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The Sobramesa Dinner Group: Discipline Boomers in Active Adult Living Communities

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THE SOBREMESA DINNER GROUP:
DISCIPLING BOOMERS IN ACTIVE ADULT LIVING COMMUNITIES

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

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

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DEDICATION

To my wonderful partner in ministry and life, Loida. You are the greatest gift that God could have ever brought me. I am blessed to share with you the joys of marriage, the challenges of family and the passions of ministry.

To my children; Maysson, Christina and Jonathan. My prayer for you all is that you never stop growing.

To my parents John, Sharon, Joe and Debbie. Thank you for always encouraging me to continue to work through life's roadblocks.

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This project could have never been completed without the loving and supportive community of Lake Deaton United Methodist Church. I do feel blessed to be one of your pastors and have found that life is better at the Lake! I thank Len Sweet for your undiminished commitment to your students, relentlessly calling us to step into our call to be the Ischarians that our world needs today. Specifically, I want to thank Debbie Divine, Jonathan Baker and Jonathan Divine for your hours and hours of volunteer editing. I also thank my co-pastors Loida Divine and Kristyne Young for your continued support on this project and your help in working through so many of my wild thoughts and crazy ideas. You all have helped make this paper legible. And, finally, I give special thanks to Rochelle Deans, you took my work and quite literally moved it into another stratosphere of presentability.

EPIGRAPH

*So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart,
for God approves of this!*

Ecclesiastes 9:7

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ABSTRACT

Over the next 25 years, the American Church will be in a unique position to impact the eternity of almost 77 million people. As the Baby Boomer population moves into the third age of life, the church has the opportunity to reintroduce this population to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Within this large mission field is the added dimension of a large migration of retired and semi-retired people into Active Adult Living Communities (AALCs). While AALCs represent the largest-growing urban segment of the USA, the church is doing little to evangelize these communities. What the church does for these adults over the next fifteen to twenty years can have an eternal impact that is beyond measure as well as learn missional wisdom to reach other populations for decades.

This dissertation examines ways to effectively share the gospel with post-Christian populations in AALCs. Section One examines the demographics of the Boomer population and the uniqueness of the AALC and introduces a prospective tool that can be used in reaching this population: The Dinner Church. Section Two looks at various ways the church is reaching this population and their current impact. This section also explains the Dinner Church model and its potential as an effective tool for the AALC. Section Three unpacks the Dinner Church model to fully understand its effectiveness in evangelism today and where it would be ineffective in its use within the AALC. Section Four describes the artifact which is composed of two elements: 1) a book that introduces prospective participants into this Dinner Church model, and 2) an app that walks a new Sobremesa Dinner Group through their first four weeks. Section Five describes the specifications for both elements of the artifact. Section Six summarizes the value of my learning from the dissertation and potential for future research.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

I had almost stopped reacting to the comment. Over the six years that our congregation has been in existence, I have heard it so many times that I am usually able to ignore it. Not this time. This was my Bishop giving me the same old comment: “You should be excited about your congregation, you’re one of the luckiest pastors in our whole denomination.” Why am I so lucky? Why would I be getting comments like this? And why do I cringe every time the comment comes? That’s what this paper and my research is about. But before I am able to address these questions, I first have to provide some foundational background.

I am the founding pastor of a six-year-old congregation located within The Villages, Florida that started as a second campus of a large United Methodist Church. The Villages is the largest Active Adult Living Community (AALC) in the world and our congregation has experienced exponential growth each year of our existence. Lake Deaton UMC originally started as a campus of New Covenant UMC and recently launched as a new congregation. Over our six-year history, Lake Deaton UMC has grown from 153 people at our public launch in February 2014 to having hit 1,200 in worship within months of opening our first building in the spring of 2019.¹ In a denomination where over 80% of our churches are in decline,² it is wonderful to be part of a growing

¹ Attendance numbers are based on Lake Deaton United Methodist Church’s average worship attendance for its weekend services, which currently take place on Saturday at 5:00 pm, Sunday at 9:00 am and 10:30 am.

² This number was heard by the author during a lecture attended, but could not be verified. I did take the 83 congregations within my North Central Distrist of the Florida Conference and found that over a ten-year period our distrist has dropped by 21% AWA and that 79% of our congregations are in decline. https://tools.flumc.org/congregational_snapshot.asp

congregation. But there is a shadow side to our church's growth and, while many often want to skim over or outright ignore this negative side, history shows that if not addressed, Lake Deaton will be struggling, like the other 80% of United Methodist Churches, within a decade or less. Lake Deaton UMC, like almost all denominational congregations located in AALCs, has experienced fast growth due to the rapid increase of Baby Boomers moving into the communities where they are located. While this growth is wonderful, demographic research reveals that with each new year, the percentage of AALC residents who belong to a Christian church of any denominational affiliation is rapidly decreasing. As of spring 2020, close to 70% of the people who live in The Villages, while often identifying a denominational affiliation, are not active in any congregation and, in fact, have left the church.³ As the number of post-Christians continues to grow, and people moving into AALCs like The Villages begins to diminish, churches like Lake Deaton will find it hard to support the buildings and structures created during their boom years.

Not only is the church's future vitality at stake, but the missional mandate to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world calls the church to reach and develop relationships with a vast and rapidly growing, even if short-lived, population of people we cannot ignore. What the American church does over the next ten years can have consequences to the eternity of the 77 million Boomer Americans,⁴ but the church has to act now. To fully understand the opportunity that is available for the church

³ "People View Demographic Report," *Missioninsite*, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://peopleview.missioninsite.com/app/#/map/175847/reporting-demographics>.

⁴ Rhonda Randall, "Baby Boomers' Defining Characteristics Could Help Them Redefine Aging in America," *HuffPost*, June 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rhonda-l-randall-do/baby-boomers-redefining-aging_b_1448949.html.

in reaching this significant population, as well as the potential roadblocks in trying to re-evangelize possibly the largest group of “Dones”⁵ within North America, it becomes necessary explore several elements: First, the demographic characteristics of the newly retired Baby Boomer who is moving into places like The Villages; second, the nature of AALCs; and third, the obstacles to doing outwardly focused ministry within an AALC.

The New Lost Generation

January 1, 1946 launched one of the greatest demographic changes in all of American history. As World War II ended, America entered a new time of prosperity and mobility that caused a nation that had been demographically stagnant for generations to face dramatic changes. Many, if not most, of these cultural changes came about through the massive baby boom that brought almost 77 million new lives into the world between 1946 and 1964. Historian Steve Gillon has called this “the single greatest demographic event in U.S. history.”⁶ This generation, called “the Baby Boomer” (or simply “Boomer”) generation, has changed almost everything in American culture. Speaking derisively from his perspective as a member of Generation X, Rich Cohen gives this description of the Boomer generation:

We grew up in the world and mind of the baby-boomers simply because there were so many of them. They were the biggest, easiest, most free-spending market the planet had ever known. What they wanted filled the shelves and what fills the shelves is our history. They wanted to dance so we had rock ‘n’ roll. They wanted

⁵ Thom Schultz, “The Rise of the Dones,” *Holy Soup* (blog), November 12, 2014, <https://holysoup.com/the-rise-of-the-dones/>. Schultz gives a wonderful description of dones: “John had come to a long-considered, thoughtful decision. He said, ‘I’m just done. I’m done with church.’ John is one in a growing multitude of ex-members. They’re sometimes called the de-churched. They have not abandoned their faith. They have not joined the also-growing legion of those with no religious affiliation—often called the Nones. Rather, John has joined the Dones.”

⁶ Daniel R. Massey, “Developing a New Boomer-Mandated Ministry Paradigm for Adults over Fifty” (D.Min. diss., Azusa Pacific University, 2013), ProQuest.

to open their minds, so we had LSD. They did not want to go to war so that was it for the draft.⁷

An urban trend called the AALC launched in the early 1960s, but as the Boomer generation moves into retirement, these communities have transformed into a mass migration.

Alongside this demographic migration for Boomers is a massive identity shift within the Church. The church of the early 21st century finds itself in a liminal period of rapid transition from an age of Christendom into a new, “postmodern” future. While this shift occurs, the church continues to live under the old paradigm and struggle with change around them. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, in their groundbreaking book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, write: “While the Christendom story no longer defines Western culture, it still remains the primary definer of the church’s self-understanding in almost every Western nation, including and perhaps especially the United States.”⁸ This shift is just part of a rapid decline in church membership and participation that started in the last quarter of the 20th century. While this decline is unabashedly evident in the generations that follow the Boomer generation, it is of missional importance to realize that it is also having a devastating impact upon Boomers. Research by the Barna Group reveals that as of 2017, from a sampling of Americans who still considered themselves as affiliated with a church, 38% were classified as *churched* (having attended a church service in the past seven days, not including a special event such as a wedding or a funeral), 43% were classified as *unchurched* (having not attended a church service in the

⁷ Rich Cohen, “Why Generation X Might Be Our Last, Best Hope,” *Vanity Fair*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/08/why-generation-x-might-be-our-last-best-hope>.

⁸ 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), 21.

past six months, not including a special event such as a wedding or a funeral), and 34% were classified as *dechurched* (formerly either very, somewhat, or minimally active churchgoers, but have not attended a church service in the past six months, excluding a special event such as a wedding or a funeral).⁹ These statistics are significant, as they represent people who still consider themselves affiliated with the church, and these statistics stay consistent when moving into an AALC.¹⁰

While this should be a cause for alarm, most churches have not been able to make the transition to reach out to this (or any other) generation with the gospel message. This is especially true within AALCs, where often mainline denominational churches are in a time of rapid growth even as the percentage of Dones in their communities increases. I believe two problems exist within both the global church as well as local churches that have prevented us from making evangelistic inroads into the Boomer population. The first problem has been the total lack of priority found within the church to reach out to the Boomer generation evangelistically and the second has been local restraints placed on churches residing within AALCs like The Villages that hinder their evangelist efforts. In the post-WWI period of the '20s and '30s, Gertrude Stein was credited with coining the phrase, “the lost generation,” to refer to the young servicemen who roamed Europe and the US after the war with no noticeable ambition for a future.¹¹ We can place this Boomer generation within the same category, as a “new” lost generation, within which the church

⁹ “Church Attendance Trends Around the Country,” Barna Research Group, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

¹⁰ “The ReligiousInsite Report 2017,” MissionInsite, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://peopleview.missioninsite.com/app/#/welcome/demographics/step-4>.

¹¹ Gertrude Stein, quoted in Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast: The Restored Edition* (New York: Scribners, 1992), 61.

has a small window of opportunity to reach with the radical and life-changing love of Christ. Over the next several pages I would like to engage this unique church opportunity and offer some preliminary ideas on how the church, using academic research and methods that have been introduced in the past twenty years, can reverse this trend and, in so doing, help grow the Kingdom of God with potentially millions of Boomers who, for the most part, are living in the last 20 to 30 years of their lives. To do this first we need to get a deeper understanding of the nature of this new lost generation. We then need to understand the uniqueness of AALCs and their impact on both the Boomers who migrate to these communities and the churches ministering within them. Finally, we need to examine the potential means, methods, and obstacles present to begin to leverage these congregations into becoming the missional communities God created them to be.

Understanding the Boomer

While 2011 may not have seemed like a momentous year for many, it marked the beginning of what has become known to many as the “death tsunami.”¹² Lovett Weems created this term to refer to the increasing number of deaths that have begun because of the aging Boomer generation. Weems states that, “The total number of deaths each year is predicted to go up every year until 2050 as Boomers pass away.”¹³ Pew Research indicates that, beginning in January 2011, “Every day for the next nineteen years, ten thousand more people will cross that threshold”¹⁴ of 65, considered the normal age of

¹² Lovett H. Weems, “The Coming Death Tsunami,” *Ministry Matters*, October 5, 2011, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1868/the-coming-death-tsunami>.

¹³ Weems, “The Coming Death Tsunami.”

¹⁴ Massey. “Developing a New Boomer-Mandated Ministry Paradigm for Adults over Fifty,” 3.

retirement in North America. Dr. Amanda Brian says, “Baby Boomers will soon comprise the largest cohort of senior citizens in American history, and as sociologists and gerontologists have pointed out, they have already had a tremendous impact upon social and cultural institutions in the United States.”¹⁵ This unprecedented rise in the American retirement landscape calls for a new appreciation of the Boomer generation that is causing the change.

To begin to understand the Boomer generation, we must acknowledge that this is a *generation of firsts*. Boomers are the first generation to be considered consumerist; they are the first leisure generation; they are the first generation to accumulate wealth; and they are the first generation where the majority of its members are expected to live into their eighties.¹⁶ While Boomers come from all demographic segments within society, there are some characteristics that they share in common. “They are united by their disillusionment of the broken promises of the post-war euphoria and pride in their rebellious political attitude.”¹⁷ Daniel Massey, in his dissertation on ministering to the Boomer generation, gives seven other characteristics common among almost all Boomers: they have a sense of entitlement; they are more educated (28.5% have received a bachelor’s degree) than almost any other generation in history; they are cause-oriented, quality-conscious, and anti-authority; and they volunteer (on their own terms). For those Boomers who are still engaged in Christian communities, they are seekers of full-service

¹⁵ Amanda M Brian, “The Faux History of The Villages, Florida,” *Southern Cultures* 20, no. 4 (2014), 62. Muse database.

¹⁶ Randall, “Baby Boomers’ Defining Characteristics Could Help Them Redefine Aging in America.”

¹⁷ Massey, “Developing a New Boomer-Mandated Ministry Paradigm for Adults over Fifty,” 15.

churches.¹⁸ These characteristics are important in understanding how the Boomer generation approaches retirement.

As more and more Boomers enter into retirement, this generation has stayed consistent with its history as a trendsetter. Amanda Brian shares, “Boomers reimagined the concept of retirement as a highly desirable and worthwhile period of life.”¹⁹ Bartling adds, “For a generation that experienced the emergence of a mass consumptive economy that made tourism, travel and leisure commonplace and accessible to the middle classes, the transition to retirement is a portentous time.”²⁰ Today, it is common for Boomers to approach retirement free from the bonds of raising children and blessed with good health and strong financial reserves. Griffin shares, “Although many of them continue to work, there has been a shift of focus from their children to themselves, and they are enjoying what has come to be known as ‘third age.’”²¹ Unlike any generation before them, Boomers approach retirement as a time to grow, explore, and have fun. They commonly view themselves as a sandwich generation, as many still have parents living as well as their children. Griffin adds, “This is a generation that intends to continue to make its mark in the world for many years to come.”²² In one research session I led, a gentleman

¹⁸ Massey, “Developing a New Boomer-Mandated Ministry Paradigm for Adults over Fifty,” 17-19.

¹⁹ Brian, “The Faux History of The Villages, Florida,” 62.

²⁰ Hugh Bartling, “Tourism as Everyday Life: An Inquiry into The Villages, Florida,” *Tourism Geographies* 8, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 380–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680600922070>.

²¹ Griffin, “Boom! The Babies Have Left the Room,” 11.

²² Griffin, “Boom! The Babies Have Left the Room,” 11.

suggested, in jest, but with a tinge of truthfulness, “we are like teenagers who have no parental discipline and unlimited financial resources.”²³

The Great Migration

Out of this newfound freedom, a migration has begun that is unlike any migration in history—a migration of 55+ adults moving into adult living communities scattered predominantly throughout the American Sun Belt, stretching from Florida to Arizona. Let us now turn our attention to this new utopia that many are seeking as they enter into their “leisure years.”

A Short History of AALCs

Retired Americans have been flocking to the southern states since the end of the 19th century. Because of the straight trainline route for the Eastern Gilded Elite and a marketing campaign extolling Florida as the fountain of youth, the Sun State became a common destination for retired adults. Judith Trolander says, “Ever since the late nineteenth century, Florida has been the leading destination for snowbirds. The elite began the trend. Florida identified itself with the Fountain of Youth legend and promoted the belief ‘that nature’s rejuvenating powers existed in their purest form in Florida.’”²⁴ Into the mid-20th century, Florida developed as a destination for aging Americans with a desire to seek the healthy environment of the southern climate. Through the World War II crisis, Florida was predominantly a place to come and purchase mobile homes in

²³ This comment was made during a field research group on April 17, 2019.

²⁴ Judith Ann Trolander, “Age 55 or Better: Active Adult Communities and City Planning,” *Journal of Urban History* 37, no. 6 (November 1, 2011), 953, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144211418435>.

communities that were rich in amenities. “By the 1930s, Florida trailer parks, designed to attract retired snowbirds, were providing an important precedent for age-restricted, active adult communities. The Kiwanis Club of Bradenton, FL, began its trailer park in 1936 as a means of attracting tourists.”²⁵ Because of a series of fraud and bad land deals, the post-war years of the 1950s saw a rise in retirement to Arizona with a development called Youngstown. Unlike the predominantly trailer park environment of Florida, Youngstown was developed around constructed homes at an affordable cost. By the end of the 1950s, an Arizona developer, Del Webb, combined the durability of the developed home with the amenities of the Florida trailer parks and launched the first major AALC, Del Webb’s Sun City, outside of Phoenix. Trolander shows how these communities grew:

The Webb corporation deserves major credit for promoting the concept of golf course housing developments. Webb repeatedly used that concept in future communities. Other developers also used the concept in both “active retirement” and intergenerational communities. In fact, between 1972 and 1984, over a thousand of these kinds of residential golf course communities were built.²⁶

In 1988, a major bill was passed in Congress, called the Fair Housing Act, that allowed age-restricted communities to prohibit anyone under the age of nineteen from living within. This allowed an even greater influx of people to move into these destinations that became increasingly focused on the creation of a fantasy world of retired bliss.

The most successful of all of these retirement communities is located in central Florida in a place called The Villages. Combining the advances of places like the Del Webb communities with the appeal of the entertainment industry of central Florida, The

²⁵ Trolander, “Age 55 or Better,” 954.

²⁶ Trolander, “Age 55 or Better,” 957.

Villages created a fantasy retirement community where retirees could live within a created world 24 hours a day, seven days a week. “Envisioned by its founders as a ‘Disney World for Active Retirees,’ The Villages both emulates and expands upon the dominant model of postwar American retirement urbanism originated in Del Webb’s Sun City of the early 1960s.”²⁷ The Villages has grown to a community of over 200,000 people during January through March—almost five times larger than other large AALCs. A large part of its appeal is the combination of massive amounts of whatever a person needs, with the feel of a small town. Simpson says, “At the intersection of demographic aging on the one hand, and the development logics of late-capitalism on the other, The Villages is an experiment in scalar elasticity—realizing a settlement that functions simultaneously as a ‘village’ in the countryside and as a metropolitan Centre for the young-old.”²⁸ It is interesting to note that, in my first few years of launching our new congregation, one of our leaders continually told me that we would not make inroads into reaching people within The Villages until we firmly understood that people who move into The Villages “do not come to The Villages to buy a home, but move into The Villages to buy a lifestyle.”²⁹ It is within this environment that I am working to develop a model for connecting with Boomers who have left the church. To deeper understand the problem with this mission, we will describe the characteristics of the person who chooses the “Villages lifestyle.”

²⁷ Deane Simpson, “The Villages, Florida: Small-Town Metropolitanism and the ‘Middle of Nowhere,’” *Architectural Design* 86, no. 4 (August 7, 2016): 86–91, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2072>.

²⁸ Simpton, “The Villages, Florida,” 88.

²⁹ During a Finance Committee meeting at our church on June 18, 2020, Randy Rimington, our Finance Chairperson, shared this quote.

People who Move into AALCs

While active living communities are not the largest urban segment in the U.S., they are the fastest growing. Research conducted in 2011 suggests, “Many expect ‘the active adult retirement community business to account for between 20 and 30 percent of all housing by the year 2020.’ Active adult communities are an ‘antidote to negative stereotypes of older age as a period of decline in physical and social competencies.’”³⁰ Who are the people who chose to move into these new lifestyles? Historically, while people have tended to remain close to “home” in retirement, “Research by the Del Webb company has ‘indicated that more than 80 percent of people prefer to retire close to home, near family, friends, and other longtime personal and professional ties.’”³¹ Advances in travel and general mobility are changing this statistic. Not only are people moving greater distances to become part of a community that fits their lifestyle, they are also changing demographically in many ways. For example, “Different age cohorts within the active adult market are likely to have different needs and preferences... The active adult market is generally considered to encompass those aged 55 to 74; outlooks and needs vary among those aged 55 to 59, 60-64, 65-69, and 70 to 74.”³² The newly retired, and those contemplating retirement, Boomers that make up the current and future crop of AALCs, represent the demographics of their generation well. One significant

³⁰ Donald Bernstein, Marshall Ottenfeld, and Carl Witte, “Active Adult Communities: A Development of Hypotheses Regarding Consumer Attitudes and Preferences,” *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal; Arden* 15, no. 2 (2011): 151–64, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/886554095/abstract/D336FEC19E514BB9PQ/1>.

³¹ Bernstein, Ottenfeld, and Witte, “Active Adult Communities,” 154.

³² Bernstein, Ottenfeld, and Witte, “Active Adult Communities,” 154.

thing is this migration is demographically very narrow rather than all-encompassing in nature. Simpson says,

Just as the sheer scale of The Villages is unprecedented, so too is its demographic singularity. Those aged between 60 and 85 years constitute 85.7 per cent of the population, 98.3 per cent are of white European ethnic descent, and 80.1 per cent of households are married couples. Paradoxically, this leads to a simulated form of expanded urban scale as a result of the spatial concentration of such a homogeneous demographic group.³³

Simpson and others have shown that the majority of new homeowners in places like The Villages are typically between the ages of 55 and 75. Within our congregation, we find that the majority of people will tend to move as they are reaching the fourth age of life (83 to 85 years of age). Thus, our ministry focus has a necessity to center on those people living within their “third age” of life, or Boomers.

Implications for the Church

Before we conclude this section on the advance and influence of the AALC, we need to examine some of the significant implications these communities and, more importantly, the people who live within them, have on the ministry of the church. A person who chooses the lifestyle of an AALC is often a person who desires to live life to the fullest, even into their retirement. One of the attractions of AALCs is a “philosophy reflecting the cultural value of staying active into old age.”³⁴ Boomers often have “priorities different from established residents, in that they continued to work full or part

³³ Simpton, “The Villages, Florida,” 89.

³⁴ Erin G. Roth et al., “Baby Boomers in an Active Adult Retirement Community: Comity Interrupted,” *The Gerontologist* 52, no. 2 (2012): 189–198, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr155>.

time, support young adult children, or provide parent care.”³⁵ These trends toward active lives are evidenced in their level of entertainment, travel, and fitness. Combined with the ever-growing number of Boomers who continue to work at some level, even after moving into these communities, a trend is revealed in the church of a declining trajectory of volunteerism within the mainline denominational churches within these communities. Kim Griffin shows, across all Boomer congregations, that, “Volunteering at churches has shifted from 28% in 1991 to 18% in 2011.”³⁶ While this reduction in the volunteer force is taking place in most congregations within active adult communities, churches continue to have volunteers because of the steady increase of new members from Christians moving into the area.

Another important factor for congregations within these communities are the restrictions placed upon them from the Homeowners Association, which do not look as favorably upon churches as they once did. This makes it harder for churches to get an inroad into the community. However, this can also be liberating, as we have moved beyond a Christendom model of church. While these hindrances are present within these communities, I believe that we are in a day when the church can have a monumental impact on the lives of literally millions of Boomer “post-Christians” who reside in these communities. To do this, though, the church will have to develop new tools, strategies, and models for doing ministry into the future.

³⁵ Roth et al., “Baby Boomers in an Active Adult Retirement Community,” 194.

³⁶ Griffin, “Boom! The Babies Have Left the Room,” 12.

Missional Tools for Evangelism

To address the problem of the inability of the mainline denomination to evangelize AALCs, we need to first explore the reasons behind the church failing in its missional task. Then we need to develop a list of tools that can be used in transforming the culture of the church into a missional congregation.

Issues Limiting the Mission of the Church

To understand what needs to happen for the church to regain its missional momentum in the future, we need to comprehend the issues that limit the church from having a mission impact today. Three main issues stand out as major contributors to the ineffective efforts of the church in reaching our neighbors with the Gospel of Christ: first, an institutional reluctance to focus on the church's call to join God in the mission of making disciples; second, a cultural focus on the evangelization of younger demographics in America at the exclusion of Boomers; and third, the lifestyle of the active living community church member that keeps them from developing the skills and passion for such a pursuit.

There has been a slow but steady move within mainline denominational churches to focus on caring for the people within the walls of the church and serving the world through social services rather than on the evangelistic call to join God in mission to the world and make disciples. This trend is evident within my congregation, as it is within most churches I research in Boomer communities. When I came onto the staff at New Covenant UMC, where I served as a campus pastor for seven years, I was impressed that this congregation had more outreach ministries than any church I have ever served. This

is something that brings me pride, but I came to realize that all the outreach ministry was of a service nature. From soup kitchens, to crop gleanings, to a ministry to build houses, our church had over 30 active relief ministries while, at the same time, not having one missional ministry with the evangelistic intent to share the gospel. I am grateful that, as our new campus has been launched as an independent church, we are working hard to change this trend, but change is a slow and one that is not welcomed by many of our congregation. We also discovered, consistent with other AALCs, that our congregation emphasized its desire to have chaplaincy ministries to serve the needs of people, especially as they get older. I have learned that one of the main attractions to a church within these communities is its reputation on how well it takes care of its members.

While this is a problem, an even deeper issue lies within the body of Christ that we simply do not find the evangelization of Boomers to be a priority. Literature focuses on the evangelization of younger populations, especially millennials. This is understandable, but we cannot lose sight of this generation of nearly 77 million people. It would be devastating, if not immoral, for the church to demonstrate that it is unconcerned with their eternal destiny.

Lastly, there is a reluctance within my own congregation for people to engage their neighbors with the Gospel of Christ. Even those with a passionate evangelistic heart seem reluctant to share their faith stories or invite their secular community to faith events. We have to develop a culture and tools to address all these issues. This reluctance is magnified when we understand that within our congregation most people are not active in their attendance. At Lake Deaton, about 40 percent of an average worship attendance is made up of people who come at least three times a month to worship, while

approximately 60 percent is made up of people who are averaging worship attendance of once every month and a half. In conversations with many of these attenders, I have found they perceive themselves as being active participants within our congregation despite averaging seven to nine worship experiences per year.

Tools for Evangelism

If we are going to reverse this trend, we will need to develop a new model for ministry that emphasizes and then equips the body of Christ with the tools needed to share the gospel within our AALCs. I will briefly develop two areas I believe are essential for the transformation of our communities into a missional model: first, the call to become “center set congregations;” and second, the power of the “mixed economy church” in reaching Baby Boomers, allowing it to both practice invitational evangelism as well as move away from the church to pursue fresh expressions of the church.

Many churches today, especially churches predominantly populated with Boomers, find they reside in a Christendom model of ministry that is chiefly a “bound set model” for entrance. A bound set model establishes a boundary around a community that can be entered only through the acceptance of the community norms and values. Within this model of ministry is the expectation that a person changes and then enters into community. Within our changing culture, especially with Boomers, there has developed a need to be part of community, and often community comes before belief. Speaking of moving away from a bound set model, missiologist Mario Weyers says,

We doubt very much whether one should still maintain this practice in our present era, as we agree with Bosch (1991) that we are experiencing a paradigm shift in the theology and practice of mission. Such a period requires creative solutions to

new problems, which is why we wish to explore whether one could and should rather follow a pattern of “belonging before believing.”³⁷

If a church today is going to be effective at reaching Boomers, it must move away from a bound set mentality into a center set model of church, which centers itself on basic beliefs, allowing all people to enter into the community at whatever understanding and/or faith experience they have, while continuing unabashedly to direct them toward the center. This culture welcomes all who come into the community while creatively developing a culture that pursues growth and belief. To effectively reach Boomers today, the church must develop an environment of hospitality that unconditionally welcomes all who are on their spiritual pilgrimage.

Doing ministry in predominantly Boomer communities opens the door for a congregation to explore being a mixed economy church. The mixed economy describes the church that invites and welcomes the community from a traditional invitational model of ministry. This is a legitimate task within a Boomer community, as most Boomers still have a Christian background and do not have a negative opinion of the church, rather an attitude of non-interest. Unfortunately, many, if not most, Dones are simply not going to come back into an institutional church, however hospitable and welcoming the congregation may be. Schultz says of the Dones within our community, “Will the Dones return? Not likely, according to the research. They’re done.”³⁸ The mixed economy church also realizes that many within the community will never come into the doors of a congregation, so it goes out of the church into the “third places” of the culture to develop

³⁷ 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): 8.

³⁸ Schultz, “The Rise of the Dones.”

new faith communities, often called Fresh Expressions. Ray Oldenburg describes “third places” as “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”³⁹

Often these third spaces are around the dinner table. Leonard Sweet, speaking of the table says, “The story of Christianity didn’t take shape behind pulpits or on altars or in books. No, the story of Christianity takes shape around tables, as people face one another as equals, telling stories, sharing memories, enjoying food with one another.”⁴⁰ This idea of developing a church that is outside of the norm and takes place within the third places opens the door for a Fresh Expression of the church that is experiencing rapid growth today called the Dinner Church. This Dinner Church model offers the greatest hope as the base model to reach Boomers withing AALCs.

The Dinner Church

Like many new ministry initiatives that change the course of the church, the Dinner Church Collective was created out of desperation. In 2004, the leaders of Westminster Community Church, an urban Seattle Assemblies of God congregation, came to the realization that their church had “started to decline by 14 percent per year in both attendance and finances”⁴¹ for three straight years and they could find no way to

³⁹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999), 16.

⁴⁰ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 5.

⁴¹ Verlon Fosner, *Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 3.

reverse the trend. This realization led them to ask questions such as “How would the neighbors know Jesus if he lived at our church address?” Even deeper, “How do we know our neighbors know us?”⁴² Out of these questions came a realization that they had become a consumerist church. Verlon Fosner describes the church as having cancer that was eating away at the very vitality of who they were called to be as a community of Christ-followers. His description of Westminster at that time is consistent with many congregations today:

With such a shallow mission as increasing our attendance, well-meaning Christians started to think like congregants with political power and alliances, each lobbying for dollars to be steered toward his or her favorite program—consumer Christians.⁴³

Eventually, this congregational soul searching led to a re-discovery of the early church understanding of hospitality focused on the presence of God found around the table at mealtimes.⁴⁴ Fosner and his congregation learned from the early church “that transcending social and ethnic differences by sharing meals, homes, and worship with persons of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith.”⁴⁵ Key to their discovery was the recognition that their congregational “version of Christianity consisted of a values-based list of activities rather than a behavior-based list.”⁴⁶

Out of this time of discernment, study, reflection, and prayer, the leadership of the church made a radical decision to end the way the congregation had been doing ministry

⁴² Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 4.

⁴³ Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 5.

⁴⁴ Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 17.

⁴⁵ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 5.

⁴⁶ Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 7.

for more than 80 years and live into a new pattern of what they perceived as a New Testament call to ministry on the front lines of social need, what Fosner calls “sore” neighborhoods—neighborhoods where the least and the lost are found. To transition into this new ministry focus, these leaders spent time demographically and prayerfully identifying twenty-seven “walking neighborhoods” within Seattle where they could develop local community dinners. To develop these community dinners, they learned from the early church the fundamentals necessary for developing a dinner church theology as well as practical approaches used within the church. From this study, they developed several essential items that would need to be incorporated into their dinner churches:

- Locate them in a place and at a time that would allow sinners to observe our fellowship and feel comfortable to join us.
- Provide a sumptuous feast free of charge to communicate a generous gospel.
- Assure that everyone eats together—server and served, rich and poor, saved and sinner.
- Sing Christ-focused worship music.
- Preach from the Gospels.
- Offer prayers for favor, presence, and healing; and
- Maintain a prevailing atmosphere of Christ in the room of peace, joy, healing, and laughter.⁴⁷

With their foundation in place, the first community dinner was launched at the Pike Place Market in the heart of Seattle. Today this ministry, now called Dinner Church Collective, has developed thirteen active community dinners and is continuing to work toward their goal of having a community dinner in each of the twenty-seven walking neighborhoods of Seattle. The Dinner Church Collective has also experienced exceptional growth across denominations and regions within the US. Fosner’s accurate

⁴⁷ Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 27.

observation that “The fact is that only one church out of a hundred is growing from conversion of lost people,”⁴⁸ has led to the participation of churches across North America and now into Europe to join this movement.

I became acquainted with the Dinner Church Collective in 2017 as a new trainer with the Fresh Expressions US team. Fresh Expressions is a missional movement growing across the world:

Beginning in 2004 as an initiative of the Church of England and the British Methodist Church, the movement has resulted in the birth of thousands of new communities in the UK alone and brought renewal to scores of established churches. The movement has spread to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Germany. In 2010, the movement began taking shape in the US through the vision and generosity of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and a growing number of partners committed to a new era of *missional ecumenism*, a unity around the mission of God the Father through the resurrected Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

I had joined, along with many other clergy of different denominations, with Fresh Expressions US to lead several events each year training church leaders on how to launch “fresh expressions” of faith out of their predominantly declining congregations. Fresh Expressions are “a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church.”⁵⁰ One of the key factors to the growth of the Fresh Expressions movement is that it is missional in focus while not trying to “eliminate” or “escape from” the inherited church. Through my early involvement with Fresh Expressions, I was privileged to meet Verlon and Melodee Fosner and learn of the Dinner Church Collective, recognizing almost immediately this is an easily approachable

⁴⁸ Verlon Fosner, *Welcome to Dinner Church* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 11.

⁴⁹ Fresh Expressions, accessed December 15, 2019, <https://freshexpressionsus.org/about/#what>.

⁵⁰ Michael Moynagh and Philip Harrold, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012.), xii.

form of fresh expressions for most mainline denominational churches. This, I believe, is a key to the rapid growth of the Dinner Church Collective across the US.

While the Dinner Church model has been a much-needed model for reaching many communities within our urban centers and within other economically depressed communities, which is at the heart of the Dinner Church, this model needs to be adapted to reach into an AALC such as The Villages. I propose through implementing a home-based dinner church modified from the Dinner Church model, mainline churches can effectively evangelize post-Christians living within The Villages and other AALCs.

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Within the first chapter of this dissertation, it was established that Boomers are a uniquely complicated generation as well as a missionally significant population for a church struggling to live into its call to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19 NLT). This is a population that is, by and large, consumerist yet looking for something that is authentic with which they can connect. Boomers have rejected institutional authority while at the same time seeking the community that historical institutions have provided. A further complication for the church attempting to connect missionally with this generation is that the AALC predominantly is not open to the traditional ministries of the church taking place within their communities outside of the walls of the church.

The Dinner Church model, which is effectively being utilized across the US with great missional success, can be a valuable asset for reaching this population that is comprised predominantly of Dones. This model of evangelistic outreach has great potential to make strong inroads in communities like The Villages. Through my research, I am unaware of this model being used in any other AALC. However, this model can be accomplished by understanding the core assumptions of what has made the Dinner Church an effective evangelism tool and modifying it to fit into a new paradigm composed of moderately affluent Boomers living in AALCs. Before we can effectively develop a deeper understanding of the Dinner Church model’s core elements to create a modified model of evangelism for this community, we need to examine several significant models being used to reach out to AALC Boomers today.

The Majority/Common Approach

A church located in or near an AALC and focused on reaching this population of aging Boomers must develop a missional posture to remain viable within the next decade. However, most churches within these communities are choosing between two alternative models of engagement: the “do nothing” model and the “attractional” model.

Do Nothing Model of Evangelism

Many mainline denominational churches within AALCs are choosing a “do nothing” path. These churches are happy with their growth patterns, and many are becoming some of the largest churches within their respective synods, districts, conferences, or presbyteries simply by opening their doors and hosting worship services that effectively engage consumerist Boomer Christians. Resembling denominational church planting of 50 to 60 years ago, as long as the AALCs continue their current growth, which urban sociologists believe will continue for the next decade,⁵¹ these congregations will continue to experience growth as well. It is important to examine this approach (or lack of approach), as it is a common position for many ministries that are focused on Boomers in America today.

There are several reasons for this apparent lack of missional focus. First, I have learned within my own denomination that many pastors simply do not have a missional vision for the church. They view the church more from a chaplaincy viewpoint, taking care of the people already in. While this paper will not address this systemic problem

⁵¹ Roth et al., “Baby Boomers in an Active Adult Retirement Community,” 189.

within the church, it is an important phenomenon to acknowledge. For the sake of this research, I will focus on another observation, which is of more concern, as it is common among leaders and ministries that have a mission heart and vision. While I had previously observed this phenomenon among many colleagues, it was in studying other dissertations for this project that I saw a pattern emerge. Many of these dissertations focus upon engaging senior adults. However, most of the dissertations focus on engaging the “already in,” with almost no attention given to those who are not part of the church. There are several reasons why churches choose this path, but the most common is a belief that we are not able, or even called, to evangelize retired senior adults.

Within missional literature, we find a common call from Christian academia to focus our efforts on the evangelization of younger people. This would seem, from a missional perspective, to be the wise choice for many, if not most, congregations. Charles Arn, in a paper focused on the need for evangelizing senior adults, outlines the churches valid reasons for the dismissal of focused evangelism on senior adults:

Religious conversion—when, how, and why it occurs—is of interest to anyone concerned with the spread of the Christian gospel. In the late 1800s, Edwin Starbuck conducted groundbreaking studies on conversion to Christianity. He observed that the average age of a person experiencing a religious conversion was 15.6 years. One hundred years later, Virgil Gillespie reported that the average age of conversion in America was 16 years. In Canada, Arnell Motz found that over 80% of Christian conversions occurred before age 40, while only 1.2% were over age 60. Arn & Arn noted that two-thirds of the 1,000+ member churches surveyed in the United States reported only one or no 65+-year-olds added to their membership roles during the prior year through “conversion growth”.⁵²

Also found within the research is the acknowledgment that ministry geared toward this often-narcissistic consumerist population is difficult, with much work

⁵² Charles Arn, “Factors Affecting Late-Life Conversion,” *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 331.

necessary to simply keep the average Boomer engaged within the congregation and hopefully on a path of spiritual growth. From the research project *The Great Opportunity*, we find a clear call for the church to focus on our youth:

As a result of months of research, we now think we are at a pivotal moment in the life of the American church. What we have found was the largest mission's opportunity ever in American history, and if we move quickly, we can help introduce tens of millions of young people to Jesus over the next 30 years.⁵³

Johnny Baker, in his research on engaging retired evangelical men in spiritual transformation, offers this insight:

Research indicated that even among mainline Protestantism the boomers in the mid 20th century began to embrace the values of science and modernism to the neglect of God as they socialized into adult religious life without exploring transcendent spiritual experience and now were without spiritual resources and beliefs that provide meaning.⁵⁴

Baker goes on to acknowledge that, "In reality, most church organizations focused on extrinsic worship opportunities and fun-filled activities for senior adults without real emphasis on the intrinsic needs and developmental processes at work."⁵⁵ Like many others Baker has concluded that it is enough to actively focus on this population of insiders to keep them on a spiritual path of growth and not focus on those outside of the church. In an excellent dissertation on the loss of Boomers for the church, Kim Griffith, offers a call to reconnect with Dones:

This project will address the question: What resources can I develop to help churches better understand the needs of the Baby Boomer generation and reengage them in Christian community? It is my hope, that through a greater understanding of the Baby Boomer generation and the unique values and

⁵³ "The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050," Pinetops Foundation, February 2018, <https://www.greatopportunity.org>, 5.

⁵⁴ Johnny Baker, "Finishing Well: Phenomenological Investigation of Spiritual Transformation in Retirement-age Evangelical Men," (PhD diss., Liberty University, Lynchburg, 2012), 3.

⁵⁵ Baker, "Finishing Well," 5.

characteristics that shape their needs and desires, churches will create ministries and spaces to connect or reconnect with Baby Boomers who are not involved in a local congregation.⁵⁶

Although Griffith significantly details the causes that have created the growing population of Dones within the Boomer generation, her research ultimately offers no model for reaching this group outside of the church. It focuses almost exclusively on developing ministry to keep the “already in” from leaving. While keeping the congregation involved and in the deepening their faith is meaningful work, something is wrong. Arn articulates this need well: “As stewards of the gospel, we do well to learn the process of effective sowing, cultivating, and harvesting the good news in the lives of the unreached older adults in our midst. For they are, both figuratively and literally, fields that are white unto harvest.”⁵⁷ Other problems can arise out of an inwardly focused ministry model. Before we examine these, we need to look at another model that is predominate among many congregations residing in or near AALCs: the attractional model of evangelism.

Attractional Model of Evangelism

Within The Villages, as well as many other AALCs dotting the southern US landscape, are many church leaders and churches that have realized their congregations are shifting. Though their congregations continue to grow, because of the growth patterns of the typical AALC, these leaders realize the majority of their community is not engaged spiritually within a Christian congregation, and leaders have a desire to engage their

⁵⁶ Griffin, “Boom! The Babies Have Left the Room,” 6.

⁵⁷ Arn, “Factors Affecting Late-Life Conversion,” 333.

communities. Often the pastor assigned or appointed to serve in an AALC mirrors the inhabitants (e.g., a fellow Boomer). They come from a church background that has not embraced the missional mandate of the church to be an externally focused congregation and are still functioning under an attractional model of the church. In referring to the attractional church, Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren write:

The common theme is that church is about an event (usually the Sunday morning services) and about getting people to attend that event. Those who come to this event expect certain people will provide spiritual goods and services that will help them live better lives. From the perspective of the average church attendee, church plays a specific and limited role of speaking to their spiritual life, and it has little to nothing to do with how they live with their families or at their workplaces. If the measure of church success is how many people come to an event, the church must meet the expectations of providing excellent spiritual goods and service to attract people.⁵⁸

It is valid and valuable to be attractional to reach the Boomer population moving into an AALC. Even Roxburgh and Boren attest this, writing, “There is nothing wrong or bad about attracting people to attend the various meetings that a church holds.”⁵⁹ Within the six years of our church existence we strived to live into an attractional model of church as well as developing a missional model (commonly called a mixed ecology congregation), and it has effectively served us. As of the writing of this paper, over 19 percent of our new members have come into the church by profession of faith or by reaffirmation of faith after being absent from a Christian community for at least a decade. This growth number of the return of Dones is due to our focus on developing a good Boomer-based attractional model that is radically hospitable to all people who come into

⁵⁸ Alan Roxburgh, Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 19.

⁵⁹ Roxburgh, Boren, and Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 19.

our church at multiple levels. The problem comes when the attractional model is the only model utilized for a congregation. Again, Roxburgh and Boren write: “If we are good leaders in a church that is good at what it does, then we will attract people, and that is good. We are simply saying that the attractional pattern is not the goal or the primary call of the church.”⁶⁰ What I have observed locally is that, when a church chooses to focus on a “do nothing” approach or even an “attractional” approach exclusively, several negative side effects occur.

Effects of Do Nothing and Attractional Models of Evangelism

By opting to “do nothing” or by singularly focusing on attractional evangelism, a Christian community tends to develop a mentality of competition with other congregations around it. I had staff members of another local congregation tell me that, on Mondays, their lead pastor looks at the numbers from all the other local churches in The Villages to get a comparison of their attendance versus that of the other congregations. It is easy to write this off as the case of an overly competitive pastor, but the problem is when churches are focused on reaching into an ever-narrowing population, such as Christians moving into The Villages, other churches become your adversaries and not your family members joined as the body of Christ.

Competition is not limited to The Villages. Unfortunately, it is too common everywhere, but especially common when churches chose an inward or attractional model of evangelism. Not only does this hurt the spiritual witness of the congregation, but it also leaves out the growing populations of Nones and Dones as a missional focus, which

⁶⁰ Roxburgh, Boren, and Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 20.

is especially negative with Boomers, who are living within the last third of their earthly lives. This can be seen clearly in how our churches center on a consumerist mentality of service, as Fosner notes in quoting E.V. Hill,

E. V. Hill summarizes this confusion by saying, “The gospel says, ‘go,’ but our church buildings say, ‘stay;’ the gospel says, ‘seek the lost,’ but our churches say, ‘let the lost seek the church.’” In other words, the congregation-centric church of today differs considerably from the churches of the Apostolic Era; however, the body of Christ now faces new and significant pressures.⁶¹

Just as the research for *The Great Opportunity* suggested we have a short window of opportunity for reaching a vast mission field of young Americans, it also reminds us that is equally relevant to the AALC: “It is one of our jobs in the church, as both a community and as individuals sent out, to seek the peace and welfare of the cities where and when we are placed.”⁶² For the leaders and churches that find themselves near or within the AALC, we, too, have a short window of opportunity for reaching the 50 million plus Boomers who have left or were never in the church.⁶³ Our prayer is that the church will step up to its missional call to follow Jesus into this field ripe for the harvest.

Fresh Expressions US

In the mid-1990s, two movements began in response to the crisis of declining church participation primarily in North America, the UK, and Australia. These

⁶¹ Verlon Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” (DMin. Diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014), 60.

⁶² “The Great Opportunity,” 7.

⁶³ Thom Rainer, “Last Chances for Church to Reach 50 Million Americans,” *Church Today, My Christian Daily*, 2013, <https://mychristiandaily.com/church/?p=409>.

movements, the emerging church movement and the missional church movement, both emphasized a call for the church to make radical changes in its orientation and its missional vision if it was going to remain relevant for future decades. Setting the goal to connect with popular culture, the emergent churches developed a new model of church focused around three core practices and six secondary practices. The core practices were: “identifying with the life of Jesus, transforming secular space, and living as community.” The six secondary practices were: “welcoming the stranger, serving with generosity, participating as producers, creating as created beings, leading as a body, and taking part in spiritual activities.”⁶⁴ While many of these practices were incorporated within the historic institutional church, there was also a trend within these movements to separate from their historic identity. Many of the leaders of both movements have viewed the inherited church as something of the past, and have called for missional leaders to develop new, creative forms of ministry to reach the changing culture around them.

In 2004, the Church of England published a report entitled *Mission-Shaped Church* which acknowledged the church’s losses and called the church to proclaim fresh the gospel for each new generation while not abandoning the inherited church. Within the report they co-opted the term “fresh expressions,” previously used within the Anglican church’s *Declaration of Ascent*, to emphasize that something new and enlivened by the Holy Spirit needed to happen for the church to regain its missional call to the world outside the doors of individual congregations.⁶⁵ Working with the Methodist Church of

⁶⁴ Michael Moynagh and Philip Harrold, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), xi.

⁶⁵ Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, xii.

England, they began to develop a new focus of ministry called Fresh Expressions and gave the term a new definition:

A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. It will come into being through the practices of listening, service, contextual mission, and making disciples. It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.⁶⁶

Within a few years of beginning this transformation of the church in the UK, Fresh Expressions was brought to the US and, over the past decade, it has taken on a life of its own predominantly among mainline denominational bodies emphasizing a mixed economy of church, “A church that includes both traditional and nontraditional worship styles, strategies, places, and language.”⁶⁷ Fresh Expressions has brought new life and fresh ministry into many denominations over the past decade. One of the early adopters of the Fresh Expressions US movement has been the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, of which I am a pastor. Early within the timeline of Fresh Expressions coming to the US, I was introduced to this new missional focus and found that I was drawn to several aspects of this new approach to ministry.

As a planter of a new congregation, within the largest AALC in the world, the mixed ecology (inherited church in conjunction with missional fresh expressions of church working side by side) approach was extremely attractive to me. This foundational element of the Fresh Expressions US model emphasizes our call as a congregation to live into many different levels of ministry. We are called to continue to be “attractional,”

⁶⁶ Kenneth Carter and Audrey Warren, *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church for People Not in Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 11.

⁶⁷ Carter and Warren, *Fresh Expressions*, 70.

realizing that a large number of people moving into The Villages are going to be looking for a congregation and as Boomers they will be discerning in finding a congregation that is welcoming and fits within the lifestyle preferences that they have adopted.

We understand, through Fresh Expressions US, that we are also called to “engage” people through service, outreach, and social activity and then invite them back into the congregation. Many of the 19 percent of new members within our congregation by a new profession of faith are the result of some type of engagement that we have had with them outside of the church.

But Fresh Expressions also calls the church to be “incarnational”: to go out into new settings and reach people who will potentially never “come back” into the church but form a new body of faith within their new context.⁶⁸ By implementing this blended ecology, our congregation has been able to attract Christians moving into our community and call them into a vision for missional living as they enter their retirement years.

Within this call to mission, we have found people being reenergized with a purpose for their retirement and a newfound love for the church and for those who are on the fringe of the church. This movement has also given our congregation the groundwork to challenge the consumerist mentality of many Boomers, encouraging them to grow through outwardly focused action.

We must acknowledge that this call to action has caused many institutional “church” people to make decisions to leave our congregation and find a church that is more focused solely on their needs. Such loss is inevitable and even necessary whenever

⁶⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2014), 55-61.

calling people to faithfully live into a missional lifestyle. While our congregation became a proponent of Fresh Expressions early within our development, we also found the main avenues for the development of Fresh Expressions communities out of our inherited congregation have failed to have discernable results in making a missional mark within our surrounding community. As we studied our results, we found several factors that caused our Fresh Expressions to struggle.

One of the foundational assumptions in launching Fresh Expressions is that we are moving into a new and different culture, where the inherited church is no longer relevant. “The inherited church was planted in a different ecosystem,”⁶⁹ says Michael Beck. If the church is going to reach that world and be relevant, they will need to enter into the community and form a new expression of the faith that is connectional with the people who are no longer in sync with the world of the church.

We found this assumption to be true when launching Fresh Expressions outside of our AALC but have not found the same within The Villages. While almost 60 percent of the people who reside within The Villages have become Dones, they have an inherited church mindset and do not look at the inherited church as either a non-entity or as a negative entity. We have found they have positive impressions of the church, while still choosing to view the church as irrelevant to their lives. When trying to launch expressions of church that do not have the “bells and whistles” of the inherited church, they are not attracted to it.

⁶⁹ Michael Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2019), 21.

Furthermore, we have found, as introduced in Section One of this paper, that the Homeowners Association of the average AALC tends to block the possibility for the typical successful locations for Fresh Expressions. Within The Villages, recreation centers, golf courses, town centers (shopping and entertainment areas), and restaurants can be found in abundance. Historically, these “third places” have become the prime locations for launching Fresh Expressions of church. The typical AALC, such as The Villages, limits the use of these locations for patronage only by homeowners and approved clubs within the AALC.

While the members of our congregation are almost exclusively homeowners within The Villages, the Homeowners Association does not recognize religious organizations as viable candidates for the use of these facilities or as being connected with any club. We have twice launched a new missional activity through the members of our congregation, only to have it shut down when discovered it was associated with a local church. If we are going to have vital missional opportunities within The Villages, they need to take a different form than have typically been launched as a Fresh Expression of the church. This is what propelled our congregation on a path that opened the door to the Dinner Church Collective.

The Dinner Church Collective

One of my favorite Mahatma Gandhi quotes is, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”⁷⁰ In

⁷⁰ Mahatma Gandhi, Brainy Quotes, accessed December 13, 2019, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/mahatma_gandhi_160841

a time when the church in North America finds itself in the midst of rapid decline in numbers and missional focus, this simple statement by Gandhi sums up a movement launched within the past decade in the United States by various small groups of “determined spirits” with a faith to reach out with the radical love of Christ. Across the United States, a movement is growing that could become a positive catalyst of change in a time of discontinuity and discord. Returning to lessons from the early Apostolic Church, these groups have adopted an model of worship and evangelism based around a table that is already demonstrating effectiveness in its missional impact to our seemingly barren church. Launched in small outposts scattered across North America, many distinct dinner church movements have begun out of various denominations since 2009. The most predominant of these include: The Dinner Church Collective in Seattle, Washington; Saint Lydia’s in Brooklyn, New York; Potluck Church in Madisonville, Kentucky; Southside Abbey in Chattanooga, Tennessee; The Simple Church in Grafton, Massachusetts; and Table of Mercy in Austin, Texas.⁷¹ While these various dinner church movements have launched within a short period, almost all of them were created without knowledge of other dinner churches being created elsewhere.

Each of these movements exhibits common characteristics, such as the dinner table as a sign of the abundance of God and practicing radical hospitality especially to the disenfranchised, disconnected, and outcast of society. Almost all these dinner churches have based their ministries on their understanding of the table ministry of the early church and see this as foundational to the call in reaching the least and the lost. Also,

⁷¹ Kendall Vanderslice, “Dinner Churches Spring Up Nationwide,” *Christian Food Movement*, January 13, 2017, <https://christianfoodmovement.org/2017/01/13/dinner-churches-spring-up-nationwide/>.

most dinner churches have established themselves as a walking ministry, where the target community is within walking distance. This is reflective of an early church understanding which focused on taking the gospel to the disenfranchised and under-resourced nearby.

What is not consistent within this movement is that many of the dinner churches focus on justice ministries, placing a strong emphasis on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons.⁷² While all of the dinner churches surveyed welcome all people, the emphasis on this inclusion establishes a different flavor for these particular dinner churches. What is also significant, but not surprising, is that some many of the dinner churches focus the meal on the practice of the eucharist celebration, while others do not. Structurally, the various dinner churches function differently as well. A few dinner churches, such as the Potluck Church, are structured around a potluck dinner, where all the participants are invited to bring a food offering to share as a sign of community and to extend worth and dignity.⁷³ Within other dinner churches, like Saint Lydia's, the community prepares the meal and the table together.⁷⁴ Most common is the model of preparing a meal of abundance and then inviting neighborhoods to come and partake of the meal; such is the model of the Dinner Church Collective.⁷⁵

Of these six dinner church movements, one stands out for its rapid growth across the US. The Dinner Church Collective, led by Verlon and Melodee Fosner and developed

⁷² Saint Lydia's is a good example of this emphasis. On the home page in a prominent placing is written: "A progressive, LGBTQ-affirming congregation in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, we are working together to dispel isolation, reconnect neighbors, and subvert the status quo. You are welcome here." <http://stlydias.org>

⁷³ Potluck church, accessed December 14, 2019, <http://www.potluckchurch.co>.

⁷⁴ Saint Lydia's, accessed December 14, 2019, <http://stlydias.org>.

⁷⁵ Dinner Church Collective, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://dinnerchurch.com>.

out of the Assemblies of God denomination in Seattle, Washington, has grown into a collective of dinner communities across many denominations throughout almost all of the continental US and is moving into locations outside of the US. There appear to be several contributing reasons why this dinner church movement is growing at rates significantly higher than other movements. First, the Dinner Church Collective was created from the very beginning to be something bigger than just a practicing community in one location. To do this, the Fosners created a model that is simple to replicate and adaptable to new locations and demographics. Another reason the Dinner Church Collective has grown rapidly is that, early within its development, the Dinner Church chose to affiliate with Fresh Expressions US.

For the remainder of this section, I will examine the Dinner Church Collective to understand the key elements that have made it an effective evangelistic movement across the US over the past ten years. To begin, I will establish the foundational elements which make a dinner church so effective in reaching evangelistically within communities as well as the elements that have caused the growth. Once accomplished, I will then disassemble the Dinner Church Collective to find what elements are essential to its success so that this movement can be modified to a different environment and reach people to whom almost no dinner church has reached—the active, middle-class, retired adult living within Active Adult Retirement Communities across the American South.

Defined Structure and Processes

One of the key factors that influenced the rapid adoption of dinner churches within mainline denominational churches is that the Dinner Church Collective developed a model-based approach to launching and overseeing a community dinner church that is

replicable to an institutional congregation. Dinner Churches focus on reaching the 20 to 30 percent of the population of “Nones” and the “Dones” who are not going to respond to an attractional model of evangelism, but they do it in a way that is acceptable to inherited churches. Every day in America, a growing number of inherited churches reach places of desperation because “The old refill factor is no longer in operation. A new generation of people does not come into church to replace those who are leaving or dying.”⁷⁶

Once they come to this missional realization, these churches often find themselves going through a process of change, first by trying old models of evangelism which have not been working and continue to not work, then often finding themselves looking outside the walls of the church for new and creative models of mission. This often leads them into the Fresh Expressions movement as a viable option to connect with people they have been unable to connect with before. Unfortunately, the typical Fresh Expressions church is so abstract to an inherited church member they often cannot comprehend the process. By developing a structured approach for both developing and for overseeing a dinner church, the Dinner Church Collective has created an approachable plan for institutionally minded people.

Authentic Table Community

Let’s face it, people love to eat, and they love to eat with other people. Dr. Leonard Sweet says it this way: “It’s not just a cultural coincidence that throughout the ages, all over the world, people gather together at a meal in order to get to know one

⁷⁶ David Male and Paul Weston, *The Word’s Out: Principles and Strategies for Effective Evangelism Today*, Revised and Updated (Abingdon, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019), 27.

another.”⁷⁷ Sweet goes further: “To bring back the vigor to Christianity, to reverse the church’s attrition rate, we must bring back the table.”⁷⁸ At the heart of the Dinner Church Collective is the creation of community dinner churches. This may sound simple, yet it is the profound feature of all of the dinner church movements. The Dinner Church Collective has focused on providing hearty meals that taste good and which create a metaphor of the abundance of God’s provision.

In an average dinner church, the goal is that each participant will satisfy both their taste buds and their stomach. Additionally, there are almost always leftovers for people to take home with them, again as a sign of the abundance of God. This compelling view of the table is appealing to those who serve at these dinners and is especially compelling to those who are visiting the dinner church. It is significant that, within the abundant table, the call for all to eat together is lived out by all joining together for the meal, both server and served. Quickly, when a new community dinner is launched, the team works to incorporate the people of the community they are reaching into leadership and service, so the dinner church does not become just another feeding station for a community to get a free meal, but truly part of a Christ-centered community worship service focused on a meal.

Proclamation of the Word

Finally, I believe the Dinner Church Collective has been so successful because of its focus on the proclamation of Jesus Christ combined with an adaptive nature of letting

⁷⁷ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 59.

⁷⁸ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 19.

people work through their spiritual questions and conflicts to encourage their relationship with Christ. At the heart of the hospitality of the Dinner Church Collective is the call to create an open space for people to question. Dr. Christine Pohl calls the church to this type of hospitality and gives its implications to ministry, namely the diversity of community:

In the context of hospitality, strangers with questions about faith and meaning can find answers...When hospitality is a way of life, the strangers and guests we welcome seem to become increasingly diverse. A life that is open to surprise and contingency has room for the refugee family and the elderly woman down the street recovering from surgery.⁷⁹

While this diversity is reflected in the Dinner Church movement, we also find a proclivity to move people toward Jesus as they work through their questions, fears, and objections to faith. This happens in a community dinner through radically hospitable relationships where Jesus is lived out in conversation and action. At the end of a typical community dinner, a “Jesus story” is shared and then a time of prayer takes place. While people are given the option to not remain for the Jesus story, Dinner Churches have found most people desire to stay as well as engage with the story.

Needed Changes for Implementation

I have been privileged to learn about this new movement of God and also have been blessed to experience community dinners where I have witnessed the life change of participants among these communities. Through the study of the early church agape feasts, community meals, and even household rituals of hospitality practiced by disciples, I have discovered the foundational principle of most dinner church movements is correct.

⁷⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 103.

I consider myself an active supporter of the dinner church movement and an active participant of the Dinner Church Collective, with our church having launched two Dinner Church Collectives and community meal churches. However, while we have engaged with the dinner church model, we have also found that this model does not work in its present iteration in The Villages, Florida, our main missional focus.

Both community dinners our congregation has launched are reaching under-resourced neighborhoods surrounding our community, not The Villages. Today, while most people living in The Villages have a Christian background, over 60 percent self-identify as Dones. This group of people offer a significant missional opportunity for the church, but they do not fit the demographic of being under-resourced or disenfranchised. Most people who live within The Villages are economically upper-middle-class, educated, and relationally engaged. When researching the dinner church movement, especially the Dinner Church Collective, there is strong evidence that a table ministry could have great impact in missionally reaching this population, but we have found the model used by the Dinner Church Collective and most dinner church movements is not functional in this type of community.

Demographics that Don't Fit

Demographically, the vast group of Baby Boomers who are retiring to The Villages or similar AALCs across the sunbelt are active and engaged with other people. They have financial as well as other needed life resources. While this largest group in America today is the last generation where almost every member has some distant memory of a "Christian" America, it is also the first group to see the mass exodus of people fleeing organized religion from the late 1960s into the 1990s. Today, over 65

percent of the Baby Boomers moving into The Villages have no discernable relationship with Christ and have been removed from the church for at least a decade or more. This becomes a vast mission field and one almost no missional engagement is addressing. While churches in places like The Villages are growing active communities of faith, because of the sheer volume of people moving into AALCs, these active church participants have largely been reluctant to practice evangelism within their communities. David Male describes the problem this way, in a critique to the popular evangelism model of the 1990s, Alpha Class:

The main problem at the moment appears not to be the lack of evangelism courses, but the lack of people to go on them, which suggests churches need to do significant preparatory work in which enquirers set their own agenda and raise their own questions before many of them are ready to work through somebody else's agenda in a published course.⁸⁰

Within our community we have found Male's critique is astute. If we are going to reach the Dones of The Villages, it will need to be in a way that they can raise their own questions and work through their own agenda. The Dinner Church model has potential in this, but not in the form of the Dinner Church Collective or other dinner church models I have examined. For a dinner church to work within this population, it would need to be small in scale, radically relational in nature, and non-threatening in proclamation, while at the same time taking the opportunity to share Jesus.

The key elements that can be replicated from the Dinner Church Collective, as well as other dinner churches are the focus on the table and table conversation, radical hospitality, accepting people wherever they are in their spiritual journey, and proclamation of Jesus through actions and words. I propose Dinner Church 2.0, a process

⁸⁰ Male, *The Word's Out*, 26.

that will incorporate these elements while opening the door into a new missional model of witness.

Small Groups for “Dones”

Taking the key elements of the Dinner Church Collective described above, as well as adapting or eliminating elements such as large group dinners, structured format, and the focus on reaching Sore Neighborhoods, we can create a model consistent with the early church model of agape meals reaching an entirely new group of people with the Gospel of Christ. Reducing the size of the community dinner into small groups where two to four Christians invite four to six friends and/or neighbors into an ongoing dinner group, a model is established that gives all people opportunity to share, question and process beliefs and faith issues. This model also creates opportunities for Christian leaders to share their faith “story” and pose “faith” dialogs when given the opportunity.

Meal groups have become a popular trend today throughout the entire US. As people search for places to find true community and as we become a “foody” nation, people are drawn into home dinner communities that focus on good food, good relationships, and deep conversation. Using the British model, which creates small group opportunities for deep conversation focused on each participant over a long period, leaders have the opportunity to direct the conversation topics and thus allows for topics of spiritual depth to be inserted at appropriate times. This pattern allows people within the church who have friends outside the church to create a model to share and go deeper with their friends without the traditional modes of evangelism that many Christians would never use, fearing alienating their friends. We began to implement this method with two of our small groups at a beginning level and found great success. Within each of these

groups, the “Dones” who were invited knew that they were becoming part of a dinner and dialog group focused on discussing spiritual questions. Each has been open to the environment and the dialog.

Conclusion

We stand at a great time in history to impact the changing world through the gospel of Jesus Christ in significant and tangible ways that will impact the future of the Christian movement within the global West. We also have the opportunity to reach a population of the church which has left the church but is on the verge of eternity. While God is the initiator of the missional opportunities that present themselves to the church, we must work to unleash a movement to join God in the mission. David Male calls the church to this truth and to join God in His mission:

Evangelism comes from God himself, is about God and is accomplished by God. It is not something that we create or engineer—yet we should not be passive about it. The reality is that God, by his Spirit, is at work today and calls us to work with him in his world, enabling people to encounter him and seeing lives and communities transformed.⁸¹

The basic foundations of the community dinner have the potential to have a significant impact on reaching many Baby Boomers with the life-changing love of Jesus Christ. If we will take the key components of this model and faithfully adapt them into this more affluent culture, it has the potential to impact the eternal destiny of people living in the last quarter of their lives as well as having long-term impact on the mission of the church. It also, I believe, will challenge the affluent church, in many locations, to move into a more traditional model of Dinner Church that will help people to live into the

⁸¹ Male, *The Word's Out*, 153.

biblical mandate to reach the least and the lost. My prayer is that this model can be developed within the community of The Villages and ultimately adopted across the inherited church of the West.

SECTION 3: THESIS

This project has argued that the Dinner Church Collective, created by Verlon and Melodee Fosner, has been a successful evangelistic model and has experienced tremendous growth over the past decade because of the core elements that make up Dinner Church communities. However, certain elements make the Dinner Church model incompatible in evangelistically reaching into the average AALC, such as The Villages, Florida. To fully develop the model of a Dinner Church 2.0 that is being proposed, the Sobremesa Dinner Group, I will identify the core elements from the Dinner Church Collective that are essential for the success of any dinner church movement and examine three elements that need to be modified. My focus will be to use the research at the base of Fosner's dissertation to establish norms which cannot be broken and elements that can and must be adapted for a different community. At the heart of this study is a deep admiration for the work that Fosner did in effectively reestablishing this ancient model of ministry today.

Essentials for Successful Dinner Churches

Six key elements stand out in making the Dinner Church Collective movement effective and have been the foundation for its continued growth. First, and foremost, is the centrality of worship based around the dinner table. Second, the focus of locating dinner churches within "Sore Neighborhoods" and hosting their dinner fellowships at times that are comfortable for people within these neighborhoods to participate in the community. Third, the focus on establishing a shared dinner table of abundance for everyone who enters the community. Fourth, establishing a large community that is

radically welcoming to all who enter, with shared work and eating responsibilities for “server and served, rich and poor, saved and sinner.”⁸² Fifth, the focus upon sharing Christ stories and, through these stories, offering grace and invitation over condemnation and repentance. Sixth, establishing a pattern of comfortable table talk where grace can be authentically lived out and prayers shared for all equally.⁸³ Three of these elements stand out as non-negotiable for the implementation of an early church model for evangelism that is both faithful to the biblical narrative while also practical for evangelistic outreach within an AALC. These three elements are the focus on the table in establishing Christian community, the centrality of reflection on Jesus stories as found in the Gospels, and the relentless pursuit of comfortable, yet deep table talk when gathered in community, which I will now explore in detail.

Table Focus

The table is at the heart of the Dinner Church Collective as well as all dinner-focused ministries growing today in the US and abroad. A major focus of Fosner’s core research is on God’s redemptive grace and hospitality found in both the Old and New Testaments. Fosner does an excellent job establishing the Scriptural and historic foundation of the radical hospitality of God, especially expressed at the dinner table:

The twists and turns of God’s redemptive plans have held several constants, one of which is the dinner table. Perhaps the house churches of Acts, the agape feasts in Corinth, and the group of Christians in Bithynia in AD 112 who gathered their neighbors around dinner tables, included the poor, sang hymns, read Scriptures,

⁸² Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 33.

⁸³ Fosner, *Dinner Church*, 27.

and remembered the life of Christ serve as more than spiritual ancestors; they provide an attractive picture of the Church for Christianity today.⁸⁴

At the core of this model is the understanding that the dinner church of Scripture and the early church, as evidenced in the agape feast for the first three centuries of the church, is the foundation for a new resurgence within the church of North America. Tim Chester establishes this connection to the table and its power in hospitable outreach today:

Jesus didn't run projects, establish ministries, create programs, or put on events. He ate meals. If you routinely share meals and you have a passion for Jesus, then you'll be doing mission. It's not that meals save people. People are saved through the gospel message. But meals will create natural opportunities to share that message in a context that resonates powerfully with what you're saying.⁸⁵

God reveals to us through Scripture what the church established in its infancy: that the simple meal is one of the most effective ways to share hospitality ever created. Kristin Schell challenges us to embrace a call to hospitality and to center it on the table: "We've got to debunk the myth that hospitality is the same as entertainment. Genuine hospitality begins with opening our lives... It all starts with inviting people to come to the table. Hospitality is always about the people, not the presentation."⁸⁶ This centrality of connection and hospitality found around the table is not limited to Christian history but is expressed throughout all social and cultural engagement. Adam Gopnik, writer for *The New Yorker*, quotes British chef Fergus Henderson,

"I don't understand how a young couple can begin life by buying a sofa or a television," he said indignantly to me. "Don't they know the table comes first?"

⁸⁴ Fosner, "Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal," 59.

⁸⁵ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 89.

⁸⁶ Kristin Schell, *The Turquoise Table: Finding Community and Connection in Your Own Front Yard* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 78.

The table comes first. The table comes first, before the meal and even before the kitchen where it's made. It precedes everything in remaining the one plausible hearth of family life, the raft to ride down the river of our existence even in the hardest times.⁸⁷

Gopnik expresses a truth that has been evident since the beginning of human social interaction. There is something of significance that happens around the table and at the core of developing a holistic Christian community. Ultimately the call to evangelist ministry based around a table comes from the simple and time-tested example of radical connection that happens when people sit down to eat together. Not only do meals bring about intentional social interaction, but they also force the interaction to be slow and purposeful. Tim Chester writes, “Meals slow things down. Some of us don’t like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people oriented instead of task oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list.”⁸⁸

In a community such as The Villages that limits ministry conducted in third places, but emphasizes good food and active fellowship, the dinner table becomes as relevant as it was for the first-century church. Establishing ministries that focus on the table have potential for deep missional engagement and developing holistic communities.

Jesus Stories

Beyond the gathering of community around the dinner table, Fosner is clear that the early dinner church, as well as the current dinner church, centered on shared stories of

⁸⁷ Adam Gopnik, *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food*. 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2011), 9.

⁸⁸ Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 47.

Jesus. Quoting Stanley Hauerwas, Fosner writes, “early Christians, interestingly, began not with credal speculation, but with stories about Jesus, about those whose lives got caught up in his life.”⁸⁹ David Male, the Director of Evangelism and Discipleship for the Church of England, provides an evangelistic foundation for the use of the centering of the story:

I want to suggest that the “primary” evangelistic material in the New Testament is to be found in the gospel accounts themselves. This approach seems to make the best sense of the gospel narratives as we have them and indicates that an integral part of their purpose is not just to disciple believers but to “evangelize” non-believers. They are not simply stories that help to “illustrate” the gospel, which is to be found later in the more “doctrinal” parts of the New Testament. No, these stories are themselves the substance of good news about Jesus.⁹⁰

Leonard Sweet takes this a step further: “Evangelism is not leading people to right beliefs about Jesus. It is introducing people to a relationship with Jesus the Christ.”⁹¹ He takes this concept deeper as he describes the Christian’s call to a person, not a doctrine:

But Christian revelation is a Person named Jesus who calls us into a graced relationship through faith. Christianity was built not on doctrine, but on the person of Jesus. The Christian church was created, not to preach doctrine, but to preach Jesus. As Paul stated: “We preach Christ crucified.” The purpose of doctrine is to keep us focused on the Christ who is, who was, and who is to come.⁹²

Much of the Fresh Expressions movement being introduced to my Methodist Conference has taken a slow and often timid approach to introducing Jesus, often to the detriment of the ministry being launched. To remain consistent with our heritage and our calling, I believe Jesus should remain central and that Jesus be proclaimed.

⁸⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 55.

⁹⁰ Male, *The Word’s Out*, 66.

⁹¹ Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question—into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the Godlife Relationship*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 29.

⁹² Sweet, *Out of the Question—into the Mystery*, 24.

I do not want to diminish the possibility that some will abandon the idea of hosting, or even being part of, a Sobremesa Dinner Group, if the focus is upon sharing Jesus stories. “Scripture emphasizes that believers will not be popular and that the message of the cross doesn’t make sense to outsiders,”⁹³ David Kinnaman writes in his book, *Unchristian*. But this potential for loss is not a reason to abandon the Jesus story. Rather, it challenges one to work hard at making the story relevant and relational for the world in which we live. David Male expresses it this way:

We take the gospel narratives as our material starting point and seek to find the dynamic equivalents between the issues that Jesus addressed in his day and those that our contemporary hearers face in our own time. This, it seems to me, is the essence of the evangelistic task. We want to bear witness to Jesus, the good news, by allowing him to draw attention to himself in his own words.⁹⁴

I believe it is essential to keep the stories of Jesus central to the Sobremesa Dinner Communities but to also encourage dialog and openness of thought and perspective. If we can do this, the door will be opened for the many Dones who are struggling with their biases against institutional church assumptions to work through their objections, leading to a more authentic faith.

To fulfil our evangelistic mandate to make disciples calls us to remain faithful in our communities that are missionally motivated to teaching the stories of Jesus, but to do this in a way that is comfortable, authentic, and open to listening to the stories of others. This is the third non-negotiable element of the Dinner Church Collective as we develop the foundation for a Sobremesa Dinner Group.

⁹³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyon, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 206.

⁹⁴ Male, *The Word’s Out*, 67.

Comfortable, yet Deep Table Talk

In describing a typical Dinner Church evening, Fosner writes, “In this artistic rich environment, 120-150 neighbors from that community sit, eat, talk, and become friends. Conversation intersperses with laughter, and an inescapable sense of family fills the room.”⁹⁵ In examining successful Dinner Churches, one almost instantly finds a place of holistic and authentic conversation in a family orientation, providing safety for the work of Christ to take place within this community. This is present in the encounters Jesus has with people who came to him. “How did Jesus win people over? Not by standing against them or arguing with them, but by walking alongside them and inviting them to the table,”⁹⁶ Leonard Sweet says, describing the posture of Jesus. Visiting the Pike Market Community Dinner, the location the first Dinner Church was launched over a decade ago, I was instantly captivated by the way that those who came from outside the walking neighborhood and those from within the neighborhood engaged in authentic and deep conversation. I realized immediately that Christians who were engaged in entering into this village came in with humility and grace that allowed them to be transparent with those they were dining with from the local neighborhood.⁹⁷ I also came to understand that many “church” people today would not be able to fit into such an environment or live in such an openly authentic way with people who were not like them. David Kinnaman

⁹⁵ Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 69.

⁹⁶ Sweet. *From Tablet to Table*, 126.

⁹⁷ This observation came during attending a class with the Dinner Church Collective in February of 2019.

describes this scenario as something at the heart of Christian interaction that leads toward the making of disciples:

It is encouraging that our research uncovered scenarios in which outsiders' experiences with Christians helped to reshape their perspectives about God and about Jesus. Rather than being unChristian, the Christ follower no longer seemed judgmental, offensive, or insincere. Meeting such Christians made outsiders believe that becoming a Christ follower might actually have merit. For a few moments they discovered that Christians think, love, and listen.⁹⁸

Again, Sweet observes that this basic posture is one that opens the door to share the gospel: "We don't love our neighbors merely by not bothering them or by doing nothing bad to them. We love our neighbors when we reach out to them, when we listen to them, when we 'give them something to eat.'"⁹⁹

This open engagement in community in an environment of grace and humility is what leads to genuine sharing of one person to another and, in that interaction, a natural connection with Jesus Christ. Robert Farrar Capon, an Anglican Priest/Theologian and writer of cookbooks, writes about this idea of community engagement in *The Supper of the Lamb*: "Since people are the ultimate reason for having a dinner at all, try your best to summon guests who will enhance each other as persons... You have called them, not to sit solitary, but to become a company, a *convivium*."¹⁰⁰ It is at this deep place of conversation that the secular becomes sacred.

A foundation is in place for a meaningful community of faith to develop firmly based on the Dinner Church model when these three elements are incorporated: joining

⁹⁸ Kinnaman and Lyon, *UnChristian*, 209.

⁹⁹ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 172.

together as friends around a dinner table, taking time within an evening to share and dialog on a Jesus story, and working to cultivate authentic community and open yet responsible communication that does no harm.

Elements that Fail to Translate into the AALC

While it is believed that the above elements are essential to the success of a Sobremesa Dinner Group, it is equally understood that certain elements within the Dinner Church Collective model are not essential and, in fact, detour or even derail the effective implementation of a Sobremesa Dinner Group. We will examine these now.

Sore Neighborhood versus Meaning of Life

At the heart of the Dinner Church Collective is the understanding that the church is called to the poor. Fosner dedicates one of the largest sections of his dissertation on a defense of ministry to and with the poor. Referencing the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), Fosner starts this section with a clear challenge to the church: “The American Church needs to polish its theology of poverty, especially as it pertains to poverty in the big cities...The Church must act wisely, learn from this parable, and reconsider its theology of poverty.”¹⁰¹ He proceeds to give a strong argument based on a biblical imperative, sharing that “the Bible speaks about caring for the poor in approximately 2,300 verses”¹⁰² and again citing the parable of the separation of the goats and the sheep and the respective judgment that will come because of how we have taken

¹⁰¹ Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 86-87.

¹⁰² Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 86.

care of the poor, the hungry, the widow, and the prisoner.¹⁰³ Having extensively studied the Dinner Church Collective, examined the Scripture and early church history as it pertains to a posture toward the poor, and having visited several Dinner Churches, I am in full agreement with the church's overall call toward the poor. However, the question should be asked, does an overarching call to the poor preclude ministry to other peoples and groups?

Is a posture toward the poor the only posture found in Scripture? Can we find examples of evangelistic endeavor toward other groups and/or specifically dinner movements with others than simply the poor?

While the Bible is full of passages that call the church to a posture of uplifting the poor, we also see an openness to all people believers encounter as they share the gospel story. We see this especially in the meals with Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, known for its use of meals, we find Jesus at the table with others in ten different episodes. We find Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:27-32), Pharisees (Luke 7:36-50, 11:37-52, 14:1-24), 5,000 people (Luke 9:10-17), His friends Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the Apostles (Luke 22:14-38, 24:36-43), and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:28-32). A consistent trait found within Luke's meal encounters is that all people need Jesus. In these accounts, for example, we discover Jesus does not exclude anyone from any economic strata. In Acts, this inclusion is further developed when studying who is to be the recipient of the gospel. For example, we see God using a variety of people to connect the good news of the gospel to different and unique people: first, Philip shares with the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40); second,

¹⁰³ Fosner, "Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal," 87.

Peter shares with Cornelius and his household (Acts 10); third, Paul works to connect and share with whomever God brought before him, such as sharing with Lydia, a merchant of expensive purple cloth (Acts 16:13-15), or the Philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:22-34).

Paul shows us that his call is to all people, regardless of their status or position in the world. Rich and poor stand in need of the gospel. Leonard Sweet gives us the prime example of the Apostle Paul:

Paul was a master Gridwalker. He immersed himself in the field, or grid, of the people to whom he was sent. He learned their language, plied their trades alongside them, studied their culture and their customs, and got a sense of their economic-political milieu. Paul approached people where they were not where he wished they would be. Wherever Paul went, he walked the grid. He did not plop down the gospel story from on high, like a prefabricate box. He walked the grid until the gospel came to consciousness in the context of the culture.¹⁰⁴

One of the most common observations made of people moving into their retirement years is they are searching for meaning for the remainder of their life. Just as many in the New Testament were looking for meaning and found it through the hospitality offered at the table with Jesus, Paul, and others, we need to shift our focus within an AALC to reach newly retired people who are searching for a meaningful purpose for the rest of their lives.

A refrain I often hear as a pastor from those who have newly moved into The Villages is, “What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life?” Often this is quickly followed by a comment about a lifetime of hard work and that they are now ready to play. To be faithful to the gospel as well as to the individual, I warn them that this is not the right course for the remainder of their life. Rather, at the heart of an evangelistic model to

¹⁰⁴ Leonard Sweet, *The Well-played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn't Have to Be Such Hard Work* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 213.

reach people within this Boomer demographic must be a focus on helping them transition, not lose, their purpose in life as they enter retirement. Sociologist Hector Garcia expands on this idea:

Those who give up the things they love doing and do well lose their purpose in life. That's why it's so important to keep doing things of value, making progress, bringing beauty or utility to others, help out, and shaping the world around you, even after your "official" professional activity has ended.¹⁰⁵

Leonard Sweet adds to this idea, "The time until Jesus returns is not the time for rocking-chair readiness, indemnified dreams, or risk-free investments. The third age is the time to blaze new trails, find undiscovered truths, explore strange lands, search for better worlds in which to live and love."¹⁰⁶ To further examine how to help people discover purpose, we will explore an idea from Japan and its proclivity, as well as in eight other locations of the world, to produce centenarians in great volume. Hector Garcia and Francesca Mirallas, in their work *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, give us the foundations for this idea: "In addition to a healthful diet, a simple life in the outdoors, green tea, and the subtropical climate is the *ikigai* that shapes their lives."¹⁰⁷ At the core of physical and mental health for growing old is the basic philosophy of *ikigai*. Garcia and Mirallas explain it this way, "Our *ikigai* is different for all of us, but one thing we have in common is that we are all searching for meaning. When we spend our days feeling connected to what is meaningful to us, we live more fully, when we lose

¹⁰⁵ Héctor García, Francesc Miralles, and Heather Cleary, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 184.

¹⁰⁶ Sweet, *The Well-played Life*, 189.

¹⁰⁷ García, Miralles, and Cleary, *Ikigai*, 3.

the connection, we feel despair.”¹⁰⁸ Core to the philosophy of finding our ikigai is understanding the intersection of what motivates us with what serves the world around us.

Applying this concept of helping people find their ikigai, at the center of the evangelistic effort of the Sobremesa Dinner Group is helping people, often cynical, consumerist, and narcissistic, recenter their lives into something of greater significance and meaning by engaging them in ministry to and with the poor. Parker Palmer, writing about the joy he is experiencing in old age though living into a purposeful life, expresses this idea of ikigai well in his newly published memoir on growing old called *On the Brink of Everything*. “That’s exactly where I am today at age seventy-nine. I’m frequently awestruck as I stand on the brink of the rest of my life, including the part called death, which I sometimes think I can almost see from here.”¹⁰⁹ His statement also transitions into the second shift that needs to be addressed in creating a Dinner Church community to reach into an AALC community; to focus on sufficiency and death.

Abundance versus Sufficiency

This shift from focusing on the poor to focusing on those who are of higher economic status leads to a second and associated transition that must be established to have effective ministry within an AALC. For this transition to take effect, we need to move from focusing on abundance to a new focusing on sufficiency. This transition

¹⁰⁸ García, Miralles, and Cleary, *Ikigai*, 183.

¹⁰⁹ Parker Palmer, *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 13.

provides an opportunity to support a theology of the poor while ministering to and with those of higher means.

Fosner establishes that “another value that emanated from the dinner church practice was the image of abundance. An abundance of food, more than the attendees could possibly eat, characterized hospitality; it shaped not only the biblical stories of loaves and fishes, but also the agape meals.”¹¹⁰ This image is very important for the Dinner Church located within a sore neighborhood, as it reveals the overflowing grace of God. Fosner continues, “The image of abundance remains of deep importance to God because it reveals the generous nature of the gospel, and it spills forward to this very day.”¹¹¹ Foster describes in vivid detail a description of an average Dinner Church evening: “When guests walk into a dinner church, hosts greet them and direct them toward a buffet table leaded with an abundance of food that has been colorfully displayed. The overflowing buffet tables illustrate an abundant gospel. These feasts feature full-course meals served from hot chaffing dishes and carved meat stations.”¹¹² In a community that is often focused on scarcity and lack of provision it is important to convey that God is active in providing for all of our needs.

But in an AALC, we find the average Boomer is part of a community of consumerism and overabundance. By making a slight shift in focus from abundance to sufficiency, we can create an environment that provides a new model attractive to those seeking meaning in life. Leonard Sweet gives us a base for this shift:

¹¹⁰ Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 35.

¹¹¹ Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 36.

¹¹² Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 68.

Jesus exhibited a theology of enoughness and envisioned a world where everyone has enough. Jesus himself knew what it meant to “Live *Dayenu*.” *Dayenu* is Hebrew for “It is enough.” He lived simply and mindfully and knew when “enough” was “enough” in his life. Jesus lived a life of enoughness instead of too-muchness. In the words of the proverbialist, “Give me neither poverty nor wealth,” but only enough (Prov. 30:8 NEB). Disciples of Jesus eat good food with bad people, and “Live *Dayenu*.”¹¹³

Chester, speaking to the church of affluence today, reminds us of this idea to be dependent on God for enough: “Every time we eat, we celebrate again our dependence on God and his faithfulness to his creation. Every time. Food is to be received with gratitude. ‘Taking the five loaves...he gave thanks’ (Luke 9:16, NIV)”¹¹⁴ For the Boomer to understand and experience the image of sufficiency or “enoughness,” they must deal with the idea of mortality and death. This may seem counterintuitive, yet consistently, research has shown that, when people come to the place of accepting the finiteness of life, people shift their focus outward and into more substantive endeavors. This is relevant for the Boomer whose life is moving toward that end point. Quoting psychologist David Feinstein, Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi, in his book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, reveals this truth:

“When we confront our mortality, a shift occurs in our attention that makes us more aware of how precious life really is,” says psychologist David Feinstein, co-author of *Rituals for Living and Dying*. “We have an enhanced ability to accept ourselves, along with a greater ability to love. We lose the pervasive anxiety that makes us grasp obsessively for power, wealth, and fame. As we discover a deepened sense of purpose and a profound connectedness with other people, we tend to be motivated by higher, more universal values, such as love, beauty, truth, and justice.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Leonard Sweet, *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 134.

¹¹⁴ Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 70.

¹¹⁵ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014), 83.

Grasping this truth allows us to be released from worry and doubt so that we can pray with conviction, “Give us each day our daily bread (Luke 11:2-3). That is how Jesus teaches us to pray. We need to pray for our daily bread not because we’re worried about where our next meal might come from, but because we’re not.”¹¹⁶

Schachter-Shamlomi expresses the need to teach this truth to anyone moving-into fullness for the remainder of life:

As we approach the subject of our mortality, let’s be clear from the beginning: Death is not a cosmic mistake. Woven into the warp and woof of existence, the presence of death deepens our appreciation of life. It also regenerates our psyches in preparation for harvesting. The more we embrace our mortality not as an aberration of God and nature, but as an agent urging us on to life completion, the more our anxiety transforms into feelings of awe, thanksgiving, and appreciation.¹¹⁷

As we develop a Sobremesa Dinner Group through the style of presentation of the meal and study of Jesus, we have to help people move to a mentality of sufficiency that recognizes mortality and helps them focus on the day at hand in order to live into that day with purpose and sacrificial service.

Larger Community versus Authentic Relationships

One of the essential elements of the Dinner Church movement is that they have worked to engage with numbers consistent with smaller communities of approximately 150 people rather than with megachurches. Fosner supports this focus on groups of 150 through a series of examples:

Historically, people gather in groups of 150 at a time. Malcolm Gladwell refers to this as the “rule of 150.” In twenty-one hunter-gatherer societies, the average village had 148.8 people; most military fighting units constitute fewer than 200

¹¹⁶ Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 71.

¹¹⁷ Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, 82.

soldiers; the Hutterite communities of the sixteenth century grew no larger than 150, and John Wesley collected people into communities numbering about 150. The most visible sociological line between organic structures and secondary structures remains 150 people...Contrary to the church growth message, not every group should feel obligated to progress to a secondary social structure.¹¹⁸

I applaud Fosner on his focus upon working to keep Dinner Churches small communities of faith, but number goals like this are not going to be effective in reaching “Dones” who live within AALCs. To reach this population, we must understand the need for small and deeply authentic relationships that can be and forged in smaller groups of five to fifteen people. Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope offer us some insight here as they examine those who have left the church in their book *Church Refugees*:

The dechurched also cling to one another. They deeply desire to be part of a community. They find or create these communities wherever they are with whoever is around them. The data revealed a stunning variety of communities: online communities, neighborhood-block groups, small groups still associated with churches, dinner clubs, Bible studies, and numerous other kinds of groups that met regularly and had an underlying spiritual component.¹¹⁹

One common characteristic of these communities with which the dechurched strive to associate is that these communities are small, especially within the Boomer community. In his book *The Search to Belong*, Joseph Myers tells us, “People are trying to find their place in this world not in individualist ways but in ways that connect. They are searching for the ‘back forty,’ for a place to belong. They are searching for family.”¹²⁰ Myers is quick to point out that these connections are going to happen, not by contrived rigid development, but through authentic holistic community.

¹¹⁸ Fosner, “Dinner Church: An Urban Proposal,” 81.

¹¹⁹ Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015), 132.

¹²⁰ Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 26.

In launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group, the need to connect Boomers at a small group level seems imperative for success. An added dimension is the connection to the larger institutional church that is overseeing the Sobremesa Dinner Group. This can be accomplished through an invitation to bi-annual dinner gatherings at the host church, bringing together the greater Sobremesa Dinner Group at one location for a meal with entertainment and basic Christian instruction. Even these bi-annual gatherings would be limited to approximately 150 people, consistent with a Dinner Church model.

Sobremesa Dinner Group

Having established the Dinner Church elements essential to launch a Sobremesa Dinner Group, we complete this section by examining the structure of a proposed Sobremesa Dinner Group. By applying the elements key to the Dinner Church Collective's success and adapting the other important elements, this model provides a great opportunity to reach the AALC with an authentic and approachable model, touching people where they live and sharing the essence of the gospel while allowing them to work through their own faith journey.

Launching A Sobremesa Dinner Group

I have found a great excitement from this population about the prospect of joining a dinner community that spends time in religious dialog through the typical Boomer living within an AALC and from personal experience working with Boomers who would be classified as Dones within our own congregation. To provide a foundational tool to present the Sobremesa Dinner Group in a community of well-education persons seeking to continue to grow in their retirement years, I introduced this idea through a short, highly

attractive book laying out a call to engagement as well as an introduction to the Sobremesa Community. This book would ultimately direct a prospective Sobremesa Dinner participant to a website giving a four-week outline to launch a new community. These two elements comprise the artifact associated with this project and are explained in greater detail in Sections Four and Five.

A Typical Evening of a Sobremesa Dinner Group

The vision of the Sobremesa Dinner Group is that once or twice a month a group will gather at the home of one of the participants around a dinner table. The food for the evening can be provided by the host, another group member, or by the whole group bringing different parts of the meal. As the group sits down to the table, an opening statement and prayer will be read to launch the evening. After the meal, there will be a reading of a Jesus story followed by a dialog that strives to provide an open and safe environment for all participants. Following the dialog, a time of prayer will take place where the group can pray for one another's needs.

The Bi-Annual Gathering

At the core of the Fresh Expressions movement is that the institutional church has something to offer new expressions of faith and that these new expressions also have something to offer the historic/institutional church. As this model is being launched from a mainline denominational (institutional) congregation, it would be a natural place for a connection to take place between the institutional church and the Sobremesa Dinner Communities. This connection will occur through bi-annual gatherings at the home church where Sobremesa Dinner Groups and church members join for dinner, Christian-

based entertainment, and basic instruction. These gatherings will be like a traditional Dinner Church Collective gathering and will focus on mixed tables of people so that relationships and bonds can be forged and learning take place on all sides.

Conclusion

The church has been offered a wonderful tool for the early 21st century that is being used effectively in sharing Jesus in vastly unreached groups of people across the US. This model has all the elements essential to be utilized within an AALC if we are willing to transition the model in some areas to be effective for the semi-affluent demographic of the average Boomer moving into one of these communities. As we take the lessons learned and apply them to places like The Villages, the church will effectively reach outside of its doors and make a powerful impact on a Boomer population that has 20 to 30 vital years remaining within our North American 50-and-beyond subculture. Our goal is to implement this new model over the next year in The Villages and, from this initial implementation, develop a model that can be used in other communities like The Villages.

SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The artifact for this project consists of two elements. The first element will be a short book of invitation and introduction called *Welcome to the Sobremesa Dinner Group*. The second element will be a website called sobremesacafe.com. At this website a participant will find a four-week introduction to launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group, a link to icebreakers, a link to Jesus Stories and a community board. Used in combination, these two elements will connect with post-Christian Boomers living within AALCs and will give them the foundational resources and attractional call to engage in a new activity within their communities. The following describes each element of the artifact for this project.

The primary element of this artifact is publishing the book *Welcome to the Sobremesa Dinner Group*. This book will be a short introduction to and invitation into launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group with friends and neighbors. As this book is geared toward the Dones of the AALC community, it will be honest and open about the fact that it is ultimately a spiritually focused dinner community while highlighting the elements that would make this type of community appealing for the demographic being reached. It is believed this type of book will appeal to the ever-growing community of retired Boomers who see themselves as spiritual but are not actively engaged within a Christian community of faith.

As stated in Section Three, the once-a-month Sobremesa Dinner Group will focus on gathering around a good meal and having dialog around deep questions relevant for the day in combination with hearing and having dialogue about a Jesus Story. The website will consist of the information needed to establish a local Sobremesa Dinner

Group with a basic outline and the resources necessary for success. The website will provide a foundation that will establish the spiritual element of the community from the launch of a new Sobremesa Dinner Group. By utilizing an engaging video, a deep topic for discussion, and basic questions upon which to focus, the website will establish an environment and tone for the community that is fun, engaging, and safe for open and honest dialog.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

The research of this dissertation has shown that AALCs are rapidly growing with Boomers, who are predominately done with the church but are still seeking a spiritual base for life. Further, it has revealed that, while the church recognizes this growing population segment, it has been unable to attract this segment back into the institutional church community in any viable way. The artifact that has been developed for this project consists of two elements designed to draw nominal and post-Christians into a home-based dinner community with the goal that these dinner communities would ultimately become a true fresh expression of the church and combine to be part of a larger community of faith in an AALC.

Structure

The main goal of my artifact is to develop a short, artistically appealing book combined with an instructional website to be used by congregational leaders to invite participants into a Sobremesa Dinner Group. I believe these combined elements have the potential to reach nominal and post-Christians in a way that will draw them into an authentic and vibrant community of faith that is unlike those that they have previously experienced. The following explains the structure of these elements.

Audience

The audience for this artifact is Boomers living within AALCs who are nominally active within local congregations or have altogether abandoned the institutional church but still are active spiritual seekers. This audience makes up approximately 30% to 40%

of AALCs today. Culturally, this audience is educated and active within small communities of friends and clubs. The research has found that, while this audience would not be considered foodies, they do focus much of their recreational life around tables in close friendship circles. The scope of the artifact utilizes two elements important in the life of this community: their proclivity toward the development of small communities of friends and their tendency toward focused fellowship around tables. As an educated community that prizes reflection, growth, and aesthetic beauty, the booklet will be attractive and informative, with the desire to inspire the recipient to try a new form of spiritual interaction. The book and the initial dinners will intentionally address the spiritual aspect of the dinner communities as this population is leery of the potential for “bait and switch.” The website, sobremesacafe.com is the second element of the artifact, which will provide the tools needed for a successful Sobremesa Dinner Group.

Location

The goal of this artifact is that the audience will develop Sobremesa Dinner Groups in their homes. While this population tends to dine out often, the core elements essential for developing a thriving community will necessitate the more private atmosphere of a local home over that of a restaurant. The elements of the artifact will also be explicit that these home dinner communities are connected to a local congregation and that an important part of the Sobremesa Dinner Group is the bi-annual combined dinner gathering at the local church that hosts the Sobremesa Dinner Group.

Goals and Strategies

The goal of this project is a complete program an inherited church could use to launch their own Sobremesa Dinner Group. This program would include an additional book geared toward pastors and/or church leaders introducing the Sobremesa Dinner Group model as well as the two elements that are being developed for the current project. While this is the overarching goal of the project, the initial two elements of the shorter book and the website need to be beta-tested within our local congregation before making it available to other churches. While the goal is that the second element be a website, I will use our church's lakedeatongrows.com blog and add a link as a host site for this website. This will allow for further development and for changes to be made before paying for host website development and upkeep.

Certain elements of this dissertation project have been tested in our community over the past three years but were not called Sobremesa Dinner Group. They were more geared towards people inside of the church. It was initially the goal of this dissertation to test this project in its fullness throughout the final year of my Doctor of Ministry program. I had an initial cohort of three Sobremesa Dinner Groups in place to launch when we were shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With everything in place, it is my goal that these initial elements be utilized through the summer of 2021, with groups being launched by fall of 2021. From these initial groups, our goal will be to refine the current elements of the artifact and develop the overall program that can be launched publicly for other congregations by the summer of 2022. Success will be measured on this project in the number of groups initially formed and then monitoring the measured progress of each group, focusing primarily on

community development and the identification of spiritual dialog within the community. A significant emphasis will also be the attendance of the first and second greater community gatherings. At these events, we will measure the perceived excitement of respective groups and individuals.

Artifact Description

The Book

The first element, the book, will be short in length, keeping to less than 20,000 words. Each chapter will be focused on the courses of the meal to create great metaphor and utilize photography and other artistic elements to give visual appeal. In the following, I will unpack the general flow of the book through a description of the five chapters.

The Appetizer. The first chapter, The Appetizer, will offer an invitation into a new way of living in spiritual community. It will use the fact that our tendency as a nation today is to be foodies but note that most people are casual foodies and it's really all about the table fellowship. This chapter will introduce the main themes of Sobremesa: friends, table, and dialog.

The Salad. In this chapter, the basic structure of a Sobremesa Dinner Group evening (or other time) will be described for the audience. Using a quote from chef Yotam Ottolenghi, "a well-made salad must have a certain uniformity; it should make perfect sense for those ingredients to share a bowl,"¹²¹ this chapter will focus on the key

¹²¹ Yotam Ottolenghi, "Yotam Ottolenghi's End-of-Winter Salad Recipes," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/09/late-winter-salad-recipes-ottolenghi>.

ingredients for a successful Sobremesa Dinner Group. It will also offer a more substantial defense on this new type of spiritual community.

The Entrée. Beginning with the chapter *The Entrée*, the focus will narrow in dealing with the three key ingredients that make up a Sobremesa Dinner Group: great friends, good food, and deep dialog. This chapter will focus on the great friends, emphasizing the details about the “who and how” of invitation and the goals of the community gathered: spiritual growth, deeper friendships, and lived out common life together.

The Dessert. In this chapter, the food will be discussed and focus on issues dealing with the meal itself. In this chapter we will unfold ideas about sufficiency over abundance and how to make the meals real and authentic for the group. It will also present ideas about the function of the food to encourage community and openness.

The Sobremesa. In the chapter *The Sobremesa*, the description of Sobremesa will be unpacked fully. The focus will be upon getting to the heart of the evening, which is going deeper with each other and with God through dialog. Suggestions on approaches to study and rules for dialog will be included in this chapter.

The Website

The second element, the website, will have several parts: A Welcome, a four-week introduction, a location to get icebreakers, a location to get Jesus stories, and a Community Board. The heart of the website will be the four-week introduction for any potential Sobremesa Dinner Group to use to guide it through its launch process. This website will be located on our lakedeatongrows.com blogsite initially for easy access for our community. Each week, the introduction will consist of three separate posts that can

accessed through our website: the first posting a video introduction of the goal for the week, the second post will be an introduction into the theme for the evening, and the third post will be an introduction into practical elements of the Sobremesa Dinner Group. The four-week introduction will focus as follows.

Week One: Welcome. The main goal for week one is for the group to enjoy an evening together and begin to dialog about what they would like their community to look like. This week's post will focus on the three elements of good food, great friends, and deep dialog. It will also include a proposed plan to establish the basics for good spiritual dialog. This week the challenge will be given to establish a two- or three-month commitment to meet together.

Week Two: Deeper Goals. Week two will add structure to the development of the team by working through longer-term issues such as the dinner itself, where to meet, and other overarching issues for the community. This week, the spiritual reflection will be on living past the superficial to intentional dialog around the spiritual and commitment to going deeper with friends.

Week Three: Dealing with Diversity. Week three will focus on issues of diversity within the community of friends and to establish guidelines for dealing with issues that arise around differing opinions. This week will also focus on how to strive for authenticity in the community.

Week Four: Long-Term Growth. The final week of the introduction series will focus on how to create an environment for spiritual growth and creativity in which to keep the community together and growing. This week will discuss the connection with the greater church community and direction for how to connect with other groups. It will

extend an invitation to the bi-annual combined gathering that will take place at the church.

Conclusion

These key elements of the invitational book and the website will provide a sufficient foundation to grow a Sobremesa Dinner Group, reaching out to an audience the congregation will never reach with traditional outreach. It will provide a fresh expression from the congregation that has the potential to add new and exciting creativity for the existing inherited congregation's mission and ministry.

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

Bill and Maggie, a recently retired couple who had just celebrated their first year of living in The Villages, the largest AALC in the world, were still excited about their choice to leave their home and embrace the active retirement lifestyle that had been promised to them on their move into The Villages. Of the many activities that they engaged in, one of their favorites was their church. While they had only attended about five or six times, they considered themselves active members of this large congregation and they called Lake Deaton UMC home. They had been involved and active in their churches throughout much of their adult life, but now that they had finally made it into retirement, they were ready and felt justified in joining a church that was not so intrusive on their active lifestyle.

They had a little apprehension when their pastor invited them to lunch. Was he going to try to push them into plugging in at a deeper level or guilt them on their attendance? After the usual chit-chat and get-to-know-you conversation, they were surprised that they were not asked to volunteer for some church job or guilted into more active engagement. They were even more surprised when the pastor asked them to come to an informational meeting about a new home church group they felt sounded interesting. After some explanation and answers to several questions, they decided to attend the meeting and find out more about this alternative style of church.

Summary of Execution

During the first four months of 2020, I began the process of developing this ministry outreach which has become called the Sobremesa Dinner Group. The Sobremesa

Dinner Group is a group of missionally minded people who are members of Lake Deaton United Methodist Church, The Villages, Florida. The goal of the project was to experiment with a model of church that I have named Dinner Church 2.0, which was formulated from the Dinner Church model. Initially, the goal of the project was to work with this volunteer group for three months to see if, within this relatively short time period, the participants would begin to experience connectional growth in a home-based missional dinner encounter. This would be followed up with a second round of launching Dinner Churches in the fall of 2020, which would be geared toward people who are classified as nominal or post-Christian.

Over the three-month experiment, I had six hours of large group dialog and training with the original participants, five hours of interview/dialog with group leaders, ten hours of development time with a clergy colleague who is developing a similarly based model focused on the community gathering, and about 15 hours of research and analysis.

Shortly after launching this experiment, our process was interrupted because of global events that prevented our small groups from meeting and stopped all larger gatherings as well. While this precluded our experience to be lived out fully to the desired outcome, I was still able to have dialog with group leaders, form some observation of parts of the experiment which seemed weak, and draw conclusions.

Critical Analysis

In the fall of 2019, I spent time researching the Dinner Church model, as well as studying other dinner church models that are growing within the United States. The Dinner Church model is a form of evangelism that originates from the early church and is

finding great success within the United States and beyond. While it is finding success, it is focused almost exclusively on reaching into under-resourced neighborhoods and is conducted at a large scale of 50 to 300 participants in an average Dinner Church encounter. From developing an understanding of the specific elements of the Dinner Church model that seem essential to the success of a ministry of this type, I developed an understanding of areas that could be modified, changed, or even dropped so that this model could become relevant within a different type of people group than where it is predominantly being utilized. This new ministry area is that of Active Adult Living Communities (AALC).

This research led to the development of a model that I called Dinner Church 2.0. The Dinner Church 2.0 model utilized the essential elements of the Dinner Church model, but focused them on small, home-based communities of six to twelve participants. This model of relationship is happening in great numbers today all around the U.S. People are understanding at a heart level that health and wellbeing is centered around common tables that have wonderful food and deep dialog. Kristin Schell, in *The Turquoise Table*, says of her learning the lessons of the table from studying abroad, “People in France gathered at tables not just once a week, not just for holidays, but three times a day, giving a whole new meaning to ‘leisurely meal.’”¹²² Tim Chester describes it this way: “Think about your dining room or kitchen table. What dramas have been played out around this simple piece of furniture? Day by day you’ve chatted with your family,

¹²² Schnell, *The Turquoise Table*, 4.

sharing news, telling stories, and poking fun... guests have been welcomed. People have found home.”¹²³

I also worked with an app that has been developed within the Church of England, called “Godsend,” and the development of a model of broad-based support around this model for encouragement and support for those who are launching smaller evangelist communities such as that of the Dinner Church 2.0. Michael Moynagh, one of the originators of the Fresh Expressions movement in the U.K. was instrumental in the development of the GodSend app. Moynagh says, “When you desire passionately to serve other people, all your other priorities will fall into place. Your life focus will shift from what works best for you to what is best for the people you feel led to serve. Time, money, and friendships become ‘re-engineered’ around your call.”¹²⁴ The problem, though, with this call is the need for available resources to give you support and direction in how to support the call and find success. This happens through the GodSend app.

Through the initial launching of these communities, the name was changed from Dinner Church 2.0 to Sobremesa Dinner Group. Sobremesa is a Spanish word that is ripe with flavor. *The Local*, an international news outlet, sums up the meaning in this way: “Sobremesa literally means over the table, but in Spanish it’s used to refer to the period after a meal when you chat with friends or family and enjoy each other’s company.”¹²⁵

I believe the methodology and the objectives of this experiment have been sound and were set to accomplish the stated goals of ascertaining the openness of post-

¹²³ Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 10.

¹²⁴ Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life*, 152.

¹²⁵ The Local, October 4, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.es/20191004/spanish-word-of-the-day-sobremesa>.

Christians living within AALCs to becoming part of Sobremesa Café Communities, where spiritual dialog may be able to take place. Unfortunately, the global events of COVID-19 impacted the overall effectiveness of this study due to its almost total dependence on close personal contact between its participants.

By the end of February, we were forced to begin to dismantle public and then private gatherings, which took away the prime elements of this experiment. While our home group participation, a central facet of this experiment, did not take place due to the COVID-19 outbreak and its ensuing quarantine, I do not consider this time to be a waste. I have been able to respond to several logistical issues that our pioneer groups have had with the model and have been able to make significant changes to that model that will make the next trial much more meaningful and, I believe, lead toward a successful result.

Personal Discoveries

From this research, I have also had many personal discoveries that I believe will have impact on my future ministry. I began the Doctor of Ministry project with the goal of finding an effective way to engage the ever-growing number of post-Christians who inhabit AALCs. While I believe I have found a model that can do this, I have also found a need to take place to engage those who are “insiders” so they do not move into this post-Christian category. The research suggests that the traditional ways that senior adult Christians have been engaged by the church has not been effective or even relevant to where their true needs are for the season of life they find themselves in. Many choose to treat senior adults like they are invalid and no longer active. I have learned that people moving into the third state of life need to be engaged with meaningful opportunities for active and purposeful ministry and work. Health is a major concern for people who are

living within their third age, but it is not the motivating factor that will excite them and engage them for meaningful retirement. Churches that are engaging people in meaningful, service-oriented ministry to the real needs of the world outside the door of the church are the churches that are growing and expanding the lives of the members of the community.

APPENDIX A: ARTIFACT ELEMENT ONE

WELCOME TO THE SOBREMESA DINNER GROUP

WRITTEN TRANSCRIPT

WELCOME TO THE SOBREMESA DINNER GROUP
A NEW WAY TO BUILD DEEP FRIENDSHIPS AND GROW SPIRITUALLY

BY JIM DIVINE

...let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do,
but encourage one another...

Hebrews 10:25

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this introduction of something which we call the Sobremesa Dinner Group. Over the course of this book, we want to share with you a story, as well as give you an invitation to be part of something that we believe is really needed in today's polarized world: the opportunity to develop a great group of friends who are able to honestly dialogue about real issues, all set around a dinner table.

For us this story began in the course of developing a new Christian community in The Villages, Florida. The Villages is the largest and fastest growing Active Adult Living Community in the world. It is a community that is built around recreation, entertainment and active living. Every evening, 365 days a year, The Villages' "town centers" offer live entertainment and cheap drinks. Any day of the week a Villager (a resident of The Villages) can golf at any of the 12 championship and more than 40 executive golf courses. They can also participate in pickleball, basketball, swimming, or any of dozens of sports. A Villager can engage in as many clubs and organizations as they could imagine; the current list of active clubs is over 125 pages (<https://www.districtgov.org/images/clubslisting.pdf>). As you can see, the community is an active place for over people who are over 55 years of age. This is the reason The Villages continues to grow at such a rapid rate.

However, when we began our new congregation, we quickly discovered that there was a dark side to the excitement of The Villages. As a pastor launching a new church, I would often visit with someone over lunch or coffee. Many times, when I tried to discuss how they could get involved in the church, they would express that they were done with active involvement in a church, that they had completed their time in service, and that

they had moved to The Villages to just have fun and live out their remaining days enjoying the fruits of their labor. I would often express that the wonderful thing about living in The Villages is that someone can have all the activity, the entertainment, and the rewards of living in such a place, while actively participating in the meaningful things in life: serving others and living into their life's mission (which I would remind them does not stop at retirement). Almost always, they would respond with something like, "That's OK for you, Pastor Jim, but not me."

Gradually we discovered that this lifestyle of constant entertainment and play did not yield deep, meaningful relationships. In fact, we had to face the possibility that our church, in and of itself, could be just another one of the many clubs and organizations that keep people busy without engaging them on a deep, inner level. This tendency toward superficiality, found in The Villages and places like it, usually seems fun for a period of time, but when life hits—the golf and pickleball fall away, health concerns grow large, or a spouse is diagnosed with the beginning of Alzheimer's—these superficial communities often seem to evaporate. In this new form of communal connection, we have found that although the quantity and variety of groups and organizations seem to proliferate in places like The Villages, the social depth of prior generations has diminished, to the ultimate casualty of social capital¹²⁶. Robert Putnam, in his classic book *Bowling Alone*, documents the decline of social capital and the deep impact this has on our culture. To illustrate this loss, Putnam quotes - not a sociologist

¹²⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19. Putnam defines social capital as the value that social networks produce in society. *Bowling Alone*. 19

nor an economist - but none other than Yogi Berra: “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”¹²⁷ You may spend a few minutes thinking about that one, but for our purposes, we have to acknowledge that, despite all of the activity that people are involved in while living in The Villages, there seems to be a loss of social capital; without which people cannot be there for each other in times of need. We found ourselves asking how to develop a way to help people find depth, purpose and deep community during their retirement years, even while living in a place like The Villages.

You are holding the outcome of our question. Over the past three years we have begun developing a way for a small group of people to engage with each other around good food and deep conversation. We have found that this engagement can give them a meaningful purpose in their retirement years, as well as help them develop great friendships in the midst of their journey of growing older. This is a model of living that can have an impact on people who are in the church and can have an impact on people outside the church, with spiritual questions that they are working through in their lives. We think it is something that could impact your life as well.

Over the next few pages, we will introduce this model, which we have called The Sobremesa Dinner Group, and give you the basics for how to start such a group with your friends. We hope this book will engage and call you into a new and deeper path which still allows for all the other great things of life as well. We have organized this book around five courses of a great meal: Appetizer, Salad, Main Course, Dessert, and the Sobremesa (you will hear much more about this one). Each of these provides a foundation for learning about a different aspect of The Sobremesa Dinner Group. As you

¹²⁷ Yogi Berra, quoted by Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

read these chapters our hope is that you will feel encouraged to apply the lessons that we have learned, and to ultimately design your own group in a way that fits within your context and community.

We welcome you to this great adventure that we have begun to dive into at Lake Deaton United Methodist Church. Our hope is that, as a great meal will satisfy our hunger for delicious food, so too may this book satisfy our hunger for meaningful and deep relationship.

CHAPTER ONE: THE APPETIZER

“My life changed when I was able to not only get seated in nice restaurants, I was given free appetizers. That was like, “Oh, My God, I’ve arrived.”

Matt Groening

Let’s face it, we have become a foodie nation! We love good food. I intentionally say *good* food, because we are not necessarily obsessed with great or extravagant food, but “feel good” basic food. In The Villages, expensive restaurants are just as full on a Tuesday night as the local pizza place. The one thing they share is that they are typically full of people eating in community. This is the deeper truth: we are a foodie nation that is *communal*. We love the act of sitting down at the table and enjoying good food with great friends.

This may sound crazy, but I think appetizers have become more popular than ever, for the simple reason that in ordering an appetizer we are able to show love for those with whom we are sharing a table. Appetizers are almost always ordered as a communal item, and they serve to open a great evening together with friends. There is a ritual that goes with ordering an appetizer: someone has to ask the table, “Hey do we want to get an appetizer?”

And the group almost always says, “Yes!”

The server comes and the game begins. “We will take the cheese sticks lightly smothered in Belgium Honey, and dribbled *Tuong Ot Sriracha* - add that to my bill!”

To which all the other participants immediately reply, “No, put that on *my* bill!”

In this simple game of paying for the appetizer we establish that we are all excited to be with each other for a time of good food and great fellowship.

Another aspect of our foodie nation communal aspiration is that we like to be at a table which experiences deep and authentic conversation. At dinner parties or other large social gatherings, a participant often meanders around a room, engaging in small talk with several people over the course of an evening. On the other hand, when someone goes to dinner with a few great friends, they go with the expectation of having deep and meaningful conversation. Nothing is worse than going to dinner for the first time just to experience an awkward silence; this is when conversations have to be agonizingly drawn out of people. The time will tick by, and everyone will wait for “No thanks, we’re too full for dessert tonight,” and the end of the evening will finally arrive! The dinner guests may be wonderful people, yet their hosts will have made a mental note to never dine alone with them again!

When it comes to deep dialog, I have found that - without some intentional forethought - our deep conversations often end up being deep conversations of trivia, or nothingness. Don’t get me wrong, sometimes sitting at a table with great friends experiencing good food and talking about nothing for two hours can be wonderful and can be an amazing way to wash off the stress of a long day. Having said that, with a little planning and intentionality, I find that most people love to have conversations that are deeper in nature.

That’s what this book is about, the intentionality of developing a community of Great Friends, experiencing good food and authentic deep dialogue: specifically, dialogue revolving around spiritual and cultural issues that are important for most of us today. Over the next few pages, I will introduce you to a new form of dinner community called the Sobremesa Dinner Group that is becoming an important part of the lives of many

people within our community and which could possibly take you to a deeper level of peace and relationship in your life journey as well.

Great Friends

For my wife and I this concept of a Sobremesa Dinner Group started almost 20 years ago, when we and three other couples decided to gather every month for an International Wine and Dine evening. This was something I remembered my parents being part of when I was a teenager, and I thought it would be a fun way to get to know people after moving to a new community in Tallahassee, Florida. When we started our group, we knew the other couples and liked being around them, but none of us were what you would call “deep friends.” We met for our first dinner and proposed the new gathering. Everyone was excited to take part, and it was decided that we would meet monthly, rotating homes and enjoying dinner from whatever country the host couple chose for that month. Our group had three basic rules: first, each guest couple must bring a relevant food item, which had to be personally made and not store bought. Second, the host couple would make the Entrée of the meal. Finally, everyone would also bring an interesting fact about or current issue in the country of choice to discuss when we gathered for our monthly dinner.

Over the years that our group met, we found that our conversations grew deeper, and that our involvement in each other’s lives became more profound. Today, even though my wife and I no longer live near them, we still consider that group to be some of our closest friends in the world. The simple truth is that **the dinner table is a great place to develop significant relationships**. There is something that happens when a group of

people gather around a table that causes authentic and lasting relationships to develop.

Author Leonard Sweet describes it like this:

You can't build a relationship without spending time together. You can't get to know someone without talking with them. The best place to spend time together, talking to each other and getting to know one another, is a table. Relationships are not like mirrors, where everything you see is really about you. Relationships are like meals, where you feed yourself while feeding each other.¹²⁸

Over the ten years that our group met for our monthly International Wine and Dine night we discovered that we provided each other with both great food *and* critical comfort in times of trial; with encouragement when someone needed lifting up; with accountability when someone started down a dangerous path.

One of the greatest needs we have in our world today is the need for authentic friends, who are there to celebrate the good days of life's journey, and who are there to comfort in the bad days, when everything seems to be falling apart. The dinner table for us has been the perfect place to develop our closest friendships. Whether you are a young single person just starting out in the world or a newly retired couple who have moved into an Active Adult Living Community, we all need to have a group of friends who we can live life with and who will stand by our side. Several years ago, I read *Making Room for Life*, by Randy Frazee, and discovered a new term the "refrigerator friend." Frazee describes a refrigerator friend as someone who is close enough to you that when they enter your house, they can walk straight to the refrigerator and, without asking, open it to make a sandwich.¹²⁹ That's the kind of friends that we need today. The Sobremesa

¹²⁸ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 59.

¹²⁹ Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life: Trading Chaotic Lifestyles for Connected Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 51.

Dinner Group is a place to organically develop refrigerator friends who walk through a period of our life with us. We will unpack this idea of great friends more in Chapter 3, “The Entrée.”

Deep Dialogue

Sobremesa Dinner Communities are also about deep dialogue. We live in a world that is progressively becoming more polarized every day. Never before, in 57 years of life, have I experienced the social, political, religious, economic, and racial divergence that we are feeling today. Everyone and everything seem to be splitting apart. Living in this age of divergence has created great strain on the social fabric of our community. This has caused many within our community to begin to take sides and to move away from others who were once considered friends. We have found within our community of The Villages that many are choosing to participate in activities and organizations only superficially, not engaging at any level beyond the function of the club or organization itself. While this may be an effective way to alleviate the discomfort of disagreement, it also leads to a shallowness that does not give us the depth that we need from meaningful relationships. Sociologists have stated that the way out of divergence is not separation - it is not in dividing up into our unique tribes and differing communities - but intentional and repeated interaction, and open dialogue with people who are different from us. This is not a time to be splitting off, but a time for seeking a return to real community. In one of my favorite books of all time, *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg opens us to the idea of lost place in America and how it continues to fracture our society:

The problem of place in America has not been resolved and life has become more jangled and garmented. No new form of integral community has been found; the

small town has yet to greet its replacement. And Americans are not a contented people.¹³⁰

Rather than leaving us in that lost place, Oldenburg's book calls us to develop the Third Place, "...public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."¹³¹ While Third Places fulfill many functions, one that Oldenburg emphasizes is that of creating a level field, where differing views and perspectives can come together in open dialogue.¹³²

We have found that effective Sobremesa Dinner Groups work as functional third places, which allow people to come together around open and safe dialogue. Our need for community is often met by the friendships that come through this authentic dialogue, which takes place around a dinner table. The table creates a relaxed environment that opens people into deep conversation.

Within our own community our friends include people who are very different than we are, that are politically on different sides of the aisle, with differing opinions on the pertinent issues of our day. Because of those differences, at times, conversation can become heated. But through the intentionality of gathering regularly around the table, we have created ways to work through issues and listen to others' perspectives. Over our years of gathering we have worked out basic "table rules" that keep us united. The rules even helped us to grow with each other, by being able to hear and experience the voices

¹³⁰ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999), 3.

¹³¹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 16.

¹³² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 24-26.

and stories of others. Chapter Five: “The Sobremesa” will detail how to create an environment for deep and open dialogue.

Good Food

The last ingredient of our Sobremesa Dinner Groups is good food. At the very basic level of developing our dinner encounters was the idea that the dinner table is one of the greatest ways to bring people together that has ever been developed in all of humanity. We believe this is because the table is something which God thought up. That’s a bold statement that we totally stand behind. In both study and observation, we have witnessed that something amazing happens around a table of good food (remember, good food not necessarily *great* food) that opens people up to being hospitable, transparent, communicative and open to listening.

In fact, we first considered this new community group after experiencing a ministry that is having great impact and quick growth throughout North America and Europe today: The Dinner Church. The Dinner Church Collective is a conglomerate of Christian communities reaching into impoverished neighborhoods which is totally built around offering a good, abundant meal and authentic conversation. Not to get too religious, but Verlon Fosner, the founder of the Dinner Church Collective, found that from the very beginning of God’s interaction with humanity “God showed up at mealtime.”¹³³ Fosner observes that the Gospels place eating in community at the heart of

¹³³ Verlon Fosner, *Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 17.

Jesus' earthly ministry; "In fact, Jesus employed a very intentional dinner strategy...an average day would reveal him doing two things repeatedly: healing and eating."¹³⁴

Margaret Feinberg, in her wonderful book *Taste and See*, describes this idea of the table. She tells of eating at a friend's home after a long period of work travel: "Every prior meal to this one during our marathon season of work suddenly felt like pig feed. Our hearts weren't brought back to life because the dinner was swanky or exclusive; our hearts revived because the food was intentional and curated with love. The meal nourished my soul in places I didn't realize I was starving."¹³⁵ The key to Feinberg's description is that the food was *intentional*, and that it was curated with love. We will go deeper in how to develop the intentionality of the food aspect of a Sobremesa Dinner Group in Chapter Four: "The Dessert."

Our Spiritual Journey

I want to take a short time-out before we go further into the idea of the Sobremesa Dinner Group to share with you the heart of why we, Lake Deaton United Methodist Church, have bought into this new model for our community, and why we are introducing it to others. The Sobremesa Dinner Group, I believe, is a safe and creative place to focus on going deeper in life by diving into the spiritual matters that are most important to us. I believe that all people are on a life journey which includes working through spiritual matters. Since the beginning of history people have been asking basic questions of life:

¹³⁴ Verlon Fosner, Dinner Church, 18.

¹³⁵ Margaret Feinberg, *Taste and See: Discovering God Among Butchers, Bakers, And Fresh Food Makers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 13.

where did I come from? Why am I here? How did it all begin? What's the purpose of my life?

I firmly buy into the idea that people have spiritual questions; I also buy into the assumption that most people have within them the ability, within a safe and open community of friends, to work through the basic questions of life and come to conclusions that will give their life more depth and purpose. While I believe in the idea of the Christian community and have committed myself to serving within this community, I know that many people are not going to come into my congregation (or any other congregation) today. As I searched for a way to help people deal with their spiritual questions, while acknowledging that many would not choose to come into our congregation, I started to work through ways to develop a model that would allow a community to emerge which was safe and open for every person, wherever they were on their own personal journey of faith. In fact, much of what we have tried to do within our congregation is develop an environment of safe and open dialogue for all people to be able to work through their own spiritual journey.

The more I studied this idea the more convinced I became that most of us have to have some type of community to be able to work through our big life questions - spiritual and otherwise. We simply were not created to work through these life issues on our own! We were created as communal beings. I also discovered, as I already have shared, that the dinner table is a prime location for communities to develop and grow. When our community discovered the Dinner Church Collective and realized that this basic model could be modified to reach almost any community—especially an Active Adult Living Community such as The Villages—we knew we were on to something good.

Our hope is that you will be able to develop a community of several close friends that become even deeper in relationship—potentially becoming “refrigerator friends” — with whom you can both go through the normal issues of life that all of us must go through and discover the answers to the spiritual questions of life that we all have. With this in mind let’s begin developing a picture of what a Sobremesa Dinner Group *is* and what it *is not* before we move on to the deeper issues of launching your own Dinner Group that will be discussed throughout the rest of the book. We will do this by looking at the next course of a good meal, the Salad. By bringing together some basic good elements we believe we have found a way to develop the deep relationships that so many of us are seeking in life as well as provide a safe environment to dialogue on the spiritual questions that many, if not most of us, have in our lives. It’s all about great friends, good food and deep dialogue. Let’s move ahead as we continue this journey of discovery.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SALAD

“A well-made salad must have a certain uniformity; it should make perfect sense for those ingredients to share a bowl.”

Yotam Ottolenghi

For years I hated salads. I always attributed that fact to my being born and raised in the heartland of Kansas, making me a “meat and potatoes” guy. I am so glad that I finally grew out of this aversion, because I have learned that a good salad mixed with several ingredients can produce amazing flavor. It is also good that I have begun to love salads as I have learned that the healthiest diets are ones that include whole foods; vegetables, fruits, nuts and other items that have not been tampered with to a great extent.

In the first chapter I told you about our International Wine and Dine Group that we were privileged to be part of for ten years. When we moved to our current home eight years ago, we sought to do the same thing. We had been in The Villages for about eight months and were beginning to make friends, but our true desire was to develop the kind of friends that we had in Tallahassee. We invited three couples over to throw out the idea. As we started talking about our Tallahassee group and the idea of getting together, we found that two couples in our group were vegan and that the third couple was moving towards having a healthier, predominantly vegetarian, diet. So much for our choice of friends! It was decided, instead of having an International Dinner Group, that we would have a Vegan Dinner Group. With similar basic rules and processes in place our group made the decision to meet once a month to have a vegan meal.

You may be asking; how could a self-described “meat and potatoes” guy agree to enter into a Vegan Dinner Group? Let me assure you that I have often asked that question of myself. But the simple answer is that we all need diversity. We need to be exposed to

new and different ideas, worldviews, peoples, and (even) food! That is what is so good about a well created salad, it is full of new and exciting flavors blended into one great creation. I learned about this need for diversity from, of all places, a cookbook; one of the best cookbooks ever written, and in fact the only cookbook that I have read cover to cover. The author, Robert Farrar Capon, calls his book *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, a fitting description as it contains so much more than just the recipes needed to produce an extravagant meal. The first time I read through the book (I have since reread it as it was full of such great life insight) I was captivated as Capon would go off on some new tangent, seemingly every few pages, only to bring everything back together with lessons for life and cooking. One of the life lessons which captured me was his idea of expanding ourselves into the new and exotic. Capon talks about exposing his kids to something more than the bland diet of most Americans by taking them down a path of forcing their senses into experiencing new and sometimes unsavory things. To this he says,

True enough, food is only one small corner of the field. They need these experiments even more in music, art and literature, and they need them most of all in their relationships with people—the most startling realities on earth; but for all that, the table is not a bad place to start.¹³⁶

In this one statement Capon calls the active reader into a truth that is at the center of what we have tried to develop through our Sobremesa Dinner Groups, that we need to venture out in many of the mundane parts of our lives. I've become convinced that this is true living, and this truth is what would cause me, a meat and potatoes guy, to say yes to joining a Vegan Dinner Group.

¹³⁶ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 123.

I have to be honest with you, our newfound ventures into vegan cooking did not start off very well. After just a month or two we found ourselves blown away at the amazing things that our group was bringing to the dinner table versus the steamed veggies or basic salads that we would bring. We decided that we needed to up our game. Over the next several years my wife and I have tried to grow in our vegan cooking, seeking to make more and more exotic and exciting dishes to go with our community meal. Even with our hard work, our monthly contribution is almost always the simplest and most bland of all the amazing dishes presented. What we have learned as we have leaned into our group is that salad is one place where we can still shine. Even though everyone takes turns making the different courses of our meals, more often than not my wife Loida and I are tasked with making salad for the group. The salad is such a great thing to bring to a vegan group as it is very simple to put several key ingredients together and produce something which everyone loves. It is our vegan group that has helped me move beyond my meat and potatoes and grow into developing a more diverse palette.

I have learned from our Vegan Dinner Group that our friends are very generous and loving (just like our friends in Tallahassee), that they are amazing cooks and that they are always very encouraging to us in whatever we bring to the table. I have also learned that a fully vegan meal can be amazing. In fact, nearly every month that we have meet I find myself telling the group “This has been *so* delicious that I am almost ready to become totally vegan!” To which everyone groans, as they know I am probably not going to move that way. On a more serious note, while our Vegan Dinner Group is about coming together for a great meal, the thing that stands out about the evening is not the food, but the fellowship and the community that is being nurtured and expanded by the

intentionality of four couples agreeing to come together each month around a table. There is much more that has made this group, like our group in Tallahassee, successful. It is through our monthly gatherings that we have found the essence of what it takes to form a Sobremesa Dinner Group.

Our vegan group actually sums up all that can be great about starting a Sobremesa Dinner Group. When we gather monthly with our friends, we come together in expectant anticipation that our evening will be a fun time at a table, with great food and fun, deep and meaningful conversation. At the time that we started our Vegan group we had not even begun developing the Sobremesa Dinner Groups, but our experience in Tallahassee and now the Villages had taught us the basic things that need to be in place to create a group that will grow with each other and be a safe place for authentic conversation. In this chapter I would like to introduce the basics of a Sobremesa Dinner Group evening and look at the things that we believe are essential for such a group to grow and thrive.

Before we break down and go deeper into the specific elements important for a healthy Sobremesa Dinner Group we need to first wrap our minds around the overall evening experience. From the first day of developing this new model we understood that at the heart of the evening were three key ingredients: 1) gathering with friends, 2) sitting to a table of good food, and 3) the added intention of working toward meaningful and deep conversation (often around spiritual matters). Within this basic framework we felt that each group needed the autonomy to develop their gathering in whatever fashion suited them best. Often churches try to create organic groups by legislating every aspect of the group's activity, only to wonder why the groups did not take off when launched. I am sad to admit that I have made this mistake. Communications consultant Joseph Myers

helped me develop a better understanding of what it means to be part of a community, and how to—instead of focusing on every little aspect of a small group or small community—create an environment that allows for organic communities to develop on their own. I had the pleasure of hearing Myers speak at a national conference I attended almost 15 years ago. It was a conference on developing small groups; that was the “in” topic for many churches during the early 2000’s. I went with a group of people from my church to learn all the lessons so that we could come back and turn our large church into a community of small groups.

I confess that I only remember one breakout session that I attended that week. It was a session led by Joseph Myers, and it stuck with me because of the boldness and audacity with which he spoke. Speaking to a packed room of about 150 people, he began by explaining that before he could really launch into his topic, he had to give a warning that he was going to upset a lot of us, and that one or two people would even storm out of the room during the lecture because of what he was going to say. The crowd laughed, but I was enraptured, because I could tell that he was not joking. During the next hour and half session, I listened to someone present an understanding of what it meant to belong to community that was totally different from what anyone else was saying at the conference. In fact, he let us know that he thought the stuff we were receiving at the other sessions was total garbage (I can’t remember if he said it that way, but it was what I took from his comments), and that if we replicated them, we would experience what almost every other church in America was experiencing in their supposed shift to small groups: total failure!

The session lived up to his warning, and within twenty minutes a woman began to cry. She stood up and literally screamed at him that he was trying to destroy all that they

were doing in their church. This was followed soon after by a man beginning to argue with him about his ideas; when he would not stop, Meyers suggested they talk after the lecture was over. The man slammed his stuff into a backpack and stormed out of the room. I don't know if it is the subversive part of me, but I was totally bought in by this point. First off, I love someone who can shake up a room of church people; but more importantly, I found that the stuff that Myers was teaching seemed true to my own experience. Who am I to tell people how to do things and how to think and set up places of community? Wouldn't it be better to establish a culture that invites people into community, and lets them work out what community will look like for them? We will return to the lesson of Myers much more in future chapters, but for now I give this story to let you know from the beginning that our goal in the creation of our Sobremesa Dinner Groups has been to create an environment for people to come together and form their own indigenous communities around food, fellowship, and growth.

Having said that, we have found that, as we have launched our Sobremesa Dinner Groups, most groups have several things they do in common. At the heart of the dinner group is the development of deep friendship. With this basic idea in place, we have found that almost all of our dinner groups grab onto the idea that the table is one of the best places to create and develop lasting relationships. Thus, we have found that within our community all of our groups take the dinner itself very seriously. I don't mean that every group makes some extravagant meal, but rather that the dinner is the center of the evening for almost all of our groups - which is exactly how it should be.

We have groups that revolve their dinners around themes, like the ones that I have participated in, and we have groups that meet at nice restaurants and don't cook a thing.

While most of our groups meet for dinner, we also have groups that meet for lunch. Most of our groups meet monthly, but we also have groups who meet twice a month. I have learned that the key to launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group, when it comes to the meal, is that the group makes the decision of how they will join together at the table. In fact, if you are reading this book and are contemplating starting one of these groups, I would suggest that you first consider what you would like to do with your friends whom you are considering inviting into your dinner group. Do you like making extravagant multi course meals? Then maybe that is the invitation you will make to your friends. Do you like to eat out? Then that can be your invite. Your passions and preferences are often a good place to start in developing your own dinner community.

A second thing we have learned from our active dinner groups is that every group usually needs at least one person or couple who takes the lead in bringing people together and in launching the intentionality of the evening. This does not mean that they have to lead every aspect of the dinner, but it often does mean that they have the passion and persistence to get the group going and to keep the group on track as it develops into a strong community. Again, if you are the person reading this book and this idea of a Sobremesa Dinner Group sounds fun and rewarding to you, then maybe this is your call to take the lead, to make a list of friends with whom you would like to build a deeper relationship, and to bring them together to pitch the idea of launching this new group.

This brings up a question that I am often asked: what if your group first meets together and you find that the group doesn't "gel?"

When launching a new Sobremesa Dinner Group we encourage groups to launch for a specific time period. When my wife and I have launched similar groups, we have

always done so for a given time period. We usually bring a group of people together, propose the idea of gathering for dinner and dialogue, and then say, “Let’s do this for the next four months.” We have actually launched a group at one point with a group of great people, but by the end of the first dinner we realized that the group didn’t gel, as we had invited a couple that we felt would not allow the group to become open and transparent in our conversations. So, we met for four months, enjoyed our time together, and had a big celebrational dinner for our last gathering. Then we all went our own ways. We did not have to hurt anyone’s feelings, and we were able to have a successful dinner group for four months. In today’s transient world we understand that even the groups that grow to great depth with one another are, for most people, going to be groups that meet for only a period of time, and not forever. We approach each group with that mentality, and then we focus on enjoying and growing for the time that we have together.

Before we conclude this section, I want to speak to the focus on intentional dialogue. Even though the Sobremesa Dinner Group is centered on the table, the heart of these gatherings is our growth into a community of deep conversation. We will talk more about this in Chapter Five: “The Sobremesa,” but for now let me just emphasize that the process of going deeper and becoming more authentic with others requires intentionality of safe and open conversation. We have found that groups which never move beyond food and superficial fellowship never seem to last. In a time and world that seems to be moving more and more into polarization, people are desperate for real and meaningful conversations about the issues of our day, as well as about the spiritual issues that consistently arise within the lives of most people. As you begin developing your Sobremesa Dinner Group you may find that some people are not interested in joining a

group that wants to talk about deep things. It is important to make the decision from day one that this is the focused movement of the group.

The Sobremesa

This is a good place to explain how we chose the name of our program:

“Sobremesa Dinner Groups.” Sobremesa is a Spanish word which literally means: “The time spent around the table after lunch or dinner, talking to the people you shared the meal with; time to digest and savor both food and friendship.”¹³⁷ Within certain Spanish communities the most important part of the meal is the time spent *after* the meal, often enjoying a fine cigar or a sweet beverage, and above all else a deep conversation about the events of the world. When we began to develop these communities, we realized that—while the word “Sobremesa” may be new to many of us—in our western culture the idea of Sobremesa is essential and needed in today’s world. We also realized that we needed to call our community groups by a name that was not tinted by other ideas that we have formed around various words. We felt that using the word “Sobremesa” would allow us to develop a new idea for a movement revolving around an intentional table with friends.

While we have called *our* community groups “Sobremesa Dinner Groups,” calling your group this is certainly not essential to develop a dinner group in your community. However, I do hope that this name will catch on and that many will begin to buy into this new model for intentional community. I would love to see this grow into a movement that impacts many who are going through life and looking to better understand

¹³⁷ The Local, October 4, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.es/20191004/spanish-word-of-the-day-sobremesa>.

their place in this world, as well as develop real and meaningful relationships with others for the journey.

Before we move on, let's spend a few moments talking about the personal benefit of joining a new Sobremesa Dinner Group. To do this I will share a story from our International Wine and Dine Group that we were part of for ten years. When we started this group, it was initially just my wife and I and one other couple. We knew that we wanted to grow with that couple, but we also knew that we wanted to have the opportunity to develop deep relationships with others as well. We had met with our friends Mike and Arlene a couple of times and began to discuss the idea of a dinner group. We made the decision that each of us would invite one other couple for our first gathering. On that night we were not sure if this would work, if it would go for the four months that I offered, or if it would be anything other than a way to get to know a few people in a deeper way. In our first couple of months, we found that our group had fun, that we laughed a lot, and that we all enjoyed good food and each other's company. As our group continued to meet, we found that we wanted to invite others into the community. Over the first five years there were times when the group grew to six couples (12 people), and times that it decreased back to the four original couples. Even when my wife and I moved to launch a church in a new city, the group continued on—and added another couple to replace us. We have now been away from Tallahassee for ten years, yet this group has meant so much to us that, even though we have developed two other similar groups—filled with people that we love and are growing with—we still return to Tallahassee several times a year to see everyone from our first group. Those trips are often the highlights of our year. Whenever we are going through an issue in our life or

health, or an issue with our children or parents, it is this group that we immediately correspond with. We have found the greatest thing in life: companions to walk the journey with us, even though we now live three hours apart. This idea of the Sobremesa Dinner Groups is about finding others to walk the journey with you. We have found that almost anyone, no matter how old or young, is eager to develop these kinds of friendships, and it is these friendships that give us the stamina to have victory in our life's journey. With this in mind lets go even deeper, as we now focus on developing great friends.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ENTRÉE

A dinner is not complete without the Entrée. I've attended social gatherings where finger foods were the sole offering of the evening, or even events that had lavish layouts of desserts spread across large tables; and while these get-togethers have been fine, I would never call them a "meal." To have a good meal requires a main course: something of substance, the foundation from which all other courses of the meal emanate. Several years ago, my wife and I were in our last days at a church and preparing to move to a new position across the state. A couple from our congregation invited us to go with them to the fanciest restaurant in the city, as a "going away" dinner. This was the first time I had ever eaten at an exclusive French restaurant, and it was a full meal that included several courses. I will never forget how each course led into the next, and how each was an exquisite display of both beauty and flavor. The dinner lasted several hours, and right in the middle of the wonderful evening was the *pièce de résistance*: a grilled trout covered in a light sauce that brought out the amazing flavor of the fish and created an explosion of subtle, yet delicious tastes. Everything that came before and after accentuated the artistry of that main entrée.

As my wife and I drove home that evening, still basking in the euphoria of the meal, we realized that the true entrée of the meal, the thing that impacted our hearts the most, was not the fish, nor any of the other dishes leading up to or coming after, but that we were with good friends who showed us unbelievable hospitality, and whom we realized we were going to greatly miss when we moved away. It took me a long time in life, probably much longer than was needed, to realize that friends are the Entrée in this journey called life. The winner at the end is not the one who has the most "things." The

winner in life is the one who has cultivated relationships with family, friends, and others along the way. Friends come in many forms and are developed in many spaces.

Joseph Myers, whom I mentioned earlier, building on the work of cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall, describes four spaces in which we all interact: public, social, personal and intimate.¹³⁸ Myers shares that in each of these spaces people are consistent in connecting with others and in active participation. The spaces differ from each other in terms of intimacy and population—let me describe what I mean.

“Public space” is any space that I share with people who are similar to me in various ways. When I was a teenager, I bought a Jeep CJ-7. Living in western Kansas I soon discovered that, whenever I would cross paths with another Jeep, the driver would always flash their lights at me. Within one week I was doing the same thing. Without knowing it at the time, I had become a member of the public space of Jeep owners in western Kansas. It was my community, and a pretty large one at that. Another community I have belonged to for many years now is that of being a faithful fan of the University of Florida Gators. Within my public space of being a Gator, I have acquired UF T-shirts and other paraphernalia, and I have found that even on a mission trip to the Congo, when seeing someone clad in a Gator t-shirt, I will still hear a, “Gator Nation!” To which I immediately replied, “Go Gators!”

All of us are part of many public spaces, which is a good thing: it helps us feel belonging and connection. But public spaces are usually made up of hundreds, if not

¹³⁸ Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 36.

thousands, of people, and our intimacy with these people is typically very low, if it exists at all.¹³⁹

We also share space with other people on a social level. Like the name implies social space is reserved for the social gatherings that we all take part in throughout life. Our social space is made up of those people in our lives with whom we have not moved beyond a “shallow” level of dialogue. That may sound negative, but this is actually a very needed space in our lives. We need a community of people that we know and enjoy at a social level. Many of our church or community connections are in social groups. In this group we know peoples’ names and often something about their lives, yet we really don’t know them deeply. Whereas our public space may be filled with thousands of people, I have found that my social space is limited to 100 to 120 people. These are the people that I interact with on a regular basis, but with whom I do not have an intimate relationship.¹⁴⁰

Our social community is an important space when it comes to the Sobremesa Dinner Group. Myers tells us that it is within this population that we find our neighborly relationships, which is what helps a community or organization function. We need these types of relationships, and it is ok that they stay at a superficial level. At a deeper level though, it is from this social space that we are able to decide whom we would like to grow into deeper relationships with, and to whom we display our own identities so that they can make the same decisions.¹⁴¹ This is where the Sobremesa Dinner Group comes

¹³⁹ Joseph Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, 38-44.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, 44-47.

¹⁴¹ Joseph Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, 46.

in. Do you have social space friends that makes you think, I would love to get to know them more? These are the people you can invite to become part of your dinner group.

The next space in which we all live is that of personal space. This is the space that is made up of a handful of people who know us and who are known by us. These are the people with whom we have shared our private lives—our experiences, feelings and thoughts.¹⁴² They do not know our “naked,” totally exposed self; people who do, occupy our intimate space, which is reserved for those people whom you could say “Know all of my dirty laundry.”¹⁴³ The intimate space is limited to only a few people at most, usually our spouses, children, parents etc.

One of the most pressing needs in our lives, sociologists say, is the need for personal belonging. It is the people residing in our personal space that make our lives whole and give us depth. Whereas our public space may be made up of literally thousands of people, and our social space may have up to 150 people, most healthy people have a personal space that is made up of several to a couple dozen personal friends at most. Today things like Facebook and Twitter have given us a false sense of space, and many find themselves living entirely through their public and social spaces, while never growing their personal or intimate spaces. By living our lives online many begin to live into Facebook relationships like they were engaging at a personal level, when in reality those relationships never really move beyond the public or social space. The Sobremesa Dinner Group, at its core, is about the intentionality of developing personal space.

¹⁴² Joseph Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, 47.

¹⁴³ Joseph Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, 50-51.

In a Sobremesa Dinner Group the Entrée is friends, but not just any friends. Our goal in creating a dinner group is to grow into the deep personal relationships where people know who we are at a deep level. They are not our intimate relationships, which at our age is usually reserved for our spouses, but they know our baggage and still choose to love us. The question that we have to answer is how to create this type of community in an age of polarization—let's look at that now.

Creating the Personal Community

In my life I have found that almost everyone I have ever met is looking for a place to belong. Everyone needs to have a community in which they are an active participant. I have also learned that many people are not going to move beyond the public and social spaces of community. Some people simply do not want to enter into personal space. They often have only one or two people in their intimate space as well. I found this out many years ago when I had become the new pastor of a long-time congregation. Over my first few weeks in the church, I had started the process to get to know the members of the community and had found a group of ladies who occupied the last row of our sanctuary for worship every Sunday. I assumed that these ladies were all widows, only to find out the majority of them were married to men who did not attend church. I am not one to ever try to force someone to be somewhere they do not want to be, but I did want to know my congregation, so I decided that I would try to get to know the husbands of these women who I saw often at our church functions.

Over several months I made the time to meet every one of their husbands, and in these meetings, I came to a sad observation; many of the men that I met not only did not attend church, but they seemed to have very few personal relationships at all in their

lives. For whatever reason, they had moved away from personal engagement and had settled into the very small community of themselves and their wives. I made it my goal to get to know these guys well, and over the next three years spent intentional time with nearly half of them. I found that these men each had public spaces in which they lived: they loved football teams, and they were proudly Chevy or Ford men. They also for the most part had a very limited social space. Typically, their social space was just their extended family. They also, for the most part, were not a member of any personal communities. While I tried many ways to get these men to move into more personal spaces, I found that, for whatever reason, I was simply not able to accomplish the task.

Once I was even asked to officiate a funeral for one of these husbands and was blown away when, while meeting with his wife to plan out the service, she informed me that he considered me one of his closest friends and that he had really cherished our time together. I had only visited with this man three times into two years! From this experience I came to the hard conclusion that my task is not to bring people into a space, but simply to develop a culture conducive to personal space and to invite those who desire to participate into the space.

This is where I believe our communities need leaders to step forward, particularly in communities like The Villages, where I live and work today. In communities like mine, which emphasize the public and social spaces, we need pioneers who will seek to create culture and take leadership of inviting people to experience a deeper space than that within which they are currently residing. In our church community we have found that we have many who are gifted and called to be such people. They have a great desire to build groups of people who move beyond the superficiality of social space and into a

deeper level of personal encounter. Maybe you are being called to take on this role in your neighborhood or among your social space community.

If you feel this urge within your spirit, I invite you into the journey of creating a Sobremesa Dinner Group. It all starts with a few choices you have to make and the people you choose to invite into your group. We have found, in the groups that already exist at our church and beyond, that the most successful groups are those where a leader established the intentionality of the community from day one, and asked others to join with this intentionality in place. This intentionality establishes that, although all groups start off at the social level, the host enters into the community with the goal of developing them into a deeper “personal space” community. By entering into a Sobremesa Dinner Group with this one intention the host is able to create and then stay true to the ultimate vision of the community. While all successful groups grow in an organic fashion, the intentional host, through reminders and various cues, to keep the developed flow of the community to stay true to the “the main entrée” idea of being all about relationships that are deep and meaningful.

How do we live out this intention? How do we establish the culture needed to create a safe space to grow in personal relationship? These are the questions we will try to answer through the remainder of this chapter, and we will do it by sharing the story of a couple in our church who have the call to build a community intent on moving into a personal level of relationship—a community of refrigerator friends.

Kim and Carol are a couple who moved into The Villages about five years ago and have become very active in our community. Like many people who move into The Villages, Kim and Carol have recently retired from long term jobs; Kim having been a

chemical engineer and Carol having worked as a personal trainer. They were both active and social but found in their first year that they were missing the deep relationships that they had developed in their earlier lives. When they were invited to an informational meeting about launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group, Kim and Carol were at the first meeting in the front row. They had lots of questions and ended up being our first couple to launch a group in their neighborhood.

By way of our training session (we have these materials online for you to access in developing your own dinner group) Kim and Carol made several decisions up front:

First, they made the decision to ask another couple to join with them in their goal of launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group. We have learned that the best groups are always started as teams. There is something about having a compatriot with you when you launch a new endeavor that makes the good days better and the bad days bearable. Kim and Carol had one couple that they had become very close to and felt this couple would be the perfect partners to start a new group.

Second, they made the decision that they would work closely with their partner couple to determine the size that their new Sobremesa Dinner Group would be limited to. In my stories of creating both our International Wine and Dine Group as well as Our Vegan Dinner Group, you may have noticed that each time we invited three other couples. Each time this was an intentional choice that was made out of space limitations. We have found that most dinner groups need at least four couples (or at least six individuals if not couples) to be successful, so that if a couple or individual is not able to attend a gathering the group will still be diverse and the conversation lively. At the other end we have found that most groups that begin with over twelve individuals find it hard

to move deeper than the social level of engagement. Most of our healthy groups have ended up having eight to ten members in the group.

Third, they made intentional decisions on who they would invite to be part of their group. By joining with their partner couple this new group came up with a list of three other couples whom they all agreed that they would like to potentially move into a deeper relationship with. These three couples were then asked to attend to an introductory dinner to invite them into joining their Sobremesa Dinner Group.

I would note that this is the place where groups can, through a little intentionality create a community of people who are diverse and in this create an environment of exciting dialogue and discussion for the growth of the entire group. We often challenge groups to go down this path but give a disclaimer that this takes the intentionality of the whole group to a posture of openness to the thought of others and to be a group who work through the hard issues of our day. Often groups ask people who are from similar social spaces and thus are not very different than themselves, but even these people, when engaged are different, but that is for Chapter Five: The Sobremesa.

Fourth, they made the decision with their partner couple to limit their prospective gatherings to once a month. We originally encouraged groups to meet every week or at least twice a month, but quickly found that this almost always has to be an organic change that happens over time, and that at the social level in which most groups begin, the participants are simply not willing to meet any more than once a month.

After doing this preliminary work these two couples hosted their first dinner gathering. They invited their three couples, letting them know in advance what they were being invited to, and they came to the first gathering prepared in several ways:

First, Kim and Carol entered their first gathering with hearts of hospitality. They covenanted with their partner couple to live out unconditional love and openness to each other and to those who had been invited to their dinner. This may sound like a no-brainer, but the truth is most of us have to be intentional in our hospitality if we seek to develop that welcoming culture within a community. Hospitality is much more than having a clean house and good meal: it is an internal heart of peace that seeks to be open to new individuals and to know them at a heart level.

Second, they came prepared with icebreaker questions and games for the group to play. This may sound simple or even childish, but we have found that most people entering into a new community need some type of intentional motivation to begin to feel at ease within the community. A fun (and hopefully even silly) ice breaker will change the atmosphere of a community within minutes to one of relaxation and ease.

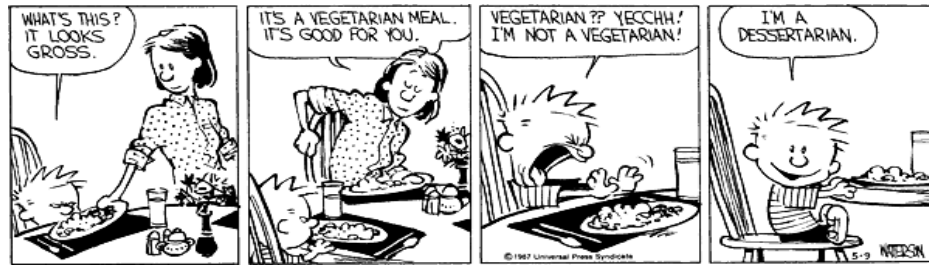
Third, they came prepared to present the basic idea of the Sobremesa Dinner Group, but also prepared to then listen with an open heart to the group as the group worked through both the decision to be part of the group as well as the logistics of gathering. This is a crucial step, that cannot for any reason be skipped. The host couples have to openly invite with an idea of how their group could function, but then be quiet and listen with open hearts for the whole group to be involved in the creation. The group that helps to create what their own dinner group will look like is the group that will find success. Two critical points, though, need to be established as soon as possible: that the community will have dialogue questions that they speak on each month, and that the community will meet for four months. We have found that if the hosts, through the introduction of the invitation, explain the meaning of the word Sobremesa, and why they

are using that word to describe their group, people understand that the group will be set around an atmosphere of deep conversation.

One final comment to make on this process of invitation for launching a new group is that host cannot use “bait and switch” tactics when inviting people to join a Sobremesa Dinner Group. We have found that some hosts do not share up front with people their intent of developing personal depth and deep dialogue, for fear of scaring off the prospective group member. It is true, as we said earlier, that some people will not want to be part of the group with those foundational assumptions in place, but we have learned that it is better to know this up front so that we do not waste their time or ours.

There it is, the basics of launching a Sobremesa Dinner Group. I hope you are still on board and that you are already thinking about prospective individuals to come alongside you as partners in launching this new dinner group, and that you are thinking about those people in your social circles whom you would like to go deeper with in developing a personal relationship. Once you have the Entrée (the people) in place everything else seems to slide right into place to make your dinner group a success and a meaningful part of your life and the lives of the others who will join the journey with you.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DESSERT



Bill Watterson

In the last chapter I shared that, for me, a meal is not a meal unless it has an Entrée. It is the Entrée that seems to establish the foundations of a good evening with great friends, it is the item from which all other parts of the meal emanate. That being said, while the Entrée provides the foundation of the meal, a great meal is still incomplete without some kind of sweet, tasty dessert to finish the evening. If you spend any time with me, you will know that I am open to almost any dessert. My wife and I have our favorite desserts for when we go out to one of the local fine dining establishments: at the Rose Plantation we always have to get a giant piece of their Banana Cream Pie. It is so large that even two healthy adults like us find it hard to finish, as delicious as it is. At our favorite Mexican Restaurant, Los Magueyes, we always get an order of Flan, made authentically like what we used to purchase in the 90s when we lived in Central Mexico. One of our fondest dessert stories (yes, sadly we *do* have dessert stories) happened several years ago, when one of my former employers and his wife, Bob and Katheryn, took me, my wife, and several other employees out to a restaurant in Tampa, Florida called Bern's Steak House. Bern's has to be one of the best steakhouses in all the US. I have now eaten at Bern's three times and I would say that I was fed probably three of the

best steaks I have ever enjoyed— don't let my Vegan group know. As amazing as the steaks are at Bern's, on this particular night Bob and Katheryn also treated us to dessert, which turned out to be a unique experience. When dining at Bern's, if you choose to partake in dessert, you leave the lush dining room and are escorted into a second-floor private suite that is just large enough to host whatever sized group you happen to have with you that evening. Once in your private "dessert suite" you are brought menus just as large as the menu for the meal you just ate. There are literally dozens of dessert creations to choose from, and all are handmade on location at Bern's. At our end of the table the four of us sitting close together decided to get four different items and share them all with each other. I left Bern's that spring evening in a sugar induced high from the amazing sweets that I and my friends had just enjoyed.

When I think about a Sobremesa Dinner Group I have to compare the "good food" aspect of the gathering to that of savoring a fine dessert. You don't need dessert in order to have had a meal. In fact, for all my rambling above, we only eat dessert at certain restaurants, and we almost never have dessert when we make our normal family meals at home. Desserts are something special; they take a *good* meal and make it into something *great*. If you want to get really basic, you do not have to have good food to be able to have a Sobremesa Group. You could still meet with people, you could dialogue about current events and spiritual issues, and you could work at building deeper relationships; but without the food, everything seems to fall flat. In the church we would call that a small group, or a Bible class; they are ok to be part of, but a group that is based around a meal moves everything to a different level.

At this point, if you haven't guessed, I should admit that I am a foodie.

Unfortunately for my waistline, I love almost all food. I have been blessed over the past thirty years to have lived in four countries and traveled extensively as a missionary before becoming a pastor in the US. During this time my wife and I both discovered that we found joy in trying new foods prepared in different ways, per different cultures and backgrounds. While this love of food has helped me extensively in working on this project, it is not because I am a foodie that I have worked on creating the Sobremesa Dinner Group model. I was first drawn to this model and have since developed it more because I am convinced that it is the dinner table (lunch or breakfast for that matter as well) where people can come together in a way that opens them up to move into a deeper understanding of themselves and the people they are with. As a Christian, I have also become convinced that it is at the table that we most easily encounter God.

Since the beginning of time, humanity has connected, quarreled, made treaties, and displayed love by sitting down at the table. In America, until very recently, the table was a vital centerpiece of every family. I was blessed to grow up in a time period, the 1960's and 70's, when families still ate their evening meals together at the dinner table. For many years my family had a spider who lived in the light that hung over our dinner table. Being the grandson of an entomologist who had specialized in arachnids, spiders had a special place in our family, and we were taught at an early age never to kill a spider unless absolutely necessary. Every evening when our family of five would sit around the table the spider would slowly descend and hang in the middle, sharing in our stories of school, work, and adventures that would bounce across our table. My family was so used to our spider that we would talk with him just like he was part of the family. Several

times we had to stop an unknowing guest from trying to kill our spider. I have spent many hours in my adult life thinking about that spider and the fact that he would descend to be with us, right in the middle of the table, every evening. The only thing my non-entomologist mind could come up with is that even insects need community. That is what the dinner table represented in our home: it was the central place for community to take place in the Divine home.

This centering of the table has long been established as foundational to hospitality and to community growth. Writer, Kristin Schell, in her book, *The Turquoise Table*, challenges us to embrace a call to hospitality and to center it on the table: “We’ve got to debunk the myth that hospitality is the same as entertainment. Genuine hospitality begins with opening our lives... It all starts with inviting people to come to the table. Hospitality is always about the people, not the presentation.”¹⁴⁴ This centrality of connection and hospitality found around the table has been expressed throughout all social and cultural engagement. Adam Gopnik, writer for *The New Yorker*, quotes British chef Fergus Henderson:

...I don’t understand how a young couple can begin life by buying a sofa or a television,” he said indignantly to me. “Don’t they know the table comes first?” *The table comes first*. The table comes first, before the meal and even before the kitchen where it’s made. It precedes everything in remaining the one plausible hearth of family life, the raft to ride down the river of our existence even in the hardest times.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Kristin Schell, *The Turquoise Table: Finding Community and Connection in Your Own Front Yard* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 78.

¹⁴⁵ Adam Gopnik, *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food*. 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2011), 9

Gopnik expresses a truth that has been evident since the beginning of human social interaction: there is something of significance that happens around the table.

Not only do meals bring about intentional social interaction, but they also force the interaction to be slow and purposeful. Anglican Priest, Tim Chester writes, “Meals slow things down. Some of us don’t like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people oriented instead of task oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list.”¹⁴⁶ It is this slow process of community that moves people from a social space to a personal one.

Unfortunately, something has happened in our modern America that many say plays a part in the polarization of our culture. It is the breakup of the family table; in fact, it is the breakup of almost all tables! Even though you can go out to any local restaurant in our community on any evening and find them filled to capacity with tables that are mostly being shared by at least three or more people, statistics show that for most meals on most evenings Americans eat, not at a table and not in the company of friends, but on the couch in the company of a television. I have to confess that this has been true for my wife and I for many years. We were blessed that when our children were young, we lived outside of the US, and for many of those years we did not have a TV. Being a young family, living in a foreign country with no Television meant that not only did we eat our dinners together around a table: most days we also ate our breakfast and lunch together as well. We are convinced that part of the reason our three children have such a close relationship with each other today, as adults, is the time we spent around the table

¹⁴⁶ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 47.

together as a family when they were young. This idea of lost community and superficial relationship is central to why we believe it is so important for the Sobremesa Dinner Groups to form around the table. It is also why the food that is provided is not as important as what goes on *at* the table.

I am blessed to have a mother and a father who are great cooks. When I was growing up, like most American homes at that time, my mother made most of our meals, but we were also blessed often with good dinners made by my father. I think this is part of the reason my siblings and I all love to cook to this day. We had a fine example of the joy of cooking through both of our parents and it has created a love in our lives for cooking that has carried on to our children as well. Growing up, when my mom was going to be out of the house for some school meeting or some other special engagement, my Dad would hype up the fact that we were going to get a special meal that we could only have when mom was away: a meal so good, that he only made it for us kids. That meal, which we all love to this day, was liver and onions—my dad is, if nothing else, a great salesman. It was not until I entered adulthood that I learned most people do not like liver and onions, and that the reason we had liver and onions when we did was because my mom absolutely hated it! Interestingly, while we have personal preferences, generally speaking no one in our family is a picky eater. I think this is because our table was typically a place of joy and community, and so the food presented at the table, whether simple or spectacular, took on the mood of the table encounter.

I say all this to remind us that what is important, when it comes to food for a Sobremesa Dinner Group, has nothing to do with the food itself. While the food is central to creating the environment of community and warmth needed for open and transparent

dialogue, what the food is, for the most part, is irrelevant. We have found that these groups do not end up working the way they should without joining together around a meal, but that the meal itself does not make much of a difference. I think it is the sheer act of sharing of food and conversation which creates a heart of relaxation and openness, and enhances a bland conversation, turning it into an evening of excitement and growth.

When we launch new Sobremesa Dinner Groups at our church, we encourage that at their first gathering, the one described in the last chapter where the basics of the encounter are discussed and agreed upon, the group discusses how to handle food. I have been a part of groups which rotate to a different home each month, with the host making the entire meal. We have seen a group that, because of size and location limitations, met every month at the same home, with a different group member bringing the complete meal each month. Most groups we have participated in and have witnessed starting out of our church have chosen to rotate homes, going to a different home of the group each month, as well as rotate dishes brought for the meal. In our current group the host house for the month declares and produces the Entrée: from there someone then takes the appetizer, someone the salad and a side dish, and someone a dessert. Our meals are typically simple, but always prepared with love, and always delicious. We have groups within our church that meet and do something like the International Wine and Dine Group we did in Tallahassee, but most groups just focus on whatever the host wants to make for that meeting.

Over the past few years, we have learned to encourage two things in new communities as they launch their Sobremesa Dinner Groups: first, that they think about focusing on their meals being about sufficiency and not abundance; and second, that they

emphasize the joy that is found at the table. While both of these areas are somewhat abstract, we have found them to be vital components for healthy, growing communities.

Meals Based on Sufficiency

As I stated in an earlier chapter, the ministry that the Sobremesa Dinner Group is based on is a wonderful ministry called The Dinner Church. I became acquainted with the Dinner Church in 2017 as a new trainer with a ministry called Fresh Expressions. I had joined, along with many other pastors of different denominations, with Fresh Expressions US to lead several events each year training church leaders on how to launch new “fresh expressions” of faith out of their predominantly declining congregations. Fresh Expressions are “...a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church.”¹⁴⁷ Through my early involvement with Fresh Expressions, I was privileged to meet Verlon and Melodee Fosner and learn of a type of Fresh Expression they had created called the Dinner Church. The Dinner Church is a church, located in what the Fosner’s call a “sore,” or a “walking community” (under-resourced), that is based around the dinner table. Today this ministry, now called Dinner Church Collective, has developed 13 active community dinners and is continuing to work towards their goal of having a community dinner in every one of the 27 walking neighborhoods of Seattle. The Dinner Church Collective has also experienced exceptional growth across denominations and regions within the United States. As we examined this ministry, we found that while the essence of the model was

¹⁴⁷ Michael Moynagh and Philip Harrold. *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*. (London: SCM Press, 2012.), xii.

sound, the demographics of our community and many others as well called for a model of social gathering that moved beyond an emphasis on the poor. I must pause to quickly state that we are all called to serve and help the poor, but as a Christian congregation located in a community that is predominantly upper middle class, we needed to find a different way to engage our community.

One of the key elements of launching a Dinner Church ministry is to provide a table of abundance. This is the correct posture for a community that suffers from poverty, as it shows a God of abundance and hope. But for the upper middle-class neighborhoods that we find ourselves in we realized an emphasis on abundance was too much. Many within our community struggle in over-consumption of goods and services, and a focus on sufficiency is more valuable than a focus on abundance. With this mindset we encourage our new Sobremesa Dinner Groups to establish with their new communities, from day one, a plan of bringing healthy and sufficient offerings to the community gatherings—not ones of abundance. When we started to emphasize this shift, we found that many felt it was unnecessary; but over time we have received feedback that this one small mental shift has helped groups grow in understanding their place of wealth and their need for service to others. In the call to sufficiency over abundance, we have also encouraged our groups to find ways to serve others in our community or the world who find themselves in places of impoverishment. Today we have groups that collect socks and undergarments for the homeless in Chicago as well as groups that volunteer together at a local Soup Kitchen or food pantry; the ways to serve are limitless.

Meals Built Around Joy

We also encourage our new and prospective groups to create a fun table environment. This may sound obvious, but we have found that many groups don't understand that part of what makes the table so powerful is the joy and relaxation experienced by a guest when they come to the table. One of the most important lessons we learned from The Dinner Church, is that it is through casual and authentic conversation that people end up engaging and becoming transparent. This is at the heart of our call to create a joyful environment in our Sobremesa Dinner Groups.

Over time we have found that some people do not have a personality which naturally creates this type of environment or are simply unaware of its importance. Within our call to emphasize this aspect of the table we have found two points essential. First, if someone is capable of creating a fun and relaxing environment, they simply need to be reminded of the value that this brings to the group, creating a culture of hospitality and welcome. Second, for those who are not naturally inclined to be "fun" people (don't worry, less inherently "fun" people are still called to create groups and community like this), we encourage them to locate the people who are so inclined and let them loose on the group. We also encourage them to find ways to create the right environment, like bringing games or sharing canned stories. It is amazing that even something that is read off of a piece of paper can create a wonderful environment if it makes people laugh. We have a guy in our church who is very serious but wanted to launch a group with some of his golf buddies. He started the group off by bringing a joke that he had downloaded off the internet. The group has several men in it that create a fun and relaxing environment,

but our friend still brings his one, internet joke to the group every time they meet, and the group would not be complete without it.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SOBREMESA

Many people around the world, especially in certain regions of Spain, consider the Sobremesa to be the most important part of the meal. That's why they've created a word to describe this last part of their meal, this time of savoring food and friendship through deep dialogue.

As I have shared the stories of our various dinner groups over the past twenty years, one thing that stands out to me is that—while these groups ate different kinds of food and took place with different people—they each consistently generated lively dialogue over deep issues of our day, and especially over issues of spiritual importance. These dialogues sometimes became contentious, but as communities, our intentionality to be authentic with one another and to grow always kept us together. I remember one story from our International Wine and Dine Group when one of our group had read a book and had taken a stand that directly contradicted the stance of another in our group. It ended up being a tense evening, and actually led to tears and to our all leaving early. Luckily, our commitment to each other called us back together for dinner the following week. What is fascinating is that our whole group today says that evening was one of the most important dialogues our group ever had. Not because it ended in tears and everyone left upset, but because our group decided that our relationship was more important than our differing beliefs. Even though our group has never come together around the issues which came up that evening, we are still together!

The Sobremesa is the group dialogue and discussion that takes place around topics of spirituality and/or other items of depth. This is the part of the meal that creates true bonds of friendship and community. In this chapter we will look at this important

part of the Sobremesa Dinner Group evening: first, we will focus on the elements that make for a safe place for people to move towards open and transparent dialogue. Next, we will get to the ultimate goal of the entire Sobremesa Dinner Group, which is creating a community for people to work through our spiritual questions and come to a place of spiritual growth on our continued life journey.

Creating Safety for Authentic Dialogue

In today's polarized world it is essential for a new community—with the ultimate goal of developing deep and meaningful dialogue and discussion—to create a safe space for people to grow into a deeper level of meaningful talk. The best way to describe how this can be accomplished is to share with you an experience that I had almost thirty years ago when I joined an accountability group while working on my master's degree. Our group leader, Bill, exemplified all of the elements necessary to create a safe place for open and transparent conversation, and through his mentorship I learned lessons that I have been able to use to this day.

The whole process of this learning and growth started from the initial invitation that Bill made to me when I was invited to the first gathering of our accountability group. Bill, a professor at our seminary, introduced the idea to a handful of new students who had him as their advisor. Before our first meeting he had given me a brief and clear description of what I was being invited to. I found that knowing what I was about to attend allowed me to go in with an open heart, prepared to listen and discern if this was a group that I wanted to be a part of.

My wife and I have emphasized this idea of full transparency ever since in our groups. When we invite a couple or individual to our inquiry dinner to introduce the idea

of creating a Sobremesa Dinner Group we tell the prospective person or couple what they are being invited to. We share with them that they are being invited to a dinner with a few other people to consider becoming a dinner group that meets regularly, to enjoy each other's company, and to dialogue and discuss matters of spiritual concern that most of us have. If they have questions, which often people do, we take the time to have open conversation about their questions.

Thirty years ago, when I came to that first gathering of about eight other new seminary students and myself, we found Bill ready and welcoming of each of us. Greeting us with graciousness and hospitality, Bill spent the first session explaining exactly what he was envisioning our group to be, then asking what we would like to see if we were to choose to be in such a group. In that very first session we worked out issues of meeting times, created boundaries, and already began to share about ourselves. Even though I was a young man, I was amazed with the openness that Bill spoke about himself. He did not, on that first night, say anything condemning about himself, but he openly shared his faults and issues, at just enough of a level that allowed us each to open up about issues in our own life as well. I learned that night from Bill that to help other people to feel safe to become open and transparent, we ourselves have to *be* open and transparent. I also learned over time that we have to exercise this practice with wisdom. We don't spill all our guts on day one. This usually indicates a person who is needy, and most certainly does not open a group to the idea that this is a safe space. But as we take the first steps of transparency and allow others to as well, it is amazing how quickly a group can grow together.

On this first evening we also discussed boundaries. I have found over the following years that this is a necessity. Groups need to have the safety of boundaries. In most groups that we have led we have shared at our first meeting that our goal in the group would be for us to grow to a point that we could be open and transparent with each other. We have found it essential to talk about the fact that this means we could potentially disagree, and at times even argue, with each other. When we outright acknowledge this seemingly obvious truth - that people will have differing opinions and ideas - a sigh of relief seems to go through the group. They have just been given the freedom to disagree, have started to set boundaries for how to handle disagreements, and have begun to have a feeling that something good is potentially going to come out of this group.

Practically, this means anyone who would take information shared in the group and share it with others outside the group would not be a welcome part of the group. In the past year, we have had a group in our church that had to ask a couple to leave, after twice this couple had shared personal information that had been shared within their dinner group. While different groups establish different boundaries, we have found that this boundary of confidentiality of the group is sacred and needs to be established in every group.

People need to know these boundaries and they need to know you are serious about keeping them. One method I have picked up to facilitate this is that of a group covenant. A covenant, in this context, is a list of agreed-upon items that our group comes up with together that we then all sign. I have found that this is not something that can be introduced in the first days of a new Sobremesa Dinner Group, as most groups are just

not ready for that kind of depth in the first few months of gathering, but this has been used effectively in many of our groups who were already a few months into their gatherings.

One last thing that Bill gave our group has stuck with me all these years. From our first gathering as an accountability group Bill was the first to accept whatever was said, even when whatever was said was possibly inappropriate or counter to the perception of the overall group. If we truly want to help people grow and to have safety in speech, then we have to be willing to accept whatever their positions might be on a topic or idea. This does not mean that we cannot give counter ideas, but that we remember that each person has the freedom to have their own ideas.

At times this can be tested in groups, typically in one of two ways: first, that someone in the group gives too much information too often. This is the person that likes to tell the sensational, oversharing story. I have learned over the years that the only way to deal with this person is to speak with them in private and share with them how this disrupts the group; if this does not work then have the whole group give an intervention where each person shares how the inappropriate sharing of the specific person affects them at a personal level.

The other test that many groups struggle with today is what I call the political debate. Often our polarized world today carries over into even our personal spaces, and to those with whom we are the most intimate. One of the saddest moments in our Sobremesa Dinner Groups over the past two years happened when two members of one of our earliest groups started an argument over politics. While the whole group tried to intervene as the argument escalated, the episode ended up both destroying a group that

had been together for almost two years as well as causing one of the members of the group to leave our greater community.

What I learned from this experience as a group leader is that I need to get the politics issue out there fairly soon in the life of a new group.

Often in our group session on creating a group covenant (our third or fourth gathering) I will bring up that we live in a world of polarized political views and talk about how destructive this has been to our society. I will then talk about the intentionality of growing beyond this and how I hope that we have different political views so that we can learn from one another. As we go through our covenant, we will often come up with an item of listening to each other's views, even in politics, and that each is entitled to their views. Second, I begin to dive into politics, beginning at more superficial levels, and moving deeper over many months so that slowly our positions and ideas emerge.

The Basics Needed for Conversation

With these general guidelines in place for creating an environment of safety and openness it is now time to begin to have dialogue. We have found that the best way to begin to start having dialogue is to come prepared to each session with an icebreaker type of question or game and also to have what we call a "Jesus story" that comes from one of the Jesus stories found in the Bible. These are stories from the life of Jesus, and they are often stories that reflect issues of morality and spirituality that people have in their life. You may be wondering, "How am I going to come up with a Jesus story to share each time we gather for a dinner?" This part we have made easy for you. Recently we created a website that we call the Sobremesa Café. The Sobremesa Café has four sections you can explore:

FIRST FOUR WEEKS: This is a place where Sobremesa Dinner Groups can go to get an overview of your first four weeks. For each week you will find a video introduction that helps you to have a focus for that week. You will then have a basic overview of the evening and main topics that need to be discussed and worked through in that gathering. Each night ends with a Jesus story that comes with questions to be asked of the group.

ICEBREAKERS AND GAMES: This section includes a growing list of icebreaker questions and games that welcome people into your gatherings.

JESUS STORIES: This section is filled with Jesus stories that each come with two or three questions to spur group conversation.

COMMUNITY BOARD: Lastly, the Sobremesa Café has a community forum where you can chat with others who are developing Sobremesa Dinner Groups and share ideas and stories.

By going online to sobremesacafe.com you can find a brief overview of basic questions to ask a group to facilitate dialogue. We encourage you to try it out now!

When to Dialogue

One of the questions that we are often asked is when to do the time of dialogue during an average Sobremesa Dinner Group. Even though you are free to do this at any time during your dinner group, we have found that most groups start their evening off with an icebreaker and then share the Jesus story and questions during the dinner itself. Alternatively, some groups will focus on casual conversation during the meal and move into another room and spend time in dialogue after the meal is over. Whichever way

works for your group, we encourage you to make sure to allow time for casual conversation within your evening gathering.

While both our International Wine and Dine Group and our Vegan Group were started not as Sobremesa Dinner Groups, they both had this spiritual element of going deeper and hearing stories of spiritual significance. We found in both of our groups that our meals typically were times to come together around sharing stories of life and were filled with casual conversation. After our dinners we would usually retreat into another room to hear our Jesus stories and have dialogue around these. For us the time of casual community conversation has always been of utmost importance and we would not like to lose that by getting into the focused Jesus story too early in the evening. The main thing is to find an approach that your group feels comfortable with, and then to not be too rigid. Remember, it's all about relationship!

We are almost finished describing this new idea of the Sobremesa Dinner Church, but before closing, let's make sure we have the after-dinner cleanup and not leave anything behind.

EPILOGUE: THE AFTER-DINNER CLEANUP

You may be thinking that the after-dinner cleanup is not part of a meal, but over the past couple of years I have learned to look at this time differently. My wife and I have been blessed to meet regularly with a group of friends who have truly become our “refrigerator friends.” As we have grown closer with the group, one transition has taken place that was almost unnoticed at first.

Whereas the host of a dinner usually encourages everyone to just leave the plates and other utensils where they are at the end of the meal—usually saying “We will get that later,”—with this group we have grown to the point where we not only allow but encourage helping each other clean up at whichever house we are enjoying a meal. Through our group of friends, I have discovered that the after-dinner cleanup can actually be one of the most important parts of a good community meal. It is in the after-dinner cleanup that we just live together as good friends, and it is also this time that reveals our relationship is growing into something so much more than that of casual friends. So, why have an After-Dinner Cleanup here?

I have tried to lay out the main parts of launching your own Sobremesa Dinner Group, but I realize that life is more than just putting some words on a paper and hoping everything will connect. In this epilogue I hope to give you a couple more resources we have found useful as our community moves into fully embracing the Sobremesa Dinner Group. I will focus on three areas: first, the challenge for pioneers. We are in a time when we desperately need pioneers to come to the top to start new things, especially in this area of launching dinner communities. Second, I will introduce the twice-annual gathering that we have for our Sobremesa Dinner Groups and why this is important for us. Third, I

will share with you about where we go from here. In this we will return to our Introduction and look at what this is really all about.

We Need Pioneers

Over the course of this book, we have talked much about the possibility that you may be called to launch a new Sobremesa Dinner Group. Before we close out this introduction into a new way of forming meaningful and deep community, I want to speak to you specifically. In every great movement there is always the pioneer and trailblazer, out in front of the crowds, that opens the doors for the rest of us to come up from behind. These are the people who opened up the led us into new locations on earth, who invented new mechanisms that have changed our lives and took us to the moon.

When our youngest child was in middle school our family got the opportunity to become pioneers. Our son was attending a school that up to then only went through the eighth grade. Early in his eighth-grade year the school announced that the following year they were going to expand their program all the way through high school, and that this expansion was going to start with our son's class. We had put Jonathan in this school because we loved their program, and the emphasis they had in developing kids who could think for themselves and work through their own educational challenges. It was more about skills than rote knowledge. Having returned from the mission field when our two youngest children were in elementary school, after having homeschooled them for the years that we were living in Latin America, this school had been a great bridge to prepare our daughter for the public high school that she attended.

As the year went by, we went back and forth on the merits of keeping our son in the school and being part of this first class to move into the new high school. One of the

things that heavily influenced our decision was that, as the year came to an end, it was obvious that only about four or five kids (and families) were actually considering staying to continue through high school. After much discussion with our son, we decided to be one of the pioneer families that stayed. After the dust settled it ended up that only four students remained. It was not easy to be a pioneer. The kids themselves had times when they missed being in a class with 20 other kids. They missed many of the activities that larger classes can do. The school, with only four students in this class, was deeply aware of the needs for this class which led them to develop a program especially for them, much of which was independent directed learning. The kids soared, and not only did they soar, but they developed amazing relationships with each other.

The next class almost entirely remained to attend high school, and so by the time my son's class graduated they were the leaders of a normal-sized school and loved the position at the top. We and the other parents often share that all of our kids can say they graduated within the top four students of their class! Today, our son would say that going out in front as a pioneer, while hard at times, prepared him for college like nothing else could have ever done. We are also blessed that those four young people, now ten years removed from high school, are still close and are all doing great things in life.

We need pioneers! We need people to go out in front and to forge new paths; and today, as the world continues to pull apart, we need people to step forward and stand in the gap to bring people together. I can tell you from experience that it is not easy to be a pioneer. Sometimes people don't understand what you are doing, and often when we move into uncharted waters, we encounter hardships and obstacles that we have never witnessed before. But it is exactly these types of experiences and hurdles that help us

create something new, something that is beautiful to behold and which can have an impact on our community and throughout all of society. So this is your call to become a pioneer, to step up and step out in launching a new Sobremesa Dinner Group.

Here is our promise. If you do, you will not be alone. This is why we have created our Sobremesa Café, as a place for people to get together and learn from one another, to have a place to gripe and complain but also to celebrate success.

We have also created in our community another way to stay connected: our twice-annual Sobremesa Café Gathering. I will now share about this great opportunity.

The Twice-Annual Gathering

Early within the launching of this new ministry in our community we discovered that we had to provide ways to continue to come together in community at all levels. If we believe that we are called to do life with others and that we are also meant to be part of the four different spaces of life, then we needed to create a space above our Sobremesa Dinner Groups where we could meet in a social space for encouragement and companionship. Our solution was to develop a twice-annual gathering, which of course happens around a meal.

Twice a year we invite all of our Sobremesa Dinner Groups to come together around a catered meal at our church, where we celebrate good food, great friends and deep dialogue. We enhance the evening with good music and a short presentation of something pertinent for small group communities. It is our hope that this will be a vehicle for groups to find they are part of something bigger than themselves, and a place where they will meet new friends and develop larger communities for growth.

As a church we also hope these groups will bring some new vitality and perspectives into our community that help us continue to grow with excitement for all that is happening in our greater community of The Villages. If you go to our Sobremesa Café and join our Sobremesa Dinner Group Community, you will be alerted to these opportunities as they arise.

Our hope, one day, is that we will host an annual Sobremesa Café Retreat for people to come and join with us for two or three days of community, education, and entertainment; as well, of course, of good food!

Can't wait to see you there.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As I write this, a few days have passed since violence stormed into our nation's capital—yet another incident to drive the stake ever deeper into our country's internal division. In our workplaces, our schools, and—yes—even our churches, we view each other with mounting suspicion and dread.

Reconciliation and understanding—the core starting places of unity—are difficult things to come by, or to even hear preached. Yet, as stated above, I firmly believe that this is our calling as followers of Christ—to form deep relationships within diverse communities. Today more than ever we need to do the hard work of developing relationships that withstand the tensions of a divided world and these relationships take work.

The dinner table is the place that I believe God has provided for humanity to do the hard work of reconciliation, restoration and rejuvenation. The table, when set right and when all the courses are included can not only bring diverse people together, but it

can give us the foundations to build deep and meaningful relationships, even in the midst of our diversity. This should be the desire of any of us who want to see our country move ahead in a way that brings peace and reform to the peoples of this planet.

Let's get back to the table and let's bring some new friends to the table with us— with the intentionality to do the hard work of building real and lasting relationships— then let's be intentional to work through our spiritual questions, knowing that while we may not come to a place of ever having all the answers the journey is worth the work. The world needs us today like never before and I am convinced that through these Sobremesa Dinner Groups our neighborhoods and local communities will see better days ahead.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. Our prayer is that you will find groups of peace and love set around a table that will walk with you into an uncertain future and that these groups will make the journey all worthwhile.

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