

**Organizing the Kingdom:  
Community Organizing as a Model to Empower a Telos of  
Human Flourishing in New Church Plants**

by

Jason Paul Butler

Date: April 22, 2019

Approved:



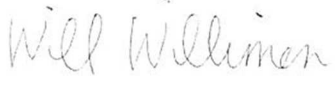
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Dr. William Willimon, D.Min Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
Requirement for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
In the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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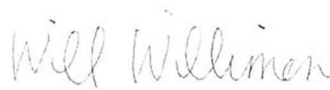
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## **Abstract**

The Church in America is in sharp decline despite the nearly 4,000 new churches that are started each year. This thesis poses critical questions about the viability and effectiveness of church planting in America and inquires whether new “missional” churches are truly impacting their communities. Through research and field experience, this project will present a church-planting and church-renewal model that may lead to both missional community impact and growing communal influence through the principles of community organizing. The model presented here in this thesis will drive church planters and leaders to view church more as a social movement that empowers communal agency toward a telos of human flourishing rather than simply a footprint of a worshipping community that is focused on numeric growth. The key finding presented in this work is the framework of building institutional power through empowering participants toward three specific sets of practices that make a church “missional”: Kingdom Missiology, Incarnational Ecclesiology, and Political Theology. This thesis argues that precisely within the intersection of these three principles, paralleled in models of community organizing, is where all churches, but especially church plants, can create movements that shape identity and cultivate human flourishing.

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## **List of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

**AARP** – American Association of Retired Persons

**AFSCME** – American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees

**IAF** - Industrial Areas Foundation

**PATH** - People Acting Together in Howard

## Introduction

It is no secret that the church in America is in decline. Whether attendance and influence of the American church are measured in terms of research data or through the experiences of pastors and denominational leaders, the results are the same: fewer members, less money, and shrinking cultural relevance.<sup>1</sup> To reverse this trend and reach more people for Christ, many have seen church planting as a strategy for growth. In a detailed study on church planting, Lifeway Research found that in 2015, more than 3,700 churches closed in America, but nearly 4,000 were planted.<sup>2</sup> The United Methodist Church, for example, accounts for approximately 250 new church plants annually across the United States.<sup>3</sup> While there is an unprecedented amount of time, money, and leadership devoted to church planting in America, and even though many church plants are thriving, the American church still closes nearly as many churches as it opens annually. The overall numbers of church attendance and involvement continue to spiral downward as nearly half of all Americans now classify themselves as “post-Christian,” with only 31% of Americans reporting attending church at least once-a-

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<sup>1</sup>Kelly Shattuck. “7 Startling Facts: An Up-close Look at Church Attendance in America.” Churchleaders.com, last modified Dec 2017, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Cannon-Green. “Study: Thousands of Churches Closing Every Year, But There is a Silver Lining.” CharismaNews.com, last modified Dec 2015, <https://www.charismanews.com/us/53715-study-thousands-of-churches-closing-every-year-but-there-is-a-silver-lining>.

<sup>3</sup> Heather Hahn. “Growing Impact of New Churches.” UMC.org, last modified June 2017, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/growing-impact-of-new-churches>.



month.<sup>4</sup> While once-a-month attendance is hardly a marker for robust faith, is it becoming the norm of American Christian discipleship?

All of these inter-related discussions lead us to ask some hard questions about the viability and effectiveness of church planting in America. Are churches in general, and church plants in specific, truly impacting their communities? How would one measure this? Does the future of the American church depend on church planting to stave off its decline? While this project will not attempt to address the “effectiveness” of church planting, it will seek to present a church-planting and church-renewal model that may lead to both missional community impact and growing communal influence. This model for church planting will push church leaders to view church more as an incubator for communal/individual agency with the telos of human flourishing rather than simply a footprint of a worshipping community. It is the hope that the model presented in this thesis will allow for further reflection and practical implementation of key principles of community organizing to help strengthen the church. The key to this model is the framework of building institutional power through empowering participants toward three specific sets of practices that make a church “missional”: Kingdom Missiology, Incarnational Ecclesiology, and Political Theology. This thesis will argue that it is precisely within the intersection of these three principles that all

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<sup>4</sup> “The State of the Church 2016.” Barna.com, last modified Sept 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>.

churches, but especially church plants, can create movements that shape identity and produce flourishing.

The goal of this work is the focus on the central organizing values and habits that make a church “missional” and that empower human flourishing and communal flourishing. The heart of this work will be its attempt to offer new connections and insights from the work of community organizing that help build “on the ground” practices that help instigate change and create localized social movements. Miroslav Volf’s most recent book, *For the Life of the World*, helps to frame the scope of this work. In his book, Volf pushes for a reframing of *theology* toward an end (or telos) saying, “Christian theology has lost its way because it has neglected its purpose. We believe the purpose of theology is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The flourishing of human beings and all God’s creatures in the presence of God is God’s foremost concern for creation and should therefore be the central purpose of theology.”<sup>5</sup> Just as Volf is attempting to reframe and re-establish theology as a work to point toward visions of human flourishing, the work proposed here is attempting to do something very similar with the concept of *mission* as expressed explicitly through church planting. The central organizing idea in this work is that *mission* has lost its way in the same way Volf describes that *theology* has lost its way. Both mission and theology should return to “discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God’s self-

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<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 11.

revelation in Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> As church planting is the specific vehicle of this “mission of human flourishing” this thesis articulates how, through community organizing, both mission and church planting can point back towards human flourishing.

Why community organizing? Community organizing contains certain strategic processes and a central telos for flourishing that often transforms imaginations, builds relational power, and engaged public action. As a result, an organization’s focus turns to the flourishing of a community, which transforms individuals, the institution, and the surrounding community. Organizing, then, becomes a way to embody and enact a vision of human flourishing. As Jeffrey Stout suggests in his book, *Blessed are the Organized*, “The rationale for broad-base [community] organizing, then, is twofold: first to mitigate the tendency of groups organizing around singular identities to use their power to advance only their own narrowly conceived interests; and second, to build up coalitions with enough power to address issues that cannot be resolved merely by applying leverage to local institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Luke Bretherton further lays out the contributions of community organizing to communities, and the potential contributions to faith communities, saying, “Community organizing is seen as having something to contribute to the cultural and organizational change required to reorient professionals beyond, on the one hand, the pursuit of money, status, and power, and on the other hand, the

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<sup>6</sup> Vof and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 38.

reduction of their work to compliance with managerially and economically determined targets and performance indicators.”<sup>8</sup>

There seems to be a catechism in this process of community organizing that both forms the participant and the community. Does this hold a key for helping people in a faith community deepen their faith? And does community organizing hold a key for helping church leaders develop new churches and reinvigorate existing churches? This work will attempt to lay out answers to these questions and present a model for church planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the pivotal connection of missiology, ecclesiology, and political theology that can be formed through the telos and strategy of community organizing.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke Bretherton. *Resurrecting Democracy* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2015), 15.

## **Chapter 1: Jesus: The Organizer of a Social Movement for Human Flourishing**

To understand the connections that will be offered later in this work, let us look at the work and ministry of Jesus. Some believe that no other person in human history has been researched and written about more than Jesus, his life still holds new and unfolding insights that are unearthed as evolving culture provides new perspectives. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God who redeems the world from sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection, captivates our theological imagination, and his teachings liberate our hearts and lays a new foundation for the Kingdom of God - but the question that we need to probe for this study is: What was Jesus' strategy? Is it a strange question to pose about Jesus? Did Jesus intentionally create a movement that would be catapulted by his death and resurrection? Most of the time we do not consider Jesus as one with a strategy, but a look into his ministry leaves us with a compelling vision of a person who did not simply gather a few disciples to "see how things went". If we were to ask church leaders who is responsible for founding the Christian Church, all would point to Jesus as the founder and author of our faith and the Church. Therefore, we can view Jesus as a man who had the vision to create a movement that would live on well past his own life. The answer to this question of Jesus' strategy may lie at the heart of what the Church believes about itself and how it functions in the world today.

First, let us examine what makes a movement a movement. Shannon Deric defines a social movement as an "organizational structure and strategy that may empower oppressed populations to mount effective challenges and resist the more

powerful and advantaged elites."<sup>1</sup> Sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald define a social movement as "a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society."<sup>2</sup> And finally, Paul van Seeters and Paul James argue that a social movement must incorporate a few entails a few minimal conditions of "coming together" to be a movement. These would loosely be:

1. The formation of a collective identity;
2. The development of a shared normative orientation;
3. The sharing of a concern for change of the status quo and;
4. The occurrence of moments of practical action that are at least subjectively connected across time addressing this concern for change.<sup>3</sup>

With these minimal criteria of togetherness, they define a social movement as "a form of political association between persons who have at least a minimal sense of themselves as connected to others in common purpose and who come together across an extended period to effect social change in the name of that purpose."<sup>4</sup> While a reading of the Gospels would certainly seem to meet these definitions and criteria for a social movement, let us gather more evidence before making any conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Deric, *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance, and the State* (Newbury Park: Pine Forge Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>2</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *The American Journal of Sociology* 82. no 6. (May 1977): 1217–1218.

<sup>3</sup> Paul James and Paul Van Seeters, *Globalization and Politics, Vol 2: Global Social Movements and Global Civil Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2014), xi.

<sup>4</sup> James and Van Seeters, *Globalization and Politics, Vol 2: Global Social Movements and Global Civil Society*, xi.

In considering the criteria for a “Jesus movement” the first piece of critical information is Jesus’ encounter with the disciples. Each Gospel clearly states that Jesus had no intention of proceeding with his mission alone and called individuals to join him. In his commentary on Matthew, R.T. France says, “But it is significant that his first recorded action is to gather a group of followers who will commit themselves to a total change of lifestyle which involves them in joining Jesus as his essential support group for the whole period of his public ministry.”<sup>5</sup> While the choice of language with the term “support group” may be a gross undervaluing of the role of the disciples, it is clear that the disciples were being invited to radically shift the trajectory of their life through following Jesus and, as we see, this call cost them more than they may have ever realized. Jesus may here, as France later suggest, have called them into a rabbinic community of learning and growth but as France also concedes, they [the disciples] soon found that he [Jesus] was far from a conventional rabbi.”<sup>6</sup> Ched Myers, with the help of Eduard Schweizer, casts a deeper meaning on this call, saying, “Normally the student sought the teacher and followed only for as long as it took to attain rabbinic status himself. The call of Jesus, however, is absolute, disrupting the lives of potential recruits, promising them only a “school” from which there is no graduation. The “first” call to discipleship in Mark is an urgent, uncompromising invitation to “break with

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<sup>5</sup> R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 145.

<sup>6</sup> France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, 147.

business as usual.”<sup>7</sup> Whether Jesus called the disciples into a rabbinic way of learning or something bigger, it is clear that Jesus called them into a collective identity of which would govern the rest of their lives.

But why would the disciples leave their livelihoods to join Jesus? Many focused on the act of decision the disciples demonstrated, but it is more difficult to determine their motivating factors that required them, in some or all, to abandon their livelihoods and families. Richard Horsley, among others, begins to paint a portrait of life in first-century Galilee (where we are first introduced to the disciples) as one that was on the edge of revolt. Israel lived under the colonial rule of Rome, and the demanding subservience to this empire crushed the hearts and souls of the Jewish people. Horsley says, “The Galilean people eagerly asserted their independence of both Jerusalem and Roman rule at every opportunity. After the Romans imposed Herod as “king of the Judeans” in 40 BCE, Galileans repeatedly resisted his attempts to control their territory. When Herod died in 4 BCE, peasants in the area around Nazareth, having acclaimed Judas ben Hezekiah as their king, attacked the royal fortress in Sepphoris.”<sup>8</sup> Tensions were high in the region when Jesus approached the disciples.

Horsley further described the economic hardship common people faced in small Jewish towns such as Galilee, saying,

Under the impact of pressures from multiple layers of rulers, however, both families and the village communities began to disintegrate. Herod had exhausted the economic base of peasant producers to underwrite his massive building

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<sup>7</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 133.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Horsley, *Jesus in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 46.



programs and other expenses...Families unable to feed themselves after rendering up tithes and taxes fell into debt, often to Herodian officials who controlled stores of food. With their debts spiraling out of control, the poor gradually lost control of their lands, presumably becoming tenants of Herodian officers or of the king.<sup>9</sup>

The portrait of struggle, pain, and tension that Horsley paints of first-century Galilee gives us a better picture of the events surrounding the call of the disciples. In this small region, the disciples and Jesus would have most likely either have known each other, or at least have heard of one another. After Jesus' baptism by John, who was the most popular religious figure in all of Israel at the moment, the whole region would have been abuzz about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah.

So, when Jesus approached the boats of Simon and Andrew in Mark 1, the groundwork may have already been laid for this pivotal moment. As Jesus calls them to lay down their nets and follow him, he invites them to become "fishers of men." While many interpret this to mean the "recruitment of new subjects to God's kingship,"<sup>10</sup> in his commentary on Mark, *Binding the Strongman*, Ched Myers offers a perspective that may more properly reflect the sociological tension of this moment while offering a mission that fits into the criteria of a social movement. Myers says,

There is perhaps no expression more traditionally misunderstood than Jesus' invitation to these workers to become "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). This metaphor, despite the grand old tradition of missionary interpretation, does not refer to the "saving of souls," as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status. Rather, the image is carefully chosen from Jeremiah 16:16, where it is used as a symbol of Yahweh's censure of Israel. Elsewhere the

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice of All* (Louisville, Westminster Press, 2009), 87.

<sup>10</sup> France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, 147.

“hooking of fish” is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and powerful (Ezekiel 29:4). Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.<sup>11</sup>

While this interpretation can seem absurd to a modern reader who views Jesus as a soft-spoken religious leader and beloved kindergarten teacher, the historical and sociological evidence points to a Jesus who responded to the suffering of the people of Israel under the domination of Roman oppression. His response was the inauguration of a renewal movement to challenge the status quo, destroy the powers of evil, and liberate the people into a new future of flourishing.

If examine the start of Jesus’ ministry/movement, highlighted by the call of the disciples, we begin to see deeper into what Jesus was doing and we may be able to begin to see the strategy at the heart of the movement. If his choice of the disciples was a random act, then why do the Gospels spend precious details upon the profession and location of many of the disciples? Remember that the countryside (where Jesus began his ministry) was comprised of small villages where most people knew each other. Yet, he chose , among others, several fishermen, a tax collector, a former disciple of John the Baptist, and a zealot (who was part of political movement to vanquish Gentile involvement in Israel). His selections indicates that there may be more intentionality than we give Jesus credit for. Even today, when considering a new board member, many non-profits seek out individuals who have a large and diverse network that they can

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<sup>11</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 132.

draw from and bring into the organization in some way. Should we think any less of what Jesus did here? He chose a political and sociologically diverse grouping of individuals that was bound to create conflict. A zealot and a tax collector playing for the same team? This seems like an unnecessary amount of tension to create if Jesus was just forming a new rabbinic/spiritual community. However, when considering that Jesus may have been creating a broad-based group that would connect with a diverse network then this grouping may make more sense. Each of the disciples would naturally connect Jesus to their families, their friends, their colleagues, and their own networks that would reach far beyond themselves to create a broad-based network that represented differing interests and viewpoints.

Further, these were the types of people that could afford to join such a movement. Each of these disciples may have had the financial room to join Jesus, not yet having lost their land or livelihood to heavy debt, and not wealthy landowners with too much to lose to join someone who would challenge the status quo. As Horsley says, "Those who have already lost their land become heavily dependent on wealthy elite families or their agents, hence less free to join the movement."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there seems to be mounting evidence that Jesus may have been intending to start a social movement but, if so, the question of purpose arises. If Jesus was starting a social movement what was the goal?

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<sup>12</sup> Horsley, *Jesus In Context*, 47.

Every social movement needs some sort of goal in mind, so if Jesus was indeed laying the groundwork for a movement, what was the goal of this movement? What was Jesus calling people into? When we think of Jesus' goals, we usually tend to think that his goal was to save humanity from sin, which is absolutely true. But is this all? Besides, saving from sin into what? Gustavo Gutierrez lays out a beautiful and holistic view of Christ's salvation that gives a picture of what human flourishing looks like in relation to salvation saying,

In Christ the all-comprehensiveness of the liberating process reaches its fullest sense. A Latin American text on the missions seems to us to summarize this assertion accurately: "All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history, the movement towards the creation of a more just and fraternal world, the overcoming of social inequalities among persons, the efforts to liberate humankind from all that depersonalizes it – physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger – as well as the awareness of human dignity – all of these originate, are transformed, and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ. In him and through him salvation is present at the heart of human history, and there is no human act, in the last instance, is not defined in terms of it."<sup>13</sup>

This all-encompassing salvific work seems to be what Jesus is pointing towards in Luke 4:18, 19 when he lays out a picture of his mission and the direction of the movement he is leading when he says,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18,19)

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<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 104-105.

This quote at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke seems to indicate Jesus' mission. Joel B. Green paints a picture of this, saying, "It is thus evident that Jesus' mission is directed to the poor – defined not merely in subjective, spiritual or personal, economic terms, but in the holistic sense of those who are for any of a number of socio-religious reasons relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God's people. By directing his good news to these people, Jesus indicates his refusal to recognize those socially determined boundaries, asserting instead that even these "outsiders" are the object of divine grace."<sup>14</sup> But when it comes to the last line of Jesus' mission statement here Green, like many scholars, begins to back off of the radicality of "the year of the Lord's favor" or put in Old Testament terminology, "the year of Jubilee." He says,

The third major theological feature of Jesus' missionary program grows out of a further way of construing "release" in the Lukan narrative – namely as "release from debts." This draws our attention to Jubilee legislation (Leviticus 25) – the freeing of slaves, the cancellation of debts, the fallowing of the land, and the returning of all land to its origination distribution under Moses. The jubiliary theme is most evident in 4:18-19 by the repeated praise, "release" and the phrase, "the year of the Lord's favor," borrowed from Isa 61:2. It is now widely recognized that Isaiah 58 and 61 develop jubiliary themes, describing the coming redemption from exile and captivity in the eschatological language of jubiliary release. Other texts follow a similar interpretive maneuver, moving away from more literal applications of Jubilee legislation to the employment of jubiliary themes to signify the eschatological deliverance of God (with its profound social implications). This interpretive tradition encourages a reading of Luke 4:18-19 as the announcement of the eschatological epoch of salvation, the time of God's gracious visitation, with Jesus himself presented as its anointed herald.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Joel B. Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 211.

<sup>15</sup> Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, 212.

While this is, by far, the predominant theological interpretation of the meaning of “the year of the Lord’s favor” is this interpretation correct or simply convenient? Could it be that when Jesus here is referencing Jubilee, it can be both symbolic of eschatological deliverance and literal social debt forgiveness?

Although lacking explicit historical evidence, Jubilee was a concrete concept to the people of Israel imprinted on their collective social and religious imaginations, and it pointed to more than a line-by-line debt forgiveness program but reached into the very identity of what it meant to be human as it referenced a return to one’s land. In Western society, land is simply an asset to be used and holds no deeper intrinsic value of identity or self-worth but to a first century Jew, “land,” conveyed identity and relationship to God. While as Western Christians we may say that the most prominent theme of the Bible is God’s love, or God’s faithfulness, or even God’s forgiveness – if we were to look at Scripture with a more culturally contextualized view we may come to understand that the central theme in Scripture is actually “the land.” As Walter Brueggemann says in his book *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, “Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith. Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging. In what follows I suggest that land might be a way of organizing biblical theology.”<sup>16</sup> The land is central, Brueggemann argues, because the land was connected to Israel’s identity

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2002), 3.

and if one was disposed from the land, they were essentially disposed from their identity. He goes on saying, “The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers it never unclaimed space but is always a place with Yahweh, a place well filled with memories of life with him and promises from him and vows to him...Biblical faith is surely about the life of a people with God. And if God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as historical place in a special way.”<sup>17</sup> In some way, countering the overly spiritualized metaphorical view of Jubilee, he goes on to say,

“The land will indeed be redistributed. This relates to the practice of the Jubilee Year, which consists of returning land to its rightful owner. The land is not managed according to calculating economic transactions. There may be such transactions, but they happen in contexts of promise and inheritance, which finally override such transactions. It is worth noting that the powerful tradition of land redistribution can be understood as the center of Luke’s presentation of Jesus. Jesus is a threat to vested interest in his time because he proposed to give land and dignity back to those who had lost it.”<sup>18</sup>

Viewing the entirety of the Gospel of Luke, John Howard Yoder seems to agree with Brueggemann’s take on a very tangible Jubilee saying,

“The two parables of the merciless servant and the unfaithful steward thus confirm what the Nazareth discourse, the Lord’s prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount had already given us to understand. It is really a jubilee, conformed to the sabbatical instructions of Moses, that Jesus proclaimed: a jubilee able to resolve the social problem in Israel, by abolishing debts and liberating debtors whose insolvency had reduced them to slavery. The practice of such a jubilee was not optional. It belonged to the precursors of the kingdom. Those who would refuse to enter this path could not enter into the Kingdom of God.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 193.

<sup>19</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 68-69.

This is extremely significant for this study because it begins to point to Jesus inaugurating more than simply a spiritual forgiveness, but a movement focused on the holistic flourishing of a community, especially those who were currently struggling through the difficulty of exclusion, displacement, and shame. Jesus' ministry can then be seen as a fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophetic anticipation of God's shalom crashing into the systems of suffering of "the world." In his book, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Jonathan Pennington points us in this direction by saying, "...a state of relationship free from conflict is called *shalom*; and most generally, one can be described as flourishing when all the parts of one's life – health, economics, interpersonal relations – are functioning together in harmony and completeness."<sup>20</sup> Pennington argues that the main thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is more than a moral teaching or a suggestion for how to live in God's newly inaugurated Kingdom, but rather an ethic of blessing that puts people in right relationship with God and each other that produces both spiritual and physical flourishing for individuals and communities. Pennington argues that this central teaching is a key to understanding the mission of Jesus saying,

The Sermon is offering Jesus' answer to the great question of human flourishing, the topic at the core of both the Jewish wisdom literature and that of the Greco-Roman virtue perspective, while presenting Jesus as the true Philosopher-King. Understanding this will provide a powerful gestalt, or interpretive paradigm, for reaching and interpreting the Sermon...This is the ethics of virtue, focusing on

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2017), 72.



the good as a way of being in the world that will result in the goal (telos) of flourishing and happiness.<sup>21</sup>

This seems to be a detail of interest, especially when we look into the continuity of the Luke-Acts narrative. Luke includes such rich detail about the tangible focus of flourishing, especially when Luke lays out Jesus' mission which includes the Year of Jubilee in Luke 4:19, continues through the details that have been laid out above and then finds some sort of resolution in the Book of Acts. As Luke recounts the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church, for which the disciples led – the first instance of the gathering of a group of individuals for fellowship and prayer (that would constitute the earliest reference to the church) there lies a detail that simply cannot be overlooked when this is taken *telos* of flourishing into account. Acts 2:43-45 says, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." The early church manifests Jesus missiological focus by implementing a sort of "privatized" Jubilee system with the selling of land, holding all things in common, and distributing to the poor so that the disenfranchised could not only "pay their bills" but can also have an economic and tangible stake of equality in the life of the new church. If Luke-Acts is seen as a continuum where Jesus lays out the renewal of Jubilee, an argument could be made that the birth of the church in Acts is displaying the fulfillment of the Jubilee at

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<sup>21</sup> Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 36.

the center of Jesus' mission. This is a major step that the disciples, under the empowerment of the Spirit, would have made and must point to a deep understanding, a deep formation, a deep telos for flourishing that Jesus would have formed and organized in them that they now were organizing in others. This has every mark of an organized social movement with a telos of communal and individual flourishing and has major ramifications for the church today.

When the mission of Jesus is observed more as a social movement and less as a privatized religious experience, all of these pieces come together to reveal the church in Acts as the extension of Jesus. Further, the church in Acts then becomes the sign, instrument, and foretaste of this Kingdom of God/Jubilee movement in order to bring flourishing to all people, but especially those who have been evicted from their social standing into a state of desperation and displacement. But what does this have to do with church planting and church renewal? Broadly speaking, new churches are organized under the goal of proclaiming the message of Jesus and creating disciples but often fail to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. Even if they are planted as part of a denomination, these connections are often difficult to be made. But if Jesus is inaugurating a social movement with the goal of human flourishing and the church in Acts is fulfilling that goal through the practice of Jubilee, then how is the church today part of that "bigger story?" What is being proposed here is that when forming new churches and re-organizing struggling churches, each church should operate within this Jubilee framework and see themselves not as an individual gathering

of followers of Jesus but rather as a people coming together as an outpost, chapter, or member organization birthed to continue this social movement for human flourishing. The telos at the heart of the formative imagination of a church plant should be inspired and guided, then, by some understanding of and working towards Jubilee. The “why” of “why start new churches” is precisely to bring people together to organize an institution with this “social movement for human/communal flourishing” telos. This central imagination is thus not the horse or the cart, but rather the driver sitting on the cart that guides the horse. This central goal guides the central components of the church such as discipleship, financial sustainability, liturgy, outreach and so on.

At this point, the question of strategy once again arises. What was Jesus’ strategy and what can be said about a strategy for church planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? If this is indeed the “why” churches should be planted – what is the “how?” At this point we turn for insight to The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a community organizing organization that has successfully launched hundreds of member organizations with the three guiding principles: reforming imaginations to what is possible, building relational power through one-to-one meetings, and enacting change through public action. The hope in examining the IAF’s techniques for community organizing is that we can be reminded of sociological commitments that existed within both Jesus’ work and the work of the early church. This, in turn, may help us understand our own eschatological assertion that the Kingdom of God is a paradigmatic vision for the perfection of human flourishing and give us the tools to organize churches whose end reflect that goal.

## **Chapter 2: Organizing People and Building Power: Community Organizing as a Secular Parable for the Modern American Church**

Theologically, we maintain that the organization of this social movement of Jesus is the historical result of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God announced in the incarnate Word and evidenced through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The question at this point is not whether principles of organizing made Jesus' movement "work" but rather: Can modern examples of community organizing remind the Church of what was present in Jesus but has been forgotten over time and thus assist in church planting today? To investigate this link and to understand the relevance of community organizing for this study we will focus in on the largest and most well-established community organizing organization in the United States: The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

The IAF was formed in 1940 by Saul Alinsky and a group of community advocates that arose from Alinsky's work in the neighborhoods of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Today, the IAF is the "nation's largest and longest-standing network of local faith and community-based organizations. The IAF partners with religious congregations and civic organizations at the local level to build broad-based organizing projects, which create new capacity for leadership development in a community, organizes citizen-led actions and helps build relationships across the lines that often divide our communities."<sup>2</sup> The IAF has 57

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<sup>1</sup> "History," Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed Oct 12, 2018, <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/content/history>

<sup>2</sup> "Home," Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed Oct 12, 2018, <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>

affiliate organizations in 23 states and five international affiliates.<sup>3</sup> The IAF's model is to offer a national network of tools and resources to local groups that wish to organize and associate with the IAF, so each affiliate is made up of local leaders who lead their local organizations and are comprised of local faith communities and civic organizations.

Michael Gecan, a national organizer for IAF, gives the rationale for this local strategy saying,

In the IAF, we deliberately create new organizations – each with a mix of leaders, different set of member institutions, new name, new bank account, new founding assembly, and new identity – not coalitions or alliances of existing groups. The process of founding a new organization is freeing, demanding, and exhilarating. Leaders can become equal co-owners of the new entity – a critical opportunity rarely open to us in a public arena largely crowded band dominated by established groups with well-entrenched operatives clinging to most of the lead roles.<sup>4</sup>

This sort of local organizing forms the basis for everything that IAF works to create: local leaders that engage in local issues that arise from the desire to fix local problems. This organizing also offers a flexibility that instills in each of its affiliates the need for taking big organizing principles and contextualizing them to local communities. Over almost 80 years, many local IAF affiliates have seen dramatic results in public policy. A few examples of their work, taken from their website are:

- East Brooklyn Congregations, an IAF affiliate in New York City, pioneered the Nehemiah Housing strategy to replace hundreds of acres of blighted, abandoned

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<sup>3</sup> "Members," Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed Oct 12, 2018, <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/affiliate-members#all>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gecan, *Going Public: An Organizers Guide to Citizen Action* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 134-35.

housing with large-scale developments of new, high-quality housing affordable for ownership to low and moderate-income residents of those communities. Since 1983, more than 4500 Nehemiah Homes have been built in East New York, more than 1000 homes in the South Bronx, more than 1000 homes in Baltimore, and more than 250 home in Washington, DC – which has completely transformed some of the nation’s most blighted urban communities.

- The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, the IAF affiliate in Massachusetts, spearheaded the state-wide coalition that pushed through Massachusetts’ 2006 bi-partisan universal health care law, signed by then-governor Mitt Romney. This groundbreaking legislation, which provided access to life-saving health coverage for 500,000 Massachusetts residents, became the template for the national Affordable Care Act.
- Southeast Wisconsin Common Ground successfully negotiated over \$4 million in housing re-investment from financial institutions whose foreclosures had devastated the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee.
- Thanks to the organizing work of religious leaders in Howard County, the Maryland General Assembly's budget for 2013 includes \$13 million additional dollars to expand the Medicaid Waiver for Older Adults by 300 slots, as well as improve the program, expand services, and increase home care workers' pay. This is a start to shifting Maryland's budget from institutionalized to home

and community-based care. PATH worked closely with AARP, AFSCME, and Secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene, Josh Sharfstein, to win on this issue.<sup>5</sup>

Though the IAF has seen incredible change towards the common good, the organization, and its founder, Alinsky, are not without controversy.<sup>6</sup> Many, especially conservative political groups, have branded Alinsky as a communist and the IAF as a communist political organization.<sup>7</sup> One of the most common critiques from many Christian groups arise with a quote in the preface of Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, seemingly glamorizing the organizing prowess of Satan saying, "Lest we forget at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgment to the very first radical: from all legends, mythology, and history, the very first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom – Lucifer."<sup>8</sup> Regardless of what Alinsky was attempting to convey with these words, this quote creates a lightning rod of criticism and clouds the work that Alinsky, and the IAF, seeks to do with congregations as many, understandably so, cannot reconcile working with an organization that would speak with such flattery about Satan. I have also struggled with this quote and have spoken to faith leaders who reject the IAF because of it. The width and scope of Alinsky's work and his style of offering polarizing quotes should not cause

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<sup>5</sup> "About," Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed Oct 12, 2018,

<http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/content/signature-accomplishments>

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed look at Alinsky, his work and a balanced critique see: *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky* edited by Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief rundown of the critique of Alinsky see Dylan Matthew's July 19, 2016 article on vox.com:

<https://www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing>

<sup>8</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 2.

someone to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” or reject all that Alinsky has offered simply because of one off-beat quote.<sup>9</sup>

To also offer a fair assessment of how community organizing can offer wisdom for the church another criticism must be considered, that of IAF’s tactics of public action that occasionally are focused on producing a “reaction.” These public actions are often intentionally polarizing, disruptive and sometimes civilly disobedient but are always aimed at breaking through the political stalemate to bring positive change to the system. The French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who was a friend of Alinsky, said, “Alinsky’s methods may seem a little rough. I think they are good and necessary means to achieve good and necessary ends. And I know that the deep-rooted motive power and inspiration of this so-called trouble maker [Alinsky] is pure and entirely self-giving, and love for those poor images of God which are human beings, especially the oppressed one - in other words, it is what St Paul calls agape, or love of charity.”<sup>10</sup>

While we will not linger on these criticisms, they are important to note as we navigate the relationship between community organizing and the church. The IAF is by no means a perfect model of Christian engagement in the world, nor do they claim to be a “Christian organization.” That said, the IAF can still be examined to learn how the

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<sup>9</sup> In his book, *Resurrecting Democracy*, Luke Bretherton also deals with this controversial statement saying, “It is in light of Alinsky’s Machiavellian insights into the nature of politics that we should read his notorious dedication of *Rules for Radicals* to Lucifer as the first radical. Alinsky was making explicit the fundamental conflict between the pursuit of Christian virtue and the virtues demanded by republican politics,” 39.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Philosopher and the Provocateur* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 109.



church can engage the world for the common good because it is exactly the desire for the common good that forms and guides both the work of Alinsky and the IAF. As Alinsky says, “...we are concerned with how to create mass organizations...to realize the democratic dream of equality, justice, peace, co-operation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which man can have the chance to live by values that give meaning to life.”<sup>11</sup> The “common good” of the IAF certainly seems like a secular reminder for what the “shalom” of Scripture may look like in public today. Longtime organizer and Christian leader, Robert Linthicum makes this link distinct as he says, “What the Bible is essentially about when it is dealing with shalom is public justice, not private morality. Although it is concerned about morality, it is far more concerned with public life, and especially how the political, economic, and religious powers seek or deny justice and economic equity and how the people avoid or unite in engagement in public life.”<sup>12</sup>

Here is where we come to a key relationship between community organizing and the church. It is being proposed here in this study that the “common good” of community organizing is a secular vision of the Biblical concepts of “shalom” or “Jubilee” and that community organizing offers a glimpse into what the church can be at its best. Thus, community organizing is a sort of “modern parable” for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Linthicum, *Building a People of Power* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 8.

century. This “parable” is significant in three unique ways that will have a great influence on our final observations:

1. The values, processes, and analysis that form the interior life of an IAF organization re-form the worldview of its participants toward the common good.
2. The formative relational practices of one-to-one meetings build organizational power through relational power that lead to broad-based community engagement for communal transformation.
3. The transformational practices of external public action lead to individual and corporate political agency and thus, community flourishing.

The goal of IAF affiliates is to build an organization that helps people imagine the world as it should be, and to work towards the common good. These are values that are designed to form a new telos – a new desire - in a person. People come to an IAF organization from a variety of different perspectives – some have experience in political life and some do not, but by the end, the goal, as Ed Chambers says, is to form a sort of “politicalness.” He says,

Politicalness is a capacity. Developing our politicalness requires that we know and value what it means to have power, and that means developing the head, the heart, and the gut. Exercising politicalness demands that we participate in something larger than our individual projects, and that means give-and-take, compromise, and mutual respect. Being political entails responsibility. Our politicalness is our God-given ability to respond to our world as it is by joining with others to take a stand for the whole.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice*. (New York: Continuum, 2003), 70.

How then does the IAF move people toward this politicalness? The values and habits that form the desires of individuals toward the work of the common good are the formation of a broad-based ideology, the practice of relational meetings, and the creation of agency through public action.

One of the values of the IAF is its commitment to “broad-based community organizing.” Broad-based community organizing is essentially the process of bringing a diverse group of people together to form an organization that uses the knowledge, experience, and expertise of this group to affect change. While this may seem rather intuitive at first, it can only be accomplished through intentionality. It can be the tendency of an organization to attract people that fit their “interest area” as defined by geography or other sociological factors. Most people naturally build relational networks with others in their socio-economic environment. But this tends to give an individual or an organization a narrow scope and thereby limits the issues it sees as vital to the success of humanity. Further, when an organization lacks diversity it often limits their willingness to engage in certain issues due to the experience and/or networks (or lack thereof) it has developed. For example, many wealthy Americans value public parks and may believe that more public parks may also benefit those living in under-resourced neighborhoods. However, for those living in neighborhoods with under-resourced public parks may be have a grave need for better public transportation or access to early childhood education. Only when these two groups interact and build relationships with one another can they begin to understand that while both want to improve their

communities, the urgency of one issue for a certain community may be a matter of survival while the need of another community may be for pleasure. Apart, these two groups may never comprehend what is good for the other community, how they can work together to accomplish good for both communities, or how they can draw upon the resources, expertise, and networks of each community to bring good to both communities.

One of the great benefits of broad-based community organizing is that it brings together under-resourced communities, who often lack the political connections and social power of the wealthy, with the wealthy, who often lack the diverse connections to the wisdom and experience that many under-resourced communities possess. Only working cooperatively can each group accomplish what it truly is seeking. Similar concerns arise when talking about the need for different ethnic, cultural, or religious groups to work together to achieve what is good for the whole community. In his book, *Blessed Are the Organized*, Jeffrey Stout lays out the need for this broad ideological focus, saying,

The rationale for broad-based organizing, then, is twofold: first, to mitigate the tendency of groups organized around singular identities to use their power to advance only their narrowly conceived interests; and second, to build up coalitions with enough power to address issues that cannot be resolved merely by applying leverage to local institutions. The first point is that the well-being of the city as a whole is actually in the interest of each individual and group in the city. There is no radical or permanent division between pursuit of one's own interest and promotion of the common good. The second point connects the convergence of interests in the common good with the need to amass power. If the well-being of the entire city can be secured only by a broad-based network that transcends neighborhood and

ethnicity, then systematic efforts must be made to build up connections among groups with varying backgrounds in different communities.<sup>14</sup>

This value of being broad-based has the effect of bringing together those that do not normally find themselves working together. An ideal organization will have members and organizations that represent a variety of ethnicities (African-American, Latino, Caucasian, Indian, etc.) from a variety of religious congregations (both protestant and Catholic Christians, Islamic, Unitarian, Jewish, etc.) from a variety of economic communities (under-resourced, affluent, middle-class) to other non-affiliated community organization and businesses. If one group is not represented, or under-represented, the organization will usually use the networks of the existing membership to invite under-represented populations to participate. The intentionality of being broad-based stems from the value that to bring about the common good for all people, all people need to be working together to bring about the common good.

But this sort of diverse broad-based organization does not just happen on its own; it can only be accomplished through the intentionality toward building a network of diverse relationships within the organization. This value of relational meetings is IAF's central principle as everything, they believe, comes from the value of meeting people in one-on-one meetings. A one-to-one meeting is exactly that – the intentionality of reaching out, setting up, and meeting with others in the community for 45 minutes to establish a “public relationship” and learn the passions and commitments of the other

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffery Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*, 37.

person. Ed Chambers says, “The relational meeting is an encounter that is face-to-face and one-to-one. Its purpose is to explore the possibility of a public relationship with another person...We are not looking for new “friends” when we are conducting a series of one-to-ones...The purpose of a systematic, disciplined, organized process of relational meetings is a public relationship – one built on mutual self-interest, respect, and power that eventually leads to joint action.”<sup>15</sup>

Speaking about his early organizing experience, Michael Gecan says, “In the middle of worsening deterioration, crime, arson, and abandonment, in a place that looked as if it had been repeatedly bombed and strafed, I resisted the nearly overpowering urge to rush into action and instead filled my scheduled with individual meetings. And I began to develop one of the most important habits any leader or organizer can have – the habit of building new public relationships. Power in our society does not just come from the concentration of wealth on Wall Street...Power can come from the habit of building new public relationships.”<sup>16</sup>

And this leads to the importance and purpose of individual meetings: building relational power. Everything the IAF will do depends upon relationships and the extensive network that those relationships offer. Together, they form power. Chambers fleshes this out saying,

In this fuller understanding, “power” is a verb meaning to “give and take,” “to be reciprocal,” “to be influenced as well to influence.” To be affected by another in relationship is as true sign of power as the capacity to affect others. Relational

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Chambers, *The Power of Relational Action* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2017), 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Gecan, *Going Public: An Organizers Guide to Citizen Action* (Norwell, MA: Anchor, 2004), 21.

power is infinite and unifying, not limited and divisive. It's additive and multiplicative, not subtractive and divisive. As you become more powerful, so do those in relationship with you. As they become more powerful, so do you. This is power understood as relational, as power with, not over.<sup>17</sup>

A common summation of power in the IAF is to simply define power as the “ability to act; the ability to get stuff done.”<sup>18</sup> This talk of power is often unsettling for many faith leaders because the Church has a very uncomfortable relationship with power. But if it's properly understood, relational power changes communities. Relational power is “power with”, not “power over”, as is so common in our society. Alinsky squarely lays out the importance of power saying,

Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together. Power is the reason for being of organizations. When people agree on certain religious ideas and want the power to propagate their faith, they organize and call it a church. When people agree on certain political ideas and want the power to put them into practice, they organize and call it a political party. The same reason holds across the board. Power and organization are one and the same.”<sup>19</sup>

The church is also an organization with power, which is why IAF organizations organize churches – because they realize there is already pre-built (but often unrecognized) power structures in place that they can help organize.

One-to-one relational meetings that build relational power lead to mid-sized listening sessions, or house meetings. These house meeting are intended to draw between ten and 20 people who have met together into a common space where they

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<sup>17</sup> Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 113.

listen to each other. The purpose here is to specifically listen to each other answer very specific questions related to the needs in a community. These listening sessions can take place in homes or churches. Those in Wesleyan faith traditions will find this method of organizing familiar to how Wesley organized the early Methodist movement in England. Over the years spent building an IAF organization, organizational leaders can have thousands of one-to-one meetings and hundreds of listening session meetings. Through these meetings, community needs become clarified, the expertise and passions of the community rise to the surface, and the anger that will propel action for change is concentrated. The smaller meetings lead to larger, public meetings where hundreds to thousands of people gather; the fruit of these relational meetings and listening sessions are presented in a strategic plan to affect community change. Public leaders and political officials are often invited to these meetings to make public declarations about these proposed strategic plans and inform whether they will support the organization's efforts around specific policy or community action. The one-to-one public meetings slowly form into large political rallies that do not center around a candidate or political party, but rather center around the combined need and strategy for community change.

Maybe the most important element to highlight about the way the IAF organizes is to understand their focus on creating individual and collective agency for people to engage in the politics of civil society. The "iron rule" of IAF organizing is simple: never do for someone what they can do for themselves. This is repeated over and over and becomes a sort of mantra for organizing efforts. This rule goes two ways. First, it



conveys respect for communities that are suffering and a belief that if the people are taught how to organize, they possess the strength, the resolve, the wisdom, and capacity to lead their own communities in the process of change. Secondly, this puts the emphasis of agency onto the participants in the organization and away from the leaders of the organization. In his book, *Resurrecting Democracy*, Luke Bretherton states,

As a form of political action, Broad Based Community Organizing (BBCO) is focused on practices and learned sequences. Mastery is transmitted in and through practice, without necessarily requiring a high level of conscious verbalization or rational deliberation – despite plenty of words being used in the formulation and outworking of the practice. Rather than cognitive recognition and verbal articulation, what is important in community organizing is the sequence of things and the skillful deployment and performance of a repertoire of actions and practices in order to provoke the desired reaction: one-to-ones, caucusing, assemblies, power analysis, evaluations, and inventive forms of contention are the ingredients of a successful sequence. As a sequence of practices, community organizing constitutes a public or common work...Crafting a good sequence enables the identification and training of leaders, the building of relational power, and the reweaving of civil society.<sup>20</sup>

This specific process builds awareness of and an ability to operate in public life; in short, this process builds political agency. This process takes individuals who have little to no political experience, and through the course of building relationships, rebuilding imagination, receiving training, and participation in public action, they learn how to engage.

When I initially engaged with Common Ground, an IAF affiliate in Milwaukee, WI, I had no idea how to organize or engage politically. I showed up with a group of about 20 pastors for our first meeting with the Milwaukee's mayor, Tom Barrett. I dressed far

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<sup>20</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 174-75.

too casually, was nervous, and was far too timid to ask a question or speak up in the meeting. Three years later, after being immersed in the sequence of relational meetings, practices, and training, I knew how to engage politically with community leaders. By the time I learned how to engage, I was leading meetings with both the mayor and high-level corporate leaders – asking them hard questions, pushing back on their lack of specificity, and holding them accountable to keep their promises. In many ways, the process of learning to organize instills a person with a new ability and understanding of the world and how to engage in that world. Engaging in public life in and through politics seems like a spot reserved for seasoned politicians and political activists, but once the veil is lowered and one learns that one has all the tools necessary to engage, any person can become a community leader.

The leadership development and personal empowerment that is familiar in the IAF also finds a parallel in the church. As pastors and leaders, one of our explicit objectives is to help each person coming into the church find their own voice and become leaders or “priests”<sup>21</sup> in the church and, more broadly, in the Kingdom. When examined through the “Great Commission”, which tells the church to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations, the parallels may even be greater. While the language to describe the process of the IAF and the Church may be different, the Church’s mission is to bring together a diverse group of individuals, take them through a catechism and process of continued discipleship, help them to realize their gifts of

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<sup>21</sup> This is a reference to the common held protestant theology of “the priesthood of all believers.”

leadership in the Kingdom, and then send them into the world to do the work of the church to help spread the message of the Kingdom of God. Transposing the IAF and the Church, it may seem that the church too is working in a sort of broad-based community organizing. Could it be that these two are far more linked than we often realize? In short, this is the focus of this work.

It is precisely here that the parallels between the formative process and outcomes that community organizing produces can be seen as a possible parallel to the discipleship process of Christian faith communities. While this description of community organizing is somewhat technical and limited in scope, the hope here is that this overview of the techniques and values of the IAF highlight three distinct elements of their organization that directly lead to change and the flourishing of a community. These three elements can also exist in parallel in the church and specifically when it comes to building new faith communities. They are:

1. Reforming *telos* from individual flourishing to the possibility of communal flourishing through examining the world “as it is” and then analyzing the power dynamics to build a coalition that desires to bring change for the common good.
2. Intentionally building a broad-based organization of power through the inclusion of as many networks and people groups as possible and building the organization through the relationship building of one-to-one meetings.

3. Training, equipping, and empowering individuals to engage in political structures through public action to affect change that builds communal and individual agency.

A Venn diagram of these three elements could look like the following – with communal flourishing as goal and the center:

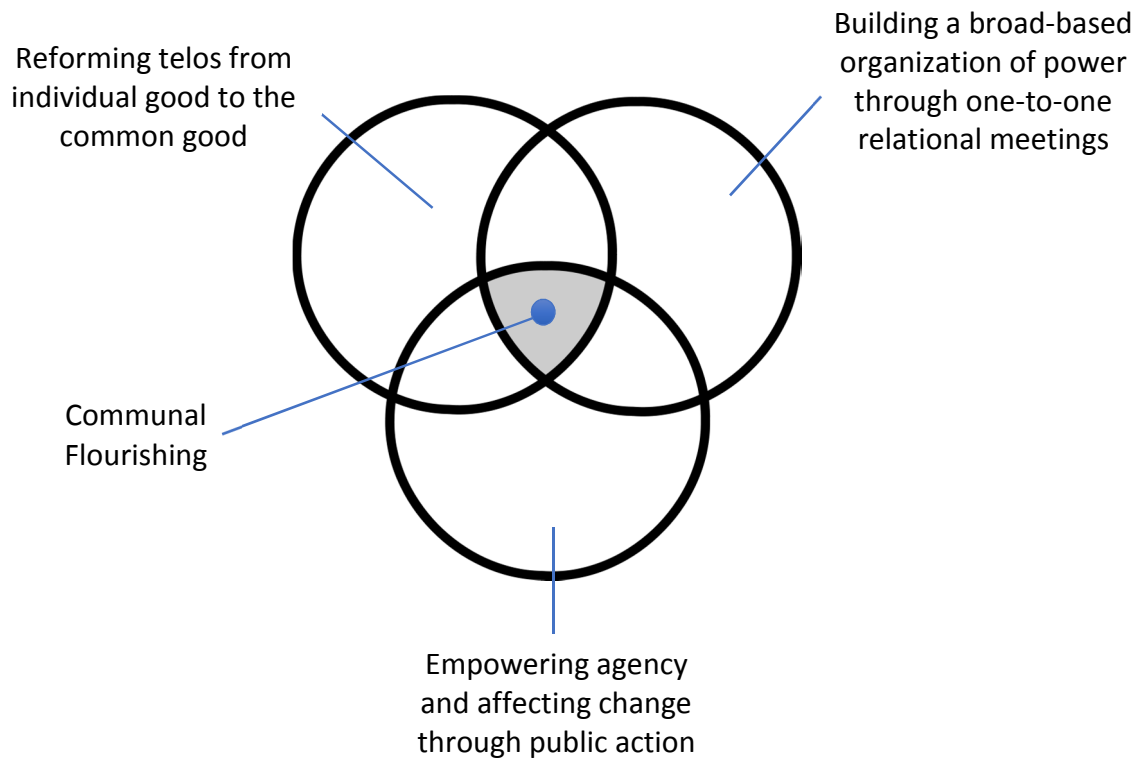


Figure 1 – Venn Diagram Illustrating Community Organizational Elements

The key argument of this thesis is that community organizing offers a secular glimpse (or parable) into what the church can be, through these three elements, with communal flourishing as the central goal. While community organizing offers these

three principles in a non-faith organization – the structure and theology of a faith community can parallel that of an IAF organization in a language and structure of Christian theology that offers a process of catechism that reforms telos and empowers personal and corporate agency towards communal flourishing. Thus, this Venn diagram, with a theological framework of the mission, the structure, and the practice of the church can offer a parallel framework for how the church can engage the world. Adding a theological framework for each of these three principles can move the principles and values of community organizing to the principles and values of the church by overlaying:

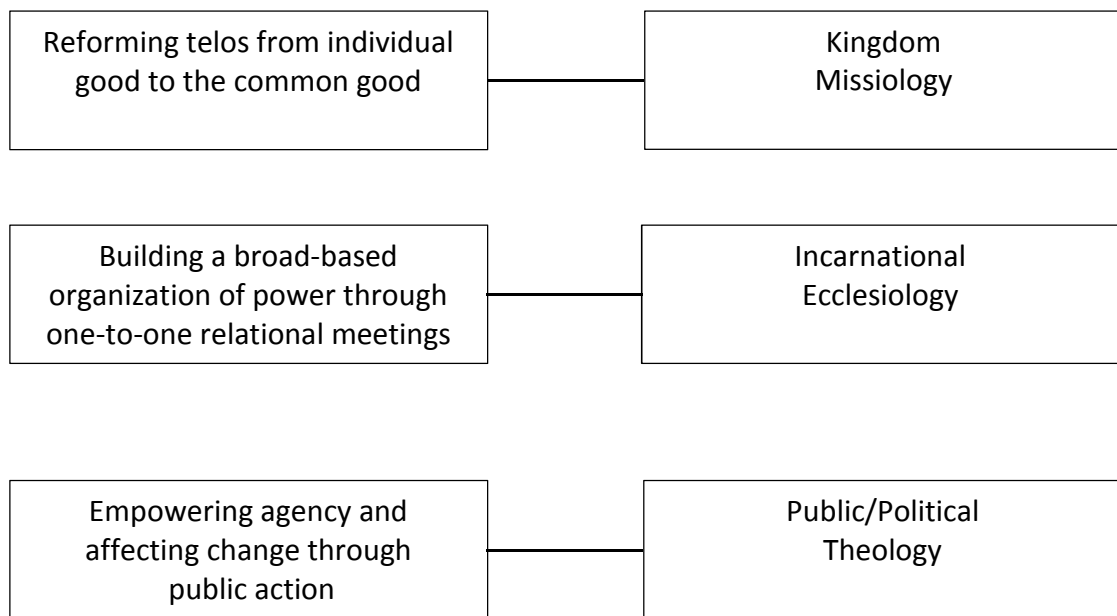


Figure 2 – Parallel Between Community Organizing Principles and Kingdom-building Principles

Do these three central ideas truly correlate to one another, and if so, what does this mean for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Can the church learn from the principles of the IAF to affect change in our local communities and build stronger congregations? If the

church is seen more as a social movement connected to the network of other worldwide and historical churches rather than singular, isolated organizations can these principles propel the church to start and renew congregations to connect with their communities in new ways and ultimately fulfill their mission? Examination of these questions will reveal that these three principles can help create new churches that do not only participate in mission projects, nor are just “missional,” but create a commitment to communal flourishing that is integrated so deeply within the language, values, and practices of the church that Jubilee becomes both the means and the end of the mission of the church.

### **Chapter 3: Kingdom Missiology: Worldview Recovery Toward Reimagining the World as it Should Be**

The Christian mission, or *missio Dei*, has been a central part of the church since the disciples walked out of the upper room and into the streets of a bustling Jerusalem declaring to all that Jesus is Lord. While this word “mission” is not strictly a Biblical word, it is a deeply Christian concept that has propelled the church to understand God as a “God of mission” that desires to redeem the world. But what does this word “mission” mean? Defining this word in practice has become a great problem for missiological thinkers. Since mission is not clearly defined in Scripture, it has thus been defined by the church theologians, practitioners, and lay members alike, and (it seems that) the definition is ever-changing. David Bosch, author of *Transforming Mission*, which stands out as one of the most influential books on mission in the 20<sup>th</sup> century says, “Ultimately, mission remains indefinable...The most we can hope for is to formulate some approximations of what mission is all about.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, mission is defined not by its direct meaning, but by the principles and elements that exist within the concept. While this may seem adequate, an examination of the principles and elements reveal the fundamental issue: that the terminology “mission” is ultimately defined by its use. Why is this a problem? Because when a word is not clearly defined the word can take on a variety of meanings which may (and has) led to the reality that,

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<sup>1</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 9.

for many churches, anything and everything *can* be mission. But if everything is mission, is anything mission?

Part of the issue here lies in the linguistics of the word. Over time, words may take on different meaning to different cultures. For example, the word “communism” is not a negative word in and of itself as it directly implies an economic system that values the sharing of goods and services. But in American culture, “communism” has assumed a strictly negative connotation that seems to also imply treason, poverty, and an abandonment of American ideals. These tangential ideas have attached themselves to the word “communism” like a burr to a dog’s fur. And if enough burrs get on the dog’s fur, one will look and wonder if the fur is still fur or if it is just a mess of burrs. This has happened to the word “communism” so that one can no longer freely use the word to describe an economic system without considering all the baggage this word also infers. Practically, “communism” may be a word that that is no longer practical to convey the strictest of meanings. Currently, this is also happening with the word “evangelical” in America. While this term was birthed to describe Christians, who were actively bearing witness to their faith through words and deeds, new meanings are currently being attached to it that are pushing the word also to take on a political meaning that defines the word as republican, conservative, pro-life, etc. To use this word now in our culture implies something different than it used to. This is the way culture works, like the constant flow of a river eroding the cliff to form new pathways that may not have



previously existed. Words have definite meanings, but those meanings may change over time.

Circling back to the original question - what value does the word "mission" have for us today in the church? Keith Ferdinando pushes us to reexamine the meaning of the word saying,

It must by now be questionable whether the word "mission" retains any residual value for missiology. Humpty Dumpty's approach to language—"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less" —perhaps reflects his creator's diagnosis of a degenerative disease that attacks some words, a sort of linguistic entropy or inflation. If so, this pathological condition seems to have caught up with "mission," and perhaps with terminal effect. The opening sentences of Bosch's *Transforming Mission* point this way: "Since the 1950s there has been a remarkable escalation in the use of the word 'mission' among Christians. This went hand in hand with a significant broadening of the concept, at least in certain circles." If words are defined by their use, then the variety and breadth with which "mission" is used suggest that Neill's prophecy may have been fulfilled: "If everything is mission, nothing is mission."<sup>2</sup>

This is further complicated by the reality that the church's "mission" endeavors in the past 500 years have been complicit with colonialism. The entrance of Christian missionaries into a native culture has often resulted in the erosion of the values of that native culture and has sometimes served as the front edge of a colonial wave that resulted in natives serving a foreign power.

Objectively, this should not come as a surprise since the many of the modern ideas about "mission" suffer from dualisms that divide people into problematic categories of "the going" and "the receiving"; the "in" and the "out"; the "saved" and

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition," *Themelios* 33, no 1 (May 2008): <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mission-a-problem-of-definition>

the “lost”; the “right” and the “wrong.” Further, the one embracing, participating, and being sent out into “mission” takes on a certain moral authority, a privilege of being “in on the salvation experience,” whereas the ones on the receiving end of “mission” are not. While they too can become members of this mission “club” – they are not in their current state. This is problematic at best and dangerous at worst but has largely seemed to have gone unexamined in the life of the western church in the past two centuries. There can be a certain privilege and arrogance that the participant of “mission” assumes – as if they have something to offer and the receiver has nothing. This can be seen sometimes when well-meaning upper income Christians go to “serve” the poor, but in reality, they sometimes exacerbate their social separations by offering charity to those in need.<sup>3</sup>

Now, while this may be the dominant experience with “mission” the church has engaged in the past few centuries – it is not the *only* experience, which is important to point out. Christopher Wright’s definition of mission may be helpful here as a baseline for understanding as he defines mission as, “our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”<sup>4</sup> But more interesting is the way Wright pushes against the idea of “sending” that is inherent in the traditional understanding of mission. In his book, *The Mission of God*, he says,

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this see “Toxic Charity” by Bob Lupton

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 23

Furthermore, I am dissatisfied with accounts of mission that stress only the “roots” of the word in the Latin verb *mitto*, “to send,” and which then see its primary significance in the dynamic of sending or being sent. Again, this is not because I doubt the importance of this theme within the Bible, but because it seems to me that if we define mission only in “sending” terms we necessarily exclude from our inventory of relevant resources many other aspects of biblical teaching that directly or indirectly affect our understanding of God’s mission and the practice of our own. Generally speaking, I will use the term *mission* in its more general sense of a long-term purpose that is to be achieved through proximate objectives and planned actions.<sup>5</sup>

This is primarily relevant to the recent popularity of the term “missional church.”

What must be pointed at this point is the way “mission” and “missional” are understood from a strictly *theological* point of view versus a practical point of view as seen in the local church. From a local church perspective, this term is now being used in seemingly every single church in America (maybe this is an exaggeration, but maybe not) to describe their church as a church that participates in mission to their community. But what does “missional” even mean and what makes a church a missional church? Wright once again chimes in with a basic definition of this term saying that, “Missional is simply an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission. Missional is to the word mission what a covenantal is to covenant, or fictional to fiction.”<sup>6</sup> While this may be helpful as a baseline definition, it still means very little, if anything at all. The problem is that the idea of mission (from a local church perspective), and thus, missional, is so broad that nearly *any* activity a church engages in can be described as *missional*. Bingo night to

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 24.

engage the community – missional. Christmas cantata – missional. Trunk or treat “outreach” – missional. We could go on and on forever but will spare us all the agony of listing what churches describe as “missional activity.”

*Missional*, in practical terms, means whatever an individual or a single church defines it as. In reality, it seems, many are simply attaching the word *missional* to their marketing efforts to create brand awareness and attract new guests so that they may (assuming the best) begin to build a relationship with the persons so that they may come to faith in Christ. While nothing is wrong with this, and it is needed, it seems a stretch to call it mission activity in the world. In reality, such magnanimous intentions are not always the case. The point is this – in these sort of cases, the term missional often becomes a useless term because when everything is missional, nothing truly is. While Van Gelder and Zscheile make a needed argument for elasticity of the term missional saying, “We are proposing a different argument...namely, that “missional” displays an inherent elasticity that allows it to be understood in a variety of ways.”<sup>7</sup> Moving forward it will be important to hold this balance between the overuse and misconception of the word *missional* and the elasticity and hope for the concepts that lay behind the word itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 3.

While the scope of this work will not allow us to dive into the discussion on a theology of mission<sup>8</sup> but rather to present a practical model for community engagement at the local church level, it may be helpful for a brief baseline understanding. Mission here is not necessarily to be considered an “activity” of individuals or the church. Mission must always be kept in the bounds of God’s activity to the world. As Bosch says about the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s debates on the *missio Dei* concept,

In attempting to flesh out the *missio Dei* concept, the following could be said. In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church” (Moltmann). Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.<sup>9</sup>

But what is God’s mission? And what is the church’s role in that mission? These pivotal questions have been theologians’ focus for two millennia. Logically, whatever God’s mission *is*, the church should be about that business, as God’s agent in the world, as Carl Braaten says, “This trinitarian grounding of mission should make clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of mission. Advocacy is what the church is about, being God’s advocate in the world.”<sup>10</sup> God’s mission is clearly the redemption of humanity to usher in salvation to all the earth, but there are many

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<sup>8</sup> For such a case I’d suggest reading David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*, specifically Chapter 12: Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm or Christopher Wrights, *The Mission of God* for a fuller understanding of a theology of mission.

<sup>9</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 400.

<sup>10</sup> Carl E. Braaten, “The Mission of the Gospel to the Nations,” *Dialog* 30 (1991): 127.

different perspectives on what “salvation” means and how the church should go about God’s advocacy plan. This is why the term missional is problematic. This is highlighted in the book, *Starting Missional Churches*, and books similar to this (as the market is flooded with them) which lead off the discussion about missional church planting with fundamentally “seeing” our neighbor as important. Nick Warnes says,

The time of a pastor in a new church is best spent in relationship with his or her neighbors and people committed to founding the church...When the priority is building relationships and equipping others to build relationships, a solid foundation is built for an effective witness...Building relationships with people and equipping them to do the same with others is the most important asset not just for the pastor but for everyone in a new church.<sup>11</sup>

While building relationships is important, for sure, is it the most important thing a pastor can do? Does this elevate relationships to the point of experiencing God? That’s certainly not what was meant here, but often when discussions about what it means to build a “missional church” it begins with building relationships. Yes, relationships are pivotal to building any church and engaging in mission, but it feels like something is missing when “relationships” become the end goal, or telos, for a church’s mission, which is the case in countless church plants. Missional activity for many new churches is boiled down to building relationships with neighbors because that fits the criteria of God’s mission to the world: reach out to others, build relationships in order to build relationships, which *may* lead to user-defined “salvation” through discussions and church attendance.

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<sup>11</sup> Nick Warnes, “Shifting Perceptions on How We Plant Churches,” in *Starting Missional Churches*, ed. Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2014), 26.

Could it be that it is so hard to define God's *mission* because we do not know what God's mission is in the world and that we don't truly know what the church is called to be? The argument in this work is that while most churches engage in great activities that are focused on loving and connecting with neighbors, they are rooted in a less than complete understanding of what Jesus' mission was (and is) and what the Kingdom of God is all about. And many Christians engage in the work of mission within the paradigm and worldview of the world's culture without having experienced true transformation of their own worldview; we are, for the most part, asking people to add Jesus on top of their already established and functioning cultural worldviews instead of allowing Jesus to replace those worldviews fully with the Kingdom of God.

In his book, *Transforming Worldviews*, Paul G. Hiebert defines worldview as, "the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives."<sup>12</sup> But a worldview is much deeper than this as Hiebert continues by laying out the six elements of worldview as:

1. Worldviews are the structures that we build to provide answers to our most ultimate human questions: Where are we? Who are we? What's wrong? What's the remedy?
2. Worldviews give us emotional security when facing human anxieties and difficulties by supporting our foundational beliefs with emotional reinforcements so that they are not easily destroyed.
3. Worldviews validate our deepest cultural norms, which we use to evaluate our experiences and choose courses of action.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 27.

4. Worldviews help us organize our ideas, feelings, and values into a more or less unified view of reality so that we can have the sense that we live in a world that makes sense to us.
5. When confronting cultural change, worldviews help us select those changes that fit our values and reject those that do not.
6. Finally, worldviews provide psychological reassurance that the world is truly as we see it and give us a sense of peace that we can live at home in the world we live.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, our worldview creates the way we interpret and engage with the culture and dynamics of the world around us and will ultimately dictate our actions. Speaking to the relationship between Christian mission, conversion and worldview transformation

Hiebert astutely points out that,

Conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels: behavior, beliefs, and the worldview that undermines these. Christians should live differently because they are Christians. Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behavior, but if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and the result is a syncretistic Christo-paganism, which has the form of Christianity but not its essence. Christianity becomes a new magic and a new, subtler form of idolatry. If behavioral change was the focus of the mission movement in the nineteenth century, and changed beliefs its focus in the twentieth century, then transforming worldviews must be the central task of the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup>

This idea of worldview transformation is where we now turn our attention as we will see that for any idea of Kingdom missiology to take hold in a community, worldview transformation, or as Charles Taylor calls, “social imaginary,”<sup>15</sup> must be taking place.

While the American worldview, or imaginary, of nationalism, individualism, work ethic, manifest destiny, white supremacy, capitalism, and corporate infallibility are strong, the

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<sup>13</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)



first step of the “mission” of the church should be on subverting and replacing these with Christian understanding of the way the world is. Now, before we move forward with a discussion of “worldview”, we need to hold the classical understanding of worldview in tension with the importance of practice and liturgy. James K.A. Smith is very helpful to hold the tension between “thinking” and “practicing” so we don’t get lost in simply believing that a person can change simply by changing their thinking. The hope here is that the understanding of worldview has been laid out here is not simply a constructed set of implicit ideas, because it is so much more and is affected and formed by subconscious ideas that have been given to us at a very young age. Nonetheless, Smith’s critique is important to hold as we move forward. He says,

Such construals of worldview belie an understanding of Christian faith that is dualistic and thus reductionistic: It reduces Christian faith primarily to a set of ideas, principles, claims and propositions that are known and believed. The goal of all this is “correct” thinking...Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs in your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly – who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of love. We are made to be such people by our immersion in the material practices of Christian worship – through affective impact, over time, of signs and smell in water and wine.<sup>16</sup>

This is the sort of holistic thought we are pushing towards when we speak of worldview. To highlight this need, let’s visit the story in John 3 where Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and inquired about the Kingdom of God,

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that

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<sup>16</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 32-33.

you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. Jesus replied, "Very, truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:1-4 NIV).

This is a curious text that often seems to get sanded down to convey to us the need for each individual to surrender their life to Jesus, but there's much more to the text than a personal salvation experience. Jesus spoke with a ruler in the elite Jerusalem council specifically about the Kingdom that Jesus would usher in. Nicodemus benefited greatly from the way of the world and presumably, had no reason to change the structures and hierarchy of the world against his benefit. So, Jesus curiously responded to Nicodemus' non-question by telling him that to understand and participate in what is happening here in Jesus' ministry, he'd have to be "born again." Birthing, a difficult and painful process for both baby and mother, results in a whole new life. Jesus may have been telling Nicodemus that the way that he saw and processed the world (i.e. his worldview), built on privilege, hierarchy, power, and either overt or subvert oppression, was incompatible with the message into which Jesus was called people. Jesus may have indicated that Nicodemus needed to "renew his mind" and fully embrace a whole new way of seeing the world. This required more than spiritual conversion but, rather, a complete disruption of the worldview that existed within Nicodemus. Speaking to this, and to the need for radical discipleship Ched Myers articulates the sort of conversion that Jesus may have been speaking of by saying,

Radical Discipleship is about nothing more and nothing less than laying bare the roots of the personal and socio-political pathologies of our imperial society and

its dead-end history, even as we seek to recover the roots of our deep biblical tradition: namely, the messianic movement of rebellion and restoration, of repentance and renewal...It was this tradition that animated John the Baptist to go feral, troubling Herod's business as usual and then troubling Jordan waters to re-birth a certain Nazarene upon whom the old Spirit of the Movement came to rest like a condor. He rebooted the old movement afresh, accompanied only by clueless fishermen and faithful women of ill repute, by demoniacs liberated from imperial possession and peasants armed only with palm branches. Jesus faced down the Mammon system with loaves and fishes in the wilderness, remembering the old catechism of Manna; redirected our attention away from Temples and towards wildflowers and birds; raised up street beggars and brought down fat cats to co-inhabit the Jubilee common ground his mamma had sung to him about as a baby.<sup>17</sup>

This is not the sort of talk that we often hear from the pulpits of our churches on Sunday mornings, but this may indeed be the language of rebirth. American culture is formed by the powerful forces and ideologies of individualism, consumerism, manifest destiny, capitalism, and Christian hegemony and often, when we "accept Jesus" and become part of a Christian community, we allow these cultural forces to go largely unquestioned and thus untransformed. So often our American values are so synonymous with American Christian values, they are considered untouchable to our journey of discipleship. So rather than being "born again" we simply change our dirty onesie by acknowledging that Jesus can and will enhance our lives in some way and so we "repent" and "believe." But it is quite clear that when a community of faith continues to tap into the cultural forces of power "the world" they have not undergone a worldview transformation. When a church attracts visitors by offering to give away

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<sup>17</sup> "Radical Discipleship," Chedmyers.org, accessed Dec 2, 2017, <https://chedmyers.org/2015/03/06/blog-2015-03-06-what-radical-discipleship-ched-myers/>.

expensive gifts (iPads, new cars, etc.) they are simply attaching themselves to the powerful patterns of consumerism that Americans are trained by respond to. There are countless examples of this sort of cultural appropriation churches engage in to connect to the power of culture. And make no mistake, these powerful patterns of American culture work to attract people and build numbers! But maybe what is required to get us to embrace a mission of communal flourishing is a full worldview recovery. Like addicts entering a 12-step recovery program, maybe being “born again” requires a detox from the ideologies and practices of the culture of empire in order to see the world in a completely new and lay the groundwork for a life of sobriety in the Kingdom of God.

This is precisely why the Kingdom of God is difficult to see, because it is not assumed that when we come to know Christ we will necessarily need to undergo this sort of detox recovery process. So, in the absence of a detox, it is only natural to build a symbiotic relationship between the Kingdom of God and the world’s culture we exist within. This, in large part, may also begin to explain why some missionaries through history have helped to usher in colonialism, albeit (hopefully) unknowingly.

What is being proposed in this work is a different understanding of mission that is currently held by most of the American church. Although this understanding is certainly not new, it may have been covered up by the blowing sands of cultural appropriation and needs to be unearthed again for an effective western Christian witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bryan Stone’s perspective in *Evangelism After Christendom*

is helpful to begin to help in this excavation project as he brings together these ideas of mission, church, and the Kingdom of God. He says,

Jesus talked about the reign of God as a radically new order that comes to put an end to the age-old patterns of wealth and poverty, domination and subordination, insider and outsider that are deeply ingrained in the way we relate to one another on this planet. But in order for that new order to become a serious option for the world, it must be a visibly and imaginatively embodied in the world. And if Scripture is a faithful witness, the purpose of God throughout history is the creation and formation for a new people whose mission is to do just that. The fact that the old Christendom arrangements have been shattering therefore may prove to be liberating for the church and for the practice of evangelism. But then evangelism will have to be understood not as an adventure in “winning friends and influencing people” but as a fundamentally subversive activity, born out of a posture of eccentricity (living “off center” or “outside the center,” at the margins) and out of cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, and telling the truth.<sup>18</sup>

This requires a radical re-orienting of our lives to participate in and desire the Kingdom that Jesus is speaking of. When Stone speaks of “evangelism”, it is not the sort of evangelism that goes out into the street and asks people their future eternal lodging situation but rather is the practice of the church to be this sort of alternative and subversive society while bearing witness to it by their actions. As he later says, “The most evangelistic thing the church can do, therefore, is to be the church not merely in public but as a new and alternative public; not merely society but as a new and distinct society, a new and unprecedented social existence.”<sup>19</sup> This begins to transform the idea of what salvation is from the idea of “an individual accepting Jesus and gaining eternal

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<sup>18</sup> Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 16.

security” to the transformative power of moving from empire to God’s Kingdom. Stone points to this saying, “Likewise, Stanly Hauerwas speaks of salvation as “being engrafted into practices that save us from those powers that would rule our lives making it impossible for us to truly worship God.”<sup>20</sup> So here, this soteriology is bigger and more cosmic in nature than just an individualistic decision. Speaking to this sort of salvation of all things Volf says, “The purpose of Christian theology is the flourishing of all life because Christian theology stands in service of the continuation of Christ’s mission to embody and spread the good news of God’s coming to make the world into God’s home.”<sup>21</sup> Is it possible that the most fundamental mission activity the church can engage in is the work of being and bearing witness to a whole new alternative society that reflects *God’s* home where Jesus is Lord and salvation is the transformation of all creation to a state of flourishing?

This sort of “born again thinking” seems to have led Lesslie Newbigin to include a critique of the free market in 1978 as a critical missiological issue. He surprisingly says, “The ideology of the free market has proved itself more powerful than Marxism. It is, of course not just a way of arranging economic affairs. It has deep roots in the human soul. It can be met and mastered only at the level of religious faith, for it is a form of idolatry. The churches have hardly begun to recognize that this is probably their most urgent missionary task during the coming century.”<sup>22</sup> Saying that an economic system is the

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<sup>20</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 95.

most urgent missionary task is not something many hear in their Christian education. Newbigin offers an alternative missiological possibility that is not rooted in the power of the surrounding culture, but in the liberation of those who are hurting. And it is this liberation that Newbigin insists be part of any discussion about salvation. He pointedly says,

Any talk of salvation apart from action for liberation of the exploited is false. Love and justice are distinct concepts, but where justice is denied love is certainly denied. If the economic order is such that owners of land and capital can and do exploit and oppress the workers, then the commandment of love must mean more than marginal acts of personal charity; it must mean action to end exploitation. It must mean actions for liberation of which the Exodus is the model, and this must mean taking the side of the exploited and fighting against the exploiter.<sup>23</sup>

Within this understanding, it seems that what Jesus is bringing to bear on the world is an alternative imagination and practice that center around love that liberate the oppressed and actively work to bring flourishing to all people everywhere. This new reality that Jesus is Lord over, and the church is an advocate for, is the Kingdom of God and precisely the mission that God is calling Christians into. The missiological imperative of conversion is only a worthwhile pursuit if it is rooted in and seeks the outcome to draw individuals into the worldview of a liberated and salvific life of practicing this alternative reality as a realized future crashing into the present. With this in mind, it is most likely that much of the “missional” activity that American churches engage in today may not be in line with ushering people into this alternative reality, but more in

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<sup>23</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 97.

line with accumulating people for the purpose of membership. This also critiques a mission rooted in a substitutionary atonement theology which makes mission all about saving abstract souls than a creational shalom. This sort of dualism that separates a person's "eternal soul" from their "current living conditions," at its worst, embraces a sort of "slave-holders religion," as Jonathan Hartgrove-Wilson claims,<sup>24</sup> that allows a Christian framework to maintain the injustice of slavery in society. While this sort of rhetoric may be dismissed by some as inflammatory and unhelpful, the history of Christian missions is riddled with examples of missionaries "converting" souls but turning a blind eye to the deplorable and harmful social conditions natives lived in. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile push beyond this sort of dualism to a mission that embraces the fullness of transformation saying, "Missional theology begs for a robust understanding of creation and culture existing within the life of the Trinity and as integral to God's missionary ends of bringing the whole cosmos to fulfillment."<sup>25</sup>

It must also be conceded that people need something to aim at, to shoot towards. Simply saying that the church's mission should be "to bear witness to the Kingdom of God" falls short as it runs into the same problem discussed earlier in that the "missional" movement allows each user to define what the Kingdom means. Obviously, this is a real issue as so many churches define this idea differently. Some

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Hartgrove-Wilson, *Reconstructing the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: IVP Books, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Craigh Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 139.



point to the need only for spiritual renewal; while others point to political renewal; while yet others point to societal renewal. So, which is it?

The argument that this work is making is that the proper focus for a Kingdom-focused mission is a crucial component that (along with incarnational ecclesiology and political theology) can produce human and communal flourishing. This human flourishing is also the central key to understanding the Kingdom of God. Jesus' mission and thus the Kingdom he inaugurated is concerned with the shalom flourishing of the world. This is a shalom that is spiritual, physical, and societally holistic, bringing healing to the whole cosmos that is tangible and covers every aspect of existence. But the question remains: What does this look like lived out missionally in the world? What action and activity constitute something that is "missional" and reflects the values of the Kingdom of God? What values live into the Kingdom identity of Jesus?

To give a tangible point of reference, based in the ministry of Jesus and the shalom of God, here is a list of values that this work defines as Kingdom mission. Each of these values, as is the Kingdom, is cosmic in its redemptive focus and is proposed to include all creation (all humans and all nature).

The activity of:

1. Working towards and advocating a life free of oppressive powers (liberated) for all creation, people included.
2. Working towards and advocating a life where all humans, everywhere can live in economic sustainability (debts forgiven).
3. Working towards and advocating a created order free from violence or discrimination (protected).
4. Working towards and advocating for a system of life free from shame and social hierarchy (equality).

5. Working towards and advocating a life where all people, everywhere can live in unregulated relationship with God and each other (restoration of communion).

The church exists, and is carved out by God in this world, to live into this future reality within its fellowship and to work to liberate systems and individuals to live into this reality in society. This is a salvation that is centrally about liberation and empowerment to live free and flourishing with God and others. Mission is the church that is in the world (not sent to the world – but exists within and always has existed within) from a God who is “other than” but become “one with” the world so that the world could know truth within a flourishing life; having been liberated from the world’s systems of oppressive power and pathological patterns that often enslave humans to pain and suffering. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God should be synonymous with the word *flourishing*. A Kingdom life is a life lived under the true King of the cosmos, and when life is lived under this true King of love, then all humans will flourish.

This will indeed necessitate a worldview recovery. Humans tend to become addicted to the ways of our culture around us – to its strategies and economics and interactions – but this addiction deeply harms us all. The church has often been satisfied with encouraging its people to transpose Jesus over the already existing cultural scaffolding of our lives in the hopes that it that will fix our problems (magic) but it often does not. Rather, if worldviews are not transformed, it only produces churches full of people who sing hymns of personal salvation while we serve the ways of Pharaoh. In Egypt, our imaginations are dulled, and our ability to hope is dimmed. This is why imagination is central to the process of forming a church and forming a people. As Stone argues,

Yet the church's story does nourish and legitimate a social imagination, a cluster of common assumptions about the way things are and the way things out to be. This social imagination, as Charles Taylor describes it, is an "ensemble of imaginings that enable our practices by making sense of them." It is embodied in a complex set of social habits, relationships, and patterns that habituate us (often unconsciously) into ways of living and acting that come to be understood as not only possible but natural and right. Among the important features of social imaginary are its distinctive ways of forming us into a "public" and its provision of a creative framework within which we construe space and time, our relation to others, our sense of common agency and our relation to power."<sup>26</sup>

The fundamental root of hope is the ability to see the world as it should be, which is the principle that the IAF bases all of its future work upon. When someone new arrives into an organization, like someone arriving in our church, they often bring with them the despair they have been given and the resignation that this is the ways the world works. But through the process of reforming the imagination to what is possible, the IAF begins to help people dream about what is possible. Yes, we see the way the world currently is as we begin to examine the dynamics of power and unveil the forces that hold individuals and communities in oppression. This is done slowly but intentionally. But why? Why is this the starting block of organizing communal flourishing? This is the starting point precisely because it begins to reform a worldview from that of "the way the world is" to "the way the world should be." It begins to transform minds and imaginations from individual success and accumulation to the worth of communal flourishing. As Stone argues, this too is the work of the church in that our imaginations,

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<sup>26</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 173.

and thus our relationship to others, is transformed so that we begin to believe in different outcomes, different goals, and a different telos.

This sort of worldview transformation and transplanting/reforming of a new imagination about how the future can be under the Lordship of Jesus also then puts Kingdom missiology into the realm of a social movement. As Hank Johnston argues,

I take the position in this book that social movements are characterized by big, change-oriented ideas that guide them and impart to them an overall unity. In what we might consider to be the grandest movements of all, namely, the great social revolutions of history, the goals are huge, aimed at changing the very social, political, and economic organization of society, and the ideologies are vast, proposing new ways of thinking about human relations and human nature.<sup>27</sup>

In the way that the Kingdom of God calls upon its followers to embrace new ways of thinking about human relations, human care, and is aimed at changing the fabric of social structures toward flourishing it also fits nicely into the idea of a social movement.

In this light, Kingdom missiology is a commitment to reforming the goal of one's life to the telos of human and communal flourishing. Because only in the shalom of Jesus' kingdom is the world "as it should be" where people can live liberated from oppression, free from debt, in social equality, and restored to communion with God and each other. To experience this sort of transformed focus one will inevitably need to experience what Nicodemus encountered, a truly "born again" "worldview transformation" sort of experience. This is the *telos* of the Kingdom and the necessary step that every church should engage in to bring transformation to its people, and transformation to the

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<sup>27</sup> Hank Johnston, *What is a Social Movement* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 12.

community. But this is only the first piece of the puzzle when considering what it truly means to be “missional.” This transformed *telos* is not complete nor fulfilled in simply seeing the world as it should be. The next principle which flows out of this Kingdom Missiology is where we will turn to next.

## **Chapter 4: Incarnational Ecclesiology: Building a Church with Relational Power**

For the telos of Kingdom missiology to take root and grow, it needs to be lived and habituated in one's life regularly. The dominant culture is a powerful force that drives behavior, and any movement to create change in an individual's culture requires a great deal of counter-force in the form of regular and intentional efforts. In forming the internal structure of an IAF organization, the organizers also face this dilemma which leads us into another key principle of organizing and thus, to the work of church planting and rejuvenation. A central principle that gives an IAF organization its structure, and thus its power, is found within its focus on bringing a diverse group of people together to build a broad-based coalition that consists of individuals from different backgrounds, experiences, cultures, ethnicities, religions, social-economics, and neighborhoods. This focus on building relationships across these boundaries is a central key that empowers IAF's most central value: building relational power.

Relational power is the power of a community or organization that has built intentional relationships with one another across boundaries that typically divide us to partner together in the work of community transformation. The purpose for those in any IAF organization is to discover what each person is passionate about and how we can work together, using everyone's gifts and talents, to create a dynamic and networked organization that community leaders pay attention to. When a large group of people, united by a common desire for communal flourishing, make a demand of its city leaders, the unified power of its voice is amplified by its diversity, resources, and

experiences. When people come together they acquire social power to affect change. What does IAF's focus on building a broad-based organization and understanding of power dynamics have to teach the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This is what we will explore in this chapter.

As we begin to discuss the church in detail, it may be necessary here to loosely define what we are talking about when we talk about church. In the current landscape of the American church many Christian expressions of community may be described as "church." While it is not in the scope of this work to argue for or against each expression that is labeled as "church", it is necessary to define what "church" is being referred to here. As a baseline, The United Methodist Church's Articles of Religion define church saying, "The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world."<sup>1</sup> The church may then be commonly understood as a group of individuals bringing parts of their individual lives into some sense of shared community that regularly share and celebrate the Eucharist, and live for and under the Lordship of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Willimon and Hauerwas give a fuller picture of what this

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 25.

sort of church may look like and approaches the understanding that is being proposed here, in their book, *Resident Aliens*. Referring to this as “the confessing church” they say,

The confessing church also calls people into conversion, but it depicts that conversion a long process of being baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative *polis*, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacing the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the visible church, a place clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, live their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, sufferer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.<sup>2</sup>

This line of thinking lends itself to the overall premise here of considering the Church more as a social movement more than an isolated “congregation.” An important addition to Willimon and Hauerwas is Van Gelder and Zscheile’s use of Martin Marty’s, “Public and Private” saying, “As Martin Marty observes, congregations today often function as “publics” within a larger public context – not as separate colonies in isolation, but rather as public gatherings of people whose activities often engage directly with the wider society.”<sup>3</sup> But even with that said, an element of internal structure and differentiation is essential to maintain for any church’s movement as creating an internal structure of the church, an ecclesiology that allows for both internal and external flourishing. While much of this literature focuses on discipleship processes stemming from the Apostle Paul’s writings to the early church – there may yet be a

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2014), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 144.



more fundamental, a more “root” element that can deepen the discussion of ecclesiology. While much of Paul’s writing teaches the church how to operate as the church, the forming principles and motivations are not always spelled out in Paul’s work. To better understand the “root” or “radical forming principles” of how the early church brought together a diverse community of individuals together to work in and for this new “polis”, it may be helpful to understand a key theme of Scripture and Jesus’ ministry within the Luke-Acts narrative. The Gospel of Luke is sometimes given the thematic slant of offering a preferential option for the poor, but could it be that the Luke-Acts narrative is simply offering the cohesive structural sphere that flows from Jesus’ Kingdom ideology that has distinct social and economic benefits for the poor and oppressed? Could it be that the Luke-Acts narrative both defines the central structure that Jesus is teaching and offers the fulfillment of this teaching in the birth of the church? If this is indeed the case, we need to come back to what has been alluded to previously, the Biblical view of “land.”

For many in modern America, land is not something we stop and think about having any relation to ecclesiology, but to those living in the era of Scripture, land was maybe the most defining theological and practical issue in their social life. In fact, two of the most prominent Old Testament scholars in America both agree that land is probably the most significant theme in the Old Testament. In Chapter One, I highlighted Walter Brueggemann’s view of the importance of land in Scripture that connected each Israelite to their faith and gave them their central identity and even makes the audacious claim

that “land might be a way of organizing biblical theology.”<sup>4</sup> Adding support to this notion in her book, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, Ellen Davis makes the bold assessment that, “...land possession is a central (arguably the central) issue of the Hebrew Scriptures...”<sup>5</sup>

The Biblical story opens with the creation of land in the book of Genesis, continues to the apex of the creation story declaring that humans were formed from the land, then these people of the land were given a land – Eden - which they promptly lost. Land, by no coincidence, is a central component of the creation account and continues to play a central role in the story of God’s unfolding salvation as the people of God enter into the Old Testament’s recurring cycle of the gift of land and the loss of land. From Abraham, to Joseph, to the Exodus, to the Prophets; God spoke to the people of Israel in terms of “giving them a land”, only for the people of Israel to lose their land through disobedience. Over and over, the people of Israel found themselves in exile (living away from one’s land) and praying for restoration to their land. This cycle is paramount, because to the people of Israel, as it is with many native populations, land equals identity. Dr. Brueggemann confirms this notion saying, “land continually moves back and forth between literal and symbolic intentions. A symbolic sense of the term affirms that land is never simply physical dirt but is always dirt weighted with social means derived from historical experience. A literal sense of the terms will protect us from

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2008), 101.

excessive spiritualism, so that we recognize that the yearning for land is always a serious historical enterprise concerned with historical power and belonging of land.”<sup>6</sup>

This understanding may give a deeper meaning to Jesus’ ministerial inaugurating proclamation in Luke 4:18, 19, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (NRSV) While this “year of the Lord’s favor” is most often interpreted as a spiritual release of debts by many modern commentators (and this would make great sense since most published religious commentators are people of varying privilege and may also have something to lose to interpret Jesus’ statements as a call to reinstitute Levitical Jubilee), Jesus is most likely speaking to the real, tangible idea of land restitution. One of the great commentators on the Gospel of Luke, Joel B. Green, seems to approach, but then retreat from, the idea of Jubilee first saying of Jesus’ radical ministry to the poor saying,

It is thus evident that Jesus’ mission is directed to the poor – defined not merely in subjective, spiritual or personal, economic terms, but in the holistic sense of those who are for any number of socio-economic reasons relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God’s people...The third major theological feature of Jesus’ missionary program grows out of a further construing “release” in the Lukan narrative – namely as “release from debts”. This draws our attention to Jubilee legislation (Leviticus 25) – the freeing of slaves, the cancellation of debts, the fallowing of the land, and the returning of all land to its original distribution under Moses.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, 211.

But then back peddling from the real and tangible implications of Jubilee, Dr. Green seems to lead the reader to understand that this jubilee is more of an end-time deliverance saying, “Other texts follow a similar interpretive maneuver, moving away from more literal applications of Jubilee legislation to the employment of jubiliary themes to signify the eschatological deliverance of God (with its profound social implications).<sup>8</sup> While this may make sense to the modern American white middle-income reader who has known little systematic oppression and even less about a connection to land as a historical element of identity, it would not have been the case with the poor in Jesus’ day.

To understand the electric impact of this proclamation of Jubilee, Richard Horsley gives us a picture of why this would resonate by illustrating the impact of Roman domination. He says, “the Romans consistently practiced scorched-earth policy: they burned villages and slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants and crucified any who resisted as a way of terrorizing the remaining populace into acquiescence to Roman domination...Economic and social recovery in such cases would have been difficult and slow...”<sup>9</sup> Horsley goes on to write about the economic implications of Roman’s conquests by describing the situation of the Jewish peasants by saying,

Under the impact of pressures from multiple layers of rulers, however, both families and the village communities began to disintegrate. Families unable to feed themselves after rendering up tithes and taxes fell into debt, often to the Herodian officials who controlled stores of food. With their debts spiraling out of control, the poor gradually lost control of their lands, presumably becoming

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<sup>8</sup> Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 82.

tenants of Herodian officers or of the king. Beginning in 6 CE Judean peasants, already exhausted by the demands for taxes to support Herod's ambitious programs, were required to render tribute to Caesar, again in addition to the tithes and offerings to the Temple..."<sup>10</sup>

The idea of Jubilee was not symbolic in the Old Testament – even if it was not ever practiced by Israel, it was surrounded by a host of other commandments about the nature and use of land. William Herzog highlights this saying,

If the land belonged to Yahweh alone, then it was his to apportion as he willed. Leviticus expresses this conviction quite clearly: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me, you are but aliens and tenants" (25:23). The principles of equity and justice guide the division of the land. Because land is a gift, the people must leave their gleanings for the sojourner and the poor...The same fundamental conviction underlines the practice of the sabbatical year, when the land was to lie fallow, debts were to be canceled and slaves to be freed. But, while the land may have lain fallow, debts were not cancelled, nor were the victims of debt servitude always released.<sup>11</sup>

To make matters more complex, the ruling class of scribal and temple leaders, in partnership with Herod and the Romans, used the Jerusalem Temple as a system of law and order as Herzog describes by saying,

The temple allied itself with an internal ruling class who collaborated with the Roman masters, producing an arrangement of convenience and necessity, since the Roman perfect controlled the high-priestly appointments. As the priestly elites curried favor with Rome in order to cement their own standing, they increasingly shifted the interest of the temple from serving the people of the land to exploiting them for the resources they needed to consolidate and maintain their position.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 89.

<sup>11</sup> William Herzog, *Jesus and the Justice of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 192.

<sup>12</sup> Herzog, *Jesus and the Justice of God*, 193.

The common people were living in a toxic swamp of debt and oppression that produced both economic and religious suffering and marginalization. So, while the modern reader may find hope in seeing Jesus' *spiritual* claims of Jubilee fulfillment, the poor of Jesus' day most likely would have not. Their hope would lay in a tangible salvation that literally saved them from the misery of their debt and restored their identity and social standing through land restoration and debt destruction. Taken from this historical perspective – Jesus' proclamation of Jubilee probably was a declaration of the renewal of Torah land provisions which would have had profound and salvific social implications for the poor. Maybe this is why the leaders desired to throw Jesus off a cliff shortly after he made this declaration.

Further, the seemingly profound popularity of Jesus' call to Torah regulations of land restoration and debt dissolution may have been enough on its own to create a social movement solidified around this radical call for debt release. This "idea and intention" is precisely what marks a social movement as described by Hank Johnston who says, "Ideas that envision new social arrangements, new possibilities, new policies, and new political alignments give social movements shape and motion."<sup>13</sup> Could it be that Jesus' message was not simply one of spiritual forgiveness but rather a real, tangible economic movement that would see the poor participating in a movement of economic equality and debt release? Absolutely. This literal interpretive connection may be easier to relegate if not for its thread of continuation into the Acts narrative. In fact,

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *What is a Social Movement*, 15.

as the church was birthed, filled with the Spirit, and gathered into community, their first act together was to sell land and give it to the poor. Acts 4:32-37 says,

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (NRSV)

Isn't it interesting that Acts is so keen to include the "selling of land" in light of this understanding of the significance of land in Scripture? It is not difficult to argue that here, in the birthing of the church – the extension of Jesus' mission and movement – we see the fulfillment of Jubilee. If religious leaders do not endorse Torah Jubilee, then the church will take it upon themselves to see this come to fruition, albeit in a smaller, more intimate way.

Further, the hallmark of Peter's announcement upon being filled with the Spirit in Acts 2:18-19 was that the poor and marginalized were welcomed into the movement and given a place of authority, and women and slaves had a role in leadership and teaching. The ideology of radical hospitality that Jesus started was continued by the church as boundaries were erased and equality was instilled. This ideology of Jubilee is fulfilled in the selling of land and sharing with those who were heavily in debt. This functioned as a way to give freedom to those who were living in social exile because of debt and welcomed them to fully live in this new movement as social equals. When

Johnston described the ideology of a social movement, he defines it as the values that, “specify a movement’s goals, what they aspire to. A simple definition would be that an ideology is a system of ideas that couples assertions and theories about the social life with values and norms relevant to goals that promote or revisit social change.”<sup>14</sup>

Liberation from the grinding wheels of oppression was a central theme in the early church and appears to be a founding value by which the earliest Christians organized themselves around. But how does this relate to the organizing principles of developing broad-based organizations through one-to-one meetings that help us live into a more vibrant incarnational ecclesiology?

With the rise of the Nicæan Creed in the fourth century, Christianity became tethered to a system of beliefs that created a complicated relationship between doctrine and practice. Maintaining a balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy balance has been difficult throughout the course of the Christian tradition. While orthodoxy is vitally important, faith transformation often takes place when faith is put into practice. This focus on practice is more in line with what the ancient Jewish rabbi’s view the law as a common phrase in Jewish teaching is: “*na’aseh v’nishma*,” or in other words, “We will do and we will hear/understand the law.”<sup>15</sup> This, in many ways, is the power of liturgy in worship – a putting into practice what we believe helps us to believe

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *What is a Social Movement*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> “Do First Understand Later,” My Jewish Learning, accessed Jan 4, 2018, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/do-first-understand-later/>.



what we believe.<sup>16</sup> This understanding of learning by doing was confirmed by a recent study published in *Psychological Science* that showed better test results from students who put classroom concepts into action.<sup>17</sup> While this confirms the common knowledge that actions are more formative than observation, it also leads to a very important element in our discussion on Jubilee. Jubilee is a set of practices (orthopraxy) within a historic and faith-rooted set of beliefs or social arrangements (orthodoxy). In terms of faith development, the practice of Jubilee confirms one's beliefs about the world and builds faith.

When a person holds an ideology of Jubilee, three main things happen:

1. A person sees their faith as an active partnership in liberation and equality.
2. They engage in relationships with people who are vastly different from themselves forming a web of relational connections.
3. They put their faith into practical action by allowing faith to speak to and direct their personal economics.

This creates a structure of practiced discipleship that creates diverse networks, empowers new participants, forms new engagements in the work of justice, and pushes the participant to allow their faith to inform their real-life economic decisions – all of which deepen their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and pushes the participants to see their faith as being part of a larger, change-oriented social movement.

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<sup>16</sup> This is the main point that James K.A. Smith is making in his book *Reimagining the Kingdom* referred to earlier.

<sup>17</sup> "Learning Doing Helps Students Perform Better," University of Chicago News, accessed Jan 5, 2018, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/learning-doing-helps-students-perform-better-science>.

The key element that ties social movements, Jubilee, the IAF, and the church together are now held together in an intentional focus on building broad-based networks through building intentional and diverse relationships. The IAF's understanding of how building broad-based relationships builds power is fundamental to our understanding of incarnational ecclesiology. Why? Because the key within any movement is the coming together of people across social boundaries. In the early church, when the poor and wealthy interacted within the same community under the Lordship of Jesus – the poor found liberation through Jubilee. Today, when those who are white and those who are not begin to build a relationship in the same community, when the “straight” community builds relationships with the LGBTQ community, when the wealthy interact with those that are not, we begin to see each other as human, attest to the worth of each individual, and begin to learn from and be affected by those from different backgrounds and experiences. But something further happens as well - we are saved by each other and our prejudices and biases are transformed; our privilege or lack thereof is mirrored in each other and essentially, we save each other from the Gehenna that we have created for ourselves. As Gustavo Gutierrez says,

Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind – gathered into *ecclesia* – which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open – in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of

humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society – to the gift of the Kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

It is precisely this *ecclesia* that is formed around the idea of liberation – the ideology of Jubilee – that creates new and deep relationships that exchange and build power. The church speaks a lot about developing relationships, but it is the *type* of relationships, with the *telos* of Jubilee, that holds the key to igniting Kingdom mission and building an incarnational worshipping community. Often times, many people focus on pursuing relationships with those people “like themselves” as this is easier and more comfortable, and we see that often churches focus on this sort of “relationships building” as well – creating affinity groups within the church. But affinity groups fail to build power because they focus on meeting the needs of the participants. While this may be a quick way to build a certain sort of community and connection (as people are naturally drawn to people like themselves), it often does not build power as it has no *telos* as such.

The ministry and mission of Jesus show us something radically different from an affinity group model (as we have shown in previous chapters) and pushes us to understand Kingdom relationships as building a network of diverse individuals that, in essence, offer liberation and forgiveness to one another. But we must be careful with this word “forgiveness” as Jesus’ mission was more than offering people forgiveness of their sins in a spiritual sense. While we use the word “sinner” today as a spiritual label,

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<sup>18</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 12.

the religious leaders in Jesus' day used it as a derogatory word that implied shaming a person over their poverty or sickness in order to keep them bound up to the only source that could offer "forgiveness" – the Temple. This created a cycle of religious shame and dependence that socially marginalized the sick and poor while at the same time made them dependent upon seeking forgiveness from that same source – the Temple. This helped to keep the power structures in place between the peasant "sinner" and the "righteous" religious leaders, who also happened to be wealthy for the most part. Herzog highlights this by saying, "When he declares God's forgiveness, Jesus proposes a strategy of bypassing the temple and establishing another means of access to the forgiving Patron through his own brokering."<sup>19</sup> Ched Myers elaborates on this further in reference to Jesus' healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 saying,

In choosing to introduce the language of debt code, Jesus is elaborating the symbolics of hierarchy. The man's lack of bodily wholeness would have been attributed to either his own sin, or, if a birth defect, inherited sin; he was thus denied full status in the body politic of Israel. Jesus summarily releases him from all debt – hence restoring his social wholeness and thus his personhood, which in turn is equated with the restoration of physical wholeness...the scribes are incensed, and for good reason. Their complaint that none but God can remit debt (2:7b) is not a defense of the sovereignty of Yahweh, but of their own social power. As Torah interpreters and co-stewards of the symbolic order, they control determinations of indebtedness.<sup>20</sup>

Healing, then, in Jesus' ministry was not seen as a "cure" for the physical ailment alone, but a restoration of the person back into the fellowship of the social religious order that was controlled by the religious elite. The shame of the term "sinner" and the

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<sup>19</sup> Herzog, *Jesus and the Justice of God*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 155.

social isolation that accompanied it were usurped by this social liberator. In his book, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias also highlights the great significance of Jesus “eating with sinners” in light of this liberation as well, saying,

For the oriental every table fellowship is a guarantee of peace, trust, or brotherhood...The oriental, to whom symbolic action means more than it does to us, would immediately understand the acceptance of the outcasts into table fellowship with Jesus as an offer of salvation to guilty sinners and as the assurance of forgiveness. Hence the objections of the Pharisees...who held that the pious could only have table fellowship with the righteous.<sup>21</sup>

In eating with and healing those who were sick, who were labeled as “sinners,” Jesus was offering forgiveness from economic and social debt and essentially restoring their religious-social identity. While this is not a “Jubilee” in full – it marks a significant step in the overall liberation – a step that the church in Acts would later fulfill. Michael Goheen leans further into this saying,

The life into which Jesus leads his followers is also defined by reconciliation and forgiveness. The words translated “forgiveness” here means much more than is often assumed. It derives from an imprisonment metaphor; forgiveness is liberation or release not only from the guilt and power of sin but also from alienation, hostility, exclusion, and injustice. To know forgiveness from God and to exercise forgiveness of one another will distinguish the people of God as a reconciled fellowship. Jesus also embodies peace and joy and invites his people to live lives of peace and joy. Peace (*shalom*) describes human life in creation as it was meant to be: a life of flourishing and prospering in which our relationships with God, with one another, and with the nonhuman creation are luxuriant, thriving, and wholesome.<sup>22</sup>

While this is prevalent in the early church, it seems that the modern church rarely, if ever, focuses on such real economic aspects of debt forgiveness; instead, it

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<sup>21</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 204.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 92.

focuses strictly on spiritual forgiveness. But what value is spiritual forgiveness if it is not connected to a real tangible social liberation? If the church is the foretaste of the Kingdom of God as evidenced in the early practices of Jubilee – what does this mean for the church today? How does the church of today participate in this mission of Jubilee?<sup>23</sup> This, most likely, begins in our understanding of not what the church *is*, but what the church *does*. Central to the liturgical acts of the church is Eucharist – the participation in the life and death of our Lord through the sharing of bread, which is also a deeply economic act. Using Yoder as a reference, Bryan Stone gives clarity to this understanding saying, “The breaking of bread around a common table creates a solidarity and a unity that may be organically extended to every area of life and that further reinforces the leveling of rank and status established in baptism. As Yoder says, “The Eucharist is an economic act. To do rightly the practice of breaking bread together is a matter of economic ethics.”<sup>24</sup> The Eucharist may be properly understood not only in a liturgical act of participation in Christ but also as the central and most formative act of egalitarian table-sharing that holds in it the power of spiritual forgiveness, social restoration, and economic sharing. In essence, the Eucharist should be a visible and tangible re-enactment of some sort of communal Jubilee. The Eucharist is a table where all who sit at it are becoming equals in a common life and common economics and thus, together, respond to the social isolation of poverty, respond to the division that our

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<sup>23</sup> Luke Bretherton’s discussion on debt and society in chapter 8 of his book, *Resurrecting Democracy*, and society may be helpful here for further discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Stone, 200.

society has around race and nationality, respond to the unjust social hierarchy of patriarchy, and respond to the ideological isolation of individualism and manifest destiny. The Eucharist is the full expression of an open hospitality and incarnational ecclesiology that is to be the hallmark of the church. As Hauerwas says,

Christians know no “barbarians,” but only strangers whom we hope to make our friends. We extend hospitality to God’s kingdom by inviting the stranger to share our story. Of course, we know that the stranger does not come to us as a cipher, but the stranger also has a story to tell us. Through the stranger’s reception of the story of Jesus, we too learn more fully to hear the story of God. Without the constant challenge of the stranger – who often, interesting enough, is but one side of ourselves – we are tempted to lose the power of Jesus story because we have so conventionalized it.<sup>25</sup>

This is a sort of hospitality that has, at its core, a generous view of God’s image in all people and thus invites all people into the table to become “one with us in ministry to all the world.”<sup>26</sup> Could it be possible that the central aspect of this sort of Eucharistic hospitality is listening to one another? William Stringfellow makes a case for such, saying,

You cannot listen to the word another is speaking and be preoccupied with your appearance or impressing the other, or if you are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or if you are debating about whether the word being spoken is true or relevant or agreeable. Such matters may have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered. Listening, in other words, is a primitive act of love, in which a person gives self to another’s word, making self-accessible the vulnerable to that word.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1983) 109.

<sup>26</sup> From the United Methodist Church communion liturgy.

<sup>27</sup> William Stringfellow, *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, ed. Bill Wylie Kellerman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 169.

Listening, then, is a sort of self-emptying to make room for the words and perspectives of the other person. It is coming alongside someone for the sake of their life – not for the sake of commodifying their experience for one’s own gain; it is truly about the position of opening oneself up for the desire for the flourishing of the other. This sort of deep listening and connection is a radical act in a world that cannot stop talking and is consumed with “being right.” It is a position that says, “being with” is more important than “being right.” This, as George Hunsberger puts it, may be best articulated as a “spirit of companionship.”<sup>28</sup>

This is why every IAF organization begins with a focus of one-on-one relational meetings as it creates a network of diverse people who are connected to one another, know each other’s stories, and begin to coordinate within each other’s passions and gifts. When people within an organization begin to meet and share their stories and listen to one another, this creates a sort of relational power. It shifts the perspective of an organization from trying to obtain a power that is “out there” somewhere and realigns the individuals within an organization to see that there is power that is right in front of us – the power that comes when people build relationships with those different from themselves. While there is a relational power that comes from those that are “like” one another, there is something significant when those from different backgrounds share their stories and lives together. This is the power built in the IAF.

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<sup>28</sup> George Hunsberger, “The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing,” *Missiology* 34, no 1 (January 2006): 15-18.



This too builds a common ideology and a common *telos* for the organization – which are both essential to our understanding of any social movement as Della Porta and Diani remind us saying,

Social movements are not merely the sum of protest events on certain issues, or even of specific campaigns. On the contrary, a social movement process is in place only when collective identities develop, which go beyond specific events and initiatives. Collective identity is strongly associated with recognition and the creation of connectedness. It brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause, which enables single activists and/or organizations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilization.<sup>29</sup>

The key in any social movement is making meaning of and defining the purpose for which each individual is working toward. Being a part of an organization or being a part of a church is not enough to create this sort of deep meaning and a common goal, more is needed. As Johnston says about social movements,

Obviously, the big marches and demonstrations that mobilize thousands are critical in defining the movement for its participants as well as for their audiences. But what the movement means to its participants is crucial for mobilizing these large protests, and small organizational meetings and coffee-shop gatherings where movement ideas are discussed, elaborated, and “performed” are locales where rationales and motivations for action are grounded...it is through these performances, big and small, that the movement’s structure and its ideations...it is where movement culture is created and confirmed.<sup>30</sup>

The key within any social movement, and within the IAF is not simply building relationships to know more people, rather, it is the act of building relationships for a

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<sup>29</sup> Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2006) 21.

<sup>30</sup> Johnston, 22-23.

specific purpose of communal flourishing. There is an ideology, a telos, behind the action of building relationships across a diverse network of individuals. As Johnston points out, “Whether general or specific, ideologies constitute the ideational-interpretative component of social organization that serves as the basis for shared goals, common discourse, interpersonal network-based contact, shared identity, and coordination.”<sup>31</sup> Within the IAF, the goal that drives participants to engage in the act of networking is community flourishing. That for the participants in the organization, as was noted in the previous chapter, there is a realization that the world is not as it should be, that certain individuals in the community are suffering, and that change can occur if we work together with a shared goal. Once that new imagination is ignited and fueled by a new language of relational power, the one-to-one relationship building serves as the backbone for bringing together diverse individuals for the specific goal of community flourishing.

An important caveat to make at this point, as the discussions between the church and the IAF may seem to conflate is that, as Volf says, “For the Christian faith and therefore also for Christian theology, the question about God, who in Christ has taken on human life and destiny in order to bring creation to its consummation as God’s home, is always and inescapably the question about truly flourishing life. To imagine flourishing life without God is to embrace false immanence.”<sup>32</sup> For the church, the

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<sup>31</sup> Johnston, 16

<sup>32</sup> Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 71.

Kingdom of God is distinct and necessary for full human flourishing because it has, at its core, God. So, the pursuit of the “beloved community” as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr would say, while similar, is distinct from the pursuit of common good by community organizations such as the IAF because, for the church, the only one that can transform all creation to flourishing is Jesus.

With precisely this “beloved community” in mind, Jesus organized a movement in which he brought a diverse group of people together, imparted them with a new imagination of possibility, and then cultivated them and others to engage with the suffering and marginalized to restore them into community. The argument being made here is that Jesus was not forming people around the ideology or telos of spiritual renewal, but rather that Jesus was forming a community with the imagination and networked telos of the restoration and flourishing (salvation) of all creation within the framework of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ purpose was to restore identity through both social and physical debt-release and incorporate those individuals into the new movement that was being formed, which pointed the new community toward the restorative possibility of a life lived in pursuit of Jubilee. This is continued in the Book of Acts where Jubilee, or at least an intentional reflection of Jubilee, was practiced through the selling of land and the distribution of goods to those in need. This Eucharistic practice was far from strictly spiritual renewal but went to the heart of empire economics that continually solidified the structures of poverty. The telos of Jesus’ Jubilee found fulfillment in the practices of the early church that embraced a network of

diverse individuals and invited them into the movement as participants who have been liberated from their debt and given their social identity back. This sort of relational power is developed as people gather into this sort of “confessing church” that listens deeply to one another, welcomes each other as equals to the table of Christ, puts into practice the faith of economic sharing, and seeks justice for the strangers who have become friends for which we share the common meal of Eucharist together.

This telos of Jubilee, put into practice, transforms relationships and social dynamics; it builds power as it builds networks of new opportunities for the poor and marginalized, restores identity in the forgiveness and economic forgiveness of debts, offers systems of empowerment within the structures of equality, and deepens everyone’s faith as the lived practice of Jubilee movements connects us in an ever-deepening ways to surrender and embrace God and our neighbor and to be saved from the isolation and idolatry of the self. This Jubilee *telos* ignites an incarnational ecclesiology that builds community and thus builds relational power as the community is focused, in unity, on using its relationship capital and networks for the common good and flourishing of one another and “affect change” for the flourishing of those who are also at the table. The final piece and principle that we now turn to is the examination of how this power of incarnational ecclesiology can be turned into action in the world to bring flourishing to our neighbors and community.

## Chapter 5: Public Action and Political Theology: Seeking the Flourishing of the Community

One of the difficulties of reading the Gospels in our modern world is the rise of the desire to read from the point of spiritual nourishment and inspiration. When one reads the Bible solely from a “devotional” perspective, unaware of the cultural dynamics at play in the time the text was written, we can sometimes dull the Bible down to Twitter-like inspirational posts that we put on our refrigerator to encourage us through our days. This removes the reader from the broad narrative of the text and the overarching theme of both the Gospels and the whole of the New Testament: liberation. This sort of isolated reading causes readers to sometimes wonder why Jesus was ever crucified in the first place. Was it because he loved people so much? Or because he spoke the truth of God’s word? This perspective can sometimes lead to the development of a “love ethic” that frames Jesus as the nicest person to ever live who loved people more than anyone ever has. Steve Long, quoting Hauerwas in his book, *Augustinian and Ecclesial Ethics*, challenges this sort of thinking saying, “If we prove that the Romans dragged Jesus to the cross kicking and screaming, crying out ‘But all I want is for everyone to love one another,’ then Christianity is false.” No one gets crucified for telling people to love each other.”<sup>1</sup> This is a provocative idea that the modern American church constantly needs to be reminded of. Why would Jesus be crucified if he simply was trying to preach a message of love? Rather, the Romans reserved crucifixion for

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<sup>1</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Augustinian and Ecclesial Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 27.

those deemed as political revolutionaries or other “enemies of the state.” This understanding puts Jesus squarely in the role of an activist of sorts who launched a social revolution that disrupted economic exploitation, eliminated religious oppression, restored divine communion, and established God’s Kingdom of justice. This sort of subversive activity that threatened the status-quo of the empire is what brought Jesus into conflict with the powers of Rome and ultimately led to his execution. But how does this understanding of Jesus affect how we do church planting and how the church engages in our final principle: public action.

Failing to consider the social situation that Jesus actually lived in separates his life and teachings from his death and resurrection. This sort of reading has not benefited the modern church nor the modern Christian as it transforms Jesus into a strictly spiritual figure coming to renew Israel spiritually and washes him from all things political. It is indeed this “political” piece that so many struggle with within the church, somehow believing that the church should have no voice or call into the political struggles of our age and should keep itself within the boundaries of “saving lost souls.” But a soul always has a body, and a body always lives within a society, and society is always political. As John Howard Yoder points out, “The Christian community, like any community held together by a commitment to important values is a political reality. That is, the church has the character of a *polis*, namely, a structured social body. It has its ways of making decisions, defining membership, and carrying out common tasks.

That makes the Christian community a political entity in the simplest meaning of the term.”<sup>2</sup>

In an era of non-stop Presidential campaigns, 24-hour news coverage, and “continuing coverage” of every political tweet, comparing the church to a political organization may seem strange. But at its core, the church is a *polis* (the Greek word from which we get the adjective political)<sup>3</sup> in that it is a group of people coming together for a specific purpose, organized around central goals, and working in society to see those goals enacted in some limited way. So, to say that the church is “not political” is an inaccurate statement. What people may *mean* to say is that the church should not be *partisan* or taking a position that solely aligns itself with a political party, however the church should be engaged in society in such a way that seeks to bring some sort of public common good. After all, the whole reason for the establishment of a city-state, that has a governing political rule, is for the material distribution and protection of the common good. Laws are enacted for protection of its citizens. As Aristotle says in his opening lines of *Politics*, “Since we see that every city-state is a sort of community and that every community is established for the sake of some good it is clear that every community aims at some good, and the community which has the most authority of all and includes all the others aims highest, that is, at the good with the most authority. This is what is called the city-state or political community.”<sup>4</sup> The church, then, could be

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<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), viii.

<sup>3</sup> Yoder, *Body Politics*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*. I.1.1252a1–7.

seen as a sort of *polis* within a city-state (society) that also seeks to do good within people's individual lives and the society as a whole. But saying that the church is a *polis* is only half of the equation. To understand the church's full political identity, the church can be better described as sort of a hybrid *oikos-polis*. In his book, *The Ways of Judgment*, Oliver O'Donovan draws on the unique communal attributes of both the public political (*polis*) side of society and the private household (*oikos*) side of society saying,

It is commonly enough said that the ancient world separate *polis* and *oikos*, city and household, the sphere of the public and the sphere of the private. As a generalization it will serve, and we may accept it without underwriting everything that has been made of it. It is commonly enough said, too, that Christianity allowed the two spheres to mingle in a single type of community that married the political authority of the city with the mutual affection of the household...It is not the domestic alone or the political alone that displays the kingdom of God socially, but the conjunction of the public and the private.<sup>5</sup>

This relationship between public and private life, between the political and the familial, keeps the church in balance with itself and governs the way the church shares its own resources both to the world around it and to those within its self. The New Testament offers this balance in the way it refers to Christians as both brothers/sister and citizens. This balance is important because each role comes with the responsibility of how and with whom the church shares. This understanding of a sort of *oikos-polis* balances the need for the church to share and seek the common good for the

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 268-269.



community around it as citizens and to share and seek the common good for those for whom we now call brothers and sister.

Under this understanding, the church always retains a *political* and public nature. However, thinking of the ministry of Jesus and the early church as a political movement can seem like a stretch for many modern Christians as we may be more comfortable with the *oikos* side of the church. But when the life of Jesus is viewed more in line with a social movement, his political engagement begins to rise to the surface, and his ministry begins to make more sense.

While Jesus was operating squarely within Judaism, his efforts of religious renewal brought him into repeated critique of the institutional and hierarchical religious system that was operating in Jerusalem. This conflict climaxed at Jesus' most controversial moment - his confrontation with the Temple in the scene when he turned over the money changing tables. While this may seem like a strictly spiritual act, when one examines it deeper, it takes on a deeper context of critique and public action against an economically oppressive system that was sheltered in the walls of the religious heart of Judaism. This was no accident, as Mark 11:11 shows us that Jesus seemingly "scoped out" the situation the night before to make a maximum impact saying, "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve." Jesus had just engaged in a dramatic scene of political theater announcing his arrival into Jerusalem to the shouts of "Hosanna!" and then came face-to-face with the object of his

repeated criticism, the Jerusalem Temple. Read casually, this combination of events may go unconnected, but seen within the whole of Jesus' movement, it takes on a defined element of political action. Ched Myers points this out saying,

Then Jesus calls for an end to the entire cultic system – symbolized by his “overturning” of the stations used by these two groups [merchants and religious leaders]. They represented the concrete mechanism of oppression within a political economy that doubly exploited the poor and unclean. Not only were they considered second-class citizens, but the cult obligated them to make reparation, through sacrifices, for their inferior status – from which the marketers profited. Jesus' action here is fully consistent with his first direct action campaign to discredit the socio-symbolic apparatus that discriminated against the “weak” and the “sinners.”<sup>6</sup>

If looking at Jesus' life as a movement that was calling for the end of oppressive forces, a renewal of the politics of Yahweh, and an incorporation of Jubilee – this move, that came at the end of Jesus' life, is a direct public action against the injustices that were destroying people's lives. In his book, *The Politics of Jesus*, Obery M. Hendricks, Jr sums this view of Jesus' public political action saying,

The truth is that the harsh social, economic, and political factors of Jesus' life as a colonial subject of the Roman Empire helped to shape the holistic spirituality that undergirded his earthly message and ministry. In this sense, the ministry of Jesus paralleled God's self-revelation in the Exodus event: both God and Jesus intervened in history in response to the cry for liberation of the oppressed people of Israel. And like the God of the Exodus, Jesus not only responded to a particular system of political tyranny, he also asserted the justice of God as the basis for struggling to vanquish degrading social practices and oppressive political structures for all time to come. His repeated emphasis on the “kingdom of God,” that is, the sole rulership of the God of justice; his unrelenting focus on freedom and liberation, on the right of all to have abundance in every sphere of inner and outer life; and his ever present concern for the poor and unprotected

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<sup>6</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 301.

together constitute a platform for liberation that far exceeds in its scope even the most ambitious secular political agenda.<sup>7</sup>

While some will choose not to entertain the thought of Jesus being engaged in any sort of political campaign or social movement it is clear that Jesus was speaking to social situations that were far beyond just the “spiritual” and “religious.” The modern American culture of church often “declaws” Jesus’ words and actions in an effort to keep Jesus safe for consumption in order to appeal to the largest amount of people possible. Does this do the church credit? By washing out the social critiques that Jesus offered to his own culture, we are eliminating Jesus’ critiques to our own culture and thus removing the socially prophetic elements of Jesus in favor of a strictly spiritual love guru.<sup>8</sup> Why is this important for our conversation? Because inherent in Jesus’ action against the Temple and Jesus’ critique of socially and religiously oppressive policies of the leaders of Israel is *conflict*, something few among us enjoy or embrace. With any conversation of a social movement, public action, political engagement, or forming a people of power, there will come conflict because change does not usually happen on its own. Change is brought to be because there is some conflict forced onto the system. Community organizers understand this at their very core. As Alinsky says, “Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in a frictionless vacuum of a

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<sup>7</sup> Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. *The Politics of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 95.

<sup>8</sup> One shining example of how we have done this with Jesus is a nearly hyperbole but sadly true and can be found in the “Slave Bible” in the Bible Museum in Washington, DC. In this Bible, used by missionaries in the 1800s 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament is redacted to remove anything the slaves could read and believe that God is in favor of their liberation. “Slave Bible,” NPR, last updated Dec 9, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-incite-rebellion>.

nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without the abrasive friction of conflict.”<sup>9</sup>

Conflict is not often good for the business of the church because people do not normally go to church to fight a battle, but rather to receive comfort. As Tim Conder and Dan Rhodes point out in their work, *Organizing Church*, “Sadly, church mission often avoids initiatives that have such a sharp and provocative edge. Duke Sociologist Mark Chaves, in his research on American congregations, confirms that most churches’ social missions tend toward noncontroversial projects, such as disaster relief, soup kitchens, and the development of human necessities, rather than substantive social change.”<sup>10</sup> The question in this becomes then, why is conflict necessary to help a church engage missionally?

Earlier, in our discussion of building an organization, we pressed the need to connect a group of diverse people coming together from varied socio-economic systems. When this diverse group of people, some socially affluent and some socially marginalized, come to the Eucharist table of fellowship, the Christian love that binds them together should inspire collective action of the whole “table” to listen and work towards social change that will create the ground for which flourishing can bloom. While it’s important to help someone in a time of need, these sorts of mission programs that only work in conflict-free zones of charity do not change the conditions that created

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<sup>9</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Conder and Dan Rhodes, *Organizing Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2017), 95.

poverty or isolation. Only by bringing diverse people together and working together in mutual reciprocity for the purposes of Jubilee can this change happen. Jubilee is, Biblically speaking, difficult for those who have accumulated a great deal of land, resources, and power - as Jubilee demands that those with the accumulated resources give freely to those that have lost it. When resources and power are accumulated and then protected, change can so often only occur through the conflict of public action where demands are made. Conder and Rhodes point out the importance of this willingness to engage in conflict as a key, however counter-intuitive it may seem, to revitalizing churches from the inside out saying,

“We think such a practice, to which we have returned in part through our involvement in organizing, would be reinvigorating and revolutionary. Embracing it and learning to embrace conflict, we can develop active congregations no longer stuck in maintenance mode or help captive by the limited agenda of one person. The intimacy that comes from relentlessly and graciously addressing conflict allows us to engage deeper in and embody more fully the reconciling, dynamic mission of God’s kingdom on this earth.”<sup>11</sup>

Engagement in public action, some of which may result in public conflict, opens a new side of engagement that brings people together to help one another. Serving together in what is traditionally called “charity” can also have this effect, but since charity is offered in a singular direction from the giver to the receiver, it fails to create a sense of mutuality and shared leadership as it keeps in place, or even solidifies, the social structures of power and economics that were present before the action. As Bob

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<sup>11</sup> Conder and Rhodes, *Organizing Church*, 97.

Lupton says in his book, *Toxic Charity*, “Giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people.”<sup>12</sup>

The key to developing this sort of shared leadership to build power within an organization is “eucharist relationships” that seek to establish equality. This intentional pursuit of equality requires an action that comes into conflict with the structures that sustain hierarchy and division. When Jesus fed the 5,000, he engaged in a public action that was re-casting the Exodus event. In the face of Roman imperial policies that created scarcity and fear Jesus was implying a liberation and sequential action of God’s provision of the abundance of manna. This public action meant to inspire his followers toward a sense of God’s abundance and push against policies that kept people hungry while simultaneously re-casting the purpose of 4,000 men from armed rebellion to subversive sharing.

While public action can take place in a variety of ways, Jesus’ actions were always tethered to non-violence and full of compassion for all, even toward those perceived as his opponents. While this can be a very tricky balance to hold for churches, the challenges that public action will bring far outweigh the callousness of avoiding issues that are decimating our neighbors’ lives. Actions such as showing up at city hall when key decisions are being made that impact the lives of the friends in our congregation, protesting or marching for causes that impact the lives of the friends in our congregation, organizing letter-writing campaigns to our politicians, art displays in

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<sup>12</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 4.

the front of our church buildings that highlight the plight of our suffering neighbors, gumming up zoning meetings for developers who are unjustly gentrifying neighborhoods, staging public protests around issues that are discriminating the vulnerable in the community - are all ways to engage in public action, but the ways are limitless. The key component that the IAF and other community organizers understand is that every action is built around getting a reaction. If leaders do not react, then they are not listening, and nothing will change. Actions do not need to be organized around shaming or violence, but should be organized in such a way that it is clear to everyone that the people who have made demands have enough social power (that have been built through diverse networks) to affect change. While there is a certain myth around the American Civil Rights Movement that the events that led to victory were simply coincidental in nature, that is not true. Though many of the events that evolved in the Civil Rights movement were nonviolent, they were certainly not unplanned. For example, Rosa Parks was certainly not a random African-American that just randomly ended up on that certain bus who decided to sit in the front of the bus on that particular day. She was trained and strategically hand-selected to get a reaction from the bus driver, the law enforcement officials, and the white community.<sup>13</sup> As Edward Chambers says,

The exercise of democracy requires a space where citizens can appear publicly, not as individuals acting on single interests, but representing collectives that do

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this see Paul Schmitz's article, "How Change Happens: The Real Story of Mrs Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott." [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-change-happens-the-re\\_b\\_6237544](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-change-happens-the-re_b_6237544). Jan 28, 2015.

politics. This space for exercising politicalness is what a broad-based organization creates. Staying in the public dialectic of action/reaction over time with those who have serious political and economic clout requires organized people. People seek justice, and they may seek it right now, but their wiser political selves recognize that the truth of Weber's classic description of politics as "a long, slow boring of hard boards." The work of justice is the world of people organized for the long haul.<sup>14</sup>

Actions, too, are formative. Every Sunday in our routine liturgies of worship, we see that the habits of liturgical actions have the power to form us into a different sort of people over time. The action of the Eucharist forms us into a different sort of people with a different view of the world and ourselves. The action of intentionally being in relationship with other people form how we see the world and each other. Outward public action has the same formative effect on a group of people to solidify our beliefs and renew our minds. As the ancient rabbis have said, "We do the law in order to understand the law."<sup>15</sup> When we engage in "action" together, it takes on a profound and formative liturgical quality that forms a community of solidarity and pushes us towards a vibrant public theology. In his book *Awaiting the King*, James K.A. Smith speaks deeply to this idea and brings us back to the idea of *telos* saying,

The political is less a space and more a way of life; the political is less a realm and more of a project. When we reduce the political through this twofold spatialization and rationalization, what is lost and forgotten is an appreciation for the way the polis is a formative community of solidarity and the fact that political participation requires and assumes just such formation – a citizenry with habits and practices for living in common and toward a certain end, oriented toward a *telos*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Chambers, 83.

<sup>15</sup> "Do First Understand Later," My Jewish Learning, accessed Feb 6, 2018, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/do-first-understand-later/>.

<sup>16</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 9.



What is this telos that we are oriented towards? Smith again leads us towards the formative nature of public action that forms us as an ecclesial body saying,

The practices of the body of Christ inculcate in us a social imaginary, orienting us to a *telos* that is nothing less than the kingdom of God...The church is not a soul-rescue depot that leaves us to muddle through the regrettable earthly burden of “politics” in the meantime; the church is a politic that invites us to imagine how politics could be otherwise. And we are sent from worship to be Christ’s image-bearers to and from our neighbors, which includes the ongoing creaturely stewardship and responsibility to order the social world in ways that are conducive to flourishing but particularly attentive to the vulnerable – the widows, orphans, and strangers in our midst. The regeneration and sanctifying power of the Spirit also nourishes a *political* will that engenders solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

Public action gives legs to the practice of Eucharist and forms a community of solidarity that seeks to invest deeply in each other’s lives. Action removes distance and places people who are different near to one another. As Smith says, “A liturgical political theology is a missional political theology.”<sup>18</sup> Political theology, or a theology of public action to bring flourishing to our neighbors, forms a community of social power because it brings together an economically and culturally diverse group of people that is so profound and unusual to the world, the media takes note and leaders are surprised. This ability to act together, on behalf of one another, with a telos for human flourishing forms potential energy that is released as power in the public sphere. This community is not formed around affinity or socio-economic similarities, but looks like what Martin Luther King, Jr calls “the beloved community.” This is a community that puts relational

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 151.

care and communal love into action with a telos of flourishing; a community with the ability, capacity, and willingness to act alongside their neighbors and friends is truly what Hauerwas and Willimon refer to as the “confessing church.”

Robert Linthicum says that the three indicators of shalom “occur in the economic, political, and social/spiritual systems of a community,”<sup>19</sup> and so the church, operating with a desire for shalom must also operate in those three sectors. This leads a church to engage *with* its community, seeking to fulfill the “iron rule” of community organizing. And in doing so, it becomes part of the community and incarnates itself in the everyday struggles of the people in their community. Sometimes churches offer programs that the community around them has little to no need for and so, seeking shalom for those within and around the church creates a church that is *with* the community; not *for* or *a part of*, but *with*. As Linthicum says,

When a church seeks to ministry with its community, it seeks to incarnate itself in that community. That church becomes flesh of the peoples’ flesh and bone of the peoples’ bone. It enters into the life of that community and becomes partners with the community in addressing that community’s needs. That means the church allows the people of the community to instruct it as it identifies with the people. It respects those people and perceives them as being people of great wisdom and potential. Such a church joins with the people in dealing with the issues that the people have identified as their own.<sup>20</sup>

This is a far cry from the *modus operandi* of many American churches who believe that “we have the answer” to the problems of the community and that in “offering salvation” to people we can fix their lives. The approach of building

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<sup>19</sup> Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 279.

relationships in order to build a community of power with the telos of flourishing takes the position that the church is coming to be *with* the people, to incarnate itself in the needs of the people – not assuming it has the answers but rather believing that the Spirit moves as we listen and trust one another and that the purpose of the church is not to “save the lost” but to come alongside the community. In this work, the Spirit liberates us all from our division, oppression, and fear and moves us all to *shalom* together. This answers the common question a community asks of when a new church opens its doors, “why do we need another church, aren’t there enough already?” This gives a purpose to the church beyond “growth,” a mission that is tangible and announces to the community through word and deed that the church is for the community, not simply benefitting from the people in the community that may come to church.

While this sort of political action can be difficult to navigate, it draws people in, pushes people to the forefront of the struggle for justice, and builds an organization. As Alinsky says, “change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together. Power is the reason for being of organization. When people agree on certain religious ideas and want the power to propagate their faith, they organize and call it a church. When people agree on certain political ideas and want the power to put them into practice, they organize and call it a political party. Power and organization are one and the same.”<sup>21</sup> This sort of change does also not exclusively

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<sup>21</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 113.

act over and against the structures of society but can be seen in social innovations that derive from churches and community organizations. Many of the community-based institutions we have today such as hospitals and schools were formed by groups of Christians using their organizational power to bring good to the community without a form of action that moves against.

Public action builds people of power that can affect needed change in their community. It propels a church forward with a mission beyond “bingo night” and places the desperation of people’s lives at the center of its mission and vision. This brings the Gospels to life, moves Jesus from the Hallmark inspirational religious action figure back into the gritty political revolutionary he was. This missiological imagination calls a people together who are compelled to see themselves organized for the social movement of the Kingdom of God’s flourishing for all people everywhere. This is the sort of church that can be a force for good in the world, a church that is a compelling witness to the justice and mercy of God precisely because it is the continuation of a Kingdom missiology and an incarnational ecclesiology. These three elements, working in a sort of dance, can form churches that are truly missional in nature that seek the flourishing of their community. But why is this sort of understanding of a missional church important for church planting and church rejuvenation? This is the question we will turn to in our final chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Organizing the Church Plant that Empowers Personal and Institutional Agency for the Flourishing of Communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

As we move to a conclusion of this work, we are once again pressed with the central question of this work: Why is this conversation about community organizing important for church planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Further, can understanding the work of Jesus as a social movement help to reframe the mission of the church? The answers all lie in the effect that the answers to these questions have in forming and reforming the church's life to a *telos* of flourishing. This work began by quoting Miroslav Volf and his work that reframes theology toward flourishing, saying, "The flourishing of human beings and all God's creatures in the presence of God is God's foremost concern for creation and should therefore be the central purpose of theology."<sup>1</sup> In the same way, mission, as expressed through church planting, has lost its way in some sense. This work has attempted to help churches remember the needed centrality of human flourishing as an organizing *telos* of their Kingdom work. Churches are being started at a staggering pace in America; many new churches are driven by denominations trying to reverse their decline in membership, megachurches create new campuses to decrease drive time of its members, churches expanding their brand, or charismatic leaders wanting their own space to lead and preach. While these may be justifiable reasons that produce numeric growth, are they fundamentally Christian reasons?

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<sup>1</sup> Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 11.

The argument that this work has tried to put forth is that no – these are not fundamentally “Christian” reasons to start new churches, but rather often reflect personal and institutional self-interest, driven by a desire for numerical growth or denominational sustainability. While a desire to reach more people for Christ, create more disciples, and expand the Kingdom of God may be more fundamentally Christian reasons – even these reasons lack a central *telos* that will fuel a church plant to be missional. For example, if a church’s *telos* is growth, then their discipleship will naturally be centered on the growth of the individual and the growth of the church – so, discipleship with a skewed *telos* will result in skewed discipleship that then reproduces itself.

Just as Volf articulated a need to recapture the central essence of Christian theology as a vision toward human flourishing, so does church planting, missional engagement, and for that matter – all ecclesiology. Evangelism and discipleship are not a *telos* but rather a means to empower and instill a *telos*. The *telos*, as this work has attempted to argue, for church planting and church rejuvenation is a desire to cultivate human flourishing, shalom, and Jubilee for its members and the community that the church exists within. As Van Gelder and Zscheile remind us, “New missional congregations keep at the forefront of their minds and hearts the question of how they can give the gospel as well as their gifts to the community. They resist the tendency to make their own institutional stability and survival the primary end. Rather, they

recognize that their primary end – indeed, the very reason for their existence – is participation in the Triune God’s mission in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

While this work has not proposed a certain method or offered tools to cultivate thriving church plants, hopefully it opens up a discussion that will lead to further reflection and dialogue about what church is, what it means to be missional, how a church captures and extends its central identity, and pushes church planting to understand that the Triune God’s mission in the world is a soteriology that is ushering in creational shalom. Church in America is a cultural experience that many do because they have done, but as the culture shifts underneath our religious feet, it may be time to open ourselves up to a broader discussion about what Jesus was doing and how that may affect our view of the church today. The narrative thread that has woven this work together is the general idea that Jesus did not simply come to die for humanity’s sin, or to heal the sick, or to establish a religion of sorts (even though he, of course, did those things), but his true work was announcing and forming a new Kingdom that takes shape in a community that embodies Jubilee. This “community” here, as has been argued, meets, what we believe to be, is the very definition of a social movement governed by a goal to bring sweeping change in how communities and people within society relate to one another.

What does the work of historical and contemporary social movements help Christians to remember? Social movements help us understand the scope and sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 162.

change and movement, and when we join a church, we are not joining something that is focused on our own satisfaction or well-being, but we are becoming part of something that will make changes in communities, society, and in the world. While the case cannot be fully argued that Jesus was creating a social movement or that Christianity fits completely into the category of a social movement, the hope is that the evidence presented here will, at least, lead to further discussion about the church as social movement, and may even possibly help the church to lean into this possibility.

This, creating new churches with a *telos* of flourishing and joining the movement of Jesus to bring flourishing to humanity, is what gives Christianity and individual churches their “bite” and reason for existence. It is, as Jonathan Pennington says, the purpose of the Biblical witness: “The biblical and Christian understanding of flourishing, however, is not just a means for the individual to experience the good news but is a universe-sized mission to spread God’s *shalom* (flourishing) or peace throughout his creation.”<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez lays out a beautiful and holistic view of Christ’s *shalom* that gives a picture what this sort of human flourishing looks like in a church saying,

In Christ the all-comprehensiveness of the liberating process reaches its fullest sense. A Latin American text on the missions seems to us to summarize this assertion accurately: “All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history, the movement towards the creation of a more just and fraternal world, the overcoming of social inequalities among persons, the efforts to liberate humankind from all that depersonalizes it – physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger – as well as the awareness of human dignity – all of these originate, are transformed, and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ. In him

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 297.



and through him salvation is present at the heart of human history, and there is no human act, in the last instance, is not defined in terms of it.”<sup>4</sup>

While this *shalom/flourishing/Jubilee* may lie at the center of Jesus’ mission and movement and may be the desire of our church plants, the problem lies in how to translate these theological thoughts into practice. Realistically, many church leaders (both clergy and laity alike) are not trained in this sort of practice, which may be the reason that many churches settle for community-focused activities which they label as “missional” rather than organizing a community with a *telos* of flourishing throughout. This missiological task is difficult and the reason why we have identified the principles of community organizing as holding such a key to church planting. Community organizing, especially seen through the IAF, strives to cultivate communal human flourishing and train leaders to create member organizations that cultivate human flourishing. This puts the emphasis of agency onto the participants in the organization and away from the leaders of the organization. This solidifies the argument we started with, as Bretherton has pointed out, how community organizing forms identities and communities saying,

As a form of political action, Broad-based Community Organizing (BBCO) is focused on practices and learned sequences. Mastery is transmitted in and through practice, without necessarily requiring a high level of conscious verbalization or rational deliberation – despite plenty of words being used in the formulation and outworking of the practice. Rather than cognitive recognition and verbal articulation, what is important in community organizing is the sequence of things and the skillful deployment and performance of a repertoire of actions and practices in order to provoke the desired reaction: one-to-ones, caucusing, assemblies, power analysis, evaluations, and inventive forms of contention are the ingredients of a successful sequence. As a sequence of practices, community organizing constitutes a public or common work...Crafting

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<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 104-105.

a good sequence enables the identification and training of leaders, the building of relational power, and the reweaving of civil society.<sup>5</sup>

Through cultivating public imagination for the common good, empowering broad-based relationship building, and facilitating public action with and for those who are suffering – this offers a beautiful glimpse, a modern parable of sorts, for how the church can (and should) function in the world. It offers a model for how the church can be when the church is at its best. Community organizing brings these three elements together, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Translating these three key elements to the idea of church planting and church rejuvenation, the argument here is that these three elements are exactly what makes a church “missional,” reforms its *telos*, and cultivates Biblical flourishing.

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<sup>5</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 174-75.

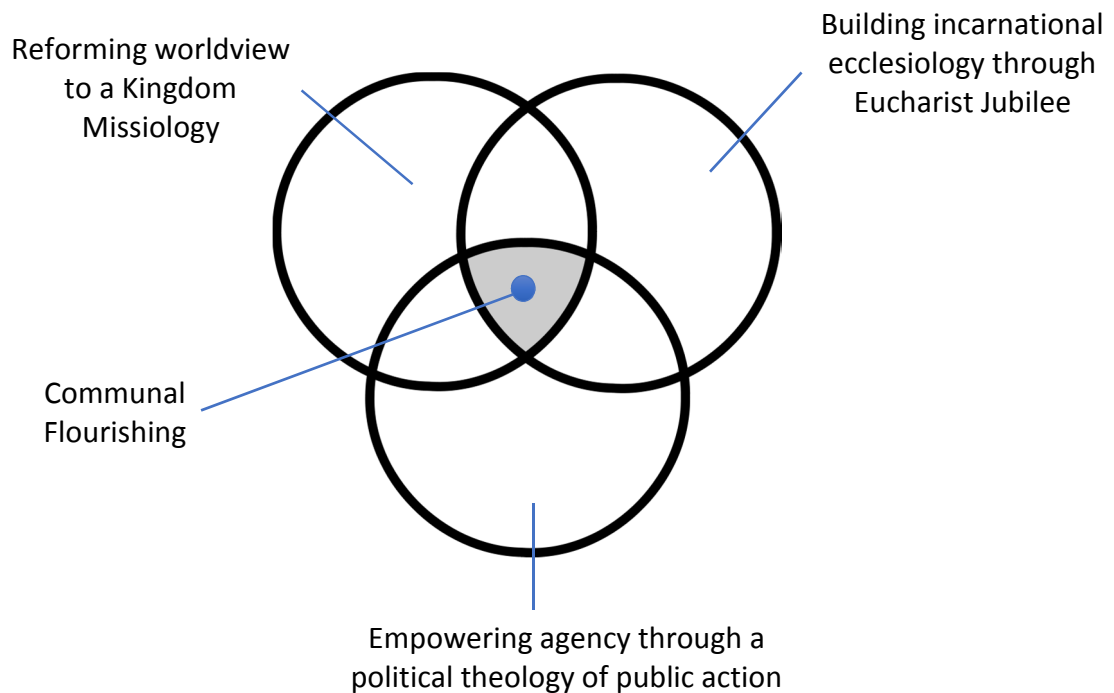


Figure 3 - Venn Diagram Illustrating Church Planting Organizational Elements

These three elements, just as they do in community organizing, forms a cycle or re-habitation that creates agency of both the individuals and the community. As Kingdom imaginations are formed and reformed, they lead to new friendships of equality formed around the table of the Eucharist which, in turn, lead to action on behalf of those friends in the public square. These relationships then lead back to new ways of understanding the Kingdom and having our worldviews reformed and so on. On the contribution of community organizing to reorienting worldviews and forming faith communities, Luke Bretherton said, “Community organizing is seen as having something

to contribute to the cultural and organizational change required to reorient professionals beyond, on the one hand, the pursuit of money, status, and power, and on the other hand, the reduction of their work to compliance with managerially and economically determined targets and performance indicators.”<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, these elements, working together, form a sort of catechism of Christian agency that can have tremendous, transformational effects on the individual, the church, and the surrounding community. Speaking to the early church’s catechumenate process in his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Alan Kreider speaks to the importance of practices in the formative life of the new believer saying, “During the catechumenate the candidates learned about the Christian faith by verbal teaching and, perhaps more importantly, by doing things. Actions that involve the body activate kinesthetic learning; they build up bodily habits and form reflexes that express the community’s values.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, practices were the heart of the Christian life as, “the church’s growth was the produce, not of the Christians’ persuasive powers, but of their convincing lifestyle.”<sup>8</sup> The ancient church focused new converts around action more than belief. While belief was important to initiate the newcomer into a fuller understanding of the way of Jesus – as it helped give birth to a new way of seeing the world in light of Jesus’ Kingdom, action was key. This is important for us because it confirms that the IAF has tapped into a formative process that molds new participants

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<sup>6</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) 154.

<sup>8</sup> Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 155.

into a certain way of seeing the world and creates agency in them, just like the early church. This agency was not just a type of “serving” in the church, but rather a lifestyle centered upon and rooted deeply within seeing oneself as part of a community changing the world for good, for *shalom*. Precisely, because this is the sort of movement that Jesus inaugurated and what the church is called to continue. The key for new church planting and continued church rejuvenation efforts are laid out here in these three fundamental principles: creating a truly missional telos that ignites Kingdom imagination, facilitating Jubilee relationships around the Eucharist table of equality, and empowering political theology through public action. The three principles come together to form a habitus and catechism that create agency in the individual and Christian community for the purpose of the flourishing of humanity in the name of Jesus.

While this work does not set out to give “how to” instructions for this sort of church planting and church renewal work, tangible suggestions that help to frame the direction to which it points may be helpful at this point. Granted, each community is vastly different and will require deep listening and networking to engage in the work of flourishing, so the work of contextualization is central to the task of church planting. David Fitch’s book, *Faithful Presence*, is helpful in this discussion as his work centers around the idea of moving the idea of “the church” from a building to wherever the people of God dwell. He says,

Throughout the Bible the Kingdom of God is located wherever a people come together and submit to his rule over their lives. God calls a group of his people

subjects together, and in this space he rules. His kingdom and his presence go together. In the church God will uniquely dwell and make his presence known in Christ. With his presence always comes the justice, reconciliation, renewal, and healing of his new reign. This is faithful presence. It is the way God works. This is how God will change the world. This is the mission of God.<sup>9</sup>

Fitch goes on to lay out seven distinct practices that help shape a church, and specifically new churches, for mission. He describes them each as:

1. The Discipline of the Lord's Table: practicing the power of the Eucharist
2. The Discipline of Reconciliation: practicing the power of forgiving and being forgiven
3. The Discipline of Proclaiming the Gospel: practicing the power of proclaiming in both words and deeds the power of Jesus' upside-down good news
4. The Discipline of Being with the "Least of These": practicing the power of building friendships and kinship with those on the margins of society
5. The Discipline of Being with Children: practicing the power of engaging with and supporting children in the community
6. The Discipline of the Fivefold Gifting: practicing the power of recognizing and empowering the Spirit giftings of those in the church community
7. The Discipline of Kingdom Prayer: the power of praying and being formed by the prayer that God's work of renewal and flourishing would come<sup>10</sup>

Seven practices of our own extend from Fitch's disciplines and are centered around the three categories offered in this work; they are outlined below:

**Reforming Worldview to a Kingdom Missiology:**

- Allowing a focus on communal flourishing to be centered in all language, values, beliefs, and habits.
- Decentering "whiteness" and making an intentional effort to learn from non-white community leaders and theologians.
- Moving from "sending" language (being sent into the world to save the world) to "hospitable" language (being empowered to attend to and receive those that are in need of rest).
- Embracing counter-cultural patience in the work of discipleship and community renewal.
- Connect salvation to the liberation of those who are socially marginalized.

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<sup>9</sup> David Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> David Fitch, *Faithful Presence*.

- Focus on language and practices that deconstruct dominant social hierarchy.
- Incorporating all of the above into liturgy, discipleship practices, external communication, and the branding of the church to the community.

**Building Incarnational Ecclesiology through Eucharist Jubilee:**

- Organizing lots of diverse dinner parties in diverse settings that always have an element of listening to one another, forgiving one another, and being forgiven by one another.
- Encouraging and facilitating 1 on 1 meetings with people both within the congregation and those outside of the congregation.
- Teaching and preaching on racial and economic oppression, Kingdom based business practices, Kingdom based buying habits, and facilitating reconciliation.
- Inviting community, non-profit leaders and social activist leaders to speak to the church about their work and how the church can partner to bring good to the community.
- Encourage people to financially invest in projects that bring flourishing in the community, setting up funds to relieve medical debt, financially supporting foster care families in the church, financially supporting families hosting immigrant sojourners, etc.
- Encourage people to relocate parts of their lives (work, home, free time) to live with and among under-resourced communities.
- Extending all of the above to also organize the surrounding community to do these with the church.

**Empowering Agency through Political Theology and Public Action:**

- Joining a local community organizing group such as IAF, Gamaliel, Congregations for Social Justice, Council of Churches, etc.
- Meet with local city officials to hear, from their perspective, how the church can bring good to the local community.
- Gather small groups and participate in marches and rallies for justice and then debrief about people's experiences.
- Organize groups in the church to write letters to city, state, and national elected leaders to encourage them to support specific legislation that brings flourishing and justice to communities.
- Organize groups, both within the church and in the community, to show up to city council meetings that discuss local issues of justice that impact the poor and marginalized in the community such as affordable housing, immigration support, minimum wage increases, school funding for under-resourced communities, etc., and advocate for change.
- Teach and preach about the political nature of the Gospels and the importance of engaging in a non-partisan nature on behalf of those at our Eucharist table.

- After listening and building community relationships, participate in missional long-term development projects that seek to bring dignity and long-term justice to those hurting in the community.

While this list is certainly not exhaustive, and takes a great deal of contextualization, the hope is that it can further a conversation about what it means to put this work into practice. It is vital to note that these suggestions are not short-term solutions. This work is not suggesting, in any way, that churches should grow rapidly. Rather, this process of planting, renewal, and habituation takes time and intentional effort that Kreider beautifully describes as an “unhurried formation of believers who unlearn the reflexes of the world and are formed in the habitus of followers of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> What is central in this work is the connection that is made between this sort of reformation and the formation of politicalness. This sort of catechetical process forms politicalness which, in turn, forms power. Chambers, who was quoted earlier, pushes our understanding of power. It may be helpful here to revisit Chambers’ words as they may take on a fuller meaning as we close this work,

Politicalness is a capacity. Developing our politicalness requires that we know and value what it means to have power, and that means developing the head, the heart, and the gut. Exercising politicalness demands that we participate in something larger than our individual projects, and that means give-and-take, compromise, and mutual respect. Being political entails responsibility. Our politicalness is our God-given ability to respond to our world as it is by joining with others to take a stand for the whole.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 277.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 70.



Churches are cautious of power, and rightfully so, as power can often lead to corruption and a disfiguring of the Gospel. But the sort of power that is advocated here is not a power that should be centralized in a charismatic person or leader of a community, but rather a power that is dispersed within the very fabric of a community itself to be used for the benefit and good of those who are being abused and overlooked. This beckons back to Fitch's disciple of listening to, recognizing, and empowering the fivefold giftings in the community of the church. The power that is spoken of here is the power to act on behalf of the marginalized, not power to create more power for oneself or one's organization. So, in essence, this is a power that is built to be exhausted, then rebuilt. That is why this work has advocated a very specific sort of power found in forming diverse relationships. Chambers once again helps our understanding of this sort of power, saying,

In this fuller understanding, "power" is a verb meaning to "give and take," "to be reciprocal," "to be influenced as well to influence." To be affected by another in relationship is as true sign of power as the capacity to affect others. Relational power is infinite and unifying, not limited and divisive. It's additive and multiplicative, not subtractive and divisive. As you become more powerful, so do those in relationship with you. As they become more powerful, so do you. This is power understood as relational, as power with, not over.<sup>13</sup>

This is the sort of power that is a rising tide that raises all ships. This is a sort of power that a community can give to those that have previously had no power. This is the agency of power that transforms communities and gives purpose to the world longing to activate its most central gift: the capacity to love.

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<sup>13</sup> Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 28.

Could this sort of focusing on networking to build a community of Jubilee be a key to growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Many of the tangible gestures laid out here directly lead people to network and connect with the surrounding community in a way that does not only elevate the relationship, but it helps those in the relationship bear witness to the Kingdom of God that is evidenced in the partnerships that emerge from those relationships. Highlighting this in his monumental book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark lays out two key factors why the early church became a force in the Roman world. First, he lays out the importance of social networking in the growth of any social movement but specifically why the early church grew at a rate of 40% per decade saying,

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semi closed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, Stark lays out the selfless ideology of serving and seeking the flourishing of the community around them, highlighted by a letter written by Dionysius around the height of the second great epidemic in 260 AD, saying,

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected

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<sup>14</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1996), 20.

by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.<sup>15</sup>

This heavily contrasted to the non-Christian response as he continues, “The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.”<sup>16</sup>

This combination of focusing on the expansion of social networks and serving others, even at the expense of their own well-being, certainly supports the arguments made here of the importance of building diverse broad-based networks and then focusing on the flourishing of those new friends as being a means to cultivate telos and create agency within a community. Here too, growth did not come through focusing on discipleship alone, but growth came through reforming worldviews, networking, and the action of Jubilee which focused a community on the flourishing of others rather than itself. Thus, strangely enough, the goal of a new church plant or any existing church cannot be discipleship for discipleship sake. We cannot make “more and better disciples” without fully understanding the “why” of discipleship. Discipleship is not the “end” or the “means to the end” for it is like happiness, which is a byproduct of many other factors working together. Rather, discipleship thrives when it is rooted from and flows out of a community that is focusing on bearing witness to the flourishing of jubilee

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<sup>15</sup> Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 83.

and surrendering one's everyday life to God's Kingdom. This focus on the flourishing of those outside of the community guards against the consumeristic nature that drives self-enhancement through "better faith" – which will almost always warp an organization or church in on itself and close itself off from building new networks and creating new pathways to exercise its power for the benefit of others.

While the principles outlined here are not exhaustive, the hope is that this way of seeing the purpose of the church – as a member organization of a larger social movement, motivated by the goal of flourishing, can serve as a tool for discussion for all churches wishing to expand and multiply. Americans are currently so deeply isolated and divided from one another and the church is shrinking. While cultural techniques of business and marketing may "work," they often instill values that focus on entertainment, life-enhancement, social status, prestige, accumulation of social power, quick fixes, and the survival of the fittest instead of creating agency for the presence of the Kingdom into the world. The Kingdom's presence, rather, moves through our own rehabilitated presence. It moves out into the world as our imaginations are renewed toward the possibility of hope and we build new kinship with those that challenge our status and force us to re-evaluate our dedication to shalom. As we move into the community, with this presence, as those who wish to be *a part of* the community we have an opportunity for action that put our faith on full display as we stand with our new friends in public places and creatively cry for justice.

The task of church planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a task of growth. Rather, as this work has attempted to highlight, our task is to be a Kingdom presence of Jubilee that stands with and among those that are suffering under the weight of the social injustice of empire with a hospitable welcome and call for their flourishing that is evidenced in our contagious agency to organize the Kingdom. As David Fitch closes his work, he resonates with this sort of activity saying, “We have no choice, therefore, but to become political organizers for the kingdom. As Christendom wanes and the old ways of attraction fail to bring in new church members, and our resources for doing good in the world dissipate, we have no choice but to lead our communities into being present to Christ in all circles of life. We have no choice but to practice his kingdom as an entire way of life.”<sup>17</sup> This is the sort of church planting, motivated by the life-giving focus on flourishing, that has a chance to join in the social movement of Jesus to change lives and revitalize communities and hopefully can empower the church to reframe its mission and *telos* to a concern that is not just ours. Living in this may lead us to practice the sort of public and household life that, as Volf says, pushes our concern, “not just to lead life well ourselves. Instead, we will strive for life to go well for our neighbors and for them to lead their lives well, and we will acknowledge that their flourishing is deeply tied to our own flourishing”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> David Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 183.

<sup>18</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 71.

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## Biography

Jason currently serves as the Senior Pastor of Open Table United Methodist Church in Raleigh, NC where he lives with his wife and three children. Open Table is a hybrid church plant/church restart that launched in 2018 under Jason's leadership. Previously, Jason served as the Lead and Founding Pastor of Transformation City Church in Milwaukee, WI. He is the founder and former board president of *Inhabit: Live Into Community* and *Exploit No More*, whose mission is to provide residential aftercare for underage victims of human trafficking in Milwaukee. In Milwaukee, he served in leadership with a local IAF affiliate called, "Common Ground," and a local Gamliel affiliate called, "MICAH." He is a graduate of Campbell University, Asbury Seminary, and will graduate with a Dmin in May 2019 from Duke Divinity. He is also the author of *Dangerous Presence: Following Jesus Into the City*. You can follow his writings at [www.theprogressivepastor.com](http://www.theprogressivepastor.com).