

2-2021

## Invitational Vulnerability: Practices that Increase Communal Resiliency by Nurturing Belonging Across Difference

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

INVITATIONAL VULNERABILITY:  
PRACTICES THAT INCREASE COMMUNAL RESILIENCY BY NURTURING  
BELONGING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2021

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## DEDICATION

*In loving memory of Ann and Earl St. Jean, who embodied all the practices of this research until the end. I am forever grateful.*

*In memory of Richard 'Dick' Morton, who dared me at 16 to preach my first sermon in the safety of our small country church, launching me into pastoral ministry. Thank you for making room for a slightly sassy teenage girl.*

*And to the glory of God. Jesus, your love rescues me over and over and over.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey would not have been possible without my colleagues from the 9<sup>th</sup> cohort of Leadership and Global Perspectives doctoral students out of Portland Seminary. The variety of perspectives, experiences and giftings represented in this group testified to how diverse Christ's body is. I am thankful to each of them for their academic contributions, their friendship and their prayers. You each added to the richness of this experience.

I am forever indebted to our lead mentor, Dr. Jason Clark, whose wisdom, kindness and deep pastoral heart were both a gift and a model. Jason's expansive knowledge and academic brilliance is surpassed only by his love for Jesus and others.

I have benefited greatly from the guidance and input of my advisors, Dr. Antipas Harris, Dr. Christine Roush and Dr. Randy Woodley. I wish also to acknowledge the encouragement and support of the staff and faculty at Portland Seminary.

Thank you to those who have prayed for me throughout this process—the 'praysations' (Linda, Tri, Victoria and Dee), Kate Mills and The Well church. You carried me when I had nothing left.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the support of my family without which none of this would have been possible. Mom and Dad, thank you for supporting us through my educational trips. To my children, Noah, Elijah, Zoe and Luke—thank you for your patience while I studied. I hope as you grow this all may come to matter to you just a little more. And to my husband, Adam, for your support, sacrifice and encouragement along the way. I love you all so very much.

## ABSTRACT

The mental health crisis, rising individualism, polarization and conflict aversion are key factors preventing Canadians from building the bonds necessary for individual and communal flourishing. Communal Christian resilience will be characterized by love across differences. Drawing on psychology and neuro-theology, this paper suggests communal practices of eating, play, service and prayer will contribute to reducing anxiety, moving responses from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic region of the brain. By activating neurogenesis and utilizing storytelling to encourage neuro-coupling, collaborative meaning-making can effectively build resilient communities.

The table facilitates exchange that encourages personal histories and cultural expressions to be shared. It provides natural space for ritual. As it engages all the senses, participants become fully present enabling deeper connection.

Play reduces anxiety by eliminating the goal of productivity in favour of creativity, attentive presence and social adaptation. Neuroplasticity is increased through contexts of measured and appropriate exposure to risk, ideally outdoors. Play can function therapeutically by implementing methods from gradual exposure therapy. Time together will increase familiarity with each other, reducing suspicion and encouraging a favourable polyvagal response.

Serving one another and the community encourages interdependence and provides shared experiences through which communal narratives arise. As well, resilience is increased through meaningful actions. This is demonstrated, as diverse capabilities are offered to meet diverse needs, and where the value—rather than the difficulty of difference—is emphasized.

Corporate prayer invites cultural and personal expressions of faith. It encourages invitational vulnerability, whereby the sharing of oneself creates hospitable space for another. Shared longing for transcendence creates an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to shape the story of the group's particular identity.

By practicing community across difference, the church might reclaim an influence on society by modelling how to best practice an existing cultural ideal in a manner that improves individual and corporate resiliency.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Belonging - You are missed when you are absent

Christian Resilience - Drawing on the Biblical narrative and Christian practice to positively adapt when faced with adversity

Communal Resilience – The maintenance of communal bonds when faced with challenges, including the introduction of new ideas, changes in leadership or the emergence of societal polarization and tension which also affect the community.

Difference - The broad spectrum of classifications and groupings that differentiate people

Inclusion - Barriers are removed so that one can be welcomed

Institutional Church - The structured and organized expression of the church, promoting longevity and expanded influence

Organic Church - The fluid expressions and shared practices of the church, promoting authenticity and relational influence

Resilience - Positive adaptation when faced with adversity

SECTION 1:  
IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONTEXT

**Introduction**

The Covid-19 global pandemic has tested the resilience of many sectors, including the church, demanding that they innovate and adapt or be lost. Social distancing has shifted gatherings and services online, demanded that shops create non-contact pick-up or delivery options, and vastly diminished socializing with friends and family. Fear of infection and death are an added dynamic requiring resiliency. As a result of these unique challenges and constant unpredictability, Canada is undergoing a crippling, prolonged trauma. While anxiety was already problematic, mental health has significantly deteriorated, with an increasing number to a pathological level.<sup>1</sup> Isolation and loneliness are significant factors in this shift, with 33% of the population now considering themselves desolate (experiencing both isolation and loneliness.)<sup>2</sup>

Historically, pressures on an entire population, such as a pandemic, reveal both the best and the worst of a population's nature. In the search for meaning amid suffering there lies a tendency to seek out a scapegoat. This propensity has repeatedly revealed latent prejudices and biases as minority groups within, or international adversaries

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<sup>1</sup> David Korzinski, "Isolation, Loneliness, and COVID-19: Pandemic Leads to Sharp Increase in Mental Health Challenges, Social Woes," December 2, 2020, <http://angusreid.org/isolation-and-loneliness-covid19/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

beyond, become vilified.<sup>3</sup> Ideological polarization, exacerbated by online exchange of ideas<sup>4</sup> and (mis)information, has further contributed both to anxiety and communal fracture.

The pandemic has increased and exposed isolation within weakened senses of community and has amplified pre-existing mental health conditions. While there are many strategic therapies available to treat people individually, returning to the early church's prioritisation of community building could offer a broader therapeutic approach to increase both individual and communal resiliency. Given resilience is "a construct connoting the maintenance of positive adaptation by individuals despite experiences of significant adversity,"<sup>5</sup> the benefits could go as far as improving the capacity of faith communities to adapt in response to the changing pandemic-induced landscape as well as being prepared for future disruption.

"People want to be seen, known and loved"<sup>6</sup>; they want to belong. Healthy community is imperative for individuals to thrive. Increasingly, 'community' has come to suggest a collection of like-minded people. Online communities are held together by shared perspectives and offer little space to explore the variety of stories that led to a particular value or belief, reducing the awareness of diversity even when it may exist.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. James Robertson, "Falling Forward: Canadian Christians in Crises" *New Leaf Learning Centre*. Zoom Lecture from Hamilton, ON. November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Galloway, *The Four: The Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google*. (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2017), 144, Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Suniya S. Luthar, Dante Cicchetti, and Bronwyn Becker, "The Construct of Resilience: A Critical Evaluation and Guidelines for Future Work," *Society for Research in Child Development* 71, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 543.

<sup>6</sup> Rhonda Elgersma, interview by author, Kelowna B.C., April 2020.

Belonging becomes largely contingent on conformity because there are insufficient character allotments on social media for nuanced and detailed discussions: 125 visible characters on Instagram, 280 on twitter and 477 visible characters on Facebook (with a ‘read more’ option). Community as “a solidarity based on a responsibility to care for others because that is essential to living a good life”<sup>7</sup> has been replaced by community as uniformity for expediency. There is an ease by which these online communities form because they require no compromise, no risk and limited vulnerability. Discussion boards become echo chambers and algorithms designed to encourage the user toward articles and products in which they are already interested<sup>8</sup> creates an online communal experience designed to maximize comfort; these settings also promise the maintenance of this comfort through appropriate consumption of products offered through targeted advertising.

The hidden cost in this pseudo-community includes the sacrifice of growth opportunities, particularly the development of the capacity to create and innovate, that is readily available amongst *diverse* perspectives. In-person interactions increasingly centre on productivity (in work and school environments), which offer conditional belonging based upon one's valued contribution to a group, which in turn nurtures insecurity and competition. Productivity demands efficiency, decreasing the value of pleasure and mutual care within relationships. The deep emotional need for community goes unmet the more task completion replaces interdependence. No longer are communities forged

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Bellah, Richard Madden, William Sullivan, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated Ed. (Berkeley: University of California. Press, 1996), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Galloway, *The Four: The Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google*, (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2017), Kindle. 113.

around shared commonalities such as neighbourhoods, resources, or routines. Instead “[t]he greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection. Disconnection from God, certainly, but also from ourselves, from each other, and from our world.”<sup>9</sup> Nurturing reconnection across this spectrum would improve mental health, spiritual lives, physical well-being and overall resiliency.

Resilient communities would be characterised by diversity as they nurture greater creativity and problem solving than do homogeneous groups. Non-resilience has come as a result of a culture of high anxiety/poor mental health, rising individualism, polarization and conflict aversion. The following section will explore these roots in depth.

### **An Anxious Culture**

#### *Disconnection from Self/Body*

Mental health in North America is an emerging crisis. University campuses, for instance, are experiencing drastic increases in anxiety, depression, and suicide.<sup>10</sup> The cultural shift corresponding to these increases was the release of the smartphone, along with social media and the expectation that one can maintain constant connection to the virtual world.<sup>11</sup> This connection has resulted in a disembodied culture. Connecting to one another virtually disengages people with their physical body and in their spatial proximity. Online images, both edited photos and avatars, have replaced fleshly presence,

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (PA: Whitaker House, 2020), Kindle. Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), Kindle. Chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

and typeset and emojis are replacing handwriting and the giving and receiving of facial cues through in-person conversation. Social media platforms unabashedly target users with tailored advertising<sup>12</sup> aimed at heightening feelings of insufficiency and shame in order to sell programs and products.

A prime site in which shame is made manifest is towards the body. Fuelled by carefully curated photos on social media and advertising stories promoting body transforming programs—the body and self have been pitted against each other.<sup>13</sup> Eating disorders are further mental illnesses that expose a disordered relationship between food, the body, and the self. A disordered relationship with food is revealed when food is attributed a moral quality: when certain foods are categorized as ‘bad’ or ‘sinful’ one’s focus is no longer on the nutritional value of food; its ingestion is connected to a moral failure which results in shame. The story is not that ‘I ate something unhealthy’ but that ‘I am bad’.<sup>14</sup> Shauna Niequist reflects “that women typically experience shame about two things: their bodies and their homes.”<sup>15</sup> The body has become a site of shame and failure rather than the way through which the world and relationships are experienced. Fear of inadequacy becomes a barrier to extending hospitality in the personal and vulnerable space of the home. Unprocessed pain and internalized shame nurture mental health problems; isolation exacerbates them.

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<sup>12</sup> Galloway, *The Four*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Tatarnic, *The Living Diet: A Christian Journey to Joyful Eating*. (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2019), Google Play. Chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. (New York: Random House, 2018), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Shauna Niequist, *Bread and Wine: A Love Letter to Life Around the Table* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle. Section 2.

*Canada's Mental Health Crisis*

Canada is an increasingly anxious populous with one poll identifying 41% of the surveyed population identifying as struggling with anxiety *prior to* the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> These mental health conditions become rooted and flourish in isolation. There are many suspected causes for the rise in anxiety including a decrease in appropriate exposure to risk in childhood,<sup>17</sup> a “compulsive search for safety and certainty,”<sup>18</sup> and rising fear of failure or perfectionism.<sup>19</sup> Canadians with a “stronger sense of belonging to their community and higher social support” (frequently found in rural communities) had lower rates of these mental health manifestations.<sup>20</sup> Edwin Newport identifies that a key to alleviating pervasive anxiety is for people to learn to be well-differentiated, remaining clear about their own identity while being connected to others.<sup>21</sup> While some of the work required to become well-differentiated must be undertaken through introspection, family and friends also play an important role by reflecting back what they see and experience of an individual. Identity is not formed in a vacuum of isolation and then presented to the

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<sup>16</sup> Sharon Kirkey, “Nearly Half of Canadians Report Struggling with Anxiety, but Are We Really Coming Undone?” *National Post*, October 29, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com/health/its-not-just-you-nearly-half-of-canadians-struggling-with-anxiety-but-are-we-really-coming-undone>.

<sup>17</sup> Nevin Harper, Kathryn Rose and David Segal. ‘Outdoor Risky Play in Nature-based Therapy’, *Nature-Based Therapy: A Practitioner’s Guide to Working Outdoors with Children, Youth and Families*. (Gabriela Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2019.) 107.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017.), Loc. 1141. Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Dare*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> S. Romans, M. Cohen and T. Forte, “Rates of Depression and Anxiety in Urban and Rural Canada,” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 46, (2011): 567-575.

<sup>21</sup> Friedman, Treadwell and Beal, 417.



world, but is shaped through ongoing enculturation. Unfortunately, isolation--rather than connection--is on the rise.

### *Disconnection from Others*

For the first time in Canadian history, single person households are the most common living arrangement.<sup>22</sup> An increase in overall wealth is contributing to the capacity to live comfortably alone. While overall economic well-being is increasing, so is loneliness and isolation<sup>23</sup> and with it, accompanying health risks.<sup>24</sup> For some of the group members interviewed as part of this research, participation in their faith-based small group was the only time during the week that they sat to eat with other people. Working singles had a greater tendency to participate in small faith groups as they were not navigating multiple people's schedules. Seniors are particularly vulnerable to isolation as they have left the workforce, and many have lost their spouses.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, experiments in organic expressions of church, with their higher emphasis on community do not tend to attract this age group (though further work in this area seems warranted).

Connection around a table could address both the disconnection with the body and with other people. In adolescence, multiple indicators of health, including substance use,

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<sup>22</sup> Nora Galbraith, Johnny Truong, and Jackie Tang. "Living Alone in Canada." *Insights on Canadian Society*. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, March 6, 2019. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2019001/article/00003-eng.htm> .

<sup>23</sup> Galbraith, Truong and Tang, "Living Alone."

<sup>24</sup> Perlita Stroh, "Feeling Lonely? It Could Be Doing You Physical Harm | CBC News," *CBC News* (CBC/Radio Canada, January 19, 2019), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/national-dealing-with-loneliness-1.4828017>)

<sup>25</sup> Galbraith, Truong and Tang, "Living Alone."

weight and mental well-being were demonstrated to improve with an average of even one family meal a day.<sup>26</sup> Studies of Canadian children and adolescents demonstrate that self-esteem is significantly higher if they frequently eat gathered at the table with family.<sup>27</sup> [OBJ] If the church could replicate the experience of the family meal, perhaps these benefits would extend to adults as well. Drawing together an eclectic mix of people could counter the negative effects of isolation and loneliness.

### **Rising Individualism**

#### *The Church in Canada*

Canada prides itself on diversity. Aside from Canada's Indigenous population, most Canadians are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. According to the 2011 census, 20.3% of Canadians were foreign born.<sup>28</sup> The Canadian government reports that "inclusive societies that take full advantage of their diversity are more innovative, creative, dynamic, resilient and prosperous."<sup>29</sup> While migration has occurred in waves and has come with evolving approaches and beliefs concerning 'appropriate' behaviour of both the receiving community and the arriving immigrant, the national grand narrative

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<sup>26</sup> M.E. Eisenberg, R.E. Olson, D. Neumark-Sztainer, M. Story, and L.H. Bearinger. "Correlations Between Family Meals and Psychosocial Well-being Among Adolescents," *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 158, no. 8 (2004):792. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.158.8.792>

<sup>27</sup> Megan E. Harrison, Mark L. Norris, Nicole Obeid, Maeghan Fu, Hannah Weinstangel, and Margaret Sampson, "Systematic review of the effects of family meal frequency on psychosocial outcomes in youth," *Canadian Family Physician* 61, no. 2 (Feb 2015): e96-e106.

<sup>28</sup> "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada," Statistics Canada: Canada's National Statistical Agency / Statistique Canada: Organisme Statistique National Du Canada, July 25, 2018, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm>.

<sup>29</sup> "Inclusion and Respect for Diversity," Global Affairs Canada, November 07, 2018, [https://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/inclusion\\_respect.aspx?lang=eng](https://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/inclusion_respect.aspx?lang=eng).

is that Canada is a diverse collection of people ultimately defined by its commitment to freedom. Of those freedoms, The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms names “freedom of conscience and religion” first.<sup>30</sup>

The Christian church in Canada reflects these values. In multiple interviews, one key word respondents selected to describe the church in Canada was ‘diverse.’ Their comment was then followed by an acknowledgement that the church lacks influence and is often viewed by outsiders with ambivalence, at best. What this could reflect is the way in which diversity is embraced as multiculturalism, defined by Bernardo and Presbitero as respecting the differences between cultural groups<sup>31</sup>. Respect within a Canadian context is generally demonstrated in two ways. Respect for people of faith is demonstrated by non-critique; critique of cultural and religious practices (outside one’s own) violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, can be subject to legal prosecution, and is largely disavowed. Critique becomes legitimate public discussion *only* when a practice or belief impinges upon another freedom.

Secondly, people of faith are expected to demonstrate respect by refraining from imposing their religion on others. People often view and receive overt evangelism as disrespectful and even in violation of the freedom of religion, which includes the right to unbelief. These underlying values contribute to similar patterns within the church, whereby both receiving and extending critique about faith-related matters is considered disrespectful, adding cultural nuance to intra-church conflict. This also explains Canada’s general resistance to revival style evangelism reflected in an overarching suspicion of

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<sup>30</sup> Canada., Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Ottawa: Supreme Court, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Allan B.I. Bernardo and Alfred Presbitero, “Belief in Polyculturalism and Cultural Intelligence: Individual and Country-level Differences,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 119 (2017): 308.

authoritarian and charismatic teaching.<sup>32</sup> Unsurprisingly then, the church has experienced its greatest growth spurts when the values of the church happen to align with the evolution of national values.<sup>33</sup>

### *Community is a Decreasing Value*

Ecclesiology has a rich and varied history. The way Christians practice faith in community has been both in response to, and in resistance to, surrounding cultures. Community is a diminishing cultural value and heightened polarization has left a conflict-adverse nation weary<sup>34</sup> and people tend instead to settle for the safety of social isolation, making the church less attractive. A rise in both mobility and migration means that geographic communities are less stable, which results in less cohesive communal identities. An overall increase in wealth continues to decrease the need for interdependence (though this may change as a result of the pandemic). Middle class values in particular lead to heightened individualization, evident in parenting choices that focus on maximizing a child's opportunities through structured activities. This leaves both the child and family fatigued due to their rigorous daily schedule<sup>35</sup> resulting in a reliance on technology to satiate a social need, without demanding more time.

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<sup>32</sup> Robertson, "Falling Forward."

<sup>33</sup> Robertson, "Falling Forward."

<sup>34</sup> Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Non-Religious Identity in the U.S. and Canada* (New York, N.Y.: University of New York Press, 2020.) Chapter 5. Kindle.

<sup>35</sup> Janet A. Flammang, *Table Talk: Building Democracy One Meal at a Time* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 40.

### *Consumer Church*

The influence of consumerism on church practices and community formation has led to decreased communal fidelity. Pastors interviewed for this research identified different responses to this challenge. In one, the pastor emphasized a narrative of the church as ‘family.’ He repeatedly articulated the identity of the church through a relational paradigm to resist commodifying the community. Alternately, a second pastor instead laid out explicitly what the church had to offer and what the expected buy-in was from members. He emphasized to newcomers that if this was not what they were looking for than there were plenty of other options in the city. He leaned into the church as a commodity but completed the narrative with an expected exchange: defined parameters of commitment.

Both approaches consider what churches used to be; each recognizes the moral authority the church once had in speaking into the lives of people, but they also indicate that this tacit connection has been eroded by the characterization of people as consumers. Churches have often responded to this consumerist approach<sup>36</sup> through increasing focus on performance, relevance, and excellence packaged together and marketed for consumption: “In consumer culture, religions are broken down into commodified fragments that are abstracted from their traditional interconnections and the communities that connect them to a particular form of life.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jim Coggins, “Analyzing the State of the Canadian Church,” *BC Christian News*, February 2008, <https://canadianchristianity.com/bc/bccn/0208/04state.html#articletop>.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 123.

Meaningful signifiers are now available for appropriation and consumption with the chaos of community -real human relationships - increasingly optional. It is yet to be seen whether the patterns appearing during the pandemic of drive-through communion and parking lot pickups of Sunday School activities will permanently alter how church practices are undertaken. The practice of Church as consumable decreases fidelity to a particular group of people, creating a pattern of fractured relationships as people move to have their personal needs better met<sup>38</sup> or their stylistic tastes better satisfied. Notably, however, consumer power is disproportionately available to the economically affluent. Shane Claiborne relays the story of a woman who reminded her more affluent listeners that community is a choice only for those who can be self-sufficient: “Her family didn’t choose community; their survival depended on it.”<sup>39</sup> This portrait exposes the socioeconomic factor which increases tensions that contributes to group fragmentation.

## **Polarization**

### *Favouring Familiarity*

One of the challenges of engaging conversation across difference is that people who are similar affirm one another’s convictions and worldviews<sup>40</sup> which generates an atmosphere of comfort rather than growth. Such people, those who are drawn by their similarity, contribute to stability. It is easily understood that “[f]amiliarity is the most

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<sup>38</sup> Coggins, “Analyzing the State of the Canadian Church.”

<sup>39</sup> Shane Claiborne and John Perkins, *Follow Me to Freedom: Leading as an Ordinary Radical* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 170.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 2, Google Play.

powerful predictor of friendship.”<sup>41</sup> People tend to feel safest around those with whom they are most like because their actions are most predictable, reducing fear and anxiety.<sup>42</sup> A person who has lived their life in one area may have noticed slight cultural variations around them but has normalised their own insular culture.<sup>43</sup> For the high number of people living with anxiety this strategy is particularly attractive. Such security allows energy to be poured into exercising consumer choice with respect to church rather than the much harder task of learning to work across local or global cultural difference or addressing the much deeper causes of anxiety, such as trauma or chronic stress. These types of relationships *feel* safe, and do not demand the work of changing or healing. Unfortunately, if one wants to engage the world, “to go and make disciples of all nations”<sup>44</sup>, then moving toward unfamiliar places and lingering there will be required. “A longer, more truth-filled fidelity is needed”<sup>45</sup> if we are to answer Jesus’ invitation.

### *Social Media’s Role*

The rise in online dependency has contributed to an increasingly polarized society. One might surmise that the exponential surge in access to and consumption of information ought to lead to a more educated populace. One might also expect a greater

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<sup>41</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 28, Bluefire Reader.

<sup>42</sup> Cleveland, *Disunity*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map: Decoding how People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 28:19, NIV.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 100, Bluefire.

and more nuanced understanding of complex events—what at one time would have been provided through balanced, unbiased journalism. However, social media has contributed to the destabilisation of and the reliability of information.

First, the witness-as-expert and opinion-as-fact is now routine; trained journalists must now compete against anyone with an opinion and a smartphone. In addition to this, sources have moved “from a mediated to a more disintermediated selection process.”<sup>46</sup> Individual articles, and even blogs, are consumed without the strength of a varied collection, which would offer ongoing updates or a range of perspectives, nor is there a complete publication offering a range of content.

Confirmation bias leads most readers to click on more articles that reinforce their existing beliefs, rather than those that would supply an alternative point of view.<sup>47</sup> Social media algorithms exacerbate the problem,<sup>48</sup> whereby the information offered to consumers mimics the form of associated articles in an attempt to maintain their attention through affirmation of their position. It is outside the realm of social media to invite or instruct readers on how to be good information sleuths or discretionary sifters of bias or opinion. The valuation of the social media platform increases as it holds the consumer’s attention longer, so the mainstream culture is decreasingly exposed to opposing positions nor is it developing the skills to dialogue respectfully or engage in diverse relationships.

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<sup>46</sup> A. Bessi et al, “Users Polarization on Facebook and Youtube,” *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 8 (August 2016): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0159641>

<sup>47</sup> A. Bessi et al., “Users Polarization,” 7.

<sup>48</sup> Galloway, *The Four*, 113.



*A Threat to Liberal Democracy*

In Canada, religious polarization appears as an increasing gap between the committed protestant Christian and the non-religious<sup>49</sup>; this gulf is widening with a sharp decline of the nominally religious.<sup>50</sup> Polarization is a threat to liberal democracy as it rejects public deliberation,<sup>51</sup> a system which has been importantly shaped by Christian values and has lifted up the dignity of personhood by affirming that people possess a pre-social identity, granted through a relationship with God.<sup>52</sup>

Democracy presupposes that societies will establish a middle ground, within a spectrum of opinions<sup>53</sup>, which an elected leader will uphold. The expectation is that a benevolent, dominant ‘centre’ will retain the resources and influence to care for the marginalized, appreciating the promising diversity those at the margins offer. Ironically, an exclusionary human rights focus, which advocates for the marginalised through identity politics, has created barriers to communal belonging<sup>54</sup> within diverse community rather than healthy integration towards characterized by greater equity.

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<sup>49</sup> Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, Figure 5.1.

<sup>50</sup> Sam Reimer, “Conservative Protestants and Religious Polarization in Canada,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 46, no. 2 (June 2017): 197.

<sup>51</sup> J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. (MIT Press, 1998) 306.

<sup>52</sup> Nick Spencer, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has Shaped our Values* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), Kindle. Chapter 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>54</sup> A.B. Seligman and D.W. Montgomery, “The Tragedy of Human Rights: Liberalism and the Loss of Belonging” *Soc* 56 (June 2019): 203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-019-00356-7>

*Us/Them Binaries*

The general categorisations people make is an *us* group versus a *them* group. The *us* (or the *we*) is a group whose theology, culture, values, ethnic background, and worship style matches closely to one's own. This group becomes unconsciously categorised as 'Right Christians.'<sup>55</sup> What makes them 'right' is their familiarity to 'us.'<sup>56</sup> By contrast everyone else is *them*. They are, again mostly unconsciously, categorized as 'Wrong Christians.'<sup>57</sup> While still recognized as part of a Christian 'whole,' this group's differing perspectives may be perceived as threatening. The benefit of this threat is it helps to consolidate the *us*. 'We' know we are an *us* because we are not *them*. "(G)roup formation involves going to great lengths to distinguish the group from other groups and ultimately derogating other groups."<sup>58</sup> Membership in a group, then, is delineated along lines of similarity and the consolidation of reified values.

Once groups have been established around familiarity, there is a decrease in the exchange of ideas. "Social psychologists call this phenomenon group polarization. In the absence of diverse influences, homogenous group members tend to adopt more extreme and narrow-minded thinking as time passes,"<sup>59</sup> writes Christena Cleveland. There is also a tendency to privilege one's own perspective. Groups that see themselves as empowered

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<sup>55</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.), 9, Bluefire Reader.

<sup>56</sup> Cleveland, *Disunity*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Cleveland, *Disunity*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Cleveland, *Disunity*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Cleveland, *Disunity*, 27.

then tend towards paternalism and live a story wherein they are the hero.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, this belief has led many well-meaning Christians to do more harm than good as ‘we’ reach out to ‘them’—lower socioeconomic groups, particularly of a different culture<sup>61</sup>. Rather than come together as a community rooted in commonalities, exaggerated or biased differences become the prime focus, with the group increasingly more communally impoverished than prior to their consolidation.

### **Conflict Adverse**

#### *Prioritizing Comfort*

In order to be more marketable, and culturally palatable, the church has tried to minimize or mitigate controversy. This has occurred by the softening of culturally unattractive teachings such as interdependence and respecting rather than confronting hyper-individualism which “values independence and self-reliance above all else.”<sup>62</sup> In response, church members have come to expect church to be a place of peace rather than conflict or even healthy debate. One interviewee recognized in church members a declining ability to disagree with love. This phenomenon may be due to a broader degradation of conversational skills as a result of over-reliance on digital

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<sup>60</sup> Ashley Bunting Seeber. “Just Perspectives: How can we Become Just Global Citizens?” in *The Justice Project*, Ed. Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2009), 147.

<sup>61</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 162.

<sup>62</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Sidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (California: University of California Press, 2007), iix.

communication<sup>63</sup> or an increasing assumption that the pluralism arising from multiculturalism prohibits the debating of ideas. It may also be in part due to a Canadian cultural trait of prioritizing agreeability. Hence, the capacity for members to live in tension, which naturally creates discomfort but inversely increases stretching, is diminishing; instead, people are more likely to disengage altogether or engage confrontationally, mimicking the hostile tone of online debates and resulting in the creation of factions.

Engagement within disagreement is often characterized by an expression of low diversity intelligence<sup>64</sup> and a lack of hope<sup>65</sup> that the relationship will survive let alone thrive in the face of difference. A high reliance on one's own experience and expertise fosters an unwillingness to listen to other people's perspectives toward learning and developing better outcomes,<sup>66</sup> and is instead replaced by listening toward the goal of creating stronger counterpoints. Few people who dialogue are humble enough to listen with the goal of refining themselves as part of a team or community, a trait recommended by Brené Brown through 'rumbling.'<sup>67</sup> "A rumble is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of the problem identification and solving, to take a break

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<sup>63</sup> Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 143.

<sup>64</sup> Claretha Hughes, *Diversity Intelligence Integrating Diversity Intelligence Alongside Intellectual, Emotional and Cultural Intelligence for Leadership and Career Development* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 12.

<sup>65</sup> Steve Backlund, Phil Backlund, and Melissa Amato, *The Culture of Empowerment: How to Champion People* (United States: Igniting Hope Ministries, 2016), 13.

<sup>66</sup> Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston, *Simple Habits for Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 75.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Dare*, 166.

and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts...to show up with an open heart and mind so we can serve the work and each other, not our egos."<sup>68</sup> It is easier to move churches or walk away from faith altogether than participate in practices that would demand self-reflection and adjustment in one's position or behaviour. However, without walking through conflict and pushing through to the other side, a church fails to emerge as the refined community she is called to be.<sup>69</sup>

### *Tension*

Tension in the church is as old as the church itself. During the earliest manifestations of Christian community, the Hellenistic Jews complained that the Hebraic Jews were getting a better deal in the distribution of resources to their widows,<sup>70</sup> Ananias and Sapphira lied to the whole church about money,<sup>71</sup> Paul and Peter disagreed about how to engage with culture<sup>72</sup> and Paul and Barnabas parted ways after having a different sense of God's calling.<sup>73</sup> However, God calls believers to contend for unity and peace<sup>74</sup> and to celebrate diversity.<sup>75</sup> Today many factors create and contribute to tension and division. Too often difference is accommodated by separation rather than wonder and

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<sup>68</sup> Brown, *Dare*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Jason Barnhart, *Sunday Asylum: Being the Church in Occupied Territory* (United States: House Studio, 2011), Bluefire Reader, 89.

<sup>70</sup> Acts 6:1, NIV.

<sup>71</sup> Acts 5:1-11, NIV.

<sup>72</sup> Galatians 2:11-14, NIV.

<sup>73</sup> Acts 15:36-41, NIV.

<sup>74</sup> Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Corinthians 12 NIV.

respect. While conflicts each have their own context and nuance, there are broad cultural factors at play that increase a community's susceptibility to fragmentation.

### *Push/Pull Factors*

Two forces contribute to factors that lead to an individual or a group of people leaving their church either for another church or in leaving Christian fellowship altogether. These might be classified as 'push' factors—those leading them to want to leave<sup>76</sup>, and 'pull' factors—the attractive alternatives to participation in their church.<sup>77</sup> Push factors, as revealed through interviews, included feeling on the outside of cliques, failure of the church to embrace innovative ideas, poor pastoral response to life challenges, and a growing discomfort with an insular community. Push factors can also include organizational politics, interpersonal conflict, change in belief, breaches of trust or lack of supportive response when trying to get involved in serving the community. For children, a key push factor is witnessing unhealthy tension or conflict between their parents or other key adults in their lives.<sup>78</sup> For youth and young adults, their expanding awareness of worldviews and their growing ability to see beyond the context which they have grown up in.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Josh Packard and Todd W. Ferguson, "Being Done: Why People Leave the Church, But Not Their Faith," *Sociological Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2018): 504. doi:10.1177/0731121418800270.

<sup>77</sup> Packard and Ferguson, "Being Done," 508.

<sup>78</sup> "Testimony of a Church-Conflict Casualty," *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*, August 12, 2015, <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/testimony-church-conflict-casualty>.

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Tam, *The Personal and Lived Experience of "the Dones,"* New Leaf Learning Centre, Zoom, November 12, 2020.

What became apparent through interviews was that pull factors generally follow push factors but quickly increase the overall tension. Personal examples offered by interviewees included: supportive pastoral care after insufficient pastoral care in a previous church; attraction to more innovative ministry approaches following dissatisfaction with a prior insular community; and opportunities to serve after efforts in the original context were frustrated. For some interviewees, scheduling conflicts became a tension only when they were already finding diminished value in communal worship and hoped an alternative activity would prove more beneficial, for example an exercise group or team sport for the children. In an era of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and Netflix, people are increasingly resistant to commit to scheduled events in their leisure time if the event does not carry a high value. When worship fails to be a communal experience, online experiences prove a more convenient and attractive substitute.

### *The Dones*

A demographic that is attracting more attention and research recently has been the group who take their faith and walk away from church altogether, known as ‘the Dones’.<sup>80</sup> Once members who were connected to the church, they have since decided to practice their spirituality separate from the church. This group has not necessarily lost their faith (though a shift in theology or preference for practice may play a role) but many have lost their willingness to practice faith in an institutional church context. For some this choice is a marker of differentiation from their parents and/or their community of

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<sup>80</sup> For more information on this demographic see Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), Kindle.

origin. With an increasing delay of other differentiation markers--"the process of forming an identity distinct from one's family of origin"<sup>81</sup>-- young adults may move to another church, but more often leave the church altogether.<sup>82</sup>

This particular demographic has grown weary of the pursuit of excellence, and long for authenticity.<sup>83</sup> This group's keen perception pierces through church marketing strategies: "The catechism of easy answers and quick fixes may be partly to blame for the rise in the dechurched."<sup>84</sup> When the church fails to walk the long road with people through difficulty or offers only a 'health and wealth' gospel and neglects the call to faithfulness through hardship and suffering, people grow disillusioned with a story that fails to reflect their experience. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a satisfactory theology of suffering within the church. Yet too often in its current context, the church has become an impediment rather than an encouragement to faithful living; this "done" demographic takes their own understanding of faith and departs the church, permanently dissociating themselves with the formal institution.

It is in this space, of chosen and permanent absenteeism, where small faith communities have an opportunity to provide an example of healthy diversity. "[Churches]

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<sup>81</sup> Rick Hiemstra, Lorianne Dueck, and Matthew Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada* (Toronto: Faith Today Publications, October 17, 2018), 24. <https://p2c.com/wp-content/themes/avada-corp/files/Renegotiating-Faith-Report.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Rick Hiemstra, Lorianne Dueck, and Matthew Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada* (Toronto: Faith Today Publications, October 17, 2018), 31, <https://p2c.com/wp-content/themes/avada-corp/files/Renegotiating-Faith-Report.pdf>.

<sup>83</sup> Marina Mwaura, Lee Ecole, Rachel Trisha and Eric Bryant, "How Can we Respond? Four Pastors Share their Thoughts on Reaching the Dones" *Leadership Journal*, 36, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 21.

<sup>84</sup> Mwaura, Ecole, Trisha, and Bryant, "Four Pastors," 21.



are essentially sprawling collections of a billion imperfections, biases and wounds all trying to coexist in close quarters and, in this case, to hopefully do so in a way that reflects the character of God.”<sup>85</sup> Nurturing resilient communities able to thrive amidst diversity and adversity requires the intentional implementation of strategies. The first step must be working towards *inclusion*—creating a welcoming space for others, regardless of their background. To accomplish this however, a second necessary second step is nurturing *belonging*: where people are missed if they are absent.

Section three will thus offer practices that create spaces for belonging that nurture resilience both proactively and responsively. These practices address the problem of an anxious culture by having therapeutic strategies integrated into them rather than depending solely on institutional therapy. The emphasis on smaller faith communities allows them to be organic expressions of the church, countering individualism through voluntary practices of interdependence. In response to polarization these communities will create opportunities for diverse people to discover one another’s stories and uniqueness through shared experiences and unstructured time together. Rather than formal discussions centred on contentious topics, storytelling will be the norm. Differences will thus remain contextualized and nuanced in order to encourage empathy and compassion. These strategies will be implementable through the practices of eating together, playing together, serving alongside one another and through communal prayer resulting in a resilient community of belonging. The work of institution and inclusion is

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<sup>85</sup> John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 83.

often the first step towards this ideal, though incomplete on its own, and will be explored in section two.

## SECTION 2: INCOMPLETE SOLUTIONS

There exist various structured strategies for addressing the root causes non-resilience. These approaches have demonstrated themselves to be somewhat effective; however, these same strategies could be further enhanced in combination with a context of belonging. The following methods are either starting points, or complements to, organic communal practices. For example, a common response to the mental health crises is therapy—either pharmacotherapy, natural therapies, or professional counselling. The response to rising individualism might be the mobilization of the institutional church to make the community both more accessible and attractive. A suitable response to polarization may be education. Finally, conflict aversion may be overcome through formalized, mediated discussions. Each of these approaches has a demonstrable benefit in mitigating the root causes of non-resiliency.

### **Therapy**

#### *Pharmacotherapy*

Pharmacotherapy is often an effective component in the treatment of mental health conditions, particularly anxiety and mood disorders. SSRIs and SNRIs are the most prescribed to date, generally accepted as the ideal first line of treatment, improving the lives of many struggling with Generalized Anxiety Disorder.<sup>86</sup> The effectivity of

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<sup>86</sup> Nastassja Koen and Dan J. Stein, “Pharmacotherapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Critical Review.” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13, no. 4 (2011): 424, doi:10.31887/DCNS.2011.13.4/nkoen

these medications has also been proven with the comorbidity of anxiety and depression,<sup>87</sup> at least equal to outcomes derived by Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in isolation.<sup>88</sup> It is worth noting that favourable outcomes are contingent on correct diagnosis, which is often difficult if there are underlying medical conditions or concurrent mental health conditions. In most circumstances, pharmacotherapeutic effectiveness is not confirmed with other comorbidities.<sup>89</sup> Finding an effective pharmacotherapy can take considerable time as each requires a ramp up and ramp down schedule to test effectivity and to reduce withdrawal systems. Side effects are common. Often psychotherapy is also recommended alongside a patient's prescription.<sup>90</sup> Clearly pharmacotherapy is neither a simple nor straightforward solution.

### *Psychotherapy*

Psychotherapy is a common treatment both in isolation and in combination with pharmacotherapy. “Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) is a structured, time-limited psychological intervention”<sup>91</sup> which relies on a warm relationship with a therapist. This

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<sup>87</sup> David S. Baldwin, and Claire Polkinghorn. “Evidence-based Pharmacotherapy of Generalized Anxiety Disorder,” *The International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology* 8, no. 2 (2005): 293. doi:10.1017/S1461145704004870

<sup>88</sup> Babak Roshanaei-Moghaddam, Michael C. Pauly, David C. Atkins, Scott A. Baldwin, Murray B. Stein, and Peter Roy-Byrne, P., “Relative Effects of CBT and Pharmacotherapy in Depression Versus Anxiety: Is Medication Somewhat Better for Depression, and CBT Somewhat Better for Anxiety?” *Depression and Anxiety*, 28, no. 7 (2011): 565. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20829>

<sup>89</sup> Roshanaei-Moghaddam et al., “Relative effects of CBT,” 365.

<sup>90</sup> Nastassja Koen and Dan J Stein. “Pharmacotherapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Critical Review.” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13, no. 4 (2011): 423-37. doi:10.31887/DCNS.2011.13.4/nkoen

<sup>91</sup> Pim Cuijpers, Tara Donker, Myrna M. Weissman, Paula Ravitz, and Ioana A. Cristea, “Interpersonal Psychotherapy for Mental Health Problems: A Comprehensive Met-Analysis,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 7 (2016): 680. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2015.15091141>

treatment is most effective for clients whose depression has been triggered by stressful life events and with a focus on ameliorating interpersonal relationships which are compromised or have pre-existing tensions exacerbated by the mental health crises.<sup>92</sup> The end goal of therapy is to equip the client with adaptive interpersonal strategies.<sup>93</sup> The success of this approach is dependent upon a high-quality client-therapist relationship<sup>94</sup> that curates an environment where the client is willing to share openly and vulnerably.

Early intervention consistently improves the efficacy of both pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy in minimizing mental health challenges. However, the majority of those who would benefit from such support are slow to acknowledge their psychological difficulties or to seek professional support. They may also be hampered by financial restrictions, time-delays from wait lists, fear of stigmatization, or difficulty in finding capably skilled practitioners.<sup>95</sup> There is a shift taking place in the approach to mental health from a deficit-based approach to a competency-based model that focuses on prevention<sup>96</sup> All strategies work toward the aim of helping an individual function competently within society.

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<sup>92</sup> Cuijpers, Donker, Weissman, Ravitz, and Cristea, "Interpersonal Psychotherapy," 680.

<sup>93</sup> Cuijpers, Donker, Weissman, Ravitz, and Cristea, "Interpersonal Psychotherapy," 680.

<sup>94</sup> Sarah Kate Cameron, Jacqui Rodgers, and Dave Dagnan, "The Relationship between the Therapeutic Alliance and Clinical Outcomes in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Adults with Depression: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, February 26, 2018, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/cpp.2180>, 446.

<sup>95</sup> Roshanaei-Moghaddam et al., "Relative Effects of CBT," 565.

<sup>96</sup> Steven M. Southwick, George A. Bonanno, Ann S. Masten, Catherine Panter-Brick and Rachel Yehuda, "Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives" *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 1 (2014): 11. DOI: 10.3402/ejpt.v5i25338

## Institutional Response

### *Institutional vs Organic Church*

In the discussion of how to make room for a broader diversity of people in a faith community, it is useful to identify the difference between the ‘institutional church’ and the ‘organic church.’ This is not a binary identity but rather two overlapping modes of expression of the church, in which all faith communities engage in varying degrees and in particular times and contexts. Both are necessary and both enable faithfulness to the gospel. Jesus’ teachings within the temple might be understood as an expression of the institutional church. He integrated his ministry into the structured pattern of meeting, accepted the established modes of teaching, and worked within the ecclesial hierarchy. Drawing on traditional source texts, Jesus modeled the process of change he was bringing to the institutional expression of faith. The institutional church is characterized by order, predictability, clear authority and communicated expectations. In contrast, when Jesus invited himself into the home of an undesirable, where a vast array of low to high status people were drawn in, each expressing their devotion in surprising or even uncomfortable ways— *this* was an expression of the organic church. The organic church is characterized by authenticity, flexibility, inclusivity, and fluid expectations. It is through the institutional church that longevity and influence are generally attained, and through the organic church where reformation is enabled and openness to marginalized voices is sought.

The institutional church is better equipped, and more often responsible for the work of inclusion—that is, making *official* space for minority groups to be welcomed in. Expansive social justice work requires organizational structures and methods consistent

with institutional behaviour. Policies organize the behaviour of the institution and at their best, reduce the risk of harm and extend the collaborative efforts for good. For example, safe church<sup>97</sup> policies may require police records checks, references and an interview process for people wishing to volunteer with vulnerable people or ready to assume leadership in a formal role. The goal of such restrictions is to ensure that those who represent the organization in official capacity, whether volunteer or paid, represent the values of the church. This strategy has a history of exclusion. While the examination of someone's character seems appropriate for the protection of the community, it can also deny or suppress diversity. The work of inclusion at this level looks like intentional examination of policies to ensure that people of various backgrounds have access to positions of influence. However, difficulty arises when character and identity are conflated. Is sexual orientation an expression of character or identity? Are there roles in the church that are limited to a single gender? Are there roles limited to those who fall into a clear gender binary? These are questions that must be attended to in the institutional expression of the church. The church as an institution can empower and include diversity by naming access for both sexes to leadership positions. The institution can affirm efforts to inclusivity by establishing ratios of representation from diverse groups who are part of the community. This institutional response should occur to counter visible discrepancies in representation. Justice is at the heart of this work.

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<sup>97</sup> The term 'safe church' refers to policies that work to prevent the vulnerable from abuse. Different denominations have varying language for this common work. The term is particular to the Christian Reformed Church. "BC Safe Church Equips Churches to Cultivate Safe Communities for All People," BC Safe Church, accessed November 15, 2020, <http://www.bcsafechurch.com/>.

However, the work of institutional inclusion also sets boundaries around who is invited into leadership or influence. Even when visible boundaries are removed, agreement with the ethos, or values of the community is a necessity. In an egalitarian context, a member with a complementarian view will be restricted from leadership. Restrictions may take a more theological route. Predestination or election? Sola scripture or ongoing revelation? Established commonalities are necessary to achieve a broader goal. The institution becomes a team who strives together to extend the work of God's Kingdom, the supreme goal. "Institutions are social structures that by nature are hierarchical...we can view these authoritative structures as vital to the capacity of the organization to achieve its mission."<sup>98</sup> If the church is to embrace a mission, or many contextual missions, then it must be soundly organized. Training and teaching within an organization, at the very least, is an invitation to accede to the strategies of the leaders if only to accomplish an agreed upon goal. While full agreement is not an absolute necessity, provisional agreement is.

Jesus himself organized his disciples around himself under the condition that they *follow* him. Their mission was primarily to reach the Jewish community with the message of salvation through the demonstration of loving power. His strategy was that through accomplishing this mission, wider communities would be invited in, and even during the practice of this primary mission, extraneous blessings were poured out. However, had the disciples debated or fixated on whether actual following was needed, no further mission would have been fulfilled. The hierarchy that was established was Jesus as the leader

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<sup>98</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Institutional Intelligence: How to Build an Effective Organization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 209.



(who himself identified as under the authority of the Father), with the disciples nurtured to be successive leaders. Over time, the church grew, as did attendant local leaders. In its inception, the hierarchal structure of Christ's church provided the needed organization to create space for people to explore his message and a mission for the emerging community.

### *Legal Rights*

Of further benefit, the church functions much as other institutions do, to “provide us with mechanisms for accountability.”<sup>99</sup> North American history demonstrates that exclusion has been practiced through carefully curated legislature. Shaped in part by Jesus' inclusion of the poor and outcast<sup>100</sup> modern democracy extends citizens the right to elected representation, and yet the concepts of personhood and citizenship historically (and to some extent currently) have been contested and debated, marginalizing and dismissing the “other.” Churches have mimicked this method of exclusion in similar ways. While it has been because of her institutional makeup that exclusions persist, it is through this same nature that they may be challenged. For example, when women have been granted access to serve in pastoral leadership, the official shift has been established at formal gatherings,<sup>101</sup> though particular women paved the way through their anointing to a particular leadership role and context.

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<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Institutional Intelligence*, 210.

<sup>100</sup> Spencer, *The Evolution of the West*, chap. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Denominations vary widely on how ordination takes place, ranging from the authority of the local church to it coming under the authority of the national church. Regardless it is through the ordered and defined nature of the church that such changes have been made as even if a woman were to lead an

### *Membership Requirements*

A church will rarely turn someone away at the door, but if an individual is obviously intoxicated, for instance, or deliberately disruptive then they may be gently directed elsewhere. Such a response may seem reasonable as it protects the rights of those gathered for worship, however it must be acknowledged that this course of action favours the rights of the stable uniformity within rather than those of the desperate and vulnerable for whom the church also exists. Outsiders who fit a sufficiently palatable mold are permitted entrance to a gathering, while local or denominational rules around membership determine who participates in congregational decisions. Criteria for membership varies across denomination, but most include an agreement with the current theological standpoint, though some criteria extend to examine how certain theologies are lived out. This has led not only to the exclusion of people of theological difference, but also of cultural difference, sexual orientation, or life circumstances.

Since membership can be restrictive, one response has been to simply deemphasize membership. In mega churches the institutional structure is upheld by hired staff. The employees of the church are bound to doctrinal agreement through contract and can deemphasize what they deem as necessary agreement from attendees. The staff mobilizes screened volunteers to create a hospitable environment. Welcome is cultivated through orientation and assimilation into a culture. Thus, these large churches have the capacity to create subcultures for various ages and demographics. Through these subcultures, welcome can then be enhanced through the comfort of familiarity and sense

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organic expression of the church, such a decision would not dictate this inclusion further nor set a precedent to be referenced.

of recognition. In this scenario, participation within the community is limited to perpetuating the established culture rather than co-creating the vision and culture. Growth and expansion of the *culture* rather than innovation behind it are the hallmarks of being part of the community.

## Ducation

### *Cultural Intelligence*

Global migration continues to rise, particularly in Canada where 22% of the population (as of 2016) were foreign born<sup>102</sup>. Within the existing population, 4.9% are from Indigenous people groups.<sup>103</sup> Within Canada's borders there are many histories, cultures, and religions which combine to foster a variety of values. "If you go into every interaction assuming that culture doesn't matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge them accordingly."<sup>104</sup> In response to this diversity Canadians generally communicate explicitly, with low context.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Statistics Canada, Government of Canada, "2016 Census Topic: Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity," accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/rt-td/imm-eng.cfm>.

<sup>103</sup> Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Key Results from the 2016 Census," *The Daily*, July 2, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm?indid=14430-1>.

<sup>104</sup> Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 13.

<sup>105</sup> Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 39.

Erin Meyer usefully draws attention to eight different scales upon which to map a culture in order to better understand one another.<sup>106</sup> These areas include communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing and scheduling.<sup>107</sup> In a diverse context, awareness of these areas as possible sites of differing values can inform strategic conversations, either preventatively or in response to conflict.

### **Formal Discussion**

#### *The 3 Practices*

In order to engage in discussion across difference in a conflict adverse culture, formal settings can offer a solution. For example, Jim Morrison and Jim Hancock have developed a method of bringing people with different perspectives together to listen and learn from one another. In a three-practice circle,<sup>108</sup> a small collection of people from different perspectives are brought together and the conversation is framed with a polarizing statement. Often this scenario includes an audience. Unlike formal debate, the goal of the conversation is not for each person to convince the group of one's rightness, but rather to become better informed about *why* an alternative view is held. The three guiding principles of these circles are: to be unusually interested in others, to stop comparing one's best to the other's worst and to remain in the room despite the tension of

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<sup>106</sup> Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014),16.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*,16.

<sup>108</sup> Jim Morrison and Jim Hancock, *3 Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide* (Seattle: OffTheMap.com, 2019), Kindle. Chapter 1.

difference.<sup>109</sup> Within the circle practice a head referee ensures that each person has equal time to share their opinion, ask questions of one another and finally there is the option to thank people directly for their contribution.<sup>110</sup> The strengths in this model include a low-risk platform in which individuals may enter into dialogue and where learning can be shaped through listening. The drawback is that the conversations have not been primed with relational loyalty. The result remains academic rather than pushing participants to become friendly and relationally connected. This method can also risk fostering increased stereotyping as the few voices within the conversation could be misconstrued as representational. The three practices can be extended to everyday attitudes, but to truly break down stereotypes, deep relationships must move past single issue discussions toward complex and complicated interactions.

### *Flourishing Apart*

While the focus of this paper is on integration of diversity, with the broad assumption that separations resulting from tension or conflict are a negative occurrence, there is evidence to show that flourishing *can* follow separation. When interviewed, some people who had left one church for a new one admitted they felt that their faith was enriched by the move as more of their felt needs were met. They also believed that the newfound community was a better fit and they intentionally engaged in their new community where they had held back in their previous one. This occurrence may be in

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<sup>109</sup> Morrison and Hancock, *3 Practices*, Chapter 1.

<sup>110</sup> Morrison and Hancock, *3 Practices*, Chapter 3.

part because in deciding to move, these people invited self-reflection and subsequently reconnected deeply with their faith.

Studies of church splits indicate a pattern that has emerged which points to healthy outcomes for both factions over time: “After a split, the parent congregation initially experiences a large drop in attendance, while the breakaway group grows rapidly. Over the next few years, however, the parent gradually gets back on track, while the growth of the breakaway slows dramatically.”<sup>111</sup> This would indicate that divisions can lead to overall church growth. However, growth does not necessarily equate to health; the wounds acquired through separation often linger and potentially impact the church’s culture moving forward. To prevent this interpersonal collateral damage, healthy practices of belonging must also include pathways and rituals for parting ways peacefully, while offering mutual blessing.

### **From Inclusion to Belonging**

While there remain potential positive outcomes from separation in response to tensions between individuals or groups, division is ultimately a detriment to the body of Christ and its witness to the world. As communities become increasingly complex and globalized, so too does the church; thus, the perspectives and contributions by each member of the church are not only valuable but necessary *because of* their diversity. Though a homogeneous church may provide a sense of belonging and affirmation for her own members, better still would be micro and macro communities of interconnected

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<sup>111</sup> Bruno Dyck and Fred Starke, “Understanding Church Splits,” *Canadian Mennonite*, Feb 26, 2001, 6.

churches. Truly diverse faith communities are needed. A key hallmark of the early church was that it drew people together from across gender, class, ethnic, political and social lines. In Christ, zealot and tax collector became brothers and bore witness to the Kingdom of God. In the early church, people sold their possessions to ensure that there would be enough money to be distributed amongst the needy.<sup>112</sup> In order to reclaim this foundational principle of God's Kingdom fidelity to a community must once again emerge as a core value. In a consumer-focused society, both material privilege and communal poverty must be acknowledged in order to reunite the whole body; resiliency that enables fidelity through conflict is a necessary process to become shaped as the people of God.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Acts 2:45, NIV.

<sup>113</sup> Hauerwas and Barnhart, *Sunday Asylum*, 36.

## SECTION 3

While the work of inclusion is valuable and necessary, it does not guarantee church members the deep sense of belonging which reduces fear and anxiety. Inclusion is an appropriate act of biblical justice but one which fails to nurture the personal and communal resiliency necessary for ongoing response to injustice and adversity. While inclusion reorders structural relationships moving forward, it does not engage the work of healing in a manner that knits people together, offering the strength of a collective. In fact, inclusion can increase anxiety and stress for the newly included person as it requires them to leave their version of what is familiar behind and engage in a new context.<sup>114</sup>

In order to temper this stress, resilience offers an individual adaptability or the capacity to thrive in response to change or adversity.<sup>115</sup> Psychological research indicates that resiliency can be predicted based on a Three-Factor model defined as: mastery (which includes hope, self-efficacy and the belief that one can influence one's environment); relatedness (which includes building trust, having social support, and possessing social skills) and emotional reactivity (a vulnerability factor which measures one's ability to regulate emotions).<sup>116</sup> Social resilience is how people work together to overcome adversity, resilient community might be defined as one that can preserve its interconnectedness through adversity. Ideally a resilient community will increase the resiliency of its members. If a faith community is intentionally invitational to a diversity

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<sup>114</sup> Sandra Prince-Embury, Donald H. Saklofske and David W. Nordstokke, "The Resiliency Scale for Young Adults," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 35, no. 3 (2017): 276.

<sup>115</sup> C.E. Agaibi and J.P. Wilson, "Trauma, PTSD, and Resilience: A Review of the Literature," *Trauma Violence Abuse* 6, no. 3 (July 2005): 196. doi: 10.1177/1524838005277438. PMID: 16237155.

<sup>116</sup> Prince-Embury, Saklofske, and Nordstokke, "The Resiliency Scale," 278-279.



of people, and nurtures belonging, then that community will not only be secure in itself, but set an example to other churches, and their community at large, for how to embody resilience based within a broad spectrum of diversity.

The following practices are designed specifically to complete the work that inclusion begins. These practices intentionally maximize flexibility, enabling specific members to be adaptable. When implemented well, they also create a conducive environment for healing, strengthening, and building resilience as outlined in the Three-Factor model. The nature of the established culture will also be such that a desire to influence any affiliated institution toward more effective and thoughtful inclusion is probable. The combination of inclusion strategies and practices of belonging can result in a fuller expression of the hospitality of Christ. Each practice contains: a therapeutic element, complementing the work of therapy and addressing the mental health root of fragility; space for adaptability and authenticity, complementing the work of institutional inclusion and addressing the toxic effects of rising individualism; an opportunity to learn through discovery and reflection, complementing the work of formal education and addressing the fracturing effect of polarization; and space for meaning-making through storytelling, complementing the work of formal discussions and addressing the root cause of conflict aversion. The combined practices of eating, playing, serving, and praying build a communal resiliency that is improved by diversity and creates a safe space from which to navigate difficult situations and conversations.

## Food

### *Creating Safe Space*

**Hospitable Space.** Creating safe space requires attention to physical space as well as psychological space. Chairs around tables invite people to share a common focal point. For people who are frequently on the move and easily distracted, a dinner table invites them to temporarily focus on the food and the people in their midst. Seating is valuable because it keeps people in place. In all four small faith groups that were interviewed about eating together, tables were central. Regardless of whether it has been personally experienced, dinner as a planned gathering around a table has become a western cultural symbol for the family. As such, each of the interviewees described their small group as akin to family at some point during the interview. The goal in these scenarios was to create the probability of conversation. Space for personal storytelling is both a way of drawing out marginalized voices<sup>117</sup> and breaking down feelings associated with shame, such as powerlessness and isolation thereby increasing shame resilience through connection.<sup>118</sup> It is also within the security of the private sphere that people can develop their ideas and be nurtured into active citizens in their wider community.<sup>119</sup>

In addition to safe physical space, psychologically safe space is also key, often through. Brown highlights that “[s]etting boundaries is making clear what’s okay what’s

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<sup>117</sup> Parker Palmer, “On Creating a Space: An Interview with Parker Palmer,” interviewed by William E. Powell. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 82, no. 1 (2001): 16. <http://dx.doi.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1606/1044-3894.237>

<sup>118</sup> Brené Brown, “Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame,” *Families in Society* 87, no. 1 (2006): 47.

<sup>119</sup> Flammang, 8.

not okay, and why.”<sup>120</sup> Similarly, the founder of the Ottawa dinner church describes a key boundary within this setting: a protected space in which to have different perspectives. At these dinners, not only do people resist ‘correcting’ others’ thinking, but they are encouraged to resist coming to a ‘conclusion’ during discussion. In the context of the Ottawa dinner church, some members reported feeling protected by these guidelines while others felt frustrated that there was not clear learning happening. Participants even left the group as a result of this frustration.

While boundaries provide security through agreed upon expectations, they may also produce division. If the group as a whole becomes invested in one another, discussions might prove fruitful and refining. Unfortunately, they can also highlight who is not yet integrated into the group and may lead to a parting of ways.

### *Table History*

**The Greco-Roman Banquet.** The early Christian church inherited and adapted table practices from their surrounding culture. In ancient Greek and Roman culture, gatherings around tables generally took place in the common room of a household, on an upper floor. The meals would typically begin with a sacrifice to the local god, followed by eating and after-dinner entertainment known as ‘the symposium’.<sup>121</sup> The early church engaged this practice and gathered together to eat and then dialogue over wine.<sup>122</sup> These

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<sup>120</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 39.

<sup>121</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2016), 186.

<sup>122</sup> Mike Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion and Community*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017, 12.

face-to-face encounters were open and inviting across class and ethnicity. The amount of food consumed was modest in contrast to banquets of the time in order to ensure the needy could also be fed.<sup>123</sup> Worship practices emerged naturally within the symposium space and the communal behaviour of the meal set the stage for the communal nature of worship. Testimony, prayer, singing, and prophecy were all components of the latter part of the banquet.<sup>124</sup> Graves describes that “[w]hat took place in those first-century gatherings resonates with the very nature of God and the Gospel itself—intimacy, inclusion, festive joy and participation in community.”<sup>125</sup> These banquets came to be known as *agape*<sup>126</sup> meals or ‘love feasts,’<sup>127</sup> shifting the focus from the food to the relationships. Where Christians came in hungry, they went out loved.

**Food in a Canadian Christian Context.** In Canada, food has historically been somewhat divisive. Early settlers came, in particular, from different regions of Britain and France, and brought with them different tastes and expectations around food. The primarily Catholic practices of the French saw observance of fast days and meat free Fridays,<sup>128</sup> while the Anglican British expected meat and potatoes. While distinct cultural practices could be maintained within family groups, settlement demanded collegiality for

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<sup>123</sup> Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 187.

<sup>124</sup> Kreider, 187.

<sup>125</sup> Graves, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Jude 12 NIV.

<sup>127</sup> Kreider, 187.

<sup>128</sup> Michel Desjardins and Ellen Desjardins. “The Role of Food in Canadian Expressions of Christianity” *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics - Towards a Canadian Food History*, Ed. Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek and Marlene Epp. (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada, 2012) 71.

survival. Farmers who shared resources and work gathered together for meals; hosts who had benefited from their guest's labour would be eager to offer appealing food. Catholics found themselves preparing meat on Fridays out of a desire to meet expectations of their Protestant neighbours and to keep from seeming stingy. Likewise, protestant hosts would in turn intentionally accommodate their Catholic neighbours by preparing fish on Fridays or meat free meals through lent.<sup>129</sup> Motivated by interdependence, this behaviour began to unify communities as they learned to honour each other's religious practices. As the country has increased in diversity, so too have food practices continued to be expanded, each ethnic group accommodating and incorporating new learned tastes. Also, a desire to respect different dietary requirements in accordance with religious beliefs has grown in shared public schools and workplaces, for many people nurturing curiosity and a desire to understand the culture behind certain food practices. Importantly, food has connected people together across difference and invites deeper understanding between Canadians.

### *Creating Connection*

**Mutuality as Ownership.** A sense of belonging amid a diverse group can prove challenging. While it can begin with shared space and rituals, ownership emerges only as one assumes responsibility for some aspect of the group. In both the Kelowna church plant and the Sauble Beach small group, households take turns providing the meal for the group. This rotating opportunity means that members both learn how to give to the group and how to receive from the group. In giving, members accept responsibility for contributing and voluntarily meeting the bodily needs of the community which might

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<sup>129</sup> Desjardins and Desjardins, "The Role of Food," 72.

then extend to meeting one another's emotional needs. In receiving, group members affirm the value of those who have extended hospitality, and receive with thanksgiving. Jesus demonstrated the importance of receiving when He insisted that Peter permit his feet be washed at the final meal the disciples shared together,<sup>130</sup> illustrating to his followers that they should receive blessing from one another.

**Potluck.** Potluck meals provide an immediate increase in reciprocal sharing as everybody becomes a giver and receiver at one meal. This strategy for dinner might be compared to the church offering where everyone contributes to a communal table for the work of the body. An authenticity emerges from potlucks whereby food offers insight into culture, tastes and food preparation. The sharing of prepared meals provides a rich opportunity for conversations initiated around the food. In interviewing small groups, interviewees pointed to food as a key topic for conversation which then elicited stories about childhood, culture, holidays, and other significant life moments. "Only when diverse perspectives are included, respected and valued can we start to get a full picture of the world."<sup>131</sup> While these humble exchanges may not seem particularly significant, "trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection."<sup>132</sup> It turns out that one can affirm and confirm people's belonging through simple acts consistent with good table manners. "The crucial aspect is the intimacy that naturally develop[s] as they spend a whole evening together eating

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<sup>130</sup> John 13, NIV.

<sup>131</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 107.

<sup>132</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 32.

and talking.”<sup>133</sup> Thus, providing a simple framework around shared food creates the foundation upon which meaning and connection are developed.

**The Value of Ritual.** Communal identity is nurtured through shared experiences. Repeated experiences might be understood as rituals. Repetition offers predictability for participants and as such lowers the anxiety of participants when they join the group for gatherings. A ritual also signifies meaning. For example, saying grace around a table with food connects those gathered in prayer and positions the following action of eating into the presence of God. Grace similarly signifies an acknowledgement that the food has been provided by God and is being received with thanks. This ritual also signals an official beginning to the meal and an invitation to the gathered to begin consuming food together. Through this sharing of food together, “[r]itual is embodied. An obvious feature of...human activity. People do it, and they do it in overt, bodily ways. Because it is in and of bodies, ritual is also cultural since bodies are enculturated. Ritual is not only in the mind or the imagination, even though it can be both mindful and imaginative. If an action is purely mental, it is not ritual even though mental processes clearly underly ritual action.”<sup>134</sup> Ritual sets up concrete markers “against the background of ordinariness; it is, we might say, extraordinary ordinariness.”<sup>135</sup> Though concrete, these rituals maintain appropriate flexibility, within a context.

The Ottawa dinner church, for example, has a communion ritual that signals the beginning of the meal they eat together and contains echoes of the early church’s *agape*

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<sup>133</sup> Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion*, 16.

<sup>134</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 195.

<sup>135</sup> Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 195.

meal. Any group member can volunteer to facilitate the ritual. It will begin with a reading or question or prayer. Often an appropriate scripture passage will be read. There is often wine and bread, though substitutes are readily accepted if nobody has brought the usual elements as part of their potluck contribution. (They maintain they are happy to keep the ‘luck’ in potluck and feel no need for greater structure.) This opening ritual is what sets dinner church apart from other feasts. Ordinary food is ingested by the church body, in a moment that is profoundly sacred.

There are multiple names given to the meal-turned-sacrament. Each name reflects a different nuance, but in the original Greek none of the words are proper nouns. The words were rather descriptors for what was taking place and offer insight into the meaning of this meal for the early church. Communion is a derivative of the word for sharing, indicating a sharing with each other and with God.<sup>136</sup> Paul refers to the meal as ‘the Lord’s Supper’ when he is addressing the unequal distribution of food.<sup>137</sup> It is a reminder that all the food from the feast belongs to the Lord and ought to be treated as such. This carries a connotation of the meal as an act of social justice. Finally, the word ‘Eucharist’ is the word for ‘thanksgiving’.<sup>138</sup> The emphasis here is a reminder of how one positions themselves to receive from Jesus.

The unifying and redemptive work that takes place might be understood as thus: The Lord’s Supper is His body, the extension of God’s presence onto the earth. By taking Christ’s body into one’s own body with thanksgiving, the fleshly need to be fed is

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<sup>136</sup> Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion*, 23.

<sup>137</sup> Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion*, 23.

<sup>138</sup> Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion*, 23.



interconnected with our spiritual need to feast on love and both are equally affirmed. The ritual thus reconnects the self to the body in a redemptive work. In participating in the ritual in community the work of ‘communion’ reconnects each to the other which thus unites the body of Christ.

### *Difficulties*

While communal meals have great benefit, there are challenges that must be acknowledged. The increase in prevalent food allergies may make this a threatening experience for those with allergies. Depending on the nature of the official status of the group, insurance considerations and the need for foodsafe practices and certification may be useful, though daunting for a small group to undertake. In addition, an imbalance in contribution in terms of preparation and cleanup work may exacerbate frustrations or tensions. Cultural differences may also lead to friction if participants inequitably assume or expect gender specific roles with regard to food and cleanup.

### *Embodied in the Organic Church*

These various practices inject the organic church with foundational, life-giving opportunities. Gatherings centred around eating create ideal opportunities for conversation and familiarity to grow. This common practice eliminates some of the barriers that keep people from engaging in the institutional expression of church. Through the bodily occupation of space, reconnection enables individuals to reclaim their sense of belonging in the real world over that of the virtual world. The relational bonds and interactions between people within these rituals and planned points of connecting counteract the isolation and loneliness, and associated health risks many Canadians face.

This support network can provide care and practical help to those in need. Hardship and struggle can be shared equally, improving resilience and healing, while celebrations and milestones have a location to be recognized, increasing joy. Rituals can help establish socio-religious identity and embed the group within the broader traditions of the church. And this space may even go as far as providing space for natural endings of seasons together or the disintegration of the organic expression altogether. The table equally provides a space for gathering, with the possibility also that a natural dispersion might follow.

## **Play**

### *How Play Connects*

**What is Play?** Reclaiming the much-neglected practice of play would offer a significant contribution to building communal resilience. “Play is a *state of mind*, rather than an activity.... [It] is an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self-motivating and makes you want to do it again.”<sup>139</sup> Closely related to play is playfulness. “Playfulness can get you out of a rut more successfully than seriousness.”<sup>140</sup> Bateson and Martin offer this nuance, play “is a broad term denoting almost any activity that is not

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<sup>139</sup> Stuart Brown, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*. (New York: Avery, 2009), 60.

<sup>140</sup> Friedman, Treadman and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, Loc. 104. Kindle.

‘serious’ or ‘work’”<sup>141</sup> whereas “‘Playfulness’ is a particular positive mood state that may (or may not) be manifested in observable behaviour.”<sup>142</sup>

Creating a playful tone requires an invitational informality. Unlocking people’s silliness and humour requires dismantling the expectations set by formal environments. This work must begin with the leader who both in model and instruction embody the freedom and confidence necessary to engage in play.<sup>143</sup> Once initiated though, “[play] is intensely pleasurable. It energizes us and enlivens us. It eases our burdens. It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities.”<sup>144</sup> This found state decreases anxiety sufficiently to engage the risk required to build relationships with new people. It shifts one from fear to possibility. “[Play] shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation.”<sup>145</sup> Once open to the possibility of relationship, trust must be built.

**Building Trust.** Trust begins with creating safe space—both physical and psychological. This is initially the task of the leader but must be internalised and practiced by the participants. Environmental risk assessment requires the leader to differentiate between risk and hazard<sup>146</sup> and draw participants attention to how to behave

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<sup>141</sup> Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2, Kindle.

<sup>142</sup> Bateson and Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*, 2.

<sup>143</sup> Stephen Cowley, interview by author, April 2020.

<sup>144</sup> Brown, *Play*, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Brown, *Play*, 5.

<sup>146</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, *Nature-based Therapy*, 108-109.

in order to protect health. Ensuring that participants have the freedom to choose whether to participate or observe—known as ‘challenge by choice’<sup>147</sup> ensures they maintain appropriate control. For some, play that requires physical ability can be intimidating so offering incremental or diverse opportunities for participation can further nurture trust<sup>148</sup> as participants see that the leader has their best interest in mind<sup>149</sup>. The goal is to create the probability of participation. Play creates space for the shared experiences that lead to inside jokes and stories that offer the bedrock of friendships.

**Therapeutic Play.** As neighbourhood relationships erode, next-door therapeutic relationships are replaced with paid experts.<sup>150</sup> Play therapy has a long history with children but has also had success in family and adult therapy for anxiety, depression, ADHD, PTSD and grief and loss to name but a few<sup>151</sup>. But what if these benefits could be nurtured within intentional community? Re-prioritizing creative play in safe communities could reduce, or even eliminate, the need for therapeutic interventions for some people. Nurturing practices that help individuals engage with and process their experiences in an empathetic community can reduce shame and promote healing. If undertaken as part of creative play, such as through art, metaphor, role playing or the like, vulnerability can be validated, and shame healed through social affirmation.

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<sup>147</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, 238-239.

<sup>148</sup> Rhonda Elgersma, interview by author, Kelowna, B.C., April 2020.

<sup>149</sup> In an interview with Youth Specialist Lance Wright, he emphasized the importance of the leader being sensitive to the needs to the participants and ensuring that the program/play was always implemented to empower the participant rather than the leader.

<sup>150</sup> Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical theology of Small-Group Ministry*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 17-18.

<sup>151</sup> Good Therapy Team, “Play Therapy,” Good Therapy, 2020, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/play-therapy>

Porges' polyvagal theory looks at how therapeutic social engagement can activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, diverting the impulse from the sympathetic branch which activates the fight or flight response.<sup>152</sup> Thus, an increase in healthy social interaction leads to a strengthening of the pathway to the parasympathetic branch and weakens the sympathetic pathway that increases anxiety, heart-rate, and blood pressure.<sup>153</sup> Further, play prompts continued neurogenesis and can greatly slow mental decline common with ageing and the accompanying tendency to cease to play<sup>154</sup>.

Nature therapy has also proven effective in treating people experiencing depression and anxiety. Exposure to sun on the skin and the retina reduces cortisol and subsequently improves the mood of clients.<sup>155</sup> The less predictable environment can provide space for gradually increased risk taking and overcoming childhood fears which have grown into ongoing anxiety due to a lack of opportunity for developmentally appropriate risk taking.<sup>156</sup> The pleasure found in play can frame these risks as fun rather than something to be feared and the resiliency is thus built voluntarily and with minimal anxiety. Done in community, this could have the added benefit of encouragement and result simultaneously in a heightened sense of belonging. While communal play in nature

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<sup>152</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, *Nature-Based Therapy*, 86-87.

<sup>153</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, *Nature-Based Therapy*, 87.

<sup>154</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 58.

<sup>155</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, 57.

<sup>156</sup> Harper, Rose and Segal, *Nature-based Therapy*, 57.

is not a substitute for formal therapy relationships it may have a preventative benefit or provide a healthy complement to work already being done with a counsellor.

### *Games: Structured Play*

**Icebreakers.** When rules are introduced to play, it becomes a game. Games can be categorised into a variety of genres, with varying and flexible criteria. ‘Icebreaker’ games are scheduled at the introduction of a group of people to one another or to promote connection as a group reconvenes after being apart. They function to reduce the relational anxiety in the room. Depending on the agenda, they may also be used to help people get to know details about each other, unlock creative thinking, or begin to move the group towards cooperation. These games should be easy to grasp with few rules. Primarily the goal is to draw people’s attention to be present. When brains are in default mode and allowed to wander, thoughts are commonly neutral or negative.<sup>157</sup> Helping shift people’s thinking to the focused mode through an interesting activity will increase the likelihood of them having positive thoughts towards the setting and towards the people in front of them.<sup>158</sup> This will further invite participants to look for the novelty in each person, shifting them to the parasympathetic emotional connections rather than the sympathetic system which evaluates the people based on their threat level. A good leader can help shift the group in this direction by narrating people’s diverse contributions to the game.<sup>159</sup> These are always useful but are critical for team building.

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<sup>157</sup> Amit Sood, *The Mayo Clinic: Handbook for Happiness* (Minnesota: Long Life Books, 2015), 12.

<sup>158</sup> Sood, *The Mayo Clinic*, 13.

<sup>159</sup> Lance Wright, interviewed by author, Kelowna, B.C., April 20, 2020.

**Team Building.** Team building continues to grow in popularity for school groups, non-profits, and corporations. The goal of this type of play is to increase a group's ability to work together by drawing on the collective creativity and strengths of a group to accomplish a particular task. A good facilitator will lead participants to reflect on the process in a manner that helps them understand their teammates' gifts and strengths better as well as their own. The tasks are not common to everyday life, so they do not have a singular solution and instead invite 'teaming.' Amy Edmondson describes the necessary ingredients of teaming to be: humility in the face of the challenge ahead—acknowledge you don't have the answer; curiosity about what others bring; willingness to take risks and experiment in order to learn.<sup>160</sup> Challenge courses have expanded team building by increasing risk and are designed to “build healthy communities” through “action-based learning.”<sup>161</sup> The benefits extend beyond team functionality as “only when diverse perspectives are included, respected and valued can we start to get a full picture of the world.”<sup>162</sup> “Play [...] builds enduring social resources. Social play, with its shared amusement and smiles, builds lasting social bonds and attachments, which can become the locus of subsequent social support.”<sup>163</sup>

**Simulations.** Experiential learning has been demonstrated to have value across industries. A use for faith groups can be to increase empathy for those on the margins

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<sup>160</sup> Amy Edmondson, *How to Turn a Group of Strangers into a Team*, TED, accessed April 27, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_edmondson\\_how\\_to\\_turn\\_a\\_group\\_of\\_strangers\\_into\\_a\\_team](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_edmondson_how_to_turn_a_group_of_strangers_into_a_team)

<sup>161</sup> Adventureworks, “Professional Development and Adult Learning.” [www.adventureworks.org/professional-development/index.html](http://www.adventureworks.org/professional-development/index.html). Accessed May 2, 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Brown, *Dare*, 107.

<sup>163</sup> Barbara L. Fredrickson, “How Does Religion Benefit Health and Well-Being? Are Positive Emotions Active Ingredients?” *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (2020): 210. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1449332>

which can be nurtured through role playing. For example, *Scene Change* founder Lance Wright undertook the task of raising awareness of the nutritional vulnerability of different global regions. He developed a simulation game in which attendees would be randomly assigned a new ‘identity’ based on statistics and regional circumstances. The attendees were then invited to a space where they would receive their dinner. North America and Europe were separated from other regions by a wall. The rules of the game were limited, and the participants were quite free to interact if they chose to do so. Lance never saw a group play out a scenario in which everyone was fed. Similar to team building, the reflection questions and discussion became crucial for learning. Participants experienced deep learning, and many went on to take action in response to the problem. The strength of simulation games for group cohesion is that learning is discovery based through shared experience, reflections, and conclusions rather than learning individually and only sharing once conclusions have been solidified.

**Unlocking Creativity.** Creativity is an expression of our Creator God who sends us out to reconcile all things to Him and one another,<sup>164</sup>— to form and nurture community as a reflection of the unity of the triune God. The Holy Spirit is the sustainer of communities and creation, keeping us from an addiction to novelty.<sup>165</sup> Openness to people with different experiences, backgrounds and opinions requires adaptability which is the combination of resiliency and creativity. Storytelling through metaphor can unlock creativity gently.<sup>166</sup> Inviting participants to find themselves within a metaphor or story

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<sup>164</sup> Jared Siebert, “Unlock Your Creative Potential: Help Your Church Innovate Now & Into the Future” (Webinar, Fresh Expressions US, Richmond, VA, May 1, 2020).

<sup>165</sup> Siebert, “Unlock Your Creative Potential.”

<sup>166</sup> Palmer, *On Creating Space*, 21-22.



offers them an incremental way to share autobiographically.<sup>167</sup> Space for personal storytelling builds confidence to speak for those often silenced<sup>168</sup> and effectively breaks down feelings of shame as peers respond with empathy.<sup>169</sup> Games with these aspects offers the added security of clear boundaries.

A successful example of building community through creative expression is the *Messy Church* movement. This missional program is designed to build age diverse community around crafting and creative activities. One of its strengths is that it affirms intergenerational familial bonds, while encouraging openness to new relationships by moving people into their creative and innovative ‘zone.’ In a context of art, play, and food, families and individuals are invited to an exploration of biblical stories and relaxed community. Participants have the flexibility to choose which activities they engage in and later have the opportunity to share what they have learned through their creative encounter with the group.<sup>170</sup>

Gathering around games has even led to a church plant aimed at the gaming community. *Geekdom House* meets together to play Dungeons and Dragons and watch fantasy and sci-fi shows towards the end of theological reflection.<sup>171</sup> In the midst of fictional stories, people are invited to find Christ and themselves.

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<sup>167</sup> Rhonda Elgersma in an interview with the author discussed the benefits of finding oneself within a metaphor as it triggered creative thinking and allowed people to connect pieces of their experience only in proportion to their sense of security within the community.

<sup>168</sup> Palmer, “On Creating a Space,” 16.

<sup>169</sup> Brown, “Shame Resilience Theory,” 46.

<sup>170</sup> “What Is Messy Church?” Messy Church Canada, 2020, <https://messychurch.ca/about/>.

<sup>171</sup> “Geekdom House,” The Hearth, May 1, 2020, <https://thehearth.church/geekdomhouse>.

### *Embracing the Creative Age*

Leaning into play and playfulness as a strategy to build resilient diverse communities acknowledges both present realities and anticipates an emerging age. In the current information age, anxiety is rampant and restoring local communities over, or at minimum alongside, tribal allegiances will offer much needed healing. Through the transition from the Information Age into the Creative Age,<sup>172</sup> diverse communities will become the contexts from which the innovation needed for the future emerge. Of even greater importance, it is only when Christians can practice unity across extreme difference that they become the model that God intended for the world and the womb from which new relational order can be birthed.

### **Service**

#### *The Need to Reach Out*

It is important to recognize that there are other critical ingredients to building a resilient community. Pleasure as a goal is simply hedonism. If there is no communal altruistic goals or efforts, the community will have a limited lifespan. Victor Frankl's describes the *will to meaning* as it "represents the deepest and universal human need to reach beyond oneself and serve something greater."<sup>173</sup> While an emphasis on play and

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<sup>172</sup> Mitch Marcello, "Unlock Your Creative Potential: Help Your Church Innovate Now & Into the Future" (Webinar, Fresh Expressions US, Richmond, VA, May 1, 2020).

<sup>173</sup> Paul T. P. Wong, "Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being," *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna Logotherapy and Existential Analysis*, 2016, 312. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29424-7\\_27](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29424-7_27).

“wasting time together”<sup>174</sup> is necessary for building interpersonal relationships, these will not fulfil the need for meaning that every person, and in turn collection of persons, also have and the community will ultimately flounder.

In discussion with interviewees most also named the importance of shared work or service. Jen Nighswander<sup>175</sup> shared about a University experience with a group of fellow education students in Kenya. While neither faith, nor play were part of what they shared, 12 years later this group continues to share together frequently. Long-time camp director and now camp committee chair, Dr. Greg Rushton<sup>176</sup> points to the long-standing allegiance of camp staff alumni stemming from shared work and purpose and wisely contrasted it to the more limited allegiance of campers with whom the focus included play but lacked purposeful work. Youth pastor Rhonda Elgersma contrasted the difference in her youth community connectivity between years the group undertook a service trip outreach together (work) and the years they did not. The group was far more committed to one another and their identity as a group on the years purposeful work was added to the usual gatherings for play, worship, and bible study.

### *Responsive Adaptability*

“A theology of faithful presence means a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God.”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Dr. Greg Rushton, interview by author, Kelowna, B.C., May 1, 2020.

<sup>175</sup> Jen Nighswander, interview by author, Kelowna, B.C., April 17, 2020.

<sup>176</sup> Dr. Greg Rushton, interview by author, Kelowna, B.C., May 1, 2020.

<sup>177</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 95.

While the work of the institutional church might look to building regional, national and global expressions of this kingdom, it is the work of the local, organic church "to deepen [their] communal discernment process leading to faithful presence in [their] neighbourhood"<sup>178</sup> Organic faith communities have the flexibility of quick mobilization and adaptive response to the needs of their neighbourhood. "The passion to engage the world, to shape it and finally change it for the better, would seem to be an enduring mark of Christians on the world in which they live. To be Christian is to be obliged to engage the world, pursuing God's restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private."<sup>179</sup>

### *Stress Reducing Work*

Helping others has been proven to counteract the stress inducing hormone cortisol,<sup>180</sup> as it nurtures the release of the three hormones known as the 'happiness trifecta': serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine.<sup>181</sup> Jesus' admonishment to serve one another, was not merely a sacrificial act which costs those who obey. While there is certainly a practical cost in terms of time, energy and resources, there is also a hormonal reward that breaks the power of stress and the resulting anxiety. It will *feel* better to be part of a

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<sup>178</sup> Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 120.

<sup>179</sup> Hunter, Soerens and Friesen, *To Change the World*, 4.

<sup>180</sup> Eva Ritvo, "The Neuroscience of Giving," *Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers, April 24, 2014), blog, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/vitality/201404/the-neuroscience-giving>.

<sup>181</sup> Ritvo, "Neuroscience," blog.

group that is serving others both because it is a collective act of obedience and because it favourably alters the brain chemistry of the participants to a more resilient state.

## Prayer

### *The Search for Transcendence*

Resilience requires space, and the capacity for meaning-making.<sup>182</sup> This search frequently leads people to areas of spirituality. The desire for transcendence finds expression and fulfillment in prayer. “[H]ealing and well-being, to a large extent require a shift away from attachment to materialistic pursuits to the spiritual realm of self-detachment and self-transcendence.”<sup>183</sup> Through conversations with the Creator, immediate concerns can be placed in eternal context. One’s life can be interpreted through a cosmic lens as a small part of a much larger whole, while at the same time embracing the immediacy and specificity of the inherited moment. Psychologist and holocaust survivor Victor Frankle describes self-detachment as the process of looking at one’s situation from outside; it is “perspective-taking and detaching oneself from all kinds of anxieties related to self-interest. This capacity to step away from ourselves allows some space and time to choose to respond with the right attitude in accordance with our spiritual values.”<sup>184</sup> When this search is undertaken in community, the tendency to accommodate self-interest can better be overcome. The community can also provide

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<sup>182</sup> Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick and Yehuda, “Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: interdisciplinary perspectives” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5, no. 1 (2014): 9. DOI: 10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338

<sup>183</sup> Wong, “Meaning-Seeking,” 312.

<sup>184</sup> Wong, “Meaning-Seeking,” 315.

external structure and support, when invited to do so, to help a member working to respond to life's circumstance with a more faith shaped response.

### *Identity Formation*

Prayer, both written and spontaneous, has the capacity to shape group identity by positioning the group in relation to God and to each other. Paul admonishes that the faithful 'pray continually' (1 Thessalonians 5:17); "[w]hat is done unceasingly becomes naturally conducive in forming people's identity."<sup>185</sup> Less than the content of the prayers is the habitus of prayer in orienting a faith community towards transcendence. "Christian identity finds one of its most distinct expressions in Christian prayer, and also, conversely, [] this identity [is] shaped and gradually formed by prayers."<sup>186</sup> To mark it as distinctively Christian prayer, Jesus must be embraced as central, for example as intercessor or advocate. As a privilege of the relationship with Jesus, addressing God as 'Father,' or equally intimate name might be incorporated. This is a distinctly Christian practice.<sup>187</sup> Imitating Jesus by including the Lord's prayer, asserts connection to the broader Christian community and acts as both prayer and confession of faith. "Prayer [becomes] evidence of 'performed theology.'"<sup>188</sup> It is not only an understanding of God

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<sup>185</sup> Reidar Hvalvik and Karl Olav Sandnes, "Prayer and Identity Formation: Attempts at a Synthesis," as quoted by C. Stenschke *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation. Acta theol.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 154.

<sup>186</sup> Hvalvik and Sandnes, "Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation," 154.

<sup>187</sup> Larry Hurtado, "The Place of Jesus in Earliest Christian Prayer and its Import for Early Christian Identity," as quoted by C. Stenschke *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation. Acta theol.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 156.

<sup>188</sup> Reidar Hvalvik and Karl Olav Sandnes, "Prayer and Identity Formation: Attempts at a Synthesis," as quoted by C. Stenschke *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation. Acta theol.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 158.

that emerges through the practice of prayer, but a greater understanding of the self-- particularly as the created relates to the Creator. “Augustine searche[d] for the self and [found] it in dialogue with God and fellow human beings.”<sup>189</sup> “Prayer implies posture, gesture, space, direction and time;”<sup>190</sup> nurturing healing through presence and embodiment.

### *Intercession*

**Space for Healing.** Brokenness takes a variety of forms including physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. Research has demonstrated that intercessory prayer—even when the patient did not know they were being prayed for—has a beneficial therapeutic effect on outcomes.<sup>191</sup> To increase the likelihood of reaching holistic wellbeing, creating an intentional space to invite the healing of God is needed. When practiced corporately, the benefits can be extended. For example, one study confirmed that discussion from a religious perspective and prayer during cancer treatment, decreased negative feelings and improved mental health contributing to greater physical resiliency.<sup>192</sup> In another study of 44 women, subjects who received six sessions of

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<sup>189</sup> Reidar Aasgaard, ““What point is there for me in Other People Hearing my Confessions?” Prayer and Christian Identity in Augustine’s Confessions,” as quoted by C. Stenschke *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation. Acta theol.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 158.

<sup>190</sup> Reidar Hvalvik, “Praying with Outstretched Hands: Nonverbal aspects of early Christian Prayer and the Question of Identity,” as quoted by C. Stenschke *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation. Acta theol.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 156.

<sup>191</sup> Randolph Byrd, “Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population,” *Southern Medical Journal*, July 1, 1988, <https://insights.ovid.com/article/00007611-198807000-00005>.

<sup>192</sup> Bret Shaw, Jeong Yeob Han, Eunkyung Kim, David Gustafson, Robert Hawkins, James Cleary, Fiona McTavish, Suzanne Pingree, Patricia Eliason, and Crystal Lumpkins, “Effects of Prayer and

person-to-person prayer maintained significant improvements for at least one year, showing less depression and anxiety, more optimism, and greater levels of spiritual experiences.<sup>193</sup> As community members lay their needs before God and one another, meaning is excavated out of the suffering, offering a critical component to resiliency. This is the hallmark of Christian resilience. This work does not merely serve the afflicted but nurtures theological reflection for all gathered. A communal story emerges. When healing is received the group becomes a place for joy and celebration. These stories contribute to shaping the future as past answered prayers become the testimony from which hope is nurtured in response to arising adversity.

**Contemplative Space.** Centering prayer or contemplation shares characteristics with many spiritual practices growing in popularity, such as yoga, mindfulness, or meditation to name a few. Victor Frankl maintained that “spirituality is the part of human nature that separates us from other animals.”<sup>194</sup> While a deliberate centering upon the triune God will mark the practice as Christian, the benefits should not be rejected out of a fear of slipping into syncretism. Contemplative prayer implements practices that organize the nervous system. Deep breathing, where the exhale is longer than the inhale, shifts the participants biochemistry to relaxation.<sup>195</sup> Disconnected from the virtual world, there is the opportunity for the soul and body to be appropriately reintegrated. With lowered

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Religious Expression within Computer Support Groups on Women with Breast Cancer,” *Psycho-oncology*, 16, no. 7 (2007): 676. Doi:10.1002/pon.1129.

<sup>193</sup> Peter A. Boelens, William H. Replogle and Harold G. Koenig, “The Effect of Prayer on Depression and Anxiety: Maintenance of Positive Influence One year after Prayer Intervention,” *The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* 43, no. 1 (January 2012): 85.

<sup>194</sup> Wong, “Meaning-Seeking,” 312.

<sup>195</sup> Michael J. Gelb, *The Art of Connection* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2017), 215.



anxiety, openness to God, one another, and learning increases. New perspectives can be acquired in line with the values and strategies of faith.

### *Liturgy*

**Lectio Divina.** A shared story contributes to developing a shared identity. Lectio Divina is an ancient practice, originating in monastic communities where a passage of scripture is read or prayed through four times with shifting perspective. While often used for personal devotion, it offers a rich communal experience. Uri Hassan’s research on brain activity during storytelling has revealed that neural coupling takes place when a story is related.<sup>196</sup> As the story is told, and particular areas of the brain are activated in the storyteller, the same areas of the listeners brains will be activated in a synchronised pattern.<sup>197</sup> The value of this practice as an entry into scripture, is that it begins with a unifying action, with people in an open posture. If the group were to continue into personal reflections and resonances with the passage, differences would certainly become quickly evident. However, the discussion can emerge from a place of listening and sharing. This ritual is intended to bring comfort rather than compliance and will nurture vulnerability only if entered into volitionally.

### *Confession*

**Breaking Shame.** Confession is another ancient practice that can build unity if approached with sensitivity. James 5.16 offers the instruction to “confess your sins to

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<sup>196</sup> Uri Hassan, “This Is Your Brain on Communication: Uri Hasson,” YouTube (TedEx, June 3, 2016), <https://youtu.be/FDhlOovaGrI>.

<sup>197</sup> Hassan, “This is Your Brain.”

each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (NIV) Confession within the context of community, rather than privately, is for the purpose of healing. Therefore, this group must have established intimacy first. This practice is most effectively healing for transgressions that elicit a feeling of shame. “Shame is the fear of disconnection—it’s the fear that something we’ve done or failed to do, an ideal that we’ve not lived up to, or a goal that we’ve not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection.”<sup>198</sup> There are two connections that can be affirmed in response to someone’s confession: their connection to God and to the community. Brené Brown shares from her research that when the shame inducing story is voluntarily told and received with compassion and understanding that the power of shame is broken.<sup>199</sup> Confession is a combination of prayer and storytelling that together can build resiliency. “Shame resilience is the ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Ultimately, shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy—the real antidote to shame.”<sup>200</sup> The practice of confession ought then to move the community to greater empathy, compassion and commitment to restoration.

**Discerning Prayer.** Of the four practices explored in this research, prayer is the one with both the highest risk, and highest reward. This is precisely because it is the space that can nurture the greatest vulnerability. It is critical that people are invited to

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<sup>198</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 124.

<sup>199</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 134.

<sup>200</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 134.

bring their authentic voice to prayer. Praying in a way that builds belonging must allow for a diversity in how prayer is done and laying down any inclination to 'correct' how another prays. In prayer the deepest yearnings of the heart are exposed. The most desperate people, even when their lives have been devoid of faith, will utter words of prayer. The community must enter this space with great humility. To pray alongside the desperate, listening for God's voice, is a sacred privilege and all wisdom shared must be offered with gentleness. While collective discernment can be powerful in helping discern a next step, the seeker must be sufficiently empowered to ultimately sift the wisdom for themselves. This holy space is also the appropriate place to determine when it is time for the faith community to disperse back into the broader body of Christ. Rather than a leadership decision, or a result of conflict, this creates a pathway for this decision to be discerned in community. It is also the reality of organic expressions of the church as they either re-integrate with an institutional model, or provide energy and resources to another organic expression by its dissolution.

## **Leadership**

### *The Changing Role of the Leader*

**The Problem with Centralized Power.** Both the history of church leadership and the imitation of business leadership models have damaged the capacity to empower the whole people of God and failed to resist conforming to the consumerist patterns of the western world. These models have depended on patriarchal leadership whereby a powerful leader is responsible for casting vision for less able followers. This is a role that has, until quite recently, been reserved for men who were deemed to have earned this

power so then proceed with minimal accountability. Their role has been to manage the practices that nurture appropriate morality within the broader community or nation. The model of the leader as church CEO is similar however the goal has been more numerical growth and increased influence driven. This is the model of leader as expert. While all these pieces have value, measuring a church in primarily numerical terms has a profoundly dehumanising effect. It also creates a situation where the people's presence contributes to the success of the leader. This mindset misses the fact that "*leaders are made for people not people for leaders.*"<sup>201</sup>

Unfortunately, "[m]any people lead from a place of hurt and smallness, and they use their position of power to try to fill that self-worth gap. But we just cannot fill a self-worth gap by leading and using power over people."<sup>202</sup> It is also a particularly vulnerable model as, if the hero leader falters, given the high differential of leader to follower, so does the entire organization.<sup>203</sup> Further, this understanding of church as organization rather than church as community is fundamentally flawed.

**Authenticity.** As an alternative, "the style of women's leadership [is] relational, connectional, flexible, intimate, and passionate."<sup>204</sup> While this style may be credited to have originated primarily in female leaders, we might be better off today to name this *nurturing leadership*. Jennie Harrop recognizes this relational dynamic in Jesus. She introduces the idea of Jesus having AQ, whereby the leader is completely aware of the

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<sup>201</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993), 67.

<sup>202</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 112.

<sup>203</sup> Dennis Tourish, *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective* (Hove: Routledge, 2013), Bluefire Reader, 240.

<sup>204</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 67.

particular audience.<sup>205</sup> There is a specific engagement by the leader to the person or group in front of them. For a long time now “[t]he church has been torn between two values: excellence and authenticity. The exodus of the Dones and the rise of the Nones seems to indicate a turn in this tug of war. People want real more than they want perfect.”<sup>206</sup> One of the pastors interviewed confirmed that a number of people who had joined their church had this as their motivation. The pastor endeavoured to remain vulnerable and authentic with his congregation. This shift requires not only a leader committed to authenticity, but a leader committed to creating space for authenticity. honor others as worth listening to.”<sup>207</sup> While hierarchical, visionary leaders may attract consumer church seekers to begin with, they also ultimately increasingly contribute to their departure.

**Nurturing Leaders.** The type of leadership warranted by such undertaking must focus on nurturing the connections amongst the group. "Instead of seeing ‘in charge’ as being the boss or the leader, one can think about how having charge of someone or something can be understood as having a responsibility to care for them.”<sup>208</sup> The leader must pay careful attention to group dynamics and prioritize being aware of the audience<sup>209</sup>. Just as a parent may model behaviour for their children, so would a leader in

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<sup>205</sup> Jennie A. Harrop, “The Jesus Quotient: IQ -> EQ -> AQ,” (Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, George Fox University, Oregon, 2018), 33. <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/267>

<sup>206</sup> Marina Mwaura, Lee Ecole, Rachel Trisha and Eric Bryant, “How Can we Respond? Four Pastors Share their Thoughts on Reaching the Dones,” *Leadership Journal* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 21.

<sup>207</sup> Sparks, Soerens and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 125.

<sup>208</sup> Emma Percy, *What Clergy Do: Especially When it Looks Like Nothing* (London: SPCK, 2014), 13.

<sup>209</sup> Harrop, “The Jesus Quotient,” 33.

this setting be an exemplary group member. In some cases, it would in fact be most appropriate for the person who most embodies the values of the group to assume leadership rather than a leader determining values for the group to adopt. In certain circumstances it may even be feasible to share leadership informally as multiple members take on roles of responsibility. To function this way can be more empowering as it draws out a higher level of ownership from the group.

### **Conclusion**

Nurturing space for belonging within small faith communities, through invitational vulnerability, has been demonstrated to increase individual and communal resilience in response to the general and widespread anxiety which plagues Canadian churches and culture. The practices of eating together, play, service, and prayer work to congeal group identity across a wide variety of differences. The four practices function therapeutically, stimulating neurogenesis and laying neural pathways that allow stressors to be responded to creatively and strategically. The flexibility of the practices allows them to be adapted to the specific people gathered so that the inclination toward individualism can be expressed through authenticity rather than separation. Gathering provides learning experiences where practices of discovery and reflection limit the hierarchical flow of information and grants people the right to be the expert of their own experience while simultaneously having non-judgemental support to evaluate on process those experiences. Through storytelling and engaging the Christian meta-narrative the community becomes co-creators of a common story from which the group can contribute to the wider family of God in setting an example for the world.

Through these practices a high value can be re-instituted within community. When interdependence can be entered into voluntarily, then freedom is not limited, but exercised for the benefit of the greater good. Individualism has proclaimed a false gospel of self-actualisation and self-care *against* community. Social media abounds with affirmation that ‘you’ are entitled to prioritize ‘yourself’ and one ought to remove anyone or anything from their life that may distract from a defined purpose. But such a path leads quickly to loneliness and isolation. Jesus’ invitation to be amongst a group of diverse followers must be re-extended. Practices that shape community members as servants of one another will illuminate the truth that community is how God cares for people and helps them discern their calling. Through voluntarily interconnected lives, people can find their hearts cared for and not just their bodies.

Consumerism would have us believe that power lies in our freedom to choose; Christian community ought to remind us that our power comes from having been chosen by God. Worship practices must include retelling the story of God’s love for people. Too often scripture has been reinterpreted to be a personal invitation to make individual choices. This incomplete narrative oversimplifies the mystifying call *as a people*. “For you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s very own possession.”

<sup>210</sup>How faith stories are told, shapes beliefs about community.<sup>211</sup>

Theology that acknowledges faithfulness as a necessary practice both to God and to one another might offer a solid foundation of understanding. However, in a context

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<sup>210</sup> 1 Peter 2:9, NIV.

<sup>211</sup> Jessica Senehi, “Constructive Storytelling: A Peace Process,” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 9, no. 2. 43.

where education is not a demonstrated value, this theology must be learned through practice. Creating rituals that insist that each one show up, because all have a role to play, helps nurture a recognition that consistent presence is necessary. As individuals are invited to contribute out of their unique circumstances, the value of diversity can be highlighted. Behaving like a community and experiencing its richness will have a more significant impact on retention than teaching alone.

Finally, leaders who can normalise and facilitate the joining together of people in uncertain conversations will create space for authentic engagement. If mindsets can be shifted beyond 'us/them' or 'me vs you' people will move beyond a defensive posture of rightness, and instead will enter into dialogue with genuine curiosity about the other. If we can affirm that difference is not only permissible, but advantageous the community might be enriched by varying perspectives finding voice. Above all, committed communities can become places of security, where hope flourishes.

Resilient, diverse communities can engage theological discussion without fear that the relationship is at risk. It is possible for members of the community to engage in deeper thinking where broader experiences and applications can be considered, leading to a richer theology. The organic expression of church illustrated in these types of small faith communities can provide relationally-derived insight to better shape the institutional expression of the church to become more invitational. The fluid nature of these organic expressions creates space for people working through a deconstruction of their faith to remain connected to the family of God while reorienting themselves to their traditional experiences and expectations.



Of further hope is that these spaces for belonging will embody two key overlapping values of Canadian culture: freedom and diversity. Since historically it is at this juncture point in which the church in Canada has experienced growth, demonstrating these core values as actionable could open people to accepting an invitation into community. For the Church to claim a respected spot in the community, it needs to promote invitational vulnerability, in addition to proving its ability to decrease or even eliminate anxiety in new members.

## SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The work proposed by this research is organic in nature and thus requires spaces in which to be planted, nurtured, adapted, and grow through collaboration. Creating space to share the research behind the four practices of eating, playing, serving, and praying together will offer practitioners the foundations from which to improvise. It is also important that the complementing work is identified so that the supplemental pieces are transparent in their function. The artifact also demonstrates examples of what these practices have looked like and how they have been effective. Dialogical space is necessary for this work to influence the culture of faith communities; it must not be utilized merely as a seasonal strategy. To be consistent with the priority of vulnerability, the pieces that are published or presented must come from a place of vulnerability that invites others to join in.

The starting point for this work is a website from which topical content can be shared through video and blog. There is space to add audio teaching or interviews. The next move will be to turn the content into a book and include the website and linked social media to build an audience book. In collaboration with my publisher (New Leaf Network Press), I will also arrange my content into a non-credit course that will be offered through their network, which focuses on equipping church planters, innovators, and out-of-the box thinkers.

The artifact can be found at [www.invitationalvulnerability.com](http://www.invitationalvulnerability.com)

The website has a home page, about page, page for video content, blog page, an events page, and a contact page. Pages for audio recordings and book information and

redirection are prepared but will not be published until they hold content. The video content is offered in 4-10 minute reflections and either communicates the content of my research or exemplifies invitational vulnerability through personal story-telling that reflects on current circumstances. The blog is a collection of poems, narratives and prayers that reflect the heart of invitational vulnerability as well as practical ideas that can be tailored to individual contexts.

SECTION 5:  
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATIONS

**Project Goal**

The goal of the project is to promote the value and potential of a focus on building resilient communities that are equipped to be strengthened by difference. Given the current vulnerability and volatility of the present social climate, there is an opportunity for faith communities to offer leadership in how to nurture care amid an on-going mental health crisis, replace toxic individualism with voluntary interdependence, reduce polarization and create space for meaning-making through storytelling. I aim to offer resources that can attract pastoral leaders, organic church members and faith community builders from Canada and beyond to engage in discussion around the invitational vulnerability approach to empowering small, organic expressions of church.

**Audience**

The target audience includes:

- Church planters
- Community builders
- Innovators
- Leaders struggling with division
- Faith communities looking to address the mental health crisis
- Churches looking to create intentional space for those exploring significant questions

- Faith communities looking to draw in various types of difference including age, culture, theological, ability, socioeconomic, etc.

### **Scope and Content**

The website will be the hub for hosting a breadth of content. It will offer space for community interaction and supply updates on opportunities to engage in collaborative and experiential learning. It is a space that has the capacity to grow the community into more video and blog contributors.

Videos will be 4-10 minutes in length and intentionally minimally produced. They will be in the form of personal reflections and storytelling, imparting the culture and values of invitational vulnerability. While the first collection will be videos I will create, my hope is that as the community grows, more voices will be included in the collection to represent more fully the diversity of the expanding community.

The blog will include resourcing through storytelling, poems, prayers as well as examples of the four practices. Hopefully, it will become a space where people find ideas that they try and then offer their own reflection on. The blog can then embody the learning strategy of discovery and reflection.

### **Budget**

- Website + Annual Domain fee 190.00\$

### **Post-Graduate Considerations**

Following graduation, I will continue working with my publisher, New Leaf Network Press, toward building a platform and producing a book. At their suggestion, I

will design a course that will be made available to their network in order to build an audience for the content of my book. I will continue to have speaking opportunities through the New Leaf Network and will offer some from my own platform.

I will expand the capacity of my website and social media accounts as the community grows. I will continue to look for network connections in order to link my work with organizations who are working toward similar goals and with which I have historical affiliation. Nurturing intentional partnerships will help model the benefit of building community across diversity.

Once I publish the book, I will offer experiential learning opportunities as well as offering myself as a consultant to communities that would like to learn how to use the four practices with intentionality.

### **Standards of Publication**

The website will contain only content written by myself or used with permission. Images will be original or used in accordance with copyright. Material will be evaluated based on authenticity, and for the purpose of drawing people together. Demeaning or intentionally divisive comments will be prohibited and deleted from the site. No compensation will be accepted for promotion of any events or products recommended on the site.

### **Action Plan**

- January 2021: Website up and running with new content weekly
- March 2021: Have an online course created and ready to run for Spring 2020

- June-Aug 2021: Offer two webinars through zoom presenting and workshopping content
- October 2021: Submit first draft of book to editor
- December 2021: Complete work for book

SECTION 6:  
POSTSCRIPT

**Reflection**

The development of a website as my artifact took a circuitous route. The plan was initially to write some chapters towards a book, but in consultation with my publisher we put together a broader outline of ways to communicate the information I wish to share. I also began meeting with a writing partner for accountability in producing some writing. The outcome of these conversations was the reminder that I am a storyteller and that if I hope to find my authentic voice to write my book, it would be useful to create a space to text and compile stories that reflect and exemplify the research that I am excited to share with the church. The two forms my storytelling take outside of usual conversation are in short videos and in blog/article form. A website became the logical place to collect these story experiments as it is easily expanded to communicate and information and news about speaking engagements, course or conference offerings, as well as to promote the book once it is ready.

The website has caused me to experiment with how to express the idea of authenticity, and in particular what is *my* authenticity. The result was a deliberate choice to lean into natural scenes and unpolished images. The colour scheme supports this style. I also had to develop a logo of sorts, and while it is still a work in progress, it seems to successfully capture both the natural flavour of the rest of the website and the idea of creating space for belonging. I also intentionally branded the content with the central idea rather than my own identity in order to leave it open to the possibility of having others contribute to the work.



## **Evaluation**

It is too early to be able to tell whether or to what extent the website effectively reaches people, and in isolation it likely won't have an expansive reach. However, when I share new posts on social media I am able to reach many of my networks as well as enable people to share content that resonates with them. It also creates space for me to receive feedback through comments on each story, helping me to recognize what resonates with people and what needs more refinement; I've already had a number of conversations arising from content already shared. While it has been a challenge to learn how to put the site together, I am hopeful that it will serve its purpose effectively in the end.

## **Further Research**

The publisher I am working with (New Leaf Network Publishing) is quite new to publishing but has an expansive community. I have already made many connections that will help expand my research as well as experts in the various areas of communication. These doors continue to open. I do expect, given the persistence of the pandemic, the most obvious next step is to create opportunities for more discussion to take place online through zoom conferences. This avenue will help me gather stories and experiences beyond my own to help illustrate the ideas I'm suggesting as well as to increase the resources I can offer.

### **A Platform for Further Work**

Working on this website as my artifact has allowed me to create a springboard for a much broader strategy than I had anticipated. While I had initially hoped to write a book that would share my research and experience, I am now expecting that I will be able to offer resources to faith communities for building spaces for belonging as well as creating space for people to share the practices that they have found useful. It is my hope that in this time of crisis and challenge small faith communities will feel empowered to increase resilience and release hope amongst themselves and into the wider community.

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