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**A View of the Future from the Broad Top: Reaching, Connecting,  
and Engaging with Zillennials in Rural Pennsylvania**

Jared Fields

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A VIEW OF THE FUTURE FROM THE BROAD TOP:  
REACHING, CONNECTING, AND ENGAGING WITH ZILLENNIALS IN RURAL  
PENNSYLVANIA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
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BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by  
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RCHOG: Robertsdale Church of God

## ABSTRACT

The church in the twenty-first century is not effectively reaching, connecting, or engaging with Zillennials. While Robertsdale Church of God's<sup>1</sup> lack of reaching, connecting, and engaging with the younger adults that comprise the Zillennials is not isolated, it in no way makes the problem less concerning. Many Zillennials live in the rural Broad Top area of Pennsylvania that have not been reached, connected, or engaged with any church. This paper will argue that the key to reaching, connecting, and engaging with these adults is a discipleship process using an EPIC framework focused on growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

The challenges that rural churches, such as RCOG, face in reaching Zillennials will first be introduced. Then the biblical foundations looking at Walter Brueggemann's works, framing the work of reaching, connecting, and engaging with Zillennials in terms of inviting people to participate in the story of God, will be explored. Several Old Testament passages and several New Testament passages will be examined to understand how the invitation to participate in the story of God is a biblical understanding of evangelism. Theological foundations will then be explored, including Bonhoeffer's theology of community, Leslie Newbigin's theology of Evangelism, Joseph Myer's understanding of belonging and social spaces, and Frost's and Hirsch's Missional Ecclesiology. The different discipleship practices that will help reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials in the Broad Top Area will be discussed. The EPIC framework and its relation to reaching, connecting, and engaging with Zillennials will be elucidated.

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<sup>1</sup> From this point on RCHOG

Finally, the paper will give guidelines for RCOG to create and implement a plan for reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials. This will result in a process for envisioning and implementing evangelism/discipleship using the EPIC framework in the ministry of RCOG.

## CHAPTER 1:

## ZILLENNIALS AND THE CHURCH

"So, you're the new Pastor."

"Yes, I am," I replied

"My wife and I have been thinking about coming to church, especially with all that has been happening in the last month around the world," said Danny.

"Well, That's great. Right now, we are doing our services virtually and are doing different things to connect until we can begin to meet again in person in some semblance of normal."

"Yeah, Sam and I saw that on Facebook. We'll check it out, and we'll see you in church when this is all over." Danny finished as I continued my walk with my family down the road.

Danny and Samantha have lived in Robertsdale, PA since they were married several years ago. They have a seven-year-old daughter named Stephanie, who just completed the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. They know about the church and live within walking distance but have not been connected to or involved in the church. The couple has been thinking about giving the church a try again. Part of this may stem from their daughter growing up and partly from the COVID 19 Pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> I am referencing here the events during the Spring of 2020 and the COVID 19 world Pandemic that effectively shut down much of the world.

For four months, the Church did not meet physically because of the COVID 19 pandemic and the commonwealth of Pennsylvania's response to it; thus, the church has had a much more significant online presence. This more significant online presence is one of the things that Danny and Samantha have noticed and is part of what has made them think perhaps RCHOG might be a place for their family. In the past, the church has not had much for their age group, and they don't know if this will change with other innovations that they have seen from the church at it has been meeting online. There are still several reasons that Danny and Samantha are hesitant to visit the church and get involved. How to connect and get involved is more prevalent than ever as the church is working towards a new normal after the impact of COVID19 on the world.

The conversation that began the story of Danny and Samantha and their story may seem strangely familiar to most pastors. Many pastors have had similar conversations with people who keep telling them, "we are thinking about getting involved in church." But those people never come to a worship service, or, if they do, never connect with the church and never become fully involved with the church. How to help people go from this conversation and this sort of story to them becoming disciples of Jesus is an essential question for the church that it has found it challenging to answer.

It has been said, "The church is always one generation from extinction." As we look to ways for the church to reach younger generations, one must realize that times have changed. The changing times present the church with new challenges, and one might even say that more challenges we have ever faced before. This is a time in which,

as Len Sweet writes, "The world is on fire."<sup>2</sup> James Heft reverberates that thought as he asserts, "Christianity in the West is on the threshold of a seismic shift over the next quarter-century."<sup>3</sup> With the upheavals, it is crucial for the church to reach the next several generations. The problem is that the church is not reaching the upcoming generations with very much success. Those generations are moving away from the church and religious belief and practice in general.<sup>4</sup> While there seems to be a broad moving away from religion in adults under forty, ironically, many, instead of being more closed to the Gospel, are more open to it.<sup>5</sup>

This time of upheaval requires the church to answer questions concerning how to reach people in the current and future world. The answer to this question seems to be more elusive than ever before. If one were to look broadly across all churches and denominations, one would find that there are many more adults over forty than under forty. There are many reasons that this is the case. This paper will explore these reasons.

The struggle for the church to reach, connect, and engage adults under forty is ubiquitous. While some churches can fulfill this mission to Millennials and Generation Z, they are few and far between. One of the challenges to this study is that looking at adults under forty means looking at two different generational cohorts. The majority of adults

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<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2019), 255.

<sup>3</sup> James Heft, "Introduction: Youth and the Continuity of Religious Traditions," in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions From the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. Heft Heft James, vol. 6, Abrahamic Dialogues Series (New York, NY: Fordham Press, 206AD), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me- Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--And More Miserable Than Ever Before*, First Atria Paperback Edition. (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2014), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched And The Churches That Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2009), 55.

under the age of forty would fall under the generational cohort known as Millennials. Much of the research presented concerning young adults is focused on this generational cohort. But at this point, the next generation, commonly known as Generation Z, is transitioning into adulthood. It seems best to look at both of these groups in looking at how the church can best reach, connect, and engage adults under forty.

This researcher has chosen to combine the generational cohort known as the Millennials (born 1980-2000) with Generation Z (Born 2001-present) because there are many similarities between these two generations that separate them significantly from previous generations. This merging of these two cohorts into one is found in other literature.<sup>6</sup> In this study, we will be using the term Zillennials<sup>7</sup> to refer to adults under forty. These two different generational cohorts, while having some differences share much more in common. Since there is no agreed-upon moniker for these two generations combined, this study will use the term Zillennials to refer to Millennials and Generation Z as a combined cohort.

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<sup>6</sup> Bennie J. Van Der Walt, “Bennie J. Van Der Walt, “Sharing an Integral Christian Worldview with a Younger Generation: Why and How It Should Be Done and Received?,” *In Die Skriflig* 51, no. 1 (2017): 6.

<sup>7</sup> This is a term of my own invention by simply combining the Z from Gen Z with the term Millennial to form Zillennial. This paper will be using research looking at both Millennials and Generation z but will use the term Zillennial in reference to both. In order to prevent from having to switch the different titles back and forth all mentions of Millennials and Gen Z in others research will be referred to using the term Zillennial.

## The Problem

The Church of God at Robertsdale has not effectively reached, engaged, or connected with Zillennials in Pennsylvania's Broad Top Area.<sup>8</sup> This problem is widespread across the Church of God (Anderson, IN). In his book *Mosaic: A Journey Across The Church of God*, Patrick Nachtigall states these generations "are increasingly disconnected from the church in general and do not have much familiarity with the traditions and theology of the Church of God."<sup>9</sup> That this disconnection is widespread does not make it any less concerning, nor the need for a remedy less urgent for RCHOG.

This study will examine how the RCHOG can better reach, connect, and engage Zillennials to become disciples of Jesus in the Broad Top Area. This study will discuss the various challenges that the church at Robertsdale must overcome to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials. These challenges vary. There are challenges that the church has concerning the way that Zillennials view Christianity as a whole. Whether correct or mistaken, the perceptions must be discussed and reconciled to reach and engage Zillennials in the church's life. Some of the challenges in engaging Zillennials have to do with the church's structure and leadership; this may be the case in RCHOG. Other challenges have to do with the differences in how Zillennials operate and view the world as opposed to the Baby Boomers.

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<sup>8</sup> The Broad Top area in this paper refers to the area including and surrounding the Broad Top Plateau in south central Pennsylvania including parts of Huntingdon, Fulton, and Bedford Counties.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Nachtigall, *Mosaic: A Journey Across The Church of God* (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 2010), 41.



One of the problems is that many churches do not see the problem or only see the symptoms of the problem and seek to address them. During this time, churches should be redoubling their efforts to help our culture connect with the Gospel by adapting, but instead, they are living out "fortress mentality" and do not understand the problem.<sup>10</sup> "A Mighty Fortress is our God," but the church should never be one. The church should rise to the challenges that it faces making use of its rich history without getting stuck there.<sup>11</sup>

This paper will argue that one of the keys to effectively engaging Zillennials in the Broad Top area will be a discipleship process focused on becoming maturing disciples of Jesus in every aspect of one's life. Such a discipleship process will be experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connective. These four emphases make up the EPIC framework, which, according to Leonard Sweet, is effective in engaging in our digital culture.<sup>12</sup>

Chapter 1 will introduce the church's challenges to reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials. This paper will look at the Barna Group's research, Lifeway's Research, and a few independent researchers concerning the challenges the church faces in reaching, engaging, and connecting with adults Zillennials. Jeanne Twenges's research on Millennials and Generation Z will also be used to understand Zillennials better.

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<sup>10</sup> Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub. Group, 2014), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 304.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 44.

Chapter 1 will also look at the context of RCHOG and issues particular to the Broad Top Area and other such rural areas. One of the challenges is that research on Zillennials and the church focuses on urban and suburban areas. The Broad Top area is very rural, with the village of Robertsdale having a population of 350 people; the larger area has a population of fewer than 10,000 people. The geographic remoteness and the population make Robertsdale very different from an urban or suburban area.

Chapter 2 will examine the Biblical foundations for understanding both the problem as well as the solution. Walter Brueggemann's works will be used to investigate the issue of engaging the next several generations. Bruggeman's "three scene drama"<sup>13</sup> approach to evangelism and discipleship will be helpful in this regard. Joshua 24 and Ezra 8 and the implication of these passages for becoming part of the faith community will be of particular interest to this study. The call of the disciples by Jesus, as well as Jesus' various interactions with people and invitations to faith in the gospel accounts, will be examined. The early church in the book of Acts will then be explored to guide our understanding of both the problem and the opportunities RCHOG faces in reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials.

Chapter 3 will examine these issues from a theological perspective and the standpoint of church history. Bonhoeffer's theology of Community as found in *Life Together* will be reviewed, and other understandings of what it means to be a community of the people of God will buttress this paper's use of Bonhoeffer's theology. Leslie Newbigin's discussion of the importance of story in his work *Proper Confidence* will help

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 16.

to understand community and connect Brueggemann's work on the entrance to the community of faith with Bonhoeffer's understanding of the community of the church. This chapter will also examine Joseph Myers' understanding of community in terms of spatial relationships and how these relate to the church. These three currents of theology and Alan Hirsch's and Michael Frost's missional ecclesiology will create a theological framework to understand how the church can reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials.

Chapter 4 will focus on discipleship and how the various aspects of Zillennials can be reached, engaged, and connected within discipleship. Looking at the problem through the lens of discipleship and spiritual disciplines will allow an understanding of solutions to be much more holistic and prevent the church from merely looking for a "silver bullet" program to fix the problem. Many times the solutions offered for the challenges that face the church are programs and are short-lived. A programs-based solution also often deals with the symptoms and not root issues that create the church's challenges. This is something that has been the case in how the church has tried to reach and engage young adults and youth over the last several decades. A new program is not the answer.

Chapter 5 will explain, unpack, and illuminate the components of the EPIC framework. The EPIC framework will enable the church to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials. Mentoring relationships, storytelling, service, and preaching, and teaching fit into the EPIC framework. This paper will look at these and how they can be used in the RCHOG to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials.

Chapter 6 will present conclusions of the study and ways in which the RCHOG can seek to reach, engage, and connect with adults under the age of 40 so that they may

become disciples of Jesus. Part of the challenge is that this means reimagining how church has been done over the years. The conclusion will then give a framework and actions for changing the culture at RCHOG to use the methodologies recommended in Chapters 4 and 5 to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials.

### **The Image Problem**

In their book, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—and Why It Matters*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons assert that "Christianity has an image problem."<sup>14</sup> When looking at the literature, this sort of statement, if not this exact statement, is repeated over and over again. Research done by the Barna Group found that:

Many millennials perceive the church to be judgmental, out-of-touch, and riddled with political striving. They see the church as an institution structured to meet its own internal goals: attendance, souls saved, financial obligations. They also see the church as largely disconnected from the day-to-day lives of people and neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>

It is challenging to argue against the idea that there is a problem that has resulted in the disconnection of the church and Zillennials. This disconnection has resulted in Zillennials either never engaging in the church or leaving it.

The church is struggling to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. Part of the problem is the image problem that Kinnaman and Lyons articulate in their book. Solving this image problem is part of how the church can better engage Zillennials, but it is only

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<sup>14</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space For Millennials: A Blueprint For Your Culture, Ministry, Leadership, and Facilities* (Barna Group, 2014), 124.

part of the solution and not the most crucial part. This study argues that this image problem is a symptom of a more significant problem for the church as a whole and the RCHOG to reaching Zillennials specifically.

To combat the disconnection of Zillennials from the church, the church's perceptions must be both understood and explored to deal with the larger issue of which the image problem is a symptom. While there may be as many perceptions that cause Zillennials to be disconnected as there are Zillennials, a few seem to be brought up continually. These perceptions include that the church is: anti-science,<sup>16</sup> intolerant of doubt,<sup>17</sup> non-inclusive,<sup>18</sup> hypocritical,<sup>19</sup> judgmental,<sup>20</sup> overprotective,<sup>21</sup> repressive,<sup>22</sup> shallow,<sup>23</sup> sheltered,<sup>24</sup> and too political.<sup>25</sup> The church cannot easily disregard these perceptions because there is some truth in each of them. Acknowledging these perceptions and dealing with some of the truth behind these perceptions is one step towards better reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials. These perceptions may not

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<sup>16</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Younger Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 131.

<sup>17</sup> Clint Jenkins and A. Martin, "Engaging Adventist Millennials: A Church Embracing Relationships \*," *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 8, no. 1 (2014): 96.

<sup>18</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>21</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Sarah Moody and Randall W Reed, "Emerging Christianity and Religious Identity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 1 (2017): 36.

<sup>24</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 153.

be wholly correct, but even incorrect perceptions will continue to hinder the church's ability to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials. It does not matter how many things a church participates in; if people are unaware of them and still believe that "the church's base agenda is to condemn and control behavior,"<sup>26</sup> the church's message will not be heard.

There are a few perceptions that the church assumes that younger generations have about it that are incorrect. The fact that Zillennials view the church as shallow should cause the church to rethink an understanding of a seeker-sensitive mentality that seeks to "dumb down" the Christian faith and what it means to follow Jesus. Zillennials want something deeper that engages them at every level. Stetzer argues that "the church should be the most challenging hour of the week rather than a sitcom where you can guess the ending before it even starts."<sup>27</sup> Zillennials do not have a problem with traditions alone; rather, "they are frustrated with a slick or shallow expression of religion."<sup>28</sup>

Also, they are not disconnected from the church because they think the church is simply "out of date."<sup>29</sup> More of the disconnect has to do with the ten perceptions mentioned and the impression<sup>30</sup> that the church is only worried about meeting its own

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<sup>26</sup> Derick Brennan, "Fulfilling the Commission: Purposefully Evangelizing, Assimilating, and Integrating Millennials in Today's Church" (DMin Diss., Duke University, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins and Martin, "Engaging Adventist Millennials: A Church Embracing Relationships \*," 256.

<sup>29</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 124.

<sup>30</sup> This impression that the Zillennials have of the church is more correct than the church would like to admit in many cases.

self-absorbed goals concerning budget, buildings, and bodies in seats.<sup>31</sup> These realities mean that there is much that the church can offer Zillennials, but it requires a course correction from the current ways the church is trying to connect with Zillennials. It is not about being cooler or more tech-savvy; it's genuinely about offering the Gospel in a community of faith with all of the complications and intricacies that such faith and community involves.

There is hope to reach Zillennials. As Stetzer states, "So, there are issues, big ones. But the faith has not been lost in one generation."<sup>32</sup> The church can still reach the Zillennials, but it will require thought and adaptation. The church may have a better chance to reach the young unchurched than older generations of the unchurched. One of the more surprising findings when looking at Zillennials is that they "are generally less 'fed-up' with religion than older unchurched people."<sup>33</sup> One of the primary adaptations that will need to happen is that the church will have to let go of the mentality that the church can simply let people come to it and embrace the mission to go out and endeavor to reach, engage and connect with the Zillennials.

### **The Context**

One of the challenges in reaching Zillennials is that most of the research on millennials and Generation Z focuses on urban and suburban contexts. The research

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<sup>31</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched And The Churches That Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2009), 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

looking at these groups and how to best minister to them in a rural setting is very sparse. The Broad Top area's context is nothing like many urban and suburban areas where the research on reaching younger generations is focused. One might argue that people are people, whether they are in an urban, suburban, or rural context. This mentality fails to consider how culture has a much more significant effect on people's thought patterns, habits, and how they see and interact with the world around them.

People resemble the culture that they grow and operate in<sup>34</sup>; some argue that culture is one of the most formative forces at work in any generation. Those living in a rural culture would naturally differ significantly from those living in an urban or suburban one because of culture's formative nature. While there are some similarities between people living in urban, suburban, and rural areas, there are some differences as well. These differences must be considered for RCHOG to engage Zillennials better to become disciples of Jesus in the Broad Top area.

Some issues and circumstances are particular to the Broad Top area and other such rural areas, making it challenging to reach Zillennials. The Broad Top area's context is very rural, with the village of Robertsdale having a population of 350 people and the larger area has a population of fewer than 10,000 people. The remoteness of the geography and the population makes Robertsdale very different from an urban or suburban area. It also differs from some areas considered rural but aligns closer to a suburban context. Most people in this area travel some distance for their work, some of them working away during the week and coming back to the Broad Top area for the weekends or off weeks.

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<sup>34</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 12.



The many small villages scattered around the Broad Top area were created because of the mining industry but are much smaller than they once were. There are not many businesses and third places in the area because of the population dispersal and geographic remoteness. Most of the towns are similar in size to Robertsdale. The Church of God at Robertsdale is a congregation that is 108 years old. Before the COVID19 pandemic, the Church of God had an average attendance of 75 -100 people. COVID19 had a massive impact on how the RCHOG met and operated.

From March to June 2020, RCHOG gathered virtually via the church's Facebook page and YouTube channel, also using Zoom to have meetings. Sunday worship services and Wednesday night bible studies continued but were done via video. The church's youth group met via skype occasionally during this time. In June 2020, RCHOG conducted "drive-in" worship services in the parking lot. In July 2020, the church began to meet under a pavilion on church property, observing social distancing. On July 26, the church resumed worship services in their building following social distancing. One of the challenges is the continued long-term effects of Covid19 have yet to be seen.

There are some positive effects and byproducts of Covid19. One of the largest is the adaptivity of the Church of God in Robertsdale. When the church could not meet physically, the Church of God began to innovate and meet virtually. The necessity of virtual meetings resulted in people who had not previously connected with the church or who had been disconnected from the church connecting online through the virtual worship services. The ability to weather such forced adaptation resulted in members' closer connectivity. The leadership deliberately sought connection with members through the elders and the pastor calling parishioners, sending postcards to them, and additional

online events. The reliance on technology also made the church realize just how vital their technology staff member and worship leader were since it was only through their work that the church could migrate to strictly virtual meetings. These individuals are in their early 20's, which means that the church has a renewed vision for at least one reason to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials.

### **Zillennials**

The two different generational cohorts that comprise Zillennials have been the target of criticism for some time. One must only look at the plethora of memes that criticize their attitudes, outlooks, and ideologies to see this. Some, such as Jean Twenge, argue that Zillennials are unique from all other generations that have come before them in some monumental ways.<sup>35</sup> How the Zillennials think, operate, and interact with the world has been dramatically influenced by the times. Some see these differences not as generational but rather as developmental in their origins.<sup>36</sup> Others argue that focusing on a generational cohort's general attributes disregards the large variability of that cohort.<sup>37</sup> Whether the differences are generational or developmental does not change the overall result. According to Jean Twenge, who has done some of the most widely recognized research on both Millennials and Generation Z, rather than any other influence, "The year

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<sup>35</sup> Kali Trzesniewski and M. Brent Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 58.

<sup>36</sup> Brent Roberts, Grant Edmonds, and Emily Grijalva, "It Is Developmental Me, Not Generation Me: Developmental Changes Are More Important Than Generational Changes in Narcissism—Commentary on Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010)," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 100.

<sup>37</sup> Trzesniewski and Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," 62.

you were born is a better indicator of the culture you've absorbed."<sup>38</sup> Millennials are different, and the methods that the church has used in the past to reach, minister to, and engage young adults are no longer effective.<sup>39</sup>

The two different generational groups that makeup Millennials are very different from any previous generation. Many of these differences relate to differences in the times and the current social context that Millennials find themselves in. Millennials have different views on sex than previous generations; this has resulted in Millennials having twice as much sex<sup>40</sup>, especially in teens, but fewer abortions and greater use of contraceptives.<sup>41</sup> This is why many Millennials view the church as repressive since their views on sexual mores differ from traditional Christianity. Millennials have been called lazy and criticized for their work ethic, but many cannot find a job, and those who do are crippled by debt and living expenses.<sup>42</sup> Many see Millennials as entitled, but this entitled group feels that they have less control of their lives than generations before them.<sup>43</sup> Millennials are less likely to join in a group than previous generations, preferring to do their own thing much more than any generation before them.<sup>44</sup> Some may look at this last difference and see it as the reason that the church is not effectively engaging Millennials,

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<sup>38</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning To God's Process For Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2006), 62.

<sup>40</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 219.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>43</sup> Trzesniewski and Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," 59.

<sup>44</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 47.

but this does not seem to be the case. The fact that the church has not effectively engaged Zillennials may have to do with the fact that this group has a higher degree of skepticism toward institutions.<sup>45</sup>

This generation has been called entitled, egotistical, unrealistic, and many other descriptors related to how very different other generations view them. There are significant differences. Part of the problem is that previous generations feel the large ideological gap with the Zillennials and do not know how to bridge the gap. While there are disagreements in the areas concerning the Zillennials, there are agreed-upon attributes to the different cohorts that make up the Zillennials essential to identifying the reasons the church is struggling to reach Zillennials.

Jean Twenge asserts in her book *Generation Me*, based on her cross-temporal meta-analysis of high school students and college freshmen, that Zillennials have high self-esteem that results in narcissism.<sup>46</sup> Trzeniewski and Donnellan particularly object to Twenge's assertion that young adults are more narcissistic than previous generations due to the self-esteem movement.<sup>47</sup> They argue that when the data is reinterpreted using more traditional methods than cross-temporal meta-analysis, there is no evidence for a dramatic change in egotism or individualism.<sup>48</sup> Roberts et al. argue in response to Trzeniewski and

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<sup>45</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 77.

<sup>46</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Trzeniewski and Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," 59.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Donnellan that this is an apparent increase in narcissism over the last three decades.<sup>49</sup>

Twenge argued that there were confounding variables that, once controlled, show similar trends in the population that Trzeniewski drew data from. This researcher sides with Twenge and Roberts et al.

The result of the self-esteem movement and the entitlement of these Zillennials is seen in every place they go, and churches are not the only places where we see this; this even has overflowed into the areas of education and learning.<sup>50</sup> Zillennials' increase in self-esteem seems to also pair with them becoming more neurotic.<sup>51</sup> Not all agree that the narcissistic attributes are generational; some argue that Zillennials are just as selfish as previous generations.<sup>52</sup> This may be true, but the rise of social media and contemporary celebrity culture has created a climate that no generation before has grown up enmeshed in.<sup>53</sup> This narcissism has made it very difficult for the church to speak into Zillennials lives concerning identity, which is an integral part of the discipleship process.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Brent Roberts, Grant Edmonds, and Emily Grijalva, "It Is Developmental Me, Not Generation Me: Developmental Changes Are More Important Than Generational Changes in Narcissism—Commentary on Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010)," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 99.

<sup>50</sup> Jean M. Twenge, "Teaching Generation Me," *Teaching Psychology* 40, no. 1 (2013): 67.

<sup>51</sup> Trzesniewski and Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," 59.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva, "It Is Developmental Me," 100.

<sup>53</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Phillip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2012), 98.

Zillennials, according to Twenge, feel "crippling anxiety and crushing depression" based on unrealistic expectations.<sup>55</sup> This is seen in the ways that they try to navigate through the world. These Zillennials feel that they are less in control of their own lives.<sup>56</sup> Their parents' generation had much more stability and power than they do. Twenge found that "when you were born has more influence on your anxiety level than your individual family environment."<sup>57</sup> There are many reasons for this, but it is clear that while they would like the control, they do not feel that they have any over the weightier matters of their lives.

One of the more disturbing and problematic trends among Zillennials is the lack of community connections. The majority of Zillennials lack very many stable close relationships and a sense of community.<sup>58</sup> This can also be where the church can help Zillennials find stability in their lives if it can connect with them. This disconnection from the community could be one reason why there are high rates of depression and anxiety in Zillennials.<sup>59</sup> These sorts of findings do not seem out of line with what we see in young adults' current culture.

Zillennials confront the church with new challenges to communicating the Gospel and assisting followers of Jesus to become mature Christians. Simultaneously, there are many new opportunities and connections with which Zillennials also confront the church.

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<sup>55</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

By looking at why the church has not effectively engaged Zillennials to become disciples of Jesus, the church can answer questions that it did not know it needed to ask. By asking questions focused on reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials, the church can better make disciples of all generations. The church should begin by seeking to meet Zillennials where they are to understand the best way to reach, connect, and engage with them.

### *Zillennials, Media, and Technology*

In the last forty years, there have been significant advancements and changes in the technological landscape. Since the Zillennials had their formative years during this time, it would make sense that they would be significantly affected by technology and technology being very important to them. There is the assumption that all Zillennials are consumed by technology. While technology is vital to many Zillennials, it is not the most crucial factor in their lives like some may think; this may especially be the case in rural areas.<sup>60</sup> Technology is essential, but its use alone will not be the answer to reaching Zillennials

One of the more exciting aspects of the technological age and how Zillennials interact in a digital world is how they view technology as one more avenue to interacting with the world. They get their news from the internet and social media much more than from newspapers and news programs on television.<sup>61</sup> For many Zillennials, the idea that

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<sup>60</sup> Brunilda Martinez, "Young Adults' Spirituality: How Church Leaders Are Addressing Spiritual Needs of Young Adults in Small Rural Churches." (PhD Diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 174.

<sup>61</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 190.

physical presence is a requisite for spiritual experience is not one that they see as coherent. Martinez explains, "Their spiritual experiences can be shared via technology with others using the same communication methods. Social media has become a perfect example."<sup>62</sup> This use of technology for older generations before March 2020 would have been unthinkable. In light of most churches in states affected by COVID 19 having to either have no services or do their services virtually, many have now experienced spiritual practices such as a worship service enabled by technology.

Zillennials are not only comfortable with experiencing and practicing parts of their spirituality digitally and virtually, but they are also mainly responsible for many of the innovations in technology and digital communications that have had this possible.<sup>63</sup> One of the gifts that Zillennials have given the world, it seems, is the ability and tools to engage in some forms of digital discipleship. This reality and opportunity is one that the church must think through and seek to understand the technological landscape.<sup>64</sup> This is especially the case if the church wants to reach unchurched Zillennials.<sup>65</sup>

While there are challenges in reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials, there are also opportunities. A challenge is that there are no easy answers to getting Zillennials back in church,<sup>66</sup> but Zillennials are more open to the Gospel than unchurched

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<sup>62</sup> Martinez, "Young Adults Spirituality," 35.

<sup>63</sup> Johannes Knoetze, "Who Are the Disciples? Identity Perceptions About Millennials and the Church," *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander Houston, "How to Effectively Engage in Ministry with the Millennial Generation: Developing a Contextualized Intergenerational Church through Millennial Outreach" (DMin Diss., Drew University, 2015), 90.

<sup>65</sup> Martinez, "Young Adults Spirituality," 165.

<sup>66</sup> Ted Doering and Chelsea Doering, *Myth of the Millennial: Connecting Generations in the Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 35.



people from previous generations.<sup>67</sup> The way they are engaging in religious or spiritual practice is changing<sup>68</sup>; this is something that the church recognizing would greatly help it reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials. There is a yearning in many Zillennials for a faith that is deep and answers their existential questions.<sup>69</sup>

Zillennials do appreciate spiritual practices, including some traditional ones. One would think then that it would be easy for the church to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials, but many have been hurt by the church and "have decided to engage in their faith journey in a different way"<sup>70</sup> than the church community.

### **Conclusion**

While RCHOG has not effectively reached, engaged, not connected with Zillennials, this can be remedied. This will not be an easy task. It will provide the church with several challenges, but it will also present the church with new opportunities. It will require the church to journey through territory, both known and unknown. It will also require the church to confront some inconvenient truths about itself. But if the church is to continue, it must adapt and move forward while seeking to fulfill the great commission in the Zillennials.

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<sup>67</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Martinez, "Young Adults Spirituality," 53.

<sup>69</sup> Houston, "How to Effectively Engage in Ministry with the Millennial Generation," 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

## CHAPTER 2:

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Ultimately, any biblical foundation to solving how the church can better reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials must begin with the great commission. The problem is that the Great Commission does not offer much methodology to fulfilling its call. Several passages will help us discover how the church in general and RCHOG, more specifically, can seek to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials. This chapter will look first at some Old Testament texts and discuss how these texts can inform. After this, we will examine New Testament texts that can also inform us in our endeavor.

Brueggemann's three-storied approach to evangelism will be helpful in reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials. According to him,

The Bible revolves around three narratives which are focal and normative, which drive the imagination of Israel, and which generate many derivative claims. These three stories are the *promise* made to the ancestors, the *deliverance* from slavery and the gift of the *land*. These stories are definitional for Israel's self-understanding, and provide much of the material for Christian proclamation, done with great interpretive freedom.<sup>1</sup>

As we will see from two of the Old Testament passages that we will look at in some detail, story is central to evangelism. It seems to be one of the components of a biblical understanding and methodology for it. For Brueggemann, evangelism is the process of inviting people to participate and to claim these definitional and formative stories as their

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 10.

own, and in doing so, also inviting them to let go of their old definitional and formative stories, which lead to discontent, chaos, and exile in this world.<sup>2</sup>

A focus on story and narrative will be vital to methodological and ideological adjustments that the church will have to consider to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials effectively. Zillennials have a much larger desire for stories over dogma and moralistic principles; this is something that should not be difficult to understand. After all, the Bible is not a list of rules and principles but rather a collection of narrative episodes that form a larger interconnected narrative of God's interaction with humanity. Through these stories and the church's retelling of them and participation in them, the church will also embrace its place in a world that it finds itself in. The church finds itself opposed to the systemic forces of the world. After all, as Brueggemann reminds us concerning the stories of scripture, "They are tellings that assume polytheism, i.e., competing, conflicting powers."<sup>3</sup> The modern world is still a place filled with competing and conflicting powers with which the church must deal.

By examining an understanding of evangelism, and ultimately discipleship, that is focused on the narrative of the Bible, we will be able to discover ways in which the biblical narrative expressed evangelism. Also, the church, through participating in these narratives, will itself be re-evangelized to these understandings that can help it not only reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials but also have a better understanding of what engagement in the community of the people of God looks like and how to live that out in this modern age.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 25.

## Old Testament Foundations

This chapter will begin by looking at Deuteronomy 6:1-12, Joshua 24, Nehemiah 8, and several Psalms. These texts are essential to our understanding of evangelism and discipleship today because they relate to the time of the Babylonian Exile of the Jewish people. The Joshua text also seems to relate to a moment in which the exiled were invited into the community. We find ourselves in a time of exile as well. Brueggemann argues that there are similarities between the Old Testament Jews' struggles living in the Babylonian exile and the struggles that the church currently faces in a post-Christian West.<sup>4</sup> Michael Frost echoes this idea asserting, "The experience that faced the Jewish exiles mirrors the church's experience today....The passing of Christendom might be compared to the fall of Jerusalem, and there is no going back."<sup>5</sup> These two passages and Brueggemann's insights from them will help see ways in which Millennials can be reached, engaged, and connected with. Both of these passages occur within the context of a time which was very much like an exile in which the people were not the majority, and their culture was in opposition to the status quo of the world around them. The church is in a similar situation as it tries to reach, engage, and connect to a world drastically different in ideology from itself. Thus, Brueggemann's insights into these passages will be helpful.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 9.

## *Deuteronomy 6*

Deuteronomy provides several passages that speak to reaching, connecting, and engaging new generations to the faith, using narrative and story. One that is central to an understanding of evangelism and disciples in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6. This passage shows us very clearly that an essential aspect of the covenantal relationship is that the people of Israel are to pass the covenantal faith in Yahweh down to the following generations. The faith's transference is handed down in the totality of one's life and through constant repetition.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, it seems the faith is also passed down through narrative as we look at an example of the teaching seen in Deuteronomy 6:20-24

It is of interest, though, that the meaning and the root of *shinat* is not agreed upon. Some lexicons and scholars argue this term for teaching as meaning recite or repeat as a form of *snh*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, others argue for the definition of "teaching incisively" connected to *shana*.<sup>8</sup> While this may seem like a semantical argument, the implications are essential to understanding how to pass the faith onto the next generation. If one is to lean toward Peter Craigie's understanding of the text as asserting the meaning of teaching in terms of reciting, then the faith is passed on through the continual repetition of the Torah in conversation.<sup>9</sup> If one were to lean more towards something similar to Eugene

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene H Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 167.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 1597.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 1041.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 170.

Merrill's understanding of the meaning of teaching here in terms of *impressing* the "covenant faith into the thinking of his children by inscribing them there with indelible sharpness and precision,"<sup>10</sup> then it seems it is more complicated but also more formative. The image of carving the covenant's ideals into new generations so that they may wrestle to discover how to best live out the covenant in their world seems to line up with the ways that the people of Israel and the church have interpreted and applied scripture. Brueggemann argues that there are only two choices regarding how we pass down the commands: a continual reinterpretation, adaptation, and innovation or dismissing them as no longer relevant or meaningful.<sup>11</sup> This seems to line up with the understanding of teaching as impressing the covenantal thinking in the minds instead of recitation resulting in memorization.

Looking at this text in terms of the call to imprint the faith on the next generation to make its own instead of focusing on transmitting rote information from one generation to the following points to some important implications for the church reaching, engaging, and connecting with new generations. The verb translated in verse 6 of the ESV as *teaching them diligently* Walter Brueggemann argues, "is to be taken with enormous imaginative, interpretive freedom. That is, the evangelist in the conversation must be a skillful, sensitive, hermeneutist."<sup>12</sup> Thus, teaching in this passage is not about reciting a creedal formula, be it the Ten Commandments or the Shema, but about the evangelist's invitation to the student or hearer to enter the story and imaginatively participate in the

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<sup>10</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 4:167.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storyed Universe*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

story of Yahweh and his people.<sup>13</sup> Understanding the imperative to teach the covenantal faith in this way would seem to give insights into how the church can reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials. Brueggemann asserts that we should understand teaching diligently as giving opportunity and permission for others to reimagine or reconstrue their lives and life stories in terms of their relation to Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> This understanding would seem to be one that would encourage engagement and connection as Zillennials would be invited into understanding themselves as part of the story of God and his people.

*Joshua 24, Nehemiah 8, and Three Storied Evangelism*

Now let us move on to examine Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8. These stories offer two various examples of the third story of Brueggemann's three-storied understanding of evangelism. Yet, they also serve as two separate and distinct situations in which this third story of evangelism is lived out. Joshua 24 serves as an example of "outsiders becoming insiders,"<sup>15</sup> in which the people brought out of Egypt made a choice and became the people of Israel through fidelity to the covenant. Nehemiah 8 serves as the third story in the three-storied drama of evangelism in which the people of Israel, who have returned from exile, are reconverted, or as Brueggemann portrays it, "forgetters made

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<sup>13</sup> The answers given in Deuteronomy 6:20-24 make important use of the second person pronoun we instead of the Third person pronoun they. This small difference points to the teaching inviting the question asker into the story because it is about them as well as the people who historically experienced the Exodus. The small difference of "we were" versus "they were" point to the interpretive incitation to engage in imaginative participation in the story. This seem to point to the EPIC frame work that we will discuss in later chapters.

<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

rememberers."<sup>16</sup> These two different stories serve as a Biblical foundation for an understanding of evangelism both to those who have "grown up" amidst a community of faith (Nehemiah 8) and those who are new to the community of faith (Joshua 24). We live in a time of crisis for the church; the church is struggling to reach, engage, and connect with those who have grown up in the church and those who have not. These two passages can greatly inform ways in which the church can move forward.

### *Joshua 24*

Joshua 24 portrays a meeting at Shechem in which the people of Israel are called to choose to serve Yahweh and "Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt." (Joshua 24:14) That they are called to put away other gods recognizes that they are not yet entirely devoted to Yahweh. Brueggemann argues that since there is no armed conquest of the area around Shechem, we should reconsider Canaanite and Israelite's definitions.<sup>17</sup> Suppose we reevaluate what happened at Shechem in this meeting when the people "renewed" the covenant. In that case, we see people who formerly did not worship Yahweh coming into a covenantal relationship with him for the first time. Bruggeman argues that the word Canaanite should be understood not as an ethnic descriptive but rather as an ideological descriptor of those:

Who are committed to exploitative, non-covenantal social relationships and who practice forms of religion which may have given symbolic legitimation to non-covenantal practices. That is, 'Canaanites' are those who are committed to social practices which are viewed as hostile to the covenantal vision of Israel.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 48.



The lack of armed conquest of the Shechem area and reevaluation of the terms Canaanite and Israelite<sup>19</sup> points to Joshua 24 as an evangelistic moment in which outsiders are given the choice of conversion and thus become included in the people of God. This passage and our interpretation of it can then serve to understand how outsiders, whose lifestyles are opposed to the new covenant, can be invited into the new covenant as followers of Jesus. In a time in which much of the culture seems to be committed to social practices that are hostile to being in a covenantal relationship with God as a follower of Jesus Christ, this text is very relevant to the church as it seeks to reach, engage and connect with Zillennials.

Joshua, during the meeting at Shechem, retells the history between God and his chosen people. It is not a simple retelling, but the people at this meeting are included in the story. Joshua invites outsiders to the people of Israel<sup>20</sup> to participate in this narrative of good news and become insiders to this story and the people of Israel.<sup>21</sup> We can also understand this passage that connects with the New Testament theology because those who are outsiders to the family of God are invited to be adopted as part of the covenantal family.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> If we understand Canaanite in terms of those who are committed to social practices that are hostile to the covenantal vision of Israel then we can inversely understand Israelite in terms of those who are committed to the covenantal vision of Israel. To be an Israelite also can be understood in this context not as an ethnic identity so much as an ideological, or covenantal identity.

<sup>20</sup> Israel here should be understood as an ideological covenantal identity.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church : Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong.*, Youth, Family, and Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 16.

*Nehemiah 8*

In Nehemiah 8, the people who have returned from exile and forgotten the covenant are reminded of it. In this passage, Brueggemann argues that we have the "forgetters becoming rememberers" in retelling the text in Israel's memory through imaginative interpretation by which they become for the first time "people of the book."<sup>23</sup> Nehemiah retells the story of the people of Israel to those who have been raised in the covenantal community but are not living out covenantal fidelity to Yahweh. This is accomplished by reading the Book of the Law of Moses, which was interpreted for the people. One could surmise that this interpretation would have invited these people to envision their own participation in the story being read. In this recitation of the law, the people are invited as "the community already pledged to faith, back to a serious embrace and practice of that pledged faith."<sup>24</sup> Through the retelling of the story, Israel's amnesia is remedied, and they are called back to fidelity.<sup>25</sup>

Nehemiah 8 is instructive for a time when the community of faith struggles to engage and equip those raised in the church. This is a time when the church is often failing to keep those raised in the faith connected to the faith, and this reality makes Nehemiah 8 a timely text. This text also reminds the church that the crisis it is facing is

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<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 11–12.

not recent but simply part of an ongoing struggle.<sup>26</sup> From this text, we can learn a path to help those who were raised in the church and have forgotten the faith to become rememberers and, like the post-exile Jews, return to faith.

### *The Book of Psalms*

The book of Psalms also provides examples of how the faith has been passed down from one generation to another. Like Deuteronomy 6, Joshua 24, and Nehemiah 8, The focus is on the narrative and not on doctrine or dogma. Several Psalms will be important to our understanding of the passing on of the faith by reciting the story of God's working amongst and for his people. These psalms include Psalm 78, 105, 106, 107, 135, and 136. We will examine Psalm 78 and 107 in some depth and reference the other psalms. It is important that the focus of these psalms is the praise of Yahweh for his mighty works. There is a definite connection between Deuteronomy 6:20-24 and Joshua 24:1-3 and these psalms. Both Brueggemann and Von Rad see these psalms as having the same primal substance of the recitation of the miracles in Israel's past; the connection to the Deuteronomy and Joshua text explains the similar story recited.<sup>27</sup> The similarities in content and the function of these psalms to Deuteronomy 6 and Joshua 24 point to an understanding of the recitation of story as the tool for the passing on of faith in evangelism and discipleship of new generations. The common central purpose of these

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<sup>26</sup> Peter K Nelson, "Discipleship Dissonance: Toward a Theology of Imperfection Amidst the Pursuit of Holiness," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 4, no. 1 (2011): 67.

<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 10–11.

psalms "is to inform, correct, and nurture the faith of the congregation in whose midst they were performed."<sup>28</sup>

### *Psalm 78*

Psalm 78, argues Brueggemann, "Provides the best case known to me in the Bible for the evangelism of our own young."<sup>29</sup> This psalm was composed to be used at major festivals along with Psalm 106 and 107, which would mean that it would be heard by all those at the festivals every year.<sup>30</sup> This repetition of the telling of the story of God's miraculous working amongst his people Israel is important because, as the psalmist makes very evident, there are positive repercussions to remembering the mighty wonders that God has worked. There are also negative consequences for neglecting the stories of the wonders God has worked. Mays asserts that this psalm's "basic assumption is that remembering and telling are essential to the existence of the people of God."<sup>31</sup> The first eight verses of the psalm are concerned with why it is important to remember. Still, the following fifty-nine verses are focused on the negative consequences of forgetting God's working among his people Israel. One thing that is important about this psalm is the retelling of Israel's forgetfulness is told in a prolonged narrative that reminds the people of all of the wonders that God worked, as opposed to a propositional warning of reasons

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<sup>28</sup> James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 254.

<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms II: 51-100: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 17, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>31</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 256.

to avoid forgetting the workings of God. Even in the retelling of the people of Israel's unfaithfulness, the psalmist invites the hearers to become participants in the narrative and thus also see the incentive to remember the story and teach it to the new generation.

The psalm gives specific reasons for the passing on the knowledge of the past to new generations. 1) They will tell their children. 2) They will set their hope in God.<sup>32</sup> 3) In setting their hope in God, they will allow God's transformative power to continue to work in their future.<sup>33</sup> 4) Through the story's reciting, the people will not forget God's works among Israel.<sup>34</sup> 5) By remembering God's past workings, the people will be more likely to keep his commandments.<sup>35</sup> 6) Ultimately, through the remembrance of the past, they, unlike their amnesiac forefathers, will not become a stubborn, rebellious generation.<sup>36</sup>

Psalm 78 is not only concerned with a retelling of history. This psalm is "concerned with the past and its bearing on present and future."<sup>37</sup> Weiser agrees and further explains the reason for this when he states:

What it wants to portray and impress on the mind is rather 'the riddles from of old' or, as we would say today, the irrational quality of the things that have come to pass, in order that present and coming generations will bear in mind and never forget the revelation of God's nature and will (v. 5: 'testimony and law'), together with the nature of human sin; simultaneously they are admonished to be faithful and obedient (v. 7) and warned against unfaithfulness and fickleness (v. 8), so that

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<sup>32</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 255.

this knowledge will be preserved as a living force (vv. 4 f.), as the holy tradition of God's covenant (vv. 10, 37).<sup>38</sup>

This psalm and its urging the people to remember the past is done in such a way that they are invited to enter the narrative of history to see how to navigate the present and prevent future generations from forgetting the works of God. This means that it directly connects with the current situation the church is faced with in trying to reach new generations and pass on the faith to them.

Psalm 78 seems to encourage the church as it seeks to pass on the faith. It also serves as a challenge. But the Psalm aims to show a path to a brighter future and a generation that is ready to bring the gospel into that future. As Brueggemann asserts, this Psalm "aims to generate persons who can take responsibility for the future of the world... the future of the world which depends on steadfastness and fidelity."<sup>39</sup> As the psalm reminds the people hearing it that the past people of God have not always been faithful in remembering the past, it gives hope of a future in which the church can reach the next generations with the good news of the gospel and God's faithfulness.

One of the significant things to remember about the psalms is that these were not meant to be simply heard as a performance, but instead, they were to be participated in. When that thought is added to the fact that so many of the psalms, much like Psalm 78, are about reciting the past, then how these psalms invite participation may help us understand engagement differently. Brueggemann asserts, "Memory is an engagement with fidelity from a God who takes endless initiatives in life-transforming, life-

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<sup>38</sup> Author Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1998), 538.

<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storied Universe*, 122.

guaranteeing actions of generosity."<sup>40</sup> Every recitation of the past in the psalms in any part of the Bible, in the synagogue, and in the church today can be a compelling invitation to engage.

### *Psalm 107*

Psalm 107 provides several specific insights that the modern church can learn from in the realm of inviting engagement and participation. This psalm is similar in some respects to Psalm 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136, but it also differs from them in some crucial ways. In its very structure and historical context, this psalm serves as a lesson in the changing of hermeneutics. Some scholars seem to date this psalm after the exile and see it as referring to those returning from the exile.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, other scholars see this psalm as a combination of earlier traditions that have been combined with post-exilic additions that reinterpret the entire psalm to the context of post-exilic Israel.<sup>42</sup>

Allen argues that this psalm is "an older poem has been taken over for a new situation."<sup>43</sup> This reciting of four different stories of God working wonders amongst humanity seems to be in its very composition meant to be entered into, to participate in each of the four stories told, and thus through interpreting them for one's own time, make them part of one's own story. This ability to create participation by inviting the

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<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*.

<sup>41</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 686.

<sup>42</sup> Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 85.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21:88.

reinterpreting of the text through actively and imaginatively entering the story of the people of God is something that the modern church might consider to regain and fully embrace. This understanding is simply the living out of the theological stance that we encounter the living word of God in the Bible. As Allen explains, Psalm 107 is:

an impressive example of how the written word can come alive for a later generation of God's people and speak to them in a new way that corresponds to their particular situation. It is a mark of the living word of God that it is not exhausted in an ancient situation; nor does it necessarily require repetition of history to become valid again but runs freely, challenging a new generation of believers to see fresh correspondence between word and experience and to claim that word as relevant to their own lives.<sup>44</sup>

This seems to be something that every preacher wants to help their people to do; here in Psalm 107, we see one way to make this happen.

Another way that this psalm differs from others that have been mentioned is that it does not directly recite Israel's history. The four stories that are in this psalm are while being distinct, anonymous, and thus easily invite the hearer to imaginatively interpret the story and thus situate themselves in it. The ease with which these stories can be reinterpreted has led some scholars such as Ray Estes to see this psalm, in the four different stories, referring to the same event: the exile.<sup>45</sup> It is thought more likely these four stories are not to represent one specific event but rather encompass the human experience in its totality. Allen argues that all four accounts are concerned with human experiences, with life realities in their manifold fullness.<sup>46</sup> That four stories of Yahweh's

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 21:91.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel J. Estes, *Psalm 73-150*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 13, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2019), 311.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 21:84.



wonderous acts of salvation point to the four directions mentioned in most translations<sup>47</sup> assert a totality of experience. This is one of the reasons that this psalm not only results in differing interpretations but also invited the hearers in. When one hears a story and part of their response is either I'm not the only one who feels that way, or someone else has been, then engagement is achieved at the highest level by any definition of engagement.

Another technique that can be seen in this psalm is that even the grammar that is present is meant to invite the hearer in to claim the story as their own. There are imperfect verb forms in this psalm, which is surprising because one should expect perfect verb forms since this is a recounting of the past. Weiser sees these unexpected verb forms as a grammatical trick" to express the actualization of past events in the cult in the present."<sup>48</sup> This should serve as a reminder to the church that there is an art and skill to recounting the story of the gospel. Some ways make it easier for people to enter the story as their own.

The psalm shows how story can be used to reach, engage, and connect people with the story of God working in the lives of his people. The psalm also clearly reminds us of the validity of the concern and focus on passing our faith from one generation to another. Such concern in the psalms about passing on of the faith should also encourage us that this has never been a concern that had a simple solution, or such care to be reminded of its importance would not be so evident in the biblical text. This, in the case of Psalm 78, is through the retelling of the history of God working his wondrous deeds

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<sup>47</sup> Nancy deClaisse-Walford, "Book Five of the Psalter: Psalms 107–150," in *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 817.

<sup>48</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 687.

among his people. Psalm 78 also shows how to "inform, correct, and nurture the faith"<sup>49</sup> of the next generation who are already part of the community of faith. The psalm also shows how those outside of the faith can be invited into the faith through story. Psalm 107 reminds us how the Bible can come alive in new ways when new generations are invited into the imaginative, interpretive tack of entering the story. This interpretive participation also serves as identity formation. The participants become part of the story read and heard and the larger story of God's dealing with his people through the past, present, and future. The psalms also give examples of how readers or hearers can be invited into the story as participants and interpreters.

There are several points of connection with Deuteronomy 6, Joshua 24, and Nehemiah 8. It is evident that at least part of the Old Testament foundation for the passing on and sharing the faith is focused on story. In all of these Old Testament examples examined, it is not merely the story told that is used to pass on the faith and therefore reach, engage, and connect with future generations, but also the invitation to participate in, and ultimately become part of the story. This process is not a one-time event but also must be revisited, and the story reentered and regularly reinterpreted, just as it was for the people of Israel. As we will see, these same themes and connections will resonate through the New Testament as well.

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<sup>49</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 254.

## New Testament Foundations

In the New Testament, we see examples of this type of invitation to participate in the story of the people of God. People are invited not merely to participate in the story of God's past dealing with his people or present ones. Instead, they are also invited to consider how they might be part of God's future story dealing with his people. It is essential to understand this in terms of Ephesians 4: all believers are called to live this out as they are all called to participate in the *Missio Dei* and, therefore, the continued story of the church.<sup>50</sup> As we are invited into the story of God's church through the love of God shown in Jesus, we are transformed from individuals disconnected not only from God but also from each other into being members of a divine community, which lives out the reality of God's love and continues the story of God's people.<sup>51</sup>

### *Jesus*

Jesus uses story and narrative images in a similar way to the Old Testament. By telling stories or using narrative images that the people would have understood, such as agrarian images, he invites his hearers to enter into the story and enter into the discipleship process with him. Norman Geisler argues one of the reasons that Jesus used stories is "One of the best ways to communicate truth is to illustrate it through stories,

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<sup>50</sup> Dale L Lemke, "A Philosophy of Disciple-Centered Leadership," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 14, no. 2 (2017): 279.

<sup>51</sup> Norma Cook Everist and Craig L Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 37.

which are also an effective way penetrate hardened hearts that are not receptive to the direct presentation of truth."<sup>52</sup>

Jesus does this in ways that one might not always recognize, but this should be of little surprise since many parables might miss being labeled by such in a cursory reading of the synoptic gospels. Matthew 6:25-34 is a case that might prove this. Jesus is teaching about not worrying and how the world's worries are not to be focused on by those who are part of the kingdom of God. But Jesus teaches through telling stories that invite the hearers in to experience the story as their own and enter into the understanding of worry that is compatible with the Kingdom of God. Through the entering and imaginative interpretation of the parables, hearers can understand kingdom economics and ideals. This passage can be interpreted in several different ways. For example, because of the story and the way that Jesus uses it, there are at least three different legitimate categorical readings of this text.<sup>53</sup>

Jesus asks the hearers to “look” and “consider.” These two verbs are inviting the hearer to enter into the story to investigate and ultimately engage in imaginative, interpretive participation in the story to come to new understandings and ultimately a new identity as part of the kingdom of God. The poetic nature is part of the reason that this passage is both so powerful and so memorable.<sup>54</sup> The poetic language is part of what invites the hearer to participate in the story Jesus is telling. In looking to “the birds of the

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<sup>52</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Patrick Zukeran, *The Apologetics of Jesus: A Caring Approach to Dealing with Doubters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 79.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 74–75.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

air” and considering “the lilies of the field,” the hearer has gone from spectator to active participant from listener to invested student. Jesus also uses the question beginning with the phrase “which of you” that he uses in other parables to individualize and particularize the parable to every hearer.<sup>55</sup> The words and how Jesus tells his parable to teach have qualities similar to how Psalm 107 used verb forms to invite hearers to participate in the story. While not precisely recalling God's wondrous acts, these stories do remember the working of God to provide in the natural world. The result could be seen as similar: to understand that as God has provided for the birds and flowers, he will provide for the hearers, just as in the psalms recounting the wonderous works were to help the hearer understand that God would work in their lives as well.

Jesus used parables to teach in a way that disarmed the hearers. That seemed to be why people also got so angry with Jesus when he told parables. They were disarmed. The parable took a turn and was challenging to everyday understandings of Jewish culture and called many cultural assumptions into question. Parables were never meant to be innocent stories but rather stories to illuminate error, transform the people's thinking, and demand a response from the hearers.<sup>56</sup> While Jesus' parables may not always speak of God's past works as we have seen in the Old Testament, many of the images and metaphors that Jesus uses are Old Testament images. Thus, when he speaks of a vineyard or God as a shepherd, he is in similar ways calling listeners to engage in the story of the past in the

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<sup>55</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Bible in its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 228.

<sup>56</sup> Geisler and Zukeran, *The Apologetics of Jesus*, 79.

present. There is much that the modern church should seek to recapture in the way that Jesus used stories to better reach, engage, and connect with new generations.

### *Acts*

When we look to evangelistic moments in Acts, we see similarities with Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8. Peter's sermon at Pentecost and Stephen's sermon retell the story of God's working among his people and invite the hearers to participate in that story through the way it is told and through an invitation to decide the recitation of the past. The recitation of God's story of relating to humanity and inviting the hearers to participate in that story is part of the Biblical framework for reaching, engaging, and connecting with either outsiders or forgetters of the faith.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2 reminds the people of Israel's history through the use of the Prophet Joel, but in a way to interpret the events that are happening during Pentecost. In a sense, he is inviting the people who are witnesses to the Holy Spirit at work in the community of faith to join the community; this is somewhere between inviting outsiders to become part of the community and calling forgetters to become rememberers or, perhaps, a little bit of both. As Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32, he also refers to the text Joel was harkening back to Numbers 11:29.<sup>57</sup> The remembrance of wonders is a part of this sermon, but the wonders remembered are the prophecy of wonders that the people are seeing be fulfilled before their eyes. The promise of the restoration of Judah's fortunes connected with the events of Pentecost highlights the similarity between it and

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<sup>57</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 60.

both Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8. Willimon asserts that the pattern here of promise and fulfillment is meant to closely and concretely connect the history of Israel with Jesus and "assert that the community the Spirit forms is an unbroken succession of Israel's own pattern of expectation and realization."<sup>58</sup> Peter's speech invited the people to become participants in the story of the ancient people of Israel by fulfilling Joel's prophecy they were witnessing. Their response of "*What shall we do?*" shows that they had become participants and had engaged with the story.

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 also shows similarities to Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8 and the psalms examined. Fitzmyer sees Stephen's speech as connected with the retelling of Israel's history in "Deuteronomic Style."<sup>59</sup> Stephen uses the retelling of the history of God working wonders among his people to show "that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or any material building."<sup>60</sup> While reminding the Sanhedrin of Israel's history, Stephen is inviting them to move from forgetters to become remembers and, therefore, embrace God's new movement in history through Jesus Christ. Stephen focuses on the transient history of the people of Israel. The recalling of God's working before the temple was built invites the Sanhedrin to embrace the fresh outpouring of God's spirit outside of the temple mount.

An aspect of Stephen's speech that differs in goal is how Stephen recalls how the people of Israel rejected God. In recounting Israel's history, Stephen intersperses this

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<sup>58</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 31, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 363.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 130.

retelling with indictments and jabs at the temple community, which he is addressing.<sup>61</sup> In verse 53, when Stephen tells the people, "You who receive the Law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" he seems to be using the same sort of narrative techniques that we have discussed in Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8. Still, this time it is used for the indictment and correction of the temple community. They did not receive the law from angels, but "they" did in the same sense that God brought "them" out of Egypt. This seems to be an important use of this technique to recognize for both evangelism and discipleship. The inviting of people to participate in the narrative is also used to correct those thought to be in the community of faith, if only by themselves.

### *Hebrew 11-12*

Since most of the discussion of the biblical foundations concerning reaching, engaging, and connecting with Zillennials has been focused on texts that use narrative, it seems essential to discuss Hebrews. Some scholars assume that the epistle of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians in or near Rome.<sup>62</sup> Hebrews makes more use both overtly and alluding to the Hebrew scripture than any other epistles of the New Testament.<sup>63</sup> Hebrews, similar to some of the other texts we have looked at, has one significant difference: Hebrews is not meant for those outside of the faith. One way that Hebrews might be connected with an understanding of text like Joshua or Nehemiah is

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<sup>61</sup> Willimon, *Acts*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ Above All*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 16–17.

<sup>63</sup> George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 20.



that while the audience is a group of Christians, they are a group that seems to be "opting out of relationships with the larger Christian community."<sup>64</sup> Because of this, Hebrews might also have much more to say to the modern church concerning reaching, engaging, and connecting with those who have disconnected with the church that they grew up in, as is the case with an increasing number of Zillennials.

One place that seems to be important to look at in the book of Hebrew in light of earlier discussions of texts in Joshua and Nehemiah would be Hebrews 11-12. This text recounts the cloud of witnesses throughout the history of the people of Israel. It is different from other passages examined in recounting history because it does not focus on God's works among his people. Instead, the focus is on the people who were a part of God's people and how their faith was lived out throughout their lives throughout history. This text is the climax of encouragement for the believers the author addresses as they are facing persecution.<sup>65</sup>

This text first gives the readers a series of pictures, images, and stories of what faith looks like through difficult circumstances. Lane calls chapter 11's exposition "a celebration of the character of faith..." and "A kerygmatic review of redemptive history in terms of faithfulness to God."<sup>66</sup> The readers or hearers of this sermon are invited into the participation of the story through the shared experience of faith shown in this chapter. They are then further invited to participate through chapter 12, and its urging their perseverance

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<sup>64</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read The Bible Book by Book: Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 390.

<sup>65</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 694.

<sup>66</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1991), 312.

through their hardships.<sup>67</sup> This is a different sort of invitation to which attention should be paid when seeking to reach Zillennials.

Another aspect of Hebrews 11-12 has to do with how the story of the past is only completed through the participation of those followers of Jesus in the present and the future as well. The author of Hebrews is very clear that those who were covenantally faithful in the past did not get to see the covenant's fulfillment. Hebrews 11:40 connects the current Christian community with the generations of the past. It is only together with the generation of the past, present, and future that all those under the covenant experience the fulfillment of God's promises.<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann purports, "Their getting it right depends on us. 'Apart from us,' this faith is not complete. While the church has Revelation 21 for the long term, the immediate claim of Hebrew 11 is crucial. Present action fulfills past faith, an incredible summons to concrete engagement in the hopes of our ancestors."<sup>69</sup> Seeking the current new generation and future generations' engagement becomes even more critical for the church in light of this.

### Conclusions

One of the aspects of these stories that we might miss because of our culture is that these instances of evangelism are based not merely on the individual decision of covenantal fidelity but also on the community. In the Book of Acts, we see individuals,

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<sup>67</sup> Gareth L. Cockerill, *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998), 269.

<sup>68</sup> Craig R Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 36, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 520.

<sup>69</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 91.

and then households become followers of Jesus because the household's head becomes a believer. It is clear that community and individualism in the biblical text are very different from our modern cultural context. Chris Shirley observes that we have a problem understanding a Biblical model of community because of our culture, "We live today in a highly individualistic culture, as opposed to the strong group orientation in the early church."<sup>70</sup> For this reason, it would be wise to examine our theological understanding of community. The community was important to help those who the texts that have been discussed were written to in the past to participate in the story, and the same is true for the church today. Nathan Byrd argues that "the faith community can be valuable in assisting in this process"<sup>71</sup> of helping people participate in the Biblical narrative. To help the church reach, connect, and engage millennials in the community of the church, we must better understand biblical community.

There are clear biblical foundations not only for a concern in reaching new generations with the gospel, seeking to reach, engage and connect with them, but also how the church, through the use of the biblical story, can do so. We have seen through examining Deuteronomy the transference of faith, evangelism and discipleship, is done through the totality of one's life and should not be delineated from every day "goings and comings" of life. In Joshua, Nehemiah, the Psalms, and Acts, the recitation of the wonders that God has worked among his people is important. It is a way to invite new generations into the community of faith through participating in the repeated, continually

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<sup>70</sup> Chris Shirley, "Overcoming Digital Distance: The Challenge of Developing Relational Disciples in the Internet Age," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 14, no. 2 (2017): 388.

<sup>71</sup> Nathan C Byrd, "Narrative Discipleship: Guiding Emerging Adults to 'Connect the Dots' of Life and Faith," *Christian Education Journal* 8, no. 2 (2011): 258.

renewed, and reinterpreted story of God's working in the world. In examining some of Jesus' use of parables, we have seen different ways that stories can be powerfully used to invite the hearer to participate in the story and enter into the journey of discipleship. In Hebrews 11 and 12, we see how story can connect the past, present, and future communities. This connectedness of the past, present, and future is important because it gives followers of Jesus an identity that can weather difficult times through holding on to the promise and the recalling the cloud of witnesses that through the present and future their promises find fulfillment.

## CHAPTER 3:

## THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the church has an image problem, and that image problem has some basis in reality. One crucial question that one must address to consider how the church can better reach, connect, and engage with people of any generation is “what does it mean to be the church community?” This chapter will look at the church's theological understanding, mission, and idea of belonging. We live in a world that desires community but also demands independence. Many individuals are like the character Hermie from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964), who claims to be independent, but in the next moment, suggests to Rudolph that they be “independent together.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with this imperative of our culture is that the church is not called to be a collection of independent individuals but more like a grove of sequoia trees supporting each other, keeping each other firmly rooted, and depending on each other for strength.<sup>2</sup> An independent Christianity's danger is that the vibrant faith in Jesus Christ found in the church's community is transmogrified into a spirituality that is “not much more than inverted narcissism.”<sup>3</sup>

The reason for the church's existence is to fulfill God's mission and the great commandment of loving God and loving people. The fulfillment of the second part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Roemer, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (National Broadcasting Company (NBC), 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 175.

<sup>3</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 301.

great commandment will result in the church going out to help others know the good news, fulfilling the great commission.<sup>4</sup> The church cannot correctly make disciples outside of the community.<sup>5</sup> To understand how to reach, connect, and engage with people, the church must first be clear on what sort of community it is and how to live that out. This understanding of the idea of community will be vital for moving forward to using discipleship and the E.P.I.C. framework across all of the church to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials. This is foundational and formative to everything the church does, including evangelism and discipleship. We will examine several different viewpoints and synthesize them to understand what sort of community the church of God at Robertsedale should strive to practice being.

Some aspects of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Life Together* will be examined to portray one understanding of community that, while not ideally suited for our post-modern context, offers much for the church to think about in its endeavor to reach, engage and connect with Zillennials. Bonhoeffer's understanding of community the church should be and some of the orthopraxy that entails will serve as a great starting point. One might see Bonhoeffer's work in *Life Together* as not concerning evangelism. Still, if we understand evangelism as an invitation into the covenantal community, Bonhoeffer's work in *Life Together* is vital to understanding evangelism.

This chapter will also examine some aspects of Lesslie Newbigin's theology; his understanding of story will serve to overcome some of the weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>4</sup> Everist and Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2014), 16.

theology in a post-modern culture. Story is a central tool for inviting new people and recalcitrant members into the community in the biblical narrative. As such, Newbigin's understanding of the role of story in faith and knowledge will help us understand its use in the evangelism and discipleship of Zillennials and the entire church.

This chapter will also examine the church from the standpoint of relationships and the various spheres of relationship, exploring Joseph Myers's ideas in his book *The Search to Belong*. There are several aspects of our understanding of community in the church that may inhibit our ability to reach, engage, and connect with people outside the church. Moving from a one size fits all understanding of relationships, which allows room for relationships outside of the understanding of relational intimacy, is needed since we live in times that people struggle more than ever to relate to others. This has been even more complicated with the sudden isolation that many have experienced due to shelter at home responses to Covid19.

Finally, this chapter will look at Alan Hirsch's and Michael Frost's understanding of the church as a missional community. Understanding the church in terms of a bounded set or centered set will be essential to remedy some of the issues with Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church community. When applied to concrete praxis in the life of RCHOG, these theological foundations can be utilized to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials.

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Life Together* offers an excellent argument for a reevaluation of how we understand community and guides the church in ways to practice community from Bonhoeffer's practical experience of community life. Practicing authentic<sup>6</sup> Christian community helps the church better disciple current followers of Jesus. It will also help the church reach millennials because many are searching for a spiritual experience in an authentic community.<sup>7</sup> One can easily argue that both discipleship and evangelism are greatly hindered at best, and impossible to engage in at worst without such practice. The church offers this community as they connect with each other and connect with God through the church's communal life. The modern and post-modern church has difficulty understanding a biblical understanding of community displayed in the New Testament church. It is very foreign to our cultural milieu.<sup>8</sup> Not all church organizations or congregations would fulfill the definition of an authentic Christian community that we see in Bonhoeffer's works.

Community is indispensable for Christian life in Bonhoeffer's theology; through the community of Jesus' disciples, we encounter Jesus Christ. "Christ existing as

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<sup>6</sup> Some might see a discussion of authentic christian community as a little problematic since soe much of the prattice of authentic community is culturally dependant and therefore particularities of praxis would be varialbe to the degree of the differences of context. We understand these realities but still argue that there are aspects and prciples of nthe practice of christian community that can differentate a authentic christian community from a mere gathering of people who all happen to be christians in a worship service.

<sup>7</sup> Marsha L Williams, "Get Ready, Get Set ...Go Ye! Emerging Disciples In The Postmodern Era" (DMin Diss., Drew University, 2011), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Shirley, "Overcoming Digital Distance," 388.



community” is one of the central concepts to Bonhoeffer’s theological corpus.<sup>9</sup> This understanding should make us gravely examine how we practice community and live out the universal reality of the church in our local congregations. This understanding should also make the church value each individual in the community more. A modern explanation that resonates with Bonhoeffer’s experience of Christ existing as community comes from Shane Hipps, “The church does not exist only for us, we exist for it—each an essential part of the incarnated body of Jesus in the world.”<sup>10</sup> If the local congregation is not careful, they might greatly hinder one of Jesus’ follower’s understanding of Jesus. The church can easily misrepresent Jesus and present a counterfeit Christ through community life if it is not careful.

Bonhoeffer writes a great deal about how those within the Christian community should relate to each other. All of this is centered on Christ as the central understanding of community. He says, “For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. ‘He is our peace.’ We have access to one another, joy in one another, community with one another through Christ alone.”<sup>11</sup> Every individual is vital to community life; each member contributes to community life, even the “weak” are essential. He says, “Every Christian community must know that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the community.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer M McBride, “Christ Existing as Concrete Community Today,” *Theology Today* 7, no. 1 (2014): 92.

<sup>10</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 177.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:111.

That unity must be understood and lived out through the entire community life. Unity is lived out through the singing of songs in unison during worship,<sup>13</sup> the sharing of meals around the table,<sup>14</sup> and how well we listen to each other (which reflects on how we listen to God, according to Bonhoeffer).<sup>15</sup> It is also lived out through the practice of communion,<sup>16</sup> the public reading of scripture,<sup>17</sup> our intercessions in prayer for one another,<sup>18</sup> and how we serve one another.<sup>19</sup> One aspect community life of the unity in Christ that may make a post-modern believer a little more uncomfortable is the practice of confession, but this too, for Bonhoeffer, was an absolute necessity for what he calls the “breakthrough to community.”<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer does not offer any new or revolutionary ideas here but simply reminds the reader of the many commands of scripture that discuss community life's different practices. These community disciplines remind the church that one must be connected to a community. Geiger et al. argue, “scriptures are loaded with these instructions for how believers should interact and live in an interdependent community.... The one another commands cannot be lived out in isolation; they must be lived with ‘one another.’”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5:77.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5:82.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 5:113.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5:83.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5:65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5:103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5:115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5:125.

<sup>21</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 177.

The idea that we genuinely experience Christ in the church community speaks of the importance of interpreting Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8 as invitations into the community of God through participating in the story of God's people. Bonhoeffer does not view Christ's community in a theoretical, ideal, or unrealistic fashion. He states, "Christian community is not an ideal that we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."<sup>22</sup> An idealized church vision can lead to judgmentalism and prevent the church from participating in the Christian community's reality.<sup>23</sup> This would be an example of the church misrepresenting Jesus and presenting the community with an imitation Christ. As Bonhoeffer argues, such an idealized church vision is "a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive."<sup>24</sup>

This rejection of the validity of dreams of the "ought-to" community connects with the notion of the community's entry as an invitation to participate in a new story and leave the old narratives of life behind that we saw in the biblical text examined in the last chapter. This thought of participating in one narrative and thereby leaving another seems to echo Bonhoeffer when he says, "I find no salvation in my life story, but only in the story of Jesus."<sup>25</sup>

It is through community life that discipleship happens. As disciples engage in community life, they also engage in spiritual practices. While discipleship will be looked

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<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, 5:51.

<sup>23</sup> Everist and Nessian, *Transforming Leadership*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, 5:48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:72.

at in more depth in the next chapter, we will discuss it here. As for Bonhoeffer, it would be very difficult, if not completely impossible, to separate an understanding of discipleship from an understanding of the church community. Bonhoeffer identifies several practices of the community of the church in his work *Life Together*. One of the more counterintuitive spiritual practices of the community of Christ is that of solitude. Bonhoeffer connects the interplay between community life and solitude with that of speech and silence. Both community life and solitude are needed in the church, and the balance of both are a part of community life; you cannot have one without the other.<sup>26</sup> Some might think that practicing solitude is not something directly connected with the practice of community. For Bonhoeffer, solitude is vital to community life, he attests,

Those who want community without solitude [Allensein] plunge into the void of words and feelings, and those who seek solitude without community perish in the bottomless pit of vanity, self-infatuation and despair. Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.<sup>27</sup>

Through this understanding of a community and the individual, Bonhoeffer shows a route to understanding community that does not worship uniformity while also not valuing individuality as an idol.

Through community, we also better understand the Word of God. Bonhoeffer argued for the reading of the entirety of scripture as a central practice to the community of Christ. The church is to be a community devoted to the living Word of God. He argued that the reading of scripture should be central to daily worship in the community.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 5:96.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5:65.

reading of scripture in worship and participation in that story of scripture can be a shared experience, which further cements the community. Alan Hirsch asserts, “*communitas*... happens in situations where individuals are driven to find each other through a shared experience...”<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the reading of scripture in the community and daily worship was challenging to modern practice. He argues the readings of scripture during worship “must include a longer Old and New Testament lesson besides the prayer of the Psalms.”<sup>30</sup> The result was a focus of the whole testimony of scripture in worship. This focus on reading scripture in community differs significantly from the modern emphasis on personal quiet times and Bible study.

One must be careful when looking at Bonhoeffer’s experience that brought about his book *Life Together*. The circumstances and the practices surrounding the community at Finkenwalde may not translate to every church community. It could be argued that some aspects of the community should not be replicated in the local church. The sort of monastic community that was the basis for the practices discussed in *Life Together* is not easily translatable and may not be reproducible long term. Bonhoeffer himself admitted that the community he envisioned did not fit into the church's current models and structure.<sup>31</sup> The young men who were part of Finkenwalde were seminarians training to be pastors; therefore, modeling a traditional church ministry after it is questionable. It would be difficult to argue that Bonhoeffer saw the community of Finkenwalde as

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 221.

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, 5:70.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:28.

anything other than temporary. The life of the brother's house in Finkenwalde was always meant to be liminal and transitory.

Not only does the liminal nature of the community pose a problem when looking at how to apply Bonhoeffer's vision to the church, but the make-up of the community of Finkenwalde also poses a problem. The reality that only young single men were a part of this community makes it problematic to assume that we can apply all the lessons Bonhoeffer learned there to the broader church. The diversity of ages, relationships, and familial obligations in the wider church is something that Bonhoeffer could not readily address in anything more than theory. Readily admitting these problems helps those seeking to learn from Bonhoeffer's experience at Finkenwalde to know that his experiences cannot be understood as ultimate and universal for the church, but we can learn from them.

There also seems to be a little irony in Bonhoeffer's discussion of not coming to the community of Christ with an idealized vision of how it should look and operate, when that is much of what he did. Geffery Kelly notes that one of the reasons that he did not immediately take the position offered to him at Finkenwalde was that "Bonhoeffer also wanted to study firsthand the "monastic" training in vogue in other traditions."<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer created his own vision of an idealized Christian community even while arguing that the church does not need visionary dreamers. Everist and Nesson say that "Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the problem of "visionary dreaming" as one of the

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<sup>32</sup> Geffery B Kelly, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 28.

greatest dangers facing leaders in the church.”<sup>33</sup> While that may be overstating the point, it is clear that he thought such idealization of a model to operate as the church was problematic, yet he also was guilty of creating such a model.

Another aspect that seems to be problematic is that Bonhoeffer’s theological framework focuses on the path of discipleship as learning that leads to belief.<sup>34</sup> The notion of participating in the story of God points to the idea of believing to know or understand as Augustine has declared, “Therefore, seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand.”<sup>35</sup> The problem with a notion of learning that leads to belief is that it is based on the modernist idea of objective knowledge that has its basis on the understanding of indubitable certainties.<sup>36</sup> While Bonhoeffer does argue that the church needs to seek participation in the story of the Bible, asserting the need to be “uprooted from our own existence and... taken back to the holy history of God on earth,”<sup>37</sup> he sees this not as the invitation to the community of faith, but rather the duty of those who have learned to believe.

There are several challenges to community and how we can best live out the *church's communitas* that Bonhoeffer could never have imagined during his lifetime. Technology has given us great resources to better connect across the globe and

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<sup>33</sup> Everist and Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> McBride, “Christ Existing as Concrete Community Today,” 100.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54*, ed. Thomas P Halton, trans. John W Rettig, vol. 88, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 267.

<sup>37</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, 5:72.

challenges a basic understanding of how to “do” community. There has even been a dramatic shift in how we understand to best use technology since the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic. During a conference in 2019, Carey Nieuwhof argued that online church would never replace in-person gatherings and that the church must offer something in a meeting that can’t be translated into online viewing.<sup>38</sup> Some have argued that online church ministry is counterproductive to authentic community, and that can only happen in face to face in real-life interactions.<sup>39</sup> On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Carey Nieuwhof hosted the Online Church Engagement Summit in which his position had changed concerning virtual church; he argued, “Churches that engage people will have a larger impact than those who gather people.”<sup>40</sup> This complete reversal does not seem very uncommon as churches have had to move to virtual meetings from in-person gatherings.

### **Understanding Community in Terms of Spatial Relationships**

There are quite a few scholars that have examined how we have moved from a culture that first believes then belongs to one that belongs and then believes. Weyers and Saayman state, “No longer is it religious values or evangelical beliefs which attract today’s postmodern people to put their faith in Christ, but rather unconditional

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<sup>38</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, ““Why Attractionall Churches Have Peaked and Why Charismatic Churches Are Growing,”” (Presented at the Future Forward Church Conference, Amplify Church Monroesville, PA, October 2, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance,” 387–388.

<sup>40</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, “Online Church Engagement Summit Presentation” (Presented at the Online Church Engagement Summit, <https://online.brushfire.com/careynieuwhof/summit>, October 8, 2020), accessed October 9, 2020, <https://careynieuwhof.com/the-online-church-engagement-summit-live/>



acceptance into spiritual and faith communities.”<sup>41</sup> In her research of adolescents and young adults in the UK, Abbey Day found that many identified as belonging to a Christian identity without holding beliefs traditionally held by Christianity: belonging to post-moderns has become more about relationships than beliefs.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Myers echoes the reality of a new understanding of the relationship of believing and belonging, “We live in a culture that now prioritizes belonging over believing.”<sup>43</sup> A corrected understanding and praxis of community in the church are vital to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials.

While community holds the key to the church fulfilling God’s mission, it at the same time can be a hindrance to that mission. Some of the ways churches operate and how they talk about the community can be counterproductive to creating community. The way that the church views small groups, the language and structures that the church makes use of for their small groups, and the unintended theological implications of them needs to be clearly understood.

Small groups over the last 20 years have become the backbone of many churches’ ministry, but they have inadvertently created some barriers for the church. Part of this is connected with the idea of belonging. For many modern American churches, even if not especially, it seems mega-churches belonging is tied directly to small groups. Small

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<sup>41</sup> Mario Weyers and Willem Saayman, “Belonging before Believing’: Some Missiological Implications of Membership and Belonging in a Christian Community,” *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 34, no. 1 (2013): 3.

<sup>42</sup> Abbey Day, “Believing in Belonging: An Ethnography of Young People’s Constructions of Belief,” *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 3 (2009): 267.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2003), 6.

group ministry has become a focus on church growth models, and for a good reason: Rainer and Geiger state, “The picture is clear: people stick to a church when they get involved in a small group.”<sup>44</sup>

Many churches will communicate how “real” relationships happen in small groups or how participation in one of the small groups is how to “really” be part of the church.<sup>45</sup> These are well-intended things because churches have seen a corollary relationship between a person’s spiritual growth and their involvement in small groups. Stetzer and Geiger argue, “People in communities through small groups or classes beyond Sunday morning are our future. They are our future because in these settings mature, countercultural disciples are made.”<sup>46</sup> While this sounds good, one must ask what is unintentionally being said by this statement, especially about belonging and the community. It seems to communicate that you do not “really” belong to the church if you are not involved in a small group. The problem with this is that small groups often are supposed to be the epitome of what it means to have Christian community, but in reality, they do not always provide or guarantee community.<sup>47</sup>

In his book *The Search to Belong*, Joseph Myers addresses many of the problems surrounding how small groups are used in the church to be the be-all-end-all of relationships and community.<sup>48</sup> Myers argues that we should view relationships through

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<sup>44</sup> Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 17–18.

<sup>46</sup> Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

the lens of Edward T. Hall's *proxemics*.<sup>49</sup> Instead of viewing relationships in terms of the one end and goal in the church, we should view relationships similar to Hall's spatial understanding of personal communications. The four different spaces are public, social, personal, and intimate.<sup>50</sup> Meyers has taken these four spaces through which Hall understood all communication could be filtered through and expanded the understanding of these spaces to also included how we belong, "These four spaces communicate how we belong to each other."<sup>51</sup>

There are a few things that Myers elucidates concerning belonging. Belonging is often seen as something that people all understand, but it is also something that one might find very difficult to explain efficiently and effectively. Meyers gives his definition of belonging: "Belonging happens when you identify with another entity—a person or organization, or perhaps a species, culture, or ethnic group. Belonging need not be reciprocal. You can feel a sense of belonging and, in fact, can belong—without the other party's knowledge or sharing the experience."<sup>52</sup> The idea that belonging is not always reciprocal or a person's belonging does not need to be acknowledged by the entity that a person is a very evident reality in many churches. There are those claimed by church membership roles as belonging to the church, while those individuals no longer identify as belonging. Some claim to belong to a church while not being involved in the church for years. This reality has been played out over and over again in many churches.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>50</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimensions* (New York, NY:Anchor Books/Doubleday 1966, 1982), 94. Ibid., 20.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 25.

The idea of belonging can differ significantly from one person or party to another. Thus, it is challenging to quantify reaching, connecting, and engaging people outside of the church. To discover how to best reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials, a definition of belonging must be explored. Myers comes to the idea of belonging in a multi-dimensional fashion that helps the church understand how people “belong.” We must realize that belonging does not equate with things like membership or attendance for many people. As Myers argues concerning this point, “Sometimes they decide to follow our rules of engagement; at other times they create their own. Yet make no mistake; their experience of belonging is significant in their lives.”<sup>53</sup> The church should examine this reality and decide how it can best utilize this reality and validate peoples' feeling of belonging while also guiding them to a more agreed-upon understanding of belonging in the church.

The different ways that people belong in the different relational spaces will be helpful before moving on. When one speaks of public belonging, this means “when people connect through an outside influence.”<sup>54</sup> This relationship space can be seen in the church in worship services or other public events that do not require much engagement, connection, or participation. The social relational space is entered into “When we share “snapshots” of who we are.”<sup>55</sup> This is where some minor interaction happens, but there is not a lot of commitment or investment. Social relational spaces might be considered the “chit chat” sphere or superficial area of relational spaces. Social spaces would include

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 65.

“front porch” spaces<sup>56</sup> and “third place” spaces<sup>57</sup> The personal relation spaces are entered “when we share private (but not naked) experiences, feelings, and thoughts.”<sup>58</sup> The church best offers these sorts of relational spaces in small groups, classes, or events. The intimate relational space is entered “when we share ‘naked’ information and are not ashamed.”<sup>59</sup> By definition, intimate relationships are very few in a person’s life. A person who has entered into an intimate relational space with another person does not always inhabit that space with that person. Myers argues, “No human being can long maintain a level of consistent intimate belonging.”<sup>60</sup> Trying to force all relationships down some sort of manufactured relationship pipeline is unhealthy; the church does this and often misses the best relational spaces for many relationships.

When we take this multidimensional understanding of relationships and apply it to the church, we can easily see there is a problem with how the church understands relationships. This results in a feeble understanding of community because the church does not fully understand the different sets of relationships. Instead, we look primarily at the relationships in the church that are enacted in worship (public) and small groups/Sunday school classes (personal). Myers argues, “This does not lead to healthy

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 95.

belonging.”<sup>61</sup> When the church ignores and does not incorporate, it contributes to the relational dysfunction that we see in our society.

The church should seek to understand that there are multiple dimensions to most of our relationships and the different relational spaces in which we find belonging. This is not something that should be avoided but embraced and encouraged to help people have more healthy relationships in their lives. The church is guilty of this through the way that it has idolized intimate relationships. Meyers contends, “All of these spaces are important, real, and authentic in people’s lives. We need to validate what people themselves count as valid. When we validate the spaces where they are, we greatly increase our ability to bring help to their lives.”<sup>62</sup> Understanding these relational spaces in the church encourages healthy relationships within the church and helps the church reach, engage, and connect with those outside of the church, including Zillennials.

Through explaining the different relational spaces that Myers's relational matrix expounds on, we begin to understand the process of belonging better. In the church, personal and intimate relationships are the only authentic mode of belonging; there is the assumption that intimate relationships should be the goal of every relationship. Myers observes, “We tend to think intimacy as the ‘Mecca’ of relationships. But would all relationships be better if they were intimate?”<sup>63</sup> Part of the problem is that there is a misunderstanding that intimate relationships are the only real or important ones. The church should reexamine organizational understandings of relationships within the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 51.

church to include personal and intimate relational spaces and social and public relational spaces. Understanding these spaces will help the church better understand how people feel a sense of belonging and engage in a church community.

Because the church idolizes intimate relationships, it misses the importance of other relational spaces. Myers reminds the church, “Intimate is not the most important, the most real, or the most authentic relationship.”<sup>64</sup> The other three relationships are just as meaningful, significant, and authentic as the intimate relational space. When the only relational space that is valued is intimate, there are many vital contributions that public, social, and personal relational spaces offer a healthy understanding of relationships and belonging, which are undervalued. The other consequence of not valuing all of the relational spaces that we operate and live in is that we miss out on the opportunities that each of these spaces can offer to reach, engage, and connect with those outside the church. Through its pushing of only personal and intimate relationships and belonging, the church may also cause disconnection and disengagement because it “pushes those who are not ready for such relationships further away.”<sup>65</sup>

In our society and the church as well, there is a confusing thought that the only healthy and even real relationships are the intimate ones we have. In reality, all four types of relationships are needed for healthy community. Myers argues, “To experience healthy community, we need significant relationships. ‘Significant’ is not the same as ‘close’ or ‘committed.’”<sup>66</sup> Healthy community and belonging are about having significant

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 12.

relationships, not just in the intimate relational space, but in all four relational spaces. By accepting public and social relationships as substantial instead of superficial and shallow, the church will help bring about a healthy understanding of belonging and relationships in general.

One of the areas that these relational spaces can help the church is embracing the public and social spaces and incorporating them in how the church seeks to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials. One of the things that the church should focus on is how it fosters public relationships and social relationships. Public belonging can be seen as happening in worship services. This can be the beginning of other relationships and belonging. But we need to understand that there is not a relationship process that all relationships go through with the goal of entering into the intimate relational space. The church should find ways to encourage social relational spaces; these “Front porches are significant to our experience of community and belonging.”<sup>67</sup> The church has not always created these spaces unless it has done so to get people down the relationship line to intimacy. But these spaces are hungered for in our culture, especially by Zillennials. No small part of Starbucks’ and similar establishments’ success is built upon our culture’s desire for social spaces.<sup>68</sup>

Myers reminds us through his discussion of belonging and relational spaces that belonging is not always a clear-cut delineation. This is not a new idea, nor is it original with Myers. He says, “We are not in control of who belongs to us; neither are we in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>68</sup> Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2007), 134.



control of who belongs to God. Belonging to the kingdom is a God decision. The Gospels often reflect Jesus asking—even warning—us not to make kingdom decisions.”<sup>69</sup> We can understand how people feel a sense of belonging, but we cannot unilaterally decide who is in and out. This may make it seem like a definition of belonging and community to reach, engage, and connect with Zillennials then is impossible. But the thought of Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost will be constructive here.

### **A Missional Ecclesiology**

Hirsch and Frost discuss the difference between bounded sets and centered set in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come*. In this book and their other books, much of their thought is focused on the difference between the missional church and the Christendom church. The Christendom church has ceased to be effective, and the church needs to return to a missional mindset. The way they see it, “The standard Christendom model will simply not engage the new generations.”<sup>70</sup> Hirsch and Frost argue that the church that will succeed in reaching, connecting, and engaging with younger generations will adopt a missional mindset and model. Part of this mindset is related to belonging and community.

Seeing the church through the lens of bounded or centered sets and the MDNA of the church is, for Frost and Hirsch, a missiological imperative. The attractional church is

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<sup>69</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 111.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping Of Things To Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 31.

a bounded set.<sup>71</sup> In a bounded set, there are very clear and delineated boundaries that keep people “in” and keep others “out.” In a bounded set, the inside is closed from the outside; boundaries define the group's identity. One of the critical problems with this sort of church is there is little solid at its core. “In the bounded set, it is clear who is “in” and who is “out” based on a well-defined ideological-cultural boundary—usually moral and cultural codes as well as creedal definitions—but it doesn’t have much of a core definition besides these boundaries.” The bounded set church is closed off from those outside of its delineated boundaries. This is why it is difficult for such churches to reach, engage, and connect with those who are deemed outsiders. Churches that are bounded social sets are more institutionalized structures than organisms of the kingdom; they are focused on membership, buildings, and those inside the institution.<sup>72</sup> According to Hirsch and Frost, “The bounded-set church has determined a socially acceptable standard by which to exclude certain peoples.” In a bounded set church indicative of Christendom, “The keys to the kingdom Got locked inside the kingdom.”<sup>73</sup>

There are many different unforeseen consequences in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy of a bounded church. One development relevant to this study is how a bounded set church views its mission and evangelism. Hirsch and Frost explain, “Evangelism in the bounded set is focused heavily on getting people into the religious zone. As we’ve already pointed out, this is represented by the unyielding allegiance to the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>72</sup> Mcneal Reggie, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, Leadership Network Series (San Fransico, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 57.

<sup>73</sup> Josh Ritter, *Girl in the War*, Animal Years (V2, 2006).

work of getting people to come to church.”<sup>74</sup> One might look at the goal of getting people to church as not an entirely negative endeavor, but the focus becomes insular. As Reggie McNeal points out, “‘Reaching’ people often meant that we cut them off from their previous relationships as we absorb them into the church culture.”<sup>75</sup> A bounded set church is not going to reach, connect, or engage with Zillennials. It is guilty of being, if not motivated by, focused on, “its own internal goals.”<sup>76</sup> There are many problems with being a bounded set church.

The missional church falls under the category of a centered set. According to Hirsch and Frost:

The missional incarnational church, though, is a centered set. This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn’t, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the center. In that sense, everyone is in and no one is out. Though some people are close to the center and others far from it, everyone is potentially part of the community in its broadest sense.<sup>77</sup>

There is a stark contrast between the bounded set church and the centered set church. It would seem that all of the problems from a bounded set church are solved if the church adopted a centered set mentality; the missional church that Hirsch and Frost envision will do that.

There are many good things about the centered set understanding of the church. The greatest strength is that it has a clear core ideology or mission.<sup>78</sup> The bounded set

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<sup>74</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 74.

<sup>75</sup> Reggie, *Missional Renaissance*, 44.

<sup>76</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 124.

<sup>77</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 71.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

finds its identity from the clearly delineated boundaries of who is in and out; the centered set finds its identity in its strong central core, the church's ideology or mission. The centered set does not have boundaries because the focus is not on who is “in” or “out,” instead, in the church’s case, who is in the center. Without boundaries that show who is in and out, the centered set church focuses on being brought closer to the center: Jesus.<sup>79</sup>

This understanding of the church also affects evangelism. The point of evangelism isn’t about getting people on the outside into the boundaries of the community. Instead, evangelism in a centered set church is concerned with helping people along their journey to the center, their journey of becoming closer and closer to Jesus:

In a centered-set church, it is recognized that we are all sinners, all struggling to be the best people we can be. But we also believe that the closer one gets to the center (Christ), the more Christlike one’s behavior should become. Therefore core members of the church will exhibit the features of Christ’s radical lifestyle (love, generosity, healing, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and more), and those who have just begun the journey toward Christ (and whose lives may not exhibit such traits) are still seen as “belonging.” No one is considered unworthy of belonging because they happen to be addicted to tobacco, or because they’re not married to their live-in partner. Belonging is a key value. The growth toward the center of the set is the same as the process of discipleship.<sup>80</sup>

Evangelism in this model seems to have a much more holistic approach. According to Hirsh and Frost, despite the lack of clear boundaries, discipleship would be more rigorous and effective because of this focus on the center (Jesus) rather than the boundaries (behavior).<sup>81</sup> There is not a focus on the punctiliar conversion but rather the continual

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 74.

journey toward the center. Everyone can belong and is on the “map,” some further along on their journey towards Jesus, and some with a much longer trip ahead of them. The point is that the journey's distance does not matter because everyone is somewhere on the “map.” One of the advantages of this understanding is that discipleship is much simpler and much more compelling: It's simply moving closer to Jesus on our journey.<sup>82</sup>

Hirsch's and Frost's underlying argument is that the early church grew because they were a centered set. With the rise of Christendom came the bounded set mentality. The centered set is the biblical model.<sup>83</sup> But there are some problems with claiming that the centered set was how the early church operated. Alan Kreider gives us a different picture:

Most improbable of all, the churches did not use their worship services to attract new people. In the aftermath of the persecution of Nero in AD 68, churches around the empire—at varying speeds in varying places—closed their doors to outsiders. By the end of the second century, most of them had instituted what liturgical scholars have called the *disciplina arcani*, the “discipline of the secret,” which barred outsiders from entering “private” Christian worship services and ordered believers not to talk to outsiders about what went on behind the closed doors.<sup>84</sup>

This dates well before the time of Constantine and the rise of Christendom. In the book of Acts, one sees a church with some clear boundaries. In Acts 9, Paul cannot meet with the believers because they do not believe he is a disciple. This does not seem like the centered set church that Hirsch and Frost speak about as the early church. There seem to be some boundaries, and they seem to be clearly delineated. When looking at the gospels,

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>84</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 11.

we see these boundaries in place in Jesus' ministry. Jesus had his apostles, but within that clearly delineated group there was another group: inner circle.

It seems that the early church does not fit neatly in either the bounded set or the centered set models. It appears that the early church had a strong center that everything was focused on, Jesus. From this center is the church gained its identity. But, at the same time, the early church also had some clear boundaries. A third category, a bounded-centered set, might be a better way to understand the early church. The third category would be able to live out the missional impulse of the early church and do so to address the concerns of issues like biblical orthodoxy.<sup>85</sup>

When one looks at the relational spaces that Myers discussed and combines that understanding with Hirsch's and Frost's examination of bounded and centered set, there are a few attractive solutions to some of the issues they have alone. Belonging then in a bounded-centered set would seem to be similar to the community of Jesus' ministry. There were public followers of Jesus (many of whom Jesus healed in his public ministry), there were social followers of Jesus (Nicodemus), there were personal followers of Jesus (the apostles), and there were intimate followers of Jesus (Peter, James, and John). The public and social followers of Jesus would be centered but not bounded. The personal and intimate followers of Jesus would be a bounded set, but that also had a strong center: Jesus. Like a centered set church, all relational spaces belong; they are all viewed as being on the same journey. Some are closer to the center than others; each relational space is essential and of great value to the journey.

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<sup>85</sup> Reggie, *Missional Renaissance*, 150.

## Lesslie Newbigin

In his book *Proper Confidence*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that “the Gospel is not a matter of indubitable certainties; it is the offer of a grace that can only be accepted in faith, a faith in which both heart and intellect join.”<sup>86</sup> Newbigin asserts that the basis of the Christian faith is the story of God’s dealing with humanity as we find in the Biblical text and that to believe is to believe in that story and that “the business of the church is to tell and embody... the story of God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption.”<sup>87</sup> Evangelism that both Newbigin and Brueggemann espouse focuses on story; it is one needed in a post-modern time and culture.

The idea that stories shape us cannot be argued against as people are caused to laugh with joy or brought to tears through stories told on the big screen or the small one. We live in a culture that hungers for stories. However, the church views stories in a way that differs significantly from the culture. Newbigin states:

The church shares the postmodernists’ replacement of eternal truths with a story. But there is a profound difference between the two. For the postmodernists, there are many stories, but no overarching truth by which they can be assessed. They are simply stories. The church’s affirmation is that the story it tells, embodies, and enacts is the true story and that others are to be evaluated by reference to it.<sup>88</sup>

Understanding that all other stories are to be evaluated by the Gospel's story results in viewing the invitation to participate in the story as an evangelistic act.

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<sup>86</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 100.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Newbigin connects this thought with Jesus' call to his first disciples to "Follow me;"<sup>89</sup> we are invited to engage in the story by following the subject and author of the story. If one answers the call to engage in the story of Jesus, then that story ultimately becomes how one references all other aspects of the person's life. Newbigin argues that when this is the case, the story gives shape to the individual, the community, and can ultimately shape public life.<sup>90</sup> We must understand that everything comes down to Jesus. There will be a temptation to make ourselves the center of the story. However, the biblical story reminds us that we are not the subject; Jesus is always and forever the subject of the story. We have to understand the story in terms of Jesus, and we have to understand Jesus in terms of the story.<sup>91</sup> One cannot separate the Jesus that gives the invitation to "follow me" from any aspect of the biblical story, or they are no longer following the real Jesus and engaging in the true story.

### **Conclusions**

How do all of these different theological ideas fit together to help RCHOG reach, connect, and engage Zillennials? The place that seems best to begin is by examining the relational spaces that Meyers identified. When combined with Hirsch and Frost's ideas, we can see how the relational spaces fit within the church's mission. After this is done, we can then begin to fit Bonhoeffer's theology of community and Newbigin's emphasis on story and our biblical foundations of inviting into the community. Then we will have a

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 88.

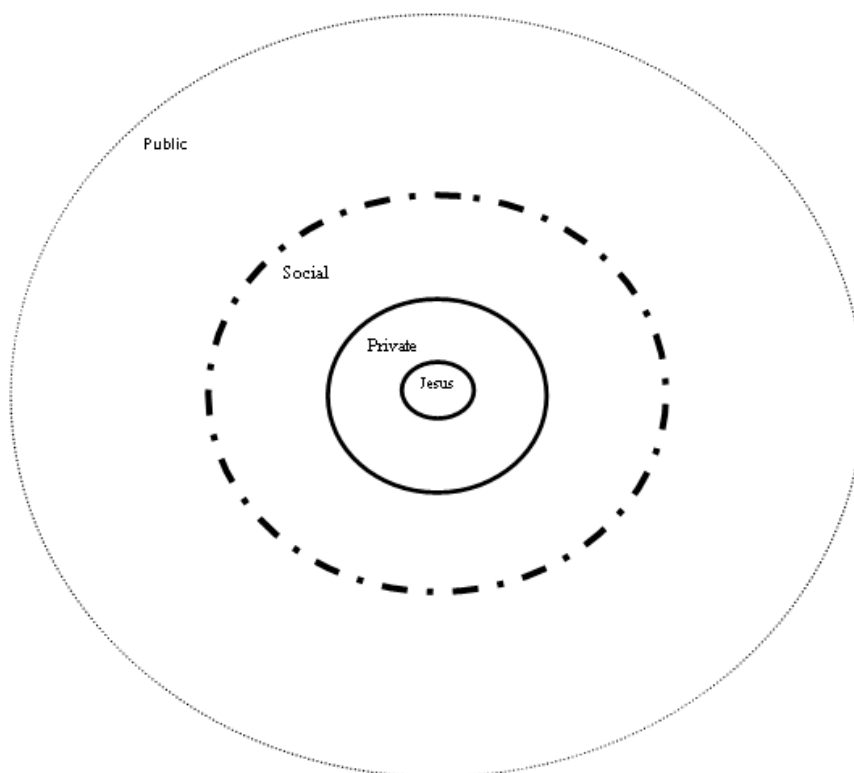


new understanding of belonging and how to achieve the goal of reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials.

One of the realities that we must address is that there are only three relational spaces in Myers that can relate to the church: public, social, and personal. It would seem foolish to argue that one can have an intimate relationship with an organization or community. We could solve this problem by claiming that one enters the intimate relational space with the community as a person enters the intimate relational space with another individual in the community or, in the church's case entering the intimate relational space with Jesus. While entering the intimate relational space with someone from the church community and with Jesus are goals that seem fair to make, it does not seem applicable to our current endeavor, and this sort of understanding would be difficult to quantify. For this reason, we will focus on the first three relational spaces.

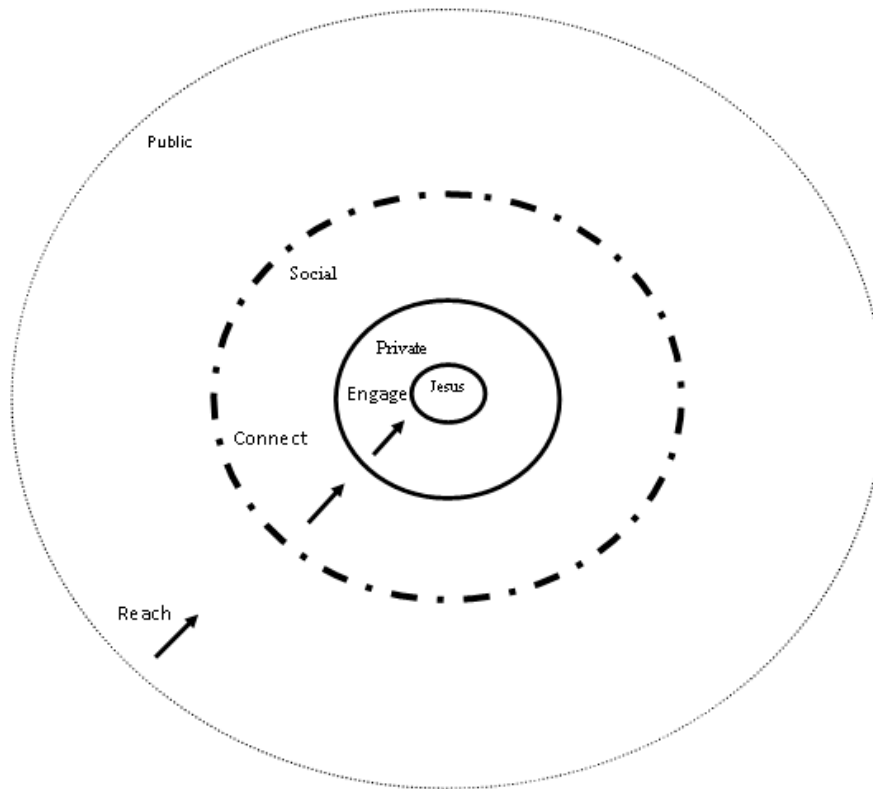
Considering a bounded-centered set, we can see where the relational spaces might fit into this church's social model. In the bounded-centered and centered set, there is a central core that the community is organized around; in the church's case, that core is Jesus. Jesus is at the center. The private social space would encircle this core. This social space would have some clear boundaries, but the focus is not on the boundaries but on the core and center: Jesus. When thinking about Jesus' ministry, his apostles would have occupied this private space. Encircling the private relational space is the social relational space. There is a porous boundary here. The boundary here is evident, but it is less delineated and thus is permeable. In Jesus' ministry, this social space would have been occupied by followers of Jesus that were not part of the twelve but were disciples of Jesus. The public relational space encircles the social relational space. There is no natural

boundary here. In Jesus's ministry, those who were interested in Jesus who came to hear him teach, be healed, or witness a miracle occupied the public relational space. This sort of understanding is visualized in figure 1.



*Figure 1-- The Bounded-Centered Set Church Model*

With this image of a bounded-centered set church, a few essential definitions can be addressed when reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials. In terms of a bounded-centered set church, reaching would be concerned with helping people move into the public relational space and begin the journey toward the center, toward Jesus. In terms of this model, connecting then would help people in the public relational space move from there through the permeable boundary to the social relational space. Engaging then would be concerned with assisting those in the social relational space to move to the private relational space. This would result in a trajectory that would look like what is seen in figure 2:



*Figure 2-- Reach, Connect, and Engage Trajectory in the Bounded-Centered Set Church Model*

By integrating “reach,” “connect,” and “engage” in the relational spaces in the bounded-centered set church model, we can now also join Bonhoeffer’s and Newbigin’s theological contributions and biblical foundations to different relational spaces. Newbigin’s understanding of evangelism as the invitation of Jesus to participate in God’s story and humanity through the call to “Follow me” places the task on initially inviting people to participate in the story points to outside the public relational space to inside the social relational space. The invitation to participate in the story and begin to reorganize one’s life under God’s story through the biblical text can be seen as traveling from no relationship all the way to intimacy. But, for our purposes, the focus will be to understand how this use of story can help someone transition into the public relational space, and then from there into the social relational space. The continued participation and retelling

of the story in one's life can also bring about more relational space transitions. This would mean story is vital to assisting the church in reaching and then connecting with Zillennials.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of community life then fits best in the social relational space and helps transition from there to the private relational space. These two relational spaces are also where the brunt of discipleship would be done. Spiritual disciplines would help a follower of Jesus who had only entered the community's social relational space to move closer toward Jesus and into the private relational space. Bonhoeffer's theological contribution would be focused on engaging Zillennials through community practices and community life. It is important to note that in practice, the separation of these theological contributions into the different relation spaces will never be as clear-cut as we would like; both story and spiritual disciplines play a role in the journey toward the core and center of the church: Jesus.

It is important to remember that while there is a trajectory, and while in this diagram, the different relational spaces might be seen as having a hierarchy of importance, this should not be the case. One does not ever leave the public relational space by entering the social relational space, or the social relational space by entering the private relational space. As we have seen, relational belonging is multidimensional. In the bounded-centered set church model, each relational space needs to be valued. Those in the private relational space are not better than those in the public one. Therefore, the core being centered on Jesus is essential. This model views everyone on a journey towards Jesus. While the reality of relational closeness is understood in the model, everyone

should be understood as all being on the same journey toward the center, towards a closer relationship with Jesus.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

"The fundamental reason your church exists is to make disciples of Jesus"<sup>1</sup> This statement should make the church think deeply about its purpose and whether the church is fulfilling that purpose. This chapter will focus on discipleship and seek to understand the spiritual disciplines involved in discipleship and how the church can more effectively engage in discipleship. Discipleship is central to RCHOG to reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials.

Understanding discipleship's goal will help understand what discipleship is and how it relates to reaching, connecting, and engaging with Zillennials. "Turning out mature, intelligent, responsible, intentional Christians disciples"<sup>2</sup> is the ultimate goal of discipleship. What is the indication that discipleship has reached its biblical outcome? Chap Clark helps with a definition of what maturing looks like for a disciple: "The outcome of faithful biblical discipleships is the unleashing of the Holy Spirit in God's called agents."<sup>3</sup> One can see discipleship's outcome as successful when the disciple engages in joining God in his missions.

The church was given the imperative to make disciples as Jesus' last words before he ascended. Since the church exists for this purpose, one would think this would be an essential focus for the church. One might even believe that the church would focus on it enough to fulfill this goal and commission. This is not the case, sadly. The church does

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<sup>1</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 163.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, "Get Ready, Get Set...Go Ye!," 25.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 50.

not live out "biblical notions of discipleship."<sup>4</sup> There is a loss of focus on the reason the church exists.<sup>5</sup> Geiger et al. state, "most churches are deficient in discipleship."<sup>6</sup> This reality should gravely concern the church. If the church is in existence to make disciples, then the church is a tool for discipleship. Frost and Hirsch ask, "Is the church still a church if it doesn't function like a church anymore?"<sup>7</sup> Many churches are like dull scissors: looking like the tool for the job, but they are no longer suitable for the task for which they were made.

One might ask, "Why the focus on discipleship in reaching, connecting, and engaging Millennials?" Brueggemann defines evangelism as "the invitation and summons to resituate our talk and walk according to the reality of God."<sup>8</sup> He then defines discipleships as entailing "a resituating of our lives."<sup>9</sup> If we understand evangelism as the invitation to resituate one's life and discipleship as the resituating of one's life, is there a clear demarcation between them? When looking at Matthew 28:19-20, it isn't easy to see a separation between the acts of evangelism and discipleship in Jesus's commands *to go, make, baptize, and teach*. The church needs to understand that the gospel is not merely for unbelievers (evangelism) but also for believers (discipleship); evangelism and discipleship are not easily separated.<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann argues that evangelism "never

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, "Get Ready, Get Set...Go Ye!," 25.

<sup>6</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 158.

<sup>7</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 72.

reaches a fixed, finished conclusion."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the problem is that we have incompletely evangelized our church members and not thoroughly disciplined those to whom the church is evangelizing. For the purpose of this chapter and the rest of the dissertation, when discipleship is discussed, the term refers to the spectrum, including evangelism and discipleship.

The church may have lost its focus on discipleship because it misunderstands what evangelism is. Rainer and Geiger argue that the church has "a faulty definition of discipleship because the question (about how discipleship fits into a church) is typically about curriculum or learning environments. We have often equated discipleship with information... The end result of discipleship is not knowledge but obedience."<sup>12</sup>

Discipleship is also not behavior management.<sup>13</sup> Another common misconception is that discipleship is one more program or activity on the church calendar.<sup>14</sup> Discipleship is larger than a program because it's the reason that the church exists.

Discipleship is an overarching process that one never completes this side of eternity. It is the process through which a disciple continues to be transfigured more and more into the person that God in Christ created them to be, each person a unique expression of a member of Jesus Christ. Leslie Newbigin says, "Christian discipleship is not a two-stage affair in which a concept of truth is first formulated and then is translated

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<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storyed Universe*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Geiger and Jeff Borton, *Simple Student Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2009), 124.



into a program for action. It is a single action of faith and obedience..."<sup>15</sup> This process is "immensely more messy and frustrating"<sup>16</sup> than churches and disciples would like it to be. Worthwhile tasks are rarely easy; easy tasks are rarely eternally significant.

### **Community and Discipleship**

Community is vital to discipleship. When looking at Act 2:42, three of the four activities to which believers devoted themselves required the community. The apostles' teachings were shared verbally in a community setting. The breaking of bread was done in a group setting. Fellowship cannot happen outside of a community. One can argue that what we see in Acts points to prayer as primarily a community activity. Stetzer and Geiger purport: "Disciples can't be fully formed apart from community. Community is sanctifying. Blind spots will remain in our lives unless we allow those we trust to look closely at us and tell us exactly what they are seeing. Unfortunately, these people cannot look closely unless they are spending time with us—in a smaller group of some kind."<sup>17</sup> Very few people would argue against the claim that human beings are "social animals."<sup>18</sup> Leonard Sweet goes so far as to say that "To act independently of one another is inhuman. Relationship is the ultimate reality of the universe."<sup>19</sup> To understand that followers of Jesus cannot become the people they were created to become outside of a

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<sup>15</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*, 82.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, vol. 21, Aristotle in 23 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), 1253a.1-19.

<sup>19</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 320.

relational community. We are made for relationships, and we cannot grow spiritually without relationships.

We see individualism celebrated in almost every aspect of the broader culture of the United States. The claim that we need community to grow in any way goes against the grain of our culture. Stetzer and Geiger argue, "No sequoia grows alone. The connection to our spiritual walk should be obvious—no believer is transformed alone. Just as the mighty sequoia would topple without a community of supporting trees, believers who seek transformation apart from a Christian community are vulnerable to spiritually topple in the winds of adversity."<sup>20</sup> The community of the church strengthens and nurtures each individual. Even those discipleship practices that can be done alone are positively impacted by engaging in community.<sup>21</sup>

The church needs to understand that the sort of individualism that argues against the need for community is toxic for discipleship and the life of faith.<sup>22</sup> While the church needs to celebrate every individual's uniqueness, it needs to be careful not to allow such celebrations to overthrow God's sovereignty over his church. Unity is not uniformity and vice versa. By creating a culture of interdependence, discipleship will be most effective in the life of both the church and the individual.<sup>23</sup> Frost and Hirsh, making use of

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<sup>20</sup> Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

McLuhan's adage "The medium is the message,"<sup>24</sup> remind the church that it is an integral part of the message of the gospel, "The medium of the church itself must communicate a message that helps people find God in every sphere of life."<sup>25</sup> Community life or the lack of it can make or break attempts to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials.

### **Spiritual Disciplines**

Just as one can argue that there is no discipleship without the church's community, there is no discipleship without spiritual disciplines. It is helpful to look at discipleship through the metaphor of a sailing ship. When one is sailing, many tasks must be done to set sail, "but in the end, all you are doing is positioning your craft for the wind."<sup>26</sup> Spiritual disciplines are the "work" that one does to prepare the ship to sail. The disciplines are more about preparing and making one's self ready for the working of the Spirit. Geiger et al. continue to explain the metaphor, "Every time you practice these disciplines, you are putting yourself in that position--a position that is radically dependent on the Spirit of God."<sup>27</sup> Our effort does not always equate to the results that we may envision. Embracing spiritual disciplines is itself a practice of humility.

There are many different lists of spiritual disciplines. The question is, what makes something a spiritual discipline, and how does that tie into reaching, connecting, and

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<sup>24</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, NY: Signet, 1964), 7, <https://archive.org/details/understandingmed0000mclu/page/6/mode/2up?q=medium+is+the+message>.

<sup>25</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 211.

<sup>26</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 154.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

engaging Zillennials? Walter Brueggemann provides some idea, "It is clear that these disciplines if taken seriously, are immensely inconvenient... I submit that only those who are inconvenienced enough to be intentional will have any energy for mission."<sup>28</sup> In the inconvenience of the spiritual disciplines, space is created for the working of the Holy Spirit. To return to sailing, harnessing the wind requires much more work in some respects than starting a motor. No one who has ever experienced the moment when the sail billows and "catches" the wind will tell you the result will be the same for you. The result of the spiritual disciplines, just like sailing, can be unpredictable. Those who view the spiritual disciplines and discipleship in general as a task or journey to complete may find more discouragement. Instead, discipleship should be viewed from the perspective of "formation and not completion."<sup>29</sup>

It would not serve the purpose of this paper to provide an exhaustive list of spiritual disciplines that are a part of Christian discipleship, nor is there room to do so. In the previous chapter, the practices of the breaking of bread, communion, confession, listening, the reading of, studying of, and meditating upon scripture, prayer, solitude/silence, and service were all identified as spiritual disciplines of the community. Some practices seem to constitute spiritual disciplines that traditionally do not show up

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<sup>28</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson, "Discipleship Dissonance," 83.

on lists of disciplines such as mentoring,<sup>30</sup> play,<sup>31</sup> creativity,<sup>32</sup> experimentation,<sup>33</sup> storying/restorying,<sup>34</sup> and, borrowing a term from Disney, Imagineering.

The spiritual practices that are more tied to creativity and imagination are fundamental to reaching, connecting, and engaging with Zillennials. Hirsch and Frost urge to church to remember how to play and put that to work in the church; the church needs to learn to engage in the dissociative thinking of play.<sup>35</sup> Through creativity, the church will move forward, adding new meaning to old activities reinterpreting and restoring ancient symbols that have lost their sense in a postmodern world.<sup>36</sup> When the church embraces and practices the discipline of experimentation, it will be able to "find new and accessible ways of doing and being the people of God."<sup>37</sup> An examination of Bible study disciplines (looked at through the lens of teaching), mentoring, storying, and service will constitute the rest of this chapter.

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<sup>30</sup> Byrd, "Narrative Discipleship: Guiding Emerging Adults to 'Connect the Dots' of Life and Faith," 49.

<sup>31</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 257.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>34</sup> Byrd, "Narrative Discipleship: Guiding Emerging Adults to 'Connect the Dots' of Life and Faith," 51.

<sup>35</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 257.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

## Teaching, Bible Study, and Discipleship

A significant part of discipleship in the modern period has been focused on teaching and preaching. Brueggemann tells us, "Teaching is fundamental to the missional church."<sup>38</sup> Frost and Hirsch point that part of the reason that the people were filled with awe in Acts 2 was the teaching of the apostles and the table fellowship (arguably a result of the living out of those teachings) of the early church.<sup>39</sup> Through the church's teaching, disciples are made, grow, and themselves help make more disciples. Therefore, teaching and preaching are directly connected to the goal of reaching, connecting, and engaging Millennials.

Much of discipleship's educational task is helping people remember who God has called them to be. One of the pitfalls that the church should be wary of is teaching that looks like it is in line with the witness of scripture, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit's guidance but reinforces the cultural norms. One place that this has been done is the way that the church has talked about sex, especially in its abstinence programs.<sup>40</sup> Instead of teaching that sex is about connection and selflessness, there are still many in the church teaching about sex in a way that betrays an individualistic and self-centered view of sex.<sup>41</sup> What the church teaches matters; how the church teaches matters. The focus of teaching

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<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 102.

<sup>39</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

should be on the Bible but as participation in God's story, or as Brueggemann argues, "Education is to commit a miracle-remembering recital."<sup>42</sup>

### **Teaching as More Than an Exchange of Information**

In many churches, teaching and preaching are engaged in making it seem like their goal is to download or dump information into a disciple's mind. We live in a time in which information has never been more widely available. We do not have an information problem in the church; we have a problem in discernment and application on which teaching and preaching should focus.<sup>43</sup> An understanding of teaching as encompassing, in one way or another, every single activity and endeavor of the church is incompatible with the view that education is primarily about information transfer.

While having information as one aspect of it, teaching cannot and should not be merely informational but should result in a resituating of one's life toward God's narrative. Any teaching focused on a transfer of information is, by definition, lacking and shallow. Setran and Kiesling assert, "Teaching, therefore, must be 'deep.' The church must be willing to teach the whole counsel of scripture and the particular doctrines of the faith. If many feel that churches are simply elementary schools of morals, that perspective may reflect accurately on the church's anemic curriculum. Churches must teach the 'solid food' of the gospel, providing theological depth."<sup>44</sup> The depth of teaching

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<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> David Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 102.

required to disciple in such a way to help reach, connect, and engage Zillennials also moves from information to formation. Frost and Hirsch argue that the focus on the combination of orthodoxy and orthopraxy will result in a more biblical church.<sup>45</sup>

In his criticism of first-century Judaism's religious leaders, Jesus made it quite clear that merely possessing information is not enough; you must learn how to live that out properly. The teaching of the church, to be fully orbbed, cannot merely focus on information or belief but should also help disciples become the truth in action.<sup>46</sup> This is a challenging imperative, but it is also a reminder that the entire church and not just "vocational religious experts" are part of the discipleship process. A focus on teaching being more than education will also make us think more about who is teaching. If the purpose of education is more than informational transfer, the church will have to think through who is to teach. Teachers must not merely read what they teach from a book, but they must have come to a knowledge that is both in theory and practice. To teach in this understanding means that one must combine the head, heart, and hand tasks. This understanding of the teaching in the church elucidates the need for teaching to change.

### **Teaching Needs to Change in the Church**

The way that the church teaches and disciples followers of Jesus in most churches can be easily predictable. Many churches have classes with one or two teachers that teach the others in attendance; there will be a discussion in some of these classes. There will be

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<sup>45</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.



a sermon where the preacher will present a 30-60-minute lecture during a worship service. The church may be the last place in the world where it is acceptable to have a 30-60-minute lecture. The impact of the sermon on discipleship is significantly overvalued.<sup>47</sup> This is one area that the church should seek to adapt or innovate. There is consensus that the bulk of the church's teaching time should be interactive and hands-on instead of a lecture.<sup>48</sup> We live in a society in which hands-on learning and the use of videos and interactive learning are not only expected, but there are also more resources for this sort of education than ever before. Jean Twenge argues, "Teachers need to meet their students where they live, break up lectures into short chunks using videos, and promoting hands-on learning."<sup>49</sup> While Twenge is speaking about teaching in the school classroom, the church should also notice how teachers use different teaching methods.

One of the massive paradigm shifts that the educational culture has gone through focuses on learning and learners instead of teaching and teachers. Frost and Hirsch argue that while the modern church has focused on teachers and teaching when we look to the early church, the focus was on learning and ultimately taking instruction and applying it to one's life.<sup>50</sup> For pastors, preachers, and even congregations moving from the three songs, a prayer, and a sermon may be challenging. It seems clear that if the rest of our culture has learned new methods that are more effective for learning and identity formation, the church should move in that direction. The church will have to look at how

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<sup>47</sup> Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> Twenge, "Teaching Generation Me," 68.

<sup>50</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 114.

Bible studies and services have been done in the past and experiment with interactive discussions and experiential learning environments. Everist and Nessian urge the church, “Think creatively about the ways to engage people in discussion, faith exploration, and action. Make it harder and harder for people to live only on the edge of knowing by providing exciting opportunities to dig deeper.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Teaching the Bible**

Brueggemann states, "the recovery of the biblical text is urgent, the most urgent 'social action' that can be undertaken."<sup>52</sup> The early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, including teaching from Jesus and the Old Testament. Today, the church is called to do the same thing by devoting itself to studying, memorizing, meditating upon, and living out the Bible.<sup>53</sup> Suppose we attend to the Bible above all other narratives. In that case, we will be more open-minded, able to explore the implications of faith, and prevent ourselves from engaging in "the clueless wandering that sometimes takes to itself the name of pilgrimage."<sup>54</sup>

The Bible should be prominent in and guide the church's teaching as it strives to disciple followers of Jesus. There is a danger that the church should avoid in teaching the Bible. Bonhoeffer tells us that "brief passages cannot and must not take the place of reading the scripture as a whole... The scriptures are God's revealed word as a whole.

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<sup>51</sup> Everist and Nessian, *Transforming Leadership*, 200.

<sup>52</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance,” 88.

<sup>54</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, 91–92.

The full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord can be clearly heard only in its immeasurable inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments."<sup>55</sup> Leslie Newbigin states, "We have to learn by the actual practice of living with the Bible how and in what way God speaks.... taking it wholly into ourselves in a way that shapes the very substance of our thinking and feeling and doing"<sup>56</sup> When we attend to the whole witness of scripture, it does shape our very substance in terms of followers of Jesus and what we understand about being human. The biblical text speaks with a voice very different from our culture's voices; to take Newbigin's imperative seriously means letting the voice of the text "have its full say in our common life"<sup>57</sup> as a community of Jesus followers. By living with and attending to the whole of scripture, we are challenged by the "alternate voicing of reality...to notice the shallowness of the stories that we have embraced from elsewhere."<sup>58</sup>

As disciples live with the text in Bible study, there is a dialectic that happens. As followers of Jesus grow and develop through the studying of scripture, "they should have a deeper longing to encounter biblical truth."<sup>59</sup> This also means that the disciples are drawing closer to Jesus in their relationship. As they draw close in their relationship with Christ, they can better understand and interpret the Bible.<sup>60</sup> This results in a greater

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<sup>55</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, 5:69–70.

<sup>56</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storeyed Universe*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 86.

<sup>60</sup> Shirley, "Overcoming Digital Distance," 85.

hunger for biblical truth and more growth. This is not about simply reading the Bible but reading it actively, studying the truth of scripture, and wrestling with what one finds in its depths. Leslie Newbigin's words seem like an apt summary and conclusion: "It is less important to ask a Christian what he or she believes about the Bible than it is to inquire what he or she does with it."<sup>61</sup>

### Storytelling

N. T. Wright argues that "Stories are one of the most basic modes of human life."<sup>62</sup> Stories are how we experience and make meaning of the world. They provide us with a framework for understanding the world and a challenge to change it. <sup>63</sup> Leonard Sweet adds to this vein of thought, "The power to change the world belongs to storytellers. The world is story shaped. The stories we tell shape the world we live in."<sup>64</sup> When we tell stories, we are not merely telling something that has happened or things that we have imagined, but we shape the world, create meaning, and recreate ourselves and others little by little in the telling and retelling of stories. When you tell a story, you can change someone's life.<sup>65</sup>

Considering the power of telling stories, it is no surprise that Jesus taught by telling stories. The stories that Jesus told did not directly quote from the Old Testament;

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<sup>61</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, 86.

<sup>62</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 38.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 178.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40.

he did not make direct references from the Law of Moses; instead, he told stories from everyday life that seemed at first simple, but when heard and meditated on turned the hearers' lives and worldview upside down.<sup>66</sup> Donald Miller tells us, "A good storyteller doesn't just tell a better story, though. He invites other people into the story with him, giving them a better story too."<sup>67</sup> Jesus did precisely this in the way that he taught. He, in the tradition of Hebrew storytelling, told powerful stories that were rich, colorful, highly visual, and intensely imaged filled.<sup>68</sup> The meanings were not easily accessible by all; his story confused, frustrated, and enraged some hearers. A Jesus story was never dull, lifeless, or boring. Why is the way that the church tells the Jesus story looked at in those ways? Frost and Hirsch speak this hard truth, "In our attempts to make the gospel clear, we have often squeezed all life out of it. Jesus' parables were intriguing, open to interpretation, playful, and interesting."<sup>69</sup> When the church relearns the art of storying and re-storying, how to participate fully in the biblical story of the past, and view itself as an Acts 29 church,<sup>70</sup> it should have no problem reaching, connecting, and engaging Millennials or any group for that matter.

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<sup>66</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 141.

<sup>67</sup> Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 236.

<sup>68</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 135–136.

<sup>69</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 142.

<sup>70</sup> This is not a typo. The point is that in the book of acts there is no chapter 29 and the church itself, its life and story are constitute "acts 29." To embrace this means that the church embraces storying because it realizes it is co-authoring its own story.

By storytelling as a spiritual discipline, followers of Jesus can free themselves from the previous narratives they have been living from and embrace God's story.<sup>71</sup> The narrative that currently dominates the culture is opposed to the purpose of God.<sup>72</sup> Brueggemann calls the narrative widespread in our culture "a dominant text of amnesia;" the past stories are delegitimized to the point of being forgotten.<sup>73</sup> The film *Memento*<sup>74</sup> serves to show the pitfalls of embracing the cultural commitment to amnesia. In the movie, the main character cannot create new memories and relies on other people, polaroid's, and tattoos to remind him of who he is and complete his quest to avenge his wife's murder. Leonard listens to the false stories and believes them over reality with dire consequences for himself and his friend. Eric Geiger argues that "we often hear the wrong voices and are marked by the wrong influences."<sup>75</sup> This is why making sure we embrace the right story is vital to discipleship and the church's mission.

Another way that stories powerfully communicate is to be encoded and remembered by a triggering phrase. Bruggeman speaks of this in terms of family stories as he says, "to be a part of the family is to learn those concluding one-liners with great precision, so that very often the story need not be told in full, but only the one-liner

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<sup>71</sup> Byrd, "Narrative Discipleship: Guiding Emerging Adults to 'Connect the Dots' of Life and Faith," 51.

<sup>72</sup> Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 95.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Christopher Nolan, *Memento* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> Eric Geiger, *Identity* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2008), 110.

recited."<sup>76</sup> This triggering of the entire story through the remembrance of one small part could have significant implications in discipleship and spiritual formation.

An example is illustrated through one of my family stories. My father was cleaning out the gutters of our two-story home using a ladder with articulated joints. After he had finished with most of the gutter, he had only about six inches he could not reach. He understood that the safe thing to do was to climb back down the ladder and move it over. But, it was only a foot out of his reach. Instead of doing what was safe, he began to "hop" the ladder over the foot needed to finish the task. On the first hop, there were no problems. The second hop was successful. With only three more inches to go, my father felt pretty good about his choice, that was until on the third hop he heard and felt the articulated joints of the ladder give way and the ladder crumpled, and he fell to the ground, landing on his back. It was at this point that he learned, in an authentic manner, that "stupid hurts."

That two-word one-liner at the end of the story as it is told every time it is repeated in full encapsulates the entire story when said to one of my family members. When anyone in my family hears the phrase "stupid hurts." The image of the ladder, the task, the choice to take a short cut "bunny hopping" the ladder over, the sound of the joints giving way, the image of my father falling on his back are all brought to mind in a powerful way that makes all of us think carefully about whatever we may be doing that might be "stupid." This is one way that the stories of Jesus work at times; it is also similar to how the medieval church's stained-glass windows operated. Through this storytelling and the participation in the story, the church will better reach, connect, and engage with

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<sup>76</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living In A Three-Storyed Universe*, 114.

Zillennials. The church will continually do this as Zillennials triggered to remembrance by the encoded one-liners, phrases, scents, tastes, or feelings that bring the story back to them.

Storytelling, as a spiritual discipline, is also an essential tool for evangelism. As discussed in chapter 2, when one looks to Joshua 24, one sees people are evangelized by being invited into the participation in God and his people's story. Brueggemann argues that "Evangelism means inviting people into these stories as the definitional story of our life and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways."<sup>77</sup> Frost and Hirsch agree, "An incarnational ministry draws not yet Christians toward God by exciting curiosity through storytelling, by provoking a sense of wonder and awe, by showing extraordinary love, by exploring how God has touched our lives, and by focusing on Jesus."<sup>78</sup> The easiest to understand is storytelling, but each of the other aspects is how the disciples continue to tell, participate, and invite others to join in God's story.

### **Mentoring**

Of the various disciplines included in Christian discipleship, the oldest and most effective is mentoring. When one looks to the ministry of Jesus and his relationship with the twelve, one can see a deep mentoring relationship with them. Mentoring and discipleship are in their foundation relational.<sup>79</sup> Part of the relational nature of mentoring

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>78</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 152.

<sup>79</sup> Geiger and Borton, *Simple Student Ministry*, 128.



and discipleship is that the mentor and student are brought together by commonality; mentoring is not merely teaching; it is dependent on a natural connection and shared vision of student and mentor.<sup>80</sup> The relationship between a mentor and student is one that is marked by prayer as "any deep relationship with Christ must entail."<sup>81</sup> The relational nature of mentoring also combats the threats of isolation, delusion, and self-deception that all those on a spiritual journey can succumb.<sup>82</sup> Mentoring also gives opportunities for the different generational cohorts to build relationships. There is a great need for intergenerational mentoring relationships.<sup>83</sup> There is much for the older generations to teach the younger ones, but there is also much that the younger generation can teach the older ones. This sort of discipline and relationship is not something that can be simply programmed and scheduled. It must be organic and natural. As Wardlaw and Murray remind us, "You can't expect to successfully schedule a meaningful conversation... These happen in the natural course of time spent together."<sup>84</sup> Mentoring must be deliberate but also organic; it cannot be programmed but must be encouraged in a relational environment that celebrates the practice of mentoring.

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Currie, "Theological- Pastoral Perspectives on Mentoring," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 57.

<sup>81</sup> David Bartlett, "Mentoring in the New Testament," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 34.

<sup>82</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "Mentoring in the Roman Catholic Tradition," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 154.

<sup>83</sup> Theodore Wardlaw and Camille Cook Murray, "Cross-Generational Mentoring," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 230.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

One of the benefits of mentoring as a spiritual discipline is that the use and invitation of story naturally come out of this discipline and relationship. One of the realities of mentoring is that the mentor often is "the primary text"<sup>85</sup> of the story. Through the sharing of the mentor's life, the student is invited to participate in the story of God. Mentoring can also help those mentored imagine a better future and their place in the story through inquiry and imagination.<sup>86</sup> The mentoring relationship also provides opportunities to bridge the past, present, and future. Bruggeman argues that the mentoring "assumes, when honest, an awareness of discontinuity... recognizing that a leap of imagination is required so that the wisdom of older experience can be recalibrated for new circumstance."<sup>87</sup> In the mentoring relationship, the past is honored to help those in the future imagine the possibilities of navigating the future. The stories of the past continue in the stories of the future. Through mentoring, the stories of faith from the biblical text, history, the mentor's life, and the student's life can be shared; both the mentor's and the student's life will be enriched.<sup>88</sup>

Mentoring assists in the growth and development of the student disciple as they are challenged through mentoring. Brueggemann looks at Mordecai mentoring Esther as an example of mentoring, providing a challenge that becomes the "trigger that turns the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Nishioka and Melva Lowry, "Building Intentional, Demanding, Mutual Relationships for the Mentoring of Youth," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 200.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Mentoring in the Old Testament," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 13.

<sup>88</sup> Wardlaw and Cook Murray, "Cross-Generational Mentoring," 230.

course of history."<sup>89</sup> Mentoring can trigger a turn in the course of an individual. Mentoring challenges the student to risk. Mentoring can also challenge society's dominant norms; it can be a remedy for mirroring in a young disciple's life.<sup>90</sup> Mentoring challenges through "exhortation, instruction, and the call to imitation,"<sup>91</sup> which we see in Jesus mentoring the disciples. Mentoring can leverage to challenge disciples through preaching. Jill Duffield argues that "Preaching, too, is mentoring."<sup>92</sup> Through the various avenues in which mentoring can challenge the student, they are encouraged to grow into mature disciples.

A mentor need not have all the answers. There is a need for the mentor as well as the student to embrace both learning and collaboration.<sup>93</sup> A mentor does not need to have answers to all the student's questions. Instead, they need to be willing to discuss practical topics in one's life from a Jesus follower's point of view.<sup>94</sup> One might think that this means that one must have everything figured out; this is not the case. Some of the best advice that one can give is to "do better than I have done."<sup>95</sup> Mentoring is not about

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<sup>89</sup> Brueggemann, "Mentoring in the Old Testament," 24.

<sup>90</sup> Douglas Ottai and Elizabeth Hinso-Hasty, "Mentoring Toward a Humane Disposition Attitude, and Imagination," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 205.

<sup>91</sup> Bartlett, "Mentoring in the New Testament," 41.

<sup>92</sup> Jill Duffield, "Forward," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 6.

<sup>93</sup> Nishioka and Lowry, "Building Intentional, Demanding, Mutual Relationships for the Mentoring of Youth," 200.

<sup>94</sup> Rebekah Miles, "Ethical Perspectives on Mentoring," in *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Dean Thompson and Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 85.

<sup>95</sup> Brueggemann, "Mentoring in the Old Testament," 23.

learning all the answers to the questions; it is more about learning to navigate a world where there will always be questions. Currie argues that "the gift of mentoring for the apprentice is the training in enduring questions, in embracing the embarrassment of having no answers save a witness to the one who refuses to be an explanation while graciously drawing us into his life."<sup>96</sup>

Helping the student to embrace the gracious draw into Jesus' life seems a fitting definition of mentoring. Mentoring will enable the church and individual believers to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. Mentoring will also assist the church to improve in inviting both believers and those who are not yet followers of Jesus to participate in the story of God.

### **Service**

Service is a crucial spiritual discipline connected to reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials. In our discussion of service, mission and service are directly connected and not easily separated ideas. The church needs to broaden its understanding of service. Frost and Hirsch urge the church to see things outside of "church ministry" as service. Businessmen who use their influence "to develop ethical schemes through business to serve the needy or create jobs for the unemployed"<sup>97</sup> are engaging in service. Service as a spiritual discipline should also be holistic and impact every other aspect of one's life; it is not a segment of one's life but is lived out in acts and attitudes in every

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<sup>96</sup> Currie, "Theological- Pastoral Perspectives on Mentoring," 52.

<sup>97</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 69.

part of one's life.<sup>98</sup> One of the places in which service and mission are engaged in is the workplace.<sup>99</sup> This is an area that the church needs to help its participants understand and better live out. The church must see "what church members are already doing in their neighborhood and places of work"<sup>100</sup> as an integral part of the church's service to the community. McNeal agrees when he asks churches to consider how "The number of children attending Sunday school might be dwarfed by the number of students under the influence of the elementary school teachers who are part of the congregation."<sup>101</sup> By expanding its understanding of service, the church empowers its people to engage in ministry in places the church could never serve.

Rick Chromey identifies one of the problems that cause the church to no longer reach, connect and engage with the younger generation is that as the church, "We've adopted attractional ('come and see') rather than missional ('go and serve') models."<sup>102</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins agree, arguing those who grew up in the church and are no longer connected and engaged with it "are dissatisfied with a church that is a weekend event, not a movement of God's people on mission for Christ."<sup>103</sup> An emphasis on service in the church will help remedy the "come-to-us" mentality and begin a "Go-To-Them

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<sup>98</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 44.

<sup>99</sup> Lemke, "Disciple-Centered Leadership," 80.

<sup>100</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 69.

<sup>101</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 51.

<sup>102</sup> Rick Chromey, *Sermons Reimagined: Preaching to a Fluid Culture* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015), 64.

<sup>103</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 78.

approach to mission and evangelism."<sup>104</sup> Service allows the church to live out an outward focus and emphasize fulfilling the great commission outside of the church's walls in everyday life. There is a need to shift discipleship from focused on information to joining Jesus, where he is at work in the world.<sup>105</sup> There is a whole lot more world for him to work in outside of the church walls than within.

When the church engages in service, this can combat the culture's perception that the church is only concerned with itself; especially when the church serves without self-serving motives. Sadly, this perception is very strong and based on more truth than the church would like to admit. Imagio Dei Church discovered that when they went out to love people in Portland without an agenda, people considered it revolutionary; serving in love should not be exceptional; it should be the status quo of Jesus's followers.<sup>106</sup> Anecdotes such as this one point to the need for the church to emphasize service as vital to following Jesus.

There is a focus in the Zillennials who are still inside the church on impacting the world around them in pragmatic positive ways.<sup>107</sup> But those inside the church are not the only ones to focus on this. Zillennials seem to be more likely to think and act in ways that positively impact the world. Even those outside of the church see the way that God is moving outside of its walls.<sup>108</sup> This reality opens up new avenues for the church to reach,

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<sup>104</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 64.

<sup>105</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 10.

<sup>106</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 90.

<sup>107</sup> Jim Henderson, Todd D. Hunter, and Craig Spinks, *The Outsider Interviews: A New Generation Speaks out on Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 151.

<sup>108</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 77.

engage, and connect with those outside of itself. It also could allow the church to multiply the ministry it can engage in by inviting those who are not yet disciples of Jesus also to serve. Asking not-yet-disciples to serve alongside the church in the community allows the church to have a relationship with them, making it easier to reach, connect, and engage them with the gospel.<sup>109</sup> The reality is that God is already at work outside of the church; the Spirit is already working in the lives of those who are not yet part of the church. Sadly, "The church often lags behind the Spirit."<sup>110</sup> A broadened view of service that embraces a "go-to-them" and "go-with-them" mentality could help the church catch up with the Spirit.

An impact of participating in service as disciples of Jesus is the cultivating of relationships. Through an external focus that comes with serving outside of the church, disciples "bring the church to the people."<sup>111</sup> By serving in the community, the church will also be more missional in investing more time and effort into relationships than in programs.<sup>112</sup> To engage in impactful service in a community, the church must be in a relationship with that community. The spiritual discipline of service is impossible without a deliberate relationship. Churches that seek to transform their community and aim to reach, connect, and engage those far from God know their communities. This is vital to engaging Zillennials. Zillennials will continue to see churches that do not know the issues that the community struggles with and the needs within it as "hypocritical,

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<sup>109</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 119.

<sup>110</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 36.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>112</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 68.

insignificant, and irrelevant."<sup>113</sup> Engaging in service means that the church will be a part of the community and regularly interact with it. The relationships between the church and the community will allow more opportunities for evangelism and discipleship; it will also make people more open to hearing what the church has to say.

Service also allows disciples to practice and learn what cannot be taught: love.<sup>114</sup> Geiger et al. argue, "As a discipline, service gives room for us to develop in our character. With God's mission as our focus, transformation of our heart occurs as we experience God's work in our development. Service develops our love and refines our view of God's work."<sup>115</sup> This may be one of the most significant results of service. This development of love, especially love for those outside the church, is vital to the mission. This also reinforces the relationships that service builds and creates more opportunities to share the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on discipleship as one of the keys to reaching, connecting, and engaging Millennials. The reason for this is evangelism and discipleship are inextricably tied together. As we have seen, it is impossible to truly engage in discipleship without participating in the church's community. Participation in community life has been central to all the various spiritual disciplines examined in this chapter. It is

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<sup>113</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 112.

<sup>114</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 209.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



evident that Zillennials will be reached, connected, and engaged not through a program or a method but by a community.

The spiritual disciplines discussed as part of the discipleship process have a vital impact on the community, allowing it to invite others to participate in God's story. It is clear that while some aspects of discipleship are tried and true and need only to be engaged in, there are some aspects of discipleship that will require imagination, innovation, and experimentation. This is incredibly clear for teaching in the church as well as storying as a spiritual discipline. These disciplines will also require a relationship and knowledge of the community in which the church serves to think through how to reach the community best.

In the next chapter, Leonard Sweet's EPIC Framework will be examined in such a way to combine it with the discipleship ministry of the church. By taking the various spiritual disciplines discussed in this chapter and those from chapter three and situating them with the EPIC framework, an understanding of how the Church of God at Robertsdale can reach, connect, and engage Zillennials in the Broad Top area can be ascertained. The focus will be not only on the teaching, preaching, and worship service aspects of RCHOG's ministry but also on growing the church's culture of discipleship to create an environment for the church to reach, connect, and engage Millennials in the Broad Top area better.

## CHAPTER 5: THE EPIC FRAMEWORK

This chapter will examine the EPIC framework and improve the church's overall ministry to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. EPIC stands for experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connective.<sup>1</sup> One thing that is important to point out that there is nothing new about the EPIC framework. The early church and the ministry of Jesus make use of all four aspects of the EPIC framework. While many may look at this framework as something that results from postmodernism, this framework's elements are pre-modern. Leonard Sweet argues that "ministry in the twenty-first century has more in common with the first century than with the modern world that is collapsing all around us."<sup>2</sup>

The EPIC framework is not a program for the improvement of church services. This is not a quick way to fix things; it is a way to reform how the church operates to help reach, connect, and engage with postmoderns, especially Zillennials. While several changes in how the church operates and views itself have to do with Sunday morning worship service, it is vital to understand that the EPIC framework should evaluate and recalibrate every aspect of the church's ministry. The place to begin is not the Sunday morning worship service.<sup>3</sup>

The process by which the church embraces an EPIC framework and becomes an EPIC church is not easy. It will be even more challenging for a rural church such as

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<sup>1</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century* (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub. Group, 2000), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 36.

RCHOG as rural churches are typically more resistant to the changes needed.<sup>4</sup> While there are challenges and difficulties with moving toward an EPIC framework from the modern-enlightenment framework, there are also great opportunities and advantages for the church. The future belongs to the EPIC; this applies to the church, business, education, social clubs, charities, political parties, social media sites, apps, or communities. Sweet asserts in *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, "Anything in business or in the church that is working in this emerging culture is becoming more EPIC."<sup>5</sup> It is a great indictment of the church that the corporations such as Starbucks have become much more adept at harnessing the EPIC framework than the church.

One can see different ways the culture outside of the church has embraced an EPIC framework. From Burning Man to Ted talks (and the many copycats), to comic cons (and other such conventions), mobile phone companies, video games, children's toys stores, and eating establishments such as Starbucks, one sees EPIC at work all around us in the postmodern world. Hirsch and Frost discuss that Burning Man represents one of the most significant challenges to the church in that "it resembles everything the church is supposed to offer. But many people are finding the transformative power of Burning Man to be far and away more effective than anything that they experience in church."<sup>6</sup> Burning Man offers many of what Sweet calls EPICtivities, which is more about whole brain

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<sup>4</sup> Lori Hider, "A Story, A Metaphor, and a Matrix For a Truly Rural Church That Grows Christ Followers In An Uncertain Future" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2019), 135, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/314>.

<sup>5</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 14.

understanding, and entire body understanding than left-brain knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the church should learn a few things from these EPIC events. Maybe the church should look a little more like Burning Man and less like a nineteenth-century library or museum.<sup>8</sup>

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to looking at the quartet of experience, participation, images (visual and non-visual), and connection. Each of these aspects of the EPIC framework will also be connected with parts of the chapters before this one. Through the use of the EPIC framework and discovering how to integrate EPICtivities into the church's ministry, the church will better reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials and subsequently others who the current culture has significantly impacted.

### **E Is For Experiential**

"Experience is the holy grail of postmodernism."<sup>9</sup> This statement is accurate for Zillennials. There is a fixation with experience in our culture, and the church needs to learn to think in terms of experience. Dwight Spears reiterates this idea, "Experience is the key, and young people today more than ever want to experience their faith."<sup>10</sup> This focus on experience has changed the way that our culture operates, learns, and even shops. Grant Carey declares, "No longer do people go to the store for just a product, now

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<sup>7</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 213.

<sup>8</sup> Modern Libraries and museums have more in common with Burning Man than they do churches in the programs that they offer and the way they seek to engage their patrons and visitors. Libraries and Museum offer some of the best examples of EPIC programming available.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A Is For Abductive* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 119.

<sup>10</sup> Dwight Spotts, "Training Volunteers to Effectively Make Disciples of Troubled Youth in the Emerging Postmodern Culture" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2006), 160, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/287> (Page 1).

they want an authentic experience."<sup>11</sup> There is even a relatively new slang for the ubiquitous fear that grapples many Zillennials: FOMO. The fear of missing out on some sort of experience is the definition of FOMO. Sweet proclaims that "Postmoderns will do most anything not to lose connections with the experiences with life."<sup>12</sup>

Businesses have learned this lesson. In his 1999 book, *Soul Tsunami* Sweet claimed, "Stores that sell values and experiences are poised for the future."<sup>13</sup> This has proven to be accurate more than 20 years later. When one goes to the Apple store, you have an Apple experience; when one goes into Starbucks, you have a Starbucks experience; stores no longer are aisles with products on shelves but are often merely displays of what one can buy. The American Girl store is a place where a person can spend several hundred dollars without purchasing a single physical product.<sup>14</sup>

The Universal Studios theme park's *Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts* has even taken the idea of experience to turn waiting in line on its head. Throughout the line, park-goers walk through Gringotts bank filled with experiential elements. One is greeted by one of the goblins in the bank lobby at work. The line has an "elevator" that takes you down a couple of floors; the experience makes you forget that and even question whether you are still in line or not. The line eventually comes to a room where you enter part of the story through video clips. And the lines also offer different

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<sup>11</sup> Grant E. Carey, "The Multiple Intelligences as Holistic Spiritual Formation in Youth Ministry" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2014), 33, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/90>.

<sup>12</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 188.

<sup>14</sup> Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 72.

experiences; there is a "fast pass" line that is shorter and provides a different experience for much of the line. The rest of the park offers a similar obsession with experience. There are interactive experiences throughout the Harry Potter section of the parks that one can experience with a wand bought in the park.

The Zillennials do not collect possessions as the Boomer generation did; they collect experiences. Sweet argues that "Enjoyable family outings and novel experiences are the most prized possessions of postmoderns."<sup>15</sup> In my own experience, even the possessions that my family collects are collected as signifiers of experiences. Every trip that our family takes to a new state or new place always includes a stop at a local Starbucks to buy a "You Are Here" mug as a reminder of our experience. We also purchase pins or patches to put on our "adventure backpack" to chronicle our experiences. Many places offer souvenirs that are experiential. Hershey's Chocolate World offers a souvenir candy bar that you design yourself and add the ingredients to it you want, and you can watch it be made in front of your eyes. Their website describes the experience, "Immerse yourself in an authentic Hershey's factory experience. Choose your ingredients and design your own wrapper. You'll create more than just a candy bar – you'll create some unforgettable family memories."<sup>16</sup> It's clear that they are not selling a candy bar for \$26.95, but an experience.

Many restaurants have designed their business model based on experience. Churrascaria restaurants such as Fogo de Chao, Texas de Brazil, and Tucanos have

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<sup>15</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Hershey's Chocolate World, "Create Your Own Candy Bar," *Create Your Own Candy Bar*, last modified November 4, 2020, accessed November 4, 2020, [https://www.hersheys.com/chocolateworld/en\\_us/things-to-do/create-your-own-candy-bar.html](https://www.hersheys.com/chocolateworld/en_us/things-to-do/create-your-own-candy-bar.html).

become popular by offering a unique experience. The Melting Pot is another restaurant that provides a meal and an experience in which you cook your dinner in a fondue pot. A hibachi restaurant or Mongolian BBQ offers a different dining experience that is always unique. Casual restaurants such as Mod-Pizza, Blaze Pizza Co, Chipotle, Qdoba, Burgatory, Duck Donuts have created new experiences in how one orders, experiences, and watches their food be made. My family will only stop at a Krispy Kreme if the "Hot and Fresh" sign is on: We don't go for the donuts, but for the experience of watching the donuts being made and then enjoying a warm donut straight off the conveyor belt. Sweet argues that "The pleasures to be derived from possessing jewels are nothing beside the pleasure of possessing experiences."<sup>17</sup> The Church can learn a lot from the environments of experience that these restaurants offer.

"Postmoderns want interactive, immersive, 'in your face' participation in the mysteries of God."<sup>18</sup> Sweet tells us. To offer interactive, immersive, and participatory experiences, worship leaders, preachers, and pastors need to plan experiences with the environmental aspects in mind.<sup>19</sup> The sights, sounds, touches, tastes, and smells that the church offers in worship experiences must be thought through. Too many times, tastes and smells are never considered. Sweet reminds us of the unique nature of our olfactory sense and the opportunities that it offers, "Smell is the only sense where your brain connects directly with the outside world. Every other sense organ collects data by intermediaries... This is why smell is the open sesame to memories: it unlocks your

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<sup>17</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 197.

<sup>18</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 76.

brain's memory board and secret storage compartments that you even forgot you had."<sup>20</sup>

There is a large difference between physically describing a chocolate chip cookie and allowing the smell of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies to permeate the room. The latter can much more effectively bring back memories of their mother's or grandmother's kitchen as children enjoying cookies. Smell can affect how you feel about an experience before that experience properly ever "begins." We need to make our churches attractive and comfortable to people; smell can help with this.<sup>21</sup>

Churches and pastors will need to switch from a programmer mindset to an environmental planner mindset.<sup>22</sup> Engaging all of the senses will take more work and creativity, but it can be done and will be more effective in engaging people, especially Zillennials. In my first senior pastor position, I preached two sermons that some of our friends from that church brought up several years later. They were remembered not because of my oratory skill but because of the experiences involved. In one, a Lego piece was given out as we talked about the call to go out and make disciples; the Lego served as a tactile reminder of the need for God's people to connect with others. The other was a sermon on communion in which bread was baking during the entire service, and we broke that bread and had communion at the end. Sweet asserts that "Churches in postmodern communities will be built, not around great preachers, but around great

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<sup>20</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Nudge* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 254.

<sup>21</sup> Doering and Doering, *Myth of the Millennial: Connecting Generations in the Church*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 74.



experiences," going on to say, "preachers must learn how to exegete images to create experiences."<sup>23</sup>

Worship is one place where churches can create an experiential and immersive story, media, body, and visual "scapes;" the only limit is the extent of one's imagination.<sup>24</sup> The extent to which the church should think through the experiential environment and how to engage all of the senses should be much broader than a few hours each week, though. The challenge is to find creative ways in which all aspects of the church's ministry, all aspects of discipleship, can use the EPIC framework's experiential element. This may require some creative thinking, but it might also require reflection and a reframing of what the church is currently doing. Service projects are, by their nature, experiential and immersive. Still, we often do not always spend time reflecting on them and thinking through how the experiences can be better tied to other experiences in the church. These sorts of hands-on experiences are what the church needs to highlight.<sup>25</sup>

One of the benefits of a focus on experience in the church is that it not only provides space for a practical incarnation of the tenants of faith and discipleship, but it also prevents the church from allowing faith to be strictly cerebral. Experience must be backed by something and is not the focus. Chromey reminds preachers, "Education without experience breeds intellectualism. Experience without education spawns superficiality. Master communicators learn and love both."<sup>26</sup> There are times that the

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<sup>23</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 199–200.

<sup>24</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 214.

<sup>25</sup> Colleen Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2013), 203, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/46> (Page 1).

<sup>26</sup> Chromey, *Sermons Reimagined*, 54.

church has misunderstood the role of experience, and the way that experience is used can be counterproductive. When the E of Epic becomes a performance, the EPIC framework falls apart. Performance understandings of experience divorce experience from the other aspect of the EPIC framework and lose the mindset "that desires everyone to have something more than an intellectual connection with the triune God."<sup>27</sup> Both the substance and the experience are needed in the church to invite people into the story of God.

### **P is For Participation**

The second aspect of the EPIC framework is the focus on participation. Sweet et al. argue that the participatory "is the anchoring ingredient in all EPIC methodologies. Postmoderns are less 'seekers' after meaning in life than participators in experiences that are meaningful."<sup>28</sup> Experience by itself is not enough to hold the attention; participation begins to make experiences meaningful; when the church offers meaningful experiences through participation, it will keep the attention of Zillennials.<sup>29</sup> Sweet asserts, "It is no longer enough to possess things or enjoy positive events. One has to be involved in bringing those events to pass or brokering those events into the home. People want to participate in the production of content, whatever it is."<sup>30</sup> Spotts purports that participatory describes the desire for Zillennials "to experience life firsthand, not just as

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<sup>27</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 204.

<sup>28</sup> Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is For Abductive*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Martinez, "Young Adults Spirituality," 170.

<sup>30</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 100.

an observer but as a participant.<sup>31</sup> An eye to participation will present the church with significant challenges but also great opportunities.

Zillennials, like other postmodern people, are wired for participation more than previous generations.<sup>32</sup> This is part of the reason that much of the church does not reach, engage, or connect with Zillennials. Zillennials want to be a part of something bigger than themselves; they want to participate, but what they find on Sunday morning is not participatory: it is as participatory as fast food is nourishing.<sup>33</sup> The church has strayed far; Jesus's ministry was a model of participation.<sup>34</sup> The culture, though, shows an embrace of the participatory. Corporations now innovate in collaboration with customers who are now co-creators, achieving new heights of participation.<sup>35</sup> Companies in the business of creating content are currently focused on making sure their content is participatory.<sup>36</sup> At wedding receptions, you see more and more couples handing out disposable cameras, or providing polaroid cameras instead of or alongside professional photographers, making the wedding photos themselves participatory memories.<sup>37</sup>

The church should be a place for such participation, but sadly, it has not been of late. The type of participation that will reach Zillennials "Must be active, and it must be

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<sup>31</sup> Spotts, "Training Volunteers to Effectively Make Disciples of Troubled Youth in the Emerging Postmodern Culture," 166.

<sup>32</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 210.

<sup>35</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 68.

<sup>36</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

real participation that has the potential to shape the development of the gathering."<sup>38</sup> This is one aspect of participation that causes churches and moderns to struggle. Actual participation means there is a loss of control. Sweet states, "Interactive homiletics is filled with out of control moments and elements of surprise, times of improvisation and creation.... It creates a sense of a living story of Jesus within our twenty-first-century culture."<sup>39</sup> This statement can and should be applied to all aspects of the church's ministry. Participation causes a loss of control but at the benefit of incarnating the story of God in Christ in new ways and making room for the working of the Holy Spirit.

An attitude that seeks to have a quota of participation without giving up control will not be enough for Zillennials and other post-moderns.<sup>40</sup> In the EPIC framework, there is either participation or not, and the participation means participants influence molding the experience. This likely will disrupt the way the church operates, which many churches and pastors will find challenging.<sup>41</sup> But these disruptions and the conversations concerning what faith is in light of them will become the ground of the "evangelism of our time."<sup>42</sup> The disruption that will result from participation will be one more way that Zillennials are encouraged to enter and participate in the story of God.

By allowing authentic, disruptive, and formative participation, Zillennials will be more likely to be reached, connected, and engaged by the church. Spotts contends that

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<sup>38</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 206.

<sup>39</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 262.

<sup>40</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 131.

<sup>42</sup> Henderson, Hunter, and Spinks, *Outsider Interviews*, 143.

through participation, Zillennials "will, in fact, facilitate discipleship."<sup>43</sup> One only has to look at the DIY and hacks subculture that is ubiquitous to see how this could be the case. A passion is added to an endeavor in which one has been a part of the planning and creation. As has already been mentioned, corporations have seen the value in customers investing themselves in production; the church could benefit from this. One of the aspects is a return to an understanding of being a follower of Jesus as a continual process. Peter Rollins's words capture the idea, "one does not learn to be a Christian, but one engages in the process of becoming one."<sup>44</sup>

One of the least interactive and participatory aspects of the church's ministry has been its sermon and teaching. Preachers and teachers in the church must transition from being "sage from the stage" and become "guide from the side."<sup>45</sup> If preaching were viewed as a sport, modern preaching is something akin to golf. In contrast, EPIC preaching that is participatory is a team sport such as soccer, football, or basketball where the ball must be passed to others for the game to be played.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes this will result in sermons in which the pastors do more passing of the mic than speaking into it; it may seem more like karaoke than preaching, but this is about participation, not the preachers themselves.<sup>47</sup> Pastors must find ways to position themselves to guide a participatory

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<sup>43</sup> Spotts, "Training Volunteers to Effectively Make Disciples of Troubled Youth in the Emerging Postmodern Culture," 168.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Chromey, *Sermons Reimagined*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 259.

<sup>47</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 90.

discussion; this will mean at times that "They sit at the table instead of being the expert behind the pulpit."<sup>48</sup>

A participatory focus as part of the EPIC framework will require a significant paradigm shift for many pastors in the pulpit and the rest of the ministry: it will require a similar change for many currently in the congregation. One of the most challenging shifts will be prepositional; Sweet asserts that "The preposition *with* must replace *for* in everything that we do. We don't do anything for people. Everything we do must be done with people."<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup> This may sound like a small change, but the difference in the language has an enormous impact on how one sees the church's ministry and how the church operates. This prepositional shift will mean that, at times, a sermon will be more improve than an oratory presentation. This will mean that we will be offered lines and stories that we did not think of and are not prepared for; for participation to be authentic, we must "Never refuse a line...Never refuse a story or metaphor. Take the line and go somewhere with it."<sup>51</sup> To truly be participatory will require immense flexibility and patience.

The consequence of a focus on participation is that much is never finished in the church in terms of ministry. This is not a bad thing. The church is an organism, and organisms that are completed are dead. Genuine participation means that sermons and teachings are unfinished from one standpoint.<sup>52</sup> An unfinished sermon and teaching

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<sup>48</sup> Hider, "A Story, A Metaphor, and a Matrix For a Truly Rural Church That Grows Christ Followers In An Uncertain Future," 135.

<sup>49</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 261.

<sup>50</sup> Italics were added and are not in the original quote.

<sup>51</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 253.

<sup>52</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 92.

because it is participatory means that it is a living sermon if the people participate.<sup>53</sup> In an EPIC church, a sermon or teaching or discipleship lesson is never finished because the point in those things is no longer the information shared. Just as content providers are focusing on interactivity, the content of the sermon is people's participation with it, not the information presented to them; "The congregation is now an essential part of sermon composition."<sup>54</sup> This will mean that sermons will not be neat and tidy packages of information wrapped up in tidy little bows at the end of service. The sermon will be less about answering questions and drawing conclusions and more about asking more questions examining a range of possibilities for the congregation to wrestle with.<sup>55</sup>

This ties directly into the understanding of inviting people to participate in the story of God. Media have formed Zillennials in a time, as Sweet says, "when television is not a medium of information but a medium to be experienced and inhabited."<sup>56</sup> Now to inhabit media means that one participates in it. Television is no longer the only medium, or perhaps even the most influential. Mediums such as Twitch, YouTube, Tik Tok, Facebook Live, and Instagram Live have become places where media is experienced and inhabited, and extensively participated in. These platforms in which people share their stories have become the modern equivalent of "testimony time;"<sup>57</sup> the compelling aspect of the story is the content and the invitation to participation and how people participate.

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<sup>53</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 264.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>55</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 215.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>57</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 193.

The future belongs to those who do not draw a crowd to spectate, but invite a cloud of witnesses to participate.

### **I is for Image-Rich**

The third component in the EPIC framework is image-rich. "we live in an image-hungry, image-rich world."<sup>58</sup> according to Sweet. While images have become our world's language, the church is still stuck in a world of words; while our world is more and more image-based, the church has become entrenched in its word-based existence. Images have become "cultural vernacular."<sup>59</sup> It is time that the church learns a new language and remembers a very old one. Sweet argues that "Images come as close as human beings will get to a universal language."<sup>60</sup> When discussing being image-rich, it would be easy to think only about visual images; this is not the case. An image may be visual, but it might also be a story, a metaphor, or a word picture used to communicate. Pictures and video can qualify as image-rich, but just because a church focuses on visuals or videos does not mean that it is image-rich.

Images in the context of this discussion activate the imagination. The reason for the Harry Potter books' success is that they were image-rich, "the way that they are written transport kids imagination to a place where they feel they are watching the stories unfold like a movie."<sup>61</sup> The human mind operates and thinks in images, metaphors, and

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<sup>58</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 100.

<sup>59</sup> Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is For Abductive*, 152.

<sup>60</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 100.



stories; this is not unique to Zillennials.<sup>62</sup> Our culture prizes image; we can see this is how advertisers use images; we can see it in the way that 1080p televisions do not have a clear enough picture; we need 4k and 8k televisions.<sup>63</sup> Businesses no longer simply advertise a product, but they tell a story or use or a metaphor to sell their products.

According to Chromey, "our culture thinks in image...the mind eye is real."<sup>64</sup> The things that Zillennials are drawn to in our modern world are "television, video games, movies, and iPad, all of which are in the storytelling business."<sup>65</sup> In education, the need to use images, videos, and interactive learning has been acknowledged.<sup>66</sup> The church needs to reevaluate its communication techniques; it needs to learn to be more imaged based through the use of not only visual images and video but also "metaphor, analogy, and story."<sup>67</sup> If the church does not learn to make use of image the way that the rest of the culture does, it will not combat our culture's false narrative, and it will fail to reach, connect, and engage any future generations.

Speaking a different language creates a communication problem. The church still speaks a Gutenberg language of text and principles written out in words while our culture hears in Google, images, stories, and metaphors.<sup>68</sup> Video games in the last several

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<sup>62</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 92–93.

<sup>63</sup> Carey, "The Multiple Intelligences as Holistic Spiritual Formation in Youth Ministry," 33.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Chromey, "E-Learning and the Academy: A New Paradigm for Training Youth Ministry Students" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2007), 42, *New Paradigm for Training Youth Ministry Students* (<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/168>).

<sup>65</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Twenge, "Teaching Generation Me," 68.

<sup>67</sup> Chromey, "E-Learning and the Academy," 43.

<sup>68</sup> Chromey, *Sermons Reimagined*, 47.

decades show this emphasis. Even the most simply based games must tell a story and not merely be visually stunning.<sup>69</sup> The business world has discovered that a company's success is not because of the company's vision, but instead because of the company's shared values that are communicated through metaphors and story.<sup>70</sup> It is time that the church catches up with the language development of the rest of the world.

Understanding the power of images, story, and metaphor is vital for reaching the post-everything world that the church finds itself navigating. While words still have power, their power is nothing compared to that of images.<sup>71</sup> If one wants to change the world, change the central images, change how one views it. If one wants to change the world, tell a new story. All images, stories, and metaphors teach; they teach more effectively than propositions and precepts.<sup>72</sup> When we look at the teachings of Jesus, we find that he taught through images. The synoptic gospels claim that he only taught through parables.<sup>73</sup> Jesus used story in powerful ways of which the church should take note of. Sweet explains, "His use of parables, narrative and metaphors can be seen as a subversive strategy. Narraphoric preaching breaks down the resistance, enters the unconscious quickly, and causes the participant to fall into the lap, or trap, of truth. Narraphors get us thinking about something we may not want to think about. They force

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<sup>69</sup> Rick McKinney, "Using Storytelling (Including Image, Metaphor and Narrative) in Cross-Generational, Cross-Cultural Twenty-First Century Evangelism" (DMin Diss., George Fox University, 2014), 63, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/91>.

<sup>70</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 95–96.

<sup>71</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 13:34, Mark 4:34

us to look at life in new ways, and they outwit our reasoned defenses."<sup>74</sup> The church has always had aspects of its ministry that were visual; one cannot reasonably claim that the church is not visual unless the church in question does not practice communion, baptism, conduct marriage ceremonies, practice foot washing, or even have a cross or altar table in it.<sup>75</sup>

The greatest teacher the world has ever known taught in seemingly simple stories using simple images and metaphors to teach God's kingdom. "The most powerful words in history were addressed to us in the simple language of husbandry and fishing. Yet we still need to read them over and over again to plumb their deepest meaning."<sup>76</sup> One of the crucial things that the church can learn from the way that Jesus taught was the need for contextualization. Jesus' parables were taught in a way that everyday people in first-century Palestine could understand. The use of image means that we also understand the context of one's culture. Frost and Hirsch tell of a missionary preaching to the Zanaki tribe who did not understand how focusing on the image of Jesus knocking on the door made him seem untrustworthy and like a thief in that culture.<sup>77</sup> It is not enough to use images, stories, and metaphors, but one must understand the images that will and will not work in one's culture. These differences vary not only from country to country, but region to region, and even city to city. Just as every area has its own language dialect, so does it also have its image dialect.

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<sup>74</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church*, Updated Edition. (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub. Group, 2011), 119.

<sup>76</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 137.

<sup>77</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 119.

The church needs to encourage pastors and preachers and everyone to become more adept in communicating in images. Pastors and preachers will need to become image weavers if the church will speak the post-modern culture's language.<sup>78</sup> Sweet argues that "One of the greatest challenges of an EPIC church is to help its members create a healthy image scape—not one controlled by popular culture but by every image that proceeds out of the mouth of God."<sup>79</sup>

This is not only a challenge, but it is also an opportunity for the church to reach our world. This challenge and this opportunity are nothing new. Israel faced the same challenge in Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 8 that the early church faced as it sought to follow Jesus and offered a new story to combat the overarching cultural narrative. The modern western church simply traded their "walk-on part in a war for a lead role in a cage"<sup>80</sup> by allowing the culture around us to master stories and metaphors that control the world. Suppose the church is to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials and beyond. In that case, it must raise image weavers to create images, stories, and metaphors that "resonate with Scriptures."<sup>81</sup> It is only through the use of the images resonating with God's story that one finds in scripture that the church can help Zillennials live and participate in the only true story, the story of God.

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<sup>78</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 156.

<sup>79</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 98–99.

<sup>80</sup> Pink Floyd, *Wish You Were Here*, *Wish You Were Here* (Columbia Records, 1975).

<sup>81</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 208.

### C is for Connective

The EPIC framework's last component may be the most important and the most difficult of the EPIC framework components to put into practice. If one were to understand the EPIC framework as a room, then the connective aspect of it would be a rug "that really ties the room together."<sup>82</sup> The EPIC framework's connective aspect brings all other elements of the framework together, working as a cohesive whole. Sweet further elucidates, "The experience that kicks off the EPIC life is attention-grabbing, and that experience becomes meaningful when we participate in it. As we participate, the experience grows in importance, and we recognized and read the images that add richness to the meaning. All of this serves as a preamble of sorts to the fourth element of the EPIC life: connection."<sup>83</sup> Colleen Butcher says, "The paradox of the participation is that it is deeply personal and yet necessarily requires community."<sup>84</sup> The connective aspect of any EPIC experience is what completes it as an EPIC experience. Without connection and experience, that which is participatory and image-rich can be impactful, but it lacks the formative impact that the same sort of experience happening in concurrence with a connection with a community would have.

There is some irony in terms of the connective as the crowning aspect of the EPIC experience. While the EPI of the EPIC framework needs the connective to be complete, the connective needs the other elements to work correctly. Butcher comments on this

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<sup>82</sup> Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, *The Big Lebowski* (Polygram Video, 1998).

<sup>83</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 129.

<sup>84</sup> Butcher, "Worship as Playground: Living the Song-Story of God," 210.

irony of the reciprocal need within the EPIC framework of the EPI and the C, "Experiential Participatory and Image-Rich are required in order for Connective to work."<sup>85</sup> Understanding how the connective and the other aspects of the EPIC framework need each other to work correctly is essential to see EPIC as an entire holistic picture instead of pieces that one can use or not use in different situations.

The EPIC framework's connective element is not only crucial to the EPIC framework, but it is also vital to ministry with Zillennials. Spotts asserts concerning the connective aspect of the EPIC framework, "at no time has the concept of being connected into a community been more important"<sup>86</sup> in ministry with Zillennials than now. Sweet argues that "The heart of postmodernity is a theological dyslexia: me/we or the experience of an individual in community... Postmoderns want to enjoy a self-identity within a connective framework of neighborliness, civic virtue, and spiritual values."<sup>87</sup> One would be hard-pressed to deny that people need to be connected to others: the need for connection is part of the human condition.<sup>88</sup> Humanity has always been connective, but we are now hyper-connective because of the changes in technology that had made greater connectivity more possible than ever before.<sup>89</sup>

The technological aspects of connection in our society created both challenges for the church while also giving the church greater opportunities to connect than it has ever

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>86</sup> Spotts, "Training Volunteers to Effectively Make Disciples of Troubled Youth in the Emerging Postmodern Culture," 186.

<sup>87</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 115.

<sup>88</sup> Carey, "The Multiple Intelligences as Holistic Spiritual Formation in Youth Ministry," 34.

<sup>89</sup> Chromey, "E-Learning and the Academy," 77.

had before and in ways it has only recently imagined. This is especially true of rural churches. In the past, rural churches were limited in their connections with people and were limited to the population within a reasonable driving distance. It has become evident during the COVID19 pandemic that this is no longer the case. During the several months that RCHOG went to all virtual services, it was discovered that the church was connecting with people from several different states and even one family located in Germany. Technology is the reason for these connections. Through Facebook and YouTube, conversations with individuals not there in person can happen, and they can connect people with the church's community. After the church has returned to having in-person gatherings, we have seen these connections outside of the Broad Top area continue.

Connections are important; relationships are important. Zillennials are profoundly concerned with connecting with the world around them and their relationships. One can see this in how Zillennials will allow this concern with connections and relationships to be one of the primary quality of life issues that they orient their lives around, including their career path.<sup>90</sup> Houston argues relationships are essential to the point that "they see no point in simply meeting with a group of people for sixty minutes on a Sunday if they are never willing to go the extra mile and work on relationships at other times as well."<sup>91</sup> The church needs to go back to school and catch up with Zillennials and learn the fourth "R" that the Zillennials have been raised and educated in: relationships.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Houston, "How to Effectively Engage in Ministry with the Millennial Generation," 16.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 195.

When one looks to the ministry of Jesus, it is clear that he was one of the most connective people ever. His relational ethic was based on whether one wanted to connect with him, not based on social mores.<sup>93</sup> Being a disciple entails being connective and building relationships.<sup>94</sup> This is the reason that Stetzer and Geiger argue, "Community is assumed—if I am out of community I am out of God's will...no believer is transformed alone."<sup>95</sup> It is not just that being a disciple is relational, but Sweet argues, "Postmodern evangelism also can be summarized in one word: relationships."<sup>96</sup> It could be that the place that the church has failed the most in terms of evangelism and discipleship is in the area of connectedness and relationships. It's a sad day when even the business world seems to understand that you can be "right," or you can be in "right relationship."<sup>97</sup>

The connective aspect of the EPIC framework is vital because if the church does not endeavor to be in the business of relationships, some other entity will. Sadly "the church is by and large no longer in the relationship business."<sup>98</sup> Instead, the church has gone from a third place for the community to a place more concerned about propositions than relationships.<sup>99</sup> The church needs to reembrace the connective ministry element and focus on making third place spaces within its ministry that allow people to connect and

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<sup>93</sup> Henderson, Hunter, and Spinks, *Outsider Interviews*, 131.

<sup>94</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 195.

<sup>95</sup> Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 196.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>98</sup> Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.



build healthy relationships.<sup>100</sup> This means that there needs to be a change from focusing on buildings and programs to a posture of relationship and community building.<sup>101</sup> This will mean that the church will have to seek to connect with Zillennials. Connections can at times be complicated, but they at the same time are simple. Clint Jenkins reminds the church that "Nothing drives teenagers and young adults from the church faster than being rejected, and nothing draws them in faster than being accepted."<sup>102</sup>

### Conclusion

The EPIC framework is connected with the various aspects that have been examined throughout this paper. When implemented, it is also clear that the framework has excellent chances of helping the church reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. The EPIC framework is not a silver bullet that will fix all the church's problems, nor is it a framework that can be implemented without much thought or effort. The EPIC framework will require considerable time and effort to put into place consistently. It will require a cultural change in the church and means that some things will look very different in the church, but these changes are not merely trying to be trendy or surface changes. For participants in the church steeped in modernism and not open to change, the

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<sup>100</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Alethia Janise Simmons, "Rescuing the Millennials: Four Essential Lessons Learned and Eight Key Principles to Reclaiming This Generation" (DMin Diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 20.

<sup>102</sup> Jenkins and Martin, "Engaging Adventist Millennials: A Church Embracing Relationships \*," 100.

shift towards the EPIC framework will be uncomfortable and sometimes downright painful. The EPIC framework is not a new method or technique for how the church operates. Instead, EPIC is part of how the church used before the impact that the enlightenment and the modern era have had on the church's culture and church.

Much of the world seems to have embraced different aspects of the EPIC framework; now is the time for the church to do so. If the church continues on the same path that it has been on, it will continue to experience the same diminishing results that it has experienced in the last several decades.

## CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: PRACTICAL IMPLICATION FOR WHERE RCHOG  
SHOULD GO FROM HERE.

This study began with the problem that RCHOG does not effectively reach, connect, or engage Zillennials in the Broad Top Area. This paper has examined some of the issues that contribute to the church's struggling, in general, to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. These issues causing a disconnection between the church and Zillennials can be overcome, but it will require changes. It would be tempting to create a program, curriculum, Bible study, or sermon series to fix this problem. That would be folly. The church's problems are much more significant and there is no simple, quick-fix solution. RCHOG will have to undergo a seismic cultural change to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. Some of these changes might seem minor, while others seem much more systemic. In reality, all of these changes in the culture of RCHOG will, at times, be difficult, but they are needed for the church to advance God's mission in the world. This chapter will discuss the cultural shifts that RCHOG will need to process through to reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials in the Broad Top Area.

One of the realities that has become quite clear since I began my doctoral studies is the fluid and tentative nature of discussing anything concerning the church and how it can best engage our culture. For some time, the year 2020 will be remembered in infamy, but that could change as 2021 could come to be an even worse year. If one were

to tell me last January that many churches would spend the majority of the year doing church virtually, or that people wearing face masks would more or less become a cultural norm in the United States, or that a good deal of our country would be under some government-mandated restrictions because of a virus, I would not have believed it. Things have quickly changed in the last year; this is a testament to our culture and the world's fluid nature. That churches have adapted and innovated to meet this crisis is a testament to the church's vitality. Any plans or shifts of the church moving forward need to be as adaptable as they are innovative.

The cultural changes that are being suggested to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials can be separated into creating a storytelling church culture and practical implications for implementing the EPIC framework as part of that storytelling church culture. The first half of this chapter will focus on creating a storytelling church culture. The second half of this chapter will be focused on implementing the various components of the EPIC framework in all aspects of RCHOG's ministry.

### **A Storytelling Culture**

Story and storytelling are vital to reaching Zillennials, as had been previously shown in this paper. One of the most important cultural changes that RCHOG needs to undergo is to become focused on story and storytelling. As discussed in chapter two, a biblical understanding of evangelism is the invitation to participate in the story of God. Sweet tells us, "Somewhere along the way, we lost the art of storytelling. Even worse, we have lost the art of story casting—finding our identity in the Jesus story, along with how

to understand, interpret, and find meaning and the truth of Jesus in story.”<sup>1</sup> To embrace a storytelling church culture, these are skills that RCHOG needs to reclaim.

*Telling the entire story*

To invite others to participate in the story of God, RCHOG leadership must also make sure that the people of RCHOG know the story. We live in a world where fewer and fewer people know God's story, sadly even those who sit in our pews.<sup>2</sup> This is a concerning issue because we live in a world where stories “are at the heart of spirituality.”<sup>3</sup> The church should focus on teaching the full story of the entire Bible and the whole story of the church; it is only then that Millennials and the rest of the church, for that matter, will understand and participate in “redemption history, the story that should define their lives.”<sup>4</sup> The focus on the story will mean that the church needs to be clear on God's story and differentiate God’s story from the overarching narrative of the culture around it. The focus needs to be continually on the whole story. There should be much time and effort devoted to helping people understand the context of scripture that helps frame God's story. This will prevent a skewed perspective of the story, which is usually the result of ripping scripture out of its context and viewing verses in terms of propositions instead of looking at scripture's overall narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, Hunter, and Spinks, *Outsider Interviews*, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 102.

The importance of telling the whole story of God as the path of evangelism and discipleship is not a new idea. Chapter two's discussion of the biblical foundations for seeing evangelism and discipleship as inviting others to participate in the story of God makes this clear. The first step in evangelizing and discipling Zillennials is to provide them access and the opportunity to interact with the whole story of God; this is why storytelling is so vital.<sup>5</sup> Sanchez agrees, "Active, intentional storytelling is the basis on which all communities have always been built, and that is no less true today when communities are so fluid and fragile."<sup>6</sup>

The story of the gospel will come into conflict with other stories in our culture. The story of God may even come into conflict with the other stories that have been propagated in RCHOG over the years. The church must learn to trust the story of God and trust the author of that true story. This may mean that there will be aspects of the current narrative of RCHOG of which we must let go. It will also mean that there will have to be revisions to the narrative of RCHOG because aspects of God's story are missing from it. The telling of the whole story of scripture should result in the church seeing itself as an Acts 29 church that continues the story of Acts. This will result in the realization that every participant in the church is an integral part of God's story and his people; there are no small parts in the kingdom of God. Everyone has a story to tell. Therefore, everyone has something to contribute to the life of the church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Knoetze, "Who Are the Disciples? Identity Perceptions About Millennials and the Church," 5.

<sup>6</sup> Melchor Sanchez de Toca, "Looking For God: Religious Indifference In Perspective," in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James Heft, Abrahamic Dialogues Series 6 (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Houston, "How to Effectively Engage in Ministry with the Millennial Generation," 36.

*The difficulty of the task*

Creating a storytelling and story participation culture is not easy. While this would seem like a simple change, such as the pastor or preacher can just use more stories in their sermon, it is more than that. The cultural shift to a focus on story and storytelling in the church does not end with the pastor's Sunday morning sermons. The sharing of stories has a more significant impact than worship services or sermons currently offered by churches do in this culture.<sup>8</sup> It is also not about the pastor inserting more stories into his or her sermons and teachings. The pastoral staff and teachers in the church are one part of the overall ministry of the church. At the same time, this area may be the more "visible" part of the church's ministry where a focus on story would have to be implemented, and such a cultural change will not happen if this is the only area that the church seeks to focus on story and storytelling.

If RCHOG is going to transition to a culture that invites people to participate in the story of God, then this must become part of RCHOG's "brand." Like any church's brand, storytelling must be present on the website, Facebook page, on all materials disseminated by the church.<sup>9</sup> Storytelling must become a part of all meetings, discussions, programs, and activities. Story should be central to services and to how the church communicates.

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<sup>8</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Brennan, "Fulfilling the Commission: Purposefully Evangelizing, Assimilating, and Integrating Millennials in Today's Church," 60.

Storytelling and its emphasis at RCHOG will create more connectedness by helping people form an identity connected with their being a part of God's people and the church's community. Eventually, everyone's "my" story will become part of the church's "our" story. Every story told can be integrated as part of my story not because I experienced it, but because I am part of the people of God and part of RCHOG and that story is one of the stories of my people.

Storytelling is a powerful form of identity formation. When has storytelling succeeded in forming our identity in Christ? While in the nursing home she lived in shortly before she died, my great grandmother would sing songs of Northern Ireland's rebellion. She never lived in Ireland, she was never part of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, but those were the songs passed down to her by her family. She made them her own so much that even as she forgot so many other things, she could remember them well enough to sing them. Storytelling is successful in forming one's identity when stories that were not one's own are embraced as one's own, just as my great grandmother embraced the Irish Brotherhood songs as her own. Creating a storytelling culture in the church to evangelize and disciple is successful when participants in RCHOG make stories that are told part of their stories in the same way that my great grandmother did the songs of Northern Ireland she learned growing up.

There can be a vast difference between telling a story and inviting another to participate in that story. One must tell the story to invite another to participate in it, but one does not need to invite others to participate in a story to tell the story. The difference between telling a story and inviting another to participate in it is also not only about the skill of storytelling. To invite others to participate in God's story, one must be able to tell



the story of God and His working with humanity and animate it in such a way that the hearers understand the connection with their own story. The storyteller needs to understand the stories of others in the community in which they are speaking.

Creating a culture in which story is valued will mean that the pastor, preacher, and teacher will no longer be the only voice heard. Creating a culture in which story is valued means that the church will strive to find avenues for all of the church to share and participate in the story. This will mean that there will be less control over what is said in the telling of stories than in most churches' culture. The story of God, as often as not, has unexpected twists and turns. If we are participating in that story and inviting others to do so, there will be times that we are left without a word, or we honestly do not know how to respond; this is an eventuality that RCHOG must be prepared to face if it is to invite people to participate in the story of God seriously.

This will also not be an easy process. The process of helping others learn how to participate in God's story and find the power and meaning of their personal story is a process that will take time, great effort, and patience; it will also not always be linear.<sup>10</sup> Creating a culture that embraces storytelling and participation in God's story as evangelism and discipleship will require flexibility; there will be successes and failures while the church learns how to best participate in the story of God and invite others to do so. The RCHOG leadership must understand that this process will not be complete in months, but this will be a continual process of growth and development as God's story in the life of the Broad Top area and RCHOG continues.

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<sup>10</sup> Houston, "How to Effectively Engage in Ministry with the Millennial Generation," 14.

The process that will result in the cultural shift to a storytelling culture of discipleship and evangelism begins with the pastor, but cannot and must not end there if the church is to become a church focused on inviting others to participate in God's story. The elders and the different ministry teams must also buy into a vision of inviting others into participating in the story of God. They must also be taught to become masters at storytelling and inviting participation in the story. Participants in the church must be educated, equipped, enabled, empowered, and unleashed to use stories and metaphors in imaginative ways to connect the stories of scripture to their own stories and the stories of others in their community. It is also vital that personal stories of victory and defeat are encouraged and modeled by the church's leadership.<sup>11</sup>

There are many reasons that Zillennials have not been reached, connected, or engaged by the church; some of those reasons point to storytelling as evangelism and discipleship as a remedy to their objections concerning the church. Storytelling can make the church and RCHOG in particular “more authentic, accessible, and animating.”<sup>12</sup> This will especially be the case if RCHOG embraces telling stories about both victory and defeat in the life of the church and its participants.

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkins and Martin, “Engaging Adventist Millennials: A Church Embracing Relationships \*,” 102.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Ammerman, “Journeys of Faith: Meeting the Challenges in Twenty-First Century America,” in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James Heft, Abrahamic Dialogues Series 6 (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 31.

*What might this look like?*

This is a larger and overarching cultural change that will be evident when all those in the church seek to communicate in the story of their intersection with God's story. When the church fully embraces a storytelling culture, most RCHOG participants will embrace and live out storytelling and sharing as integral to their discipleship. This is something that needs to be evident in all aspects of the church. Storytelling should be the primary form of communication; even mundane communications such as announcements of activities need to be about stories told and participated in rather than dates and times. While this seems like a massive endeavor, this also will allow the church to multiply its ministry if every member is a minstrel for the ministry of the gospel

One way to begin to achieve this is to deliberately create spaces and occasions for people to tell their stories. Perhaps every worship service could have a participant tell part of their story, returning to a testimony time. Make the people a part of the sermon as subjects being addressed are told through others' stories in their own words via video or live conversations. Reggie McNeal tells of how:

One Congregation in the Pacific Northwest focuses purely on the stories of those who come, mostly from the arts community and many whom are not yet Jesus Followers. The pastor uses their stories to launch into spiritual themes, point to the God story behind each of their stories. Most of those present have never thought of God as working in their lives so proactively and are intrigued to pursue him.<sup>13</sup>

While this exact approach may not work at RCHOG, people's stories being a significant aspect of the teaching and preaching ministry at RCHOG can be implemented.

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<sup>13</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 52.

Beginning to implement a story-centric culture of evangelism and discipleship may be simple as every week having a short interview, or a video of someone telling a story, or someone merely giving a testimony. The idea of telling one's story and how they are participating in God's story might seem a little foreign to some churches, but it is just another form of testimony construction.<sup>14</sup> The stories that are shared as part of the life of RCHOG do not even need to be shared by those who were a part of them. RCHOG has a 108-year history filled with stories of faith, God's faithfulness, and lives being transformed by the power of the Gospel.

This will mean that pastors, teachers, and preachers at RCHOG will need to think of themselves as curators of God's people's stories, past, present, and future. A worship gathering at RCHOG may be, at times, more and more a storytelling and sharing gathering in which everyone can have a voice and are invited to participate in the stories shared. Instead of coming to hear a word of God from the pastor or preacher alone, RCHOG would gather to share the word of God active and working in their lives and the world around them.<sup>15</sup> Those leading in worship, preaching, and teaching in the church would still have vital roles as people will need to be guided. The participants of RCHOG will need to be directed to imagine themselves as characters of the biblical story.<sup>16</sup> The preacher in a storytelling church culture seeks to animate the truth of the story of God.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Byrd, "Narrative Discipleship: Guiding Emerging Adults to 'Connect the Dots' of Life and Faith," 48.

<sup>15</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 116.

The preacher in a storytelling church is always there to remind the people that the biblical story did not just happen but happens every day, and they are a part of the story of God.

At RCHOG, these changes will need to begin within the leadership, starting with the elders and then move on to the administrative team. After most of these two groups have bought into the vision of becoming a storytelling church, the rest of the ministry teams will be focused on. Each team meeting for all the ministry teams, including elders and the administrative team, begins with a devotion. The devotion is currently not truly considered part of the meeting, and the “real” business of the meeting does not start until after the devotion is over. RCHOG can shift to a storytelling culture by making the devotional time focused on storytelling and moving to an understanding that the devotion is an integral part of the meeting and is as essential as the business of that meeting. Currently, this time is not very interactive, and people do not really participate in the devotions but only spectate. By adjusting the focus of this time, the church leaders can learn how to tell stories and participate in others' stories.

Through experimentation and practice during these leadership meetings, the church leaders will learn to use storytelling as tools for evangelism and discipleship by learning to participate in the story of God and see how their own story intersects with that overarching story. For each of the ministry teams, there is an elder representative who attends those team meetings. The elders can assist the pastor on these ministry team meetings by developing the leaders in these teams to move to a storytelling culture as a church.

Through a continual focus on storytelling as a vital part of every ministry's business, these teams will come to understand the importance of a storytelling church and

learn how to participate in that process. The leadership will “begin to see themselves within a much larger story of God fulfilling his kingdom purposes.”<sup>18</sup> Eventually, those in leadership will come to the understanding that just as one always brings a dish to a church potluck, they should always bring a story to a meeting at the church. After the leadership has shifted to a storytelling culture, the rest of the church will more easily follow.

Digital avenues for storytelling as a spiritual discipline will be of ever-increasing importance for RCHOG. One of the results of a shift to a storytelling culture at RCHOG is that the church's website will need to be reimagined from the ground up. It is not simple enough to use the website to tell stories but to truly embrace a storytelling culture that will reach, connect, and engage Zillennials, the website itself must tell a story. While this will be a challenge, this process will also allow participants at RCHOG to be involved in the process and tell their story and how they see their place in God’s story.

Both the website and social media platforms that the RCHOG currently uses will need to become digital third places for storytelling of RCHOG. There will need to be a variety of types of storytelling content. This will allow for more people to contribute to these digital third places. There will also have to be individuals from RCHOG that will monitor these storytelling spaces. RCHOG will also need to look at investing in a few laptops or tablets for people of RCHOG to be able to use for the creation of video and audio storytelling content. While this will mean an investment of funds, it will also result in more flexibility for the church to encourage storytelling. This should result in more

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<sup>18</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 56.

sharing of stories through the church's Facebook and YouTube pages and the personal Facebook pages of those sharing their stories.

The sharing of stories through the digital third spaces and physical ones such as worship services, meetings, classes, and events will also help RCHOG reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials by assisting in moving Zillennials from one relational space of belonging to another. Through the sharing of stories, Zillennials can move from the public sphere of belonging to the social sphere as they participate more in God's story and the story of RCHOG's life and ministry. Story is how RCHOG can begin to reach Zillennials; by offering avenues for them to share their own stories and see the connection between their story and the story of God, they can connect with the church. By then moving to participate in telling the church's story, they will engage with RCHOG and vice versa.

One might look at the idea of storytelling as the basis for evangelism and discipleship in the church and question the effectiveness of such an approach. When we look at Jesus' ministry, we see this is how the apostles were discipled through Jesus's telling stories and then being invited to participate in the story of God. Then, later, they became propagators of the story of God. Throughout this paper, it seems clear that storytelling can be a transformative and effective way to evangelize and disciple followers of Jesus. This is clear in the biblical text that has been examined; it is also clear that theologians such as Brueggemann and Newbigin agree that storytelling can be transformative.

**Practical implications for applying the EPIC framework as part of a storytelling culture at RCHOG to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials.**

The EPIC framework's importance and power in reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials has already been discussed. Still, the ways that this EPIC framework might manifest itself in the storytelling culture of RCHOG needs to be further illuminated. The implementation of the EPIC framework at RCHOG will require experimentation and imagination. The different aspects of the EPIC framework and how they might be made manifest in the life and ministry of RCHOG will be examined in the remainder of this chapter.

*Experiential*

The leadership of RCHOG will need to think through the lens of the experiential. This means that there will have to be a consideration from all worship services, classes, meetings, and activities of RCHOG on how they engage the senses and the experience in its entirety. To reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials, RCHOG must come to a place where the church understands and lives out the idea that “Experience matters.”<sup>19</sup> Taking the concept of being a storytelling church and combining it with a focus on the experiential means that God's story must be told in ways that engage all of the senses, and this experience also invites people to participate in the story.

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<sup>19</sup> Carey, “The Multiple Intelligences as Holistic Spiritual Formation in Youth Ministry,” 33.



Focusing on the experiential in worship services means more than just adding videos and enhancing the service's images and music. To create an experience that reaches, engages, and connects with Zillennials in ways that evangelize and disciple, an overarching view of experience must be explored and examined for every event. This will mean, at first, much more planning. To create a cohesive experience in which all pieces work together to tell the story and invite others to participate, all aspects of a worship service must be on the same page and must inform and support each other.

The Church of God (Anderson, IN) takes great pride in the fact that we sing our theology; this can help the experience of worship. The songs that are sung during worship should be chosen to connect with the sermon and the aspect of God's story being focused on during that worship service. This should also be the case for any videos, readings, skits, testimonies, or other worship service aspects. From the beginning to the end of the worship, services should be focused on inviting those in service to participate in God's story.

This will result in worship services looking differently from how they currently do at RCHOG. The traditional sermon time will more than likely not always be the same amount of time that it is presently; sermons will not always be taught in one block. Instead, other aspects will be used in tandem with what would be seen as traditional preaching time to make the entire service and experiential sermon focused on telling part of God's story and how we intersect with the story in everyday life.

Worship services will also need to engage more of the senses than they currently do at RCHOG if they will succeed in creating an experiential storytelling experience that will reach, connect, and engage with Zillennials. In general, the church has not offered an

experience that Zillennials decide to choose over other activities, including sleeping in, on a Sunday morning.<sup>20</sup> RCHOG in creating experientially designed events can change this trend among Zillennials in the Broad Top Area. RCHOG worship services will need to engage the sense of touch and feel; this is currently not being done.

The senses of taste and smell will also need to be addressed and explored. When speaking about the people of Israel being in the land of milk and honey, honey sticks could be handed out before service. During the worship service, the entire community could taste honey while the pastor or some other teacher guides the congregation in thinking about what that image of the land of milk and honey would have tasted like to the people of Israel in the wilderness. This may mean baking bread during service in the sanctuary with a bread machine before and during service and then as a community eating the bread together. This also could be as simple as buying different air fresheners of varying scents to be used in conjunction with what is being taught. If the story of the Magi is being told and explored during worship, then make the church smell of Frankincense or Myrrh using essential oil diffusers. Like other aspects of worship, the sense of taste and smell can be engaged and utilized to create and experience God's story, but it takes planning and imagination.

A change of setting can be powerful in creating an experience. If there is a class looking at a story of Jesus involving a lake, perhaps having that class by the lake would give a more significant experience. After spending an afternoon learning the basics of sailing on a small sailboat and learning about Jesus in this setting, my own perspective on the Bible stories involving boats on the sea will never be the same. Perhaps if a sermon is

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<sup>20</sup> Martinez, "Young Adults Spirituality," 170.

focused on one of these boat passages, part of the teaching can be done on the lake from a boat using video in service. Instead of having a men's group meet inside for a time of Bible study, they could meet around a fire and share stories from the Bible as well as from their own lives. RCHOG has its shares of mountains within a short distance, perhaps teaching about Moses going up the mountain from atop one of these. Again, to create experiences using a change of setting will require planning and imagination, but it can be easily done.

### *Participatory*

Participation cannot be overlooked in the endeavor to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials. A storytelling culture at RCHOG will be impossible if it is not participatory. Sweet argues that in today's culture, people "will participate first and then discern the meaning of faith. Truths about Christ must first be "lived" before they can be embraced."<sup>21</sup> A heightened focus on participation will require some adjustments in other operations and structures for RCHOG.

If the church is going to reach, connected, and engage with Zillennials in the Broad Top area, then RCHOG will need to allow for more participation of Zillennials. The current church leadership will need to deliberately involve more Zillennials in the leadership of the church. This will be challenging because in some conversations, current leaders, when discussing individuals for leadership, view Zillennials as disqualified for leadership because "they are not ready for it yet." The irony in these conversations is that

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<sup>21</sup> Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 215.

the current leaders will recount how they were entrusted with leadership positions in the church while in their twenties and thirties when they “were not ready for it.” Setran urges the church that Zillennials “must be entrusted with genuine responsibility to serve the ministry and mend the broken places of the world.”<sup>22</sup> Ted Doering argues that

Zillennials:

want to be involved. But if your response to them is to either drown them out because they aren't experienced enough or only tell them why their idea is bad, you will be tearing down the next generation of the Church. Channel their energy. I am not saying that you should simply agree with everything they suggest, but find places for Millennials to lead. Give them opportunities to fail.<sup>23</sup>

RCHOG will need to focus on developing Zillennials leaders by giving leadership opportunities and mentoring them into more significant leadership roles. This will require that the bylaws and policy manual of RCHOG be updated to allow for more leaders to be a part of ministry teams so that new leaders can be developed through participating in the leadership of RCHOG.

One of the aspects of participation that will be most jarring to some of the current leaders of RCHOG is that real participation lets loose of control. Sweet contends, “The best participation is not controlled. People are tired of control. They want the real thing in all of its messiness, and they expect real participation in the real thing themselves.”<sup>24</sup> This is where the biblical idea of the “priesthood of all believers” should shine but does not always. Zillennials desire participation; they want to be invited to take part in decisions

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<sup>22</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Doering and Doering, *Myth of the Millennial: Connecting Generations in the Church*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 134.

and leadership. They have “something vital to contribute,”<sup>25</sup> and RCHOG should treat them as such.

Spiritual disciplines will be a place that will most easily adapt to be more participatory. Bible study at RCHOG, both in Wednesday night services and other classes offered, are participatory through the encouragement of discussion. These venues can become places where people are encouraged to share stories, explore, and participate in God’s story. Mentoring is another spiritual discipline in which participation can be maximized through the give and take nature of that sort of relationship. Service naturally demands participation, and sharing stories of service and participation in diverse settings will also encourage greater involvement in RCHOG. Through spiritual disciplines, greater participation in the community of RCHOG and the Broad Top Area communities can be achieved, which will assist in reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials in the Broad Top Area.

The most challenging paradigm shift in participation for RCHOG will be in how participation will be engaged in during the Sunday morning sermon. RCHOG will need to embrace more interactive “sermon time” during its Sunday morning worship service if it is going to adopt the EPIC framework. There will have to be a change from information being the sermon's content and point to interaction being the sermon's content and point.<sup>26</sup> This will mean that during RCHOG worship services, there is no room for the rhetorical. During the sermon, some Sundays may be short breakout

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<sup>25</sup> Brother John Of Taize, “A Spiritual Crossroads of Europe: The Taize Community’s Adventure with the Young,” in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James Heft, Abrahamic Dialogues Series 6 (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 96.

<sup>26</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 257.

sessions in which individuals in person discuss in small groups, and those online discuss in the online chat the story and passage discussed. It may mean that the preacher will invite questions from the congregation and the online viewers. At other times, the sermon may be preached through several different people, using storytelling, or more specifically, giving a testimony. The community should be as involved in the preaching of the sermon as the preacher. Sermons of the future will be a collaborative endeavor of the preacher and the people of RCHOG.<sup>27</sup>

A challenge to making preaching interactive will be there are now people online that will have to be considered in exploring participation. The challenge will be to include online viewers in the service. This will mean that there will need to be individuals in the church who deliberately engage viewers on Facebook and YouTube in chat. It will also mean that if there are times during the service that the physical congregation is asked to participate, RCHOG will also need to find avenues for the digital congregation to participate. This may be as simple as having the teacher or preacher have a computer with chat to both social media platforms open to “hear” from the digital congregation. The RCHOG can invite participation by asking those who are part of the digital congregation to participate in the worship service by praying, reading scripture, or sharing a story via zoom or another teleconference program.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 248.

*Image-rich application implications*

The shift for RCHOG in all of its ministry to be image-rich may not seem like a large one, but there will have to be a paradigm shift in how things are thought through from the perspective of how images, visuals, video, audio, stories, and metaphors are used. The pastor and the different leadership of RCHOG will have to deliberately think about how images are used together to invite people into participation with God's story. We have already seen that “Postmodern culture is image-driven.”<sup>28</sup> If RCHOG is to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials, then it will need to learn to use the language of images in a comprehensive manner. Like any language, images and their use have their own “grammar,” using images haphazardly and thoughtlessly would be similar to writing something that is completely unintelligible and could do more harm than good.

The way that the use of story might be introduced at RCHOG to create a storytelling culture has already been discussed. The use of more visual images in the ministry of RCHOG will have to be planned to work together with the storytelling culture the church is introducing. RCHOG needs to have clarity in how it uses images and implements an image-rich mentality to its ministry. Barna has found that Zillennials “have a strong preference for unambiguous visual clarity.”<sup>29</sup> Being image-rich is not the same as being image-inundated. The images that are used must tie together with other aspects of the story of God being presented. Being image-rich will, at times, be more about what images are not used than what images are used. Sweet argues that “Metaphors

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<sup>28</sup> Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Barna Group, *Making Space*, 83.

are not the sermon's seasoning; they are the very meat of the sermon itself, and they are the mediators that carry the incarnational story of Jesus."<sup>30</sup> This could be taken a step further; images<sup>31</sup> are not the seasoning of the church's evangelism and discipleship process; they are the meat of it.

To become image-rich in its ministry, RCHOG will need to equip, enable, and unleash individuals in the church to assist with this endeavor. This will also mean that the planning of events such as worship services and classes will be much more collaborative than they currently are. RCHOG will need to learn to turn participants loose and give them creative freedom to use images in the church's ministry.<sup>32</sup> This may mean that the church will need to recruit, equip, and unleash "imagesmiths" as integral parts of RCHOG leadership to envision and implement the use of imagery in the church's ministry.<sup>33</sup> This may also mean that the church will enlist participants to be "VJs" or visual jockeys during worship services, classes, or other ministry events to help create an image-rich environment.<sup>34</sup>

For the roles of "imagesmith" and "VJ," Zillennials would be uniquely suited. Zillennials can navigate easily in the realm of image, story, and metaphor. They are also digital natives. That also makes them suited to the ministry roles that RCHOG will need to create to become image-rich in its ministry. Along with creating new leadership roles,

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<sup>30</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Here by images we meaning images, stories, and metaphors. Because all images are stories and metaphors.

<sup>32</sup> Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm For Preaching*, 249.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.



there will also need to be an investment in equipment related to creating image-rich experiences. This may include several projectors that can be used at the same time during the worship service. At least one additional camera will be needed to create a better image-rich online experience. Other computers may be required to run these devices if they cannot be run from the computers currently used at RCHOG.

### *Connective*

The connective aspect of the EPIC framework holds everything together. It is of utmost importance for RCHOG to implement connective elements into the church's overall ministry. As was already noted in chapter five, aspects of the connective element may blur with other EPIC framework elements; this seems to be the case with participation, especially. As shown in the previous chapter, the EPIC framework's connective element is especially important to Zillennials. Zillennials want connections; they want relationships; this is something that the church must deliberately offer them.

RCHOG will need to deliberately make itself a third place. This can be done at the physical facility of RCHOG by finding ways to better utilize the building for the community. This could be achieved by having more socially and connectivity focused activities at the church, perhaps a regular movie night designed to then have a discussion afterward in smaller groups. Perhaps having a “game night” for the community. This might also look like RCHOG doing activities together such as going hiking, camping trips together, having campfire meetings, lake days, or snow tubing outings together. Service is another avenue for creating connections; through offering service opportunities

for the community, the participants in that service would be more connected to those they serve with and the community that is being served.

The space for connections to be made must deliberately be created, but the connections themselves must also be organic. One cannot force relationships on people, but one can encourage them. RCHOG will also have to change some of its conceptions of how ministry is done and change the way it says things. In chapter five, the need for a prepositional change was stated. RCHOG needs to, as Sweet argues, switch from using the word *for* to using the word *with* in all ministry areas. There may not sound like a significant difference between the idea of “doing ministry for/to the poor” and “doing ministry with the poor.” The first phrase creates hierarchies and divisions, while the second version is much more participatory and connective. The church must be connective if it is to invite others into participating in the story of God.

One of the best ways to foster connectivity in relationships is through the creation of mentoring programs. If RCHOG is to allow greater participation of Zillennials in leadership, and if there are concerns about the Zillennials as leadership material, mentoring relationships could develop the leaders; this would also create space for connectivity in the church. One of the concrete ways this could be achieved is by having each team have a non-voting member who is a Zillennial, mentored by one of the team members through regular one-on-one meetings. This would not only serve as leadership development, but also discipleship. There must be flexibility and adaptability in this aspect of implementation as mentoring relationships that are artificial do not work. This would have to be encouraged and not forced for both the mentor and the Zillennial being mentored. This might best be achieved by asking everyone on ministry teams at RCHOG

to think about mentoring someone younger in the church for leadership positions based on the connections they already have. Zillennials put on those teams would then already, in theory, have someone that they are already connected with for a mentoring relationship.

One area of creating connections that is more challenging highlighted by the pandemic, is connecting and being a connective church when you are not meeting in person. Because of this, RCHOG will need to ensure that those who connect with RCHOG virtually are also offered similar connective opportunities as those who physically attend the church. This has been done by having someone from the leadership be a part of the chat online during the worship service. This is one area that the investment in a few laptops could be beneficial. One of the individuals who currently fulfills the virtual host's role during worship meetings has commented about how it is much easier to do this from a laptop than from a phone. This virtual host would keep the conversation going on the chat and help the teacher or preacher keep connected with the virtual audience without overwhelming the preacher/teacher with all of the chat. If there is a question that needs to be asked, the virtual host can help the preacher/teacher know, and they can then address it in response. Also, the people leading in worship and or Bible study will need to be reminded that there are people engaged in the event that are not physically present to address them by looking into the camera and addressing those at home. This is one more way that having people whose assigned role is to oversee the interaction online can help the pastor to avoid neglecting those online in favor of those in person. Virtual church's importance may become more prevalent, and these connectivity issues should not be overlooked at RCHOG.

## Final Conclusions

One of the most significant admissions in this conclusion must be that things will more than likely look very different as things are implemented. There will be a lot of experimentation and adaptation of the methods and ideas given in this paper before RCHOG can completely implement this paper's recommendations. More research will need to be done as the church continues to adapt the timeless and timely gospel to the changing times. It must also be noted that just because the church finds a method and framework effective for reaching, connecting, and engaging any group of people does not mean that it will indefinitely be effective.

RCHOG will need to make adjustments to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials in the Broad Top area. This paper has concluded that one of the ways that RCHOG can adjust that will result in better reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials is through a storytelling culture. By focusing on telling the story of God and inviting people to participate in that story, RCHOG will effectively evangelize and disciple its participants. It will also be enabled to reach, connect, and engage Zillennials as well. As has been noted, the change to a storytelling church culture is not a simple change and will only happen through the deliberate choice of RCHOG to make this cultural shift.

The EPIC framework is central to creating a storytelling culture at RCHOG; it has also been shown to be an avenue for better reaching, connecting, and engaging Zillennials. This paper has attempted to show some areas that can serve as a starting point to RCHOG using the EPIC framework in every aspect of the church's ministry to better invite people into the story of God through experience, participation, image, and connections. Many of these recommendations will require a change in how things are

done at the church and much more planning ahead of time, but they are needed adjustments if RCHOG is to implement the EPIC framework.

Indeed, these adjustments will only be the beginning of a journey that RCHOG will need to continue to reach, connect, and engage Millennials and the generations that will follow them. As RCHOG embraces a storytelling church culture, it will be important that the way it invites people into the participation of God's story must not become cemented and stagnant, but must always be ready and open to adaptation and innovation. While the various recommendations may work best now for RCHOG for implementing the EPIC framework, continued work will need to be done. It's not the end all be all, but it is the place to begin.

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