventually there is a step that becomes the tipping point. We committed to the students, and they committed to us. We’ve tipped, and now our life group is not complete without them.¹⁰¹

Christine spoke up, “As a woman in the church, I’ve always wondered where I belong. I’ve been emotional about it lately. When I’m at Highland its literally a refuge. Going into GRIT, I didn’t expect it to be the same, but it actually was, and I experienced a crazy-feeling level of respect. I always felt safe, which is very nice. I cherish it quite a bit.”¹⁰²

99. S., “Point Team Focus Group.”

100. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

101. Sessions, “Point Team Focus Group.”

102. G., “Point Team Focus Group.”

Tucker told a story of his favorite moment from the semester. “There is a GST professor in our GRIT group. For one of our “I Will’s,” we were to write and encourage a person in our group of a different generation. He wrote to me on an Israeli postcard that was really cool; I felt valued by someone of a different generation that I respect.”¹⁰³

Ella said, “My favorite moment was during dinner at our first meeting. One of the adults was asking me about ‘me’ and kept asking about my parents, but that was special to me because my parents are important to me. He valued the people and the place that brought me to this point.”¹⁰⁴

Madison closed the group with this comment, “I’m excited for the future.”¹⁰⁵

Themes and Key Learning from “Point Team” Student Leaders

Trinitarian Theology and *Koinonia* Fellowship

Experiencing the Kingdom

“I cherish the fact that these people wanted to create relationship.”
~Christine¹⁰⁶

Students cherished the time in *koinonia* and experienced the kind of mutuality, equality, and reciprocity that reflects the Trinity. Many communicated a sense of feeling honored and respected at the church in general, and GRIT became a place where this was actively and regularly practiced.

Comments about feeling valued and respected prevailed in this focus group. GRIT partners made themselves vulnerable to one another, in the view of these student leaders. They both chose to share in ways that were important to them as well as listened to each

103. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

104. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

105. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

106. G., “Point Team Focus Group.”

other, allowing each to reframe the other's perspective and introduce a new idea or consider an old one in a new way.

Church

“Highland is already really good at being intergenerational.” ~Madison¹⁰⁷

Investment and involvement affect a person's experience in anything, and GRIT was no different for the student leaders of Highland University Ministry. One busy student, out of town for three out of the four GRIT meetings, concluded that GRIT was another demonstration of what he felt he was already experiencing. It was affirming to see what is held as a high value put into practice, but it also added quite a bit to his already full calendar. Madison was in on the project from the beginning, a part of the “Point Team” when students were meeting at The Acre and requested the change.

Keychain Leadership

Service

These students were receptive to building community through the avenue of service. To them it felt they had no “agenda other than spreading the love of Jesus,” and this felt right.¹⁰⁸ This ease allowed them to laugh together and get to know each other in the relaxed atmosphere of serving in a hands-on way.

Communication

It was comical to hear students' comments about the energetic communication sent their direction by their GRIT partners. Their differing reactions demonstrate yet another reason generations must work to understand one another's experiences and

107. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

108. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

dialects when speaking the language of community. For some students, especially those who did not attend the first GRIT meeting, it was alarming to begin receiving messages in a group chat largely consisting of people they did not know. This was not perceived as negative per se, just as a demonstration of a surprising amount of energy when relationship had yet to be created. Assuming digital communication is a wide-open pathway for a person simply because they are of a younger generation is something to reconsider when future opportunities arise. Because it is such a part of life for some people, it can feel quite intimate and be alarming when encroached upon by people they do not yet know, even those with the best intentions.

Warmth in Community

Intergenerational Aspects

“It really does take equal commitment on both parts, but it is incumbent on the established group to lay down their preferences to accommodate those whom they are inviting.” ~Sessions¹⁰⁹

Aside from affirming the intergenerationality of Highland, the person in this focus group with the most to say about it was the university minister. David Sessions recalled the meeting referred to above with the small group leaders of Highland, the one in which I had to do some convincing of leaders that indeed our students desired this type of engagement with them. I did not realize he had done something similar with the students, sharing with them the impressions he had from that same meeting, that Highland small groups were incredulous at the possibility that their presence and partnership was sought by college students. Highlighted in his focus group comments was the fact that there is always some breaking down of barriers to do when joining two groups in a way that

109. Sessions, “Point Team Focus Group.”

requires intentionality. There is always a power dynamic in the agreement to partner. One group hosts and invites; the other responds and serves as a guest. In Sessions' GRIT experience, it was the small group who made the invitation and the students who responded and brought their content. In this way the invitation and response became mutual. The students were invited to come. The small group was invited into the rhythm of DIG. This mutuality created a successful power dynamic in the group because each stakeholder was both giving and receiving in a way that was both welcomed and upon which they had agreed. Communal give and take bridged the generation gaps in this group. This aspect of GRIT community demonstrates not only the perichoresis of the trinitarian theological model but also that kenosis actively fuels warmth and intimacy in relationship. Acknowledgment of the dynamic of power demonstrates key learning from the intervention. Examination of the vital ingredients of offering and receiving will empower groups to move forward with intentionality.

Meeting Outside of GRIT

“There’s something incredibly valuable in simply seeing the way other people do life.” ~Clay¹¹⁰

One graduating student made some summations about the kind of adult he wants to be based on his GRIT experience, saying he wants to be somebody who draws people in, someone who has time or takes the time to go get coffee. Through GRIT he saw the value of someone taking this time with him and wants to keep his life open to community in this way moving forward.

110. S., “Point Team Focus Group.”

**Highland University Ministry DIG Leaders
("Go-To Leaders" and "Spiritual Mentors") Focus Group
Sunday February 5, 2023**

This focus group met at our house for lunch. Seven DIG spiritual mentors and four student "Go-To" leaders attended. The same protocols for interview questions and note-taking were in place, and Coble and I worked as a team once more. I was both a participant and a researcher in this focus group, as is reflected in the comments below. There was a lot of good reminiscing, munching, and general positive fellowship during the gathering. After reading the planned questions for this focus group, I opened with the following leading questions. "What are the best parts of what you have just experienced? What do you want to preserve moving forward? How is life different in church community and ministry before and after GRIT?"

Jack spoke up first.

The coolest thing to witness was the intergenerational communication. It was not awkward, we connected quickly. It felt like GRIT was another whole program besides DIG, almost like it needed to be different. DIG was great, GRIT was great; they felt separate and needed to. My takeaway was interaction around the table. GRIT happened in a way that DIG hadn't done before. The table brings comfort. As mentors, it wasn't about us. We were observers.¹¹¹

Jack's group was paired with the group along with Daniel, whose comments are reflected in Small Group Leader Focus Group One, above.

Lyle is a spiritual mentor, and one who participated in this ministry as a student during college himself. Now as a young adult spiritual mentor he says the following.

For myself and also for our DIG students, in a lot of our churches that we grew up in, we had spiritual parents and grandparents who were not family to us, and I didn't know I missed this until we had GRIT groups. We recently sent wedding invites to many people from the older generation at my home church, just because they were meaningful people in my life. It was cool to feel the same effect with Nell and Carolyn. Church is different now because I know them. I don't look over

111. Jack N., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

at church and say, “There’s some old people.” Now I look over and say, “These old people are some of the most progressive movers and shakers here.” We have interactions of familiarity. Bill Fowler bumped me from behind making a point to say “Hello!” I wouldn’t have known him! GRIT unintentionally hurt DIG; it interrupted the rhythm too much, but GRIT as a stand-alone...those times were so rich that I think it was worth the experiment. Now the puzzle remains, how do we do this, valuing all the connections?¹¹²

Lyle’s group had been partnered with the “Sunday Sisters,” whose comments are recorded above in Small Group Leader Focus Group Two.

Jackie said, “Those precious ladies are talking about their time with you all, writing cards with y’all; they so loved it. I see them and visit with them at Grace Fellowship.”¹¹³ Jackie was in the group mentioned above in Clay’s comments from the “Point Team” focus group, and below in our one-on-one at Front Porch.

Lyle added, “There were times that we had to say, ‘We don’t have time to assemble an entire meal to bring to y’all.’ And they would totally get that. They would tell us, ‘Bring stuff to put in soup.’ And we’d say, ‘I don’t know if we can do that!’ They were thankfully flexible!”¹¹⁴

Frank joked about rocks for stone soup.¹¹⁵ This was the “Frank Deli Special” to which the “Sunday Sisters” referred in the Small Group Leaders Focus Group 2 above.

112. Lyle B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

113. Jackie C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

114. B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

115. Frank C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

About the students they said, “We just want to spoil them.’ They loved being in that position, to have people that were new to them and to whom they could pass on their legacy of prayer and faith.”¹¹⁶

Allie spoke up as a student also paired with the “Sunday Sisters.”

Before GRIT, I didn’t know “that” population at Highland. I have connected with one of the sixth graders who did an initiative with the “Sonshiners,” of which Rachel and Belle are also a part, so we were able to talk about that. It’s gone beyond simply both of us getting to know Rachel and Belle to us getting to talk about this whole ladder of intergenerational connection.¹¹⁷

Bria, in the same GRIT group as Adams above said, “One cool aspect of our group was that it went beyond our formal time with them. Our group really leaned into service. DIG and GRIT served together in multiple ways: Breakfast on Beech Street (one of our guys got up at 5am), the food pantry, and we helped them unpack on Sack Sunday. It was cool to see how it extended beyond ‘group time.’”¹¹⁸

“In my mind, all these people are ‘old,’ but in their minds the differences of fifteen years or so categorized some of them as ‘young’ in relation to each other. Our folks might be telling a story as if it were last week and throw in, ‘and by the way, this was 25 years ago!’”¹¹⁹

“Generational differences—older, but even older!”¹²⁰

Allen served on Beech Street after the first meeting but wasn’t at the next meeting, and they asked specifically about him. They knew him at the second meeting. Rich relationships quickly developed that “never would have

116. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

117. Allie P., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

118. Bria S., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

119. B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

120. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

happened if we had not...” They were as pleasantly surprised as we were at this fact. We love the connections. Now I call one Highland member by a silly nickname. That never would have happened.¹²¹

Jackie shared a few more comments.

There was a cross section of ages in our small group. We were intergenerational in and of ourselves. Students intermingled among “old souls” and interacted on a level playing field. They were openhearted and responsive. Some didn’t come, and it was limiting in that way. Some of our students never, ever came to a GRIT meeting. Maybe some weren’t comfortable with it, maybe they needed a ride, but when one was offered, they were never accepting.¹²²

Mary Ann said,

We had a couple like that as well. Each meeting we’d have returning and DIG student new to GRIT split about half and half. Returners would not come to GRIT, but new people would. With new people always coming to GRIT, it was so hard to meld with other DIG members who had come previously and divided the group. We only had 3 meetings; we missed one. We had a lot of good connection among our group, among the ones who came. DIG students wanted to serve and GRIT leaders shared ways in which they could with children’s ministry. I have not checked to see if they did or not. The second time we went it was fun, we came up with questions and just got to know each other. Brady and I, in our early thirties, are kind of in-between the two generations in our own group. The small group is older than us, the students are younger. I enjoyed getting to hear from the two different sides.¹²³

Brian added, “We had younger and older, with some professors intermingled. It made Highland feel smaller. For the students, it made campus feel smaller in a good way, more comfortable. They felt open to see ongoing interaction.”¹²⁴

Frank explained.

It did throw off rhythms of DIG, and that hurt a little, but we see the importance and value intergenerationality. It makes Highland feel smaller. Maybe there was some intimidation in meeting new people and might have been why people didn’t

121. N., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

122. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

123. Mary Ann H., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

124. Brian H., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group,” 5 February 2023.

show up. At the end of the day, our groups meshed pretty well, pretty quick, and this speaks to the desire, on both ends, to have these relationships.¹²⁵

Brad spoke up.

My experience is different as I didn't go to Highland last semester. To support a friend struggling in his faith, I went to The Well with him. DIG connected me to my people, but GRIT reminded me of the church that these relationships also connect me to. It reminded me of church in San Antonio, a church of thirty people with few young people. I'm comfortable with an older crowd.¹²⁶

Brad and Denise were both connected to the group Santhi spoke of in the Small Group Leader focus group above, as well as Ella from the "Point Team." I was also in this group.

Denise said,

I thought our GRIT group was fantastic. I loved getting to know everyone there. It felt like the kids brought a new energy. I saw one member at ACU (on a visit) and interacted because of GRIT, chatting in The Bean. Because our meetings were fewer and further between, it was a challenge to keep interactions going, but I feel excited for where it will go because students long for it. Even though it's hard to keep traction, we're craving more interactions. We've set a good foundation for it; our college students that are interested in finding intergenerational community come. I don't know if there was a better way; it went the way it went. We relied on Beth Ann to guide. It wasn't a bad thing.¹²⁷

I responded,

I found participant plus observer hard to do. After the second meeting, I realized we were halfway done, and we were still getting to know people. It felt to me like we were doing three things not as well as if we were focused on one we love. We had offsite meetings, DIG, and GRIT. What I was hoping to find and for students to discover was a piece of ministry our members do in their own, regular lives. This didn't communicate as well to everyone; not everyone understood what that meant. Did this happen in your group?

125. C., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group."

126. Brad C., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

127. Denise I., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

Lyle described, “We went to Highland Assisted Living, played BINGO, and danced the “chicken dance.” This was our GRIT time. We steered serving together into the GRIT time. We visited the nursing home/assisted living facility during GRIT time, not outside of GRIT.”¹²⁸

“We went to Belle’s house to meet with the ladies for about an hour and a half to talk about GRIT one afternoon, but then moving forward it was fun and service together.”¹²⁹

“We served at Fall Fest with our GRIT small group leaders, but the students didn’t serve. Some of our students did come, but they didn’t serve with us. We did, and that was new for us.”¹³⁰

Jackie added, “Fall Fest was fun knowing everyone would be there. We saw all our kids up there. It was a true intergenerational gathering. Fall Fest was another event that gave our ‘kids’ another chance to interface with our Highland families. Again, that was beautiful, intergenerational.”¹³¹

We closed our time with a final question, “What is your best nugget, best moment from the semester”?

Denise said, “Our last meeting. We had all the kids. There were so many! The activity with the kids drawing on our backs for so long brought a lot of laughter. We kicked it back up and did it again.”¹³²

128. B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

129. P., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

130. H., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

131. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

132. I., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

For me, it was a getting to know a fourth grader in our group. One night at a heavier “content meeting,” she was sitting by me and drawing pictures of the personalities of those in our group. She had made this little grid, and everyone had a space. For one college student she had drawn a little Christmas present. She said her personality is like a gift. A gift! She had made a spot for everybody. It blew my mind. We decided after this night to make the next meeting, the one right before Christmas, about the kids.

Lyle described card-making at their second meeting with Rachel, who was an artist. They spent time intricately making cards for the staff at Highland, and then Leah took the cards to work with her. “Honoring Rachel’s gift and doing something simple and childlike made the time really special. Everyone showed off their work. We all participated in encouraging the staff. None of us seemed good at art except Rachel, so it was a sharing time as equals.”¹³³

Allie described her best moment at Abilene Assisted Living saying,

I have never been among that demographic of people. Why are they living there? I don’t even know. I just felt tremendous joy and personally wouldn’t know about it if not for GRIT, and I had the time of my life there, talking to everyone there about their holiday seasons, what they were excited and not excited about. I’ve had conversations with Ruth about going back, and it’s because of the “Sunday Sisters.” They go there for a Bible study on Fridays. I’m anticipating going back, and it is because of them that I get to.¹³⁴

Jack said, “The Sack Sunday help, the interaction, I’m so proud of our college kids. It was an unexpected joy, and we were so blessed by it. It was an outpouring of support for Highland, not ‘what can I get out of it,’ but intentional serving. It felt really different, serving rather than receiving.”¹³⁵

For me, it was Jonathan.

133. B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

134. P., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

135. N., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

Jonathan was always the first one there. At our last meeting at a fire pit, Jonathan was helping. We roasted s'mores and hot dogs, all that in the Lott's back yard. Lighting stuff, that's always fun. It's fun to sit together around the fire with all different ages, to watch people not know how to roast a hot dog. Some of our kids have probably not hung out around a fire with a bunch of people older than their parents, or their parents' ages. What we enjoyed most were kids like Jonathan. And the outstanding food; we were very food-centric!¹³⁶

Mary Ann remarked, "It was special to watch Nancy. She became involved, was baptized, and she's enjoying it. Getting to know your church family and growing in faith, surrounded by church family. That's what we're doing."¹³⁷

Lyle spoke again of the "Sunday Sisters": "It's a blessing to learn how much loving ministry is done that we never hear about because it's just who they are. So many members of Highland are engaged in awesome, fruitful ministry nobody knows about, and they're just like, 'This is who I am.'"¹³⁸

Everyone was really looking for best outcomes and reporting positive side of things, looking for best comments to share. Lyle made cookies; there was lots of laughter.

**Demonstration of Slippage: One-on-One Conversation with Lexi
Highland Small Group Leader
Front Porch Coffee, March 8, 2023**

With a project of this size, with this many moving parts and people involved, there are bound to be important conversations that "slip off the radar," or "fall through the cracks." When listening to the "Point Team" focus group, I realized that one small group had been a late substitution for another who had gotten their meeting dates mixed up and wound up not being able to participate. This late addition, Lexi's group, had not

136. Jerry C., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

137. H., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group."

138. B., "DIG Leaders' Focus Group."

been included in the regular communication, and had not been invited to any focus group conversations. So, Lexi and I met for coffee one evening. She read the interview questions and shared her related reflections.

When we signed up, we ended up hosting twice at our house, and it was really good. The intermingling depended on the host, one long table or several small group tables. Jerry led; Jackie took notes. We brought our dinner and ate and talked. We left it in the courts of the students to reach to us to further the relationship or ministry interest once we introduced ourselves that first time and told them who we are and what we do. It seemed like they were really busy. We had students come and have to leave early for different commitments. A lot of kids do go home on the weekend. We would have liked to continue, but Jerry and Jackie opted to discontinue after the semester. We got to know them well enough. I may not remember a name, but I think I will remember something about them.¹³⁹

Lexi did reiterate the story Clay told about the firepit during his focus group, the same one Jerry told during the DIG leader focus group. “Grandpa’s Park” is what the family calls Dennis’s yard, and it is a place that impacted many in GRIT.

Themes and Key Learning from DIG Leaders

Trinitarian Theology and *Koinonia* Fellowship

Experiencing the Kingdom

“I looked around and the students were sitting among everyone, a bunch of ‘old souls.’” ~Jackie¹⁴⁰

The DIG leaders continued to reiterate what others had said, even using some of the same language. GRIT created a space where everybody interacted on level ground. Spiritually and relationally, this openhearted responsiveness exemplifies the best of trinitarian perichoresis and the relationship into which Jesus brought his disciples before his ascension when he handed the spread of the gospel to Spirit-led Christian community.

139. Lexi L., “One-Off Interview at Front Porch,” 5 March 2023.

140. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

During the project intervention one student received baptism. Her DIG leaders mentioned how special it was to see her getting to know her church family and be surrounded by them. This action demonstrated both the best fruit of triune community, the submission to and the lifting up of one another, and the best of passing on the keys of leadership. Students did ministry activities with other members of Highland, reciprocally creating meaning and enlivening the presence of the gospel around them.

Church

“DIG connected me to my people, but GRIT reminded me of the church that these relationships also connect me to.” ~Brad¹⁴¹

Many students and young adults at Highland come from rich ecclesial holding environments. In their growing up years they had a church that felt like family. Highland is a big church, and this intervention made it feel smaller. Students now know members that, outside of GRIT, they wouldn't otherwise know. More than that, they know what is important to them and how these priorities are expressed in their daily and weekly lives.

One student is also a “Huddle Leader” for a group of sixth graders at Highland. The sixth-grade huddle did a project with the “Sonshiners” at church, a group that includes the “Sunday Sisters.” Because Allie and a student from her sixth-grade huddle were both involved with the “Sunday Sisters” and with huddle, they had a lot of intergenerationality to talk about when they realized they were serving alongside and getting to know the same people. Allie said, “It created this whole ladder of connection

141. C., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

intergenerationally.”¹⁴² God worked in this pilot in ways both anticipated and in surprising and fun ways that participants would not have even imagined.

Keychain Leadership

Service

“We served at Abilene Assisted Living (Highland House). I felt tremendous joy, personally, and wouldn’t know about it if not for GRIT. I’m anticipating going back, and it is because of the ‘Sunday Sisters’ that I get to.” ~Allie¹⁴³

As mentioned above, service was an aspect into which most groups heartily leaned. One of the best aspects of this was with the GRIT group that included the oldest participants, the “Sunday Sisters.” It has been said that these women are all about service, which is true, but they serve from their primary and natural giftings. With artist Rachel, a group spent time in GRIT making cards. The “Sisters” would send these cards to members of the church and to all kinds of people. I described being the recipient of one above that forever changed my understanding of how to proceed in disagreements and situations that are difficult to understand. Since the conclusion of this intervention, Rachel has passed on to her next life, but she leaves in her wake a legacy of expression and encouragement of which her GRIT group was a part. The people of Highland are a group of Christians reflecting trinitarian fellowship. They are members of one another as Christ called his body to be, and this is reflected in their service.

Communication

This focus group did not offer comment on this aspect. This was the only group that did not comment on this particular subject.

142. P., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

143. P., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

Warmth in Community

Intergenerational Aspects

“I don’t look over during church and say, ‘There’s some old people.’ Now I look over and say, ‘These old people are some of the most progressive movers and shakers here.’” ~Lyle¹⁴⁴

True intergenerational fellowship creates space in which all participants feel seen and known. In the comments above, the participants have mentioned the leadership of peers and older people, but one of the best intergenerational aspects of this project came from one of the youngest at the time. In one meeting during which the GRIT group was working through curriculum and having a very “adult” discussion, one of the many children in the group was listening as a part of the circle and drawing all the while. When asked at the end of the meeting about her picture, she described how she had been drawing a metaphorical sketch of each person that exemplified their personality. On her paper she had a barbell, a wrapped gift, a piece of pie, a wrapped candy, one different picture for each person in GRIT. To be able to construct such a drawing, she had to be present and deeply observant. She focused in a way that meant something to her on what, in her mind, was meaningful about each person present. This focus on the adults by a child changed the plans for the next group meeting, and the group decided to focus on and highlight the presence of the children, doing something that would draw each of them in and capitalize on their importance to the group. In this way, at the leading of a fourth grader, this group learned to demonstrate a new level of reciprocity.

Meeting Outside of GRIT

144. B., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

“They were as pleasantly surprised as we were at this fact.” ~ Jack¹⁴⁵

This group of leaders did not have a lot to say about activities outside of GRIT, but they did reference the rich relationships that developed in such a short time. Through the triangulated focus group notes, it became clear that the husbands of the “Sunday Sisters” became involved in the small group during the project when they typically were not attendees. The “Sisters” mentioned how fun it was to hear them “hold court” with the rapt attention of the college students and tell stories. The students commented on seeing these men at church, and the DIG leaders mentioned connections that would have never happened, even nicknames they now call each other, that would not have happened had there not been time and relational space created for them to take place. GRIT created this. The “Sunday Sisters” now have their own triangulated research perspective: their own, that of the students, and that of their husbands!

Description of Reporting Findings

Upon completion of this project’s data summaries and recommendations, it will be made available to those involved in GRIT groups at a spiritual celebration gathering, as well as to the Highland elders and university ministry staff. It is important to me to express gratitude to the participants, so I will write a shared letter to the small group leaders and spiritual mentors of Highland who participated thanking them and expressing positive observations.

In the following chapter I will revisit the foundation of this project applying key learning and noting lingering questions as well as suggestions, both my own and those offered by focus group participants, for the future of Highland University Ministry and

145. N., “DIG Leaders’ Focus Group.”

intergenerational partnerships. Conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention in correlation with the problem and purpose of the project will be articulated next as well as how assumptions that surfaced in this pilot might apply to the church at large.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

“Always be joyful. Pray continually, and give thanks whatever happens.”
(1 Thess 5:16–18)

When humans pray, God hears, and God acts. This becomes clearer when the author of Revelation pulls back heaven’s veil and allows apocalyptic reality to come into view. Prayers, gathered in “golden bowls” by those worshippers surrounding the throne and the Lamb are offered up as incense, fragrant to God, and are placed on the altar (Rev 5:8, 8:3). Then the angels gather them, along with fire from the altar, and hurl divine action back onto the earth (Rev 8:5). This magnificent imagery indicates heaven’s responsiveness when people pray.

This project began because of divine action in the life of God’s minister and prayer. Witcher, in the throes of the pandemic crisis, put a plan in place for the students he served and their leaders. They moved their activities to an outside location and began meeting at The Acre. Witcher also knew that a vocational transition was on the horizon, so he surveyed the students and asked questions which would inform the ministry in his absence. Their response to this survey went unheard, so the students continued asking. This project exists as a response to their pleas. If this intergenerational intervention is significant in no other way, this truth alone is impactful. The students asked, and they were answered with action. Those tending the ministry following the COVID crisis and ministry transition heard the students’ cry and set a plan in motion. This action reveals

God's presence and activity in the lives of people. It demonstrates to a younger generation the presence and activity of God in their lives through those of the people important to them, individuals who listened to their concerns, to their requests, and responded. Primarily this intervention addressed the students of Highland University Ministry. They wanted to be integrated into the worship, ministry, and body life of the church, not siloed with only their peers, and they lacked a means by which to amalgamate. Secondly, the enrichment the Highland small groups received when they agreed to be partners represents the blessing the people of God receive when a community says "yes" to joining in God's mission, blessings beyond that which could be asked for or imagined. This is a project in responsiveness, mirroring that of heaven, to a divine idea, implanted in the hearts of people, for the community of faith at Highland Church of Christ, to be more deeply embedded in one another's lives and thereby reflect the fellowship that God demonstrates as the Trinity. The Trinity presents a "perichoretic sociality, or intra-Trinitarian *koinonia*, characterized by self-giving, loving, knowing, communicating, glorifying, and creating. It is superabundant and thus overflows, moving outward beyond itself like an ever-widening dance of joy."¹ GRIT created a space for diverse people to engage in this creative dance and bear the *imago Dei* before one another.

This project is significant because it demonstrates listening to the needs of one another within the body of Christ. It vivifies a body drawing together in the fellowship modeled by and patterned after the Trinity. Coble and Reed emphasize, "Christian spirituality and ministry are not an individual affair, but a transformational journey that

1. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 78.

takes place within the body of Christ.”² This is exactly what this project aimed for and achieved. The triune God demonstrates relational wholeness and shared life, which God extends to humanity, according to Coble and Reed.³ Modeling our personhood as best we can after this trinitarian truth sets people on a journey in relationships with the aim of wholeness. Coble and Reed remind, it is a journey persons will never be able to complete on their own.⁴ The students were crying out for the presence of God in coming to the space of worship; at the same they desired diversity in partnership, another trinitarian priority which this project achieved and Latini highlights:

The crisis of community is a wide-open door for the church’s ministry in the world. It provides many concrete entry points for connecting the gospel to people’s harried and fragmented lives. It does so in a profoundly meaningful and healing manner. The crisis of community provides a way of pointing to our true identity and existence in *koinonia*.⁵

Together the group listened to the leadership of Christ in community, and then acted on what they heard, all the while training their ears to continue this listening and action readily in the future.

In the previous chapter I addressed key learning that was foregrounded by this project and reflected in the triangulated perspectives of the three focus group populations in three main theological and theoretical areas. This project demonstrates a non-traditional version of participatory action research, but one on which Sensing and I agreed would address, and I believe did fulfill, the requirements of the intervention. A PAR project, according to Sensing, not only challenges the mind but calls for

2. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age,” 123.

3. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age,” 122.

4. Reed and Coble, “Leadership in a Secular Age,” 123.

5. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 93.

intervention and change. As the name implies, action that involved transformed practices of the community was the primary goal.⁶

After analysis of the context of Highland small groups alongside university small groups, my mentor Dr. Carson Reed and I determined that there must be a way to bring these two together in a fashion that would address the expressed desire of the students for intergenerationality. This chapter contains the specific enhancements enacted between the university ministry and the church's small group ministry. The triangulated focus groups directed the attention of the researcher and the participant observer to the fruit of this enhancement. I will address the stakeholder's assumptions which also impacted the project's outcome, assumptions which inform both the ministries involved and the church at large. I will note suggestions made by the focus group members as well as some of my own. Also, in this chapter I will address the pilot's trustworthiness, attending to applicability, credibility, and reflexivity, as well as the significance and sustainability of such a work for our congregation and interested others.

Interpretation

The purpose of this project was to create space for, live into, and reflect upon the pilot GRIT groups grafted between the DIG and Highland small group ministries to determine if they cultivated the expressed values of ministry and discipleship in an intergenerationally enhanced way. Following are some specific ways in which this pilot was successful in achieving this purpose.

1. Theologically, the congregation is intergenerationally enhanced by the context and opportunity this pilot created to walk the "Know and Be Known

6. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 159.

Pathway.”⁷ The preliminary focus groups explored small group life in 2021. This information combined with personal awareness of university students’ robust life, which I have been involved with since 2016, directed my attention to the students’ request for deeper connection to lives within the church. Merging the pre-existing space for small group already created in the lives of these two groups made sense. Here groups found an enhancement of pure relationship in a trinitarian pattern. GRIT offered an opportunity for Highland churchgoers of different generations to find level ground. As reflected in the key learning supplied by the focus groups, persons did experience relationships reflective of those modeled within the Trinity. Here they shared *koinonia*. Latini quotes George Hunsinger’s description of this as “mutual indwelling, participation, coinherence, and coexistence.”⁸

2. Students engaged in ministry because of the relationships created in GRIT that they otherwise would have missed. This represents what it means to “pass on the keys of leadership.” People often do not respond to a request or a “sign up” unless they know someone involved or have someone with whom to partner. They also shy away from leadership in something they have never done. This project exposed not only students but also some members of Highland small groups to ministry they would not have otherwise known about while providing them experience in participation and leadership. They engaged and ministered in ways that many were unaware of before engaging

7. “Know And Be Known Pathway,” *Highland Church of Christ*, Spring 2018, <http://highlandchurch.org/pathway/>.

8. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 76.

with GRIT. The fruit of having done these things will surface at unknown junctures in these people's future lives, and they will be able to draw on their experiences that began in GRIT.

3. GRIT fueled the growth of warm community at Highland which was expressed in different ways in the six different groups. From the beginning, the research that supported this project revealed multiple ways to be involved in Christian community and meaningful connections between Highland's vision and mission and small groups. GRIT groups offered diverse expressions of warm community in a similar way. Some GRIT groups now know each other's names and can locate each other's seats in worship. Others are still meeting for GRIT and now have close to two years of experience doing life together, creating communal intimacy. GRIT groups represent many aspects of community warmth; however, as a whole, GRIT brings to life one part of the church's "Restoration Vision," to restore Highland. To achieve church restoration, members must know one another. Now they do. Students are regarded differently by church members they now know through GRIT. Santhi reminded the group that any investment made in Christian community is an investment in the church.⁹ Our students will take what they have learned about intergenerational Christian community at Highland and with it enhance the life of whatever church they are a part.

Each of these statements can be corroborated in the key learning and in the data gathered through the triangulated perspectives of the focus groups.

9. K., "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2."

Richard Osmer's work, *Practical Theology*, has been a sentinel throughout my theological education, read early and referred to often.¹⁰ Osmer sounds the alarm, constantly asking the practical theologian to cyclically reflect on what is happening in a context and why, what should be happening, prayerfully assessed, and then what might be done. What is the next right step? This project was born when the university students at Highland rang a bell in conjunction with a circumstance, the worldwide pandemic of COVID, that was its own wake-up call in many ways. Their question about joining intergenerational community required a look around the church to see what was going on. Students had been experiencing robust Christian community within their university ministry context, and their DIG groups were a big influence on their experience of healthy Christian community. After considering what was going on in university ministry, some time was spent exploring what was going on in the life of Highland small groups, where a possible merger might be forged. The "Point Team" had communicated what they were hearing regarding intergenerationality, and all this together pointed to what students felt should be happening. They wanted to attend church with people of diverse ages, rather than continue in the siloed (albeit robust) fashion COVID had ushered in. However, this led to other questions for students: why *do* these various people gather as a church? What difference does this make in their lives, or do they attend simply because they think they "should?" These questions then led to the steps of taking action and joining together in pursuit of relational answers to these questions.

Tim Sensing, in *Qualitative Research*, complexifies the cycle that Osmer proposes and created a "Theological Reflection Model" that provided a template for this

10. Osmer, *Practical Theology*.

project.¹¹ The model begins with experience within a context as did this project. Two groups at Highland could serve one another, could benefit from one another, and could advance the mission of God through the Highland church by knowing each other. The problem was that they did not yet know one another, and further, one group did not know of the desire to be known nor of their need for the other group. The students wanted both older and younger mentors from within the Highland congregation. They wanted reciprocity in relationship, knowing this would lead to advancing the kingdom in some way in and through their lives that they did not understand at the time. Once Highland small group members learned of this need, they responded with curiosity, wanting to know more. At a lunch we conversed and explained the students' request, the desire to align their lives to create a space for intergenerational pouring. This created a point of examination. Between surfacing a need within the context of Highland and the small group leaders planning how to act, there was a need for theological resourcing, which is a key difference in Sensing's model. Small groups examined the mission and vision statements of Highland, as well as the Pathway model, and with this information freshly front-of-mind, decided to act. Nearly double the number of Highland small groups needed for the project matches responded with the desire to participate, ten in all. These Highland small groups wanted to match with DIG groups to create GRIT and see what God might be up to in their lives together. This demonstrates the mutuality to which Jürgen Moltmann refers, as referenced by Reed and Coble.¹² Here, the decision to join perichoresis is possible, effectively engaging a model of trinitarian fellowship. When

11. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 344.

12. Reed and Coble, "Leadership in a Secular Age," 124.

people come together, both what binds and distinguishes them comes into view. In a shared group, they live in relation to one another and to the presence of God within one another, within the church, and in the spaces in the world where they minister together and shine the light of the joint presence of God's image: Father, Son, and Spirit. They live as equals in and through one another as they join in a model of trinitarian fellowship amid their walking-around, jogging, coffee-drinking, breakfast-fixing, grocery-shopping lives. This action demonstrates the new practice to which Sensing's model refers; one which has created new experiences of both small group and university ministry for some in the life of the Highland church.

At the outset of this project activity, young people asked for an enhanced relationship with the different generations at their church. They wanted to return to worshipping together following the interruption of COVID; they wanted to do it better than before and for the right reasons. In their eyes, prior to COVID, the university students were siloed unto themselves and simply rubbing shoulders with the greater Highland membership, if they ever interacted at all. They felt there could be more and brought this dream of mutual discipleship and intergenerational ministry partnership to the university ministry leadership. It is incredibly significant that the younger ones came to the older ones seeking guidance because, in some way this indicates that they had already seen, already been shown through their interaction with Highland activities and Highland members that being a part of a church mattered. They came to this project hungry for this significance to be applied to their own lives. Young adults launching life more and more independently, more and more "on their own," often know that being a part of a church is important, but this project presented them with the needed next step

and an answer to the questions about why people would make such sacrificial commitments for other people. It's remarkable when their only connection is the body of Christ, and they know each other mainly through mutual fellowship at a church. What else could we do, as older Highland members, but gather the students beside us at the feet of the Father who, through the Spirit, says, "This is the way, walk in it" (Isa 30:21)?

Trustworthiness

Applicability

For the findings of this project to be worth noting, trustworthiness must be established. While the methodology utilized was flexible, it was appropriate to the research problem and purpose, to the data collection procedures, and to the data analysis, an important permission given to qualitative researchers and their projects by Sensing.¹³ The trust generated when a minister interacts with a ministry, regularly and over a long period of time is the same as that reflected in this project. This intervention was requested by students who did not know it would become a project and would have taken place even if there had been no thesis to write. At the time of the request, I had been involved in university ministry for seven years and am still a leader in DIG.

Embedded in the life of a robust student ministry and small group ministry rather than an isolated experiment, the research is applicable, and the curriculum is adaptable to any church. This project will be especially interesting to university ministers looking to integrate their ministries into the life of their church rather than having the lives of their students siloed among themselves.

13. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 326.

Sensing quotes Michael Quinn Patton's *Qualitative Research*, highlighting "The Principle of Proximal Similarity" which says, "we generalize most confidently to applications where treatments, settings, populations, outcomes, and times are most similar to those in the original research."¹⁴ Many elements in this statement point to an easily replicable pilot, such as the one conducted at Highland, in different church contexts. "The Principle of Discriminate Validity," highlighted by Sensing, essentializes a target construct for replicability of the research findings.¹⁵ In the case of this project, the target construct is the desire of college students for intergenerational community in the life of their church. As the researcher, I believe that any church containing students with this desire could find meaning in replicating a version of what was done in the faith community of Highland.

Credibility

Member checking was an important aspect in sustaining the credibility of this research. The triangulated focus group perspectives were protected from possible misinterpretation by checking back in with the members, an important element Sensing includes which enables the researcher "to hear from participants (on) new ideas, patterns, and interpretations" they might have missed.¹⁶ During one focus group interview with small group leaders, one person expressed that they had misunderstood the desire of the students to "know about their lives during the week," and had interpreted this in terms of their jobs rather than any ministry they did outside of church. This realization led to one

14. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 326.

15. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 326.

16. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 330.

of the key learnings that students will not generally sign up to be a part of a ministry unless they know someone involved. Reflecting our understandings to one another during the focus group caused the small group leader to realize the intention and desire of the students and the project more clearly and equipped them with the ability to adjust for future times of engagement.

As a researcher, I underestimated the clarity with which I needed to communicate the heart of the project. The real quest for the students, besides gathering back in the same location for church, was to see what was going on in lives of the members because they are “church people.” In an age of alternative forms of worship, many which are online and present very different opportunities for community formation, young adults are asking themselves why they would get out on Sunday morning and attend. Further, they are exploring the many needs the world has for justice and relief of oppression and asking if and how the church tends to these needs in concrete ways. Even though the curriculum for the first week offered an invitation to reach out and get together with someone from a different generation outside of GRIT, it was not until some of the small group leaders talked to one another at a focus group that the idea of serving alongside one another really “click.” Even for groups who had done some service together, the significance of this had not registered. Here in service is where “the older ones teach the younger ones” how to engage in spaces we normally would not choose to enter. We go, and we take younger ones along with us, and we show them how this activity is part of the fabric of our lives. Then when it is their turn to go and even show someone else, they have a reference point in which to frame the practice of service. They can proceed in what might be uncomfortable ministry spaces confidently because they have seen this

done before. They themselves have now engaged in this frame with people they respect, people whose motivation they have come to understand and trust because of time spent in community fellowship and worship.

Group Number Four lived in an interesting tension, as the small group leader mentioned in her focus group, that the idea of integrating students into members' service lives during the week had not registered with her. Group Number Four did a service project together, singing hymns at a nursing care facility. This leader's own high school-aged daughter joined in service with her DIG partner leader (myself; see narrative shared in Chapter Four) in regularly meeting to cook and serve dinner to a local children's emergency shelter on Wednesday nights. This partnership was created in response to the "I Will" statement the first week of GRIT, which was designed to get to know someone in the group from a different generation than yourself. This high school student became an integral part of the dinner service group.

As Sensing suggests, "peer debriefing" enhances the credibility of this project: "This allows another perspective that can question and review the account given."¹⁷ Coble, the participant observer and notetaker from the first 2021 focus group meetings was a constant conversation partner. One undergraduate student at ACU engaged Scott Swain's book, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, as an honors project and served as a conversation partner in strengthening the foundational theology of the project.

17. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 333.

Reflexivity

According to Sensing, “In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument.”¹⁸ Sensing admonishes the researcher not to over or underestimate this role and its impact on the data and the outcome of the project.¹⁹ I found it difficult to be an objective researcher on this project in two specific instances. First, it was challenging for my GRIT group to have me as both participant and observer. While I wanted the students to lead our GRIT gatherings as they normally led during DIG, both they and the small group leaders in our partner group looked to me to lead the time since it was “my project.” They knew that, as a researcher, I had aspirations for the project and their desire was for these to be fulfilled. A second time in which it was difficult to remain objective occurred during the focus group of which I would naturally be a part, that of the DIG leaders. I did share my reflection about the sustainability of this level of small group rigor, which I will share below, and I do believe it influenced our conversation. Leaders who share deep community and ministry life together want to encourage one another’s efforts, and I feel this desire was reflected in the focus group with my fellow DIG leaders. If I could have recused myself from this group, the conversation might have flowed differently and contained more objectivity. As it was, it demonstrated the Hawthorne Effect anticipated in the “Limitations” of this project.

Often when congregational life is augmented in innovative ways, parishioners perceive either success or failure based on elements that lie within their own perspective.

18. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 334.

19. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 335.

Further enhancements dictated by participation in the project will be trustworthy representations of actual data gained from the multiple perspectives involved.

Significance and Implications

Sustainability

Research is often disruptive because it causes the normative habits of people to shift for a period. Not only do they shift, but these habits succumb to observation and evaluation, and people feel different ways about this. Sensing says that ultimately the goal of a qualitative project, one which demonstrates participation and action on the parts of the researcher and the participants, is to affect change in the system or in the lives of the participants, which this one did.²⁰ Multiple focus groups reported letting go of personal preferences and making space in their routines, even changing their language in some instances.

People are often guilty of trying to do too much, and churches can succumb to the same trap. Too much of a good thing is still too much. By definition, “an excessive amount that becomes overwhelming or harmful, rather than helpful or pleasurable,” is the idiom we found ourselves living.²¹ This is easy to do for college students who like to pack their calendars with new opportunities, and it is easy for a university ministry at a church who cares deeply for students and pours a lot of energy in their direction. This tension is represented in the corresponding comments of two of the focus groups that, when examined closely are really saying the same thing. The small group leaders

20. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 337.

21. “Too Much of a Good Thing Idiom Definition,” 6 February 2024, <https://grammarist.com/idiom/too-much-of-a-good-thing/>.

repeatedly referenced the students' busy lives and how rarely the same set of students attended successive meetings. It always seemed to be a different subset of their DIG group, and a small number of students at that. This issue even caused some small group leaders to question the true desire, on the part of the students, to engage in GRIT at all. The student leaders on the "Point Team" reiterated the importance of what had taken place while confessing that it disrupted the rhythm of something that was already very meaningful to them, their weekly DIG meetings. Some students involved in DIG, especially the younger ones who had not experienced the separation between the students and the church brought on by COVID, seemed feel uncomfortable coming to GRIT meetings. They may not have expressed this overtly, but they showed it with their absence. They "voted with their feet." As both a researcher and a participant, I felt this from the very beginning. Having "offsite meetings" with DIG, an opportunity for students to visit the homes of spiritual mentors or meet somewhere else besides the church building built into the schedule several times during the semester, having regular DIG meetings, and then GRIT roughly once a month pulled the fall 2022 HUM calendar apart at the seams. One of the GRIT meetings even fell on ACU's homecoming weekend. This one was tough for everybody. The students came, but this type of scheduling demonstrated an unsustainable pace. The group was overprogrammed.

After an intervention such as this project, a ministry has opportunity to think in new frames and incorporate the new learning facilitated by the new experiences of life together. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, quotes Isaiah Berlin who recalls the world being divided into hedgehogs and foxes based upon an ancient Greek parable: "The fox

knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”²² During a warm winter season, there might be foxes running around all over the neighborhood in a way that mirrors how it felt to be a part of both DIG and GRIT during this project. We had GRIT approximately once a month through the 2022 fall semester, DIG twice, plus one other “off-site” DIG meeting in which we gathered somewhere besides the church. Although we enjoyed and benefitted from all three, running in three lanes consecutively created this mental picture of a fox darting all over the yards and the pre-dawn streets. The hedgehog, on the other hand, stays in one place for a season, especially in winter. The difference between the hedgehog and the fox is that the hedgehog sticks to what the hedgehog knows works, especially when it comes to self-defense. Key learning from GRIT says that even while those involved with both DIG and GRIT were “small-grouping” all over the neighborhood in the course of a month in Highland University Ministry, they were learning one very important thing: they are better together. While wondering about the ministry lives of Highland members, the university students *and* the Highland members realized (some once again) the importance of community formation. Communal operations bear the image of God in ways people cannot experience solitarily. Yes, it was too much, but it was for a season. Often the pendulum swings both directions before it finds alignment and peace, and this will likely be the case with the future of GRIT.

Faith communities can learn from their young adults how to fuel by engaging in quality interactions without packing their schedules in a way that creates tension. They can learn how to engage in service in the same ways they learned to drive a car. They come alongside, over a period and watch how those with experience order their steps,

22. “Jim Collins - Concepts - The Hedgehog Concept,” February 21, 2024, <https://www.jimcollins.com/concepts/the-hedgehog-concept.html>.

how careful they are in the turns, and how important it is both to come to a full stop and again, to not go too fast.

The groups who were successful in giving students a picture of what ministry looks like in life and even in forming ministry partnerships were the ones who showed the students how it was done. They offered the invitation to “do what I do” rather than simply “do what I say.” There were three groups that successfully integrated students into their ministry lives. The “Sunday Sisters” are all about service and, after an afternoon of getting to know one another, the rest of their time together involved some sort of ministry or service to others. This is who these women are, as was reflected by one of their DIG partner leaders during the DIG Leaders’ focus group. They directly addressed both the student questions and the question of this project with their lives, showing what difference their faith makes in the world and what difference their fellowship makes in the ability to live out their faith.

Personal Significance

Having been involved in university ministry at Highland since 2016, I have had a great deal invested in this community of students for a long time. My husband and I raised our boys at Highland, and one of them was participating in Highland University Ministry in the development stages of this pilot, graduating just before GRIT began. During our time at Highland, several ministers who have been meaningful to us and impactful on our boys have transitioned to other churches. This, combined with the impact of COVID, created the perspective of abandonment and isolation that we heard the students speaking of in fall 2021. In the same fall, I lost a friend in an untimely death. She was one who, when I was an emerging young adult, taught me how to do hard things.

Her loss left me feeling a sense of what the students were experiencing. During Witcher's transition, he had asked me to preach at The Acre. This was one of the last gatherings we had there, and it took place after he had made his move to Round Rock Church of Christ in Austin. I chose the text in Acts 27.

In this text Paul was at sea during a bad time of the year, on a ship full of gentiles who thought they were going to die in the storm. When they had lost all hope, Paul had a dream. In the dream, he received the message that they were not going to die, but it was going to be difficult, and they were going to crash. Paul relayed the message to those on board the ship saying, "So men, have courage. I trust in God" (Acts 27:25). Paul had received his mission. He believed in its truth, and the trust he placed in God was enough to save the entire ship's community from imminent death. They would not die, but they would crash and wonder, "Now what?" Nevertheless, they broke bread, drew their strength as a community reliant on the faith of one man, and prepared for whatever was next.

Returning to what was "normal" in life and ministry after COVID left students wondering, "Now what?" as did Witcher's departure. Even with the greatest intentionality, it's impossible to predict the storms that will come in life. No one is guaranteed that much control. But Christians are promised constant accompaniment. It is God's nearness that is a mere turn over the shoulder and closer than one's own breath. This is an ever-present reality, especially during the "now whats" when people feel alone or at a loss.

Christians can rest knowing that ministry is God's, and God's mission does not fail even when life does or people do. The message of an advancing gospel is shared all

through Acts, either through or despite people. Challenges strengthen a community of faith, allowing people to take them in stride and more gently accept God's bigger view for life circumstances, one that centers on Christ's love and God's partnership with people. This is the accompaniment of intergenerational community with people who have sailed the waters of life longer than students have, and with younger ones that cherish the attention of college students.

Theological Significance

Practical theology looks to locate the action of God in the world and discern where people can join. This can be difficult to discern on one's own, especially in younger years. This project created space for people to join their efforts and see together what God might be doing in and among them, and then to help one another see that action and name it, availing themselves to the option to return to it at any given point in time. This is true both for the relationships created and the ministry experienced together in those relationships. This project gave people a different lens through which to look when viewing God's image in the world and created a space for people to call out the reflections of God they see in one another. People experienced mutuality, equality, and community reflective of the perichoresis and *koinonia* fellowship of the Trinity. People lived life together, embodying the kingdom of God in the dailyness of earthly life.

Ecclesiological Significance

GRIT created awareness of and knowledge about diverse groups at Highland, and in this way fueled warmth in the church community. In addition to enhancing the congregation, one element of the DIG model has changed the way two different small groups and one Bible class engage accountability. Situated in the context of an academic

community, many Highland members are thinkers. This is both a strength and a challenge. The DIG model of a small group meeting includes a final action item, or a choice from several available steps called an “I Will” statement. The small groups the students met with liked the way this gave each person a task on which to focus in between meetings as well as the way it allowed them to check in on one another and see how their active commitments, and not merely their thoughts, were going throughout the week. This aspect of GRIT has changed the way these Highland members engage in small group community.

Two different sets of assumptions surfaced during the project. First, people easily lay the frame of their own perceptions over the very different lives of other people. After hearing how eager the college students were to engage in intergenerational fellowship and community, the Highland University Ministry created a calendar of meetings that were to happen throughout the fall semester. Some of these were scheduled at inopportune times based on the different activities in which college students are involved. For example, one was scheduled the Sunday night after ACU’s homecoming. When attendance fluctuated, some small group leaders took it personally and assumed that the students did not actually want the fellowship they had initially requested. In the future when schedules become challenging, Individuals in the groups who propose to form communal life together might reach out to one another and check in to see what is happening in their lives rather than assuming something negative about an individual’s desire for relationship.

Another small group leader described feeling a great burden of responsibility for the project and her group’s interaction with it. She had gone to the informational lunch,

heard about GRIT, and then carried the information back to her group who agreed to participate; however, from this point forward she internalized everyone's satisfaction with the decision, or lack thereof. At her focus group, after hearing the experiences of others, she was able to release this and realize that none of the burden she was carrying was hers to own.

In another iteration of this project, I would do one of two things (or both!). First, I would create a tool to check in with the small group leaders and clarify any negative assumptions. Second, I would create a session in the curriculum on leadership, specifically that of Moses as a leader of a large group of people. His success in weathering all the ups and downs of the wilderness involved his ability to release the people to God's ultimate care and his humble perception of himself in relation to God. I assumed small group leaders would not need training in leadership, but making this addition would be yet another way to level the playing field of small group fellowship.

Lingering Questions

Though there are no field notes from Group Number Six, one of the small group leaders spoke up descriptively at her focus group about how they partnered in service as well as joining for other activities, exercising together or getting coffee. They did things together outside of GRIT which interested the students. This joining action literally saved the life of this group and brought them to thriving. Their spiritual mentors for DIG are not always available to lead their group, so the GRIT partner has been able to step in as needed, engage, and develop relationships outside of official meeting times. It is unclear how this group spent their meeting times.

Another lingering question relates to the pandemic which precipitated the movement of Highland University Ministry to The Acre. If this had not been the situation in the world at the time, would the students have had the experience that created such a felt need for integration in the life of the church? Assessing student interest in intergenerational community in another time and place would provide the answer to this question.

Further Work

Because of his interest in those hearers of his spoken words and their receiving full benefit from them Basil the Great, as described by DelCogliano, remains a good partner and exemplar for the telos of this project.²³ Glorifying God and benefitting the congregants remains foundational to the intergenerational work of the Highland church. Merging university ministry and Highland small groups was just one of many possible areas in which this priority could be explored.

A few needed steps would further the pursuit of the value of intergenerational relationships within the congregation. To maintain the strength of the organic nature of the development of these relationships and evolution of ministries at Highland, anyone interested in getting to know someone from another generation needs a way to make their desire known. Then training is in order. Further study of generational theory and social game theory would scaffold these partnerships, but people also simply need some commonsense teaching on how to “hang out together” and go at the pace of someone who does life differently.

23 DelCogliano, *On Christian Doctrine and Practice: St. Basil the Great*, 18.

Some small group leaders said they “enjoyed” having the students there, but this was not the point. Deeper engagement, forming real relationships and considering one another true, reliable partners in ministry requires some training, practice, and a longer timeline. Though structure is important, these partnerships also would benefit from instruction in letting go of their personal agendas and truly opening to the possibility and expectant likelihood of forming something new, while not knowing exactly what that is. The metaphor that best describes this intergenerational relational space is cleaning house and simplifying. Often, people do this to make room for something they know is coming: a new bed, a new bookshelf, or a new baby. But in this case the cleaning and simplifying takes place in anticipation of God doing something new of which those awaiting it are not yet aware. And like Basil, they trust God for this to come at a digestible pace, at the pace of relationship and the rate of human growth. There is room to learn where gender, social, and racial stereotypes influence Christian service. This shows up in unexpected ways and training can help. There is room to grow in thinking the best of another person’s intentions offering grace viewing communication as a thoughtful art and words as life-giving.

Even when meeting in an intergenerational small group, it is still possible to remain siloed and separate. Meeting in the same space, even a home, does not mean that true mutuality and a non-hierarchical, common view of one another is experienced by all stakeholders. The older ones have opportunity to take the lead in letting the younger generation lead, in releasing their agendas, and letting go of the framework into which they are trying to “make the younger ones fit.” To be genuine and intergenerationally tied means that, together, generations receive the gift of the Lord doing the relational tying

and then inviting the partners into the ministry of God together. Soft hearts and open ears, to God and to one another are all that is required. To relax into faith in this way often requires intentionality and modeling which training partners could provide.

One member of Group Number Three who is also a part of the “Point Team” and attended this focus group said three or four meetings are not enough relational territory to unpack spiritual things within. By additional gatherings, people who truly open their lives to one another in a perichoretic relationship in trinitarian patterning, demonstrate three things. First, not looking to one’s own interests (Phil 2:4). Second, the older ones teaching the younger ones by their example, and third, a presentation of the hope that is available to all who are in Christ (Titus 2:3–4, 1 Pet 3:15). I wonder what would happen if this group had met together, informally, in smaller groups to enhance the relational opportunity. Now that the project is over, groups have more time to truly know each other and commit to intentionally doing the work of the Lord together at the pace at which the Lord provides opportunity.

Concluding Remarks

While expressing the desire for and questions regarding intergenerational ministry partnership, the students and the small group members and leaders realized something very basic in this project. People gather with the church not only to worship but also because people need one other. Created in the image of a God that does not operate in singularity, people forge bonds of fellowship that influence their ability to see the mission of God both in the world and in their own lives. In the words of Ella, speaking for all participants, “It was what we knew we needed but didn’t know how to ask for.”²⁴ Even

24. H., “Point Team Focus Group.”

now, while in ministry transition once again, the Highland University Ministry has a memory of deep integration in the life of the church, some of which has continued and remains ongoing. Churches wishing to have a university ministry that is integrated in the lives of their members now have a model to evaluate and a curriculum plan with which to launch their own iteration. This curriculum offers both a flexible timeline, from four to six weeks, and is inherently open-ended. It allows groups to launch with some guidance, form mutual goals, establish communication, routine, structure, and rhythm for their meetings.

At Highland Church of Christ, there is much to celebrate. This is a group of people committed, in Christian faith, to restoring one another, their city, and the world beyond. They now have a model for how to do this in community that involves an active worship life together including the hospitality of table fellowship, the sacrament of baptism, and the bearing of one another's crosses in intimate ways. Their thoughts are turned toward one another. They are not left alone with the hard and heavy parts of life. The students that came into this fellowship during their study at the university wanted to be a part of the life of the church, not simply siloed among their peers. GRIT created a vehicle to integrate these young adults into the body, a fusion that cannot be undone, and one that serves as a model for coming groups and other churches. At Highland Church of Christ, this has now been experienced and accomplished for one group of students. No doubt there will be many more opportunities to come.

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APPENDIX A

Ethics Approval

The Institutional Review Board at Abilene Christian University states that Beth Ann Fisher's project titled "EXPERIENCING GRIT (GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS, INTERGENERATIONALLY TIED) GROUPS AT THE HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST: AN INTERGENERATIONAL ENHANCEMENT OF SMALL GROUP COMMUNITY LIFE, WE'RE GONNA 'DIG' IN THE 'GRIT,'" which is IRB #2022-58, is EXPEDITED under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. This approval is dated October 19, 2022. Please contact the ACU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at orsp@acu.edu with any questions.

APPENDIX B

Protocol for Notetaking During Focus Groups

1. Record the names of the participants at each session.
2. Notes will be recorded in a three-column format. The note-taker (participant observer) will record main ideas and observations in the middle column. In the left-hand column she will place the name of the person speaking. The left column will remain empty except for the name until data is coded. The right column is for Coble and Fisher's reflections and interpretations, recorded in two different colors.
3. Notes will be given to the researcher at the end of each session. The researcher will listen to the voice memo recording of each session before the conclusion of the day and fill in any pertinent details.

Date:

Time:

Session:

Participants:

Speaker Name Themes and Frequency	Participant Observer Notes Main Ideas, Key Details	PO Reflections Researcher Reflections

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Interview Guide

Each focus group applies Appreciative Inquiry to their GRIT group experience. As a reminder, the focus of AI is “discerning narrative and practices that are generative (creative and life giving).”¹ AI will serve to “guide and nourish” us in developing our “best story” regarding the experiences within GRIT groups to this point.² Each focus group is seeking to discover the best of what is happening in intergenerational small groups.

Appreciative Inquiry Questions for focus groups:

1. Describe your experience of discipleship and ministries associated with the life of the members at Highland before GRIT.
2. How has your life as a disciple and your ability to see yourself as a resident of the kingdom of God been impacted this semester? Include any impactful influences.
3. What does your life as a child of God look like in the future?
4. What imprints have your GRIT group members made on one another this semester? (trinitarian theological foundation)
5. What evidences have you witnessed of generations passing and sharing the keys of leadership this fall (keychain leadership)?³
6. Where have you felt experiences of fueling warm community?⁴
7. What, from your experience, tells a story of the best aspect of GRIT to this point

1. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2004., 2004), <http://ezproxy.acu.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.882279&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 19.

2. Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*.

3. Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Baker Books, 2016), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat00767a&AN=alc.1530202&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690>, 50.

4. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 163.

APPENDIX D

Field Notes Protocol for GRIT Group Meetings

Field notes are the key to understanding and constructing communal meaning from the events that take place. The notetaker serves to describe what is taking place in this one unique setting, with the particular people present. These field notes serve as documentation of an irreplicable experience and will be compared with the notes of other participant observers in other groups to allow for emergence of data.

Field notes will be taken in two columns, one for the observation, and one for the coding system.

Participant Observation:	Interaction Code:

Field notetakers will attend to and record the following information within the GRIT group meeting.

1. Demographics:
List the names and approximate ages of the participants.
What other forms of diversity apparent are apparent aside from age? List any you observe.
2. Physical Setting:
Where is this group meeting?
Describe what the surroundings communicate to the group.
3. The Event:
What happens in the course of your discussion?
Record the topics discussed and the main ideas of those topics.
Who is participating in the conversation? Who is not?
4. Interactional Patterns:
Who interacts with whom? What is the substance of these interactions?

Note the following codes for marking interactions:

- A. Topic Connections (TC, marked explicit or implicit, E/I)
 - Continuation (C, maintaining the same topic)
 - Expansion (E, sharing new aspects of the same topic)
 - Differentiation (D, comparing diverse aspects of the topic)
 - Introduction of a new topic (I)
- a. Interpersonal Connections (IC, use a different color)
 - Agreement (A, similar experience or opinion)
 - Disagreement (D, different experience or opinion)
 - Support (S, sympathizing with another participant)
- b. Questions and Answers (Q/A, use a different color)
 - Between the moderator and the participants (M)
 - Among participants (P)¹

1. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*.

APPENDIX E

GRIT Roadmap: Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied

October 2, Session #1: Mission Statement

Introduction:

GRIT offers Highland members and university students a space to reflect on why we gather as a church body. Here we explore ways in which we can sharpen one another in discipleship, something students are used to and really good at. In the GRIT space we seek ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus outside of our gatherings, something Highland members are really good at. Together we experience “Genuine Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied;” here, we’re willing to DIG into the GRIT.

Goals for this session:

1. Share the ways we relate to what GRIT offers.
2. Become aware of the current purpose, mission, and vision statements of the Highland Church of Christ.
3. Think deeply about and begin to articulate ways in which this GRIT group desires to flesh out an iteration of Highland vision in its own concise, measurable mission statement for the schoolyear.

Content:

Small groups at Highland officially began in the mid-1980s, just prior to the formation of the purpose and mission statements in the mid-90s. The following purpose statement formed at that time:

The purpose of the Highland Church of Christ is to call all people to God. The God we call people to is most perfectly seen in Jesus Christ. Our task is to imitate Him. We commit ourselves through the power of the Holy Spirit to be God’s living expression of Himself on earth (a paraphrase of Eph. 5:1–2).

Here is the most recent mission statement. The mission of the Highland Church is:

to make disciples of Jesus Christ who prayerfully join together in missions, ministry, and worship. Seeking to fulfill our purpose, as a community of believers we are engaging in “A Restoration Movement,” the vision for Highland to join God in restoring all things: Highland, Abilene, and the World.

Additionally, Highland travels the *Know and Be Known Pathway* which contains the elements: Worship, Baptism, Table, and Cross. GRIT will most often reflect participation in “Table” but can become an iteration of any steppingstone on the pathway.

In 2022 Highland updated the re|storat|on Vision, formerly to “Restore Highland, Restore Abilene, and Restore the World.” Key enhancements that relate to GRIT include Re|New, facilitating the handing over of the keys of leadership to a younger generation, and Re|Kindle, actively fueling communal warmth both within and extending out from the Highland body.

Discussion Questions:

1. What from these mission and vision statements captures your imagination in ways that could be experienced or executed within GRIT?
2. What might we choose to adopt, from these statements, as our personal mission in and through our group?
3. What are some markers or activities we can measure as a group over the semester to consciously remain tied to our mission as a GRIT group?

Here are some examples:

- A group might choose to focus on restoring Highland, or Re|Kindle, and meet for a meal and fellowship in groups of twos or threes in between GRIT meetings, learning more about one another’s lives and walks of faith.
- A group might choose to focus on Re|New and share in ministry outside of those of the Highland church. Small groups within the GRIT group might meet up to engage some aspect of service together, one generation showing the other how this is done in their own lives.

“I Will”:

- Reach out to someone older or younger than me and schedule a Re|New or Re|Kindle get-together that will take place before our next GRIT meeting.
- Craft a version of a mission statement on which to invite collaborative feedback at the next GRIT.
- Create a contact list, group, or other means for our group members to reach one another this week.
- Do another creative option that I will share with the group before the end of the meeting both for accountability and in case someone else would like to participate in it as well.

Close the group with a prayer.

Participant's Guide, GRIT October 2, Session #1: Mission Statement

GRIT offers Highland members and university students a space to reflect on why we gather as a church body. Here we explore ways in which we can sharpen one another in discipleship, something students are used to and really good at. In the GRIT space we seek ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus outside of our gatherings, something Highland members are really good at. Together we experience “Great Relationships, Intergenerationally Tied;” here, we’re willing to DIG into the GRIT.

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Here is the mission statement. The mission of the Highland Church is:

to make disciples of Jesus Christ who prayerfully join together in missions, ministry, and worship. Seeking to fulfill our purpose, as a community of believers we are engaging in “A Restoration Movement,” the vision for Highland to join God in restoring all things: Highland, Abilene, and the World.

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“I Will”:

GRIT October 16, Session #2: Generational Theory

...whoever refreshes others will be refreshed (Prov. 11:25).

Introduction:

This week's material will briefly introduce the topic of generational theory. Carl G. Eeman has composed an interpretive work, *Generations of Faith*, drawing upon William Strauss and Neil Howe's seminal volume, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. The content this week is taken largely from Eeman's explanation of generational theory according to his own interpretive understanding of Strauss and Howe.

Goals for this session:

1. Explore generational theory together as a group.
2. Locate one's own generational type.
3. Begin to discuss, based upon this preliminary knowledge of generational theory, how generational types might influence Christians' views of discipleship and ministry.

Check in:

...on everybody's "I Will" statements from last week. Give a special few minutes to collaborating on and finalizing your group's mission statement for the school year.

Content:

Carl Eeman says, "Every generation shows its worth by different measures. As youth of a generation become adults, the assumptions made about them by older adults and the values instilled in them have formed a certain generational type. This type repeats the values and assumptions seen about 90 or 95 years earlier when the same generational type was at the same point in the life cycle."¹

He expounds further saying, "As a rule one's grandchildren are of the same generational type as the grandparents."² Though life experiences differ, "both were raised by parents who shared a generational type."³

Eeman interprets the four generational personality types as follows.⁴

-
1. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 7.
 2. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 22.
 3. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.
 4. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, viii.

1. **Adaptive**, today's *Silent Generation* (born 1925–1942).⁵ Famous examples include Martin Luther King and James Dobson.⁶
2. **Idealist**, today's *Baby Boomers* (born 1942–1960).⁷ Famous representatives include Sojourner Truth and Barbara Brown Taylor.⁸
3. **Nomad**, today's *Gen X* (born 1961–1982).⁹ Famous names include Dwight L. Moody and Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁰
4. **Civic**, today's *Millennials* (born 1983–2005).¹¹ Jonathan Edwards the Younger and Billy Graham are famous representatives of the Civic generational type.¹²

Generational stages and their associated foci occur at 22-year intervals.

- The generational stage called “**Youth**,” associated from birth to age 21 is characterized by “**Dependence**.”
- “**Rising Adulthood**,” ages 22–44, is characterized by “**Activity**.”
- “**Midlife**,” ages 45–66 is marked by “**Leadership**.”
- Lastly, “**Elderhood**,” 66+, is expressed through “**Stewardship**.”¹³

Eeman emphasizes:

Each generational type has its own perspective on ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ emphasizing certain perspectives, doctrines, and aspects of God while downplaying or ignoring other aspects (Jude 3). By offering its own perspective, each generational type refreshes the ongoing theological conversation among the people of God.¹⁴

5. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 27.

6. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 40.

7. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 49.

8. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 62.

9. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 71.

10. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 88.

11. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 94.

12. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

13. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xii.

14. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.

The activities of the first two generations of life translate into the leadership and perspective of the influencers during the latter two stages. It's the perspectives of the leadership of the latter two generations of influencers, based upon the activities of their earlier stages of life, that change history. Generational leaders affect historical change within the church.

Religious leaders highlight certain doctrines of the faith and redraw constitutions to embody changes in congregational power dynamics...They build up or depreciate denominational distinctiveness and loyalty, and revisit formerly settled ecumenical arrangements.¹⁵

It stands to reason that generational types have different experiences and therefore different perspectives on topics such as parenting, schooling, transitioning to adulthood, working, marriage, religious changes, midlife, leadership, becoming elderly, relating to grandchildren, and dying.¹⁶ These perspectives draw themselves into clusters of similarity based upon the 4 cyclical types.

During this session, we've introduced generational theory. If your group would like an additional session unpacking typological perspectives on issues related to generational theory, these are available upon request.

Discussion Guide:

1. Where do you locate yourself among the generational types?
2. If you are among the latter two generational stages, what activities from earlier years do you see influencing your leadership or stewardship in this current stage?
3. If you are within the second generational stage, what from your development and dependent years has influenced your present activities?
4. Go back and explore the answers to questions 2 and 3 in the context of congregational life and church.
5. If you are transitioning in generational stage from Youth to Rising Adulthood, what plans and dreams do you have for when you reach the Leadership stage? The Stewardship stage?
6. If you are in one of the latter two generational stages, fill in the blank in one of the following two prompts:

- If I had it to do all over again, I'd _____.
- If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have _____.

"I Will":

15. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xiv.

16. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.

- Send a note or a text of appreciation to a member of my GRIT group who represents a different generational stage than myself this week.
- Pray daily for a member of my GRIT group who is in a different generational stage than myself until our next GRIT meeting when I will reveal what I've been up to.
- Unpack the thoughts I've had about the differences between the generations, our perspectives, actions, and plans, writing in my journal this week.
- Do another creative option that I will share with the group before the end of the meeting both for accountability and in case someone else would like to participate in it as well.

Close the group with a prayer.

Participants' Guide, GRIT October 16, Session #2: Generational Theory

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17. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 7.

18. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 22.

19. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.

20. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, viii.

21. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 27.

22. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 40.

23. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 49.

24. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 62.

25. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 71.

26. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 88.

27. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 94.

28. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

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Religious leaders highlight certain doctrines of the faith and redraw constitutions to embody changes in congregational power dynamics... They build up or depreciate denominational distinctiveness and loyalty, and revisit formerly settled ecumenical arrangements.³¹

It stands to reason that generational types have different experiences and therefore different perspectives on topics such as parenting, schooling, transitioning to adulthood, working, marriage, religious changes, midlife, leadership, becoming elderly, relating to grandchildren, and dying.³² These perspectives draw themselves into clusters of similarity based upon the 4 cyclical types.

During this session, we’ve introduced generational theory. If your group would like an additional session unpacking typological perspectives on issues related to generational theory, these are available upon request.

Scripture: Proverbs 11:25

29. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xii.

30. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.

31. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xiv.

32. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*.

“I Will”:

GRIT November 13, Session #3: *Koinonia and Growing Young*

Read Philippians 2:5–13

Introduction:

GRIT has three founding stones. The first is trinitarian theology, the mutually indwelling relationship among God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in the fellowship of the church the first Christians knew as *koinonia*, a Greek word dripping with meaning that points Christians toward being not only members of Christ but also members of one another. The second two stones founding GRIT help us begin to unpack what it means to be members of one another in Christ. *Growing Young*, a theory developed by the Fuller Youth Institute and described in a book of the same name, contains two elements we are focusing on walking out in and through GRIT, passing the “keys” of leadership within the church to the younger generation, and fueling warm community.

Goals for this session:

1. Engage a fresh understanding the trinitarian relationship Christian fellowship truly reflects.
2. Explore ways in which the younger people in the group can share in the leadership lives of the older members.
3. Explore ways in which everyone in the group can participate in fueling warm community.

Check In:

...on everybody’s “I Will” statements from last week. Give each person a minute to share their thoughts, prayer experiences, and reflections.

Content:

At the top of this session, we read from Philippians ways in which the members of the Trinity behave with one another for our sakes. Christ gave up his right to the ease of heaven out of obedience to God’s plan of loving redemption for the world. Because of Christ’s humility, God elevated him to the highest Lordship of heaven. Jesus’ current residence in heaven avails his Spirit to indwell us, enabling us to know, desire, and achieve the will of God as Jesus did. It’s so much to take in! For us, we can see how these three dovetail one another in desire and action. It’s a model for how we are to relate with one another in service to God as Jesus did when he was a person.

The scary difference is our humanity. Immediately we see the risk of offering ourselves in sacrificial fellowship! Trust is a big issue, trusting one another and trusting God. Is it even possible? The heart of *koinonia* rests in Philippians 2, where we can see that,

whether we like it or not, we are members of one another when we are members of God and living reflections of God's image, the *imago Dei*. This implies intimacy and mutuality. Intimacy bears these marks: "reciprocal self-disclosure, emotional resonance, commitment, freedom from coercion," and the functional awareness that we are equals.³³ Mutuality reflects much of the same. These marks of membership are what we engage each week when we create our "I Will" statements, and then check in with one another's progress.

Engaging in *koinonia* fellowship involves opening our lives to one another and walking alongside one another in everything we do, including the activities of the church. This can be scary because this type of closeness is going to reveal our imperfections. Sometimes we might fear that uncovering mistakes in the lives of the leadership of the church will stunt or hinder the faith of those coming along behind, but Fuller's research has found exactly the opposite to be true.³⁴ When leaders share the ups and downs of their lives and experiences, including those with church, the faith of the younger generation is strengthened by the authenticating witness of those older ones willing to share what everyone knows is true. No one is perfect. The key difference maker is *koinonia* fellowship. We must do two things then. First, it's vital that we engage one another in warm community, that is, relationships that bear the marks of intimacy and mutuality. Second, those of us in leadership, even ministry leadership within our own lives, must engage in community with younger folks, sharing our paths through life in authentic ways. Then we must remain in relationship with them while passing genuine responsibility to them, giving them opportunities and power to make leadership decisions, leadership of themselves and others, based upon their development and activities to this point in life.

This session has introduced the risk of *koinonia*, the fact that we are human. Theresa Latini unpacks the true safety of being members of one another with membership with Christ as our shared starting place.³⁵ This material will be available to your group to utilize in an additional, optional session should you desire to explore issues of trust further. We truly do possess the power to heal, rather than wound, one another in Christ.

Discussion Guide:

1. Where or when do you remember feeling a part of warm community?
 - a. Where in the world do you feel like most people go to find this?
 - b. When have you experienced warmth within the community of faith?
 - c. When have you experienced the opposite of warm community, and what was the result?

33. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 94.

34. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 61.

35. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 124.

2. Where are some spaces in your ministry life where you can imagine expanding *koinonia*?
 - a. How might it look to bring others of a different generational stage alongside in a new way?
 - b. If there are honest apprehensions about this, name those.
3. How are trusting God and trusting people the same?
 - a. How are they different?
 - b. What are the benefits and pitfalls of each?

“I Will”:

- Prayerfully reread Philippians 2:5–13 and record any emotions that arise in conjunction with the passage our group’s discussion in my journal this week.
- Meet a group member from a different generation than mine for coffee this week.
- Ask a group member from a different generation than mine to perform a ministry or service together with me before our next GRIT meeting.
- Do another creative option that I will share with the group before the end of the meeting both for accountability and in case someone else would like to participate in it as well.

Close the group with a prayer.

Participants' Guide, GRIT November 13, Session #3: *Koinonia and Growing Young*

At the top of this session, we read from Philippians ways in which the members of the Trinity behave with one another for our sakes. Christ gave up his right to the ease of heaven out of obedience to God's plan of loving redemption for the world. Because of Christ's humility, God elevated him to the highest Lordship of heaven. Jesus' current residence in heaven avails his Spirit to indwell us, enabling us to know, desire, and achieve the will of God as Jesus did. It's so much to take in! For us, we can see how these three dovetail one another in desire and action. It's a model for how we are to relate with one another in service to God as Jesus did when he was a person.

The scary difference is our humanity. Immediately we see the risk of offering ourselves in sacrificial fellowship! Trust is a big issue, trusting one another and trusting God. Is it even possible? The heart of *koinonia* rests in Philippians 2, where we can see that, whether we like it or not, we are members of one another when we are members of God and living reflections of God's image, the *imago Dei*. This implies intimacy and mutuality. Intimacy bears these marks: "reciprocal self-disclosure, emotional resonance, commitment, freedom from coercion," and the functional awareness that we are equals.³⁶ Mutuality reflects much of the same. These marks of membership are what we engage each week when we create our "I Will" statements, and then check in with one another's progress.

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36. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 94.

37. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 61.

This session has introduced the risk of *koinonia*, the fact that we are human. Theresa Latini unpacks the true safety of being members of one another with membership with Christ as our shared starting place.³⁸ This material will be available to your group to utilize in an additional, optional session should you desire to explore issues of trust further. We truly do possess the power to heal, rather than wound, one another in Christ. Scripture: Philippians 2:5–13

“I Will”:

38. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 124.

December 4, GRIT Session #4: Why do I need intergenerational church?

*Your life is not about you.
—Richard Rohr, and many, many others...*

Introduction:

Does the concept of upward mobility apply to our spirituality? In most any aspect of life, we become like what we surround ourselves with, for the most part. What are some examples of this truth?

Goals for this session:

1. Explore and articulate as a group what benefit generational perspective offers in any or all facets of life.
2. Grow in our appreciation of and the value we place on maintaining a commitment to intergenerationality in church relationships.
3. Experience a personal reminder that all people matter to God coupled with the humbling partner-perspective that I am merely one of those people, my perspective singular among many possibilities.

Check In:

...on everybody's "I Will" statements from last meeting. Give each person a minute to share their thoughts, reflections, and experiences with one another. What did you do after last time?

Content:

For this session, we'll touch on three meaningful aspects intergenerationality offers participants: partnership, testimony, and resilience.

First, partnership.

In developing the content for these 4 sessions, I experienced a healthy reminder of the importance of generational perspective. Carl Eeman's book on generational types contains many famous examples of the different types that span four centuries. Recently, it came to my attention that a dear friend of mine is trying to tease out the denominational perspectives of trinitarianism and Unitarianism in her faith walk. It has been overwhelming to me to listen and talk with her about this openly. To this point, I've felt very alone. Looking back over the centuries, I discovered that Jonathan Edwards the Younger, a Civic according to generational type, is best known for his work in this area back in the sixteenth century.³⁹ I realized afresh that when the teacher writing

39. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

Ecclesiastes says, “there is nothing new under the sun,” it really is true (Ecc 1:9). It’s comforting both to me and to my friend to know we can study this work and not have to explore this large topic on our own.

Israel experienced this same benefit exploring and remembering their history with God as a people.

*I remember what the LORD did;
I remember the miracles you did long ago.
I think about all the things you did
and consider your deeds.
God, your ways are holy.
No god is as great as our God.
You are the God who does miracles;
you have shown people your power.
By your power you have saved your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Psalm 77:11–15*

It’s especially helpful to note that the Psalmist, in the few verses prior to these, is rehearsing the rejection from God he is currently experiencing.

Next, testimony.

1 Peter 3:15 says, “Always be ready to explain about the hope you have.” This has always been an intimidating proposition when applied to apologetics, that is, having every answer at the ready in defense of our doctrinal beliefs. This might be considered another way. If we have hope, we’ve experienced some suffering that has proven our faith to be pure according to the first chapter of the same letter. It’s these stories we must always be ready to tell, “When all was lost, God showed up.”
“When I knew no way on my own, God made a way and here I am to tell about it.”

In our relationships with those older than us, we can be reminded that we’re not the first to experience the challenge at hand, nor will be the last, and we can gain insight about how to navigate through it. It is here that the passing on of faith takes place.

And finally, resilience.

In truth, we are grappling with more types of diversity than ever before in the world today. If we really are living a life that demonstrates the truth that the gospel is for all people, this must be reflected in our churches (Rom 1:16). The fact is the world is changing faster than ever before in just about every imaginable way. Individuals, or a church, that make intentional interdenominational strides are better prepared to keep responding to the change that is inevitable.⁴⁰

40. Peter Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to Wwww.Com* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage Publishing, 2010), 10.

Discussion Guide:

1. To what benefit has it been to you, in any aspect of life, to explore and study the past?
2. Who are the dreamers and visionaries in the group? What benefit do they offer the present moment?
3. What benefit do you see in having an intergenerational focus specifically in a church setting?
4. How do you see intergenerationality as one way to treat one another as we hope to be treated?
5. Where and when have you experienced one of the three benefits we've discussed today: partnership, testimony, and resilience?
6. What is a marker of true spiritual friendship?

"I Will":

- Intentionally place myself in the presence of someone who is a few steps ahead of me on their spiritual journey and share some time and conversation before our group convenes next semester.
- Choose to have a conversation furthering the topic discussed today with someone else in the group. We'll enter and close our conversation with prayer seeking the Lord's guidance as we speak with one another.
- Spend some time journaling, inspired by Romans 1:16.
- Do another creative option that I will share with the group before the end of the meeting both for accountability and in case someone else would like to participate in it as well.

Close the group with a prayer.

Participants' Guide, December 4, GRIT Session #4: Why do I need intergenerational church?

For this session, we'll touch on three meaningful aspects intergenerationality offers participants: partnership, testimony, and resilience.

First, partnership.

In developing the content for these 4 sessions, I experienced a healthy reminder of the importance of generational perspective. Carl Eeman's book on generational types contains many famous examples of the different types that span four centuries. Recently, it came to my attention that a dear friend of mine is trying to tease out the denominational perspectives of trinitarianism and Unitarianism in her faith walk. It has been overwhelming to me to listen and talk with her about this openly. To this point, I've felt very alone. Looking back over the centuries, I discovered that Jonathan Edwards the Younger, a Civic according to generational type, is best known for his work in this area back in the sixteenth century.⁴¹ I realized afresh that when the teacher writing Ecclesiastes says, "there is nothing new under the sun," it really is true (Ecc 1:9). It's comforting both to me and to my friend to know we can study this work and not have to explore this large topic on our own.

Israel experienced this same benefit exploring and remembering their history with God as a people.

*I remember what the LORD did;
I remember the miracles you did long ago.
I think about all the things you did
and consider your deeds.
God, your ways are holy.
No god is as great as our God.
You are the God who does miracles;
you have shown people your power.
By your power you have saved your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Psalm 77:11–15*

It's especially helpful to note that the Psalmist, in the few verses prior to these, is rehearsing the rejection from God he is currently experiencing.

Next, testimony.

1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be ready to explain about the hope you have." This has always been an intimidating proposition when applied to apologetics, that is, having every answer at the ready in defense of our doctrinal beliefs. This might be considered

41. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

another way. If we have hope, we've experienced some suffering that has proven our faith to be pure according to the first chapter of the same letter. It's these stories we must always be ready to tell, "When all was lost, God showed up."

"When I knew no way on my own, God made a way and here I am to tell about it."

In our relationships with those older than us, we can be reminded that we're not the first to experience the challenge at hand, nor will be the last, and we can gain insight about how to navigate through it. It is here that the passing on of faith takes place.

And finally, resilience.

In truth, we are grappling with more types of diversity than ever before in the world today. If we really are living a life that demonstrates the truth that the gospel is for all people, this must be reflected in our churches (Rom 1:16). The fact is the world is changing faster than ever before in just about every imaginable way. Individuals, or a church, that make intentional interdenominational strides are better prepared to keep responding to the change that is inevitable.⁴²

Quote:

Your life is not about you.
—Richard Rohr, and many, many others...

"I Will":

42. Peter Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to Wwww.Com*, 10.

GRIT Session #5 (Optional) Generational Typology

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you, and I will place a curse on those who harm you. And all the people on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:1–3).

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. If people sin against me and hate me, I will punish their children, even their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But I will be very kind for a thousand lifetimes to those who love me and obey my commands (Deut. 5:9–10).

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, we added to our knowledge of generational names (Baby Boomers and such) some generational types. These types have tendencies, which we’ll explore in greater detail this week. In the spirit of first seeking to understand, rather than to be understood, these typologies have the possibility of helping us to register and empathize with one another’s perspectives to a greater degree. Also, when cognizant of our own tendencies, we can make intentional choices about the ways in which we influence our children and the generations coming behind.

Goals for this session:

1. Explore the various tendencies of the four generational types.
2. Notice these tendencies or potentialities within ourselves.
3. Examine the interactions of our GRIT groups for evidence of these tendencies.

Check In:

If your group is utilizing this bonus session, it is likely following Session 4 on intergenerational church. Based on your activities together and the “I Will” statements from Session 4, how has either your perspective on the importance of, or your experience of intergenerational relationships within church changed? Encourage each member to respond and share for one minute.

Content:

The content for this week begins unpacking typical tendencies for each generational type in the area of religious leadership, noting both positives and negatives.

Adaptive (currently the Silent Generation, 1925–1942)
Who are the Adaptives in our group?

“God is love” is the warm, parental image Adaptives relate to, and express in forgiveness, tolerance, and having a nonjudgmental attitude.⁴³ This high emphasis on forgiveness birthed Henry Ballou’s 1805 treatise that gave life to Universalism, or the idea that no one would be separated from God in the afterlife.⁴⁴ Positive emphases of the Adaptive leader include inclusivity and an emphasis on multiculturalism. When those within the Adaptive type do not display the open-mindedness characteristic of their type, it can be particularly divisive and frustrating to others within their own generation. Adaptives strive for consensus and believe it will happen given enough time and explanation. Conversely, admitting that for some issues consensus is not possible can be a challenge. After a laborious decision-making process, and once decisions are reached, Adaptives are not likely to change them.⁴⁵

Idealist (currently the Baby Boomers, 1942–1960)
Do we have any Idealists here?

The first leaders of mega-churches come from our current generation of Idealists. They seek religious experiences and pursue this freedom vigorously and publicly. They can be argumentative and critical of social status quo, seeking to perfect the situation for people within the communities of which they are a part. “Idealist generations call for people and institutions to move away from things scientific, planned, artificial, and modern. Instead, Idealists celebrate and value that which is intuitive, spontaneous, natural, and folk-primitive.”⁴⁶

Nomad (currently Gen x, 1961–1982)
Where are our Nomads?

In our contemporary congregations, Gen X is where we’ve experienced a big shift. These folks represent the Nomad generational type. Worship is a particularly important part of being involved in a church for Nomads; Gen X has experienced a breakdown in this aspect simply due to the adjusted meanings of commonly used words. Consider the following:

Religious term	Gen X understanding
Apostle	A recent movie title
Corporate	Where Xers work; “Fortune 500” list
Confession	When the perp tells police how she committed a crime
Creed	Name of a band
Hymn	Misspelled opposite of “her”
Kyrie/Kyrie Eleison	Good song from <i>Mister-Mister</i> in the 1980s

43. Carl G. Eeman, *Generations of Faith* (Alban Institute, 2002), 35.

44. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 37.

45. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 38.

46. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 63.

Preaching	Moralizing, finger-wagging, and condemnation
Trespass(es)	Walking on somebody's land without permission
Virgin Birth	"Well, yeah, we're all born virgins."
Witness	Person who saw a crime ⁴⁷

Often Nomads are attractional church members who judge a church by their own ability to interact in worship, classes, and activities suited to their demographic. They are looking to have specific needs met within church. Outward focused endeavors are their "jam" when the social justice impact is measurable at the end of a long day's work.

Civic (currently Millennials, 1981–1996)

Who are the Civics in this group?

Listening to the generations ahead of them, Civics "develop the idea that the solution to the (current) social crisis combines righteousness and pragmatism in ways that reorder society."⁴⁸ The typical religious posture of a Civic can be described as follows.

1. Great numbers of Civics attend church regularly.
2. When coming into leadership, their interest includes structures larger than congregation.
3. Civics look for commonalities between their own faith and that of others.
4. Denominational differences are downplayed.
5. In reaction to the passionate expressions of their parents Civics ascribe to logic and reason, applying these to their faith.
6. Historically, Civics have built structures reflecting their ecumenical perspectives. The additions to churches built by Civics utilize the architecture and materials used in community spaces rather than those associated with a particular religious group.⁴⁹

Civics emphasize teamwork when it comes to relating to God. They prefer the phrase "Our God" over referring to God as "mine."⁵⁰

There's definitely more to this discussion, especially relating to the typological turning of one generation to the next. The next piece to explore might be how these transitions transpire, but for now there's plenty to chew on in terms of how each typical generation relates to religious ideas.

47. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 80.

48. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 102.

49. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

50. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 108.

Remember generational types are cyclical in a series of four, changing about every 22 years.⁵¹ Anytime we're offered an explanation of our own perspective, it pairs nicely with an opportunity to lean out of our personal definitions and into greater understanding and awareness of those of others.

Discussion Guide:

1. In what ways do you agree with the ways in which Eeman typifies your generation?
2. About which aspects would you like to contend with Eeman and possibly disagree?
3. What experiences do these descriptions call to mind about your generation or that of your parents?
4. What, from your experience with GRIT, echoes some truth regarding what you now know about generational types?
5. What can we learn, as an intergenerational group of disciples, from the knowledge of generational we've accessed to this point?
6. Moving forward, what does having this information change for you?

"I Will":

- Intentionally reframe my perspective in light of another's in this way ____ (name it).
- Talk further with a member of this group from another generation about a specific topic this week's conversation stirred.
- Talk further with a member of my same generation in this group about a specific topic this week's conversation stirred.
- Do another creative option that I will share with the group before the end of the meeting both for accountability and in case someone else would like to participate in it as well.

Close the session with a prayer.

51. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xi.

Participants' Guide, GRIT Session #5 (Optional) Generational Typology

The content for this week begins unpacking typical tendencies for each generational type in the area of religious leadership, noting both positives and negatives.

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52. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 35.

53. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 37.

54. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 38.

55. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 63.

Religious term	Gen X understanding
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Civics emphasize teamwork when it comes to relating to God. They prefer the phrase “Our God” over referring to God as “mine.”⁵⁹

56. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 80.

57. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 102.

58. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 106.

59. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, 108.

There's definitely more to this discussion, especially relating to the typological turning of one generation to the next. The next piece to explore might be how these transitions transpire, but for now there's plenty to chew on in terms of how each typical generation relates to religious ideas.

Remember generational types are cyclical in a series of four, changing about every twenty-two years.⁶⁰ Anytime we're offered an explanation of our own perspective, it pairs nicely with an opportunity to lean out of our personal definitions and into greater understanding and awareness of those of others.

Scriptures for the week: Gen 12:1–3; Deut 5:9–10

“I Will”:

60. Eeman, *Generations of Faith*, xi.

GRIT Session #6 (Optional) *Koinonia*, Trusting Fellowship

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (Num 6:24–6).

We all, with unveiled faces, reflect the glory of God to one another (2 Cor 3:18).

Introduction:

Trust issues. Anyone? Issues with God, contentions with others; we've all got them. Trusting God looks like trusting the people of God, and this is going to have its ups and downs most certainly. It's a guarantee based on scripture. How are we to make peace with this fact, with one another, and with God, and ultimately enter a trusting relationship knowing there will be times that it hurts?

Goals for this session:

1. Be honest with ourselves about a real issue in small group community.
2. Be transparent with one another about this same issue.
3. Think on and share strategies to prevent the enemy's weapon of fear from prohibiting the community we all need and that reflects the trinitarian bond.

Check In:

This session is designed to be utilized at any time following GRIT Session #3. Open the group by checking in on any "I Will" statements from your last group session, offering everyone an opportunity to share.

Content:

Ontological security

We can probably all think of times when we've sought complete security from another person or group of people.

In her "Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry," Theresa Latini spends an entire chapter exploring the ways in which our small group communities can, like a Kintsugi master, begin to heal the cracks life has created in our trust, with something more beautiful than mere restoration to what existed before. In laying the groundwork for this theological perspective on small groups, Latini explores ontological security. In this "primal sense of security in the reliability of the world,"

Of course there are costs, but they are far outweighed by the benefits.

Discussion Guide:

“I Will”:

Close the session with a prayer.

APPENDIX F

IRB Consent Form

Adult Consent Form: Small Group Sessions Documented with Field Notes and Audio Recording

PI IRB-2022-58

Thank you for your interest in participating in my ministry intervention project. This form describes the project and what will be asked of you as small groups meet four times over the next three months, and then as members have the option to participate in a focus group interview as semester on of GRIT concludes. Please read over it carefully and let me know if you have any questions.

Purpose:

University students involved in DIG wish to partner with Highland small group members in GRIT groups to achieve greater concrete understanding of the difference involvement of the member in the Highland church makes in their lives, their community, and the world in their view. University students involved in DIG will share the rhythm of a typical DIG discipleship meeting in groups who choose to follow the 4-session Roadmap. Highland small group members will share Christian fellowship and offer involvement to university students in their regular ministry activities outside of the regular meetings of the Highland church. This will look a number of ways as DIG and Highland small groups form and craft their joint mission for the fall semester in the four GRIT meetings. GRIT groups will flesh out and experience a chosen aspect of the vision and pathway of the Highland Church of Christ by choosing to share in ways and activities of restoring Highland, Abilene, and the world through their members' partnerships with one another.

Procedure:

GRIT participants will meet four times throughout the Fall 2022 semester. At each meeting, a "Roadmap" is provided to guide the discussion, and a notetaker from within the group members will take notes following a provided protocol. At the first GRIT meeting, the Roadmap will guide the group in developing a mission statement for the group, which will be included in the notes. Following the first meeting, for the remaining three, the GRIT group is free to continue to follow the Roadmap or to organically discover of what each gathering needs to consist in order to achieve the group's stated mission. After the four scheduled gatherings, participants in GRIT will be offered the opportunity to participate in one of three focus groups and answer questions relating to their experience of intergenerational discipleship and ministry through their involvement in GRIT. Focus groups will be audio recorded using the Voice Memo app on an iPhone. All field notes taken in the different GRIT groups and in the focus groups will be

collected by the project leader, stored at my residence in a single location, and destroyed after three years. The audio will be recorded on the project leader's personal iPhone and deleted after 3 years. Identities of the participants will remain anonymous in any summative writing, any written suggestions, or enhancements.

Risk:

There are no known risks to taking part in this study. However, it is possible that participants might feel distress during the discussions. If this happens, please inform a DIG leader, a small group leader, or the researcher in the way you feel most comfortable. This can be done either post-session, privately during any GRIT or focus group meeting, or publicly during any GRIT or focus group meeting. Additionally, if a question or discussion point makes any participant feel uncomfortable, a response is not required.

Benefits:

While there is no guaranteed benefit, my hope is that you will enjoy sharing your thoughts and engaging in group discussions, experiences, and faith-based relationships that will prove meaningful and impactful as you imagine and experience what it means to engage in intergenerational ministry and discipleship.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refrain from any aspect that you do not wish to engage. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality/Anonymity:

Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be protected in all the reporting and/or writing related to this study. The rest of the group members, a trained note-taker, and I will be the only people present for these conversations. If necessary, an alias will be utilized when directly quoting from participants in the resulting document or any future presentations of the material associated with the study.

The project leader cannot guarantee your confidentiality outside of the small group meetings and the focus groups. While the project leader will take measures to protect your identity and responses as outlined above, it is not guaranteed that other focus group participants will do the same. All participants are encouraged to maintain the confidentiality of the other participants in the group. The project leader requests that you do not share any private information obtained during your participation or any other information that may identify the other participants unless you are legally required to do so.

Participants are encouraged to consider the limitations of confidentiality in the focus group setting. Participation is voluntary. At any time, participants are encouraged to

make their own choices about the information they share and may also choose to discontinue participating in the group altogether.

Sharing the results:

I plan to use the results in the writing of a project thesis for completion of a Doctor of Ministry degree. This document will be shared both in an academic setting. The results will be communicated to ministry leaders of our congregation as is related to facilitation decisions regarding ministry enhancement and augmentation.

Publication:

There is the possibility that I will publish this study or refer to it in published writings in the future. In this event, I will continue to use aliases, and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect the anonymity of all participants.

Contact Information and Questions:

If you have questions about the project, the project leader is Beth Ann Fisher and may be contacted at (325) 232-2000 or baf16a@acu.edu.

If you are unable to reach the project leader or wish to speak to someone other than the project leader, you may contact Dr. Carson Reed at (325) 674-3735, or cer12a@acu.edu.

If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a study participant, you may contact Qi Hang, ACU's Executive Director of Research, at qxh22a@acu.edu, or at (325) 674-2885. You can mail questions, comments, or concerns to:

Qi Hang
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Bldg., ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699.

Before you sign: By signing below you are agreeing to participate in a multi-session group for this project thesis, documented through field notes and audio recording during voluntary focus groups. Be sure that any questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant signature:

Date:

Print Name:

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Interaction Coding Protocol, Recommended by Sage Research Methods

- A. Topic Connections (marked explicit or implicit)
 - Continuation (maintaining the same topic)
 - Expansion (sharing new aspects of the same topic)
 - Differentiation (comparing diverse aspects of the topic)
 - Introduction of a new topic

- A. Interpersonal Connections
 - Agreement (similar experience or opinion)
 - Disagreement (different experience or opinion)
 - Support (sympathizing with another participant)

- B. Questions and Answers
 - Between the moderator and the participants
 - Among participants¹

1. David L. Morgan “The Importance of Interaction” in *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*, Sage Research Methods Core, (SAGE 2019), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781071814307.n3>, 27–36.

APPENDIX H

List of Participants by Alias

- A., Daniel. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1," 25 January 2023.
- B., Lyle. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.
- B., Lyle. "Who Are We, at Highland, in Terms of Our Small Groups?" 29 September 2021.
- C., Jackie. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.
- C., Jackie. "GRIT Group #3," November 2022.
- C., Jerry. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.
- C., Frank. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.
- C., Allison. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1," 25 January 2023.
- C., Brad. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.
- D., Paige. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.
- D., Sheryl. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.
- "Focus Group 1, Small Groups at Highland," 22 September 2021.
- "Focus Group 2, Small Groups at Highland," 29 September 2021.
- G., Christine. "GRIT Group #3," October 2022.
- G., Christine. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.
- H., Madison. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.
- H., Rainey. "GRIT Group #1," October 2022.
- H., Tucker. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

H., Ella. "GRIT Group #4," October 2022.

H., Ella. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

H., Brian. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

H., Mary Ann. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

H., Mary Ann. "GRIT Group #2," October 2022.

I., Denise. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

Jarvis, Leah. "GRIT Group #5," October 2022.

K., Santhi. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.

L., Jean. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

L., Lexi. "GRIT Group #3," October 2022.

L., Lexi. "One-Off Interview at Front Porch," 5 March 2023.

N., Jack. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

P., Allie. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

S., Belle. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.

S., Bria. "DIG Leaders' Focus Group," 5 February 2023.

S., Clay. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

Sessions, David. "Point Team Focus Group," 26 January 2023.

Siburt, Ben. "Small Groups at Highland," 15 September 2021.

T., Julie. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 1," 25 January 2023.

W., Betsy. "Small Group Leaders' Focus Group 2," 25 January 2023.