

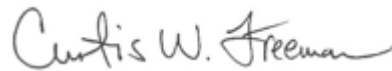
Repairing Community

By

Carol W. Francis

Date: 2021

Approved:



Curtis W. Freeman, Supervisor



Dr. Will Willimon, D.Min. Director

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

2021

ABSTRACT

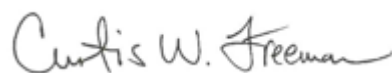
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The subject of this thesis is identifying and repairing areas of broken relationships within church leadership community. Church leaders hold in tension the notion of serving while not being served. Leaders serve the church, offering spiritual nurture and care of the congregation, while enduring the effects of broken fellowship among their colleagues. The church's vision of leaders serving together without consideration of their emotional and spiritual needs, miss a crucial element in maintaining the well-being of the leadership community. Healthy communities give personal attention to its members, they have real conversations in the hard places, and they remain connected to their group to work through their conflicts. This thesis brings forward the argument that congregational leaders can move from a picture of fragmented interrelationships to genuine Christian unity by introducing lessons that raise their awareness of the value and gift of community. The lessons designed focus on drawing people together by honoring our differences, as we locate our sameness within our shared Christian identity. As a result of committing to the real work of repairing relationships, and dismantling the disingenuous, we find a more authentic spiritual life in community.

Dedication

In memory of my mother, Lucy Wilson, who dedicated her life to serving her community, as she raised me to love and serve as well.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	8
Chapter One: Framing Community	19
Chapter Two: A Message from Paul: A Model for Unity	47
Chapter Three: Confronting the Pain	65
Chapter Four: Roadmap for Repair	82
Conclusion	115
Bibliography	120
Biography	123

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Introduction

One of my greatest joys is volunteering as a children's story time reader. My groups oftentimes consist of typical four and five-year old preschoolers, full of energy and unending *what ifs* and *why nots*. I enjoy watching them hurry in and excitedly grab a book and bellyflop on the floor. The little ones don't sit in chairs, really, so the carpet is decorated in fun colors and patterns to invite them to sprawl for a while and immerse themselves in their picture books. This situation and all cases discussed in this thesis are composite types are not based on any particular group, person or community.

During one visit, I decided to surprise the children with something new to fuel their interest. I'd selected a book for us to read together. It was the art of Spanish painter, Pablo Picasso. As I expected, the children were fascinated with the artist's work. They pointed inquisitively at the oddly shaped faces of the paintings from Picasso's Cubism age. I was amazed how they devoured the little book and insisted on seeing books with other "funny faces" (their description of the art). A quick online search produced numerous results of the artist's famous masterpieces. One painting, however, caused my little inquisitors to fall silent. The boys and girls stared at Picasso's 1938 piece, *La Fille de L'Artiste a Deux Ans et Demi Avec un Bateau*.¹ The painting depicts his daughter, Maya, aged two, holding a toy boat. The children stared at the picture, and altogether their voices broke the silence with a question. "What does *that* mean?" I understood their

¹ Picasso, *La Fille de L'Artiste a Deux Ans et Demi Avec Un Bateau*, 1938, accessed January 12, 2021, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/pablo-picasso-la-fille-de-lartiste-a-deux-ans-et-demi-avec-un-bateau-1938>.

puzzlement, as the painting was true to the artist's style of misplaced features and distorted faces. It left a lot for a curious little mind to comprehend. I explained the picture and read the title to the children. Without hesitation, they began to laugh and replied, "that's ugly!" I was not surprised at their response, but I was amazed by the actions of some of the children. They leaped to their feet and darted for their backpacks, retrieving their crayons, and drawing books. When I asked them what they were doing they replied, "we're drawing pictures of people together, and we're going to draw them pretty together!"

Later, as I thought about the children's innocent, yet brutally honest responses, I considered how they didn't try to understand the complexities of the artist's intention. They weren't concerned with how the pattern of asymmetric angles accentuated the unique features of the subject. They are kids. They like juice boxes and stickers. They simply dismissed my explanation of the work and chose to draw their own picture; one that made sense to them. I was struck by the similarity of the children's response to that of disillusioned church leaders. Rather than acknowledging the complexities and potential messiness that occur when developing community, leaders choose to ignore the necessary work of building unity and "draw their own picture" of how relationships should exist amongst themselves. Here, the matter of disunity is exposed.

Further, an inverse correlation can be drawn between one's impression of Cubism and the perspective of disconnected leadership. At first look, Cubism may be interpreted as fragmented, misaligned pieces. The images appear off scale and unbalanced. Yet, an appreciation of the technique allows the art to be understood as communicating a

message that integrates the many pieces into a complete image. In contrast, Christine Pohl draws attention to the paradoxical view of relational dynamics expressed in community, whereby spiritual, idealized terms are used to describe church associations. But, when focusing on communities, one begins to detect the undercurrents of disunifying behavior. According to Pohl, “when we focus on actual congregations and communities, we often notice the failures – the betrayals, the hypocrisy, the grumbling, the closed doors.”² Leaders may view the results of failed fellowship as unsalvageable and leave the church. They may, however, choose to remain and concede--serving together in ministry, while ignoring their group frailties that don’t allow them to well serve each other.

The challenge in remaining without changing is that complacency may seep into the soul and create dryness and toxicity that impacts the servant’s physical, emotional, and spiritual being. Moreover, working together in such an environment translates into ministry teams that cannot fully embrace the unifying power of the Spirit that is available to them. So how does the church repair the fragmented inter-workings of ministry teams? The approach must move leaders from promoting an unrealistic view of how they relate to each other to a picture of people endeavoring to grow together, actualizing authentic community.

My reading time with those inquisitive little children inspired the basis for this thesis. I reflected on how faithful servanthood itself holds in tension the notion of serving

² Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012), 7.

while not being served. Leaders serve the church, offering spiritual nurture and care of the congregation, while enduring the effects of broken fellowship among their colleagues. The costly carelessness results in burnout, isolation, a lack of trust and disrespect. It is demonstrating congregational care and koinonia while dismissing the need to develop a spiritual community among themselves.

There is a need for church leadership to transition from an idealized vision of community life, where serving the church together merely appears fine, to an authentic servanthood model where members show support, have real conversations about the hard places, and work through their conflicts. The aim of this thesis is to bring forward the argument that congregational leaders can move from a picture of fragmented interrelationships to unified relationship by introducing lessons to raise their awareness of the value and gift of community. The activities are designed to build trust and draw members together by honoring their differences, while setting their sameness within their shared identity in Christ.

The value of each member's individual contribution of gifts and unique abilities play an important role in building unified leadership teams. If assessments are administered during new member's orientation, it may speed up ministry engagement. The results are used to guide members through a discovery of spiritual gifts and strengths. The process aids churches in placing members in ministry roles. It demonstrates how the diverse giftings work together in equipping the church for service, aligning people with ministries, and strengthening commitment to the church. Should not congregational leaders be provided the same opportunity of self-discovery? What

valuable insights about group dynamics, understanding others, and team cohesiveness can be mined from the rich responses of church leaders? What are the implications of requiring such assessments to better understand each other as well as themselves, and the unique giftings each leader offers to the overall success of the ministerial team? Can church work culture be transformed by introducing comprehensive training strategies that promote cooperation and group care? Will those who implore congregations to offer their true selves and whole heart to God, be willing to bring the same self-offering to their colleagues? My response is a provisional yes. A primary ingredient in producing an open and self-offering atmosphere is transparency in leadership.

Serving with transparency is risky but learning how to be in community together will not succeed without it. The church culture that fosters transparency will encourage closeness and create space for expressing emotions. Maggie Ferrell expounds on the value of transparency noting, “transparency contributes to the welfare of employees—both in the workplace as well as in their personal lives.” She further argues, “leaders who incorporate transparency within their organizations or departments communicate trust.”³ So, where’s the risk in that? My years of serving in numerous church leadership roles have demonstrated that the fear of judgement of others is far too heavy a burden from which people want to serve. Consequently, we silently hold on to our opinions of others while we limit the sharing of ourselves as an act of self-preservation. Henri Nouwen laid bare the requirement for loving others in the act of giving oneself up for the other:

³ Maggie Farrell, “Transparency,” *Journal of Library Administration* 56, no. 4 (May 18, 2016): 444–52, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2016.1157426>.

[I]n order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.⁴

The challenge for congregational leaders and hence, the goal of this paper, is to consider practices both sacred and secular that support a construct of bridging broken unity through lessons in how to grow together as a leadership community. The members collaborate, problem solve, and pursue the journey of mending together. The community becomes a place of receptivity, accessibility, and accountability. As a result of committing to the real work of repairing relationships (dismantling the disingenuous) and embracing what Parker Palmer describes as the gathered life of the spiritual community, we find a stabilizing underpinning for true ministry connectedness. Palmer notes that this spiritual community is a discipline of mutual encouragement and mutual testing where one can remain hopeful and honest about the pursuing of seeking and sharing love.⁵ It is the community that is nurtured with honest, personal exchanges and watered with lessons that demonstrate love in action that bear fruitful relationships. The bands of love are strengthened and commitments to each other are deepened as churches commit to pouring developmental time into showing their leaders how to care for each other, as well as articulating their personal need to receive care.

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), chap. 4.

⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, 1st HarperCollins pbk, ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 18.

This is not to suggest that leaders are incapable of working together, nor to assume that servant leaders are in any way disinterested in knowing how to serve the church and be better together. However, I submit that leaders have not been given the opportunity to learn how to be with each other in community because the value of being together has been underestimated. Crabb's work in exploring the formation of spiritual communities argues, "the idea of spiritual community is far more powerful than we've assumed." He further elucidates the importance of building community noting, "it is a much-needed discussion because good conversations among spiritual friends and with a spiritual director are uncommon in our church communities."⁶ His approach to becoming a spiritual community requires people to face each other and share their hearts. I have witnessed the despair of leaders wishing for a safe place to talk about their struggles with their life, loss, and faith. Numerous conversations begin apologetically with a type of confession, telling me how they felt the need to talk, unload, and for some, simply be present with them in the space. The same can be said of a ministry team meeting I attended that was rushed to adjournment due to a lack of group engagement, a colleague whispered to me as he whisked out the door, "what's the point of these sessions? I have church work to get done." These encounters caused me to consider the necessity of redrawing the picture of community for church leaders by inviting them into learning experiences that guide them to turn toward each other and connect. The need for learning is echoed in the results of a Barna research study that conducted a poll to see how pastors

⁶ Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community: A Profound Vision of What the Church Can Be* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 2007), 10.

rank some of the issues facing the Church today. The results reflected that one in four U.S. pastors (23%) selected “lack of leadership training and development” as a major concern facing their church today.⁷ Yet, this is not a work that can be done through pedagogy alone. The repairing of community is not possible without the unifying power of the Spirit of God to heal and transform.

I will argue how it is this collaborative work of education and seeking God that transforms disjointed servant leaders into a people gathered and serving in unity. I will bring forward a strategy of training leaders how to become community together is by invoking the spiritual and communal dimensions of education noted by Palmer, who explains that students are taught how to serve in community by being brought into community with teachers and with each other.⁸ Leaders taught the value of spending time together, expressing support for one another, and bearing one another’s burdens, will become more receptive, open, and trusting. Those who are called to serve in community must be safe in community.

Chapter one will discuss the significance of community being a gift from God given through Christ. The chapter will consider the question of why sharing the gift can be a dangerous undertaking. The answer to the question will lead to examining the tension between holding the community as a gift and the risk of receiving the gift as it comes in the form of broken people and processes.

⁷ Barna Research Group and Pepperdine University, *The State of Pastors: How Today’s Faith Leaders Are Navigating Life and Leadership in an Age of Complexity*, 2017, accessed January 11, 2021, <https://barna.gloo.us/reports/the-state-of-pastorsare>.

⁸ Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, xxii.

The reasons and motives that drive disunity will be explored, as I look at the disruptive effects broken fellowship has on leaders. The paradox of leadership described by Barton suggests that “oftentimes a leader’s soul is not strengthened in the community of those she or he is leading.”⁹ The effects of not connecting in a place of mutual care can be experienced as emotional suffering that shows up in the life of the leader as disruptions to the rhythm of community. They assume various faces, such as loneliness and isolation. I will give attention to these disruptors by considering the work of theologians, organizational leaders, and national research studies, that give authoritative voice to the cause, effects, and consequences of leading under the heaviness of debilitating emotions.

Chapter two introduces a model for unity through the lens of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I will focus my discussion on his admonishment of endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace outlined in chapter four of Ephesians.¹⁰ Paul recognized the importance of building unity within the church at Ephesus by fostering an environment of oneness. He called them into intentionality in how they respond to each other in humility, gentleness, and patience. Yet, has the messaging gotten lost in translation in doing church together, today? I will walk through Paul’s instructions to the church at Ephesus to consider how his message provides guidelines for relational order

⁹ R. Ruth Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, Expanded edition (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 170.

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:3 (NKJV).

for today's church community that creates space for the Spirit to bring the church together.

Chapter three deals with confronting the pain of disunity. I will share reflections on relationship stories told to me by congregational leaders. The exchanges discussed are not based on specific people. Moreover, any reference to church and ministry roles are not based on any particular community. The people and places are all a composite of experiences I have held through the years as with those who came to my office and plopped in a chair to breathe. I find it important to include these stories to draw attention to the reality that leaders need care in community right now, while they are preparing sermons, conducting Bible study, and leading ministries. It reminds me that acknowledging stress and giving one's frustration a name, is a significant component of the healing process. The conversations were honest and at times, raw, but from the heart.

Chapter four lays out the roadmap for repair. The solution for repair, I suggest, is providing church leaders with the tools to approach relationships of the church with fresh perspective. The idea is to allow people to model the gift offering of community in a learning environment. Dallas Willard conceives that we must train as well as try when seeking to bring about transformation.¹¹ Journeying together, they will participate in learning opportunities (training) as they interface with their community to implement (trying) new skills.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Sydney: HarperCollins e-Book, 2009), Chapter 7, Kindle.

I will introduce training tools that feature storytelling and retreat as experiential learning, with the objective of strengthening relational connections of church leaders. Both tools are designed to address a different method of being in community and to bring awareness to the need for continued communal learning. The curriculum is entitled, Drawing Lessons, referring to the memorable encounter with the little reading group that triggered the idea. Lessons included in this chapter outline a plan of the scope of each tool, describing the features and objectives of activities. The case study I offer as a component of the learning tools is completely fictitious. The people and setting highlighted are not real. The study is created solely for training purposes.

The conclusion shares what I learned through this process of repairing community. I will highlight notable experiences in the learning sessions that support my argument of training and trying, as well as evaluate the encounters that challenged my position. Unexpected turns occurred during my interface with some leaders. I will analyze those encounters and discuss what I learned about my own broken pieces in those teachable moments. I will culminate the work with my theological reflections and recommendations on implementing learning communally to repair community for its ability to move leaders toward oneness and a greater care of self and of others.

Chapter One

Framing Community

Chapter one focuses on framing the contrasting views of community. Defining it may be as diverse as the people who gather in them. The strong church-based unit in which I was raised offered me a montage of community using words like commonality, one accord, and faith-filled. As experience informs understanding, I realize that leaders in the same congregation may use terms defining community that make it unrecognizable to me. Ruth Haley Barton explains, “one mistake we often make in a leadership setting is making too many assumptions about how we all approach community and what it means to each of us.”¹ Barton implies, that if every member of community shares the same views and values, then unrealistic expectations are set for each other. A difference of opinion is not evidence that there aren’t standards for serving in community. The experiences of interrelatedness provide a roadmap for how members are to live with each other in community. As we understand each other, our life together is interpreted through God’s love for us. Yet, as the principles of God’s word are consistent and unchangeable, the people living out of God’s word, may. Conflict arises when there is a contrasting view of how to be together, and the strength of relationship is put to the test. It is in that space of differing perspective that I argue the duality of our gathered life. The treasure of

¹ Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, 176.

the spiritual community can also be experienced as treacherous. I will examine the way in which the life-giving breath of community takes on the contrary winds of disunity through church leaders who misinterpret the gift and the effects of disunity that disrupt it.

Community as Gift

The finest demonstration of leadership in community I witnessed was modeled by the community where I grew up. Everything I understood about Christian fellowship, hospitality, and church demeanor came because of being raised in what felt like one of the churchiest regions of the country. Sanctioning nepotism as a preferred method for ecclesial appointments, parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles all served the church in some capacity. Between collective bands of relatives and neighbors across the town, every church role was covered. They were the pastors, ministry leaders, conference delegates, and even bossy church administrators. In retrospect, entire families brought their lives into the spiritual community and took on being the church. They were not elected to leadership, as much as they were born into a line of church leaders.

As a result of a family's super saturation in church work, the children were frequently carted off to steering committee meetings, executive board sessions and the like. These gatherings were not held at the church. Leaders took turns hosting the meetings in their homes. Although the children were young, they understood that the time spent away from home in church meetings was important. These budding future leaders watched as the gathering of decision makers devoted time for prayers and songs; creating space for God's Spirit to direct their proceedings and guide their discussions. The hosting

leader prepared a meal that would rival any grand Sunday dinner. They met, worked through the pressing business, and always concluded with a time set aside for group concerns. It was a sacred moment where men and women would report victories or confess burdens. I recall the times of my youth when I, too, quietly observed the adults modeling what it meant to be the compassionate church. The image of members laying hands on a kneeling colleague is etched in my mind. But more so, in my heart.

Larry Crabb's perspective of the spiritual community underscores my understanding of community; he states, "when members of a spiritual community reach a sacred place of vulnerability and authenticity, something is released. Something good begins to happen. An appetite for holy things is stirred."² Asking people to journey together toward God is inviting them to experience oneness in the Spirit. Opening up to each other takes courage and a holy expectation that their efforts to connect will not be in vain. Our linked faith anticipates the Spirit to saturate the atmosphere. Our meeting places are transformed into holy spaces charged with the possibilities of healing, refreshing, and miracles. The more time we share with one another in the presence of the Spirit, the more we hunger for the Spirit. Sadly, it is challenging work to expect people to abide together in a way that may be unusual for them. Society has taught us how to function apart from our feelings by restraining emotions. Entreating members to emotionally open themselves up to each other is risky. Do we dare tell our story? Will we be judged by the wounds revealed? Being real in community is a process requiring full

² Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community: A Profound Vision of What the Church Can Be*, 22.

awareness and commitment to the calling of unity in the Spirit. Members unwilling to abide honestly with each other, carefully receiving one another through God's grace, will eventually find themselves starved of the collective power to move forward the vision of the church. Filling a community's hunger for the Spirit requires, as Crabb suggests, the pressing together of deep emotion and openness to each other. This becomes a sacred work that produces a purity of intention and a wholehearted truth for living in concert with others. This was the good I witnessed; the church caring for its own. It was community in action. I recognized church leadership receiving community as a gift from God, and as an outpouring of God's love. These are the terms that defined community for me.

People enter community embracing the gift it provides of fellowship and support for one another. The spiritual community offers members a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves as they join in service to the church. We live in community at the invitation of Christ who calls for a commitment to love Him and our neighbor as ourselves. Challenges arise as we seek to serve from the first instruction and not the second. Christ calls us to walk with Him in community and in doing so we bring ourselves and our gifts to the group. We only understand the way to live in communion with one another through the guiding principles of God. Left to our own selfish desires, we would hoard our talents and become helplessly unavailable to each other.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer level sets the conversation of relationships with Christ and with others by drawing attention to our utter dependency on Him to make community possible. He makes clear that without Christ we would not know our brother (or sister)

because our egos would block the way to them.³ Bonhoeffer addresses a pressure point of group dynamics. People join communities for various reasons. Some desire to unify with an ideal, where others may aspire to a community construct of their own mini kingdom. But when the dream takes on a form they did not imagine, such as personality conflicts or disruptions for example, they regress in disillusionment. Finding community unresponsive to individual desires, we carry little place in our heart to pour into the needs of others. It is at this juncture that we meet Jesus. Rather than disconnect in anguish, the Giver of every good and perfect gift implores us to remain and be restored in community. It is through the redemptive work of our Lord that we begin to see, hear, and serve through acts of selfless love. Only then can we tenderly hold onto the precious gift of each other and faithfully offer ourselves to God and one another. We, therefore, cannot experience the gift of community until we enter into it through the Giver of the gift.

As one who enjoys the entire process of gift giving (selecting, wrapping, surprising), I frequently send little gifts to let others know I am thinking of them. I am amazed at the reactions to a gift given just because, for no reason. It is often received with shock and then anxiety with how they may seek to reciprocate. The joy of the gift gets muddled in an emotional self-obligating ritual of declaring the act of giving as unnecessary. The excitement of the moment becomes awkward, and the pleasure is dashed for both the recipient and me (the giver).

Placing Lauren Winner's insightful elucidation of gifts into conversation with the issue of uncomfortable gift giving, I understand that the discomfort felt by the receiver

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1954), 23.

causes the gift to be damaged. Winner writes, “we damage them because we are uncomfortable—not uncomfortable being in someone’s debt, but uncomfortable with not being in someone’s debt.”⁴ We are conditioned to carry the heaviness of obligation into most interpersonal exchanges. We can never do enough in response to a kind gesture. We don’t believe we’ve spent enough on a gift to show equal monetary reciprocity. Our attitude reveals an unhealthy assessment of self. Struggling with the question of how to adequately respond to a gift that one is unable to repay, implies that not only is the gift damaged in reception as Winner suggests, but the receiver is in some way damaged or unworthy of such a gesture. In their mind, the offering of a commensurate gift somehow balances the scale of self-worth and redistributes the weight of obligation. When we struggle to accept gifts that are given with no expectation of reciprocity, a deeper matter of the soul’s condition is exposed. It is difficult to embrace the virtue of a true gift when emotionally shrouded in a winding cloth of disappointment and unhealed hurts, rendering us incapable of freely receiving from another.

The case of the spiritual community sadly supports a similar situation. Church leaders, as receivers, who do not perceive linking with colleagues as a gift, will likely misuse, misunderstand, and altogether dismiss it. I witness church leaders going to great lengths to evade one another by lingering at the water fountain, staring at an outdated bulletin board, all to avoid interaction. The scene parallels the parable Jesus told in Luke of the Good Samaritan, with the personification of community being the one stripped of

⁴ Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 142.

its dignity, wounded and left half dead on the side of the road. And as in the text, the priest, by chance, happens along the way and when he sees him, he passes by on the other side.⁵ The gift of community is damaged and left for dead in the hallways and corridors of church buildings every day by leaders who scurry off to care for the ostensible needs of the church while overlooking (intentionally or not) the compassionate aid required to heal the community to which they should be ministering. Their actions reflect their human failings. The leaders I describe are afraid of exposing their broken places. They question motives and turn away from authentic group discussions, preferring to bury themselves in never-ending mounds of church work.

Although it is my assertion that community is a gift given to church leadership, I wrestle with the notion of the danger that may arise in community. How can such a gift given by God to grow and flourish together be wrought with dysfunctional innerworkings that strengthen its people in the midst of discord? How does chaos in community manifest itself? We witnessed this problem on January 6, 2021, when an ordered disorderly mob charged the Capital. The world stared in disbelief as the multitude fueled by fear and hatred, scaled the building from every side, like rancorous vines climbing up and over the walls, spreading into the sacred spaces of our government. They helped each other through broken windows. They extended hands to pull each other up. They listened to their leaders, ransacked offices, and did it all under their unifying goal of dismantling the bedrock of our democracy. Thankfully, they failed in their mission, but their actions that day demonstrated a frightening picture of the fellowship in their commonality. Their

⁵ Luke 10:30-32 (NKJV).

oneness was emboldened and on full display. In this case, such a community is indeed dangerous when its purpose is destructive to the plan of God for all people to live together in peace.

Again, a turn of the lens magnifies another disunifying perspective of community as gift. The perils of community can be viewed through those whose existence in community is to sow discord. These people feed doubt into the heart of a weak community. They devalue our investment in group development by planting mistrust and encouraging disagreements. Their behavior, therefore, identifies them as an anti-gift.⁶ The term defines a disparaging nature that seeks to destabilize the balance of unity. These people reside in community for the purpose of pointing out the limitations of others while touting their own abilities as indispensable. At times the pattern of the anti-gift is to enter community and do nothing toward building camaraderie. They are there, unchallenged to participate outside of necessary church duties. When we serve in workgroups where leaders do not steward their relationships and accept the unsettling of order, it brings an interference to the flow of our service. The leader's complacency provides an open door for an anti-gift to come into our church family and hide from any responsibility from relationships. It makes living in community feel like a prickly nest rather than a pleasant place to serve and receive the gift of each other. Jean Vanier underscores this viewpoint of the anti-gift by describing the dangerous side of community stating, "[So] community can appear to be a marvelously welcoming and sharing place. But in another way,

⁶ Jean Vanier, *Community & Growth: Our Pilgrimage Together* (New York, N.Y: Paulist Press, 1979), 160.

community is a terrible place. It is the place where our limitations and our egoism are revealed to us.”⁷

His thoughts raise another challenging question in the spiritual community. How does one handle the reality of the anti-gift whose giftings are also very real? Is there space for the duality of a gifted anti-gift? I have assisted churches that dealt with this dilemma. They share common characteristics in that they were inept at helping people find their place to fully connect. Their blind spot in building community is focusing on filling ministry positions rather than seeking the proper placement of gifts to edify the body. Put another way, the failings of church leadership are in losing sight of the responsibility and power of their position to promote covenantal relationships that are shaped by our seeing each as gifts to one another and the church. When we become attracted to the influence that gifted servant leaders bring to church as entertainment over evangelism, for example, it causes the entire church to suffer. In the case of anti-gift members, I believe, their behavior suggests that they have not grasped how their presence is part of God’s plan to strengthen the church. Neither have they comprehended the necessity of our interdependence, where we collectively experience spiritual transformation from a gathering of church workers into a Christlike community of servant leaders. The sowers of discord are blind to the power and potential hidden in our oneness because the eyes of their understanding have not revealed it. But when we permit service without recognizing presence as gift, we are blind to it by choice.

⁷ Vanier, 1.

As an illustration, the scenario I present depicts various encounters with churches whose approach to receiving servant leaders and their ministry gifts revealed the impaired condition of their leadership team. The people described are composite types and are not based on any one person, position, or community.

An associate pastor approached me for advice on how to get the ministry leaders to warm up to the new minister of music. She recognized both the enormous talent and social aloofness of the new member. She went on to justify her reasoning:

“I just want us to give him a chance. He is young and has some things to learn about leadership. I know he has blind spots, but can’t I just praise his God-given ability and sort of gloss over his frosty side? He played lead bass for a megachurch for years. They loved him there. He’s going to take our worship to another level. So glad we could steal him away. Aren’t bass players cool? He’s not much on words, but his music speaks volumes. Besides, we need a fresh, youthful wind to blow through here. Don’t you think?”

The prognosis was clear to me that the perception of this new minister as a gift to the leadership community was going to be a hard sell. The associate pastor’s giddiness was apparent as she walked him around to each office for introductions. I decided to tag along to observe. Their welcome was pleasant enough, but I knew the truth about the measure of their receptivity would unfold over the subsequent weeks. The young minister assumed the role he was hired to do, and little else. His focus was rehearsal, service, and exiting church. His lack of involvement showed his fellow church leaders that he did not want to become part of the new church family. One by one, the team members voiced their mixed bag of opinions to the associate pastor. According to her, the tribe had spoken, and they were none too happy with her hire selection (not a surprise). A meeting was requested with the senior pastor to air their grievances in hopes of having him

removed from the leadership role. Their suggestion offered, “after much prayer,” was to retain him but reassign him in a lead bass position for which he was so gifted. I was struck by the response of the community. They did not join themselves to him to help understand or encourage him. Neither did they offer him a little grace for his behavior, understanding that he was in his first major leadership role. And I am certain that their efforts in prayer was not for edifying this leader.

Leadership communities desiring to gather around new members first must place Christ at the center of their gathering. Important to the cultivation of community is the shared understanding that it will not work without Jesus at the helm. In the presence of the Spirit, we seek godly practices of discerning God’s will together and articulating the value of the people and their gifts. Consequently, we become intentional to encircle the newcomer with the spiritual support that affirms them as integral members of the fellowship.

The counterapproach to cultivating community is driven by leaders choosing not to find ways to work together. This was the condition of this church. Leaders complaining about the behavior of the new minister of music was rude and destroyed the young ministry leader’s chances of successfully transitioning into the community. Barton’s thoughts on the difficulty of cultivating community at the leadership level captures the antics of the church leaders perfectly as she calls out the actions of some leaders who get into positions as prone to posturing and maneuvering.⁸ Her point draws a direct line to an irresponsible community whose culture has not yielded their efforts to be

⁸ Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 175.

shaped by the Spirit. She assesses the community as being self-centered rather than Christ-centered, as the leaders choose to promote their agendas over finding ways to unify around godly principles.

I was perplexed by the church leaders' lack of warmth toward this young man. Where is the spirit of hospitality to bring him in close? But do these leaders represent authentically functioning and living communities or should they be more appropriately classified as ministry work groups? The scenario is problematic if the latter describes them. Albeit true that the associate pastor did not assign anyone to help the music minister get settled. Neither did any seasoned members of the team extend themselves to the young man. However, my experience with this team formulates a different reason for their behavior. These are pastoral and ministry leaders who have lost sight of the divine gift of community. Sinking into the busyness of their work, they alienate themselves from the charge of creating togetherness. Their focus drifts away from accessing the vital support of interrelationships. And ironically, they should partake of its virtue as well. The very space for concern that spiritual community affords, gets filled with agendas and board meetings. It is the gift that is appreciated when first received, but ultimately gets hidden under an anonymous pile of odds and ends. Yet, even buried under the accumulation of life's clutter, the gift of community is not permanently lost, nor is it devalued. The gift becomes more precious when found.

The senior pastor refused their meeting and elected instead to gather all members of the leadership team to pray together for unity. He chose that moment to redirect all thoughts toward heaven. He brought the newly minted minister of music in later. He

embraced him and placed him in the center of the meeting room with the leaders encircling him for prayer. The atmosphere began to shift as the leaders offered prayers for him, each one interceding on his behalf. The occasion pointed me to Nouwen's emphasis on prayer and community. He asserts, "prayer is the language of the Christian community. In prayer the nature of the community becomes visible because in prayer we direct ourselves to the one who forms the community."⁹ His position reminds the community of its need to regauge how we understand prayer. We are not coming together for a practice of the church to talk to God. We are to come together with prayer as the language of our community.¹⁰ As one, we seek God. The Christian community must prioritize prayer as the platform we use to collectively wait for God's transformational power to make us one. As the language of Christian community, it signifies that without it, we lose the communication that is specific to us. Never too busy to pray, we exercise our privilege to pray for the development of the spiritual life of its members. But relegating prayer to perfunctory opening and closing work sessions denies the power it holds to bind us together in the work. We must, instead, use our language of prayer as leverage to lift heavy hearts by the power of God moving in and through our fellowship. The work of the Spirit draws us closer, and our time in prayer, communing together, unveils an image of community that more closely reflects the image of Christ.

The team prayer concluded with leaders committing to their responsibility for being kinder and more welcoming. Ultimately, the prayer session reset the trajectory for

⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, N.Y: Image Books, 1986), 156.

¹⁰ Nouwen, 156.

the new leader's relationships with church leadership, but in retrospect, their slow decision to pray for the newcomer is troubling. The occasion of their interceding was just that, an occasion. The relativity of prayer to community is unquestionable but overlooked. The group's response should have been to spirituality lift him up and initially welcome him in prayer. But they didn't. Aren't church teams expected to pray? Praying together must be reprioritized to communicate support and continually promote wholeness among the members. It should be recognized as an ongoing act of unity and not an intermittent application to tap down community groanings.

The demonstration of community the young minister should have experienced would have brought him in with a spirit of hospitality that accepted him and through acts of community, prayer, and breaking bread, for example, they made room for him in the church family. From the safety of the leadership community, he would be nurtured and mentored. From this vantage point, we envision a functioning community mature enough to offer the gift of community to newcomers, such as the minister of music, in a way that welcomes and acquaints them to their new family. The leadership team should not have concomitantly rejected the gift of community towards the associate pastor brought onboard, due to their inability to perceive him as gift. Thankfully, prayer and the collective maturing of the team reframed the conundrum. If we are to learn how to be together, receiving each other as a gift of community, we must learn it while experiencing the way of community, set by the One who is the way, the truth, and the life of the spiritual community.

Disruptions to Community

The goal of this section is to explore the effects of disunity among church leadership. The topics examined were studied by Barna Research on Pastoral Care. They surveyed pastors across America to rate their well-being in areas of calling, readiness for ministry and work-life balance. Their findings revealed a profile that was both hopeful and troubling. The survey showed that most pastors felt a strong sense of calling but struggled with the lack of a support system and experienced feelings of isolation.¹¹ I will address how the conditions of loneliness and isolation cause unsettling in the spiritual community and undermine our ability to connect relationally. I will examine more closely the condition of isolation by addressing the face of isolation, the dangers of excessive isolation, and isolation in view of solitude.¹² The disparity in gender responses to both conditions prompted me to explore the situations that create and perpetuate women clergy to identify themselves with loneliness and isolation. As such, I will address the interplay of both issues as conditions under which women must minister.

Loneliness

At some point in our journey, we have all entertained the unwelcomed visitor of loneliness. It doesn't announce itself nor does it send word of its approach. Rather, it quietly moves into one's soul, looking for an empty place to occupy. Loneliness can be described as a feeling of being alone, empty, and disconnected from social networks. The

¹¹ Barna Research Group and Pepperdine University, *The State of Pastors*, 2.

¹² Isolation is indexed with three subsections: the Face of Isolation, the Dangers of Isolation, and Isolation and Solitude.

definition extends to include the perception of being alone, lacking fellowship or the absence of a support system. The effects of loneliness are expressed in how we respond in social experiences like searching for a space to sit in a restaurant or riding the subway among passengers staring at their cell phones. The feeling of loneliness may be easy to shake for some, but for others the presence of loneliness can be emotionally wearying.

The Barna Research *State of Pastors* studied data collected about self-leadership, reporting that pastors felt satisfied with their overall mental and physical wellbeing. This does not mean that pastors are immune to the emotional toll ministry takes on their life. I argue that for some, the demands of church work may outpace the time taken for personal care at a rate that is mind-numbing, especially in the situation of those serving with a limited church staff. Are pastor's aware of their mood swings or a change in disposition? Perhaps not. When the busyness of competing priorities drives each day, there is little time or interest in pausing to check for symptoms of poor mental health.

A point challenging the study's conclusion of wellbeing is the acknowledgment that loneliness is divided down gender lines. Although the study reports that both male and female pastors say they feel good about their state of mind, they highlight that women who lead churches are more likely than men to say they feel lonely or isolated from others. The disparity does not advocate for men not suffering from loneliness. They just aren't comfortable admitting it so freely.

A study conducted by Shelley Borys and Daniel Perlman at the University of Waterloo and the University of British Columbia, respectively, underscores this point, suggesting that men may not be less lonely than women, but they are less likely to

acknowledge loneliness because of the negative consequences associated with it.¹³ The study elevates the stigma male leaders confront, that verbalizing their need for companionship is purported to show emotional frailty and invite criticism of their ability to see after the spiritual needs of those under their care. An unwillingness to reveal a state of loneliness may drive the leader to internalize his emotions, risking a dangerous transition to the deeper pain of depression.¹⁴

By contrast, female leaders admitting their loneliness communicates a strength of vulnerability that says, “I need others.” The fact that female church leaders place a high value on interpersonal relationships among other female leaders validates their willingness to voice their need for such an important support system. I recall struggling in a personal season of sadness during a time when I should have been excited with the emergence of my new life. As a passionate church leader and Christian education teacher, I realized a strong desire to commit myself to serve the church in fulltime ministry. So, with a sense that my life’s work was calling me forward, I walked away from a successful corporate career to enter seminary. My decision was accepted by my family and friends. Yet, I felt very alone. As soon as I turned in my resignation letter, I sat in my office and intermittently cried and sighed with relief for obeying the call in my heart. The course of my life was changing, and there was no one in my immediate circle of female friends with whom I could process my emotions. I needed to sort out my thoughts with

¹³ Borys Shelley, and Daniel Perlman, "Gender Differences in Loneliness," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 11, No. 1 (March 1985): 63–74, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167285111006>.

¹⁴ Borys Shelley, and Daniel Perlman, 63–74.

someone who had walked this path before me. Why would a single woman with a mortgage leave her job to be a student again? I questioned if I had clearly discerned a call that would require such disruption to my entire life. For a moment I considered returning to the safe world I understood. I was prayed over, wished well, and granted scholarships, but there was no church strategy in place to help me transition from a church laity focus to clergy. It was mentally exhausting to have no female ministry companions with whom I could be brutally honest and hold the confessions my fear.

That early episode of responding to my ministry call revealed a truth shared by many female church leaders. Women are deprived of the support within the spiritual community that is unique to our situation. At the time there, was no one to field my questions about what to expect as a woman in ministry. I felt ill prepared to navigate my new course. Clinging to my faith that Jesus was with me, I sought answers to my questions elsewhere. And in the process of reaching out, I was surprised by an internal coexistence of loneliness and trust. They fueled my search for the answers of the life of a woman in ministry. But to a greater significance, they lead me to seek a place within the spiritual community that was created for me by God, who places the lonely in families.¹⁵ This whereby, is the tension female church leaders hold as we serve the Church. We acknowledge obeying the call to ministry may lead us into seasons of loneliness. We may experience feelings of detachment from our local body of leaders who may not be equipped to assist our unique needs. Yet, we maintain our trust in the faithfulness of the

¹⁵ Psalm 68:6 (NKJV).

Creator of families to sovereignly assign ministry placements where we may find validation and opportunity.

Revisiting the results of the Barna report, it does not speculate on the cause of loneliness, nor does it suggest how loneliness impacts the leaders' ability to minister in community while feeling disconnected and alone. I contend that the cause of loneliness for women in church leadership may, in part, be contributed to a lack of representation at the senior leadership level. Overall, women are fewer in number in senior roles, and thus a smaller community for mutual support. The inability to identify with someone in the senior ranks leads to a decrease in the numbers of women assuming leadership roles. Women are leaving the church community altogether because they feel they don't belong.

Roxanne Stone, former editor of Barna Research, studied the strain around women exiting the church. She discovered among the reasons women give is that they are confused about how and where they fit in the church. According to the studies, the (younger generation) women attending church hear a message that they can be anything they want, but what they hear at church contradicts that. As women come into the church community, they report experiencing a glass ceiling that limits the vision of leading in senior levels. As such, they chose to simply leave the church rather than challenge their motives.¹⁶ It is disheartening to know that the invisible barriers that restrict the advancement of female business professionals extends to the church. The call to mentor

¹⁶ Matlock, Mark, host. 2020. *Women in the Church: An Interview with Roxanne Stone*. Barna Access, October 26, 2020, accessed Feb. 5, 2021, <https://barna.gloo.us/videos/women-in-the-church-interview>.

young women entering ministry, and those seeking to hold senior administrative church positions, press against the manmade obstructions. Mentoring programs and partnering opportunities are initiatives that champion support systems for women. These initiatives support female church leaders through the process of advancing to the limits they set for themselves in church leadership. As church communities shine the light on the deficient areas of female representation, it changes the messaging about what women can and cannot do in the church.

Bishop Vashti McKenzie advances the conversation of the need for mentors by introducing the struggle of African American women clergy serving in isolation. She submits that the need is great for a network of women to stimulate thought and exchange ideas.¹⁷ As a woman of color, I can attest to the bishop's account, as I have been the only person who looked like me at a few churches I served. With little female fellowship available to me, I felt the weight of leaning into my role with no real gauge for my work, only the guiding principles of my call. Bishop McKenzie's assessment speaks to the pressure Black women clergy experience of being alone in assigned churches with no close point of contact. The answer for correcting the loneliness created within community for women of color is to push for mentor relationships. It is difficult to formulate the partnering when the numbers of Black women clergy are such a small number from which to recruit, but the need to fortify the presence of the leaders is vital for the community to flourish.

¹⁷ Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2011), chapter 6, Kindle.

Isolation

Closely linked to loneliness is the state of isolation. Feelings of extreme emptiness and detachment can lead one to withdraw all together from social interaction. The leader's isolation from the spiritual community is damaging to both the leader and the abandoned community. The leader departs the church with unmet needs of support and no place of belonging. The community is left to grapple with their absence while working through ministry duties left undone. Viewing isolation from the position of the one who leaves and those who are left offers an interesting angle on the disruption. Isolation becomes a double-edged sword that cuts the ties of fellowship, leaving both leader and community to suffer. The wounded community struggles with the void created by the leader's exit. The leader, feeling a sense of separation, isolates themselves because of a void they experienced in community. In both cases, the scission exposes how much we truly need each other to move toward God together with the expectation of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

The Face of Isolation

The profile for people who isolate is as diverse as the cause for which they withdraw. For some, the motivation is detachment from distressing or fearful situations. For others, it is self-isolation within community. They do so to claim greater control over the church environment in which they serve or to barricade themselves and their work from outside scrutiny. Leaders choosing to disassociate with others demonstrates a disregard for the spiritual health and development of their community and themselves.

The interdependence of community and leaders is connected at the point of their dependence on Christ, who binds all together in the unity of the Spirit. When either the role of community or member is unfulfilled, the soul of the relationship is wounded. The strength of the Body is weakened when we remove ourselves and our gifts from the church. Spiritual wholeness of the leader is at stake, the longer they reside outside the restorative space of Christian community.

The storyline of how we lose members to isolation could be true for any community that has lost sight of Christ's message that each person matters; that our spiritual witness is proven through our attention to the empty seats in our meetings. The following situation I share, though fictitious, demonstrates the point that our lack of attention to the heart of our ministry (our people) can cause us to overlook a brother withdrawing from community before our eyes.

A member of the leadership workgroup misses several meetings. His office is frequently dark. But the workgroup needs his voice added to the conversation, so the team leader calls him to ask about his attendance. He questions his decision to participate on the committee. The member quips, "I'm still with you. I just need to stay under the radar right now." The team leader does not express how much the group relies on his input. He reminds him of the meeting schedule in case the brother has lost track of the sessions. The response from both men is illuminating and disappointing. What was the impetus for his disappearance? He was not asked. The team lead didn't probe. Did the community miss clues or mishandle a concern he expressed? Perhaps they overlooked some organizational conflict he may be tackling. They missed the opportunity for divine

interaction and healing by not inviting Christ into their conversation, who joins us in our places of unhealthy detachment and guides us out, reconnecting us with His body, the Church.

The notion of keeping a low profile draws attention to the unsettled work we face in emotionally fortifying our community. His presence was missed. He had no idea how valuable his insights had been to launch the team's vision because the community had not done enough to demonstrate that. The workgroup is at fault for not expressing their need for him, but also not acknowledging a need for closer involvement with him. And now, he was essentially checked out, resolving that disengagement from the group was easier than hanging on with the hope that he would find association, in his community.

Faith communities can mitigate the risks of its members slipping off into isolation by cultivating an ethos of love and holistic wellbeing. These two values are held together in the Johannine message that voices concern for the overall condition of others. The context of John's greeting in 3 John 2 to his friend, Gaius, "that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers,"¹⁸ suggests that the apostle comprehended that the service Gaius was rendering to fellow believers as causing his soul, his entire being, to be well. John speaks a tripartite gift of life to his affairs, physical wellness, and health to his soul. His greeting acknowledged Gaius' holistic health was tied to serving the church with his whole heart and supporting the needs of others. True leadership communities foster compassion by incorporating the completeness of the members as a core element of its' spiritual development. Our task as leaders must be to

¹⁸ (NRSV).

bring their whole selves to their community so we may be fully available to uplift each other's life in its entirety. They can seek out and celebrate their successes, watch for, and walk with them in their failings. Together, the people direct the light of Christ's love into every dark space of isolation that would otherwise be inhabited by those who quietly slip away.

The Dangers of Isolation

Author and pastor, John Opalewski, warns that the drawback of extended isolation in a ministry setting is a trap.¹⁹ He sees the time away as a vulnerable space for the devil to draw the member further away from social connectivity. Indeed, a danger of isolation is that it shrinks the circle of access and limits the voices in a person's life. The silence created by the leader's absence is an open space for their thoughts to reimagine the dynamics of their relationship to community. The church becomes a place for them to avoid and they see the interaction with leaders as unnecessary.

Closer examination of Opalewski's thought seems to imply that long stints away from ministry service somehow catches one off guard; inferring that we are unaware of how long we have removed ourselves from others. Equally as concerning is the community that loses track of its members. Misplaced priorities and paying little attention to pour into each other causes a desensitization to the symptoms of broken fellowship. If there is a trap of extended isolation, it begins with the community that laid

¹⁹ John Opalewski, "3 Ways To Escape The Trap of Isolation," *Converge Coaching* (blog), February 15, 2018, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://convergecoach.com/3-ways-to-escape-the-trap-of-isolation/>.

it. The trap is baited with the disinterestedness of those turning a blind eye concerning people drifting away. The community not gauging the attitude of its people will miss the subtleties and symptoms of those in danger of growing distant. Our leadership teams that express indifference toward the interpersonal dynamics of the community are not connecting the dangers of isolation to the impact it has on the flow of our life together. We are unaware of how our actions breed an atmosphere of compartmentalized ministry. Indifference creates places for people to hide. Their disregard discourages personal expression and underscores the risks of revealing wounds to someone not interested in being their brother's keeper. In areas of ministry where we lack a deep concern for one another, we stop being the agents of God's grace, offering soul prospering strength to our members.

A true image of God's plan for communities providing self-care is seen in the efforts of the group who brought a paralytic man to Jesus. Luke records the story of Jesus teaching among a crowd and the power of the Lord was present to heal them.²⁰ Finding no conventional way to access Jesus, the men of the community did the uncommon thing; they opened the roof and lowered the ailing man to Jesus to be healed. The spiritual community must model the faith and the selflessness of the servants in the text. We must commit to giving up individual interests in the belief that mending broken community comes in bringing back those who have moved outside the household of faith. We risk the uncommon thing when we face church situations that foster isolation, that hold our separated members immovable. Our courage to recover church family bespeaks a

²⁰ Luke 5:17 (NKJV).

theology of restoration in community, where we receive forgiveness and healing for our sins as we find our place together, afresh, before Jesus.

Isolation and Solitude

There is a single point of commonality between isolation and solitude. They are both undertaken alone. From here, they diverge in meaning and experience. Isolation is not chosen but impelled upon a recipient. It arises as a response to situations that are perceived as requiring a person to distance themselves from that setting. The result of continued social disconnection leads to greater depths of despair and helplessness. Conversely, solitude comes as decision by people desiring personal betterment and self-reflection. Time away is purposed, holistic but temporary. The goal of the interlude is the refreshing of the soul to return to the main path of one's journey.

Solitude for the church leader is the gift that continually gives back. When it is accepted as God's invitation to recalibrate the cadence of life, leaders take time to realign priorities back to a Christ-centered focus. They spend time away from the demands of ministry operations and return with a spiritual grounding that resets church agendas. They reenter their roles with clearer articulation of vision for moving their ministries forward. Pastors return to their flock rested and invigorated with a renewed mandate to offer the fresh bread of the Word to the congregation. The virtues outweigh the drawbacks, but leaders may not be so motivated to spend time away with God for the sake of the ministry.

The effort needed to pull away from the work of the church can be as stressful for the leader as performing the work itself. They must manage their actual day-to-day responsibilities along with the congregation's perception of what they do beyond what they can see on Sunday. It becomes a balancing act of being "full plate" busy while serving a congregation that interprets a scheduled seclusion as a perk, temporary abandonment or worse, a presence that won't be missed.

National Public Radio recently interviewed Reverend Howard-John Wesley, senior pastor of historic Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia's oldest African American church. They discussed the divine, even prophetic timing of his decision to take a sabbatical. He shared how terrified he was to announce to his congregation that he was taking some time away from the church. He explained that in thirty years of preaching, he now felt quite distant from God, and he knew he needed a sabbatical. Of the many fears listed, he singled one out in particular:

"What happens if they're all right without me? What if they find out, yeah, you know, we really don't need this guy?"²¹

He expresses his relief that the congregation received his request well, sensing that he was weary. I want to underscore here the illustration in his experience that supports the significance of a spiritual time of isolation. Reverend Wesley began to feel the pull to go into seclusion for about one year. When he finally scheduled, he didn't realize that his sabbatical was a prophetic call drawing him away to prepare him to guide his

²¹ Rev. Howard-John Wesley, "The Rev. Howard John Wesley On Taking A Break From the Pulpit After 30 Years", hosted by Ailsa Chang *All Things Considered*, NPR, December 31, 2020, audio, 8:00, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/31/952445560/the-rev-howard-john-wesley-on-taking-a-break-from-the-pulpit-after-30-years>.

congregation through an unsettled time. As he emerged from his hidden place with God, he returned to the church at the time of heighten racial tension in this country and an out-of-control pandemic disproportionately attacking the Black community. Wesley's solitude came as a gift for him and for the church. He was given time to replenish and reconnect to his life source. With renewed strength and grounding, he was able to reassure his spiritual community of the present help of God during this crisis.

Dissimilarly, times of excessive solitude work against efforts to establish community. At the heart of the spiritual community are people who experience their togetherness in Christ and through Christ. But a community with leaders taking extended times away cannot expect to perpetuate an atmosphere of growing together in Christ. Separation for too long deprives the community of each member's gifts. It sabotages unforeseen opportunities that being together often affords. Plainly put, it is improbable to imagine that church leaders can strengthen their ranks, cast vision, and become community for each other if no one is there.

Chapter Two

A Message from Paul: A Model for Unity

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

—Ephesians 4:1-6 NIV

This portion of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus provides insight into how he sees his current state of being. He opens by declaring himself as a prisoner of Christ. His message, written while imprisoned, does not speak of him being held in a Roman cell. Rather, it emphasizes his position as a prisoner for Christ. He suggests here that he has surrendered himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and that his imprisonment is at the will of the Lord. Moreover, his station did not stop his mission of establishing the church. The church at Ephesus needed Paul's counsel, as they were a diverse group of believers leaving their ideology to become Christians. Paul's appeal was for them to live a life in light of the one God of all, and through the work of Jesus. Their new shared faith in Christ had bound them in oneness. His announcement of the calling to which they received, points to a summons to be true to their destiny of unity in Christ.¹ He implores them to conduct themselves in a manner that represents their new life in Christ, with

¹ Ralph P Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012). Kindle.

expectation of growing together forming one new spiritually mature community. The first readers of Paul's letter had to learn how to live out their new lives in earnest, exchanging their allegiance to Caesar, for loyalty to the kingdom of God.² This meant surrendering themselves to the transformational work of the Spirit to bring them into the place of maturity in their shared faith. Learning to live in their new Christian community required them to see anew the people of the community as members of the family of God. They were now brothers and sisters, in Christ Jesus. What an enormous task before them; assimilating into a different way of living together that introduced an innovative social construct that made them responsible for each other. Their Christian life dictated a radical shift in how they viewed their identity and their relationships. They needed direction and hope-filled encouragement to take on the new vision while in the context of their repressive past.³ Certainly, reading Paul's letter offered them clear instructions for living, but with it came the challenge of putting on a new understanding of family, daily putting on the mind of Christ and resisting the urge to maintain their separateness.

It is still a task for the church to read Ephesians 4 in context of our community. We are lagging in our responsibility to demonstrate the power of unity to a society that seems unfazed that we are unraveling at the seams due to steady doses of fear and apathy toward others. The church can do better. We can be better. We must push pass the comfort zone of interpreting scripture within the walls of our own church community and

² Richard J Foster, *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Deuterocanonical Books* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 336.

³ Foster, 336.

read text together with others, so we may clearly hear what the Spirit is saying to the church about unifying the body.

My experience participating in an academic exchange program left a lasting impression on how I learned to interpret community with others. The events and program discussed are composite types and do not refer to any particular situation or community. Before college, I spent a semester in a community in another part of the country. Though my time away was short, what I learned about community life informed my understanding of how we can demonstrate the power of belonging with people with whom we have little in common. I lived in a town that welcomed me into their community with a warm spirit of hospitality. I engaged in local activities to quickly immerse into their culture. It was exciting and a little frightening at the same time. This was my first time away from home. I had limited contact with my family back home (these were the prehistoric days before cellphones), and I stumbled through the process of remembering names and pretending to enjoy local delicacies that were unfamiliar to me.

I finally made my way out of the safety bubble of “exchange student, don’t expect too much of me,” when I became intentional about learning the area. I had never been so far away from the way of life I’d always known. But my desire to know more about my temporary home caused the community to embrace me even more. People were pleased to introduce me to historical sites and share stories of their town’s origin. I was acclimating to my new community. And as I familiarized myself with the area’s customs and traditions, they reciprocated my efforts by bringing me into their circle. They allowed me to sit with them in intimate family spaces. I felt the rhythm of my life syncing with

theirs. I felt, at home. They allowed me to live with them. Not as an outsider, but as a member of their community. I did not put away my own rich heritage, but their willingness to receive me, coupled with my desire to acclimate into my adopted community, placed me into part of a bigger family in the household of God. I could not have experienced this level of belonging without the gifts of acceptance, inclusion, and the support of these beautiful people who taught me how to live as a sister and daughter with them.

Paul's letter expressed the context of belonging by using words of unity, love and calling. The community needed this so they could understand their new social relationship and recognize themselves with the same language. Their identities were revised and knit together with the new identity of the group as if they were family.⁴ These early Christians were to break with their past to assimilate into the family of God, with language and actions that reinforced their relationship with God and each other. It was as much how they dealt with each other as it was what they said to each other, speaking with kindness, extending patience. Together, they learned how to live within the guidelines of their faith and be shaped onto the Christian kinship of many members of one body.

I will make the argument that leadership communities pursuing unity would do well to embody Paul's message to develop their relationship as a Christian witness of the text. Serving our communities considering the message of Ephesians 4:1-6, brings into closer view the value of learning the method Paul espoused for grounding and growing

⁴ Wayne Atherton Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, Second edition (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2003), 85–86.

the early church. The text serves as a guidepost for how church leaders are to govern themselves and engage each other. The author's words remind us of the behaviors that direct the way our communities should behave to bring about a spirit of unity in our faith. I will use the first six verses of Ephesians 4 to review three appeals that encapsulate the behaviors Paul encouraged the church to lay hold off bearing in mind their new Christian identity.

First, I will discuss the character traits Paul notes that believers should pursue to be like Christ. When these qualities are expressed in community, they shift our attention away from ourselves and realign our interests to practicing oneness in Christ. Second, noting a correlation between the unity of the Spirit with the presence of peace, I will examine the value of drawing upon the evidence of both, to manifest a unified body. The third theme will look at the synergistic effect of individual calling and the interconnectedness by the Spirit to bring about a harmonious community.

Be Good To One Another

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

(Ephesians 4:2 NIV)

The suggestion that the church must first be directed to moderate their disposition before being told how to treat with each other speaks to our resistant nature to change for others and an inclination towards a self-serving attitude. Paul's urging the new Christian community to show compassion toward each other may have originated from the memory of his own acceptance into the faith. After his conversion, the Christian community

understandably were skeptical of his intentions, remembering his fervent persecution of the church. But it was the generous gesture of Barnabas that brought Paul into the apostles' inner court by attesting to the truth of his change and commending him into the household of God.

Paul's petition to the church at Ephesus was to tell them to think of themselves less, and to consider the unity of the believers more. The members were all full of hope, sharing one identity in God, but they were not the same. Their conversion to Christianity reimagined community such that it set individuals of different cultures and socioeconomic status in relationship with each other. The baptism into the faith brought men and women equally into the Christian household where familial language of "brother and sister" were used to establish their relationships as belonging to each other. It suggested how they should perceive themselves, as well as how they should behave toward one another. Paul's reference to the qualities of humility and gentleness tells the believers that he envisions a community that is good to one another. His admonition signals that he desires the forging of their hearts as one people, the Church.⁵ Receiving their newly established relationship with fellow believers begins in the heart, but it must be worked out in daily living together. Change is a process that takes time. Relational transformation is a journey that begins with people meeting others where they are and in humble selflessness, walking together toward a new relationship.

⁵ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), part 8, sec. A, Kindle.

It reminds me of a revelation I had about the transformational journey of walking together with Christ. During a flight, the movie I was watching showed a young married couple engaged in a heated discussion over where to eat their meals together. His preference was to forego the dining room table and eat off a tray in front of the television. The wife decided to call her church going mother to complain and ask her how to remedy his thoughtlessness. Her mother answered:

“Marriage is a process, honey. Don’t try to make each other fit your own way. God will show you the way to be good to each other. He’s going to keep working with you two to rub off those selfish edges and soften your heart toward each other. Before long, that silliness over where anyone eats will pass.”

With that, she hung up. That mother’s wisdom, echoes Paul’s advice to resist the urge to be self-important in our relationship. Rather, aim to surrender our new life to the transforming process of Christian love.

Paul’s call for humility posed a challenge for the early church because being humble was considered a loathsome trait. Yet, the Christian understanding of humility viewed it as an aspiring quality, not holding an exalted view of oneself.⁶ It can be none less confusing for us today, when attempting to balance the proper measure of meekness and confidence. The role of the church leader should be the most service focused of all jobs in the church community. We do so by anchoring our values in the character qualities of Jesus. His example of humility and lowliness contradicts the social structure society associates with strong leaders. The type of humility that Jesus embodies commands an expansion of social boundaries that empowered the weak to lead the

⁶ Thielman, *Ephesians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, part 8, sec. A,

strong, and that favored the disregarded over the advantaged.⁷ Leading our communities in the humility characterized by Jesus will produce mindfulness toward the social location of others. We become situationally aware of the effect that our decisions have on others, so we intentionally extend our reach and our speech to gather the least and the lost. Humility in leadership doesn't fear the presence of differences within the community. It acknowledges the strength in the multiplicity of ideas, values people's contributions and celebrates the role each person holds in making the community thrive. Moreover, when we walk as humble leaders, we are intolerant of bias that threatens the balance of our interrelationships. We seek to minister accountability and empowerment to our people. In doing so, we call into account the high-minded among us, and lift the condition of the lowly.

If we reframe the focus of leadership to be an action that moves people to do something of a higher moral level, to meet socially useful goals, we can shift their concerns from needs for security within the organization and survival to those of belonging, the common good, or serving others.⁸ Said another way, when we lead by demonstrating kindness and humility toward our followers, we create an environment that eliminates distressing interactions. We press against the traditional leadership construct of telling others what to do, to expressions that invite community inclusion. Our actions influence the attitudes and behaviors of the members, who no longer feel they serve in a

⁷ Stephen Pardue, "Humility: The Mind of Christ, and the Early Church Fathers," *The Table*, Biola University, September 21, 2015, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://cct.biola.edu/humility-mind-of-christ-early-church-father>.

⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), part 1, sec. 1, Kindle.

stale atmosphere. Our community life is changed, as we put on a new mindset toward serving together that is founded in the care and support of the other. We are not easily offended nor provoked to unforgiveness. Our service to each other is sacrosanct. And in this environment, the virtues Jesus practiced in community tempers us to be good to each other.

Keep the Unity Through Peace

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:3 NIV)

It is reasonable to expect that bringing people together in any environment can breed disagreements. Communication breakdowns, differences of opinion, and competitiveness are symptoms of a group experiencing disunity. It is a hotbed for discord that threatens the rhythm of an organization's flow. Paul understood that if the church was to maintain an environment free of dissension, or at least managed well, it would require the work of the Spirit to cover the faulty places of our humanness and bring us together in peace. Paul shows an intentionality in his phraseology when he emphasizes keeping the unity "through the bond of peace." He draws upon how he is situationally placed as a person bound in prison through the cause of Christ, to suggest that the church be "bound in peace" by their faith in Christ, who has rendered them unfettered from the enslavement of sin to be united in the body.⁹ If we are not bound by peace, we are

⁹ Paul Stroble, "Joined at the Heart: Ephesians 4:1-16," *Christian Century*, July 26, 2003, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-07/joined-heart>.

entangled by discord. As Paul wrote while shackled to a Roman soldier, his words provided imagery for the readers to envision themselves bound to peace. Sharpening our spiritual lens, we read Paul's words and associate peace to the person of Christ. Earlier in his letter, Paul gives the church the reason they could expect a holy and mysterious conjoining of their faith. The Christological perspective for the unity they were experiencing gave the believers (who undoubtedly had questions about becoming one body) an understanding of Christ Jesus as peacemaker and their peace. Through the sacrificial death of Jesus, their social, cultural, and religious divisions were torn down, and they were unified by peace; reconciled to God and reconciled to each other.¹⁰

Peace is also gift. It is a bestowment from the Lord that empowers us to hold steady the rutter of the tongue and still the troubled soul. Paul places our unity and the gift of our peace within Christ's peace:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. For He is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility.¹¹

As I noted in chapter one of this thesis, the exercise of gift giving can be accompanied with the receiver feeling a need to respond in like kind. They may also be in receipt of something that they don't fully recognize the value and usefulness it holds. We are unable to return peace, to Him who is our peace. Nor can we appropriate the strength of the gift of peace without the help of the Spirit controlling our lives. We can, however, offer back to God obedience to follow the way of Christ. So, in our communities, we

¹⁰ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians.*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), accessed April 21, 2021, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/11084817>.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:13-14 (NKJV).

must come together with an all or nothing, “if Christ be for us,” faith that seeks to unify people through peaceful means. The cost of the strength of peace is surrender to the Giver of peace. Our efforts to keep the unity of the Spirit through peace requires that we approach the operation of peace in action. We are to love and serve through Christ. It is choosing to refrain from retaliation and giving over to God our right to respond to our enemies. The bond of peace that holds us together as a spiritual community is not understood by natural terms. Its definition runs in opposition to the world’s simulation of peace. In times of difficulty, leaders of who lay hold to the power of peace find their inner world untroubled, though trouble may surround them. When we refuse to give oxygen to smoldering embers of enmity, we wait for the Spirit to bring clarity out of confusion and communion out of contention. Indeed, it would appear easier to lash out, to make our point, stand our ground or tell our truth. But this is the attitude that Paul desires us to circumvent. He exhorts the community to choose a meek position and work together; all in, to live as one people, unencumbered by divisiveness. And God’s peace will hold together the community, unify, and preserve it by the power of the Spirit.

Be of One Heart

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:4-6 NIV)

The repetitive text reiterates for the members the commonality in their faith in one God. It is the one God of Jews and gentiles together in one community.¹² They were baptized into the faith and sought to center themselves in Christ. They shared the hope in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The members were all children of the calling God, who beckoned them to God's self. They shared a Christian heritage that taught them to love the Lord God and each other with an undivided heart. It meant an unquestionable loyalty to their relationship with each other in the way of Christ. They would no longer live for themselves but would dedicate their lives to a higher calling.

I am struck by the notion that we are called to be of one heart, while offering our Christian service through the strength of our differences. This is especially significant in the context of our leadership communities grappling with how to cultivate oneness without diminishing the unique contribution of the individuals serving in their ministries. Paul's declaration in Ephesians 4:5 directs us to the starting point of the practice of oneness, our shared hope, faith, and baptism into Christ. It is from this collective that we give who we are to community and offer our differences to God as gift. In the crucible of our toil for unity, God draws out a beautifully diverse community comprised of the

¹²Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 167.

distinctiveness of each person with an appreciation for the integral role they hold in keeping the body together. When we submit ourselves to the transformational work of Jesus, we are prepared to become one in community. God uses the experiences we have with our colleagues (the good and the bad) as a means of shaping us for ministry. We all have different areas to be worked through to mature us and make us more like Christ. Our ministry interactions serve as opportunities to reframe our relationships as more than men and women of God serving the church, but as spiritual family members equipped and willing pour into each other. Our work does not end with the end of Sunday service. The work of holding each other up continues. It is the call to the leadership community to aid a fellow brother or sister who is emotionally exhausted, or experiencing a dryness in their walk with God, that their spiritual community gathers around them. God meets us in our issues and shows us how to render help to our members who are in need. Greater than putting people in the pews and increasing numbers on the membership roster, our communities can show forth the glory of God when we serve the church with one heart. Our work towards unity opens the door to mutual acceptance. We understand that although our service to the church may differ, we are all servants called by God. It is from this place of acceptance that we welcome each other, receiving one another as gifts to the body, bound together in Christian fellowship. God gathers our differences and forms us into one community shaped for service to the kingdom.

The water pitcher that sits on my kitchen shelf reminds me of the beauty of different forms of matter made into one piece. The clay pitcher was a gift. It is such a distinctive looking piece. The pitcher has various shades of brown and tan. I could tell

that several different types of clay were combined to create the form. Clay hewn from the earth comes in various colors and is comprised of different elements. Their differentiation makes some clay more suitable for one type of pottery work over another. I was intrigued with the pottery facts included in the gift box that explained how the piece was made.

The potter combined variations of clay into an art piece, working to prepare each type of clay to be molded into the final piece of art. Each type of clay has a different level of heat they must withstand to be shaped. Once all pieces are individually formed, they can be worked into one piece by putting the whole object together under similar conditions. The potter manipulates each piece to bring them all to the same level of moisture and pliability. Then they are fired at the same temperature. And at the point of evenness, the elements adhere to each other. The result is a beautiful, marbled effect baked into the clay that displays its distinctive blend. And like the amalgamation of clay that creates a unique work of art, leaders who desire to create a singleness of heart in community must lift their people up to the Master Potter for a divine intertwining of the soul; reflecting the distinctiveness of each person and showing forth as one vessel unified in ministry.

When Conflict Occurs

The final section of this chapter draws attention to insights for how we work through relational conflict. It is inevitable. Where there are people, there will be occasions of conflict. As much as the most spiritual among us would like to envision that the church is a conflict free zone, it is not realistic to think so. From newly formed committees to seasoned ministry teams, are all susceptible to personality clashes with

people bumping up against each other. Situations arise that find people taking sides, and the push and pull of heated debate can appear to put our church community at risk. Quarreling choir members in dissention over robe selections is proof that church affiliation does not exempt you from conflict.

Christian leaders disagree and sometimes part ways, and we must be prepared to address relational breakdowns by learning how to move through difficulties without losing sight of advancing the mission of the church.¹³ Leaders who prepare for rough waters prior to stormy situations are able to navigate their ministries through difficult times and stabilize their team. We further affirm the strength of our ministries by controlling the narrative around conflict by using the Christian messaging of love and forgiveness. When we model the way of Christ's love during a conflict, we enter into the messiness of relationships to uphold the significance of our connectedness in the Spirit. We advocate for unity because disputes in the body impacts every member, and we will rise or fall as one community.

I do not propose, however, that the presence of conflict is evidence of an unhealthy community. In fact, the presence of conflict may signal that members are courageous enough to work through their issues, seeking truth through their turmoil rather than avoiding it. Disputes can take on a constructive nature when it leads us to listening more than we speak and gaining perspective of the other. The reward of our commitment to confront rather than circumvent our trials brings our members through

¹³ Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 183.

conflict to a place of mutuality. From here, they learn to respect and appreciate differing voices present in our conversations with each other.

Church leaders engaged in conflicts in their community or those desiring to prepare themselves to handle potential situations may consider Paul's approach to disagreements as contradictory. His exhortation to the new believers in Ephesus to bear with one another and embrace their oneness in God, encourages us to come together and prayerfully discern the way out of our entanglements. Yet, in his dispute with Barnabas, his partner commissioned by the Holy Spirit, he communicates a different message for dealing with controversy. The situation recorded in Acts 15:36-41 describes Paul's strong disagreement with Barnabas over taking John Mark on a mission trip after the Council in Jerusalem. Paul's frustration stemmed from John Mark's refusal to complete the missionary journey he had begun with the team. Instead, he abandoned Paul and the group and returned to Jerusalem.¹⁴ John Mark's abrupt departure so displeased Paul that he adamantly opposed Barnabas' suggestion that he accompany them on their next journey. Barnabas resisted Paul's explanation for denying John Mark and insisted on bringing him. Ultimately, the tension between these two missionary partners concluded with division. Unlike his appeal for patience toward others, Paul's management of the disagreement over John Mark suggests that the best way to deal with a problematic relationship is to walk away from it.

¹⁴ Scot McKnight and Greg Mamula, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), Paul and Conflict. Kindle.

If we attempt to interpret Paul's actions for dealing with people who oppose us, it may seem like mixed messaging. Church leaders may find it hard to grasp Paul's pattern for managing conflict and his responses too confusing to understand. However, communities embroiled in conflict may find there is room for considering both of Paul's reactions. If we take the position of patience with our adversaries, we may create an opportunity for restoring relationship or winning someone over. Alternatively, choosing avoidance delays resolution but it also allows time and breathing space for parties to reset and reevaluate what is at stake at the community level.

We observe an example of the latter approach with Paul's broken fellowship with John Mark and Barnabas. His frustration caused him to have a rift with both men. In the case of John Mark, his walking away from Paul reflects that he did not measure the level of commitment to the mission as did Paul. To an onlooking community, his leaving the mission before completion may have communicated his unwillingness to support Paul's integrity as an apostle, choosing then to forego any impending suffering that awaited them on their missionary journey.¹⁵ This only added to Paul's frustration, to think that he may not be considered as a worthy co-laborer of the gospel. The altercations with Barnabas ended with them separating, with John Mark accompanying Barnabas (who happened to also to be his cousin) on his journey. Paul and Barnabas chose to manage their disagreement by separating. However, the focal point of their debate was the mission that God had assigned to them.¹⁶

¹⁵ Scot McKnight and Greg Mamula, *Conflict Management, and the Apostle Paul*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ McKnight and Mamula, chapter 1.

Undeterred from his mission, Paul did not lose sight of the usefulness of his relationship with John Mark and Barnabas. Paul was mindful of the fact that both men were important to continuing the work of expanding the church. He recognizes John Mark as a fellow worker to the church at Colossae and instructs them to welcome him in.¹⁷ He calls for him to be brought to him in Rome because he was useful to him in ministry.¹⁸ And as for his initial missionary companion, Barnabas, Paul references the worth of his partner's labor along with his own efforts in his justification for financial support of their ministry work.¹⁹ Consequently, Paul did not walk away from his mission and he did not permanently forsake John Mark and Barnabas. What began as Paul's turbulent encounters with the brethren concluded with his validation of their existing relationship. His response crystallizes the point that there is no single method for resolution. In fact, the answer to overcoming opposition will always be in our willingness to trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide us through conflict. A divine strategy for working through difficulty will cause us to remain connected to our purpose to be unified and we can emerge as a stronger community. Undoubtedly, heaven's answer to our differences will always manifest a resolution that ministers peace, reconciliation, and healing to the hearts of the saints.

¹⁷ Colossians 4:10-11 (NKJV).

¹⁸ 2Timothy 4:11 (NKJV).

¹⁹ 1Corinthians 9:6 (AMP).

Chapter Three

Confronting the Pain

Early in my career, I served as a mediator. I heard grievances on anything from housing disputes to wrongful terminations. I frequently opened the session with an anecdote of the importance of having a productive session stating, “if you turn your back to each other, you cannot confront the issues you have with each other.” I wanted the parties to understand that if their problems were going to be resolved, they would have to do the hard work of facing their situation head-on, speaking honestly, and working through the tough areas to find the best way forward. I drew on those experiences as I wrote this chapter.

I share a montage of ministry scenarios I have encountered during my work in church leadership development. All names in the examples and situations discussed are composite types and are not based on any particular person, community or situation. Each situation illustrates the challenges in the interworking of leadership communities based on interactions I gathered with various church workers. The circumstances are framed by telling what happened, examining the behavior of the leaders in conflict, and locating the pressure points in their story. There were points of commonality throughout my conversations. I found that as the people talked about their situations, they began to recognize the misaligned condition of their environment. Moreover, they expressed to me what they discovered about themselves and their community. Episodes ended with some form of breakthrough, so I have included the knowledge acquired and theological lessons

learned from each church leader that led them (and their ministries) to a deeper commitment toward healing division, building genuine relationships, and moving their community toward spiritual wholeness.

We're the Shiny Thing No One Wants to Help

Reverend Gail, pastoral leader for Little Lambs children's ministry, was sitting at my desk when I walked into my office from lunch. My office was closest to the conference room so I would often have unscheduled guests stopping in for a moment to visit or to raid my candy jar. The latter was always my excuse for a hefty inventory of Strawberry Twizzlers (personal favorite) on hand. She said she needed a place to decompress after having sat through a two-hour debriefing session of the church's annual Summer Open House weekend. RG, as she is known, was shaking her head in disbelief as she began to have an audible conversation with herself:

“Everyone knows that the Little Lambs draw people to the church, especially those young families. People say that it's such a great ministry. Children are learning about Jesus and they're thriving. It looks that way on the outside, but there aren't enough resources or manpower put into it to make it flourish the way it can. Since I accepted this role, I've felt like my ministry team is looked down upon even though we are the shiny thing that brings families to the church.”

RG brought me into the heat of the meeting with her account of her fellow leader's disposition toward the events of the weekend. This year's open house was the largest yet, with over two thousand people touring the ministry facility and many families completing membership interest cards. The leaders agreed that the weekend's dog and pony show should be given a grade of B- for execution and event success. Consequently, they thought it would be helpful to walk through the weekend's trouble spots with RG. The

most significant accusation raised was her limited foresight in not staffing sufficiently to manage the crowds attending the popular event. Annoyed by their criticism, she countered every point they raised with her own grievances. She fired back:

“We needed help from all departments for this event because as a ministry staff, we’re only three fulltime employees trying to pull this off. None of your departments wanted to help. We made timeslots for every task, and we gave you resources to assist in helping us, but your people flaked out even though they signed the schedule.”

She concluded her charge telling them how her team was left to their own devices on how to get things accomplished. Consequently, the weekend left the guests underserved, her team exhausted and feeling deflated.

I do not want to believe that the leaders were intentionally trying to leave RG and her team in dire straits. They praised the ministry team during Sunday services. But their lack of connection to this part of the church body reflected their irresponsible handling of ministry servants. The leadership was not compelled to show support for the children’s ministry. Instead of being appreciated for their work, they are treated as wrapping paper for the church. The department is the shiny object, enticing enough to increase the church roll, but not seen as the part of the gift of community that nurtures the little hearts of those whom Jesus loves so dearly.

The debrief session left RG feeling perplexed. She wondered why it seemed so difficult for her fellow church leaders to stop criticizing and start caring more. She needed their help, and they were focused on the product of her ministry’s labor and not the people who make it all happen. I offered her thoughts from Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome. His message was sent to them as guidelines for living out their faith

daily. His instruction, to love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor, portrays a spiritual community where love flows reciprocally, showing deference towards the other in self-sacrificing acts of care.¹ The notion of going beyond ourselves in order to encourage and elevate others, reflects a faithfulness to Christ's teachings that serves as a mirror for the church. What is revealed is our struggle with relinquishing control to others and letting go from the heart. We refuse to entrust our innermost thoughts and feelings for fear of exposing vulnerabilities we work so hard to conceal. This conundrum distorts our perception of relationship with fears that blind us to the grace of living in community. We find in Romans 12:10 a grounding for the soul. Paul instructs the Christian community how to think about each other; respectfully, lovingly. And in doing so, we are free to fully immerse ourselves in ministry to each other, confident that we are held safe in the compassionate care of our community.

When we lose sight of what it means to live in community, we diminish the contributions of others, esteeming individual pursuits higher than the goal of belonging to community itself. Placing the message of showing honor within the context of the leadership community requires a commitment to see and receive each other respectfully, exceeding expectations in the concern we show to each other. It is offering praise for the gifts of the Body, not minimizing service to the church through disparaging remarks. I found it troubling that RG's leadership sensed no imbalance between their behavior toward their fellow servant leader and their reasonable service to God. Selfish decisions take no account for the health of the community that Christ greatly values. If the pastoral

¹ Romans 12:10 (NRSV).

team had esteemed RG's ministry as a gift to the church, there would be no lack of hands to extend in service.

I could tell that Pastor RG was carrying more than the frustration of the confrontational debriefing. We sat in silence for a moment. I chose to honor her feelings and allow her the space to empty herself of the hurtful episode she'd just recounted and to offload the lingering heaviness I heard in her voice. She sighed and began again. She told me she realized that not only was the ministry used as a draw for the church, but she also was the shiny thing displayed. From her advanced degree to her seasoned years of experience, she knew she looked good on paper. When her predecessor left the church (a story she did not want to unpack), they plucked her from the volunteer pool offering her the fulltime position of ministry leader, complete with the title of Pastor. With no training in the role of pastoral leader, she soon discovered that she would need to figure out the job without any the assistance of the church. As a result of the team's hard work and booming children's ministry, church attendance increased, but recognition and resources did not. She told her team:

“We're going to rely on the Holy Spirit. We're going to rely on God to help us and we're going to find inventive ways to make things work in our ministry. Because there's no one out there to help us.”

She noted to me how the congregation marveled at how well her ministry operated with such a small staff. They had no idea what it cost the heart and soul of that community.

When RG was done, she felt ready to bring her issues to the senior pastor. In the weeks that followed, she reached out to me to thank me for the time we spent together and give me the promising news of the church leaders striving to repair what had been

broken among them. The senior pastor took to heart every word RG shared. Their initial discussion about the emotional condition of RG and her ministry team was a jolt to the pastor's God consciousness. He admitted that he had been extremely focused on the strategic planning for church growth. In his distraction, he was not spiritually attuned to discern the leadership team's lack of sensitivity to RG's cry for help. He confessed that his treatment of the Little Lambs ministry did not properly communicate the respect they deserved. Swift changes came with the pastor cultivating a community of helps among the leaders. He introduced a service-based exchange program that assigned ministry leaders to participate at some level in the engagement of all other church ministry events. No department would ever again need help on his watch. He set the example of praising leaders and team ministry members individually, using phrases that expressed significance stating, "I see you. I value you." RG's courage to confront the issue and the senior pastor's acknowledgment of the poor treatment of her team set the trajectory for a new leadership team anchored in love, respect, and thoughtfulness.

RG's story proves the importance of group awareness and the necessary sensitivity for living in community. When we direct our time disproportionately towards amassing members and staffing roles, we may find ourselves neglecting people called to serve the church. Our roles must include nourishing the heart of the community by fostering a spirit of mindfulness toward each other. The actions of the church leaders mirrored the values reflected by the senior pastor. The heightened priority of honoring others changed the values of their community. The authenticity of their transformed attitude brought a wholeheartedness to how they lived out their beliefs; showing up for

each other and shifting their attention from the self-serving motives of shiny distractions to serving in the light of the Christ-centered community.

We Have No Connection and I Don't Care

She landed her dream job. A chance meeting in the church bookstore brought Yvette into an opportunity that seemed custom fit for her. She and her future boss, the administrative pastor, chatted in line about the church's withering ministry, the Women's Outreach Circle (WOC), and how they needed someone to boost them up a bit. The pastor was aware of Yvette's experience leading small group Bible study. Her contributions were known to bring a fresh way of thinking about the scriptures. She knew how to get people excited about studying the Bible, and that made her classes very popular, often requiring waitlists. The pastor wasted no time hashing out particulars. He offered Yvette a job on the spot to assume a fulltime staff position of associate pastor of Outreach with the responsibility of overseeing the recovery of the WOC. The pastor gave her the flexibility to create her own office hours. He let her know that her compensation package included a laptop, an assigned parking space, and his solid support for cutting through any bureaucratic red tape that may bog down the momentum she was certain to generate. Yvette jumped at the offer to put her gifts to work.

Soon after her new role was announced to the congregation, women began enlisting to join her in the charge to rebuild the WOC. Yvette got to work mobilizing her team and communicating her vision for the path forward. On her reputation alone, she amassed a group of workers that equaled the entire church volunteer pool. She drew from

the strengths of her members to set an infrastructure in place. Under her leadership and in one year's time, she had job duties assigned, training manuals created, a marketing blitz, and a plan for an elaborate roll out of the refreshed WOC.

Yvette came to my office to ask me to speak at the relaunch. I was impressed with the tremendous achievement of her ministry, so I agreed to participate. Yvette thanked me and added a zinger that she conveniently left out of her request. "Listen," she said, "I don't want to tell you what to say, but I have some things that need to be said at the ceremony that I think it will sound better coming from you." I felt both manipulated and curious by the caveat. "Why don't you tell me what is really going on here," I responded, strongly reconsidering my acceptance to speak. Yvette knew that she needed to be real if she wanted me to be a part of the festivities, so she gave me a behind the scenes account of the difficulty she faced working with associate pastors who constantly questioned her work. She attributed their behavior to jealousy. She was turning around a broken ministry and she was too busy to address their pettiness, saying, "I should care that we're at odds, but I don't."

The rapid reawakening of WOC came as a surprise to her colleagues, including her boss. No one expected the ministry to rebound from failing to flourishing so quickly. But the ministry success was causing tension between the leaders. Yvette's freedom to conduct her position as she chose struck a nerve with her associates. She worked from home; coming and going as she pleased. She spent very little time at leadership meetings due to her nonstop engagement of WOC. The boss who pledged to push through requests found Yvette challenging to work with because she was unwilling to hold his hand over

every order and invoice she presented. She resorted to going over his head for approvals and as a result, she was now at odds with her immediate boss, along with the other leaders. The news that Yvette was able to work around the customary approval process did not win her any alliances with her pastoral team. She was undeterred. She felt she was given a God-sized assignment that required focus and thick skin. Her goal was advancing the Kingdom through the expansion of the WOC. In her mind, the ministry's success was evidence that she was in her lane, doing the Lord's work. The months of pouring into the assignment were finished, and now the time had come to let the church see what she and her team had been doing. After hearing her story, I asked her what she wanted me to say at the relaunch. She replied:

“I would like for you to use the Nehemiah story as a backdrop to point out how my team and I rebuilt the ministry in record time in the face of adversaries. People can read between the lines.”

I was shocked by her arrogance, but I've learned to hold my facial expressions steady when hearing comments that make me cringe. I'm sure my answer equally surprised her.

I agreed with Yvette that the book of Nehemiah was a fitting reference for the ceremony. The Old Testament narrative portrays a textbook illustration of the capabilities of a unified community guided by visionary leadership and empowered by the Spirit of God. Her story, however, was not the exemplar she imagined. Yvette's telling of events described glaring disconnection with her colleagues and her self-serving blind spots that are not part of Nehemiah's story. The strides she made in reconstructing the ministry produced a counterculture that communicated disregard for others and promoted compartmentalized ministry. She stared at me puzzled, so I tried to further explain.

The book of Nehemiah opens with him learning that the walls surrounding Jerusalem lay in ruins. The condition of the walls left the city unprotected and an easy target for attack. The news troubled him to the point that he had to respond. But it is his approach to what he heard that reveals his heart connection to the people as well as the task. Nehemiah wept and mourned for days. He fasted and prayed before God.² From the beginning, he demonstrates a concern for his homeland that drives him to commit himself to help them. He is sorrowful over the devastation and condition of the community returning from exile. He intercedes in prayer for the people. Nehemiah recognizes the restoration of his beloved community will require the hand of God to direct him, and the involvement of others to help rebuild. He needed buy-in from his countrymen to commit to do the work. He also understood the importance of communicating his vision to key authorities (officials, priests, nobles), to manage obstacles and provide support. Nehemiah had the ability to carry laypeople and leaders with him through the process because he cast the vision for everyone to embrace. If it was to be done, it would be done together in community.

In contrast, Yvette's account reveals her lack of awareness that her God-sized assignment was missing a God-assigned strategy. She knew what she needed to execute the rebuild but not whom she needed. Our call to serve God is not dismissive of others but seeks to include, assigning a place and use for every gift. Her indifference toward her colleagues served to widen the gap between them; making it difficult for them to see themselves playing an integral role in the journey. Yvette worked around her coworkers

² Nehemiah 1:4 (NRSV).

in the same manner as she had done with any other perceived opposition to her plan. Her attitude had sown seeds of discord within her own field, making it difficult to gain the support, trust, and the emotional infilling she would certainly need from her leadership team going forward.

Yvette understood the dissimilarity of the two stories. She admitted that she had gotten so wrapped up in the excitement of the new assignment that she had walled herself in. She reflected on how she works in community stating:

“Because I’m working alone, I’m not focused on anything else. I’m not pushing information out to anyone but those whom I believe need to know. I’m not looking at the big picture here. I didn’t mourn the deterioration of the WOC. I jumped in and got to work. I’ve been laser focused. Guilty as charged. I need to repent.”

We talked a bit longer about the need to repair the damaged working relationships. In the process, Yvette realized that she had major infrastructure work of her own that needed attending. She thought it best to take some time off after the launch to be still before God, realign her priorities and reengage her heart for the community.

The encounter with Yvette holds the message of Nehemiah up to a fresh light that draws attention to how the church responds to the condition of the walls of our community that lay in ruins due to neglect.³ If we overlook the maintenance to keep ourselves spiritually attuned to God’s leading, we lose sight of the corporate vision. Left unchecked, we open our communities up to the enemy of division to attack our intentions, emotions, and relationships. For this cause, we must be fully aware of our

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Nashville: Word Pub, 1998), 12

personal condition by asking ourselves questions to clarify our motives. Why am I pursuing this project? What is driving me to give my gifts and abilities to this work? Have I harnessed my ego enough to serve without needing personal affirmation? Our answers reveal the truest part of how and why we serve our neighbor. As Christian leaders actively involved in the life of the church, we use these questions to purify our intentions and spiritually locate us. We cannot do the work of helping others mend their torn down walls until we do the work in our own souls. The Holy Spirit guides the work of reconstruction inside us, so we surrender ourselves to the process of inspecting our ruins and walking with God on the pathway to wholeness.

Living in community, we can expect to go through seasons of stretching, straining, and strengthening. God meets us in the context of our leadership and uses the uneasiness of stretching us beyond what we can see in ourselves to draw out of us the strengthen person who leads and serves from the heart.⁴ We are imperfect people learning to trust our authentic selves within the safety zone of our community. God meets us in community and uses our experiences, gifts, and interactions with others to shape us into Christ-centered leaders. In the process, we are healed as we serve. With compassion, we extend our concern toward others and the ruins of their broken walls. Forgetting ourselves on purpose, we seek the betterment of our brothers and sisters. And like Nehemiah, we weep over the condition of the people, pray for their broken places, and start the work of restoration. Together, we lay hold to our sameness in Christ, to build

⁴ Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 25.

back the broken places of our community and journey toward a deeper relationship with each other.

A Church with Tribes

Ministry leaders of a local church, Abundant Love Community, asked me to conduct a teambuilding session for them as part of an offsite planning event. Their team was a subgroup of the rapidly growing church that promotes itself as a nondenominational church, that welcomes people of all ages, races, and ethnic origin. As a result of the church's growing popularity, the membership tripled in eighteen months requiring them to purchase an adjacent facility to accommodate the attendance overflow and provide more classroom space. The church's positive cash flow allowed them to fully fund their purchases outright, thanks to the members' generous giving and the shrewd financial team of born-again accountants and financial advisors who are dedicated members of the Abundant Love congregation. The organizational infrastructure was scaled to better serve the membership by instituting ministry subgroups, comprised of a pastoral lead, a lay leader, and several volunteers. Ministry subgroups operated as the primary point of contact for church organizations so that all ministry services, ten in total, would have immediate and personal access to their own leadership support subgroup.

The church executive board has a balanced complement of senior ministry leaders and accomplished business professionals. They use their expertise and networking affiliations to build relationships with government entities and influence community development projects and promote social change initiatives. Abundant Love's dynamic

expansion has made it a model for neighboring churches to emulate by the demonstration of their commitment to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the people in their community. On the face of things, the church seemed to have it all together, but the leadership team disclosed to me a different story.

The church subgroups worked independently. They come together only when necessary. Preparing details for worship service, for example, leaders join forces to conduct services and then return to their respective subgroups the next day. They describe themselves as a church of tribes. They explained how each subgroup attends to its own ministry projects and manages their village with very little interaction with other ministry subgroups. But if a tribe gets attacked, they band together to fight as one. A recent shipping error highlighted the church's tribal culture. The dramatic arts ministry was overrun with multiple pallets of building materials dropped off in the church parking lot. The order was submitted for one pallet, but they erroneously received one thousand pallets, and the delivery company refused to take the order back. A call for assistance went out to all subgroup leaders, and in short order, the materials were moved to another location. Crisis averted, the members returned to living autonomously, without celebration, cheers, or appreciation for the group effort.

Adding to their gap in connectivity, the subgroups are not given opportunity to be creative together. Subgroup leaders have no operational meetings suggesting that the church does not support the benefit of a healthy exchange of innovative ideas to further wrap their arms around the needs of the growing congregation. Months go by without any interaction across departments. Consequently, people don't know each other. They are in

the dark about what is happening in the lives of their colleagues. The members of the tribe may tend to those within their group, but the church culture of separation by subgroup, keeps the leaders relationally estranged. In the past, the subgroups tried to break out the tribe formation, but complacency outweighed the drive to change. The tribal arrangement allowed them a great deal of latitude in decision making, so there was no reason to disrupt what appeared to be working. Therefore, subgroups maintained the same group dynamics and continued to recognize themselves as tribes. For now, the church's decision to operate their subgroups under tribal dynamics has shown no outward effects of group harm. But ultimately, this approach erodes the foundation of the spiritual community by pulling people apart and threatening the process of bringing together leaders in their service to each other, the church, and the greater community.

As a church leader, I find it problematic to view ministries through the lens of tribalism because it endorses a system of segregating people around their own opinions and draws them away from their loyalty to the spiritual community. It may suggest rejections and exclusions. Some people are in a group and others are out. Such action damages our ability to build relationships in the church and taints our witness to nonbelievers who already scrutinize the authenticity of our faith.⁵ Further, promoting tribalism as an acceptable configuration of the spiritual community neglects the aggregate needs of the community and pushes against a shared identity in Christ.

⁵ Ed Stetzer, "Tribalism Outside the Church. And In.," *The Exchange with Ed Stetzer* (blog), *Christianity Today*, April 23, 2018, accessed April 8, 2021, Reprinted by *Black Christian News*. <https://blackchristiannews.com/2018/04/ed-stetzer-on-tribalism-outside-and-inside-the-church/>.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatian church (themselves composed of diverse backgrounds), articulates the church's mission toward unity in the body, stating, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.⁶ The message cuts through the separating walls of class, gender, and status, to affirm their new relationship as members of the body of Christ. Every person is seen and accepted the same in the family of God. Our attitude toward Paul's message should persuade us to resist the formation of church tribes, that encourages division, and embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ; sensitive to each one's needs, with equal treatment and care.

I delivered the teambuilding session they requested. Our time together centered on ways to reimagine their workgroups as service areas with cross departmental opportunities to bolster strength of the entire church leadership team. They discovered how the way they were approaching their ministry work did not model a Christ-centered team. They understood that focusing their energy and interests inside their subgroup had made them prideful in their own accomplishments and alienated them from the greater community. The subgroup's after-action work is underway. They have taken their first steps toward repairing disunity by reinterpreting their interactions with fellow subgroups. They chose to learn more about other ministries by inviting leaders to collaborate on projects and celebrating it as a practice of community. The subgroups worked at entertaining ideas across ministry lines to involve different perspectives and create churchwide operational strategies. It was a new experience for the leadership team. And

⁶ Galatians 3:28 (NKJV).

although the church chose not to restructure the organizational layout of ministry teams, there was intentionality on the part of the leaders to see themselves as co-laborers, connecting across subgroups, pursuing unity in Christ.

Chapter Four

Roadmap for Repair

The aim of this chapter is to introduce learning applications that help facilitate the rebuilding and strengthening of relational connections among the community of church leaders. The lessons are designed to be utilized for church leadership development training. The sessions target church leaders at different levels of tenure and leadership experience. The intention is to layout a training platform that bring leaders together under the shared belief that learning how to be with each other is a practiced skill. If we are willing to do the relational work of listening to each other in a common space, and recognizing Immanuel joining us there, it will position us for meaningful exchanges. Learning to honor the gifts of that each member offers, enlarges the space we share by receiving each other in Christ's love. As we come together in God's presence for the purpose of restoring community, God draws us to Himself. And through Christ, we are restored to a life that calls us to trust in the sustaining power of God to hold us in community and to lavish upon our brothers and sisters the agape love of Christ.

The training platform is entitled "Drawing Tools," as the intention of the sessions is to offer educational instruments that draw participants into spiritual conversations introspectively, with each other, and the divine. Drawing Tools incorporates learning strategies that guide leaders along a path to strong authentic interconnections by focusing the learning through storytelling, and retreat. I have written these activities as spiritual

practices for their ability to inspire a sense of belonging to each other and to our greater heritage, the family of God.

The first drawing tool suggested is a group activity entitled, “Connecting Stories.”¹ This application of the learning strategy suggests a fresh approach to storytelling in community by bringing our life experiences alongside the stories of God working in community.² The interaction of God and humanity in story offers a relatability that inspires and touches us. Storytelling in community gives place for listening and learning. Listening to the narrative of others, we express value for their lived experiences. When we honor the retelling of stories in community, we create room for people to heal, bond and hopefully entrust their heart to others.

The second tool I will introduce is offering retreat as a practice to repair community. I submit that retreat becomes a spiritual practice by claiming it as an activity of withdrawing from one’s normal rhythm of life to enter a focused time with God. It is taking time away to be still and assume a posture of openness, wherein God meets us. In this space, we are changed. God reorients our lives to bring us into truer reflections of who we are and how we are to live.³

¹ Connecting Stories format is inspired by Story Linking activity, Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, Rev. ed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005). Prologue: The Quest for Liberation and Hope Building Vocation. Kindle.

² Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, Rev. ed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), Chapter 1. Kindle.

³ R. Ruth Barton, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 144.

Storytelling as Drawing Tool

Storytelling is a means of communicating who we are. We share our lives in story form by tying events and memories. Our involvement with people, time and places come together in a story that shape our experiences, and collectively, become part of the makeup of how we interpret life⁴. For example, we build a narrative about how we are influenced by people, the media, or our last bad decision. The stories we tell ourselves about these things inform and give meaning to us. Sharing stories that carry similarities to the story of another, can bridge our understanding. Moreover, as we are honest in recounting our stories, and share our vulnerabilities, it helps us build community.⁵ As we place our life story in the context of God's story of love and redemption, it informs our Christian culture. It draws the listener into fellowship with the storyteller, and they find mutuality through their shared faith and recounting of story.

As an African American, I cannot discuss storytelling without bringing attention to the place it holds in the creation of Black church culture.⁶ Slaves were taken from the shores of Africa from various tribes, and they spoke different languages and dialects. Forced to find a way to communicate with each other, they used storytelling to express themselves. Although slaves learning to read could get them killed, they risked their lives to learn and commit words to memory.⁷ With faith forged in the crucible of their

⁴ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (Jossey Bass Inc, 2001), 4.

⁵ Anderson and Foley, 18.

⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "On His New Series, 'The Black Church'", hosted by Leah Nagly, interviewed by Jeffery Brown, *PBS News Hour*, PBS, February 15, 2021, video, 6:43, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/henry-louis-gates-jr-on-his-new-series-the-black-church>.

⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "On His New Series, 'The Black Church'".

suffering, the slaves secretly fixed in their heart Bible passages to encourage them of a better day. They believed that someday their tormented life would be swallowed up and they would live in peace with Jesus in their new home in heaven. Slaves would recite verses to each other in the manner that fit their circumstance.⁸ Sermons carried dual meaning. The retelling of Bible stories in the context of their burdened lives carried an eschatological message of a future hope that would end their suffering. And to the discerning listener, they understood the stories were code for planned escapes or brought word of safe passage for runaways.

The tradition of storytelling has passed down from one generation to the next.⁹ Testimony service as a form of storytelling, for example, plays a prominent role in Black church service, placed primarily as before the sermon. Members line up and wait to be recognized, then share their story of God's activity in their lives. Someone is healed, a marriage saved, an unemployed person has been hired. Their stories provide points of witness for the congregation as the testimonies foster a familial bond that sets them as Christian brothers and sisters with a shared history. They perceive themselves as part of the same story, expressing their personal version of a life framed by imperfections, mistakes, and in need of God.

The storytelling continues as pastors take to the pulpit to preach with prophetic imagination that refashions the stories of the Bible to meet people of color in the context of our lives. The use of narrative theology makes the scriptures relatable as we see

⁸ Gates, video.

⁹ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, 5.

ourselves in God’s story and identify with Jesus as our deliverer, who identifies with our suffering and bought our freedom with His sacrificial death. The theme of storytelling by connecting the sacred and the secular is so prominent in the African American church experience that I have chosen this motif to create the drawing tool of stories. The program structure sets storytelling around a topic of interest in church, in conversation with a biblical text.¹⁰ The stories give voice to a third story, that of an African American exemplar whose efforts contribute to the topic from outside the biblical story. This pattern of “story-linking” connects our African American Christian story to God’s story.¹¹

The intention of Connecting Stories, therefore, is to guide the process of examining places of connectivity through narrative. Through the power of Christian love, we explore shared values and support our respective African American Christian journey.¹² This storytelling model is not designed solely to bring awareness to the connecting stories of African American heritage. It is possible to recreate the model for any group of people if it reflects the ethos of their story, providing them entrance into the stories of others that they may uncover places where their stories relate.

Connecting Stories Lesson Guide and Overview

Connecting stories addresses points of commonality in the story of church leaders’ interaction, within God’s story of a caring community, and alongside reflections

¹⁰ Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, Chapter 1. Kindle.

¹¹ Wimberly, Chapter 1.

¹² Wimberly, Chapter 1.

by theologian, Howard Thurman. His story tells of the encounter with societal goodwill during the racially charged sixties. The narratives draw attention to experiences that carry with it the tension of desiring to serve safely from our comfort zone but risking discomfort nevertheless, to help someone unlike ourselves.

The participants take turns recounting a time when they became a gift of service to someone that required them to extend beyond their normal limitation. It is possible that the first time this activity is conducted that members may be apprehensive to express themselves in front of others, so as facilitator, you may share a personal story to get people more comfortable with the exercise. Another suggestion is to engage a case study, such as the one I have included in my thesis. By nature of its design, the case study does not provide a resolution. Rather, we reflect on the information and determine how we would approach the situation if it had happened to us. Case studies let us voice our thoughts on what occurred without requiring an answer.¹³ Creating story through a case study drawn on church situations can open a new way for leaders to talk to each other. Our time together helps us locate ourselves, our joys, our disappointments. And in the liberty of the Spirit, our group dialogue flows freely, building trust that moves us closer to becoming a unified community within our shared ecclesial story.

¹³ Kenneth L. Swetland, *Facing Messy Stuff in the Church: Case Studies for Pastors and Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 10.

Session Introduction

This session is divided into three storytelling activities: case study, reading of biblical text, and a short story. Each activity follows a similar format of reading, reflection, and response. The stories will be read together out loud by the facilitator. But the biblical text and the exemplar narrative will be read a second time in small groups. Breakout groups can be two to four people, preferably whose roles don't usually require that they work closely together in church activities. In their breakout groups, they will reflect on what messages they heard communicated. Participants will respond to the discussion questions that follow each story, listening for how they saw God together in the stories. Facilitators should prepare the setting in a spirit of hospitality by welcoming participants as they enter, providing them handouts of each story and notetaking materials.

Instructions

Introduce the case study activity stating that it provides a platform for participants to walk together through a typical church issue. Emphasize that the case study is not based on real people or a real church community. It is a training tool created with fictitious characters. Let them know that engaging the case study should provide an interactive exchange. They will talk about problematic areas and read for understanding. In their groups they will respond to the case study questions and discuss their answers against the backdrop of their own ministry context. Begin the exercise by reading the case study aloud. Invite participants to follow along on their handout.

Case Study

Solid Rock Community Church has served the community for thirty years. It has a membership of approximately three hundred on record but welcomes about half that number for Sunday service. The congregation's make up reflects a modest number of families with small children, a smattering of single adults, and considerably more middle-aged couples.

Over the years, the church has been fondly recognized as the place with a rock-solid commitment to loving God and neighbor. The church proudly erected a marquee years earlier that encapsulates the sentiment that boasts, hearts to love and hands to serve. But the message stated outside on the signboard has begun to wane inside the walls of the church. Something wasn't right. The pastor, Rick, was standing before a congregation that was declining, not in membership, but in concern. There appears to be a disconnect from the pulpit to the pew that is preventing the members from taking hold to the sermons and receiving it as necessary for their spiritual life. Week after week, the congregation just sits there, as if a cloud of indifference was hanging over them. There was a lack of interest and energy around the church's community outreach. This was particularly troubling to Rick because Solid Rock had been a major contributor to many of the town's social programs. The church's lethargy became overwhelming for Rick, and he resolved that it was time to shake things up. The radical plan he envisioned would include the church leaders' participation to help bring the congregation back around. He believed that if he could get ministry leaders excited about feeding the hungry and homeless in their community, they could carry that renewed enthusiasm to their church

volunteers. The workers would then pass their excitement along to their family members, and so on. Subsequently, the hearts of the membership would begin to thaw. Sharing the love of Christ would ignite the fire within, and they could again become a community with hearts that love and hands to serve.

Rick's strategy for revitalizing church leaders was to implement an innovative way of looking at church ministries and ministry leaders. He named the new initiative, Ministry Share. His plan would give them up close exposure to the work of their fellow leaders. They would shadow the host ministry leader to observe them at work and assist if requested. The idea was to encourage cross ministry alliances so they would recognize the value and necessity of each person's gifts in the service of caring for others. In this way, leaders will have a deeper appreciation for how that ministry demonstrates Christ's love. They will become more acquainted with their fellow leaders and be willing to show their support to pitch in when there was a call for help.

Rick announced his plan for Ministry Share at a leader's meeting. He began by recounting what he perceived as a dryness in the congregation that attributed to the lackluster participation with their outreach programs. He explained that his approach was intended to breathe life into the church leader's work and to invite them to briefly share their ministry space with a colleague. For a maximum of ten service hours, Rick requested that ministry leaders enter the flow of another ministry to get an appreciation of how it works. Rick rolled out the benefits of his plan, laying out how the host leader gets a fresh set of eyes observing their ministry work (helpful in identifying smarter ways of operating), there would be more helping hands, and they would get to know each other a

little better. The pairing would be voluntary. The pastor's office would create a Ministry Share sheet that would be placed in the administrative office for leaders to sign up. The sheet listed the names of all church ministries with a brief description of their function. There would be a line by each ministry so leaders could make their choice of which ministry to shadow. The experience would not begin until all ministries had been selected for pairing. Rick suggested that they pray and read through all the ministries listed and then sign up for one that serves in a completely different area than their own. For example, the ministry leader responsible for running the food pantry may choose to shadow the leader of children's ministry. His hope was that the church leaders would sense that Ministry Share was an opportunity God was offering to join Him with the host leader in another area of kingdom work.

He was pumped. It was clear to the leaders that this seemed like a good idea to Rick, but to those who felt their ministries and everything about it was fine as it was, his words sounded more like a pitch than a plea for creating change. Leaders shrugged their shoulders and didn't give his idea serious consideration. Getting to know each other is good, they thought, but there was no time to babysit another leader when there was real ministry work they needed to handle.

But it was settled. With little support, Rick forged ahead with implementing the plan. The following Sunday he announced to the congregation that a fresh wind of collaboration and congeniality was blowing through the halls of the church. He proceeded with an overview of the Ministry Share process. He concluded his remarks with his hopeful anticipation that what church leadership learns about being different but

together serving in the same space would infuse their ministries with new life. The congregation listened and responded with their usual humdrum nod.

Rick's decision to launch without buy-in brought him significant challenges. Despite the big signup sheet taped to the office door and flyers thumbtacked along the church hallway, not one ministry leader signed up to participate. The blank signup sheet compounded the leader's dismay because empty lines indicated that no one was interested enough in what others were doing to want to spend time learning about their ministry. The next several leadership meetings brought more disappointment. People said very little, mostly shuffled papers, and anxiously stared at the clock hoping for the meeting to be over. Rick then decided to reach out to the leaders individually to understand why they pushed against the idea so vehemently and to implore them to give Ministry Share a fair shake. They offered him flimsy excuses, as empty as the signup sheet they avoided. Thirty days after the announcement of Ministry Share, it was over. Rick removed the flyers, took down the signup sheet, saddened that the days of heart and hands were apparently long gone.

After the case study is read aloud, the participants will form groups of two to four and respond to the questions that follow the exercise. Allow approximately twenty minutes for discussion.

Share your thoughts on the following questions:

- What do you think about the church's response to Ministry Share when considered with respect to their message of loving God and neighbor? Where do you see God in the study? Who do you identify as neighbor?

- Discuss why the church dealt with their community outreach challenges the way they did from Rick's role as pastor and from the leader's role. Where were the opportunities for identifying with each other and for seeing God together in the church's situation?
- Can you recall a time when you have felt unrecognized or unsupported by someone you served with in ministry? Share the impact of the experience on your ministry.

Reading Biblical Text Together

Jesus heals a paralytic man

After a few days, Jesus went back to Capernaum, and people heard that he was at home. So many gathered that there was no longer space, not even near the door. Jesus was speaking the word to them. Some people arrived, and four of them were bringing to him a man who was paralyzed. They couldn't carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven!"

(Mark 2:1-5 CEB)

After reading the text aloud. Have the participants turn toward their group and reread it together. They should already be seated together after moving previously for the case study discussion. Instruct participants to slowly walk through the verses again, taking their time to capture the imagery of the scene; people crowding the premises, Jesus inside teaching, the activity of the men on the roof trying to make their way to him. After they have read the story in their small group community, have them sit quietly with their feelings to gather their thoughts before responding to the questions listed at the end of the narrative. Allow them approximately twenty minutes to discuss.

Share your thoughts on the following questions:

- What is Jesus teaching you through the story about the practice of helping others, forgiveness, and its relationship to healing community?
- Share an occasion when you have been as the paralytic unable to spiritually make your way to a place in front of Jesus. How did you witness the presence of community and their willingness to meet you in that condition?

- Brainstorm about possibilities that exercising combined faith in community can create.

Connecting Story with Exemplar, Howard Thurman

The final segment of the Connecting Stories session introduces an African American historical figure whose life experiences offer a shared narrative. We will read a story written by author, professor, and theologian, Howard Thurman. His recounting of a telephone exchange with an unknown woman, connects with our own stories of reaching beyond our contentment to aid another in their state of discontentment.

Thurman's illustrious career is traced from professor of Religion at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, to Boston, Massachusetts, where he became the first African American dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel. Later, Thurman held the position of dean of Howard University's chapel. It was during this season that he traveled to India and met with Mohandas Gandhi, whose position on nonviolence strongly influenced his understanding of the role it played in addressing social activism.¹⁴ Upon his return to the United States, he wrote the acclaimed, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. The book articulated Thurman's opinion of the reality and challenges we face attempting to reconcile living our Christian faith in a country divided by racial tension and fear of the other.

Thurman was noticeably absent from the frontlines of the civil rights movement, yet he remains a forerunner in America's history of nonviolent protest for social change.

¹⁴ "The Howard Thurman Digital Archive," accessed October 14, 2021, <https://thurman.pitts.emory.edu>.

Rather than linking arms with highly recognized leaders of the movement, like the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., he took up his pen to communicate a philosophy that argued for locating our similarities in Christ and praying for unity through Christ, who liberates us to become our genuine selves.

She Practices Brotherhood

The telephone rang at seven-fifteen in the morning. And on the other end was a lady whose voice seemed full of years, soft but strong. What she had to say was profoundly stirring: “I am sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, but I wanted to call you before you left the hotel for the day. About ten years ago (I am now sixty-nine) I decided to examine my life to see what, if anything, I could do to put into practice my own convictions about brotherhood. Why I decided this, and not suddenly, I need not say. But I did. The first thing I discovered was that I knew almost nothing about other races in my own city, particularly about Negroes. I went to the library and I was given a small list of books and magazines. I began to work. The things I learned! When it seemed to me that I had my hands on enough facts (and I discovered you don’t need too many facts, because they get in your way), I plotted a course of action. Then I was stumped. What could I do? I had not particular abilities, very little energy, and an extremely modest income. But I did like to talk with people as I met them on the buses and in the stores. I decided that I could spread the facts I had and my own concern among all the people whose lives were touched by mine in direct conversation. It took me some time to develop a simple approach that would not be an intrusion or a discourtesy. For several

years, I have been doing this on the bus riding into town each week, in a department store where I have made my purchases for two decades, and in various other places.

Occasionally, I run into a person in the street who stops to introduce himself and to remind me of a previous meeting. One such person said, ‘I guess you have forgotten, but about four years ago I sat by you on a bus, and I don’t know how the question came up but we talked about the Negroes; and you started me thinking along lines that had never occurred to me. You even gave me the name of a book which I noted and purchased. Since then, I have been instrumental in changing the whole personnel practice of our business on this question. Thanks to you!’”

Continuing, she said, “I know that this is not very much and I guess many people are doing much more. But I thought I would tell you this so that, in your moments of discouragement, you may remember what one simple old lady was doing to help in little ways to right big wrongs. Good-by and God bless you.” She did not give me her name, nor her address; she merely shared her testimony and gave her witness.¹⁵

Re-reading Connecting Stories

After reading the text aloud. Have the participants again turn toward their group and reread it together. You may ask the group members to each read a portion so they can experience the story as listener and participant in the narrative. After the narrative has been reread, instruct the participants to pause and reflect on what they heard, and pay attention to how they felt about what was said. Once all have had an opportunity to

¹⁵ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 127–29.

collect their thoughts, they can move forward with the questions that follow the exercise.

Allow approximately twenty minutes for discussion.

Share your thoughts on the following questions:

- How does this story build your faith in people responding to a need for unity?
Does it encourage you to examine your convictions?
- Talk about a time when someone went out of their way to offer you hope during your distress. How did their actions express your value to community?
- Share a time when you have intentionally sought ways to extend yourself to others to make right the wrongs that impact the quality of their life.

Conclude Connecting Stories Activity

Close the exercise with a prayer to spiritually anchor the participant's work.

Encourage the leaders to revisit their stories together in other settings, as over a shared meal, for example. Emphasize the value of connecting our stories to each other and placing them into God's story. Our efforts will create a shared vision for how we may advance the work of building a stronger, unified Christian community.

The Practice of Retreat

The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. Then Jesus said, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat.

(Mark 6:30-31 NLT)

Explicit in scripture is Jesus’ call for the disciples to join Him in retreat. His appeal to them may have appeared untimely but the call implied this time away was a divine invitation for them to reset their perspective. Mark’s narrative portrays Jesus as an empowering leader who seeks to pour into His followers. He discerns the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the disciples and bids them to withdraw with Him. The call to come away was for their good, though they may have been confused by His timing. They were probably not expecting the conversation to turn from sharing their exciting travelogue to an invitation to rest; especially in the midst of the multitudes gathering about. They had just ended a tour and were probably still in a ministry service mode. What better time to care for the needs of the crowds? Yet, Jesus chose this moment to shift the atmosphere and call them away to Himself for togetherness and restoration.¹⁶ It was not merely the urging of their compassionate leader expressing his concern for them to remove themselves from the clatter of the crowds. It was an invitation from the Good Shepherd to spend time alone *with* Him, not apart from Him. Jesus invited them to be in fellowship together. Further, the text expresses the priority that Jesus places on

¹⁶ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God*, 3.

attending to the welfare of those closest to Him. He understood that their greatest opportunity to be entangled in sin would be right after their triumphant ministry experiences. It is when we least expect it, when our guard is down, that we are most susceptible to the lure of sin that causes us to give attention to our own self efforts. For example, a string of successful ministry events that have no spiritual undergirding of prayer and surrender to God may imply that the plan is aligned with God's vision. We may start believing our own press. But what will you gain if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?¹⁷ When we enter spiritual retreat, we are reminded of our need to maintain connection with Christ, our life source, to restore our soul.

The effectiveness of church retreat as a spiritual practice has been watered down through mixed iterations of its purpose. Having facilitated numerous church retreats, I observed how members dread these events. The notion that we can be spiritually reset by following the Lord's call for rest, is lost on us when we don't perceive retreat as a divine calling away:

For the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said: "You will be delivered by returning and resting; your strength will lie in quiet confidence. But you are not willing."¹⁸

People may be unenthusiastic about retreat because they have been rolled out in a way that caused the opposite effect of what organizers intend. Instead of enjoying the time away to reclaim ourselves, our time away is filled with activities that keep us wound up and countering the rest we need. Who wants to sign up for that? In the first case, framing

¹⁷ Mark 8:36 (CEV).

¹⁸ Isaiah 30:14-16 (CSB).

retreat as attendance mandatory is suspicious, leaving us wondering what is in store that no one should hear about second hand. The image of spiritual retreat I suggest portrays us as being called away to exhale the weariness and inhale God's life-giving breath. We willingly chose to enter retreat. We don't connect with being required to retreat. It constructs a contrary dynamic for how we experience every moment we are away. Requiring attendance causes people to feel out of control of their decision. The idea that there is no way to get out of the event sets a scenario that tells people they will not be in control of their lives for whatever length of time they are offsite. Hence, participants prepare for their retreat by packing their reluctance along with their insect repellent, applying them both liberally to the dismay of those who are trying to make the best of it.

Additionally, the events have agendas filled with morning and evening sessions, breakout groups, and some form of (potentially humiliating) team games.¹⁹ The work and rest itinerary are imbalanced, giving very little time for solitude. While these events are beneficial for providing a fresh space for strategizing, vision casting and exchanging ideas, they can also be stimulating to the extent that no one leaves rested or in touch with their own souls.²⁰ Hence, the events are fashioned more as offsite work sessions and less as spiritual retreat. The rigorous schedule takes more energy to stay plugged in than it does to engage in fulltime work at the church.

Undistracted time away allows us to hear more clearly the gentle whispers of the Spirit calling us to deeper introspection. In God's presence, we move from the focus of

¹⁹ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God*, 4.

²⁰ Barton, 4.

self to setting our eyes on Christ. In the sanctity of the space, we are shaped into a greater likeness of Christ. As we feel safe resting in Him, we empty ourselves of life's toxicities and drink in the refreshing water of the Spirit.

I was surprised by my own longing for spiritual renewal, until leaving my office and getting away from the nonstop pace of my world of church, meetings, home, errands, wash, rinse, repeat. I decided to take some time away to gather my thoughts and hammer out the details of an upcoming church workshop.²¹ I shifted my calendar around and left town for a monastery in a nearby town. Little did I know that my decision to get away to work was really a divine summons to spend time in God's presence. I checked into my room, unpacked my bags, and plopped myself into a chair facing a beautifully landscaped garden. I stared out the window until the sun dropped below the trees. Sitting in the darkness of my sparse little room, I sensed the dryness of my condition. I was tired. My schedule left little room for self-care. Certainly, the quality of my relationships was feeling the effect of my whirlwind life. The perception that my work was important or even productive began to dissolve as I listened to the soft voice calling me to change my plans. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.²² God's invitation diagnosed the state of my soul and offered me healing, rest, and recalibration, as I set my pace to His. I spent the next few days surrendered to His process by giving myself to retreat. I ate, slept, journaled, and took

²¹ Event inspired by R. Ruth. Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, 24.

²² Matthew 11:28-29 (NIV).

prayer walks. I never touched my laptop, but I returned to my office with rekindled passion for knowing God, myself, and my community.

Time spent in spiritual retreat makes discernable the vague places in our service; the lack of excitement, the routineness, and the reckless care of others that cause calloused hearts. Spending time in the vibrance of the Light, reveals truths about who we really are, not the made-up persona, but the actual person that Christ died for. We set our face towards God, and we let go of false pretense. We get real. God draws us to God's self from our places of hidden brokenness into His transforming presence where we begin to see ourselves as God sees us; as priceless, beloved, belonging to God and each other.

Here in lies a glorious mystery of the making of Christian community that is created during retreat. When we quiet ourselves to rest in God, we uncover our true emotions, our heart, and our will. We give Him our true selves, safely placed at the feet of Jesus. He meets us there, breathes afresh on us and makes us whole. We emerge healed and more willing to give our whole, healed selves to other. Our strength is renewed, and we re-enter our communities with clarity and passion to make them more Christlike. Our focus shifts from demonstrating an image of the Christian community whose strength is found in the work of the church, to acknowledging Christ in each person and serving them with selfless interdependence.

Spiritual Retreat Structure

The schedule for spiritual retreat should reflect a commitment to giving participants time to rest in God. It should also create space and opportunity for self-care,

as well as time for group interaction. The objective is to allow participants to respond to Jesus' call to come away with Him to rest, be refreshed and restored in their soul. In doing so, they will be more deeply grounded in God, and will return to reconnect with their community with renewed strength, vitality, and clarity about how they are called to be in God for the world.²³ I note here that leaders should schedule a retreat as part of their personal well-being. They are encouraged to continue the practice of engaging in times of spiritual renewal to maintain wholistic life balance. However, the retreat structured as a tool for community repair is designed for church leaders to attend as a group. The format I offer here promotes retreat as time apart, away with God, yet together in worship, not church work. Further, I suggest a tripartition guide of the schedule that is designed to honor their response to Jesus' call to come away with Him: (1) for soul care, quiet and rest, (2) for a self-awareness, examining our identity in Christ, (3) for group share, interaction with other retreat members. In total, spiritual retreats use the power of intimate time with God and with others to minister wholeness to participants and guide them into stronger more authentic community relationships.

Soul Care

The soul care segment is intended to provide participants with uninterrupted time where they may give God their full attention. The prophet Isaiah describes a state of well-being that carries a condition of keeping one's mind on Christ: You will keep in perfect

²³ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, 115.

peace all who trust in you, all whose thought are fixed on you.²⁴ He places our happiness, wellness, wholeness, and faith alongside the action of looking to Christ. We need reminding that fixing our mind upon Christ brings us into a safe atmosphere where we can be present and real with our feelings. We open ourselves up to God to heal our wounded soul and make us whole. I refer to the soul as the concealed part of our being where our thoughts and feelings reside. It includes our will, our thoughts, and the choices of our heart.²⁵ It is when we have served through miserable seasons in broken communities that we long to experience the oneness of which Jesus prayed. And when Jesus calls us to come away and rest, there must be a place prepared for us to have sincere interactions about their feelings, to burden their heart, sort out our emotions. As a matter of retreat planning, soul care time is purposefully scheduled with no activities so participants can practice spiritual disciplines such as silence, solitude, and prayer. The time set apart and considered sacred time alone with our feelings to have honest encounters of the heart with God.

Self-Aware

The second component of the spiritual retreat should provide participants time to gather themselves and reflect on what is being revealed during their time away. I entitled this section, Self-Aware. It is organized around capturing participant's insights on their location in God. Practices used in this section of the retreat such as journaling, for

²⁴ Isaiah 26:3 (NLT).

²⁵ William H. Willimon, ed., *The Pastor's Guide to Effective Ministry* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2002), 11.

example, give retreatants a visible interpretation and reminder of their spiritual position. The slower pace of the environment draws stark contrast to the hustle and bustle existence from which they have temporarily withdrawn. Exercises in self-awareness exposes how our overextended lives sidetrack us from the meaning of living our true life in real time. We shape daily plans around technology, plugging in our lives to devices that can change what we do and who we are. Admittedly, pre-pandemic, I had little time for connecting in person. My choice for exchanging information was via cellphone. I didn't sound rushed in my messaging. Rather, it appeared quite pulled together since I had the ability to edit my feelings and adjust the tone of my words until it sounded like how I chose to be understood. But the busyness is setting us up to lose our capacity for self-reflection, when we can customize our lives to project the image we desire to present to others.²⁶ Our distractions keep us from experiencing the true condition of our lives as we move further and further from authenticity in living out who we are in Christ. In this place, we miss the importance of maintaining our intimacy with Jesus. Unless we are made aware that our hearts are adrift, we will not examine our lives in the light of who God calls us to be, or the richness of our Christian identity. The space for self-aware activity is giving place for God to call to each person. It is the call of the awaking of awareness of Adam and Eve. Genesis 3:9 reflects how God calls out to His creation with no need to ascertain their physical location. He knew where they were, as He knows where we are. Instead, God's question to Adam, "where are you?" speaks from the

²⁶ Turkle, Sherry. 2012. "Connected, But Alone?" Filmed March 2012 in Long Beach, CA, March 2012, TED talks, accessed October 6, 2021, Video, https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_connected_but_alone.

longing of God's own heart that we would be aware and awake both to where we are and to God's presence in the place where we are.²⁷ The blessing extends from our self-knowledge to how we live in community. Because as we find our way back to closeness with Jesus, our heart is filled with joy and compassion is rekindled within us. We rethink our church work as offerings of gift to each other as we receive and accept our colleagues as brothers and sisters in Christ. Works of service take on a spiritual significance when we perceive that Christ lives within them and serving them is honoring and serving the Lord. In these moments of discovery, retreat structure should give room for participants to capture their insights of the moving of their spiritual location to a place of closer fellowship with God.

²⁷ Helen Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2008), 32.

Group Share

Group members who participate in team retreat anticipate that there will be occasions of doing sessions together. They may expect the activities will either be loaded with work assignments or games, but the group share time I offer is to facilitate activities in ways for them to collectively seek God. Pursuing God together in retreat resets the temperature of their environment, setting the atmosphere for change. Members are more open to each other and can be more open to receive from God together. Leaders need a place for openness and honest dialogue to approach the spiritual work of listening for God as a community. In the presence of the Spirit, our hearts open to receive our neighbor with love as we love ourselves.²⁸ We begin to relate to one another, discover points of connectivity, and share our heart. Admittedly, one spiritual retreat may probably not move all members to bare their inner most thoughts and feelings, but in practicing relational skills together in God's presence, we lay the foundation for building team unity because we focus our service to each other as work unto God. Moreover, learning to listen together for God and to each other becomes a valuable skill we carry back into our ministries. It brings us into closer Christian fellowship that holds us together through organizational storms and prevents any one of us from being swept away by the strong undercurrents of community conflict.

²⁸ Mark 12:31 (NIV).

Building Spiritual Retreat

The example I have created is a sample of how the spiritual retreat can be put together. With the three core retreat elements in place (soul care, self-aware, group share), the schedule can be formatted to accommodate a few days or longer. I suggest daily time of centering together to launch each morning and celebration of the Eucharist to anchor the time. When we take communion together, we find our unity with the breaking of bread as Christ's gift giving, where He includes us within His community.²⁹ In the morning activity, we invite Christ into our day's events to focus our time, and when we take communion in the evening, we are making Christ present and His work with all His power to save.³⁰ We give thanks together and conclude our time for rest.

An appointed retreat leader will conduct the morning and evening events as well as the core elements. The participants should not be assigned the tasks of leading any sessions so they may fully immerse themselves into this time of restoration. Finally, throughout the retreat, the theme of silence, solitude and gathering is to be understood time away with God.

Placing Our Stones Group Share Interactive

During this retreat, participants will be encouraged to look deeply at how they are currently experiencing God in their life and to share as they feel comfortable. To begin

²⁹ James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 67.

³⁰ White, 65.

this process, we introduce an exercise called Placing Our Stones.³¹ This activity is to help participants think about God throughout our time together. We will place the stones on a community table, that is centrally located and will remain there throughout the retreat. Placing the stones will help set the tone for our time together of the centrality of Christ in our activities, and to love God and love each other.³²

Participants will be given a smooth stone small enough to fit in the palm of their hand with a large flat surface. They will be given a felt marker with which to write on their stone. Instruct the participants to write a message or draw an image that represents in some way how they are currently experiencing God. Allow them at least fifteen minutes to execute the activity, then begin the time together by having each person present and explain their stone drawing and lay it on the community table. Announce to the participants that their stones will remain on the table throughout the retreat as a gentle reminder of God’s presence and work in our lives, and of how we can pray for each other during our time together.³³

³¹ “Placing our Stones” was inspired by the activity, “Laying the Alter”, Next Frontier’s Retreat, Atlanta, Georgia, September 13, 2021.

³² Gary Moon, Retreat Dir., “Laying the Alter” (Next Frontier’s Retreat, Atlanta, Georgia, September 13, 2021).

³³ Moon, retreat.

Self-Aware Activity

The teaching theme for the self-aware activity explores surrendering to God and repositioning ourselves for change. When we relinquish all things, we can release ourselves more fully to God and find the spiritual freedom to be what and who God has called us to be.³⁴ Real change requires that we cease from trying to satisfy our need for belonging in natural ways that may compromise our true selves. But when we contemplate the depths of our inner most being and acknowledge our thirst for relationship with God, we open ourselves to God's divine infilling. He meets us in the space and calls us His own.

Begin the session by reading aloud the full story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke 19:1-10. Read again, verse five and six, to emphasize Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' invitation to visit his house:

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.³⁵

The scripture describes how Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector, greatly desires to get a glimpse of Jesus, so he climbs a tree to see him. We do not know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but we can imagine that his loathsome life may have compelled him to find a way to see the One he heard stories about.³⁶ The crowds on the ground did not dissuade him, and his determination was rewarded. He had no idea that being perched in that tree

³⁴ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, 80.

³⁵ Luke 19:5-6 (ESV).

³⁶ Trevor Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God's Friendship* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), 38

would lead to transforming his life. Zacchaeus must have recognized that Jesus' invitation to stay at his house, indicated that he was received by Him. He was so taken with his encounter with Jesus that he exclaims that he will amend for his wrongs. But change for Zacchaeus goes far beyond a change of heart; it involves facing the truth, making amends, and reconciling himself to others.³⁷ His identification with the dishonest tax system and perhaps also his stature, brought him criticism and rejection. But the compassion of Jesus changed his relational space. Zacchaeus was released from the social construct that previously informed how he lived and brought him into a new household that received him as he was. Jesus' call gives him the ability to restart, reimagine, and revolutionize his life with a new identity that enables him to reach beyond his mistakes, beyond his occupation, beyond his infractions.³⁸ His life is no longer in obscurity. Jesus called him by name, and he has been received into Jesus' beloved community.

After discussing the relatable elements of the text, instruct participants to return to the story, re-reading it for relevance in their life. Ask them to slowly walk through the passage and listen for the activity happening in the story. Instruct them to watch for what is happening and to be attentive to what they hear going on. Is the noise of the crowd growing? Can you see Jesus making His way through the streets of Jericho? Imagine that you are standing near the base of the tree waiting for Jesus to

³⁷ Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God's Friendship*, 38.

³⁸ William Dewayne Francois, III, "The Courage to Climb a Tree (Luke 19:1-10)," *The Christian Century*, October 27, 2016, christiancentury.org., accessed October 7, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-10/courage-climb-tree-luke-191-10.ed>.

come by.³⁹ Can you see Zacchaeus grabbing limbs trying to get up high enough to see Jesus? Encourage them to engage their scriptural imagination to place themselves in the text. Give them time to read and pray through the story, then ask them to write out their reaction to the behavior of each person(s) they observed in the scene. Ask them to talk to God about their reaction and write out their response to what God reveals to them. They will not share their writing in the self-aware session. They may use their writing to continue their prayerful dialogue with God during the solitude of soul care.

Post Retreat Reflection

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

(Isaiah 43:19 NRSV).

We return to our lives strengthened and recalibrated in our being. Entering again into our communities that had been a place of spiritual drought, we see the space with renewed promise. The result of resting in God awakens our soul to the promise of the formation of a refreshed church. We enter the community transformed by our time away with Jesus. We take what was revealed to us in retreat and apply it to ministry relationships, and the hard ground of relationships that broke through seasons of rigidity become pliable. Church leaders take part in advancing the new thing that God initiates by exchanging thoughts with each other, taking time away to get in sync once again. Our

³⁹ Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God's Friendship*, 39

efforts are rewarded when the rivers that carry hope and unity begin to flow through our community, and we see it together.

Conclusion

My thesis approached community as a gift through which we were created to serve and live. However, the gift has been misinterpreted by individualism and polarizing views of those who seek to assume their own understanding of what it means to be in community. The various interpretations of leads to disunity. It is further compounded by leader's apprehension to address the conditions that cause broken fellowship. The solution I argued is offering practices that teach people how to get along. They learn how to find the sameness of their life narratives in the redemption story of Christ. In that sacred space, they meet and seek together Christ's way of the mending of their brokenness. Spending time with God attunes our spiritual ear to hear God's voice so we can discern the ways of connecting the rhythm of our life to the heartbeat of the community we serve.

Repairing Requires Remaining in Christ

I perceive the means to repair and sustain our leadership community is summarized in the words of Jesus. He left His disciples with a directive that was and is foundational for charting the course for doing ministry together:

Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me. If you don't stay joined to me, you will be thrown away. You will be like dry branches that are gathered up and burned in a fire. Stay

joined to me and let my teachings become part of you. Then you can pray for whatever you want, and your prayer will be answered.¹

The focus of Jesus' message here was not only to ground and guide their lifepath, but to give His followers the formula for establishing future church relationships.

Applying His example, we will seek opportunities to build a culture where mutuality and partnering is valued. We lead the commitment to community through our demonstration of care and compassion toward current members and those detached. We create that culture by bringing more of Christ's words to our work. Anchoring meetings with devotions, beginning meetings with a word of prayer or a scripture. The reason is by allowing His words to wash over our brittle relationships, our point of view can soften. The power of the scriptures to permeate our souls can lead us to stop our disruptive social patterns and take up a more excellent way to serve that honors God and our colleagues. Even as the disciples were transformed by the experiences they had in community with Jesus, He continued their spiritual formation through His explanation of how they should operate toward a successful unified community. His message identifies three points that I anticipate being important relationship connectors leading to a more excellent way of honoring God and serving the ecclesia.

The first relationship connector is for leaders to remain joined to Christ. On the surface, this seems like an obvious principle for growing together that doesn't require an imperative from Jesus. Yet, He tells the disciples that they are to stay fixed in Him. The numerous conversations I shared with church leaders discussing their loss of intimate

¹ John 15:4-7 (CEV).

relationship with Christ, affirms that we need to be reminded of the importance of being spiritually affixed to our Lord. I interpret this instruction for community as allowing time for leaders to periodically step away from their ministry duties for time of silent reflection and sabbatical. There is an assurance we claim by remaining joined to God, but it also carries a contingency. As we stay connected to God, God stays connected to us. In connection, our souls are lost in Christ, and we find ourselves representing a model of spiritual leadership that is truer than what we have professed in the past. We become more Christlike in our behavior, our attitude, and in our heart.

The second point of consideration is paying attention to how our effectiveness as a ministry team is directly related to our relationship to God and others. Jesus makes it clear that anything we attempt that is not anchored in Him is meaningless. This suggests that when we look for ways to bring unity to our ministry teams, we should seek activities that are grounded in Christian principles. Where members avoid the failings of community that can occur when attempting to serve in a manner that is apart from Christ. More specifically, it is important to cultivate a cohesive community by introducing group activities that allow people to see the value of pulling together toward a shared hope, and to appreciate the contributions of each member.

A simple activity I use to receive new and returning ministry members is to give them a brief unsigned note written by one or two current members welcoming them to the ministry and thanking them for joining. Partnering a seasoned member with a new person is also a way to introduce people into the community. The established member serves as a ministry partner, spending time with them discussing their role and how it fits in the

overall work of the ministry. They periodically check-in on them to see how they are getting acclimated, and they help them get to know fellow ministry servants. These practices tell new members that they are joining a community that sees them. It cultivates compassion, as we begin to see each other as irreplaceable plantings of the Lord in our ministry. Cultivating this ethos in our ministries reinforces that seeing and sustaining our success can only be realized through Christ's work in us and through us to collectively achieve our goals.

When we focus on remaining connected as a team in Christ, the value of our community is appraised by how individual members are treated; we look for an empty hand to hold, we check on each other. We speak to each other in terms that elicit relational imagery: together, fellowship, through Christ, belong, share, love. As our Christian kinship deepens, it signifies that we are intentionally resetting our fractured relationships through Christ's instruction to remain joined to Him. Christ sojourns with us in community to show us how to be present for and with each other. He opens our eyes to the beauty of our fellowship, where no one goes unnoticed, and the manifestation of our spiritual gifts work to minister each other. Once we experience the fullness and well-being of living together, connected in Christ, we recognize the futility of serving apart from Him.

Lastly, I see the path forward to repair community will require us to focus greater attention to prayer. Deliberately and purposefully lifting our relationships up in prayer. We have been born again into Christ's family, fashioned to need each other to fulfill the work of the church. As Christ's teaching takes hold in our heart, we begin to extend

compassion toward one another. We recognize our shared humanity and our desperate need for a Savior to heal the infirmities of our community. I understand more clearly now how our decision to remain together throughout the sometimes-uncomfortable process of becoming community, is proof of our trust that our prayers are an invitation to the Spirit to enter our space and connect us *in* the spirit. Our shared identity means that what I seek most for others, I also seek. We care for and respond to each other through our relationship in Christ. Our interdependence compels us to intercede for one another. Together we cry out to God to bring healing to the broken places that keep us apart. We pray that the eyes of our understanding be opened to acknowledge that the source of our success as community is found by remaining together. We pray that the Spirit will teach us how to journey together. The hope we find in Christ's promise to community is that as we remain connected together in Him, that our prayers for unity will be answered.

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Biography

Carol Francis is a learning consultant and ordained minister, living in the Cleveland, Ohio area. Her professional career spans more than twenty-five years as a corporate trainer and generalist. She has extensive experience providing training in the non-profit environment, primarily in the areas of Christian education and leadership development. She is a member of the leadership team of the Dale C. Bronner Institute of Ministry and Leadership Development in Atlanta, Georgia, where she leads spiritual formation practices and facilitates courses designed to equip church leaders with strategies for strengthening ministry teams. Additionally, Carol is a mentor with Westmont College's Lilly Endowment Next Frontiers program, designed to support and offer spiritual renewal practices to mid-level pastors experiencing a career transition. Carol serves as an associate faculty member at the Antioch School of Church Planting and Leadership Development, Ames Iowa. She is a senior consultant with the Christian Alliance of Pastors (CAP Inc.), Atlanta, Georgia. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, and a Master of Divinity degree from Emory University Candler School of Theology.