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Imago Dei: Identity, Story, and Who We Are in Christ

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

IMAGO DEI: IDENTITY, STORY, AND WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Dedication

*To everyone who has walked alongside me in this Journey
and to the Stories that will be written.*

Epigraph

“The most important step a man can take. It’s not the first one, is it?

It’s the next step. Always the next step...”

- Brandon Sanderson

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Editorial or Research Method

This Project utilized a blended methodology that draws upon bibliographic resources, data derived from stakeholder collaboration, and human-centered design and iteration processes to create a heuristic-based, application-oriented Project.

Abstract

Imago Dei: Identity, Story, and Who We are in Christ seeks to address the NPO: *Many people feel like they do not belong in church*. This project was developed in the context of international evangelical churches in Hong Kong. Stakeholders involved included pastors, lay leaders, and members of the international church community. Those involved come from a variety of national backgrounds.

The journey began with asking the question of what constitutes genuine biblical community and why many churches do not feel like a community. However, through the various workshops that were conducted during the research phase, it was discovered that a lack of community is a symptom of something deeper. The core of the issue was discovered to be the loss of a common identity that allows people to join their own stories to the story of Christ's redemption and reconciliation of the world.

As such, *Imago Dei: Identity, Story, and Who We are in Christ* acts as a small group curriculum that seeks to bring people to an understanding of what rooting one's identity in Christ means. It also seeks to bring people to an understanding of the power that the various narratives that surround us has in forming our identity, what it means to see our story in light of God's story, the implications of identifying with Christ, and practical tips for nurturing that identity.

The benchmarks that the curriculum is being measured by include accessibility and clarity (the average person can use it), functionality (the curriculum is challenging yet thought-provoking and useful), comparison to similar works, and technicality (free of formatting and editorial errors).

Introduction to the Project Portfolio

This portfolio begins with a snapshot of the research journey. I will reflect on the three phases of the innovation process: Discover, Design, and Deliver. In the Discovery Phase, I define the NPO (Need-Problem-Opportunity) that my project seeks to address, including the initial exploratory research. During the Design Phase, I describe three prototypes that I created in order to address the NPO. Finally, in the Delivery Phase, I focus my attention on the most viable project and bring it to life.

Discovery Phase

The context in which my research was born sprang from an international church setting in Hong Kong. The path to *Imago Dei* began in the aftermath of a time of darkness in my life. In 2018, I experienced a spiritual crisis following conflict in the church I was attending in Hong Kong. At its core, the conflict revolved around one question: “What does it mean to belong to the church?”

When I started this journey, my NPO was: “In order for the church to have a godly influence in society, the local church needs to become a community that fosters friendship among diverse people and cultivates a nurturing environment.” From the outset, I wanted to answer the question of how a church can become a community. Since moving to Hong Kong, community was something that I found missing from the various churches I had attended. With this problem in mind, I began to gather my stakeholders.

The stakeholders I gathered primarily came from those who are either actively serving on staff at different international churches in Hong Kong, have served on staff at international churches in the past, or who are/were small group leaders in different churches. At the Discovery Session, it was stressed that the end goal was not to find a solution to the problem, but rather to *understand* the problem we were facing. The discovery process had four primary

stages: Charting the Audience (who is most affected the NPO), Focusing the Problem (what exactly is the problem we are addressing), Symptoms and Causes (what are the effects of this problem), and Putting It Together (synthesizing what we learned).

At the beginning of the session, the stakeholders were given the following general statement: “The church has become a gathering place rather than a community.” As we dissected this statement, four major themes surfaced during our discussion: The allocation of resources, the lack of safe spaces, the reality of loneliness, and the lack of transformation. However, these four themes were undergirded by a common idea – namely, distorted values that churches may hold. In the end, we were left with the following discovery statement:

“Considering the diverse population of the church, we’ve discovered that the local church has ceased to be a safe place and perpetuates loneliness, which is caused by distorted values. If solved, it would mean that there would be a renewal of the people within the church and of the world.”

Following the Discovery Session, I interviewed three people one-on-one to discuss what our group discovered. Several themes came from these interviews: Moralistic trends in churches prevent the church from being a safe place, leadership sets the standard and scope for the culture within the church, and the church has lost sight of the “motherly heart of God.”

In synthesizing these trends with what was discussed in the Discovery Session, a rough idea was beginning to take shape. There are barriers in place that prevent people from joining themselves to the greater church community. It was through additional research that another underlying theme began to emerge: The idea of narrative and story. This discovery proved to be essential in moving toward my final project. At the end of the Discovery Phase, the NPO had evolved:

“My local church is failing to be a nurturing community because it does not cultivate a common identity and narrative that invites people in all of their diversity to willingly join themselves to God’s redemptive story of humanity.”

The question of community had become a question of identity. It was in the Design Phase that the means of addressing this problem would be found.

Design Phase

The Design Phase of this journey proved to be much more difficult than the Discovery Phase. Regarding stakeholders, many of those who participated in the Discovery Session returned. In addition, several new stakeholders – including a pastor and several other small group leaders – joined the session. Prior to the session, I sent each of the stakeholders a summary of what we learned through the Discovery Session.

When we all gathered for the Design Workshop, we began with a warm-up activity where we created a “Pain and Gain Map” to revisit the NPO. This ended up being the most well-received aspect of the workshop and it provided new insights into the NPO. The question of belonging was brought up not as a biblical principle, but rather as an effect of God pouring out His love for us. It’s a community formed out of God’s love that gives the church a sense of belonging.

However, going forward, the other main activities faltered due to poor facilitation and communication. For the second activity, we did a 3-12-3 Brainstorm activity to work through Joseph Myers’s levels of belonging.¹ Unfortunately, I did not communicate the intent and purpose of it well, which led to frustration. In the end, we made it through the activity and several napkin pitch ideas were formulated:

¹ Myers advocates for four distinct levels of belonging that are necessary to creating healthy relationships: Public Belonging, Social Belonging, Personal Belonging, and Intimate Belonging.

- *Identity Workshop and Cohort* – a mentor-led cohort that focuses on cultivating one's identity in Christ and connecting their identity to God's overarching narrative.
- *Community Listening Workshop* – a workshop that focuses on bringing healing and reconciliation to broken relationships within the church.
- *"2:42" Immersive Experience* – an immersive, missional experience that gives participants a taste of what community found in Acts 2:42-47 looks like.

With these ideas in mind, I then conducted one-on-one interviews. Of the ideas, the identity workshop and the 2:42 immersive experience were the most attractive to people. I settled on two projects to prototype: The Identity Workshop and Cohort and the 2:42 Immersive Experience. I settled on these two ideas because they seemed to address the NPO statement better than the Community Listening Workshop.

For prototypes, I came up with a brochure and a curriculum for each of these projects and shared them with others to get their feedback. The brochure served as way of catching people's interest. The curriculum provided an overview of what would be covered by each project.

Prototyping proved to be the best part of the Design Phase. By moving beyond the theoretical and into the creative process, I was able to get more clarity on both projects. In the end, I see both prototypes as building off one another. The identity workshop acts as a foundation to call people back to remembering who they are in Christ. By cultivating a common identity through Christ, then community could be built as one comes to see the church as Christ intended it.

As such, the identity workshop – now called *Imago Dei* – was chosen as the most viable prototype with the hope that, one day, 2:42 will also manifest itself as a blueprint for planting communities of people who have been through the *Imago Dei* curriculum.

Delivery Phase

In creating *Imago Dei*, I have created a course workbook that focuses on five modules:

- What is Christian identity?
- Understanding our personal narratives.
- Understanding God’s narrative and where we fit into it.
- Understanding the implications of Christian identity.
- How one can cultivate Christian identity.

In addition, I also included a narrative called “Ever Wandering”, which is a series of reflections on the deconstruction of one’s identity in story form. I originally considered using an online teaching platform to make the coursework easily available. However, after discovering the limitations of the software as well as its limited use by participants, I decided it best to drop that aspect of the project.

I have gathered feedback in several ways. Upon completion of the rough draft of the workbook, I sent it to beta readers who provided initial feedback on what they thought was good, what could be improved, what was missing/needed to be clarified, and other comments they had. Taking their feedback into consideration, I made corrections as necessary. I also ran the curriculum with several small groups and sent the material to other leaders to run their own small groups. This was to make sure it was accessible and made sense to people who were interested in using it.

In the long run, my hope is that *Imago Dei* will serve as the foundation to other courses in Christian education. At the moment, I have partnered with another Doctor of Ministry student from Fuller Theological Seminary who is doing his dissertation on marketplace ministry. Together, we have created a course that combines elements of *Imago Dei* with his research to create a course on “Christian Identity and Vocation.” As mentioned previously, I would also like to see this material used as a form of catechesis to build a strong

foundation of Christian identity in churchgoers and leaders alike. With this common identity restored, it's my hope that church will be restored as a community and people will be able to find a sense of belonging through God's love.

Challenges and Obstacles

Along the way, I faced several obstacles. Although the Discovery Phase was enjoyable, the Design Phase proved to be the most difficult aspect of the journey for me. For the longest time, I have lived in "theory". It was where I was most comfortable. Bringing ideas to life has always been difficult for me, so when it came to this part of the journey, "imposter syndrome" washed over me.

Throughout the Design Phase, I was constantly battling questions such as, "Who am I to address this problem?", "What right to do I have to speak into a question of identity?", and "Am I really cut out for this program?" I had locked myself away in an ivory tower of academia. I found it easy to *talk* and *write* about the problem, but to find a way to address it was a different matter entirely.

A major aspect of this was that I simply did not know where to start. When we were tasked with creating prototypes, I felt overwhelmed. It was during this time that I had a conversation with one of my peer group members who was able to point me in a direction for creating the prototypes. As soon as I was given this suggestion, the rest of the Design Phase fell into place. At the beginning of this Doctor of Ministry program, I said that being part of a cohort was one of the best parts of the program's design. My experience in the Design Phase solidified this point for me.

Further Improvements

During the feedback process for *Imago Dei*, one common theme was the sheer scope of the material. During one interview, the interviewee said it would be difficult for small group leaders to use the material because of its size. When addressing the problem of Christian identity and how story forms that identity, there are many threads that can be traced. I attempted to create a survey of many different areas and practices, but it would be next to impossible to address every single aspect in great detail. In future iterations, there will likely need to be a distillation of the material or it would need to be broken up into smaller segments.

The material needs to be accessible to people if they are to use it. An alternative approach would be to break the workbook into different studies that are both shorter in length and more comprehensive on a single subject. This would allow for there to be more depth to different aspects of the study while also not seeming to be overwhelming in a large tome. If it's broken into smaller segments, they could also form the basis of a Christian education program that explores how identity intersects with different subjects (i.e., "Identity and Story," "Communal Identity," "Practices for Cultivating Identity," "Identity and Vocation," etc.).

Although the journey has been difficult at times, it has offered clarity and a path forward. Here are some of the key insights I have learned through my research:

- *The church described in Acts 2 is not the only way of "doing church."* My journey began with an internal question, "What is the church?" It's easy for us to look back at the beginnings of the church and to idolize it without seeing the flaws it had. The church in Acts 2 was simply an iteration of the church; it was not perfect by any means.

- *The lack of belonging is not the core issue; it's a symptom of something deeper.* When I set out, my assumption was that the church had become a place that did not foster community. However, this issue was more surface level than I realized. When the layers were peeled back, it was revealed that the need to belong is an issue of identity. For the church to reclaim itself as a loving community, it must first remember on *who* it is built: Christ.
- *Identity is important.* The question, “Who am I?” is one that each of us asks at some point in our lives. There are so many narratives and identities we assume and do not question until they are brought to our attention. However, at the beginning of our journey at our London/Oxford Advance, my project mentor, Dr. Pablo Morales, made a comment that ended up being the driving force of my research: “Any identity that is not built on the foundation of Christ will ultimately crumble.”
- *“We are taught what to do, but not who we are.”* This statement came during the Design Phase of my research. When talking about the issue of identity, one of the group members made the above comment. It rang true for many people. We are taught spiritual disciplines and why they are important. However, we are not taught *who* we are in Christ. As such, we lose sight of the transformation that Christ offers us when we become followers of Him.

What's Next?

As there are still many other threads that and avenues that can be traced regarding the formation of identity, more research into these areas will be necessary if I want to expand on other areas. Entire books could be written on how identity intersects with other areas of life. On a personal level, resources for how to better facilitate retreats and workshops would also be helpful.

It's my hope that after graduation, I will be able to send *Imago Dei* to a publisher so that it can become a resource for other churches and leaders. I would also hope to run long term workshops and cohorts using the material as a type of spiritual formation exercise. At present, the material is also being used to create a course revolving around identity and vocation with a Doctor of Ministry student from Fuller Theological Seminary. This has shown me the potential for how it can be used in different contexts.

I have also been considering Joseph R. Myers's idea of different types of belonging and how we need relationships in four key spheres to have healthy relationships: Public, Social, Personal, and Intimate.² A rough sketch of what this could look like is the following:

- *Imago Dei* – The foundation of Christian identity and how our story fits into God's story.
- *2:42* – Building on *Imago Dei*, *2:42* would be a curriculum for churches to use to recapture the basic heart and identity of the early church.
- *The Fellowship* – This curriculum would set the foundation for bringing a sense of belonging and identity to small groups within churches.
- *Mentorship* – This material would focus on creating life-giving mentoring relationships within the church.

In utilizing the spheres of belonging, this could bring light into how churches cultivate a sense of Christianity identity throughout the various levels of their congregation.

In the end, the journey to *Imago Dei* has been a challenging, yet fruitful one. Born out of a personal spiritual crisis, this journey helped me to reconcile my *own* struggles with identity and remind me of who I am in Christ. I hope and dream that this project can be used to call the church back to remember who it was created to be and that it would be restored to the image of Christ's bride. To see the initial question evolve from one about community to a

² Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 20.

question of identity has been fascinating. What's more, it led to deeper friendships and relationships with stakeholders. The communal aspect of this research journey has shown that while our initial assumptions may be justified, they are just one piece of the puzzle. It's a journey that's been worth every step of the way.

Introduction to the Final Project

Imago Dei was developed in an international church in Hong Kong. The church in which it was developed was a nondenominational church where many of the members are from a middle class to upper middle class. At the outset of this journey, the church had expressed a desire to see deeper community within the congregation. The NPO statement for my final project is:

Many people feel like they do not belong to the church.

To address this problem, I created *Imago Dei: Identity, Story, and Who We are in Christ*. *Imago Dei* is a workbook that is designed for churches to use in small groups to help guide the members to an understanding of their identity in Christ. When the research journey began, it started with an observation that many churches had difficulty in creating community where people felt they belonged. As the research progressed, a common theme kept appearing: Community starts with a common identity.

In conversations and interviews with people of various backgrounds, it became increasingly clear that many churches had lost the identity that Christ gives it. What's more, people who attended church were rarely taught who they are in Christ. They had been taught discipline after discipline, but the heart of why they practiced them was lost. The question of belonging was revealed to be a symptom of something deeper.

Imago Dei was born through this process. While there are many ways to treat the symptom of a lack of community, without addressing the core – namely, a misplaced identity – it is unlikely the problem will be solved. As such, *Imago Dei* seeks to not necessarily remedy the problem, but rather start people along the journey of remedying it.

Regarding the audience, although it is suitable for a variety of groups, the group that will likely benefit from it the most are young adults who have been raised in a Christian context. Due to the recent trend of deconstructing one's faith journey, this material will

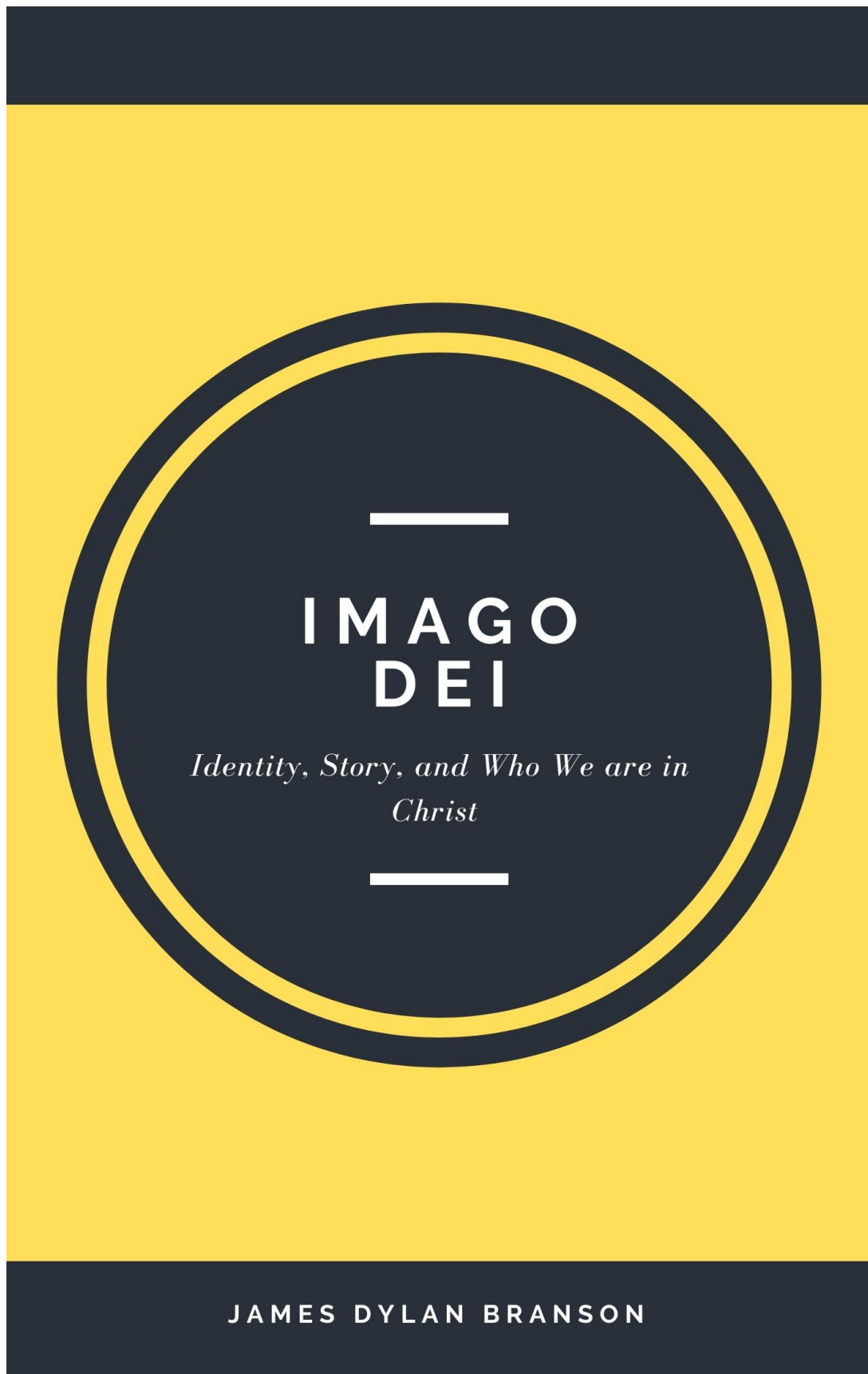
hopefully be helpful in guiding people as they parse out the various stories interwoven in their faith journey.

The benchmarks of success include:

- *Accessibility and Clarity.* The content in the workbook should be accessible and clear to the average user.
- *Functionality.* Users should be able to find the workbook challenging, yet thought-provoking and useful.
- *Comparison.* When compared to other works of a similar nature, it should be found to be comparable in quality.
- *Technical.* The workbook should be free of formatting and editorial errors so as not to detract from the content.

What follows is the final project, *Imago Dei: Identity, Story, and Who We are in Christ*.

MILESTONE 5 – FINAL PROJECT



Imago Dei:

**Identity, Story, and Who We are in
Christ**

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Introduction

Our world is facing an identity crisis.

At some point in our lives, most of us ask ourselves an important question: Who am I?

The spark that ignites this question varies from person to person, but the question usually follows some sort of personal crisis. It could be the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, a realization that life isn't going the way one planned, or any number of scenarios. But one thing is consistent: When we are confronted about different parts of our identity and are forced to question it, we are often left in a state of disarray and confusion.

Whether we realize it or not, we have put something at the center of our identity. It could be work, a family role, a position in the community, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, or any number of things. The identity we put at the center of our lives brings a certain set of expectations, implicit rules, biases, and more. And while all these things are not bad in and of themselves, what happens when something challenges that identity or it's suddenly gone?

What we put at the center of our identity is how we define ourselves. We have a picture of our "ideal Self" that we work to make a reality. We spend tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars and hours trying to make our dreams come true. Sometimes we achieve those dreams, but just as often, we don't. When that identity is gone or is suddenly shattered by crisis, lose our sense of Self and try to fill that hole with something. Suddenly we don't have an answer to the question, "Who am I?"

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "identity" is defined as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others." I would define identity as the culmination of our story and how our story interacts with the story of others. We find meaning in the stories around us. They often serve as filters to help us understand more of who we are and to understand the world around us.

Our identity is formed in the context of our everyday lives. As we encounter the stories of other people, the stories of our cultural context, and the stories of the past, we are shaped into a unique person. This begs the question of what we put as the dominant story or identity in our lives. This story or identity ultimately acts as a filter through which we see the world and other people – even if we don't necessarily realize it's there.

Think back to a moment of conflict that you've experienced:

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- What feelings were evoked?

Let me give you an example. After I first moved to Hong Kong, I was asked to lead a small group in an international church. My time with this group was fantastic and life giving in many ways as I watched them grow and become more vulnerable with one another. However, my time with the group came to an end after I encountered a conflict with the church that I could not personally reconcile. In the end, I decided to step out of leadership and take a "break" from the church, feeling hurt and betrayed.

For the next year, I fostered a rage in my heart toward those who I felt had betrayed me and the group. During this time, I felt lost. I isolated myself and lost my community. I felt betrayed by people I trusted. Above all, I felt betrayed by God in the classic “Why did this happen?” scenario.

As time passed, I was able to seek counsel from close friends and mentors. They listened closely and empathized with me (many had also experienced hurt by the broader Church in some capacity). But as time passed, instead of ignoring and fostering those feelings of rage and hatred I felt toward those who had wronged me, I was challenged to trace those feelings to their roots. Eventually, I had a conversation with the person who I felt had wronged me and was able to find a sense of closure to the whole situation. It was ultimately the spark that ignited my own journey into rediscovering my identity.

In the years since this event occurred, I’ve come to several conclusions about *why* I felt the way I did:

- My feelings of betrayal were rooted in damage to the identity of being a friend and “family member” to those who hurt me.
- My identity as a leader was called into question. I felt that part of my identity as a leader was to be able to protect and care for the people I was leading. An “outside force” had made its way in and assumed leadership over my people.
- Part of my anger came from someone using my name to hurt someone else.
- My identity as a lifelong follower of Jesus was challenged as I faced my first genuine church conflict as the people who hurt me were also followers of Jesus.
- I felt solace as I identified with those who had similar experiences of being hurt by church leaders.
- My own feelings of isolation came from not being able to identify with the people who I once called “family.”

When we perceive someone or something attacking part of what we believe to be the core of our identity, it causes a vehement reaction. While this occurs on a micro level, it also occurs at a macro level. I have a hypothesis that the major “-isms” we see in society (i.e., racism, sexism, ageism, nationalism, etc.) all stem from an issue of identity. Those who propagate such ideologies approach it from a platform of superiority of a specific identity over another. When these dominant identities find themselves in places of power, it influences the policies that are put into place to aid those who identify with us. When we feel that something is attacking the macro identity, it also causes a vehement reaction.

We rarely realize how important narrative is until the dominant story in our culture is called into question. Take for example the idea of the “American Dream.” The American Dream at its core is that if you work hard and get a good education, you’ll get that job you’ve always wanted and be the successful person you want to be. People strive after this dream, but how many make it? We celebrate those who can make their dreams become a reality – which is probably why shows like “American Idol” or “America’s Got Talent” hit home so deeply for people. Yet in the same breath, we also criticize those who can’t realize their dreams without considering their own stories.

It’s often difficult to recognize those narratives until we have distanced ourselves in various capacities. There is a “mythology” – stories found within our cultures that are part of our cultural DNA – found in each culture that we pass down from generation to generation.

These stories are not often questioned, but when they are it can cause a reaction as the blinders are taken away from their eyes. These reactions can range from disbelief and reinforcement of those stories all the way to a deconstruction as people navigate the new information they have been given.

You may be asking, “What’s the point of all of this? I thought this was supposed to be a study of Christian identity?”

The reason is that it is not just we as individuals or we as a collective society are facing an identity crisis, but the church is as well. Like Israel, we have forgotten who we were created to be as body. Competing narratives and ideologies have interwoven themselves with the story of the church – some for good, others for ill. Whether it be the pervasion of national identity woven into the church or seeing our churches as homogenous groups of people, somewhere down the line we missed something.

It’s hard to say that we have lost sight of being created in the image of God, as many of us were never taught what it means to be created in God’s image. We are taught *what* to do in order to be “good Christians,” but then somehow we missed discovering *who we are* as Christians.

Imago Dei – the “image of God” – is a study that is meant to call us back to the core of who we are in Christ. It consists of five Chapters that are designed to challenge us to consider the implications of Christian identity, the power that the stories we tell ourselves have in forming our identity, and how we can cultivate our identity in Christ. This study is *not* meant to downplay or dishonor the various identities we have assumed throughout our lives, as they are part of the unique Self that God has given each of us. Rather, it is a challenge to *see our central identity through the eyes of Christ and how Christ provides a means of redemption and restoration to our full Self*.

Throughout this study we will consider:

- Chapter 1: What is Christian Identity? – *the initial Chapter in which we will break down the various identities through which we see ourselves, as well as come to a working idea of what our identity in Christ is.*
- Chapter 2: What is My Narrative? – *where we will trace the various stories that have influenced us and helped to define who we are and how we see ourselves.*
- Chapter 3: What is God’s Narrative and Where do I Fit In? – *where we will trace God’s overarching story in Scripture and see where we fit into that story.*
- Chapter 4: So What? What are the Implications of Christian Identity? – *where we will discover what it means to live out our Christian identity.*
- Chapter 5: Personal Practices: Cultivating and Nurturing Our Christian Identity – *where we will discover practical ways to nurture our Christian identity.*

As we’ll quickly see, identity is formed in the context of community. The activities that you’ll find in this study are meant to be done in the context of a small group or cohort of

people. Identity is both an individual and communal construct. Our hope is that as you embark on this journey, it will not just be another Bible study or small group study. Rather, our hope is that it will be the spark that inspires you to journey with Jesus and discover the love He has for you when He calls you “friend.”

Chapter 1: What is Christian Identity?

“To the degree that we embrace the truth that our identity is not rooted in our success, power, or popularity, but in God’s infinite love, to that degree we can let go of our need to judge.”

– Henri Nouwen¹

“Jesus came to announce to us that an identity based on success, popularity and power is a false identity – an illusion! Loudly and clearly he says: ‘You are not what the world makes you; but you are children of God.’”

– Henri Nouwen²

Introduction

If you were active on social media throughout the 2010s, it’s likely that you came across links to various “personality” quizzes. Titles such as, “Which FRIENDS character are you?” or “What does your favorite meal say about your personality?” were probably shared by your friends with a variety of reactions such as, “This is so me!” or “That’s so you!” or “This doesn’t describe me at all.”

These quizzes – usually from the website *Buzzfeed* – were meant to be fun, lighthearted games. And yet, they also revealed something: We want to know who we are. These quizzes provided some sort of affirmation to different character traits. It’s one thing to see yourself as confident, creative, humble, or shy. It’s another to see yourself compared to Harry Potter, The Rock, or Katniss Everdeen.

This phenomenon isn’t relegated to Internet quizzes. We use psychological profiles such as the Myer-Briggs Type Inventory, DiSC, Enneagram, and more to help us make sense of why we act the way we do. People look to astrological signs, finding identity in the characteristics that are listed for each sign.

The point is, we don’t know who we are, and we want a deeper understanding of who we are and why we are the way we are.

In his book *You Are What You Love*, author James KA Smith writes, “Our wants and longings and desire are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow.”³ He echoes St. Augustine who wrote in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 61.

² Ibid., 134-135.

³ James KA Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1.

Identity. It is formed on the altar of that which we love, what we worship. As Christians, we are told that we are to find our identity “firmly rooted in Christ.” But what does that even mean?

Rich Villodas writes, “Whether we know it or not, see it or not, or understand it or not, we are always at risk of being shallowly formed. We are formed by our false selves, our families of origin, the highly manipulated presentations of social media, and value system of a world that determines worth based on accomplishments, possessions, efficiency, intellectual acumen, and gifts.”⁴ Too often, we place something else on our altar of worship. Whether it be our job, our family titles, our race, our ethnicity, our sexuality, our nationality, our allegiances and loyalties, etc., what we place at the center of our lives serves as our driving force. It becomes the lens through which we see ourselves, others, and ultimately God.

These identities we keep are important to us. Identity gives us a sense of connection and belonging to others around us. They serve as a foundation, an “in” with the crowds so to speak. But they also serve as points of contention. What we put at the center of our identity may give us a lens to how we see the world, but they also carry with them the baggage of history and the collective experience.

We come at it from the point of view of, “This person/group is my enemy because they have harmed me and my people” or “I know I can trust this person because they fit within my worldview.” Many of the “-isms” we face in our society (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) stem from seeing one of our identities as superior to the other. This inevitably bleeds over into the policies we support, the lifestyles we recommend, the people we see as good or evil, etc. But whether we realize it or not, it also influences the way we see ourselves as Christians.

We see Christ through the lens we put at the center of our identity rather than letting Christ show us what it means to live faithfully in the identities that God has given us. Even within our churches, we may see those who don’t belong to our church or denomination as the “Other” or even less than us. This attitude is not godly nor is it what God envisioned for His church (see Ephesians 2). As Christians, we belong to one body with Jesus Christ as the head of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). We are baptized into that body, given a common identity with His church, and called to have the same mindset as Christ (Philippians 2:5).

It is this mindset of Christ that is essential to our Christian identity. It is one that is marked with humility and unconditional love for one’s neighbor and for God. It is not an attitude of “us vs them”, but rather one of anticipation and longing for the unity of the body. We look at the world in expectation of seeing God’s work in the world as we partner with Him in His ministry.

But before we get there, we must come to an understanding of how we see ourselves and what it means to belong to Christ. In a fast-paced world that is constantly bombarding us with stimulation, the practice of self-examination and reflection is a dying art. Perhaps you’ve never stopped to ask yourself, “Who am I?” Maybe you’ve already faced an identity crisis and have questioned everything about who you once thought you were. We are constantly being formed by the things around us.

⁴ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2020), 13.

As we begin the journey of discovering the meaning behind Christian identity, we start by considering the various identities we've collected throughout our lifetime. How have they influenced the way we see ourselves? The way we see God? The way we see the world?

This journey is one that is "low and slow". It isn't meant to be taken at a breakneck speed. Take the time to actively reflect on the Chapter with your group. Let this be a sacred space as your journey begins.

Who is Jesus?

Before delving into what it means to have Christ as the center of our identity, we need to ask ourselves another important question: Who is Jesus? Who is the one we, as Christians, are to emulate? The one whose identity we take on as the center of our own.

The question of Jesus's identity is one that has been debated since He walked the earth with His disciples. In Matthew 16:13-16, Jesus has the following exchange with His disciples:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

“Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Then he asked them, “But who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Christians have historically affirmed the identity of Christ through various creeds such as the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.⁵

“Who do you say I am?” The very identity of Christianity hinges on this question. While the *existence* of a man called Jesus Christ is unquestioned from a historical point of view, the *identity* of the man in question is what is debated. Muslims, for example, believe that Jesus existed and was a great prophet, but He was not the Son of God. Within pop culture, Jesus is seen as a great teacher or a guru, but He is not the Son of God.

As Christians, the simple – yet complex – answer is that Jesus Christ is the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14). He is the incarnation, the “visible image of the invisible God” who “existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation” and is the one through whom “God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth” (Colossians 1:15-16).

Even within Christianity, there is a spectrum of ideas about how the person, character, and beliefs of Jesus. Dan Kimball writes:

⁵ Synod 1988 of the Christian Reformed Church, *Apostles' Creed*, translation, (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988) < <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/apostles-creed> >

We think Jesus holds to the same beliefs we do. We probably think he believes worship and preaching should be like the worship and preaching at our church. If we stress social justice in our churches, we feel Jesus would stress that too. If we stress global evangelism, we feel Jesus would want us to put the most effort into that. Calvinists would probably bet Jesus is a five-point TULIP enthusiast. We generally think of Jesus as having the same temperament and personality as we do. For the extrovert, Jesus is outgoing and ready with plenty of jokes and laughs. The introvert will think of Jesus as being more serious, deep, and introspective.⁶

We often tend to create Jesus in *our* image rather than seeing Him for who He truly is. There are nuggets of truth in how we see Jesus, yet we must ask ourselves if we're seeing the full picture or not.

The Gospels are our primary source for knowing the person and character of Jesus. They give us a glimpse into how Jesus interacted with people and how He interacted with the Father. One can see a man of compassion and love, but also one who was unafraid of calling out the narratives and lies that people bought into.

In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund writes that despite all we learn about Jesus' life and teachings in the Gospels, there is only one place where Jesus reveals His heart:

Then Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because *I am humble and gentle at heart*, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light (Matt. 11:28-30, NLT).⁷

"I am humble and gentle at heart." These words are straight from Jesus' mouth. Of all the traits that Jesus self-identified with, it was not His Divinity (Phil. 2:6-11). It was not power and "equality with God". It was humility and gentleness. Ortlund writes, "The heart, in biblical terms, is not part of who we are but the center of who we are. Our heart is what defines and directs us."⁸

It is this Jesus, the one who embraced humility and gentleness that comes with open arms and beckons those who are "weary and carry heavy burdens" so that they can find rest. It is this mindset that Paul explicitly calls for believers to have to when they share the same mindset as Christ (Phil. 2:3-5).

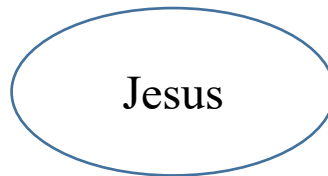
⁶ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), loc. 793.

⁷ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 17. Ortlund uses the English Standard Version (ESV) translation, which translates "humble and gentle at heart" as "gentle and lowly in heart." In future quotations, I will use Ortlund's designation of "gentle and lowly".

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

Group Reflection Exercise

When you think of the character or person of Jesus, what words come to mind? Use the space below to create a mind map of the words or phrases that comes to mind (if you're unfamiliar with mind maps, see Leader's Guide p. 112 for help).



As you look at the mind map that your group came up with, which words or phrases stick out to you the most? Write them in the space below.

“⁶ Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.
⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

– **Philippians 2:6-11**

[illegible]

“¹⁵ Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,

*¹⁶for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.*

He made the things we can see

and the things we can't see—

such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

*¹⁷ He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.*

*¹⁸ Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.*

He is the beginning,

supreme over all who rise from the dead.

So he is first in everything.

*¹⁹For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,*

²⁰ *and through him God reconciled everything to himself.*

*He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross."*

– **Colossians 1:15-20**

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

“28 Then Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.’”

– Matthew 11:28-30

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal black ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is a vertical margin line on the left side, creating a narrow left margin. The paper appears to be a standard notebook or composition paper.

Are there any other passages of Scripture that come to mind? Write them below and share them with your group.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Who am I?

The Journey of discovering oneself is a pilgrimage that spans a lifetime. We spend our entire lives accumulating different identities and masks that help us to cope with our everyday lives. In a very real way, we may build a tower around ourselves as a means of protection; a tower that we hide inside and continue to build up inner walls to safeguard those parts of ourselves we find most dear.

The world batters at our walls, trying to force its way in. There are moments when it does, influencing the way that we see ourselves, the way we see others, and ultimately the way that we see God. Sometimes we integrate it into our current identities, other times we rebel against it.

As we make our way through this journey together, there are some key questions we need to answer:

- Where do we find our identity?
- How is my identity influenced by others around me?
- How does my identity provide a lens into the way I see the world?

There is a question at some point each of us must wrestle with: “WHO AM I?” At our core, we are constantly dialoguing with ourselves trying to answer this question. Our identity is tied up in the implicit and explicit narratives that come along with the various parts of our lives. When we acknowledge a story as part of our own, we begin to see the world through the lens of that story, although we may not consciously know what we are doing. It is when these narratives that are called into question that our eyes are opened and we begin to ponder *why* we believe certain things or why we see the world the way we do.

For many, this dialogue has led to what is known as “deconstruction.” In recent years, deconstruction has become a buzzword within the evangelical tradition as Christians seek to understand and come to grips with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Brian Zahnd describes deconstruction as “a crisis of Christian faith that leads to either a reevaluation or sometimes a total abandonment of Christianity.”⁹ The history and traditions in which one was raised are called into question or are parsed out to determine the effect they have had on one’s development.

When we ask the question, “Who am I?”, we are acknowledging that there is still something more to learn about ourselves. We begin to engage in the process of coming to a working understanding that there is more to us than we think. It is oftentimes a painful process, and it is one that should not be taken lightly. It is important to have someone walk alongside you during this time of searching, lest you get lost along the way.¹⁰

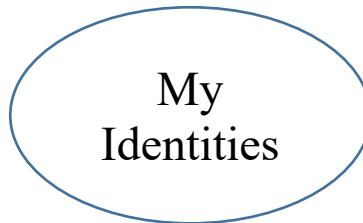
⁹ Brian Zahnd, *When Everything’s on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 26.

¹⁰ At the end of this curriculum, a short story has been included that addresses the process of deconstruction from a narrative perspective. It is the story of an “Expert” who has their worldview challenged and the process they go through to being content with living in the mystery of their identity.

Who am I to the World?

Our world is constantly pulling at us in many different directions, trying to tell us who or what we are. Take a moment to reflect and journal about the various identities and roles that you think the world assigns you.

Draw a mind map in the space below that connects the various roles and identities that you assume in your day-to-day life.



What role or identity do you think takes center stage in your life? How does this identity influence the way that you see yourself? Others? God?

Central Identity: _____

Myself: _____

Others: _____

God: _____

You can use the space below to write down any other thoughts, questions, or reflections.

[illegible]

What does “Identity in Christ” Mean?

Group Reflection Exercise

When you hear the phrase “identity in Christ”, what comes to mind? Write down your thoughts below.

Read Ephesians 1:3-14. As you read through it, highlight or underline any words or phrases that speak about how God sees us.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

Write any thoughts or observations in the space below.

If identity is formulated in the context of relationships, finding one's identity in Christ is the process of learning to see ourselves *as God sees us because of the work of Jesus Christ*. In the passage we read earlier, Paul lists out many ways God sees us:

- “holy and blameless in His sight”
- “adoption to sonship”
- redeemed
- forgiven
- lavished with grace
- chosen
- “the praise for His glory”
- sealed
- “God’s possession”

Do we see ourselves as any of these things? What would it mean for our lives if we saw ourselves as God see us? Unfortunately, it may be the case that we don’t see ourselves in that light. Our past struggles, our sin, the people around us – both positive *and* negative influences – may cause ourselves to see us in another light. In John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, and Bill Thrall’s book, *The Cure*, they write:

Nothing you believe and depend upon is more magnificently freeing than this single truth: You are no longer who you were, even on your worst day. Trusting and leaning upon “Christ in you” is the source of every shred of strength, joy, healing, and peace.¹¹

For those who are “in Christ,” we are transformed and this could have a dramatic impact on the way we see ourselves, others, God, and the world around us. However, even within the church, we have misconceptions of how God sees us. We may overemphasize a certain attribute without giving thought to His *other* attributes. *A misplaced identity in Christ can have a negative impact of our view of God*. In *The Cure*, the authors write:

“Your view of you is the greatest commentary on your view of God.”¹²

Personal Reflection Exercise

How does the truth that Christ is in you allow you to embrace the identity He gives us in Ephesians?

¹¹ John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, & Bill Thrall, *The Cure* (Phoenix: Trueface, 2011), 40

¹² Ibid.

How do I See God?

If our view of ourselves directly influences the way we see God, the way that we see God can directly influence the way we see *ourselves*. Our faith tradition (or lack thereof), our interpretation of Scripture, our culture, our own personal narrative, and many more all converge together when we consider the nature of God.

Personal Reflection Exercise

When you think of God, what words, phrase, images, etc. come to your mind?

As you reflect on these thoughts, what implications do you think they have for how God sees you?

Below is a list of attributes commonly attributed to God:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • love • grace • mercy • kindness • infinite • omnipotent (all-powerful) • unchanging • gracious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-sufficient (has no needs) • omniscient (all-knowing) • ever-present (He is everywhere) • glorious • wise • just • good • holy
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As you look at the list, circle any of the attributes that stand out to you (or add more that you can think of). Share the attributes that stick out with a partner and explain why they stick out.

Our misconceptions of how we think God sees us may stem from an overemphasis on one of His attributes. Instead of seeing God through the lens of *all* of who He is, we tend to focus on one or two attributes as His “core Self” while downplaying the others.

Group Reflection Exercise

Choose two or three attributes of God and reflect on how overemphasizing these attributes can lead to a warped and incomplete view of God.

What impact do you think this would have on how you think God sees you? Share your thoughts with your group.

Attribute #1: _____

Attribute #2: _____

Attribute #3: _____

Group Reflection Exercise

The Bible speaks deeply into our identity and to who we are. Read through each passage as many times as you need, taking time to quiet yourself and to *listen* to what God is teaching you through the Scriptures. As you read and reflect on the passages below, use the following questions to help guide your reflections:

- **What does the passage say about who I am?**
- **What does this passage say about how God sees me?**
- **What questions are being raised in my own heart regarding my identity?**

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

*²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

– Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

– Galatians 3:26-29

¹⁰For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

– Ephesians 2:10

¹See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

– 1 John 3:1

¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

– John 15:13-15

Are there any other passages of Scripture that come to mind? Share them with your group.

What words or phrases stuck out to you in the passages above? Write them below.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

The Journey Begins

The Journey that we are on is a long one. One does not find his or her identity in a single day. The Journey begins with acceptance of our identity as a child of God. It is a journey that cannot and should not be taken alone. It's a journey of pain, but it's also one of joy as we sink into who we truly are. As the first Chapter comes to a close, read the following meditation from Henri Nouwen:

Accept Your Identity as a Child of God

Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain. You can receive the praise as well as the blame that comes to you as an opportunity for strengthening your basic identity, because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame. You belong to God, and it is as a child that you are sent into the world.

You need spiritual guidance; you need people who can keep you anchored in your true identity. The temptation to disconnect from that deep place in you where God dwells and to let yourself be drowned in the praise or blame of the world always remains.

Since that deep place in you where your identity as a child of God is rooted has been unknown to you for a long time, those who were able to touch you there had a sudden and often overwhelming power over you. They became part of your identity. You could no longer live without them. But they could not fulfill that divine role, so they left you, and you felt abandoned. But it is precisely that experience of abandonment that called you back to your true identity as a child of God.

Only God can fully dwell in that deepest place in you and give you a sense of safety. But the danger remains that you will let other people run away with your sacred center, thus throwing you into anguish.

It might take a great deal of time and discipline to fully reconnect your deep hidden self and your public self, which is known, loved, and accepted but also criticized by the world. Gradually, though, you will begin feeling more connected and become more fully who you truly are – a child of God. There lies your real freedom.¹³

¹³ Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Random House, 1998), 70.

Chapter 2: What is My Narrative?

“Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?”

“I wonder,” said Frodo. “But I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. Take anyone that you’re fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”

- J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is a masterpiece in storytelling. I remember the first time I watched the movies (book purists, don’t worry; I’ve read the books as well) when I was in middle school, and I was immediately enamored with the world that Tolkien created. There was something about the world and characters he created that spoke something deep into my soul. The journey of Frodo to destroy the Ring, the quest of a redeemed throne by Aragorn, the wise counsel of Gandalf, and the hope and betrayal of Gollum all taught me a valuable lesson. To this day, I still say that *The Lord of the Rings* is the most influential work of literature in my life and it only continues to grow in its importance the more I read and study it.

What is it about a story that affects us so deeply? Each of us has a story that has stuck with us, a story that “matters.” Whether it’s a fairy tale such as “The Ugly Duckling,” classics such as *The Odyssey* or *Paradise Lost*, or contemporary novels such as *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*, we all have a story (or multiple stories) that greatly influence us in some way.

The power of story is rooted in the power of imagination. Our deepest desires, our greatest fears, our hopes and dreams all find their root in our imagination. Many of us probably engaged in some form of imaginary play as children. I remember after watching *The Lord of the Rings*, my imagination was filled with thoughts of swords and sorcery. My younger cousin and I invested in plastic swords and spears and every day after school, we would go on an epic “adventure” through our grandparents’ backyard. We took on the persona of a group of fantasy mercenaries out to stop the evil dark lord from taking over the world. We played through these scenarios almost every day after school for several years.

Our imaginations tap into the inner creativity that God has given each of us. As we read books, watch television and movies, listen to music, etc., our imaginations are captured and expanded (sometimes for better, sometimes for worse). These stories satisfy a base need to find meaning and understanding with something greater than ourselves. We cannot help but feel invested in stories that captivate us.

As we consider the power of story and of narrative throughout this chapter, we enter the world of others and invite others into our own. We will investigate why stories matters and how the *framing* of our stories impacts the way that we see ourselves and how we see God.

2.1 The Power of Story

When you were a child, what stories danced through your mind or inspired you? Was it of the noble knight slaying the dragon to rescue the kingdom? A superhero who saves the city? A detective who can solve any case? A Pokémon master? Finding a “Prince Charming” or being charmed by the princess? A historical figure who changed the world?

Group Reflection Exercise

*Think of **one or two stories** that have stood out to you in your life. It can be any story from a television show or movie, a book, fairy tale, a true story, historical figure, etc.*

In the space below, write down the titles of the work and a brief explanation about why you like them and why they have stood out to you.

Story #1: _____

Story #2: _____

Why do these stories matter so much to us? The stories that matter to us speak of the desire for hope that we each have in our lives. They provide a connection between our current struggles and what we would prefer our lives to be. Many stories connect with our need for adventure, a need to break free of the status quo. We are transported into a galaxy far far away or to a land of swords and sorcery or even to our neighborhood, but with a sense of freedom we don't normally have.

But even more than that, the stories that matter are the ones that ultimately lead us to the Truth of who God says He is. The stories that we read and listen to often reveal a deep desire for something more.

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

Perhaps one of the most beloved examples of this is found in the relationship between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In what is revered as one of literature's most profound friendships, C.S. Lewis was a determined atheist who saw myth and story as having little value because they didn't tell us much about real life. Lewis was known to have despised the "Christ myth" or the story of the Gospels. He went so far as to say that myths were "lies breathed through silver."

Tolkien fervently disagreed with this sentiment and in response wrote Lewis a poem entitled "Philomythus to Misomythus" (now more commonly known as "Mythopoeia"). Tolkien dedicated the poem "to one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver'". This poem is regarded as one of the key moments in Lewis' life that would ultimately lead to his conversion to Christianity.

But what did Lewis actually have to say about this? What was it about this poem and his relationship with Tolkien that was so impactful? In a letter to Arthur Greeves on October 18, 1931, Lewis wrote:

Now what [Hugo] Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: That if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself...I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of a dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'.

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'.¹⁴

¹⁴ Walter Hooper, ed. *Collected Letters Volume One: Family Letters, 1905-1931* (HarperCollins, 2004), 976.

Stories have a way of awakening a sense of something more. The stories that Lewis refers to are stories of gods and demigods whose deaths are echoes that pave the way for the coming of the Christ myth. One could even argue that Christ is the fulfilment of the deeper themes found in these stories. In the same letter to Arthur Greeves, Lewis wrote:

Therefore it is *true*, not in the sense of being a ‘description’ of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The ‘doctrines’ we get *out* of the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.¹⁵

For Lewis, he knew in his heart that there was a greater meaning behind the stories he loved so much. He would refer to himself as the “most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England” in his work, *Surprised by Joy*.¹⁶

Clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson further comments on this phenomenon in his book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*. He writes:

An unforgettable story captures the essence of humanity and it distills, communicates, and clarifies it, bringing what we are and what we should be into focus. We learn to see and act in the manner of the heroes of the stories that captivate us. These stories call to capacities that lie deep within our nature but might still never develop without that call. We are dormant adventurers, lovers, leaders, artists, and rebels, but need to discover that we are all those things by seeing the reflection of such patterns in dramatic and literary form.¹⁷

Stories matter because they reveal to us our true hearts. They put into words those inner feelings that we know are there, but just don’t know how to verbalize. We watch revenge movies because we’ve been wronged in one way or another and we want our own justice. We love to read and watch romance novels and movies because we long for a deeper companionship, for intimacy that we feel we cannot get in our day to day lives. The stories that matter not only reveal to us our hopes and desires, but it also brings to life our own sins and insecurities.

What does this look like in our own lives? What are the stories that have spoken to *you* in a way that reveals the depths of *your* heart?

¹⁵ Hooper, 976.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (United Kingdom: Geoffrey Bles, 1955).

¹⁷ Jordan Peterson, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 56.

“I Don’t Want to Write More from Underground...”

When I had my first true conflict with the Church, I felt like I had completely lost myself.

I went on a sort of binge. I tried filling my life with anything and everything imaginable to block out the mental and emotional pain I felt at the situation. These people were supposed to have loved me, to care for me, and I was betrayed. What’s more is that I felt betrayed by God, so I shut myself off completely from Him. Yes, I continued to attend church and meet with a small group of men (also “exiles” from that church), but spiritually, I would not have considered myself a Christian at that time. For all intents and purposes, in my mind and my heart, God was dead.

This had a profound effect on me. For most of my life, my identity had been found in the church. I was the “Golden Child” in a small Baptist church in Kentucky who could do no wrong. I was an assistant children’s church worker, a youth worker, aspiring pastor, mission trip leader, seminary student and graduate, everything you could ask for as a “good Baptist.” But now that was gone.

I remember being consumed by my anger at being treated unjustly. All I could think of was how I could possibly get back at the people who hurt me (I never did anything. I’m all bark and no bite). I noticed a change in the way I talked with people. Where once I felt free to be open with others, I was suddenly locked away in the inner sense of turmoil I was experiencing.

But then something changed. I was able to find a “mentor” through Dietrich Bonhoeffer after a chance conversation with my housemates. I began to read through Eric Metaxas’s biography of Bonhoeffer and found that had spent his entire life pursuing the same questions that I was wrestling with: “What is the church? What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ?” To be able to journey along with someone of history who had struggled with the same questions was something reawakened a hunger and thirst for God.

However, I was still battling internally with my thoughts of revenge and bitterness at the people who hurt me. I began to open up to one of my mentors who is well-versed in classic literature. He immediately recommended to me Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. The book recounts the tale of one of the most despicable humans you will read about. He is a spiteful man, one who is consumed by petty rage and self-righteousness. The novel is divided into two main parts: The first half where he tries to exact revenge on a police officer who simply moved him out of a doorway so he could enter, and the second half that focuses on the man’s interactions with a prostitute.

The opening line of the book is, “I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man.” From the moment I read the first lines, I felt sick to my stomach. As I continued to read the man’s narrative, I felt that I connected with him. As I read the novel, I was shaken by how seeds of bitterness and anger can consume us. I saw my own sin, my own bitterness, come to the forefront of my mind and heart. By the end of the novel, I echoed the closing words: “I don’t want to write more from ‘Underground.’”

Personal Reflection Exercise

Think back to the stories you reflected upon earlier. Choose one or both stories (or another if you wish) and reflect on the following points:

- *What does this story reveal about your inner desires?*
- *How has this story verbalized your own insecurities or questions?*
- *Is there an event from your life that makes the story more relatable?*

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

Share these thoughts with someone in your cohort.

2.2 How Our Communities Influence Our Story and Identity

Story is not relegated to books, television, or film. Story is our everyday existence as we live and learn with others. The formation of our identity is narrative in its roots in that it is tied to the events and people of our lives. Our stories and identities are influenced by many different sources.

The various communities we have been part of throughout our life have a direct influence on how we see ourselves, God, and others around us. Our family of origin, our church background (or lack thereof), our friends, our culture, etc. all play a role in giving us a sense of Self.

Richard Rohr writes:

We cannot reach our potential without healthy relationships. Like an acorn maturing into a mighty oak, we grow into maturity through healthy relationships. Life-giving relationships are the source and the fruit of life. When our relationships foster appropriate connection and lead to deep communion with others, we become more fully alive.¹⁸

Part of being created in the image of God is that we are relational beings. Just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in relationship with one another, the need for relationship is planted into our very DNA. How we interact with one another and our communities plays a crucial role into developing our identity.

However, many times we don't recognize the impact our communal stories have on our individual story. Just as each of us has our own individual story, each of our communities also has a story attached to it as well. There is a history or tradition that follows each community. When we can trace these stories back to their roots and understand the values each one holds, we can get an understanding of how these stories have impacted the development of our identity and the formation of our own values.

Within each community, we create a self-image to fit into the life of that community. Rohr writes, "We are masters at creating an image, but we are novices at recognizing and repenting of the image we have created."¹⁹ There are expectations – whether implicit or explicit – to belong in a community. Not all these expectations are healthy. In trying to mold our image to fit into the image of the greater community, we can lose our sense of Self and lose sight of who we really are in our Christian identity. Even within our churches, not every expectation to belong is good (more about this will be touched on later).

There are many places we can begin to discuss our communal relationships. However, of all the places we can start, the most formational – and for some, the hardest – place to begin is with our **family**.

¹⁸ Richard Rohr, *The Relational Soul* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

What is My Family's Story?

Peter Scazzero writes, “While we are affected by powerful external events and circumstances through our earthy lives, our families are the most powerful group to which we will ever belong.”²⁰ The actions and values of our families – both positive *and* negative – influence us in ways we may not be aware of without reflection. Little things our parents may say to us as children can have a profound impact on how we develop.

Personal Reflection Exercise

In the chart below, reflect and identify any positive, negative, or neutral traits you've seen in your family.

- *Circle the traits that you think have had a particularly strong impact on you to this day.*
- *Share these characteristics with a group member.*

Positive	Neutral	Negative

Our families teach us lessons and values that are passed down from generation to generation. Even the “positive” messages can be interpreted negatively. For example, the message of “I’m invincible” or “I’m the best” may promote a strong sense of Self, but can also be a rude awakening when something counters that narrative. Or it could make reliance on Christ difficult because you are so used to relying on your own strength.

Maybe you’ve heard something along the lines of “Bransons don’t XYZ” or “A *true* Branson is XYZ”. These can become crutches or excuses for why we take or don’t take certain actions. To give a light-hearted example, one morning I was talking with my aunt, and she asked me to bend down and pick something up she dropped on the ground. “Thank you,” she said. “Bransons don’t bend.” I asked her what she meant, and she laughed saying, “Have you ever seen your daddy bend down to pick something up? We don’t bend.” I laughed, realizing that extended to myself as well, as my flexibility is all but nonexistent. Part of my family identity is that I’m not supposed to bend. I’m a Branson, after all.

²⁰ Scazzero, 73.

But that got me thinking. If “Bransons don’t bend”, what can be done to change that? “I guess I could start stretching.” During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, my job as a teacher in Hong Kong was put on hiatus for several months as the school system tried to navigate how best to proceed amidst the constant changing restrictions. I was at home most days, so I began to incorporate a stretching routine my housemate had found on YouTube into my daily quarantine routine. After several weeks, for the first time since I was in elementary school I was finally able to sit cross-legged on the ground without feeling like my legs would break.

Bransons typically don’t bend, but this one is starting to.

Our families have patterns and traditions that make up who we are as a unit. Not every pattern is positive, but not every pattern is negative as well. We teach our children what we know, and we know what we know because our family taught it to us first. The problem is, we aren’t always aware what we are doing is a problem because it’s all we’ve ever known. It’s written into our subconscious.

Self-awareness of our family’s history and values is the first step to identifying a core component of our identity. A perfectionistic attitude may stem from a desire to reach a standard your family set for you as a child. An inability to properly express your emotions could come from never seeing them properly expressed as you were growing up. An ethic of working hard may motivate you after seeing your parents struggle to make ends meet or working hard labor jobs. A generous spirit in your own life may have been instilled in you after having your family model it for you. The list could go on and on.

We tend to blame our families for all of the negative attributes we have. And while there’s truth in that, the other side of the coin is that may be how your parents were raised and it’s a subconscious effort on their part. Of course, there are lessons and values parents *want* to instill in their children, but we must also be aware of *how* we are instilling them.

But negative patterns don’t have to continue. In order to reconcile those parts of our identity we are not happy with, we must be willing to address them. This is the slow and painful process of peeling back layer after layer, exposing our weaknesses in humility.

Abraham and Isaac

We can see the power family patterns very clearly in Scripture. Even the biblical heroes fell prey to their own sin and misgivings.

Group Reflection Exercise

- Read the story of Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 20.
 - In the space below, summarize what happens in this passage.

- Read the story of Isaac and Abimelech in Genesis 26.
 - What similarities do you notice between Genesis 26 and Genesis 20? Differences?
 - What family patterns do you see?
 - What are the motivations of Abraham and Isaac?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal black lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

- *What is a phrase, motto, or family value that your family holds?*
- *How have you seen that influence the way you grew up?*
- *How did/does it impact your identity?*

[illegible]

For some, family is a touchy topic. Part of our Christian identity is being peacemakers and working to reconcile that which is not in Christ *to* Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. If there are any values or patterns you feel like you need to address with your family, now can be a time to have that conversation. It may be difficult, but it can be a conversation worth having.

Approach your family with an open heart, honesty, and humility. Be willing to ask questions about *their* story so that you can gain a deeper insight into who they are. It is not a time to be on the attack and it's very likely it will be met with defensiveness. However, be firm in talking to your family in love, not in judgment.

What is My Church's Story?

For those who grew up attending church, we carry on our shoulders the weight of our faith's traditions, practices, worldviews, theology, and much more. The way our church defines itself has a tremendous impact on our Christian identity – for better and for worse. For Christians, we refer to this formation of identity as “discipleship”. We are taught what to believe, what it means to be a Christians, and how to live the Christian life. The ultimate goal of discipleship is to make the disciple more like Jesus.

Christians who have grown up in church are the products of their Christian upbringing. Within each denomination / expression of Christian faith, there are preconceptions of what the Christian life looks like. There are also preconceptions of who we can “trust” and who we should stay away from outside of our faith tradition.

In his book *Until Unity*, Francis Chan describes his falling in love with Jesus in a Baptist church. He writes:

Because I found so much life through that church, I accepted all their theology. I questioned nothing. Why would I? It was here that I found Jesus, truth, life, and love. To question any of their doctrine would have felt a bit disloyal toward the people to whom I owe so much.²¹

He goes on to write that after he attended Bible college and seminary, he felt that same sense of loyalty to his professors and felt the need to uphold the doctrines he learned. After leaving seminary, he began to meet people with different theological beliefs and writes, “As a staunch cessationist, I literally got knots in my stomach whenever I met someone who claimed to be Christian yet spoke in tongues or claimed to have a supernatural gift of prophecy. I viewed them as ignorant and dangerous.”²²

However, as he got to know people from different faith traditions, he began to realize that their views were not as crazy or outlandish as he was led to believe. Although he may disagree with them, he has learned from dialoguing with them where he was wrong and strengthened his own beliefs in the process.

I use this example to show how our church provides a lens through which we view others. Because churches and denominations are often divided on various theological, social, and political lines, it's easy to fall into an “us vs them” mindset. David Fitch attributes this tendency to lasting habits of Christendom. “Christendom” refers to the period in the Middle Ages when all of society was united under Christianity.²³ Fitch writes, “We no longer see other Christians as being in common life together. We instead see that church down the road – the one that doesn't ‘do church’ the same way we do – as the enemy.”²⁴

²¹ Francis Chan, *Until Unity* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2021), 98.

²² Ibid., 99.

²³ David E. Fitch, *The Church of Us vs. Them* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019.), 2.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

Growing up, I heard comments in my church about how strange it was that the Church of Christ church didn't use instruments and how that they believed you needed to belong to that church to go to Heaven (they didn't; it was a rumor that somehow found traction). Salvation was presented to us as "getting your ticket punched" to go to Heaven. We may grow up hearing phrases in our traditions such as, "As a Baptist, we believe XYZ" or "Baptists don't XYZ." These become part of our group identity and become written into our social religious DNA.

This is an important observation for us to make, as our Christian identity is cultivated in the context of the local church. Scot McKnight pulls out three principles regarding how the church shapes us:

- "Everything I learned about the Christian life I learned from my church.
- "A local church determines what the Christian life looks like for the people in that church.
- "We all learn the Christian life from how our local church shapes us."²⁵

When we find ourselves in a context that looks at fellow Christians as the "Other", we lose sight of the greater Body of Christ. We begin to look at our church or denomination as the source of our identity, rather than looking to Christ. This influences how those *outside* of the church see Christians. Fitch writes, "Meanwhile, people outside the church look at us and see only conflict, anger, and even hate. Our witness to Christ is damaged. And as we enter the world, we've lost the wherewithal to engage what God is doing in Christ so save the world."²⁶

The reality is that we may not realize we have moved our denominational beliefs to the core of our Christian identity. We may take our denomination or church identity for granted as being what it means to be "Christian." Oftentimes we do not know or explore the *why* of what we or our churches believe. If we want to continue the journey of discovering or rediscovering our Christian identity, we need to be aware of our church's history and beliefs.

²⁵ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 12.

²⁶ Fitch, 9.

- What tradition (if any) does your church stem from (i.e., Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, etc.)?
- What are your church's values?
- What was required to "belong" to the church?
- Based on your experience at your church, what components of the Christian life are emphasized? Is there anything glossed over? Is there a disconnect in what they preach vs. what they practice? Are there any "sacred cows", taboos, or "must nots"?
- Are there any areas where shame has played a role in your church that may have created a false identity?

“But My Pastor Said...”

For some of us, we have found role models and leaders within our church who have been critical in our discipleship. Again, this can be for better or for worse. Truly godly men and women can help to guide us toward the image that God intends for our lives. At the same time, “godly” men and women can give us the wrong impression of what it means to be a disciple. The ramifications of this can be traumatic and warp our identity as a Christian if we are not wise about who we trust.

For every story of a supportive and genuinely formational pastor or mentor, there are stories of pastors, leaders, and mentors who are spiritually abusive. These are the ones who give us a warped and perverted idea of Christian discipleship that will infect the other areas of our lives. As we work to see what true discipleship and a genuine relationship with Jesus looks like, we need to be wise and discerning.

As you think and reflect on your experience with church leaders, here are some points that may help you discern if your leader or mentor is harming you rather than doing good:

- *They vie for control.* If someone is dictating or micromanaging what you are supposed to do rather than encouraging you to explore your faith for yourself, be wary. It is easy to fall into the trap of forming others in our own image vs. the image of God.
- *They do not allow space for questions or mistakes.* Part of grasping our Christian identity is wrestling with the tough questions. There should also be a growth mentality where mistakes and failures are used to promote learning. A good mentor will allow you the space to air those questions and doubts, not stifle them. They will also show grace in the face of mistakes.
- *Shame and/or fear is the foundation of your relationship.* A relationship that is based on a leader shaming the mentee for their actions, thoughts, and beliefs can serve as a way of manipulating others’ beliefs. A godly discipling relationship is one that is based on love, grace, and trust.
- *Lack of empowerment.* A good mentor will empower you to seek out your gifts and how you can best use them to serve Christ. A poor mentor will not take your gifts into account, will belittle them, or ignore them. The reason for this may stem from narcissistic tendencies that do not want the mentee to grow.
- *There are marks of spiritual abuse.* More and more cases of spiritual abuse are being revealed to the public. Scot McKnight gives examples of what the abuse may include, such as “manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teachings, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.”²⁷

²⁷ Scot McKnight, “What is ‘Spiritual’ Abuse? A Working Definition”, *Christianity Today*, December 2, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/december/what-is-spiritual-abuse-working-definition.html>>

- *What did this person teach you about being a follower of Jesus?*
- *What support have they given you throughout your Christian journey?*
- *Have you had any negative experiences with Christian leaders? Elaborate on your experiences and what this person taught you.*
- *What values – for better or for worse – have you taken away from your mentors?*
- *What does it look like to grow/progress?*

Paul and Timothy

One of the most well-known discipling relationships in the New Testament is between Paul and Timothy. In Acts 16, Luke records Paul's first meeting with Timothy. Paul decides to take Timothy with him on his journeys and thus began their relationship. Their relationship is further explored in 1 & 2 Timothy as Paul dialogues with Timothy about various issues of church leadership Timothy is facing. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is one of deep love and trust.

Group Reflection Exercise

Paul and Timothy's relationship stretched for over 20 years, and we can see the development of this relationship. This reflection exercise will give us a quick glance at their relationship.

Part 1

- Read Acts 16:1-5.
- What observations do you see regarding the beginning of Paul and Timothy's relationship?

Part 2

- Read Philippians 2:19-24.
- How has Paul and Timothy's relationship changed?

What is My Culture's Story?

There is a classic debate about whether our behavior is formed from our genes (nature) or by the environment in which we are raised (nurture). The reality is not an “either/or” scenario, but rather a “both/and”. It is not just our genetics nor our environment that affects the way we develop, but it is both. When we think of the formation of our narrative identity, we must consider the culture and environment we were raised in as well as the world we live in now.

Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.”²⁸ One’s cultural identity can include religious practices, language, race/ethnicity, gender, age, social class, nationality, region, and more. All these factors come together form what is one of the most influential parts of our identity.

Where we come from gives us a lens into how we see the world. For example, Western cultures are typically regarded as being individualist cultures, which means that there is more emphasis placed on the individual and what is good for “me”. On the other hand, Eastern cultures are regarded as being collectivist cultures, which means that the group is valued over the individual. It is a mentality of “what’s best for *us*” vs. “what’s best for *me*”.

It’s more often the case that we aren’t consciously aware of our cultural values until we have left their immediate context and see it from an outside perspective. This realization can come from a moment as simple as no one recognizing a word or phrase you use. When I first moved to Hong Kong, I never realized that when someone thanked me, I would respond with “uh huh” or “no problem” rather than “you’re welcome.” After several years of this, my colleague – who was from Canada – asked why I didn’t say “you’re welcome.” I responded with saying my normal response of “no problem” meant that to me, but to her it came across as rude (particularly when I would just say “uh huh”, “yup” or “mhmm”). When I asked my local Hong Kong colleagues about it, one of them also mentioned that I often came across as dismissive.

Culture is *not* a bad thing. It is part of what makes us unique and how God helps to form our identities. However, *as Christians we must not put our cultural identity as the center of our identity*. It is when we put our cultural identity as the center of our identity that we get distorted views of other people. Those outside of our primary identity become the “Other” – people you can’t trust. We begin to think of that identity as superior and that can lead down a dark path if we aren’t careful. This is why it’s so important to see our different identities through the eyes of Christ. Our Christian identity should inform our other identities.

Unless you’ve spent a significant time away from your home culture (or more simply put, away from people who are just like you), you may not recognize the “quirks” of your culture. Things you took for granted as being “normal” may not be as normal as you think...and this is a good thing. When we see beyond ourselves, we get a fuller picture of the Kingdom of God. We can see all the different strands that are being woven together to create the tapestry of God’s redemption of all of Creation.

Each part of our culture provides a narrative that colors the way we see ourselves, others, and ultimately God. Scott McClellan writes:

²⁸ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 5.

A number of stories are available in our culture. Some say money is hope. Some say sex and relationships are hope. Some say perception and reputation are hope. Some say power is hope. Some say nationalism and unencumbered liberty are hope. Some say there is no hope. When we look past culture to the individual people in our lives and communities, we're likely to see they're subscribed to one of these stories.²⁹

If we are to understand our neighbors and the reason why people believe what they believe, we must be aware of the different narratives our cultures embrace. There is an inherent desire to look for hope *somewhere*, whether we realize it or not. Oftentimes, these narratives are wired into our subconscious self without realizing it. It's only when these stories are suddenly challenged that we become aware of them. We must be critical and ask ourselves:

- What are the hidden motivations in this narrative?
- Who are the “heroes”? The “villains”?
- What history and baggage does this narrative carry?
- Where does this story need to be redeemed?
- How do others outside of this group perceive this narrative?
- What can I learn from others who live outside of my immediate context?
- Do I have any friends or contacts who live outside of my context?

²⁹ Scott McClellan, *Tell Me a Story* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 110.

Group Reflection Exercise

As we think about the various narratives found in our culture, we can recognize that some of them are not necessarily “bad.” Yet, as Christians, there are ultimately two questions we must ask about cultural narratives:

- Does this narrative allow me to love God with my heart, mind, soul, and strength?
- Does this narrative allow me to love my neighbor as Christ loves me?

If the answer to these questions is “No”, we need to seriously rethink the narratives we live by. Now it’s time to do the hard work of doing so.

Think about some of various narratives you see in the culture surrounding you. How have these values directly or indirectly influenced your sense of identity? In your group, brainstorm as many cultural themes and lessons as you can think of. Decide which ones are most prominent or are in most need of redemption. Take the time to think through these narratives critically and what an alternative narrative would look like.

Cultural Values	Christian Values

As you begin to process these narratives, here are some questions to get you started:

- What tensions are there between my Christian identity and culture’s narrative?
- Does the cultural narrative speak into a Christian narrative in any way?
- Where can and does this cultural narrative need to be redeemed?
- In what ways can a Christian narrative and identity speak life into these narratives?
- How do you think a Christian can or should live differently in this context?

2.3 Charting Your Life Story

Our identities and stories are made up of the culmination of little moments throughout our life. Think of the important moments and memories of your life. There are likely some that are filled with joy, others filled sadness, anger, hope, and every emotion in between. When we really stop and think about these moments, we can begin to unpack how they have affected our decisions and how we see ourselves to this day.

What's even more important though is that as Christians, we also begin to:

- ***See*** the big picture of where God has worked in our lives. As we reflect on different events in our lives, we can see glimpses of God's fingerprints in these events as we consider the entirety of our story. Too often we may be stuck on a single event and we refuse to see the forest for the trees because we're so caught in the moment. But when we step back, we can begin the process of seeing the full tapestry that is being woven.
- ***Understand*** where, when, and how God has spoken to us in different ways. Although we may not have an answer now, we can begin the process of understanding the connections between different events and how they impacted our identity and relationship with God and others.
- ***Question*** where God has been at work in our lives. Where are the moments we've doubted God? His love? His very existence? Moments of doubt are not a bad thing – in fact, they may be some of the most important events in our lives. Every good story needs conflict. Otherwise, it wouldn't even be a story!
- ***Remember*** the journey we are on with God. In Joshua 3-4, we read of the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River. After they have crossed, the LORD says to Joshua to choose twelve men and return to the river to grab a stone to make a memorial of their crossing. This memorial was to serve as a reminder for future generations to remember the crossing of the Jordan. In the same way, as we remember what God has done, we can see these events as memorials to God as we remember Him.

Personal Reflection Exercise

Creating a Timeline

Think of some of the key moments in your life and give a brief description of each event (they don't have to be in any order at this point). As you consider the events, these moments may include:

- important people or relationships in your life
- significant milestones
- positive and/or negative memories
- gains and/or losses

****Note: You can always add more or less boxes as you go****

Event #1

Event #2

Event #3

Event #4

Event #5

Event #6

Event #7

Event #8

Event #9

Event #10

Event #11

Event #12

Event #13

Event #14

Event #15

Ordering Your Timeline

Now that you've listed out some of the more significant events in your life, it's time to put them in order. There are many ways you can do this (you may find it helpful to do it multiple ways as well):

- chronologically
- theme
- categorically (i.e., events, relationships, milestones, etc.)
- significance
- positive or negative events

You can use the space below or another sheet of paper to order them how you want.

Group Reflection Exercise

Sharing Your Timeline

Our stories are not meant to be kept to ourselves. God reveals Himself in the stories of real people who have gone through real situations. The story that God has been writing in your life is a gift. It is legitimate evidence of the transforming power of the Gospel. Telling your story can grant freedom from the past.

At the same time, there are likely parts of our story that we don't fully understand. There may be themes that we can't recognize ourselves because we are the ones living it. Sharing our stories with others allows for us to get a fresh perspective on the events of our lives. Others may see connections that we don't or can't initially see.

Guidelines to Sharing Your Story

- Break into small groups (preferably no more than three) or pairs.
- Affirm that what is shared with the group will be kept in the group.
- Pray for the one who is sharing his/her story. See this as a sacred practice.
- Practice presence and active listening.
- Do not listen to respond; listen to receive the gift of the storyteller's narrative.
- After the person has shared, pause again, thanking God for his/her story.
- At this point, you may ask questions about the events they have shared, make observations about where God has worked in the person's life, identify any themes you heard, and offer encouragements.
- Pray for the storyteller after they have shared before moving on to the next person.

You may write down any thoughts or reflections in the space below.

[illegible]

Moments that Shape Us

As you have reflected on your story, hopefully different themes and connections are starting to emerge. If they aren't, that's all right. The journey of reconciling one's identity to the past is a slow journey. You're encouraged to continue to take the time you need in reflection.

The events of our past and our present continuously shape our identities, although we may not realize their impact at first glance. In order to understand who we are *now*, we must first go back to see *how* we got to where we are. Some events are more significant than others in this regard, but we shouldn't dismiss the smaller moments. The events of our past provide a lens into how or why we see things the way we see them, particularly if there was an element of trauma involved.

We are a combination of all the "good", the "bad", and everything in between in our lives. Although we may remember the bad before we remember the good at times, we should not forget the moments of joy. The moments of joy help us to build a foundation of hope that there's still good, even amid pain.

The next exercise may be difficult, as now we are starting to get to the root of how our past shapes our identity. A range of emotions may come over you, and that's okay. Peter Scazzero writes:

Allow yourself to experience the full weight of your feelings. Allow them without censoring them. Then you can reflect and thoughtfully decide what to do with them. Trust God to come to you through them.³⁰

Take a moment to breathe and ease yourself into the reflection. Take time to pray to God to open your heart, your mind, and your soul to what He wants to teach you through these events. If at any point you find yourself struggling to move forward, pause, rest, and reflect on what the root of that may be. It could be an event that needs to be addressed in a formal counseling relationship. If that's the case, please seek that support. *There is no shame in it.*

³⁰ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 49.

Personal Reflection Exercise

Choose two or three events you listed in your timeline that you see as particularly significant. Write down your reflections in the space below on the following questions:

- *How did this impact my identity in the past?*
- *How has this impacted my identity in present?*
- *How may it impact my identity in the future?*

Event #1: _____

Event #2: _____

Event #3: _____

Closing Reflections

As the chapter comes to a close, reflect on the following questions with your group:

- How does story shape our identity?
- Who or what has had the most impact on forming your identity?
- What does it mean for Christ to redeem our other identities?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Chapter 3: What is God's Story and Where do I Fit?

“God gives us His Story that we might get a glimpse of who He is. But He doesn’t stop there. God extends to us a story to enter, a story to put on, a story to tell.”

– Scott McClellan³¹

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we focused on the power of story and how our personal and communal narratives impact the formation of our identity and worldview. The purpose behind this was to call to attention the different stories that are interwoven in our lives. Our starting point and how we frame our story is important to understanding the various identities that we have accumulated over time.

However, there is one story we did not cover – one that encapsulates all of Creation. That is the story of God. The story of God is the story of us. It is the story of how we were created, the story of how sin and evil came into the world, the story of a God who loved His creation so much that He would send His Son to redeem and restore it. This is a story that many of us have forgotten.

In Sean Gladding’s book, *The Story of God, the Story of Us*, he reframes Scripture in a narrative format. The first half of the book is told through the perspective of an elder in Israel during the Babylonian Exile as he gathers his people around the campfire to remind them of their story. In the opening pages, a young minstrel plays and sings one of the songs of exile, begging to understand why God has led the people into Exile. In the midst of this questioning, “the old man is forced to admit to himself that his people still do not understand – or, they refuse to understand. His people have forgotten their story. They have forgotten why it is that they find themselves here in exile in Babylon.”³²

We try to make sense of the world through the stories around us, but as Christians we have forgotten our own story. The old man says to the minstrel, “And I know that the world has other stories, other songs. But that is why we tell our story and sing our songs.”³³ Our personal stories, the stories of our family, our church, our culture, our communities, etc. all give us a lens into how we see ourselves. But what happens if we reframe our story in the story of God? How does this change the way we see past, present, and future events?

³¹ McClellan, *Tell Me a Story*, 60.

³² Sean Gladding, *The Story of God, the Story of Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), iBooks, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 32.

That is the work of this chapter. Christians are products of the Gospel story, the good news of God's redemptive work throughout Creation. We will be following a four-part framework:

- Creation
- Fall
- Redemption
- Restoration

As we begin this next phase of the Journey, we pray that in light of God's story, our own story would be given new life and meaning.

3.1 God's Four Part Story

Creation

Personal Reflection Exercise

Take a moment and think about something you have created. It doesn't need to be something classically "artistic" like a painting, drawing, sculpture, etc. It could be a poem, a meal, a Mother's Day card, or even a mud pie you made as a kid.

- *What did you create?*
- *What was the act of Creation like?*
- *What was your reaction to your creation?*
- *How did others react to it?*

Share your thoughts with someone in your group.

The Bible famously opens with the words "In the beginning, God created..." It is a moment of mystery, of bated breath waiting to see what happens God speaks into existence all of Creation. It is not a scene of chaos, but one of gentleness as Spirit of God hovers over the waters, ready to bring shape, purpose, and life to the formless and empty earth. God speaks into existence light to separate the darkness, he separates the sky from the sea, brings forth dry land and the plants that cover it. With the world created, he begins to populate it.

Trevin Wax puts it beautifully:

Like a painter splashing brilliant hues of color onto a canvas, God sends planets spinning and star whirling into the vast expanse of space. He fills the sky with robins and bluebirds, eagles and seagulls, cardinals and herons. The sea teems with minnows and catfish, dolphins and whales, lobsters and crabs. On the land roam rabbits and horses, ants and elephants, puppies and mountain lions. Over and over again, like an artist admiring his handiwork, God looks at His colorful world and joyfully declares, "It's good!"³⁴

³⁴ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 29.

“It’s good.” These two words sum up the entire act of creation. The Creation story in Genesis shows us a God who is more powerful than any other god. It acts as an ancient apologetic – or defense – against the other gods of the Mesopotamian world, showing the God of Israel to be the supreme deity. The world and everything in it was created to be good. But none of what God created so far was His prime creation. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us the final act of Creation, the best and most treasured that was saved for last:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Humanity. The final act of Creation. The only act of Creation that is said to be made in the image of God. It’s in Genesis that we are first introduced as characters in God’s story and given our initial purpose.

Group Reflection Exercise

Read Genesis 1:26-28.

- *What is God’s charge to humanity?*
- *Have we followed this charge faithfully? Or have we missed the mark?*

“My friends, remember: We were made in the image of God. We are not God’s slaves; we are God’s partners in the work of Creation. We are made to be God’s friends. And we can trust God. Oh yes, we can trust God...Our God is a God of order, not chaos.”

- Sean Gladding, The Story of God, the Story of Us (36)

“God saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31).

Fall

Like any story, it isn't long until conflict arrives. The peace of Creation did not last. Following the act of creation, humanity was deceived and fell prey to its own pride. In Genesis 3, we read the story of how Adam and Eve ate from the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. This decision marked a separation between God and humanity as we chose to go our own way.

Wax writes, "Adam and Eve rejected God's rule over them. We refer to their rebellious choice as 'the fall,' and because they represented all of humanity, their action affects us too."³⁵ There's an apt metaphor that before the fall, humanity seamlessly bore the image the of God. It was like looking in an unbroken mirror. However, after the fall that image was shattered. Now it is like we are looking at ourselves in a broken mirror. The image is still there, but it's marred by cracks and missing pieces.

It's in these cracks that we see the effects of the fall: sickness, war, famine, death, division, etc. All of this is encapsulated in a single word: Sin. It is sin that acts as the force that separates us from God. It is both a personal and communal force. It warps our identity and makes us see ourselves, God, and others in a twisted light. Wax writes, "We seek worth and value in something other than the Source of all worth. Our hearts are idol-making factories. We seek to worship anything – just not the One who has made us."³⁶

The effect of the Fall on humanity's identity was devastating. Where once we could confidently say that we were made in the image of God, our attention turned elsewhere. Like a cracked mirror, we see ourselves in the cracked distortion of sin. We shy away from this broken sense of self, ashamed of who we are and what we have become. We seek to restore this image by patching the cracks with other identities.

The thing about coming from the perfection of Creation is that anything not up to that standard stands out like a sore thumb. When I turned 16, my parents bought me a 2004 Ford Mustang. It was a beautiful car with no blemishes or marks on it. ...until one morning, I was picking up my brother's friend for school and I backed into his basketball goal. The goal was unharmed, but there was a nice scratch on the rear bumper. I didn't think it was too noticeable, but that same day my dad noticed it and confronted me about it. That brief time of perfection was at an end, and I was left with a reminder of my carelessness. It served as a mark of shame and guilt, despite how "unnoticeable" it was.

When we look throughout Scripture, we can see something similar happening with Israel as it faltered back and forth on where it found its identity. Israel was meant to be a nation that was to serve as a symbol to the nations about what it meant to live in relationship with God. They barely made it into the Promised Land before they began to seek an identity similar to the neighboring nations. They looked to their neighbors, saw that they had a kind, and desired one of their own (1 Samuel 8). They looked to the idols other nations worshiped and brought false gods into the kingdom of Israel in form of Baal and Asherah. The sin of comparison caused us to look away from the beauty of our identity as we compare ourselves to others.

³⁵ Wax, 32.

³⁶ Ibid., 32.

At some point, each of us have probably had one (or all) of the following thoughts:

- “_____ has a better a job than me.”
- “_____ is better looking than me.”
- “Why can’t I be where _____ is right now?”
- “Why can’t I do what _____ is doing?”
- “If only I could be like _____, my life would be better.”

Humanity has fallen. The Enemy has triumphed and successfully separated humanity from God. In the words of Ephesians 2:1, we are dead in our sins and trespasses. Nation fights against nation and the world gets worse and worse. There is no way for humanity to claw its way out of the depths of its sin by itself.

So God intervenes.

God chooses to not leave humanity in its pit of despair and death. Rather, he forms a covenant relationship with a man named Abram, saying that He will make a great nation out of Abram's family. This covenant relationship is the channel through which God will restore His relationship with humanity. Trusting in the promises of God, Abram is given a new name – Abraham – and follows God in faith.

The rest of the Old Testament follows this journey as Abraham's family is eventually enslaved in Egypt, led out of Egypt under Moses, and chosen to be God's people. Israel as a nation is to be God's companion, showing the nations what it means to follow the one, true, God. But time after time, Israel falls into a cycle of sin and disobedience. Time after time, God disciplines Israel, but to no avail. They continuously ignore the warnings of their prophets; they engage in idolatry and in other sinful behaviors. Israel breaks time and time again the covenant that God established with Abraham.

Wax writes:

The Old Testament is a story in search of an ending. The final pages show the people of God as scattered, waiting for redemption, hoping that God will act again to save them. The world continues to cry and groan under the weight of God's divine curse. The plan of redemption cannot go forward. God's reign – His Kingdom – cannot be reestablished in the way He first intended unless a faithful, sinless human being was to offer the obedience required, pay the necessary penalty for sin (death), and be exalted as king over creation.³⁸

And so, God Himself enters Creation in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to restore the people of Israel and the world. He lives life in this world as a man but does not sin. The divine plan of God comes to its climax through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Peace has been restored. Humanity can now be in the presence of God again. Salvation has come.

The power of the Gospel is a simultaneously a juggernaut and an invitation. It is a juggernaut because there is a radical transformation as we move from one life to another. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul writes, "Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life." In Adam, we were born with the same nature that Adam had. We were born spiritually dead with a sinful human nature. We were born with the same consequences that Adam had: Death. And yet in Christ, we are given *life*.

³⁸ Wax, 36.

And yet, the Gospel is also an invitation. It is not forced on those who wish to be followers of Jesus. Rather is an echo of Jesus' words to the first disciples in John 1:35-51: "Come and see." Come and see who this Jesus is. Come and see the transformative power of the kingdom of God. Come and see what true love is as the Father sends His Son to the cross. Come and see what it means to lay down your burdens and tired bones at the feet of the Master. Come and see what *life* and *freedom* truly is. Come and see.

In Christ, we are given a new identity and a new purpose. We are no longer bound by the chains of sin and slavery, but we are given a new moniker: Children of God (1 John 3:1). We are no longer dead and enslaved in our sin, but we are now *truly alive* for first time. We are set free. We are now coheirs with Christ and are totally forgiven of our sin. We are made righteous (Romans 5:18-19). Our identity has shifted, and we can confidently echo Paul's words in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago."

But what are those good works? What are we to do? Part of that calling is to engage in restoration.

Group Reflection Exercise

What does it mean to be “redeemed”? How have you seen Jesus redeem yourself? Others?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal black lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Restoration

Jesus' resurrection is not the end of the Story. If Redemption is the "one time event" where Jesus first transformed our lives, Restoration is the continuation of that story as the Holy Spirit continues to transform and bring healing to different parts of our lives. The story of God continues as He continues to unfold His plan to restore the rest of the world. God's endgame is to renew and restore all of Creation. How does God plan to do this? Through His church. Through you, me, and everyone else who lives in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

There is a style of art in Japanese culture called *kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* is the act of putting broken shards of pottery together using gold to hold the pieces together. It is meant to show that there is beauty in brokenness and that despite our flaws and imperfection, we can still be whole.

This is similar to what Jesus has done. He has taken the broken pieces of our lives and put them back together into something even more beautiful. I remember during my undergraduate studies, one of my classmates said something I still hold to be profound: It is better to have experienced redemption than to not have experienced it at all in perfection. It is through the process of redemption and restoration that we can see and marvel at how much God truly loves us. It is in this restoration that we can live once again in the freedom of being made in the Image of God.

In Revelation 21, there is a beautiful scene of God's complete and total restoration of Creation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true. And He also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega – the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children" (Revelation 21:1–7).

"Look, I am making everything new!" This declaration from God that the old has passed away and that something new has come is a cause of celebration. Death has lost its sting; it is no more. Sin has been defeated, Satan cast into the lake of fire, and the King of Kings now reigns. Through death, we have been given life.

The story of God is also the story of us. It is the beauty and simplicity of Creation as we are made in the *imago dei* and the story of the love and faithfulness of God. Despite our shortcomings, despite the trauma and angst and betrayal, the Lord of all Creation never

- *In what ways have you seen God restore your life?*
- *What does it mean for you to engage in God's restoration?*

[illegible]

3.2 Framing Your Story in Light of the Gospel

Every Christian has a testimony, or a story of how God has worked in and transformed our lives. Our story is one of the most powerful tools we have not just in how we share the Gospel, but also in recognizing how God has changed our lives. It gives us the foundation for what it is to have our identity rooted in Christ.

As we reflect on our stories, we can see the moments where God has stepped into our lives. We can do this by linking our story back to God's story of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration. Look back on your timeline and the moments you chose as being important in the formation of your identity. As you reflect, you can use the following questions to guide your time:

Creation

For this exercise, "Creation" will represent the set-up of your story.

- *What was your history/background like?*
- *What were your early moments of "innocence" from the world?*
- *What events led up to the "Fall"?*

Fall

For this exercise, "Fall" will represent the struggles, conflicts, and sins we have faced.

- *What struggles, conflicts, sins, etc. have you dealt with?*
- *How did these affect your relationship with God? With others?*
- *How did these affect the way that you see yourself?*
- *What other effects did these events have on you?*

Redemption

"Redemption" will refer to how you met Jesus and the transformation He has had in your life.

- *How did you meet Jesus?*
- *How did you feel after you met Jesus?*
- *What changes did you see?*
- *How did this new life in Christ change the way you see yourself?*
- *What challenges have you faced?*

Restoration

"Restoration" refers to how you have seen God use your story and/or circumstances to bring restoration to those around you.

- *Have you seen God use your story to bring restoration to others?*
- *How are you participating in God's plan to restore the world? If you aren't, what are some ways you can participate with God?*

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines, and the page is completely blank except for the lines themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, we have worked at reframing our story in light of God's redemptive story of all of Creation. The above has been a survey of the four main movements found in Scripture. To get the full story, you're encouraged to read through the Bible (there just simply isn't enough space here to go into extreme detail).

When we reframe our story in light of Christ, it gives us a deeper sense of what our identity in Christ means. We are not separated from others, but rather Christians are connected through the collective identity of belonging to Jesus. To quote Trevin Wax a final time:

We are part of a story that is about Jesus Christ, the King of the universe. The slain Lamb is the conquering King – through whom and for whom our world exists.

Ironically, when we live as if our personal story is at the center of our universe, we struggle to find meaning and significance. But when Christ is at the center and we are pushed to the periphery, it is then – in that place of seeming obscurity and insignificance – that we find true worth and value, by giving glory to the crucified and risen King with whom we can become united through faith.³⁹

³⁹ Wax, 39.

Chapter 4 – So What? What are the Implications of Christian Identity?

Introduction

Throughout this course, we have been carefully laying the foundation of the roots of Christian identity and analyzed the various narratives that have been influential in our formation. We have taken a look at God's narrative and how we fit into that story. We know in our heart that our identity is constantly being formed. What we think and value today can change in a moment's notice.

With the foundation of Christian identity being laid, we can now start building. As we've mentioned previously, our Christian identity is not something that we keep to ourselves, but it is something that should manifest in other areas of our lives. While there are many different topics that can be covered, there are some that are more prominent and common that we will focus on. Those topics include:

- The Cost of Identifying with Jesus
- Church Participation – Finding Our Place in the Local Church
- Cultural Engagement – Living an Alternative Narrative

4.1 The Cost of Identifying with Jesus

Following Jesus is not easy.

Throughout the Gospels, there is a common theme: There is a cost to following Jesus. As followers of Jesus embrace the new identity that Christ gives, inevitably there will be tension as the Old Self tries to maintain a sense of control. Our past life calls out to us, begging us to return.

But Christ calls us to more. Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a German pastor and theologian during Germany’s Third Reich – wrote, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”⁴⁰ The death that Christ calls us to is ultimately a death to the old Self. It is death to our worldly attachments and to the things we once held in high regard. Bonhoeffer wrote, “It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call.”⁴¹

Those who are familiar with the Gospels will likely have heard Jesus’s words to the crowds and disciples:

A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else – your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:25-27)

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26)

Jesus calls us out of ourselves and of our past lives into something new. It is a life of obedience, walking with Jesus along the path of the cross. The Christian stands at the threshold of something new and wonderful. But the Christian also stands at the threshold of rejection as they try to navigate this new life they’ve been given.

For the contemporary reader in a Western context, Jesus’ words in Luke 14:25-27 may not carry the weight it originally did. Joseph Hellerman writes, “In the New Testament world a person’s most important group was his blood family.”⁴² To leave or forsake one’s family would be to forsake a core part of one’s identity and security. And yet, Jesus calls His ancient listeners to do just that.

The cost of leaving one’s family to follow Jesus is still found today. Stories pour in from many countries around the world of what people have given up because they choose to

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: SCM Press Ltd., 1959), 89.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 49.

identify with Jesus. Nik Ripken's book, *The Insanity of God*, is one such account. Ripken (his real name is omitted due to the nature of his work), is one of the world's leading experts on the persecuted church. His book chronicles his own time as a missionary in Africa before tragedy strikes his family. Upon his return to the United States, he begins a passion project of creating a manual to help missionaries who serve in dangerous contexts to share the Gospel. However, as he starts his global travels and interviews with people who have lived in persecution, he finds that Christianity thrives in such nations because attachments to one's family and material goods pale in comparison to the life that Jesus gives.

One story that Ripken shares is of a man he calls "Stoyan". Stoyan tells Ripken about the time his father, a Protestant pastor, was imprisoned and sent to a labor camp. When he and his mother visited his father, they found him to be skeletal wrapped in a "bundle of rags." Stoyan's mother brings his father a small copy of the New Testament but was quickly found out. Stoyan describes the scene to Ripken:

The officer took one look at the book before furiously throwing it to the ground. He screamed at my mother, with a great crowd of people around us, "Woman, don't you realize that it is because of this book and because of your God that your husband is here? I can kill him, I can kill you, and I can kill your son. And I would be applauded for it!"

My mother looked at that prison officer and said, 'Sir, you are right. You *can* kill my husband. You can kill me. I know that you can even kill our son. But nothing you can do will separate us from the love that is in Jesus Christ!'"⁴³

When we read stories such as these, our first thought may be, "Well, that's there and that was then." Or we demonize the systems that are in place that led to persecution. And while these systems may be the instrument or catalyst for persecution, suffering is part of what it means to identify with Jesus. When we identify with Jesus, we also identify with the shame and rejection of the cross. We crucify ourselves with Jesus daily, but we also live in the hope of the resurrection. We live with the hope that there is more than what we see in front of us *because we belong to Jesus*. Those who are His – though they may lose the world – will not lose their soul. We echo the words of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?

A: That I am not my own,
but belong –
body and soul,
in life and in death –
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

In the modern world, these words, "I am not my own" could be considered a scandal. The value of individualism in the Western world places our Self at the very center of existence. We simultaneously want and refuse to see ourselves in the greater context of the community around us. We live by a mantra of "As long as it makes me happy and doesn't hurt someone,

⁴³ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 189-190.

⁴⁴ Synod 2011 of the Christian Reformed Church, *Heidelberg Catechism*, translation, (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2011) < <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism> >

I can be whoever I want to be.” Identity has become fluid with no foundation. However, identity is found in the context of how others see us, which is what drives us to have people affirm the identities we assume with such aggression.⁴⁵

For the Christian, we are seen by and receive our identity through the Person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer affirmed this in his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*. He wrote, “God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human You is an image of the divine You.”⁴⁶ Put simply, the human self is a reflection of God and our relationships come out of that divine reality. Identity is not formed in a vacuum. It must be affirmed or denied by others. Yet our true identity is found in and affirmed by God.

Group Reflection Exercise

When you think about the cost of following Jesus, what emotions stir in your heart?

Have you ever been asked/convicted to give something up because it clashes with your Christian values?

Take time to silently read and reflect upon the passages in the readings above. Spend time in prayer thanking God for His faithfulness, even when we must give up those things that are important to us.

⁴⁵ Phil Vischer & Skye Jethani, “Episode 474: You Are Not Your Own with Alan Noble,” *The Holy Post*, Podcast audio, September 15, 2021 <<https://www.holypost.com/post/episode-474-you-are-not-your-own-with-alan-noble>>

⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 34.

Group Reflection Exercise

“I Count it all as Garbage”

Read the following passage of Scripture from Philippians 3:4b – 9:

“Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.”

Paul writes, “I count it all as garbage...” What do you think it was like for Paul to deny these aspects of His identity for the sake of Christ?

What parts of your identity do you hold to most tightly? What would it look like for you to “count it as garbage” in comparison to Jesus?

4.2 Church Participation – Finding Our Place in the Local Church

A second implication of our Christian identity is that we are to join and participate with the local church. In this section, we will look at several themes:

- Unity and Diversity of the Church
- Using Spiritual Gifts
- Mission

Unity and Diversity of the Church

As we have mentioned before, identity is not created solely in isolation. When we become followers of Jesus and shift the center of our identity to be *in Christ*, we become part of the larger body of Christ. We join our story to the story of God and to the story of His church. We bring with us our hopes, our dreams, our joys, our struggles, our strengths, and our weaknesses.

Who you are matters to God and it should matter to the local church. Our unique stories show us the special care and attention God gives each of us as we cultivate and live out our identity in Christ. Scot McKnight writes, “God has designed the church – and this is the heart of Paul’s mission – to be *a fellowship of difference and different*s. It is a mixture of people from all across the map and spectrum: men and women, rich and poor...a mix of races and ethnicities.”⁴⁷

...but the question becomes this: Are our churches truly a “fellowship of different”s? Or are they places where we have created an echo chamber that reflects an identity other than Christ?

One of the greatest implications of finding our identity in Christ first and foremost is that it establishes a common identity with the greater Church. As we mentioned before, in an individualistic culture, one’s identity revolves around the Self and what is best for *me*. However, the church is not merely “me”, but it is “we.” When our sense of Self is located in the “me”, we lose sight of the “we.” It also opens up a world of interpretation and difference we miss otherwise.

The Church is not for one specific group, but it is for all people. Because of its global scale, there are many different cultures and expressions of how the Church manifests across the world. The difficulty comes when we see others within the church as not belonging to it because of differences in worship style, preaching style, nonessentials in theology, etc. We forget that they belong to the same body that we do.

Cristena Cleveland writes that the “us vs them” attitude we carry dissipates when we begin to think of ourselves as one group rather than many.⁴⁸ When we see others as belonging to “our group”, we see them in a different light. They are no longer “the Other” but rather they are

⁴⁷ McKnight, *Fellowship*, 15.

⁴⁸ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 177.

part of us. We can look at our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and see beyond their cultural expressions to see that we share a common identity.

This process can be daunting. Cleveland writes, “To embrace our identities in this new, common family, we must engage in the difficult process of lessening our grip on the identities that we have idolized and clung to for far too long.”⁴⁹ Our natural inclination is to cling to who and what we know. Venturing outside of ourselves is a daunting process, one that can leave us listless and floating about without a foundation. That’s why it is so important to belong to a community of people who love us for who we truly are. They keep us anchored amidst our drifting, giving us the freedom to explore, to succeed, and to fail while preventing us from simply drifting away.

But do our churches actually allow for diversity of thought, class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc., or does it quash the uniqueness of each member of the body so that they all look and act the same?

⁴⁹ Cleveland, 189.

- *What words would you use to describe your church?*
- *What diversity do you see in your congregation?*
- *Have you ever attended a church that's outside of your "comfort zone"? If so, what did you learn about the body of Christ?*

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Our story gives us a lens into the struggles of people who share similar backgrounds. Our stories are meant to be shared in our communities. Our stories are how we show the depths of who we are to people. Timothy Keller writes, “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.”⁵⁰

Exploring Spiritual Gifts

Every Christian has been given spiritual gifts. These gifts come from the Holy Spirit and they are given to us as means of building up the church. When we engage with our local church, we should be able to use our various gifts. A church that does not create an environment where individual gifts are valued and utilized are missing a key component of allowing people to participate in church life.

We do not have every single gift, and that's by design. We each have something important to bring to the Body to build it up. Our lack of certain gifts shows us our need for the greater Church and shows us that we cannot depend solely on ourselves.

I want to use an illustration to demonstrate this:

Dungeons and Dragons is a popular tabletop role-playing game where players create a character and are guided on adventures. It is a collaborative storytelling game where the players' actions are determined by the roll of a dice as they progress through the story that the Dungeon Master (DM) crafts.

The group of players are known as an "adventuring party" and when creating your character, you choose a class. The class you choose is what determines your role in the party. Although there are many classes, they typically boil down to certain roles: Warrior, Wizard, Rogue, and Healer. The Warrior's skills usually revolve around combat, the Wizard's around knowledge, spells, and support, the Rogue's around stealth and surprise attacks, and the Healer's around...well, healing and other advantages.

A good party has a balance of different classes. While Wizards may be able to deal damage from afar, they don't take damage very well. A Warrior may be strong, but when it comes to persuasion they may not be the best choice. Each class's strengths are designed to cover the weaknesses of another so that they can successfully complete their mission.

In the same way, the church is similar to an adventuring party that's been given a mission from God (more on this in the next section). One person cannot do it alone. One set of skills and gifts cannot do everything. When we contribute our gifts to something greater than ourselves, what we are contributing to matters more. We have a stake in what is being done – "skin in the game" if you will. John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, and Judson Poling summarize it nicely:

When God gifted you, He took into account your uniqueness – your background, temperament, likes, passions. As you live consistently with your unique pattern of giftedness, you will make the specific contribution God designed you to make.⁵¹

So what are your gifts? There are many spiritual gifts inventories available online and they can be helpful. However, to discern our gifts we should approach it prayerfully and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal them to us and give us opportunities to exercise them.

⁵¹ John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, & Judson Poling, *Gifts: The Joy of Serving God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 34.

Mission

In *The Return of the King*, the final installment of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a moment following the Battle of Minas Tirith where Aragorn works to heal Faramir, who is on the verge of death. As Aragorn crushes the herb called "kingsfoil" into a bowl of steaming water, the scene plays out:

Suddenly Faramir stirred and he opened his eyes, and he looked on Aragorn who bent over him; and a light of knowledge and love was kindled in his eyes, and he spoke softly. "My Lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?"

"Walk no more in the shadows, but awake!" said Aragorn. "You are weary. Rest a while, and take food, and be ready when I return."

"I will lord," said Faramir. "For who would lie idle when the king has returned?"⁵²

"For who would lie idle when the king has returned?" This statement is one of the most powerful representations of the mission that Jesus has given His followers. We have been given a new identity, one that leads to transformation of our entire self. When one has experienced such a powerful transformation, one cannot help but want to share what has happened.

The scene calls to mind the moments before Jesus's ascension in Acts 1. As the disciples gathered together with the resurrected Jesus, they keep asking Him when Israel will be freed and their kingdom restored. Jesus tells the disciples that only the Father knows, but that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

When Jesus is taken into heaven, Luke records two white-robed men suddenly among the disciples. They say, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday He will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!" (Acts 1:11).

While the King has not yet returned for us, we are not to lie idle. We have been given a mission, a call to participate with Jesus and to be His witness as the Kingdom of God is made manifest. Our participation with the local church is not confined to those within. As Christians, part of our identity is also to engage in the mission that Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

When the church engages in mission, we are participating in God's work. David Fitch writes:

⁵² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 865-866.

4.3 Cultural Engagement – Living an Alternative Narrative

The question of the church's engagement with our surrounding culture is one that has been heavily debated since the church's birth. We use the phrase to "be in the world, but not of it" as a way of describing our relationships with culture. John Stott writes, "The church has a double responsibility in relation to the world around us. On the one hand we are to live, serve, and witness to the world. On the other hand we are to avoid becoming contaminated by the world."⁵⁴ Some advocate for a complete separation from the world while others believe we should be completely engaged and enmeshed with it.

The cost of being Jesus' disciple is seen as we interact with the world around us. We are "temporary residents and foreigners" (1 Peter 2:11). The world does not recognize us because it does not recognize Jesus. Jesus is clear when He says to His disciples that when we identify with Him, the world will reject them as well:

"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you. They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the one who sent me. They would not be guilty if I had not come and spoken to them. But now they have no excuse for their sin. Anyone who hates me also hates my Father. If I hadn't done such miraculous signs among them that no one else could do, they would not be guilty. But as it is, they have seen everything I did, yet they still hate me and my Father. This fulfills what is written in their Scriptures: 'They hated me without cause.'" (John 15:18-25)

In the early development of the church, Christians lived in such a way that was separate in identity to the Roman culture in which it was incubated. Gerald Sittser writes, "The early Christian movement became known as the Third Way because Jesus himself was a new way, which in turned spawned a new movement – new in theology, in story, in authority, in community, in worship, and in behavior."⁵⁵

One way in which Christians were separate came in the exclusive worship of Jesus. Rome was a religious nation, adopting a pantheon of gods and goddesses from other nations that were conquered by the Roman Empire – even going so far as to try and include Jesus within the pantheon. Because Christians refused to worship the Roman pantheon, they were considered pagans. However, the tension arose due to the deification of its emperors. Throughout Roman history, emperors were considered to be gods. Because of their exclusive devotion to Jesus as Lord, Christians refused to worship the emperor. Sittser writes:

Christians related to Rome with a certain degree of ambivalence. They testified and they prayed for Caesar but refused to worship him. They aspired to serve the needy of the empire but not under roman terms of reciprocity. They viewed Jesus as the

⁵⁴ John Stott, *The Radical Disciple* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 19.

⁵⁵ Gerald L Sittser, *Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian "Third Way" Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 16.

rightful king but never revolted against Rome or set up an alternative government in exile, as if their movement was exclusively political.⁵⁶

Early Christians embraced the new identity that Christ gave them, “striving to reflect the image of God by how they lived.”⁵⁷ This reflection of habits proved to be a primary means by which the church grew. Alan Kreider writes, “The sources rarely indicate that the early Christians grew in number because they won arguments; instead they grew because their habitual behavior (rooted in patience) was distinctive and intriguing.”⁵⁸ How did this come about? Through patience and the relationships that Christians built with others. Kreider writes, “The most reliable means of communicating the attractiveness of the faith to others and enticing them to investigate things further was the Christians’ character, bearing, and behavior.”⁵⁹

As Christians, we have been given a new and separate identity from what we once were. As we mentioned in the previous section, we are to participate in God’s mission of redeeming and restoring the world through mission. We are called to be different from the world, showing the world what it means to live an alternative narrative from what the culture around us dictates.

However, before we can live an alternative narrative, we must be aware of the narratives to which our culture subscribes. Timothy Keller identifies several key cultural narratives that, while rooted in Christianity, have been warped to a more extreme version of themselves:

- *The Rationality Narrative.* The natural world is the only reality and everything has a physical cause and explanation.
- *The History Narrative.* History is no longer seen as cyclical, but rather that each stage of history is automatically making progress.
- *The Society Narrative.* While the ancients saw the individual as less important than the group, Western secularism has become radically individualistic. The purpose of society is to set individuals free to live as they choose without boundaries, so long as no harm is done to others.
- *The Morality or Justice Narrative.* While modern secularism is moral in many ways, these aims don’t align with God’s moral norms so much as the norms we determine for ourselves.
- *The Identity Narrative.* Rather than having our identity determined by external forces, identity is now only found in our desires and dreams, regardless of what the community may say.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Sittser, 101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁸ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

Keller argues that while each of these narratives are rooted in Christian thought, they have lost the spirit of what originally made them Christian. While it is tempting to want to disengage from the overarching cultural narratives, refusing to engage with them is just as problematic as succumbing to them. But how does one engage with culture in a way that maintains a distinct Christian worldview?

One such way is to look for “touch points” in these narratives. Touch points are points of common agreements where the two narratives overlap. This does not mean the narratives are one in the same with different viewpoints. Rather, it shows the internal yearning for truth and how God reveals Himself to people. It is an opportunity to speak the love and truth of the Gospel into the world. Engaging with stories is an invitation to learn. It forces us to do the hard work of not just understanding other narratives, but of also understanding *our* story. We gain the right to speak as we learn to listen. This has a positive effect for us, as we gain more confidence in our understanding of Christ and of the unique identity.

What are the alternative narratives we are to live? While there are many themes found in Scripture, here are a few:

- to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37)
- to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39)
- to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8)
- to not conform to the patterns of the world (Romans 12:2)
- to care for the orphan and widow and to not be polluted by the world (James 1:27)
- to exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)
- to live in deep community with one another (Acts 2:42-47)

Personal Reflection Exercise

What would our world look like if it exhibited the values listed above? Do you see any of these playing out in our churches and/or culture today?

[illegible]

⁶⁰ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), loc. 1629 – 1683.

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Chapter 5 – Personal Practices: Cultivating and Nurturing Our Christian Identity

Introduction

Our journey of Christian identity is one we pursue for the rest of our lives. With so many voices pulling us in different directions, it's easy for us to lose sight of who we are in Christ. Our ego tells us one thing, our family another, our churches may dictate what our identity is, and the world is constantly preaching its own narrative at us. What we do can easily become the benchmark for our identity. Because of this, the voice of God is often drowned out in the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Each person has their own way of personally connecting with God. As image bearers, we are most ourselves when we are in communion with God. When we enter into His presence in humility, we are given the opportunity to explore more about ourselves as explore more of God's character.

In this section, we will outline and explore different contemplative practices that you can put into practice individually or in the context of community. This list is not exhaustive but can be a launch pad for you to explore other practices. The practices that will be discussed include:

- *Lectio Divina*
- Prayer
- Silence
- Sabbath

As your group progresses through this chapter, it's recommended that you take each of the practices and devote one session to each. The purpose of spiritual practices is not to rush through them, but to allow time to slow down and listen for and to the voice of God.

5.1 *Lectio Divina*

Scripture serves as the foundation for our spiritual practices. It is in Scripture where we are explicitly told who we are in Christ. However, the way we read and approach the Bible often turns into a scavenger hunt or we rush through passages of Scripture without taking the time to simply breathe in the Word.

Lectio Divina – “the divine reading” – is a spiritual practice popularized by Christian monks that focuses on simply hearing and reading the Word of God. It is a contemplative practice that does not put an emphasis on “theologizing” but rather letting the Holy Spirit speak to us through the Word.

There are different ways to approach *Lectio*, but the practice forces us to slow down as we read and reread the passages. It is best done with shorter passages of Scripture rather than large chunks.

The passage that you choose will be read four times. You’re encouraged to read the passage aloud, as this forces you to not just slow down, but to soak in the Word. If you want to journal as you engage in the practice, you can do that as well.

As you read and to the Word, there is a different theme for each reading:

1. *The First Reading* – Simply listen to the Word. You are taking the Scripture and enjoying it for what it is.
2. *The Second Reading* – What is a word or phrase that sticks out to you? Write it down or keep it in the back of your mind. If you are doing this with others, you may share the word or phrase.
3. *The Third Reading* – What is God trying to teach you through this word or phrase? Write down your own questions, thoughts, observations, etc. This is the stage where you spend the most time, listening to what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach you through that word. If you are doing this with others, you may share what the Spirit is teaching you and give space for others to ask questions or make observations.
4. *The Fourth Reading* – Thank God for His Word and for what He has taught you. At this final stage, you may pray through the passage, letting the Scriptures give you the words to speak.

You can use this practice to engage with many passages of Scripture. If you have never used this before, one place to start would be 1 John 3. A sample of way of breaking it down is included, as well as a starting point:

- 1 John 3:1-3
- 1 John 3:4-6
- 1 John 3:7-10
- 1 John 3:11-15
- 1 John 3:16-18
- 1 John 3:19-24

Lord of Creation, what great love that you have lavished upon me, calling me your child. Father, help me to lean into that identity, one who is chosen and loved by you. I pray for the day when what has not yet been made known will be, that day when Christ appears and I will be like Him. Lord you promise that all who have hope in Jesus purify themselves as He is pure. May your Spirit purify my heart. In Jesus' name, amen.

5.2 Prayer

When you think of prayer, what comes to mind? Perhaps it's the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13. Maybe you think about the "Sinner's Prayer" or bedtime prayers you may have used when you were younger. Or maybe you have no idea where to start or why it's important.

For many, prayer is intimidating. It is often the case that we are uncomfortable praying – especially in groups. There seems to be an idea that we must be perfect when we pray aloud or that there are certain ways you have to pray for it to be "effective". In a lot of ways, we have missed the fundamentals of why prayer is important, treating it more as a "wish list" for God.

In her book *A Guidebook to Prayer: 24 Ways to Walk with God*, Dr. MaryKate Morse writes:

Prayer is the most fundamental avenue for connecting us to God and growing in faith. Through prayer we know who we truly are and who this God is who loves us. Prayer:

- draws us to experience love and to be love
- increases our faith
- expands our vision of God
- helps us grow in self-understanding
- gives us perspective on life and death, on gardens and deserts

Through prayer, we experience forgiveness, guidance, and peace. We are healed physically and emotionally. We experience the mystery of God, see truth and receive spiritual gifts. We receive vision and courage for God's mission. Faith becomes more beautiful, more real.⁶¹

Prayer is our lifeblood, our connection to the Lord. A common phrase is that prayer is a conversation with God, but we have made it one-sided. We air out our dirty laundry or give God our wish list, but we don't take time to listen. Our Christian identity needs to be rooted in prayer. When we pray, we are entering into the divine story in humility, seeking to know and simply be with God.

Prayer can manifest itself in many ways. The previous exercise of *Lectio Divina* is a form of prayer. Creation may move us to prayer. Suffering, art, a funny (or unfunny) joke – the possibilities are endless. How we express ourselves in prayer can differ. It does not always need to be on your knees but can be through poetry or a walk-through nature.

One type of prayer that can be used as a reflective exercise is what is known as "The Examen."⁶²

⁶¹ MaryKate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer: 24 Ways to Walk with God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), loc 124 – 142.

⁶² This is only one example of the prayers found in MaryKate Morse's *A Guidebook to Prayer*. If you want to explore different types of prayer more deeply, it's highly recommended that you pick up a copy. You can experiment with different types of prayer to find the ones that best help you to connect with God.

5.3 Silence and Solitude

Silence and solitude have become a lost art in today's world. We are more connected than ever, but the advent of the digital age has also stripped us of our privacy. There is too much noise around us, too many voices calling for our attention, too many distractions that divide us and pull us away from God.

Yet silence and solitude frighten us. It's in silence and solitude that our inner Self bubbles to the surface. Our fears, our failures, our loneliness, the lies we tell ourselves...but it is also where we meet God. Silence and solitude can be a place of healing where we meet our inner demons on the front line of battle, ready to defeat and reconcile them through the Holy Spirit.

Richard Foster writes, "The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear."⁶³ In silence and solitude we seek the Holy Spirit to speak to us, to reveal to us more of who God is and of who we are. We enter into a posture of listening rather than speaking.

Silence and solitude were common tools used by Jesus multiple times throughout the Gospels. In Luke 5, following the healing of a man with leprosy, Luke writes, "Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (v. 15-16). It was in silence, solitude, and prayer that Jesus reconnected with God to not just refuel Himself, but to also remember who He is.

Practicing Silence and Solitude

The idea of disconnecting from the world is simultaneously exciting and daunting. You do not need to go "cold turkey" and pick up your life, move to a mountain or cave in the middle of nowhere, and cut off all contact with the outside world. Like all disciplines, practices, and habits, it takes time to build your "endurance".

Here are some starting points you can take:

- Get into a comfortable position and set a timer for 2 minutes. In those 2 minutes, clear your mind and simply breathe.
- Take advantage of moments of silence throughout the day. Find a spot in your workplace, your home, in a nearby park, etc., turn off your phone, and simply be present in the moment. You can also take this as a time of quiet reflection:
 - What do you notice around you?
 - What is God trying to show you?
 - What inner struggles have you been wrestling with?
- As you become more comfortable with the practice, schedule silent retreats. They can be for a day, a weekend, or as long as you need. The key again is to enter into your retreat in a posture of listening and reflection.

⁶³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 122.

5.4 Sabbath

When was the last time you stopped everything and just rested? In the story of Creation, after God creates the heavens and the earth in six days, he takes the seventh day and makes it a rest. In the Ten Commandments, Moses wrote:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six day you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

Keeping the Sabbath was extremely important for the Israelites. It acted as a sign between God and the Israelites for the generations that would come after (Exodus 31:13). For the Israelite community, if the Sabbath was desecrated they were to be put to death and if they did any work, they were to be cut off from the people (Exodus 31:14). Sabbath is a day to stop, remember, and rest in the presence of God.

For the Israelites, it was a sign of their identity. It was a practice that actively set them apart from the rest of the nations surrounding them. Sabbath is also a sign that we are not our work. We are not loved more or less by what we do, but rather by who we are. Because so much of our identity is tied up into what we do, to be told to *not* do that often feels like an attack on who we are. We hinge our desire to be loved and valued on our vocation. Matthew Sleeth writes that Sabbath “helps us remember that God is in control and that our identity is not dependent on the work we do.”⁶⁴

How we practice the Sabbath can differ. It can be done individually or it can be done in community. Peter Scazzero gives four principles to biblical Sabbath⁶⁵:

1. *Stop*. Learning to stop revolves around learning to trust. It is learning to trust and obey God’s command to rest and that He is the provider of all.
2. *Rest*. Learning to rest means putting away the distractions of the day to day and enjoying time with God. Engage in life-giving activities – a walk, cooking, art, silence, coffee runs, or whatever else you find gives you life.
3. *Delight*. Learning to delight means to take the time to be thankful for what is given and to truly appreciate its value. Take the time on your walk to delight in nature, or to delight in your companionship with others.
4. *Contemplate*. Learning to contemplate on the character of God is essential to Sabbath. It is a gift of God for the world and it is a time to remember who God says He is. It gives us the opportunity to bask in the presence of God.

⁶⁴ Matthew Sleeth, *24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 72.

⁶⁵ Scazzero, 154 – 159.

Conclusion...or the Beginning

Throughout this study, you have been challenged to think about the core of who you are. The stories and narratives that have been influential to you have been called to your attention and you have been asked to think about them more deeply. Although this is the end of this particular study, it is not the end of the journey of discovery you are on to know the heights and depths of the love that God has for you.

There will be days ahead when you will be tempted to forget who Christ says you are.

There will be days when you feel that you have lost your sense of Self.

There will be days that you will think it is better to give in to who the world says you are.

To that, I say it is okay. But do not give up on the journey.

I leave you with this meditation from Henri Nouwen:

Keep Moving Toward Full Incarnation

Do not discount what you have already accomplished. You have made important steps toward the freedom you are searching for. You have decided to dedicate yourself completely to God, to make Jesus the center of your life, and to be fashioned into an instrument of God's grace. Yes, you still experience your inner dividedness, your need for approval and acclaim. But you see that you have made important choices that show where you want to go.

You can look at your life as a large cone that becomes narrower the deeper you go. There are many doors in that cone that give you chances to leave the journey. But you have been closing these doors one after the other, making yourself go deeper and deeper into your center. You know that Jesus is waiting for you at the end, just as you know that He is guiding you as you move in that direction. Every time you close another door – be it the door of immediate satisfaction, the door of distracting entertainment, the door of busyness, the door of guilt and worry, or the door of self-rejection – you commit yourself to go deeper into your heart and thus deeper into the heart of God.

This is a movement toward full incarnation. It leads you to become what you already are – a child of God; it lets you embody more and more the truth of your being; it makes you claim the God within you. You are tempted to think that you are a nobody in the spiritual life and that your friends are far beyond you on the journey. But this is a mistake.

You must trust the depth of God's presence in you and live from there. This is the way to keep moving toward full incarnation.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 51.

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Leader's Guide to *Imago Dei*

As a leader, you want your group to have the best experience possible when working through this material. Leadership is always a daunting task, so here are a few tips and guidelines to help you facilitate your group:

- ***Ask your group to prepare ahead of time.*** Throughout the workbook, there are a lot of exercises designated as “Personal Reflection Exercises.” These exercises are meant to facilitate introspection and reflection on the material. In order to keep the discussion moving, ask your group to read and prepare certain exercises ahead of time. You can also ask your group to do some of the exercises as follow up to the initial session. For activities designated as “Group Reflection Exercises,” these are more conducive to being done during the session.
- ***Communicate expectations to your group.*** There are certain expectations that should be held to create a safe environment for people to share and be vulnerable. You’ll find a suggested list of “Rules of Engagement” following this section.
- ***Flexibility is key.*** There are a variety of activities, topics, and materials found in this workbook. Depending on how talkative your group is or what subjects interest them, you may find yourself spending more time on certain chapters than before. On average, it’s recommended to spend a minimum of two-three weeks per chapter. However, ***you know your group better than anyone.*** If you find that some sections are not as applicable or helpful to your group, ***it’s okay to skip them.*** If some sections are taking longer than others, ***it’s okay to spend more time on them.*** Ultimately, read the room and make adjustments as needed.
- ***Chapter 1 is a beast.*** Chapter 1 is full of reflective exercises and serves to set the foundation for the rest of the workbook. If I could make one major recommendation, it would be to structure the chapter as a spiritual weekend retreat. This will allow your group time to settle into the rhythms of the exercises and give ample time of reflection.

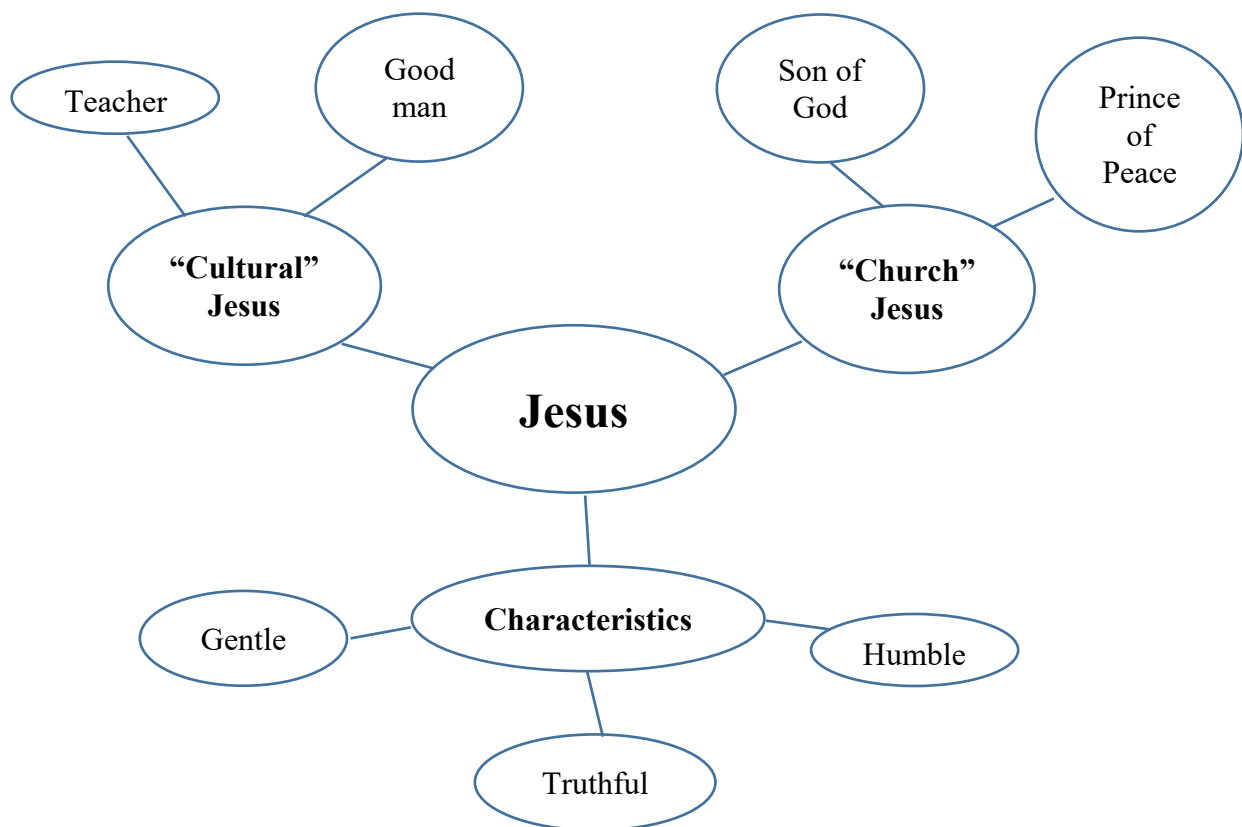
If this isn’t possible, ask your group to prepare several of the reflection exercises ahead of time. You can also work these exercises in as a weekly reflection to be done throughout the week. Discuss with your group what they would find most helpful.

- ***Give your group time to breathe.*** The material in this book can be heavy at times. If you sense that your group is getting bogged down or it’s too much, take a break. Do something fun with your group and let them regroup.
- ***Lead with humility.*** Ultimately, the journey that each member of your group is taking is one that is deeply personal. Don’t try to fix your group. Let them speak. Let them process. Listen to them. Pray for them. Love them. God has started an amazing work in their lives, and He is the one who is going to bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6).

- **Use the supplementary materials if you desire.** At the end of this curriculum, two additional resources have been included. One is a “Final Session Encouragement” that is meant to be done at the completion of this journey. It is a time of reflection and celebration for your group to encourage one another for the journey they have taken together.

The second resource is a short story titled “Ever Wandering: A Journey to Beyond the Edge and Back”. The story is broken up into eleven sections and details an “Expert’s” journey of deconstructing their identity. Sometimes difficult ideas can best be shared through story. If anyone in your group is seeking to understand more of the process of deconstruction, this short tale may be of some use to them. This material is included as an additional devotional that your group can use. At the end of the story, you will also find accompanying reflection questions for each section.

- **Using mind maps.** Mind maps are graphic organizers that can be used to break down big ideas. It is typically done by taking a main concept, identifying main ideas related to that concept, and then identifying smaller details that fit into the main ideas. Take the following example:



The Rules of Engagement

In order to get the best experience for your group, here are a few suggested guidelines to help create a safe environment for your members:

1. Be Prepared.

Your group leader may ask you to do some of the work ahead of the session to keep the discussion moving. Some activities are best done with your group, while others can be on your own. For leaders, there is a recommended schedule included.

2. Speak for Yourself, Not for Others

It's easy to project our thoughts, feelings, and experiences on to others. We cannot speak for other people. Using "I" statements helps to separate your own thoughts and experiences from others.

3. Respect One Another's Stories

There is a measure of vulnerability when one shares their story. As the past is brought up and you reflect on your story, it may bring up emotions you haven't felt in a long time. Give the space for the one sharing wrestle with the emotions. We are all on different journeys; respect your group members' journeys just as you would want yours respected.

4. Listen to Listen, Not to Respond

The goal of this workbook is not to fix someone's life. In your groups, resist the urge to try and fix or "save" someone. Not every sharing needs a response. Take a posture of curiosity and ask questions.

5. Chase the Threads

When emotions rise or you feel judgmental or defensive, take a moment to chase those thoughts to their source. What is causing this reaction?

6. Observe Confidentiality

When stories are shared, there is a temptation to want to tell others. Resist this urge. Make a commitment to protect the privacy of those who are sharing their stories.

7. Embrace Silence

Sometimes the best action is to let there be silence. Silence is uncomfortable and there will be a temptation to fill that silence with something. But silence gives space for reflection and for God to speak.

8. Breathe and Decompress

A lot can and will be said during these sessions and it can be a lot to take in. Some sections are heavier than others. Be aware of the energy your group members are showing during these sessions. If a session becomes too tense, it's okay to pause or stop to let everyone breathe. Play a game, listen to music, go on a walk together, grab some food or a snack – whatever will help people relax.

9. Lean into the Journey

The Journey ahead is difficult. Throughout what is to come, you will be tempted to jump off the path or to hold back. However, trust in what the Holy Spirit is doing in you and through your group members. Take the leap of faith and see what God is doing around you.

10. Enjoy the Process

Laugh with your group, share fun stories, and watch as God unfolds His endless love for you and your group.

Suggested Flow for Gatherings

If you are feeling anxious about leading the discussion times with your group, what follows will hopefully give you a foundation you can build on:

1. **Open the meeting place 15-30 minutes early.** You can use this time to allow people to arrive earlier to enjoy a time of fellowship before the meeting. Encourage your group to bring food so that they can enjoy a meal together. Keep this time open and light-hearted and use it as a time for catching up from the previous week.
2. **Begin on time with a time of prayer and worship.** Honor one another's time commitment and start on time. Begin with a time of prayer or worship. Worship can be anything from a time of music, a time of silence and reflection, a reading from the Scriptures, etc. Ask the Holy Spirit to open His presence to you and your group.
3. **Ask for initial observations and reflections.** Open the floor to allow people to share first about any of the personal reflection exercises or anything from the readings that stood out to them. If your group is larger, you could ask for 3-4 people to share, or you can break the group into smaller groups to share amongst one another.
4. **Work through the group reflection exercises together.** The group reflection exercises will likely serve as the core of your discussion time. As the leader, you know your group and what works best for them. If you don't get through every exercise or find that one exercise isn't relevant for you group members, *skip it*. Don't get bogged down by the exercises.
5. **Leave time for prayer and reflection at the end.** Be aware of your timing. Give your group time to decompress and to pray for one another.
6. **Be clear about what you will be doing during the next session.** As the leader, look ahead to know what exercises your group should do for the next meeting. This will give them proper expectations about what they will be doing going forward.

Suggested Schedule for *Imago Dei*

Chapter 1 – What is Christian Identity?	
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggested to complete over a weekend retreat. • Scatter the reflections as weekly reflections for your group.
Chapter 2 – What is My Narrative?	
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Power of Story
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charting Your Life Story • How the Past Influences our Story and Identity • Creating a Timeline • Ordering Your Timeline • Reflecting on Your Timeline”
Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing Your Timeline • Moments that Shape Us
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How Our Communities Influence Our Identity • Family • Abraham and Isaac
Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church • “But My Pastor Said...” • Paul and Timothy
Week 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture • Tying It All Together: Your Narrative Worldview • Closing Reflections
Chapter 3: What is God’s Story?	
Week 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation • Fall • Redemption • Restoration

Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing Your Story in Light of God's Story • Concluding Thoughts • Closing Reflections
Chapter 4 – So What? What are the Implications of Christian Identity?	
Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Cost of Identifying with Jesus • “I Count it All as Rubbish”
Week 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church Participation – Finding Your Place in the Local Church • Unity and Diversity of the Church • Exploring Spiritual Gifts • Mission
Week 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Engagement – Living an Alternative Narrative
Chapter 5 – Personal Practices	
Week 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lectio Divina
Week 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prayer
Week 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silence and Solitude
Week 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sabbath
Final Reflections	
Week 17 <i>Optional</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities of Encouragement • Reflections on the Course

Note: *The above schedule is just a suggestion for leaders to follow.*

Final Session Encouragement

We're all on different journeys. As we've said time and again, the journey of discovering our Christian identity is one that is a lifelong journey. You're encouraged to continue along this course with your group or other trusted companions.

As this particular journey nears its end, we want to take time to encourage one another. There are parts of ourselves that we are blind to – whether because of lies people have told us, our ignorance of our own abilities, or even a refusal to acknowledge the way in which God has made us.

Activities of Encouragement

Encouragement Posters

- On a large sheet of paper, write your name in the center of it.
- Post it in a spot around the room where people can access it.
- Each person in your cohort will spend time reflecting on the other members' strengths, passions, identities, etc.
- Walk around to each person's paper and write a note of encouragement to them. Some ideas to jumpstart the process:
 - *What is a word or phrase that sticks out to you about this person?*
 - *What strengths have you seen in them throughout this course?*
 - *What passions have you seen?*
 - *What areas of growth have you seen throughout the course?*
 - *Are there any passages of Scripture that you would use to encourage them?*
 - *What have you learned from this person?*
 - *If you could let the person know one thing, what would it be?*

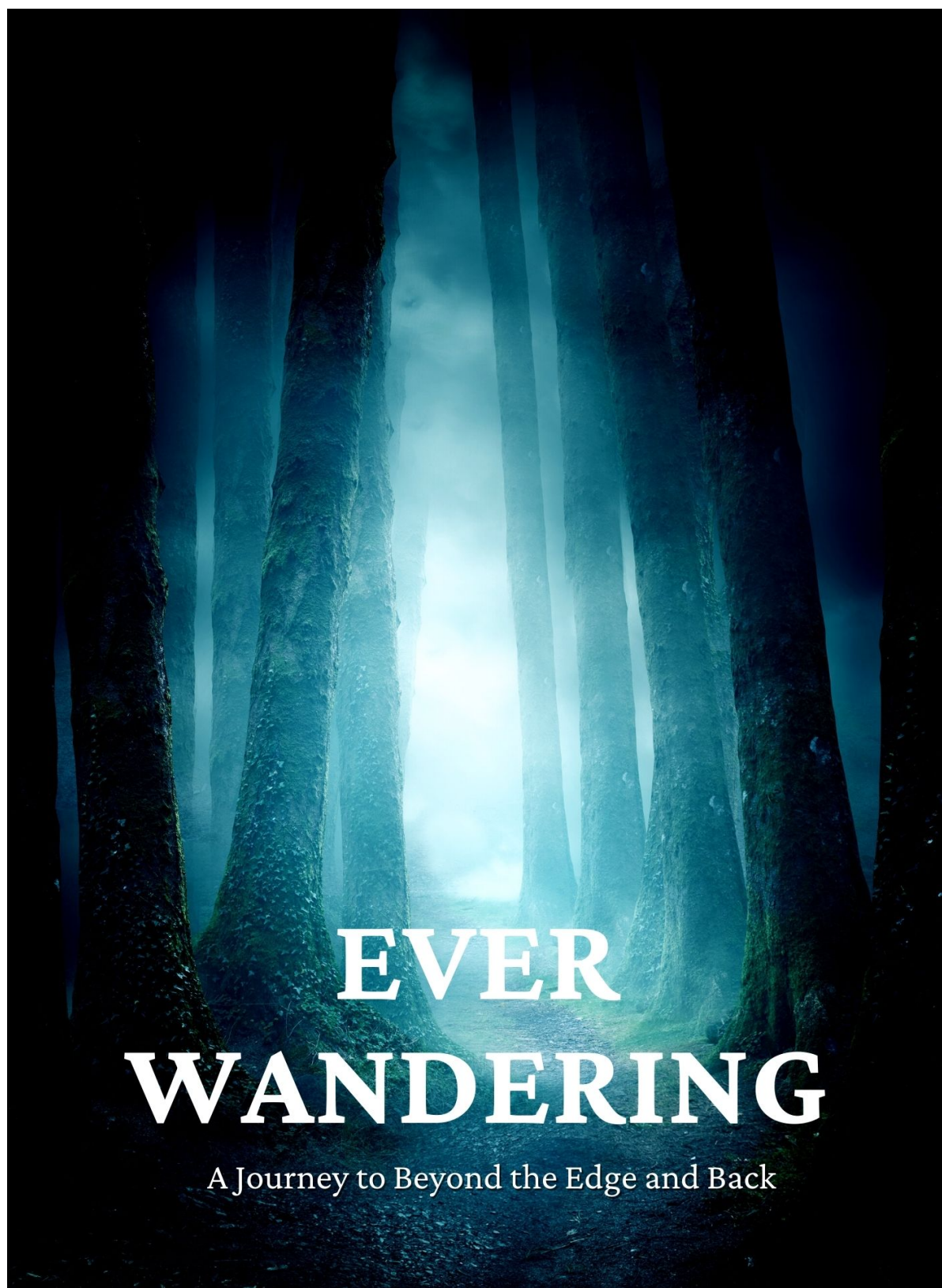
Secret Notes

- Take an index card and write a note of encouragement to each member of your cohort.
- You don't need to sign your name.
- Drop the card in a bag designated for the person you're writing to.

Encouragement Circle

- Form a circle with your chairs and put a chair in the middle.
- If your group is comfortable, have each member of your group take a seat in the middle.
- While they are in the center, each member of your group can speak words of encouragement to the one in the center.
- Pray for the person.

There are many other ways that your cohort can share words of encouragement. The above are ways to simply kick start the process if your group needs help getting started.



EVER WANDERING

A Journey to Beyond the Edge and Back

JAMES DYLAN BRANSON

Ever Wandering:
A Journey to Beyond the Edge and
Back

Author's Note

Ever Wandering: A Journey to Beyond the Edge and Back began as a series of blog posts that served as reflection of two books: *Not Knowing* and *Not Doing* by Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner. I read these two books during my doctoral studies and they focused on the concept of...well, not knowing and not doing. There's a tendency within leadership that we feel we must always have an answer or we must always be moving. In a very real sense, our identity is tied up in what we know and what we do.

As leaders, it's easy for us to lock ourselves away in the towers that we – or others – build for ourselves. We keep our distance and forget about the people outside of the tower. We become so absorbed into what we know that we become disconnected. But why do we do this? Why are so averse to letting people into our tower or leaving it ourselves?

The reason is different for everyone, but at the core of the issue is that our *identity* is tied up into what we *know* and what we *do*. As such, uncertainty is our greatest foe. It serves as a direct attack on who we are as it calls into question our very being. It leads us to believe that everything we know and have done has been for nothing. It's here when the Uncertainty's accomplice, The Imposter, shows its ugly face. The Imposter is that feeling that we are not the right person for the job, that feeling that there's someone else who could what we do, but much better.

Together, their collective mantra screams, "Why you? You're going to fail."

And so we run. We run away from uncertainty by locking ourselves away. But what if there's more outside of the tower than we think? What if life, leadership, and identity is more than what we know or do, but rather is rediscovered on the path of uncertainty?

It's my prayer that as you read this short piece, that it will serve as the first steps in a journey outside of the tower, that you will lean into the journey before you, and that you will be transformed by your own journey.

Accumulation

The room is large with high vaulted ceilings and windows that stretch to unimaginable heights. The flames of the torches hanging in their wall sconces bounce off of the walls, casting dancing shadows across the endless shelves of books of and scrolls. Each section is ordered and labeled properly: Preserved scrolls of the great philosophers, tomes that contain the wisdom of wise men and women passed down through the ages, the great classics that have served as the foundation of society, and the latest issue of Marvel's *Avengers* to name a few.

They say that knowledge is power. There is always one more thing to know, one more blind spot to cover. If I can learn just one more thing, maybe that will be enough. It will protect me. My books are precious to me; my knowledge invaluable. I pause and run my finger down the spine one of my tomes that says we treat our knowledge as “personal property to be collected and defended. It is an ornament that allows us to rise in the pecking order. We take what we know quite seriously.”¹ The author is right, but it doesn't hurt to know. Does it?

My quest has led me to accumulate all that I want in this pursuit. There are moments where I'm content as I sit at my desk reading and thinking aloud, my own voice echoing back to me through the chamber, confirming for me what I already know. I would consider myself an Expert. No one criticizes my knowledge or what I think I know because my knowledge is bulletproof. Not that they could anyway, for what do *they* know? Surely nothing close to my own knowledge.

I climb the spiral staircase into the lofts. The chamber is quiet apart from the echoes of my own footsteps. People used to come to me for wisdom on my Subject, saying that as well-read as I am I *must* have the answer. And why wouldn't I? They don't come anymore, but that's their problem. I can't help it that they don't understand my brilliance. Besides, it's also my own choice. The world is becoming more and more complicated and I would shudder to utter those damnable words: “I don't know.” The thought makes me sick, causes bile to rise in the back of my throat. Knowledge has cemented my power, my station, my livelihood. My knowledge must remain unquestioned.

¹ Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2007) quoted in Steve D'Souza and Diana Renner's *Not Knowing* (London: LID Publishing Ltd, 2014), 32.

I know what I know and what I know is that no one can take me to task if I don't allow them to ask. And so I reside in my ivory tower, inundated by my own knowledge.

I sit in the armchair nestled in the corner. It's been years since I locked the door to my tower. I see no need to leave and no need for anyone to come in. The curtains are drawn to block anyone from looking in, but it also blocks me from looking out. Outside of my tower, there is so much uncertainty and so much that is unknown to me. You never know what tomorrow is going to bring unless you cultivate what tomorrow will look like. Nothing new means consistency, comfort, that nothing will challenge you past what you already know.

Yet the comfort is becoming increasingly unsettling. Discontentment with where I am has slowly been building in my heart. Outside the window I can hear life going on as the world continues to change. But I like my tower. I love my knowledge. I love who I am inside these walls. If those are taken away, if those things are challenged, where does it leave me?

"I don't—" Catching myself, I push the thought away, immediately grabbing the weathered copy of Homer's *Odyssey* on the table. This I know. This I've read more times than I can count. It's a familiar story – one that's been retold countless times. There are no surprises here. I open the book and my eyes fall on the page, yet my heart wanders. I close the book and put it down, frowning as the sound of cheers erupts outside my window. I gaze at the curtain and my heart begins to race.

What is happening outside of these walls?

The Seeker

I move toward the window and draw back the curtain, shielding my eyes from the sunlight that pours through the window. As my eyes adjust, I can see people are flooding the streets and making their way to the various ivory towers scattered throughout town. Each tower marks the residence of another Expert – those gifted in philosophy, theology, mathematics, literature, and economics among others. I catch a glimpse of the visitors, each wearing travel worn robes. I blink in surprise. *Seekers? It's been so long.*

The Seekers are those who come to the Experts seeking to understand and glean something from our wisdom. They approach us with humility, never questioning what we have to say. My heart stops beating and my discontent is satiated as I quickly make arrangements for any who would come seeking my knowledge. This is the one time I willingly invite and allow others to enter my tower. They come to Seek, not to Challenge.

I move to the dais on the bottom floor and take my seat in the gilded high-backed chair. I stroke the armrest that is inlaid with jewels and gems. *I've earned this. I've earned my seat of power.* Surrounded by my endless tomes, I revel in the power that knowledge has granted me.

Time passes slowly as I wait. The sunlight that was streaming through the window begins to darken as the sun passes its zenith. The candles burn low and frustration begins to stir my heart. *Does no one care what I know? Surely there must be someone.*

A knock at the door rouses my attention and I sit up straight, my heart hammering. Clearing my throat, I call out, "You may enter."

The heavy mahogany doors creak as they open. *I need to get those hinges oiled.* A Seeker hesitantly enters the tower, their eyes wide in wonder and awe as they fall on me in my great seat. Pride wells inside. *Yes, this is more like it.*

The young Seeker approaches the dais and bows, paying proper respect. "Oh great Expert, I come to Seek what you know."

"And I aim to provide you with answers," I say grandly. "Tell me, do you know of the phenomenological process of Brishnish?"

The Seeker looks at me in confusion. "I'm sorry?"

"The phenomenology of Brishnish is that our everyday experience of the Brish can call us to mish mash the brashness of schlandery and vish. You see..."

I proceed through my lecture, pouring my heart and soul into the great Retelling of Knowledge. Although I love to collect knowledge, there is a certain joy in being able to pass it on to the next. I'm confident that my oratory and rhetorical skills will lead me to clearly

articulate all that I know so that this Seeker may take my knowledge out of the tower. As I conclude, I gaze down at the Seeker in pride. “Do you have any questions?”

The Seeker stares at me blankly. “I...didn’t understand a word you said.”

I blink in surprise. “What?”

The Seeker scratches their head. “Pardon my ignorance, but I’m unfamiliar with...everything you said. Can you simplify it for me?”

My jaw drops. “I...um...well you see, the phenomenology of Brishnish is that our everyday experience of the Brish can call us—”

“You’re simply repeating what you just said. I heard you, but I don’t understand. Can you try again?”

Flustered, I push on. “...the Brish can call us to mish mash the brashness...”

The Seeker shakes their head. “Do you not know how to communicate your knowledge with me? How can you expect for a Seeker to carry your knowledge and wisdom when we cannot understand?” The Seeker rubs their eyes in frustration. “We have been to every tower in this place today, and not one of you ‘Experts’ has actually taught us anything. You spout off in these ‘great and mighty’ terms and expect us to understand. You sit in your high chairs and look down on us from on high.”

I stare at the Seeker in astonishment, at a loss for words.

“What good is it to be an Expert if you cannot make accessible to the Seeker what you know?”

I don’t respond.

“What good are your fancy words when they have no real meaning?”

I can’t respond.

The Seeker turns toward the door and stops as they prepare to exit. Turning around, they leave me with these words: “Heed *my* words, ‘Expert’: Until others can grasp what you say, your knowledge is useless. Knowledge may be power, but if it is not properly wielded it is simply useless strokes on a page.”

The Pilgrim

I've failed.

My conversation with the Seeker replays over and over again in my mind. Their parting words cut to my core: "*Until others can grasp what you say, knowledge is useless. Knowledge may be powerful, but if it is not properly wielded it is simply useless strokes on a page.*" Fury rises in my heart and soul.

How *dare* they question my authority?

How *dare* they question my life's work?

How *dare* they question who I am?

People have followed me and come to me precisely *because* of my authority, of my life's work, and of my identity.² I AM THE EXPERT. In a fit of rage, I sweep the books off of my table, sending them flying across the room.

I am the Expert.

I am the Expert.

I am the Expert.

I am the Expert.

Slowly, my anger dissipates, leaving me empty. *What will the others think?* The Seeker is right: If others cannot grasp my knowledge, what good is it? I look around at my life's work, at the vast collection of knowledge and wisdom that surrounds me. Have I been betrayed by my own understanding?

A knock at the door snaps me out of my spiral. I stare at the door blankly. *Knock knock.* "Go away!" I bark. "Leave me be!"

The knocking continues. I cover my ears, trying to block it out, but the knocking pierces through my ears and into my heart. I cast an angry glance at the door before storming over to it and jerking it open, the rusty hinges screeching.

Before me stands a gray cloaked figure, the hood pulled low over their face. "Who are you?" I demand. "Have you come to mock me as well?"

The figure shakes its head. "I have heard that the Experts of this city are welcoming to the Pilgrim, are they not?"

I snort. "You've lost your way, traveler. There is nothing here for you any longer."

The figure pauses. "Perhaps. Or perhaps it is you who has lost *your* way."

² Steven D'Souza & Diana Renner, *Not Knowing: The Art of Turning Uncertainty into Opportunity* (London: LID Publishing Ltd, 2014), 72.

My nostrils flare as the words strike me. “What did you say?” I ask, my voice cold and flat.

“Once you were like me, Expert: A simple Pilgrim on a journey to answer the questions you sought answers for. The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is not found in locking oneself away from the world, but rather in the ever-constant journey of discovery.”

“My journey ended long ago,” I reply. “I’ve learned all there is to know.”

The Pilgrim shakes their head. “Not all, only that which *you* deemed worthy of knowing. Tell me, you have absorbed so much knowledge over your life. But have you questioned it? Or have you taken it for what it claims to be?”

I pause. “Have I questioned it...?”

“A great teacher once said, ‘Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions just because they have been handed down for many generations.’³ You have consumed, but have you digested?”

“Digested...?”

“Expert, your Pilgrim’s journey has not ended. You have found identity in the power and titles of your station. While your certainty is to be commended, you have lost your way in the comfort of your knowledge.”

I gaze around at the tower of my making. The exquisite beauty of it stirs my heart and calls for me to resume my place in my armchair and to banish this fool.

“Expert, leave this place. This tower of your own making has poisoned and crippled you. It has stunted your sense of adventure and wonder, for there is a world far greater than that which you can create. Expert, if you will, join me once again along the Pilgrim’s Path.”

Could they be right? Has my creation harmed me rather than helping me?

The Tower calls to me, telling me to ignore the Pilgrim. *You’ve worked so hard; why throw it away? You’ve earned this.*

As I stare at the Pilgrim, the sense of discontentment rising in my heart, growing ever stronger as I look around at my domain.

Is this truly what I have been Seeking? Or is there something more?

“Journey with me, Expert. It can begin with one step.”

³ Buddha, quoted in Steve D’Souza and Diana Renner’s *Not Knowing* (London: LID Publishing Ltd, 2014), 77.

Fear's Ballad

I pause at the door, my hand hovering over the latch.

The steps out of the Tower and out of the City are filled with Unknowns

I don't know where I'm going –

I hardly know where I've been at this point.

I can still turn back.

I can still I say, "No."

That's what the world and culture has told me to do –

It's what I've been trained to be:

Fearful

Complacent

Risk-Averse

Fragile.

Community values, attitudes, and expectations hover over my head

Yearning to leer and jeer in my face that I was wrong all along

And that I'm going to return with my tail between my legs.

"We told you so."

"We told you it was dangerous."

"We told you that you were nothing."

But I have to prove them wrong.

The first steps from my Beginning to my Tower was a path wrought with peril.

It was full of unknowns and I swore –

God, did I swear –

That I would never take that path again.

I earned my peace,

My prosperity,

My title.

Why would I ever leave again?

I fought to prove them wrong.
 I fought to make my mark.
 I fought to earn my knowledge, my power, my position.

Surely I don't need to move.
Surely I don't need to leave the comfort of my Tower.
Surely I can learn to be content.

They tell me the world is scary.
 It's a place unseen that will only kill me.
 It's a realm too big to understand.
 It's a journey I was meant to forego.

And yet, here I am again
 On the edge of that precipice.

Something stirs in my heart,
 The soul of my Being,
 As I stand on the edge of life and death.
 Anxiety floods my senses,
 sharpening them to as fine an edge as any double-edged sword.

Is this the way I am to take?
To once again walk the Pilgrim's Path?
I know where it ends –
It should end where I am –
But why does it not?
Why does this road lead ever on?
Do I not know all there is to know?
Do I not know that I should stop here and be done with it all?

But the voice continues to whisper.
 "Come.
 Follow Me into the Unknown.
 I am with you until the very end.

Trust me.
Trust the journey I have you on.
Your story isn't over.
It is just beginning."

Do I trust it?
 Do I start again along the Pilgrim's Path?

Fear is paralysis cloaked in survival.
 How does it work?
Why does it work?
 Fear should have no hold over me
 And yet it does.

I can't let go.
 I can't take that step.
 I can't move beyond my Self and what I know
 And give it all up again.
 I'm turning back –
 I *have* to.
 They'll understand.
 They'll –

NO!

Hand in hand,
 Arm in arm,
 Heart in heart
 I'm not alone.

The Pilgrim's path is not the journey of isolation.
 It was my isolation that built the Tower in the first place.

The Pilgrim's Path is one of community –
The collective journey we all must take.
It is in the Pilgrim's path that the I becomes We
As heart and spirit are joined.

Fear has no place here.
Only Wonder and Curiosity.

The Most Important Step

“There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching toward him and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange.” – Elias Canetti⁴

We stand at the precipice of the unknown. A myriad of emotions whirl inside us as we stare at the blank canvas that is the next stage. Anxiety and fear permeate our base instinct, but it wrestles with the constant push and pull of wanting to find joy, excitement, and wonder in that moment. We ask ourselves, “What is the most important step a person can take?” We validate ourselves that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. We place our emphasis, our hopes, our dreams, on that first step and yes – it is important.

But it is not **the** most important step.

A step into the unknown – the realm of unknowing, of mystery, of adventure – is a heavy step. “Everything hinges on this step, this first moment. With this step we are no longer bound by what we know. We’re finally free.” With a deep breath, we take that first step and the weight disappears.

But immediately, a voice whispers ever so softly, “Come back.” We’ve taken the first step, but doubt clouds our mind, our hearts, our actions. We cast a look over our shoulder and see everything we have ever known. It’s brilliant. Lights beam from the tall towers we’ve have a hand in building. Everything we’ve known and loved is locked away in those ivory towers that stand as a testimony to who we are. Comfort, security, love, friendship, finances, family – everything our heart desires. “Why do you want to leave?”

Why do we want to leave?

Our eyes snap forward. The path ahead is shrouded in fog with shadowy shapes prowling through the swirls of mist. Our mind begins to play tricks as the shadows grow to gargantuan proportions, red glowing lights flicker on and off, and we hear the soft cackle of derision from those who have always doubted our step.

Why would we ever want to leave?

Longing springs up in our heart, filling the space that terror of the unknown has bred in us. Doubt clouds our mind once again. We lift our foot, but it isn’t in a forward direction.

⁴ Quoted in Steve D’Souza and Diana Renner’s *Not Knowing* (London: LID Publishing Ltd, 2014), 108.

It hovers in the air, trying to discern the proper path. “There’s no shame in going back. They’ll understand. They *have* to understand.” Our leg trembles as it slowly inches back.

But again it stops as a soft light glows further ahead in the distance. The mist is not dispelled, but it catches the eye in a most curious way. It isn’t bright, but it *is* an invitation. We don’t know what the invitation holds, but it is whispering in a voice even quieter than the first, “*Come.*”

“Come. Take the step. Step into the adventure that awaits. The path is not easy, but at the end it will have been worth it. Trust Me.”

“Come, Expert. Together we take this step.”

With fear and trembling, we take a step.

What is the most important step? It’s not the first.

It’s the *next* step.⁵

⁵ Brandon Sanderson, *Oathbringer* (London: Gollancz, 2017), 1131.

Alone

I breathe a sigh of unease as the fog around me begins to clear. I cannot recall the last time I stepped beyond the walls of the Tower. There is tension in the air as we navigate the winding path through the thick fog. Pockets of it are less dense – vague recollections of places I knew long ago – but it is not the same. So much has changed, leaving me feeling unsettled.

“Where are we going?” I ask the Pilgrim.

They shrug. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I demand. “Are you not supposed to be my guide in this?”

The Pilgrim shrugs again. “The journey is one of adventure and mystery, my friend. We are simply moving toward the next waypoint – wherever that may be.”

I’m flabbergasted. *No idea where we’re going?! I cast a glance over my shoulder to see that my Tower is still in sight, still calling for me. The Pilgrim notices my continuous backward glances and pauses.*

“I will not force you to continue. The Pilgrimage is one of personal choice. You are welcome to return to your comfort and your old life, if you so choose. But I can see that there is a desire for more in your heart.”

“What if I’m making the wrong decision?” I demand.

“What if?”

“What if I’m moving too quickly? Surely I could have done more to prepare for this journey. Maybe I should return to the Tower. I don’t know if I brought enough supplies with me for the journey.”

“Perhaps.”

“There are just so many unknowns and variables.”

“There are.”

Frustration is mounting inside of me. “Don’t you have anything else to say?”

The Pilgrim shakes their head and continues along the path. “Fear is a natural response, my friend. But do not let it paralyze you. There is more growth in the journey than there is in your Tower.”

“How can you be sure?” I demand.

“I can’t,” the Pilgrim laughs.

I stand in place as the Pilgrim continues to move forward, whistling a traveler’s ditty as they walk. I try to will myself to move, but the call of the Tower is strong. I cast a glance over my shoulder and can feel myself itching to return. I turn around and stop myself. *No.*

This is the journey you've chosen. I turn back just as the fog swallows the Pilgrim, who is now much further ahead of me. Within moments, I'm completely alone. My heart begins to pound and with a loud groan, I chase after them. The fog swirls around me, its cool touch brushing my skin. I shiver with the cold.

"Pilgrim!" I call out.

There is no response.

"Pilgrim!"

Nothing.

Fear begins to take root as the fog closes in around me. It becomes so thick that I can no longer see the path beneath me. Disoriented, I turn around, looking for my Tower. It is a faint outline in the fog, getting fainter with each passing moment. The monstrous shapes with their glowing eyes reappear, mocking me in my current state. *I'm alone. I don't know where I am. This was a mistake.* My chest tightens and my pulse races, a cold sweat breaks out over my body, my head spins.

"Help me!" I cry out.

Silence.

Anger wells inside of me. "You told me to trust you!" I shout in fury. "Have you already abandoned me?"

Hot tears roll down my cheeks.

Breathe.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

Listen.

The distant sound of rushing water fills my ears.

Look.

In the distance, a dim light breaks through the fog. Hurriedly, I hitch up my pack and race toward the light. The fog parts for me and the sound water grows louder and louder as the light gets brighter and brighter. Within moments, I find myself staring at the weathered sign of an old inn.

The sign swings in the breeze reading in faded letters, "*Knowing's Edge.*"

Not wanting to stay outside any longer than I have to, I hastily push open the door and enter the common room.

Knowing's Edge

The inside of *Knowing's Edge* is unlike anything I have ever seen. Thick, overstuffed armchairs dot the room and eclectic artwork lines the walls. Long wooden tables with dinner's remains await to be cleaned, but no one actively makes their way to do so. The room itself is dimly lit with a thin haze of smoke filling the air. A strange tension hangs in the room, one that seems poised on the edge of something great about to happen but is simultaneously tinged with a sense of anxiety and dread. I shrug out of my traveler's cloak and hang it on a peg by the door. A chill runs through my body as I move toward the Innkeeper, a portly man with a long mustache and twinkling eyes.

"Haven't see you before," he says.

"I've just started my journey," I say, taking a seat at the bar.

He nods. "I can see that. You don't have the wear and tear of one who has been on the road for long like some of these others."

He gestures to the rest of the room where five others are scattered about.

"Do you get much business?" I ask.

The Innkeeper chuckles. He fills a mug with fragrant spiced wine and passes it to me. "There's a steady stream of people. Most pass on to the next stage of their journey soon after arriving while others" – he shoots a glance toward the five – "like to stay for a bit. These five are regulars, you see."

I look at the five regulars, taking a sip of my wine as I do. "Maybe you can help me," I ask. "Has a Pilgrim passed by here?"

"Haven't seen the Pilgrim in a long time," the Innkeeper says. "They eventually pass this way though, if you'd like to wait a while. Take a load off and I'll grab you some of my famous stew."

I nod and the Innkeeper hustles toward the kitchen. By now, the five regulars are staring at me from their respective tables. Feeling uncomfortable, I grab my mug and take a seat across from the nearest one, who has a sketchpad laying before them.

"It's quite chilly outside," I remark.

"I wouldn't know," they say airily. Paint smudges their cheek and charcoal lines their fingers.

I sit there awkwardly in silence for a time. "T-The Innkeeper says that you and your friends are regulars here."

“Of course we are. We are the ones who inhabit the immediate space between Knowledge and the Unknown. We refer to ourselves as the ‘Edgelings’ if you will.”

“Edgelings?” I ask.

They nod. “We are the ones poised to seek the unknown at a moment’s notice. It isn’t a matter of ‘if’ so much as ‘when’ for us. My compatriots are the Explorer, the Scientist, and the Entrepreneur. And I, my friend, am the Artist.”

“I am the Expert,” I say with a slight bow.

The Artist laughs. “An Expert? Is there truly such a thing?”

I’m taken aback. “I’m sorry?”

The Artist chuckles. “My friend, if there is one thing we have all learned from staying at *Knowing’s Edge* and the Unknown, it’s that those who claim to be ‘Experts’ are simply those who grew tired of the Journey and created a Tower for themselves.”

“I, well, yes. But I did *not* get tired of the Journey. I simply found the end of it.”

The Artist laughs. “Ah, you truly are an ‘Expert’ then.” They raise their glass mockingly. “Tell me, why are you at *Knowing’s Edge*, then?”

“I...was discontent.”

The others perk up at this. “Discontent?” the Scientist asks.

I nod.

“With what, exactly?” the Entrepreneur asks, taking a seat next to me.

“I...I’m not sure exactly.”

“You’re at the right place then,” the Explorer laughs.

I look at them curiously.

“Hopefully you’ll stay a while. I would like to look deeper into this,” the Psychotherapist says, studying me closely.

The attention is growing more and more uncomfortable. The Artist looks me up and down. “You’re looking for the next stage of your Journey. But you’re not sure where to go yet, yes?”

I nod slowly.

“We’ve found that the best way to figure out where to go is to simply not go anywhere,” the Explorer says jubilantly.

I look at the Explorer in shock. “But...you’re an Explorer. Isn’t ‘going somewhere’ part of your identity?”

They nod. “Of course. But how do I know if I’m going somewhere new if I haven’t taken the time to ferment on the edge? You see, we all have an idea of where we *should* go, but that doesn’t mean it’s the place we *will* go or if it’s even the best choice.”

“So you...do nothing?”

“For the moment at least. I follow my intuition. The time will come when I leave, but it won’t be a moment before. That’s the thing with exploration: It can take you anywhere you want to go, but only if you’re patient and have support. There’s always some kind of risk involved.”

“It’s the same for all of us,” the Entrepreneur says. “In our professions, there is always some risk involved. For the Artist, they must learn to inhabit that creative space. For the Scientist, they must be comfortable with deviating from what has already been established. I mean, how many scientific discoveries came from playing it safe? For the Psychotherapist, working with people is always a risk. You never know what you’re going to get in there. They always have to check their assumptions at the door and unknow what they think they know. For myself, I have to give myself the space to fail. I can’t tell you how many of my ideas tanked.” They all laugh at that.

The Artist nods. “We don’t know your story, Expert. But we commend you for taking the step out of the Tower. That in and of itself is a huge risk. We don’t know where you’ll be going next, but as long as you’re here at *Knowing’s Edge*, we’ll let you process whatever it is you need.”

I’m humbled by their kind words. Bowing my head in thanks, I lift my mug in a toast.

The Shadow

I stand on the bank of the raging river outside of *Knowing's Edge*, watching the stream rush by before me. The gurgling of the water flowing before is both enticing and terrifying. I'm not entirely sure how long I've been at the inn – it feels like a long time, and yet not long at all. In that time, I've watched as each of my companions had a moment of breakthrough and untied one of the boats in the small inlet nearby. We simultaneously celebrated their respective revelations and mourned their leaving us, blessing them as they paddled their boats into the rushing waves of the unknown.

New travelers arrive, coming and going. They share their stories, where it is they come from and how they arrived at *Knowing's Edge*. Their stays are never the same, but they eventually leave.

And yet I'm still here, waiting for my breakthrough.

I crouch down, sitting in the tall reeds along the bank. Pulling a cattail out by the roots, I begin to stir the small stretch of calm water before me, staring at my Reflection.

"They've all left you," my reflection says to me. *"On to bigger and better things. And yet here you are."*

"They had their revelation," I reply, suppressing the surge of anxiety that tries to mount in my heart.

"But why haven't you?"

"I...don't know. They said it comes in time and that it is best to live in the tension."

"But you don't believe that, do you? You're one of action. You don't belong at Knowing's Edge. You belong back in your Tower."

Despite my best efforts, anxiety takes hold. The pull to the Tower – something I haven't felt in the presence of my former companions – returns. I cast a glance over my shoulder and the fog surrounding the inn clears just long enough for me to catch a glimpse of the Tower.

"Go back. Here, at Knowing's Edge, you are an imposter. You're not like the Explorer or the Artist or anyone else who has passed through here. You're above them – an Expert! Go back to who you were – no, who you are."

The Reflection's face twists into a Shadow of itself.

The Tower beckons.

The Shadow rises in me, calling me out for the Imposter that I am. It's right, though. Who did I think I was to even begin this journey? I'm no Pilgrim. I'm no Artist, no

Explorer, no Entrepreneur, no Peacemaker, no Mystic, no Designer, no Pastor – hell, I’m not even an “Expert” (as I’ve been told at every step of this Journey).

How am I anything but an Imposter?

The Shadow grins wickedly, knowing that it’s hooks have found its mark and have sunk in deep.

“Follow me.” I pause, listening. It’s that soft voice, a voice that I haven’t heard since the beginning.

“Go back.”

Follow.

“Go back.”

Follow Me into the Unknown.

We always stand at a crossroads in our Journey. The Call to Return sits in the back of our mind, waiting for us at our most vulnerable and our defenses are down. It bellows, berates, and beckons us to return to where we once were, a place where at one point we had security.

The second path is the Forward Call. It does not bellow, it does not berate, but it invites us to the next leg of our Journey. It is a voice of peace; a quiet whisper that does not coerce, but in the simplicity of its command we cannot help feel drawn toward it.

Neither can force us to continue or retreat. We can always stay on the Edge, waiting and waiting.

But the Breakthrough will happen.

Slowly, I make my way to the inlet and sit in the boat. The speed of the current seems to pick up immediately, pulling and straining at the mooring line. It takes effort – more than I would have thought – to untie the knots holding the boat in place. It takes all my strength to hold onto the rope, anxiety trying to overwhelm me.

In the distance, the Tower glows, calling for me.

And then I let go, the current sweeping me away.

Raging Rapids

Regret hits me as soon as I let go of the rope.

The current of the river is too much as it drags me and pulls me every which way. I desperately scrounge around the bottom of the boat, looking for an oar or a paddle or *something* I can use to correct my poor decision. To my utter horror and despair, there's nothing in the boat.

I'm left to the mercy of the river.

I hold on for dear life, my knuckles bone white as I clench the wooden sides of the boat. Water splashes in my face as the boat rocks every which way. My stomach turns and nausea settles in.

Please God.

Knowing's Edge is already a tiny splotch on the horizon. The boat picks up speed and the shore races past me. A dense fog rolls in front of me and my heart starts to hammer in my chest. I can hear the splash of rapids as water breaks against God knows what inside. *What's waiting for me in the fog?*

It's foreboding, terrifying. *I can't go in there.* I lean over the stern of the boat, trying my best to paddle back with my hands.

Never has there been a more impossible task.

The fog is getting closer and closer with each passing moment.

I scream, covering my eyes and sliding as deep as I can into the hull of the boat.

The fog washes over me, I'm thrown every which way, hanging on for dear life and...

...and everything grows still. The sound of the rushing current becomes a soft gurgle as I float along at a gentle pace. Cautiously, I stand to try and get my bearings. The fog is so thick that I can't see my hand in front of me, so I sit down again.

Time seems to stop in the fog. There is no connection to the world outside, it is simply a place to be, a place in-between...something. I begin to reflect on my Journey, from the Seeker who questioned my identity, to the Pilgrim who led me out of the Tower.

To the first sight of the fog, to that important step, to getting lost, to the feeling of abandonment as the Pilgrim disappeared.

To my first steps into *Knowing's Edge*, to the laughter with the Edgelings, to the tears as they left.

To the Shadow who looked me in the eyes. To the Longing to return. To letting go of the rope. To the fear of the current into the unknown.

And here I am. Sitting in the boat in the middle of a dense fog. Not knowing where I'm going and unable to do anything to guide my own way.

"I can't do anything about this, can I?" I ask aloud.

The water around me seems to chuckle and gurgle a watery, "Nope."

"Nothing at all?"

Gurgle gurgle.

I pause for a moment and a smile creeps on my face.

For the first time, no one is telling me what to do – even *I* can't tell me what to do.

For the first time, no one is looking at me for what I'm supposed to know.

For the first time, I can actually breathe.

For the first time, I'm free.

"I guess I'm just here for the ride at this point."

Settling in, the soft chuckle of the river lulls me to sleep.

The Arrival

The boat gently bumps into the shore, waking me from my slumber. I sit up, the fog not as thick as it once was. A smile creeps on my face as I disembark onto the shore, seeing a rough path ahead of me. It isn't easy going, but I find that it doesn't bother me.

Something feels right about this path. It's unfamiliar, but it isn't unsettling.

The fog that once acted as deterrent to the Journey now swirls around me, calling me, gently kissing my face, guiding me. There are footprints along the path – some new, some old. I find comfort knowing that I'm not the only one who has taken this route in the Journey and can't help but wonder what their stories are.

What brought us here?

What continues to guide us along the path?

What are our desires, our dreams?

What did we lose to go on this Journey?

What did we gain?

The fog becomes thinner and thinner the further I go until I find myself in a meadow lit by sunlight. The surface of a pond reflects the sun, sparkling like the clearest sapphire I've ever seen. Flowers of every color dot the area, painting the ground with their beauty.

And, sitting at the pond's edge, is a familiar figure in a gray cloak.

The Pilgrim looks over their shoulder and grins, beckoning me to join them at the edge. I sit down and we sit in silence for a long moment.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I say.

They chuckle. "I had sense you would arrive here one day."

"It took me a long time."

The Pilgrim shakes their head. "A Pilgrim is never late, Expert. They arrive precisely where they're supposed to be *when* they are meant to be there."

I laugh. "Perhaps."

We sit in silence again, soaking in the warmth of the sunlight. It's a moment of serenity, one of rest and tranquility and beauty.

There is a moment of contentment, of knowing that this unfamiliar place is where I was supposed to be.

But also the realization that it wouldn't last.

The Pilgrim gives me a knowing look before standing up.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

They shrug. "I don't know."

“Is there a Destination the Pilgrim longs for?”

They pause, turning the question over in their mind. “There is always a Destination, but there is always another that follows after.”

“So the Journey never ends?”

“Only when we stop dreaming.”

I stare at my reflection in the pond, seeing how much I’ve changed. I don’t recognize myself anymore; my clothing is torn and worn in place; my hair is unkempt. But there’s something I see that I haven’t seen in a long time.

Peace.

Freedom.

Joy.

Adventure.

Hope.

I smile and stand, looking the Pilgrim in the eye. “Shall we?”

They nod, a grin splitting their face.

Where are we going? We can only dream.

Will we always be together? Who can say.

Together, we leave the meadow, stepping back into the familiar unfamiliarity of the fog.

Together, we take the most important step.

Together, we continue the Journey.

Transformation

The Towers stretch high into the sky as I pass through the city gates. Guardsmen who I recognize bow to me not out of recognition, but out of courtesy for a visitor to the City of Towers. I walked the streets that I once knew, everything exactly as I had left it and yet completely different. I gaze up to see curtains being pulled back as the tower dwellers stare down at me in curiosity, hoping they've found a new visitor with whom to share their wealth of knowledge. The sheen of their white robes reflects in the sunlight. They are ones I knew, but they do not see that it is me.

Though I suppose that is to be expected.

I'm no longer the same as when I left.

I wander toward my old Tower, pausing along the way to wave at those I pass. Some smile and return the wave while others give a wary look at my gray traveling cloak. I chuckle to myself but grow somber as it looms ahead of me.

How long has it been?

The shape is still there, soaring above me. But there are things I notice that I didn't before. The tower does not have the same sheen it once did. In fact, it seems quite dull as I compare it to what it was before I left. What's more is that the foundations are cracked, something in my pride that I never noticed before. I shake my head at the reflection that one strong push could send this Tower tumbling now.

"Can I help you?" a voice asks.

I turn around to see a Young Expert approaching me. *How strange.*

I smile and bow my head in deference. "I am simply passing through," I reply.

The Young Expert looks me up and down. "We don't get many Strangers passing through these days."

I nod. "Why would they?"

"Why, to learn from our great wisdom and knowledge!" they declare.

"And what they want is locked away in these Towers?" I ask.

They look startled. "Where else would it be?"

I close my eyes, remembering that moment long ago. That moment when the fog began to roll in and the discontent began to settle. When I open my eyes, I smile. They have the same look in their eyes. The same look I had so long ago.

I point to the Tower. "What happened to the one who lived here?"

The Young Expert shrugs. “No one knows for sure. One day the Expert who lived there was just...gone.”

“What happened to their knowledge?”

“As per the Law of Expertise, it was questioned, dismantled, disproven, and shown to be incorrect in its basic assumptions. The knowledge was then dispersed amongst the other Experts of the city to do with as they will.”

I laughed. *All of that work, for nothing?*

The Young Expert gives me a look. “Why are you laughing?”

“My friend, I spent my whole life amassing that knowledge only for it to be lost. How are you *not* laughing?”

Their eyes grow wide. “W-Wait. You’re the Expert?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t been called that in I don’t know how long. I don’t go by that moniker anymore.”

“Where did you go? Why did you leave? Who are you now? I have so many questions!”

“And I don’t have all the answers,” I laugh again.

They look at me in confusion.

I gesture at the city around me. “Once I lived here amongst the Experts, but I grew discontent with my life. I felt there was so much more out there, but I was afraid to take the step.”

I see the Pilgrim in my mind.

“What is the most important step?”

My Journeys play like a reel in my mind’s eye.

“I Journeyed through the fog, stayed for a time at *Knowing’s Edge*, and was carried by the great River of Grace and to the place of Peace. I have met many Travelers and Pilgrims and Wanderers, all seeking, but never fully arriving. For each stop is but a waypoint to something else.”

My friends at *Knowing’s Edge* flash across my mind.

“Ever searching, but never fully arriving. Not yet at least. And that’s okay.”

“What were you searching for?”

“What we all search for: An understanding of who I am.”

“And who are you?”

I smile and look them in the eye. “Young Expert, begin the Journey anew. The City of Towers is not where your heart belongs. Like my own knowledge, one day what you held so dear will be lost to time. We are but a breath in this world.”

I see tears in their eyes. *So much is built on that foundation.*

“There is much to be seen and done outside of the walls. All it takes is an adventurous spirit, a humble heart, and a companion with whom to begin the Journey.”

I can see the Young Expert trembling. I’ve struck a chord in their heart. I hold out my walking staff for them to take.

“Come, my friend. The Journey and your Transformation wait beyond *Knowing’s Edge.*”

They hesitate a moment before shakily taking my staff. “What should I call you?”

I smile and give them the name I searched for so long ago. A name that I strove for with all of who I am, clawing my way to the top. But it is a name I feared, one I never felt worthy of until I finally undertook the Journey - one I’m still not fully comfortable with, but I’m learning. It is a name that carries with it the trials and tribulations of the Journey, one that instills Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love. It is the name that looks beyond accomplishments, beyond the Tower I built around myself to make myself worthy.

It is the name that the One Who Calls has given me.

“Beloved.”

Reflection Questions

Accumulation

1. What identities have you accumulated?
2. Are there any “towers” or “walls” that you’ve built around your identity to protect it? Do you know anyone who has built towers or walls?
3. What effects do you think building a tower around an identity can have?

The Seeker

1. Has anyone ever challenged your sense of identity? How did you react?
2. Have *you* ever challenged someone’s sense of identity? How did they react?

The Pilgrim

1. What do you think is the difference between the Seeker and the Pilgrim?
2. Have you ever consciously questioned your own sense of identity? What was that process like for you?
3. Has anyone offered to walk with you through a time of confusion?

Fear’s Ballad

1. What stops us from questioning the things we think we know for certain?
2. What fears have stopped you from taking the journey to rediscovering your identity?
3. What role does Wonder and Curiosity have in walking the Pilgrim’s Path?

The Most Important Step

1. Have you ever taken a step out of your “Tower”? Do you know someone who has?
2. What freedoms can you find in the journey of discovery?
3. What calls us back to the Tower?
4. Echoing the questions of the Expert, why would we ever want to leave the Tower?

Alone

1. There are times in our Journey where we must go our own way for a while. Have you ever experienced this sense of loneliness? What was it like?
2. How can solitude help you reform and rediscover your sense of identity?

Knowing's Edge

1. Do you know anyone who has ever lived on the edge of the “Unknown”?
2. What benefits or consequences can you think of in living on the edge of the unknown?
3. How can stopping your Journey to “ferment” be beneficial for you? How can it be dangerous?

The Shadow

1. Have you ever experienced others’ success while you haven’t moved forward? What was that experience like?
2. Each of us has a Shadow – the part of us that tells us we aren’t good enough or worthy. Have you ever faced your Shadow? What was that like?

Raging Rapids

1. We all vie for control in our lives. What are the areas that you have worked hard to control?
2. What do you think would happen if you simply “let go” of control and allowed the rapids to take you?

The Arrival

1. “A Pilgrim is never late, Expert. They arrive precisely where they’re supposed to be *when* they are meant to be there.” --- As you read these words, what reflections do you have of your own Journey?
2. What has your own “Pilgrim’s Path” looked like? What milestones have you reached in your Journey?

Transformation

1. What areas of transformation have you experienced on your Journey?
2. How can you walk with others who have yet to take those first steps?

Assessment of the Project

In assessing the quality of the final project, I have chosen four primary benchmarks that will be presented in the “SMART” format (i.e., “Specific”, “Measurable”, “Achievable”, “Relevant”, “Time-Bound”). An analysis of each benchmark will also be included.

SMART CATEGORY	BENCHMARK
SPECIFIC	<i>Comparison:</i> When compared to other works of a similar nature, it should be found to be comparable in quality.
MEASURABLE	<i>Accessibility and Clarity:</i> The content in the workbook should be accessible and clear to the average user.
ACHIEVEABLE	<i>Includes all four benchmarks:</i> Accessibility and Clarity, Functionality, Comparison, and Technical.
RELEVANT	<i>Functionality:</i> Users should be able to find the workbook challenging, yet thought-provoking and useful.
TIME-BOUND	<i>Technical:</i> The workbook should be free of formatting and editorial errors so as not to detract from the content. This will also include following the practical aspects of the publishing process, as per the Development Timeline in the Project Launch Plan.

The two major ways these benchmarks were measured included:

- sending the material to individuals as beta readers
- leading a small cohort of and getting live feedback from the group

Analysis of the Benchmarks

Accessibility and Clarity

Through this first benchmark, I wanted to make sure that the average user would be able to use and understand what was being communicated through the curriculum.

In sending the material to beta readers, I was told that overall, the material was clear and that it was easy to understand. However, one of the major problems that was pointed out was that there needed to be a Leader's Guide that would explain to leaders how to best use the curriculum. It was also important to add a suggested schedule to the material for leaders to follow. As it initially stood, the assumption was that groups would be going through the material one chapter per session, which would have been too much. Breaking it down into smaller segments helped to provide clarity.

It was also necessary to clarify which exercises were personal and which were group exercises. These changes were made so that leaders could assign reflections outside of the formal session and would have a better idea of what could/should be done *in* the session. This would help to improve the flow and to prevent leaders from being overwhelmed by the scale of the curriculum.

As for those who were part of the initial trial cohort, they found that the material was well communicated and that it was easy to follow when they were asked to do the reflection exercises. Leading the cohort also helped me to see which parts of the material were not up to par and which parts could actually be omitted as well.

Functionality

Through the second benchmark, I wanted to see whether the material was thought provoking and useful to the users.

The participants in the cohort found the material to be quite challenging at times, as they had not thought about the concepts being presented before. In particular, the first two chapters of the material (“What is Christian Identity?” and “What is my Narrative?”) were very well received. The concepts in these two chapters invited a lot of reflection and made the participants think about things they had not thought of before.

The cohort was also able to provide insight on areas they thought were missing. Taking their feedback into consideration, I was able to add new sections and to simplify other areas as well.

The biggest complaint was how rushed the sessions were due to time constraints, so it was difficult to absorb the information at times. One bit of feedback was that the material works well in a workshop format (as it was done with the cohort), but they were not sure if it would work well with small groups. In the workshop format, we went through a chapter per session. With a full day dedicated to each chapter, it helped to set the right mindset for going through the material.

Comparison

The third benchmark, comparison, seeks to compare *Imago Dei* to other works that are similar in nature.

In trying to decide on a format for the project, I explored different book studies to see how they were formatted. However, many “Bible studies” or “small group studies” did not have a format that felt fitted what I wanted to do with *Imago Dei*.

When creating the project, my previous church small group was working Peter Scazzero’s *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* course. The format of Scazzero’s course included video segments, a workbook, a daily devotional, and a textbook. I found that the

format of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* to be easy to follow and conducive for both leading and participation.

As such, in creating *Imago Dei*, I took inspiration from Scazzero's format. However, I combined the textbook and workbook into one and there are plans for future video teaching segments to supplement *Imago Dei*. The purpose of combining the textbook with the workbook is to provide a direct reflection after the reading passages. This way, the material is fresh and can lend itself to more focused reflections.

Technical

For the final benchmark, I wanted to make sure the project was up to standard in terms of formatting and editing.

By sending the project to beta readers, they were able to pick out various formatting and editorial mistakes. During the trial cohort sessions, if mistakes were noticed I marked them down and corrected them on the spot.

Conclusion

As per the benchmarks that were set, *Imago Dei* in its current form fulfills all of the benchmarks. It is accessible and clear, functional, comparable to similar works, and free of any serious technical errors. This is not to say that the current rendition is the final form, as there are still improvements that can be made down the road as more feedback is acquired.

MILESTONE 6 – PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN

Introduction

The following is a project launch plan detailing the work that has been done toward the completion of *Imago Dei* – a small group curriculum designed as an in-depth study of Christian identity – and the steps that will follow in launching the project.

NPO Statement

Many people do not feel like they belong in their local church.

Project Description

Imago Dei

In order to help people develop a sense of belonging in their local church, I will develop a small group curriculum. *Imago Dei* is a workbook that focuses on exploring and cultivating one's identity in Christ and connecting one's identity to God's overarching narrative. This workbook is meant to be done in the context of a small group or mentor-led cohort as a means to drawing one's attention to one's identity in Christ. Because belonging and community starts with a common group identity, cultivating a common identity in Christ is key to cultivating Christian community.

Audience

The intended audience for *Imago Dei* includes church leaders who are having difficulty in establishing community in their churches, as well as those who are struggling to understand what it means to find his or her identity in Christ. During the research phase, I found that

young adults (~25 – 35 years old) who have experienced some form of church conflict or who are experiencing some form of deconstruction in their faith found it most useful.¹

As I continue to refine my project, I will continue to gather feedback from these parties through running workshops using the material and interviews with those who are wrestling with the concept of Christian identity.

Development Plan

Month	Tasks	Benchmarks
June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create rough draft of <i>Imago Dei</i> curriculum 	Technical Comparison
July – August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send out rough draft of <i>Imago Dei</i> curriculum to beta readers. Begin making corrections / adjustments as needed. 	Accessibility and Clarity Technical Comparison
September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make corrections / adjustments to the curriculum. Additional research as needed. 	Technical
October – December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin running groups that go through the curriculum. Take notes and feedback. Make corrections. Observe others running the modules if possible. 	Accessibility and Clarity Technical Functionality

¹ By “deconstruction”, I am referring to those who are experiencing a time of exploring their foundation and beliefs in Christianity.

January 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue making corrections based on feedback from running the material. • Begin running project with church in Hong Kong (will be ongoing past the project submission). 	Accessibility and Clarity Technical Functionality
February 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission of Project Portfolio 	Accessibility and Clarity Functionality Comparison Technical
March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make necessary corrections. 	Accessibility and Clarity Functionality Comparison Technical
April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of Project Portfolio 	Accessibility and Clarity Functionality Comparison Technical
May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take feedback from church use of the project. • Begin looking into graphic designers for cover design of project. • Begin looking into possible publishing options. 	Accessibility and Clarity Functionality Comparison Technical

<p>Late 2022 – 2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hopefully the material will be picked up and published for others to use. • Will begin working on the next phase of the project, 2:42. 	<p>Accessibility and Clarity</p> <p>Functionality</p> <p>Comparison</p> <p>Technical</p>
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Development Process

To continue gathering feedback, I will continue running the material with different groups. I will partner with different churches to run the material and gather feedback throughout the process. Individual interviews with those who have seen and worked through the material will be invaluable, as well as continuing to do research into the different topics in the material. As possible improvements and new insights are discovered, they will be weighed in accordance with the overall purpose of the curriculum.

APPENDICES¹

APPENDIX A

MILESTONE 1 – THE NPO CHARTER

Personal Research Manifesto

I will commit to critical analysis of my biases, to the ethical treatment of those who are interviewed, to be open about my mistakes, and to listen carefully to what people say, even if it goes against my preconceived notions.

NPO Statement

In order for the church to have a godly influence in society, the local church needs to become a community that fosters friendship among diverse people and cultivates a nurturing environment.

NPO Scope

The NPO Scope is to find the ingredients needed to facilitate a nurturing community within the church and move it away from simply being a gathering place for people. The problem was narrowed down to the notion that the church has become a gathering place rather than a community of people invested in one another's lives. This research has a three-fold goal: To identify the distorted values that compete against ideal values (i.e., values that are detrimental to community versus values that build community), to identify strategies the church currently utilizes to facilitate community, and to identify how to implement strategies that will help local churches create a safe and nurturing community for people.

¹ Within the appendices, the milestones may also contain separate appendices within themselves. Take each appendix as a self-contained piece of work.

NPO Context

The current context for the NPO is in a nondenominational international church in Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong is an international city, it carries a unique set of challenges. It is a melting pot of Eastern and Western cultures where people from all across the world have congregated to create a unique urban culture. As such, the NPO is one that stretches across various ethnic, generational, cultural, and demographic groups.

Within a specific ministry context, the NPO will be most relevant for community pastors and discipleship pastors within churches. The way that communities are formed within the local church context is essential to the growth and mission of the church in creating mature disciples and becoming a community of love.

Root Causes

The Discovery Session revealed that one potential root cause for why the church is no longer a community is due to distorted values. The church may use the language of family, but in practice it has focused most of its resources into its Sunday morning service where only key people are given the opportunity to be empowered.

From the interviews, it was also discovered that the leadership of a church also dictates the culture of the church. It is often the case that the church is formed with the pastor as its head rather than Christ. Consequently, the values that a pastor holds ultimately trickles down into the values of the church. What the pastor dislikes, the people learn to dislike.

The lack of a nurturing environment in the church can also be attributed to a misperception of God. Because the Bible consistently depicts God as father rather than mother, some

Christians do not perceive God as one who nurtures people. God is seen as one who disciplines and corrects, creating a seemingly inherent need of having to “clean oneself up” before entering into a church environment. However, viewing God as one who nurtures and cultivates can have a profound impact on the way the church forms community.

The programmatic nature of churches must also be reconsidered. If the church remains a place of programs but lacks the ability to foster relationships among church members and the greater community, a heart of love and community will remain lost.

Discovery Session Stakeholders

- **Stakeholder 1** – banker; small group leader
- **Stakeholder 2** – NGO founder; former discipleship pastor
- **Stakeholder 3** – associate pastor
- **Stakeholder 4** – NGO founder; former pastor; coach; mentor
- **Stakeholder 5** – missionary; small group leader; teacher’s aide
- **Stakeholder 6** – community groups pastor

One-on-One Interviews

- **Interviewee 1** – teacher; church attendee
- **Interviewee 2** – church worker; small groups and missions director
- **Interviewee 3** – values teacher; church attendee; not part of a small group

Academic Resources

Some key fields of study to look into would be the biblical teaching about the function of the church as a community, what God’s intention is for the church when it comes to community, how friendship is formed, what friendship is and how it is nurtured, how the church

traditionally forms community, how the church currently forms community, how leadership influences community, and the nature of nurture.

Key scholars in this field of study who have come up in many bibliographies include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Scot McKnight, Stanley Grenz, Christine Pohl, and Dan Kimball.

Key theological and academic ideas that can be explored would be the nature of the church, the character of God and how that relates to the church, the formation of community, the body of Christ, and the sociology of how humans interact and form relationships with one another.

Appendices

APPENDIX I – DISCOVERY SESSION AND ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW REPORT

Discovery Session Description

The Discovery Session was completed on October 26, 2019, in Hong Kong. One of the stakeholders offered his home as the venue, as it provided a central location for the rest of the stakeholders. Six stakeholders and the researcher met together. The stakeholders came from different backgrounds: two are currently on staff at churches, two are the founders of different Christian faith-based Non-Government Organizations (NGO), one is a teacher's aide at a local university and small group leader at a church, and the last participant is a banker and small group leader at a church.

The session officially convened at 2:15 pm (extra time was allotted in the beginning to make room for late arrivals). At the beginning of the Discovery Session, it was stressed that the purpose of the meeting was discovery and that we were seeking to *understand* the problem at this point, not to solve it. With this in mind, the session began with the illustration of the mistranslation in *Paduan Bible Picture Book*, which depicts Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments with horns on his head. This was due to a mistranslation, and as such, was immortalized in the photo. It was communicated to the stakeholders that the purpose of this session was to make sure we are asking the right questions. If one does not understand the questions he or she is asking, the end result will not be the answer one was pursuing.

The discovery process went through four primary phases: Charting the Audience, Focusing the Problem (NPO), Symptoms and Causes, and Putting it Together. The session officially

concluded at 4:30 pm, though the conversation continued into our post-Discovery Session barbeque.

Discovery Statement

The Discovery Session process went smooth. The stakeholders were given this general statement at the beginning: ***The church has become a gathering place rather than a community.*** From there, we began to dissect the problem by narrowing the audience, which proved to be one of the most difficult parts of the process. It was difficult to narrow down, as we all saw the problem of community in church to extend beyond any one particular group. In the end, we settled on phrasing it as “the diverse population of the church.”

From there, we delved into the problem. We noticed four main themes that came out of the discovery process: The allocation of resources, the lack of safe spaces, the reality of loneliness, and the lack of transformation. What we noticed was that these were perpetuated by distorted values that the church holds (i.e., the church *says* one value, but in *practice* the value is not seen). In the end, our discovery statement read:

Considering the diverse population of the church, we’ve discovered that the local church has ceased to be a safe place and perpetuates loneliness, which is caused by distorted values. If solved, it would mean that there would be a renewal of the people within the church and of the world.

Critical Insights from Discovery Session

What was interesting in the Discovery Session was the realization of how critical the general statement is for *all* people, not just a particular group of people. At first, the group voted to label the target group as the “marginalized,” which sparked a healthy discussion on what that

means. It also sparked a discussion on whether or not the church actually *wanted* to reach those who are considered marginalized. In the end, we settled on the audience as considering “the diverse population of the church.”

Another insight revolved around the four themes the stakeholders identified within the NPO. We identified these themes as allocation of resources, the lack of safe spaces, the reality of loneliness, and the lack of transformation. As we reflected and discussed these themes, we came to realize that they were symptoms of something deeper. Our discussion led to the notion that these are symptoms of distorted values the church holds. We asked ourselves, what does the church *say* its values are versus what does the church actually *do* to act upon these values. We acknowledged that this disconnect is the root cause of why the church has ceased to be a community.

One-on-One Interview Discoveries

One of the discoveries through the one-on-one interviews was the focus on the morality of the church. The interviewees hit on the notion that the church is not a safe place because there is a moralistic trend in churches (particularly conservative churches). There is a hesitance to revealing too much about oneself for fear of being judged or ostracized from the community. Trust must be built through fostering friendships among church members. From friendship, one can proceed deeper into a community.

Another key discovery was the important role that leaders have in setting the standard and scope for the culture within a church. One interviewee said that the top person in the hierarchy ultimately dictates the culture. As such, if one does not fit within that culture, they

may feel that they cannot truly express themselves as God had made them. People put on a façade in order to survive rather than truly living in community.

One interesting idea from the interviews was that the church lacks the “motherly heart of God” and that there is a need to discover this side of God. As the church is a reflection of the character of God, if there is a part of how we see God that is missing from our theology of the church we will miss out on praxis. Although the church is reckoned to be the “bride of Christ,” its manifestation has been masculine in the history of the world (i.e., seen as a commanding presence, judge of character, etc.). If the church is to be nurturing, it must connect with the feminine and motherly side.

Synthesis

From the Discovery Session and the interviews, what came through was the need for a change of culture within the church. The church has become a place of uniformity rather than a place of diversity. Diversity is not honored, but rather shamed. There is also a need for leadership within churches to help facilitate a culture that welcomes diversity within the church. How the leader perceives this challenge as well as how they allocate resources says a lot for their values. The unfortunate reality is that oftentimes a church is made in the image of the lead pastor and his/her values. When the values do not match those of the Kingdom of God, they become a perversion that puts people in the position of living a façade.

In order for the church to be a safe place for people, it must also be aware of the conscious or unconscious barriers it has set up. The mentality of “clean yourself up before coming to church” is still pervasive. An important question that was raised during the Discovery Session was, “Do we even *want* to reach people different from us?” Overcoming this

inherent need to create exclusive groups with no interest in welcoming others is a challenge that the church will always face.

In order to combat loneliness, the church must be a place that fosters friendships. Part of the problem is that many church members do not know each other or have a stake in one another's lives. Sermons on community are often preached, but there is a disconnect in that there are not actions being taken to cultivate an environment for people to be nurtured.

Next Steps

As I continue through my research, there are several questions and steps that have been raised and that would be worth looking into:

- When we put the burden of conformity onto people, how can they feel as if the church is a welcoming place for them?
- How can the church become a genuine community when we continue to live an isolated and individualized existence?
- What would it look like for the church to move beyond its programmatic elements and move into a more relationship-focused mentality?
- What values do churches hold? Do these values conflict with how they actually practice their faith?
- What kind of reflective tool and action plan can be created for churches to reflect on how it creates safe spaces for people?
- What is meant by "diversity"?
- Who are the ones excluded in our church communities? Why are they excluded?
- What are the ingredients for creating a community that nurtures people's diversity?
- How do people form and foster friendships?

APPENDIX II – NPO DISCOVERY SESSION

NPO Discovery Session

Considering the churches represented by the stakeholders in Hong Kong, we've discovered that there is a lack of community, which is caused by a lack of nurturing diversity. If solved, it would mean that people would find in the church a safe haven to be nurtured in all of their diversity.

Our purpose today is to do a deep dive into the problem. My role is that of a facilitator to give you guys a chance to speak.

Rules of Engagement:

- Give one another the space to talk.
- Respect one another's opinions.

General Statement:

- The church has become a gathering place rather than a community.
 - By this, I mean that people show up on Sunday, maybe say hello to a few people, and then go about their lives.
 - The church lacks the ability to nurture people in community.

What are the ingredients for a nurturing church community?

How do we rescue the church as a community rather than a gathering?

Exercise One: 2:30 – 2:50

Audience

- Who is our audience?
- “the audience we want to serve is the one that will provide the greatest impact and the highest level of significance for the amount of effort invested.”

Exercise Two: 2:50 – 3:20

- “What is the need / problem / opportunity around this topic?”
- What are the key ingredients to a nurturing community?
- Why does this matter?
- In what ways can nurturing communities be facilitated?

Yellow Post-It Notes – NPO Themes

- What are the needs that come with our statement?
- What are the problems that arise because of it?

- What are the opportunities that come should this problem be addressed?
 - *Select the top 3 – 5 to move on with symptoms*

Blue Post-It Notes – Symptoms –

- “What do we see that indicates there is a need, problem, or opportunity here?”
 - what’s the evidence that this is a problem?
- what are the “pain points” of the themes addressed in the yellow?

Pink Post-it Notes – Root Causes

- What are the root causes of the themes or symptoms?
- What are the themes that resonate the most? Is there one that resonates within our group the most?

BREAK

Exercise Three:

- Based on the theme that has the most traction, if it were solved, what would it mean for our audience? Which will have the most impact if it were solved?
- *On yellow post-its, write THINK, SAY, FEEL, DO* – identify as many as you can
- Why don’t they think, say, feel, or do that now?

Exercise Four:

Considering _____ (audience),
 we’ve discovered _____ (NPO),
 which is caused by _____ (root cause).
 If solved, it would mean _____ (outcome).

Dismiss if they need to leave, or invite people to hang around for the BBQ

Considering the diverse population of the church, we've discovered that the church has ceased to be a safe place and perpetuates loneliness, which is caused by distorted values. If solved, it would mean that there would be a renewal of the people within the church and of the world.

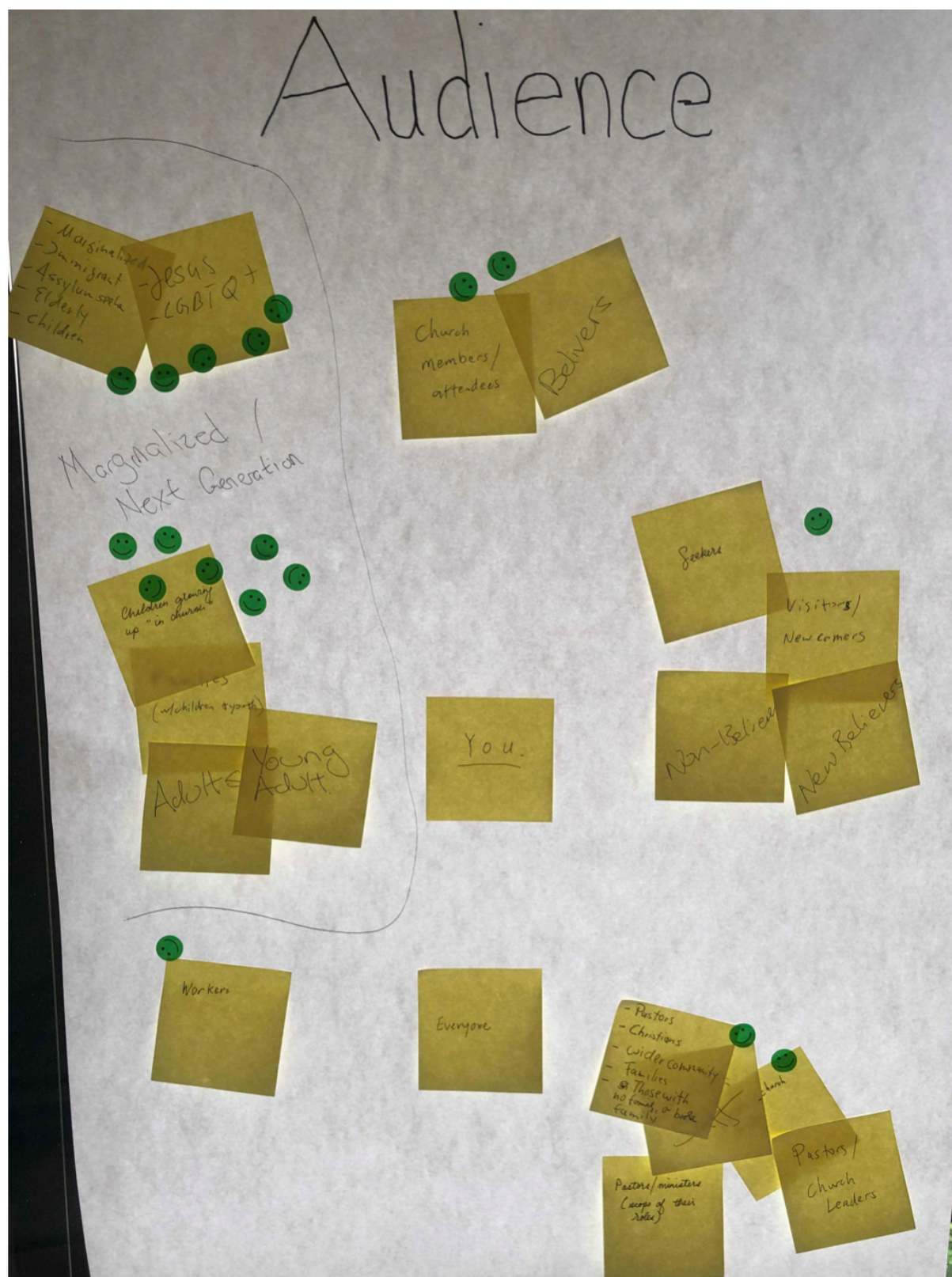
- Creating a reflective tool and action plan for how the church creates safe places and how they perpetuate that.
- Identifying the marginalized in your communities.
- How much money are you spending on it?
- Do you even *want* to reach these people?
- Interviewing the marginalized who have been affected by ministries and those who aren't there
- Moving away from programs toward relationships
- What sort of community are we? How do we take steps to become a community that lives with the marginalized and live in community with them?
- How does the church impart values?
- How do you facilitate a culture of these values?

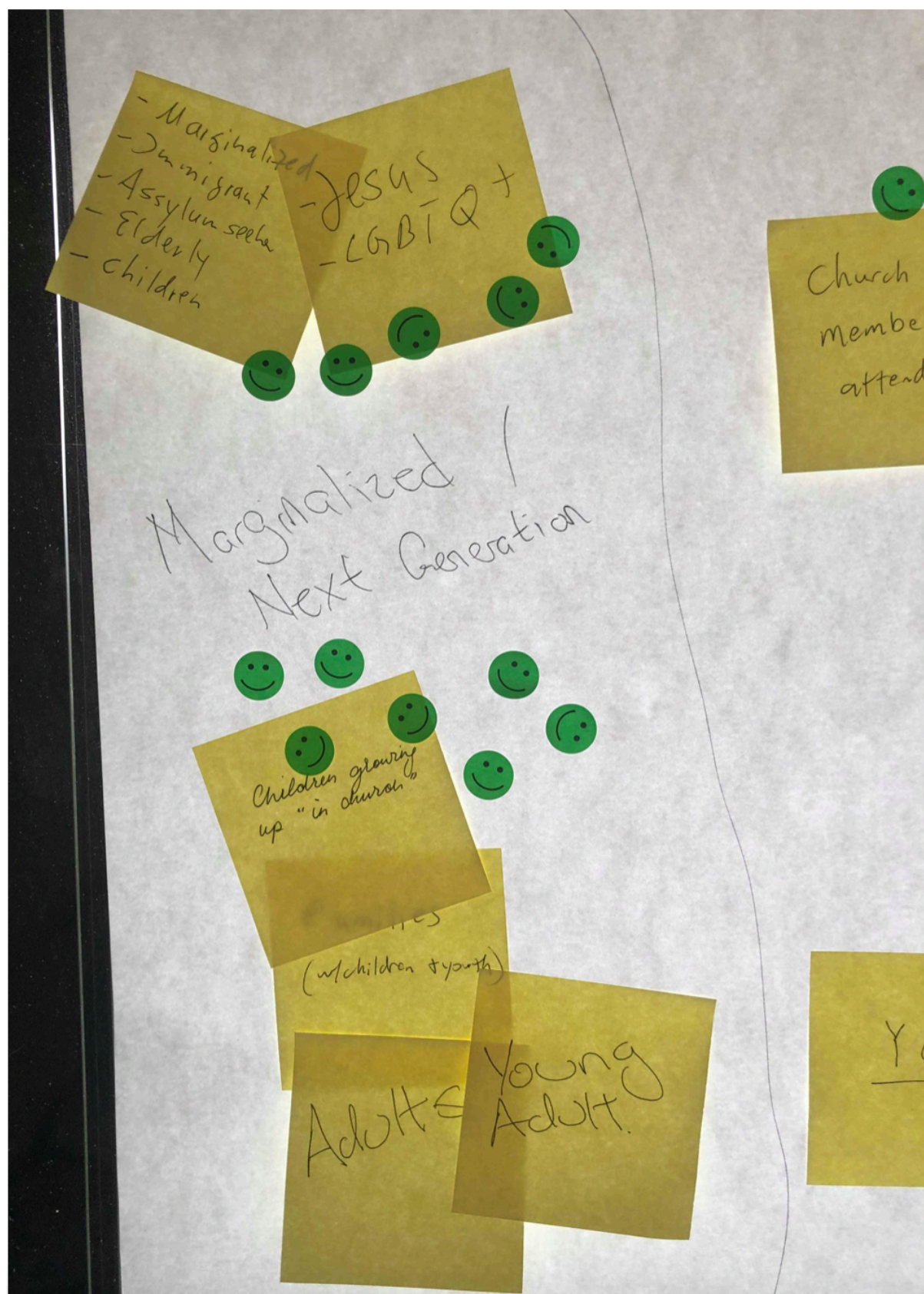
- Community takes cultivation and work; one cannot expect it to simply appear overnight.

Churches need to be collaborative with one another; some churches can reach certain demographics better than others. Why not build the church in that way? Create space in that regard?

DISCOVERY SESSION PHOTOS

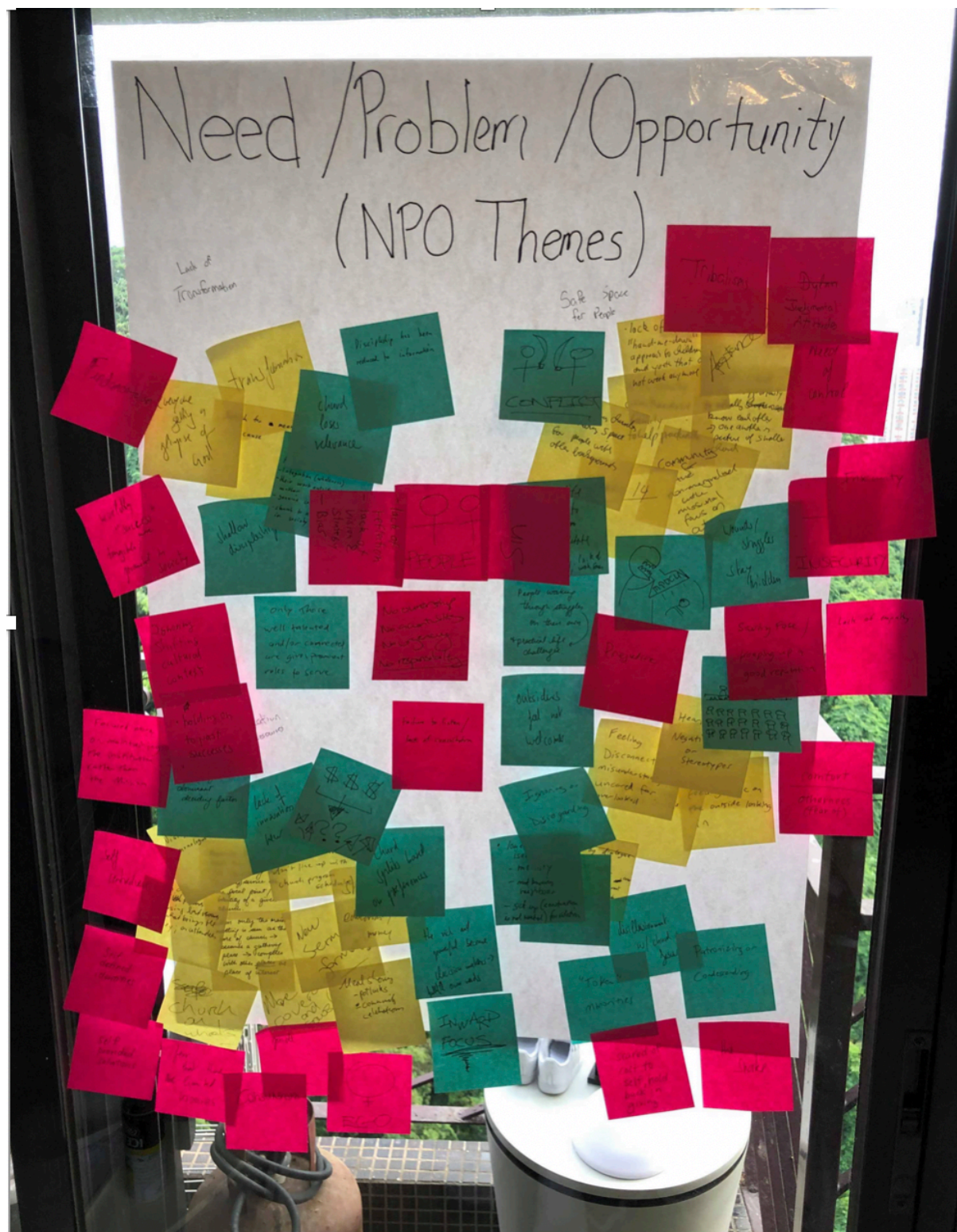
CHARTING THE AUDIENCE



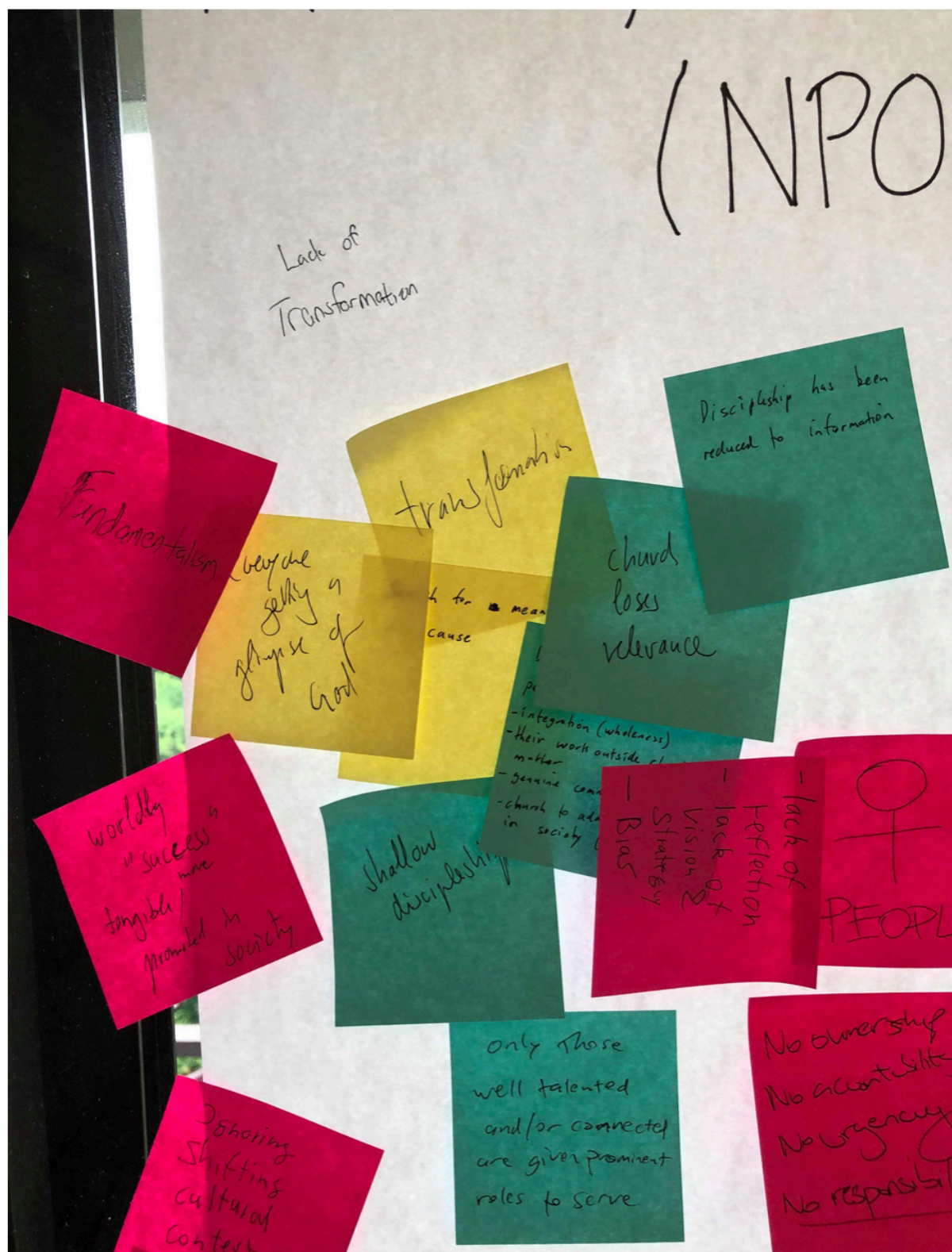


NPO BRAINSTORMING

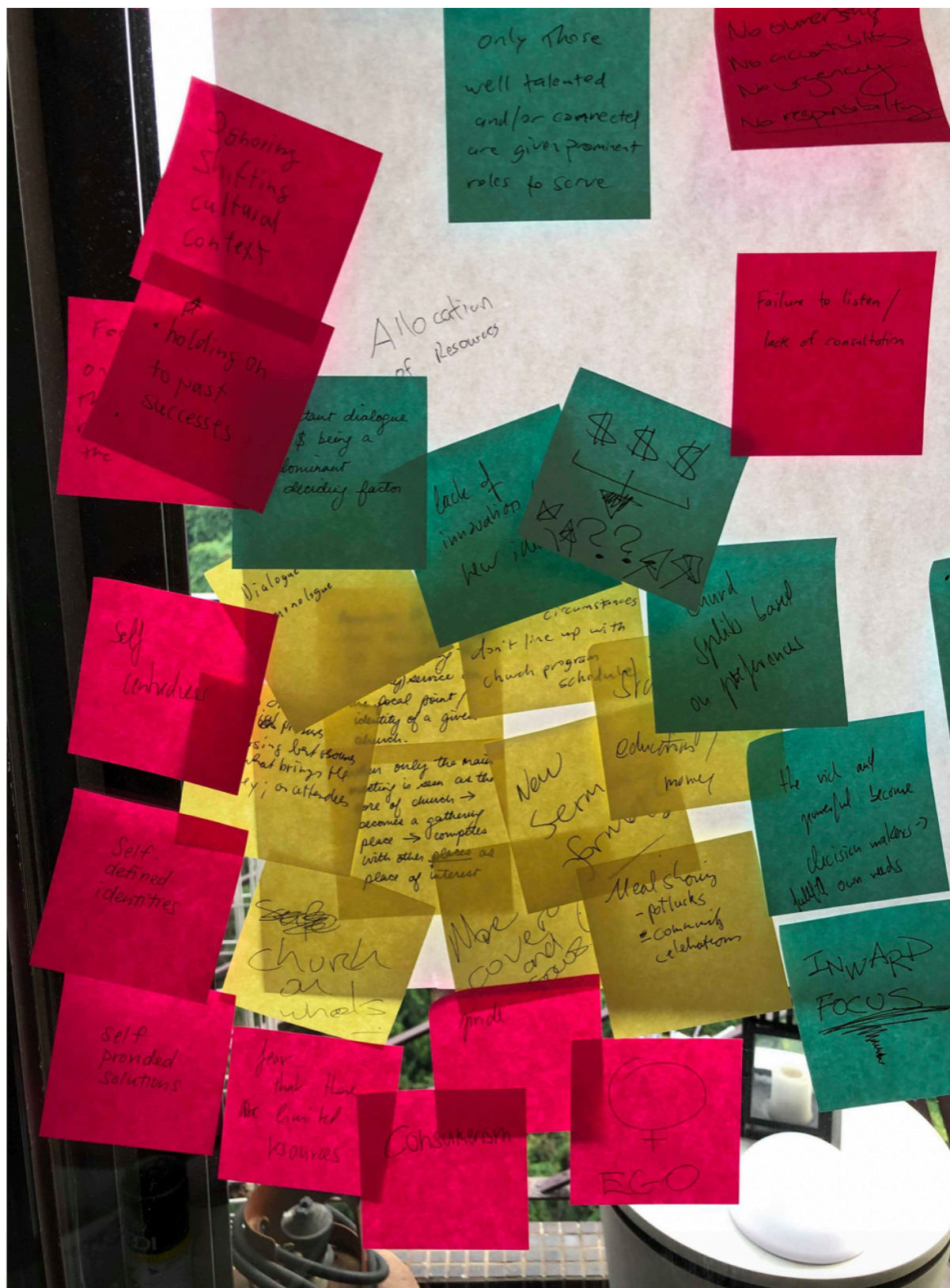
OVERVIEW



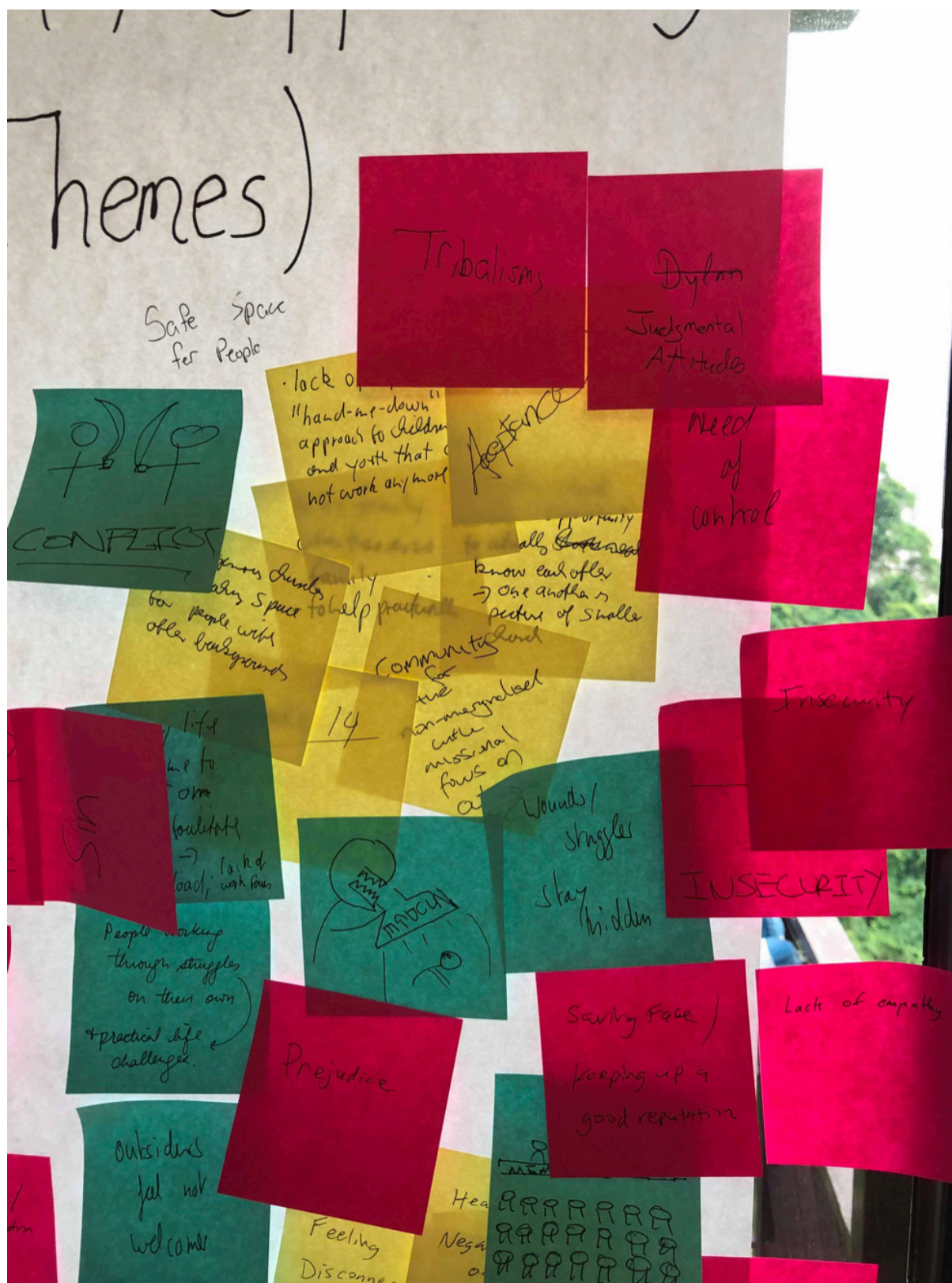
NPO BRAINSTORMING – LACK OF TRANSFORMATION



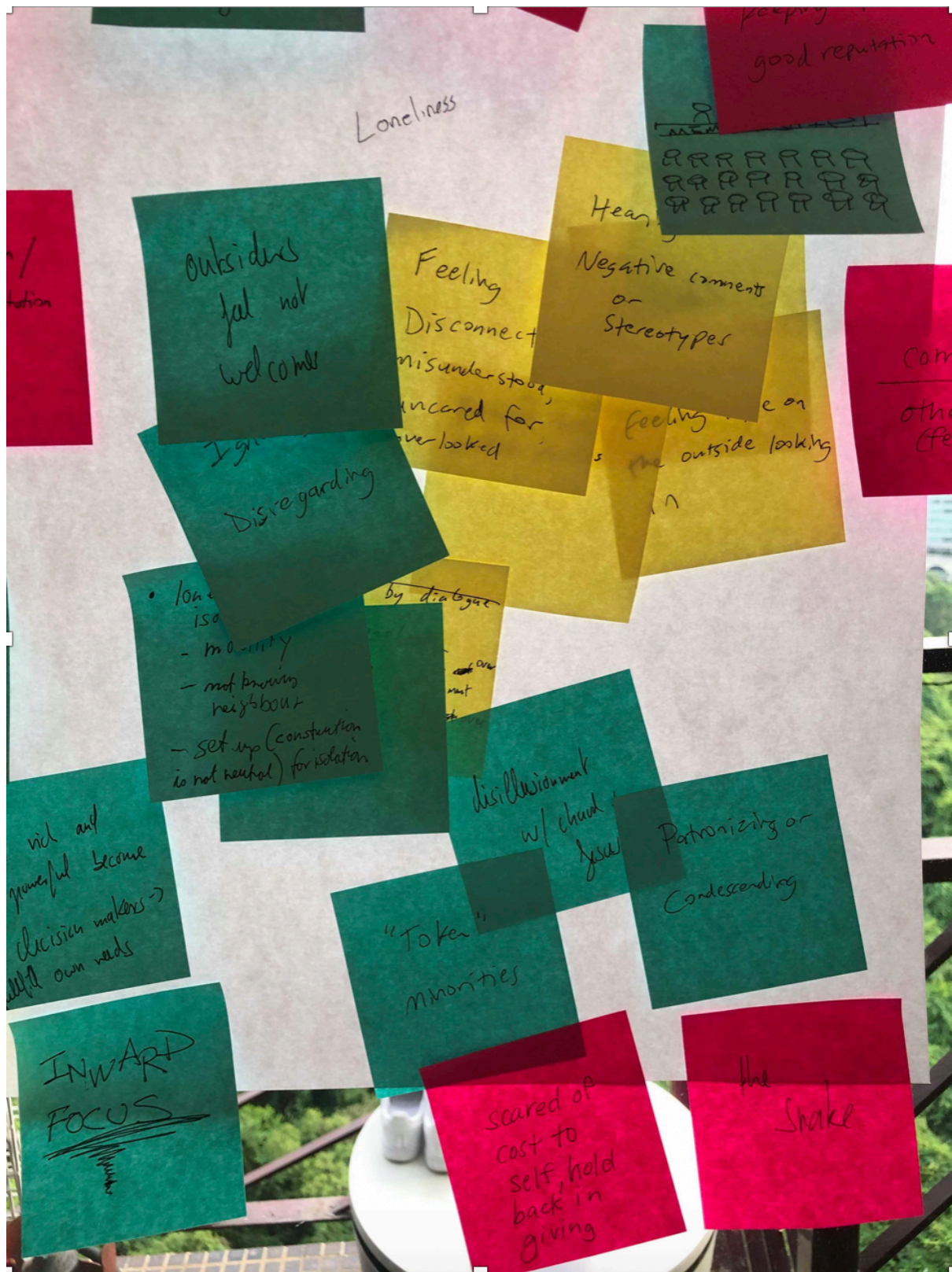
NPO BRAINSTORMING – ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES



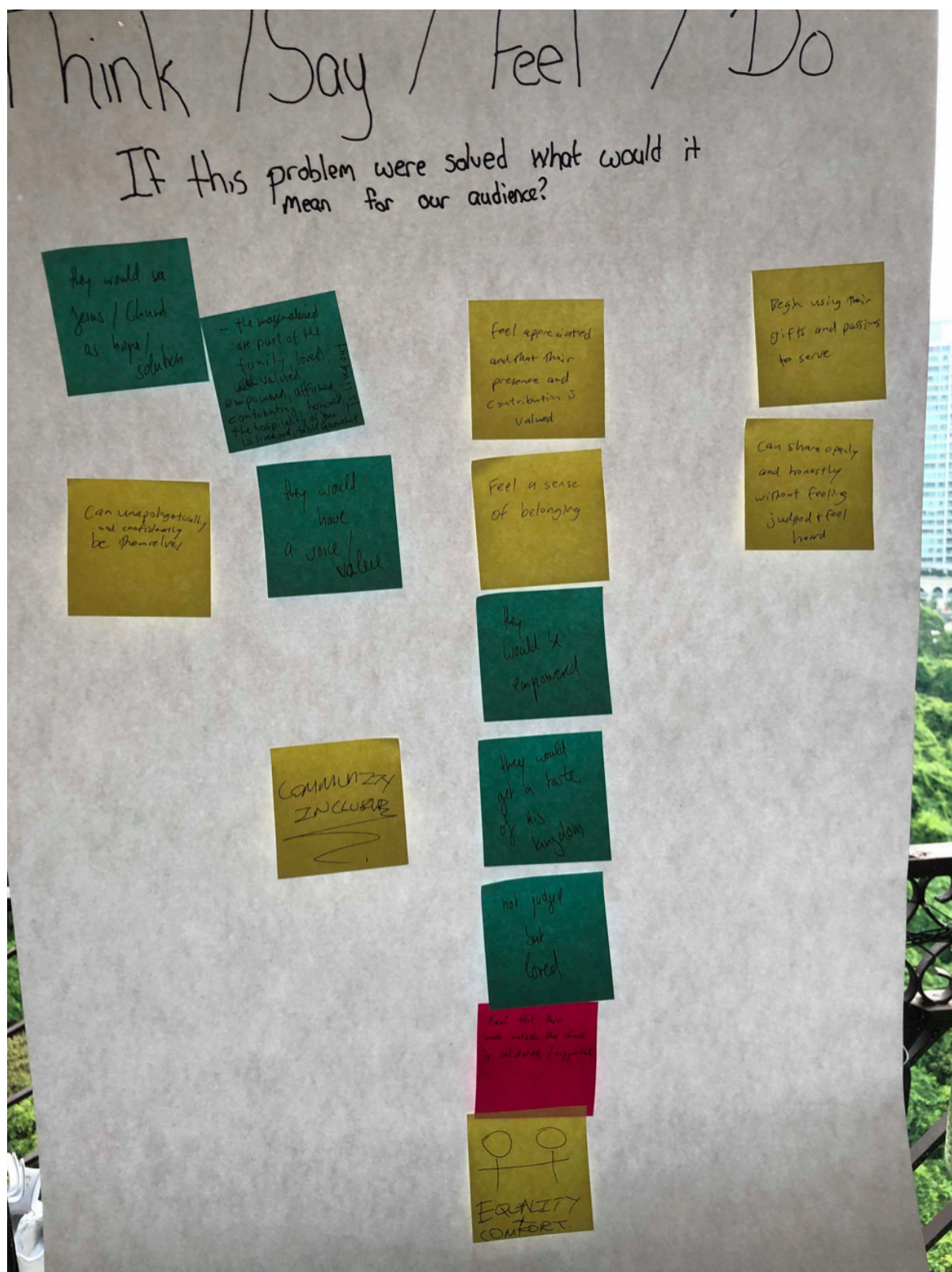
NPO BRAINSTORMING – SAFE SPACE FOR PEOPLE



NPO BRAINSTORMING – LONELINESS



IF SOLVED, SO WHAT?



APPENDIX III – ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Interview Notes

Interview #1 – October 31, 2019

What did you agree with? Why?

- Populations can be diverse, though may not always manifest itself that way.
- Churches are often not a safe place
 - Rural Church – junior high friend; brought her friend to church; friend's parents were separated; bonded over angst toward family; friend's mom became a regular attendee at the church; one day, the girl disappears – she was caught drinking vodka at school and was expelled; caught up with her months later and asked why she wasn't at church; friend said that church was the last place she wanted to be because she felt terrified she'd be judged.
 - “can't return until I fix myself”
 - “when we're broken and separated from God, the church should be the safe place you can go for unconditional love”
 - “things I would share 1x1, but wouldn't say at church
 - “secret lives”
- If there are only surface level relationships, you don't connect to others
- Distorted values → hold to a moral standard
- We want objectivity instead of subjectivity to judge our standards
- Most of our time is spent correcting one another

What did you disagree with? Why?

- Don't like the phrasing “perpetuates loneliness” as it makes it seem that it's the church's mission to make people lonely.
 - If loneliness is a disconnect, the church may cause that to continue if it's not safe.
 - “allows loneliness” / “fosters loneliness”
 - opposite of community is individuality, not loneliness; the church currently fosters selfishness; individuality; disconnection
 - “so many people attend church to be accepted and connected, but aren't”
 - “the church is supposed to be a place for the broken, but we feel we have to clean ourselves up”
 - “people at church are supposed to hold one another to a standard, but that standard is often ours”
 - “we play God”
 - We shape the church in our image and our standard, not God's
 - “as a sinner, singing up to be judged doesn't sound good”
- “I don't feel the need to be connected within the [local] church because I'm connected with so many Christians outside the church”
 - “never apart from Christians”
- not sure *how* to connect → social disconnect
 - Do I belong?

- Barriers within the church → small groups meet at awkward times; expensive meals; takes too much time to get to meeting places

What's missing?

- Where is God? How is this glorifying God?
 - “The unending and transforming love of God”
- D/DI/DC Personality → What is community?
 - Empathy
 - Can say what I feel or think and love is unconditional
 - Eating together
 - Hospitality
 - People show up (for all occasions → joys, mourning, fun, etc.)
 - Pushing one another to growth
 - Reading and not reading Scripture
 - Not making excuses
 - *Community is intimacy, involvement, commitment, and sacrifice.*

Interview #2 – November 5, 2019

Agree?

- Church has ceased to be a safe space.
 - Leaning toward uniformity
 - Prioritizing culture over principle
 - Culture clusters → top of hierarchy dictates culture
 - Tattooed staff member rejected due to his tattoos
 - Language
 - Loneliness → either put on a façade or you leave.
 - “If you’re going to adopt a culture, adopt hedonism because that’s fun.”
- Focus on morality over all else
 - Morality vs Grace; Law and Grace
 - Some things you can confess, but it draws a line between what’s redeemable and what’s not.
 - Black or white → “God’s side or man’s side”
 - “culture can lead you to a dark place”
 - “God hates that, so I get to hate that”
 - *Using God to justify hatred/discrimination*
 - Possible generation issue? → uniformity
 - “morality on the throne”
 - “Unless I’m close to someone, I don’t share everything”
 - how can you not be lonely when you can’t authentically be yourself?
- “Chameleon Club” → survival technique
 - Never had fully authentic community; just flashes of it.
 - Never allowed to show weakness
 - “we took people who didn’t fit”
 - vulnerable and authentic
 - transplants
 - hard to break into inner circles
 - human nature is to surround ourselves with comfort
 - Power/Social Hierarchy
 - Leadership – down
 - Leadership needs to be accessible
 - Leaders need to be involved; multigenerational
 - “Pastor is a Politician”/“Pastor as CEO”
 - “solution can’t be ‘all groups need to be smaller’”
 - small groups have doubled the inclusion issues; turned it into high school
- If things are so bad, why not leave?
 - What would the ramifications be socially?

Disagree?

- What is diversity?
 - Global → most churches are not multicultural

What's missing?

- “Mature Christians can test against the Word, not the pastor”
 - “lazy Christianity” → “guardrails of the church”
 - how do you respond to the actual issue?
 - If you’re not focusing on culture, you’re focusing on principles.
 - Deep change; even the unlovable and saying “you’re loved”
 - “True Christian” → when someone comes in, they will want to address issues of cliques → *imago dei*
 - “look for the person who’s alone”
- “No program can overcome; must come from a generational change that wants a new culture.”
 - Identity as the crux.
 - How do you shift that identity?
 - Develop real empathy and passion.
 - “Our focus is on building our people; not others:
 - “children aren’t welcome”

Interview #3 – November 12, 2019

- **Agree?**
 - *Forgotten Feminine* – discovering the “mother heart of God”
 - As you look through church history, it’s been established out of masculine terminology.
 - Top-down
 - What does being masculine mean?
 - “If I have to lead a church, what does that look like?”
 - tends to have a male perspective
 - the church has ceased to be a place that nurtures people, because there is not a motherly love that’s found in the church.
 - “sorg love” → between mother and child
 - growth only happens when there’s a nurturing environment.
 - God is neither male nor female, but is both (*or neither*)
 - Unless we see God as a mother, we won’t find that nurturing environment.
 - ***Church as the bride.***
 - “It’s hard for me to feel nurtured when I can’t put my roots down.”
 - Authenticity and Christ-centered
 - Never joined a small group at the Vine
 - Lacking understanding of God as mother
 - Understanding of how people see God
 - God is usually seen as “commando/chief”
 - How do we help see God for who He really is → including his “motherly” side?
 - Why do we just see God as male?
 - Disconnect with God in terms of relationship with father.
 - ***Church in a masculine image.***
 - ***Both personal and cultural.***
 - ***You can have the ingredients, but if the person has no appetite for it, they won’t eat it.***
 - Church structure as one person in charge doesn’t give a full Trinitarian leadership.
 - ***“I don’t need you to believe, but I just want to care for you” and use that to help grow people.***
 - Alternative Ideas
 - Programs X
 - Community shouldn’t have program
 - Community as coming together and being *friends*.
 - Doesn’t need to just do Bible study.
 - Be friends first and let it evolve from there.
 - Organic
 - Friend group → no matter what happens, they’ll be there; but needed more discipline.
 - Growing up is knowing that you have a safe family but can venture out.

- You have a safe spot that you can always fall back on.
 - Family; safety net
- **How to foster friendships**
 - Community is friendship
 - God is gradually revealing his love
 - “the tender love of God”
 - we have a solid foundation of knowledge, but knowledge puffs yourself up without love.
 - “We’re in a time where we want to know the nurturing of God.”
 - What can the church do to bring comfort following conflict?
- So many have been hurt by the church.
 - LGBT
 - Trend of churches being more embracing, which comes under attack.
 - People are healed by a parent who takes them back.
 - If we only see a parent who tells us what to do, we lose the love.
 - **Moralistic**
- What would a community look like?
 - People who have the heart for people.
 - Healing comes through individuals who have that revelation.
 - Community isn’t one off → consistency
 - How do you foster an environment where people can find true friendships?
 - How can people learn to trust one another?
 - How do you handle conflicts?
 - How do you set safe boundaries?
 - How do you come to the point where you feel safe to talk about struggles in church?
- Church should be a place of hope.
- Are deep communities seasonal?
- The work is taking the time to get to know each other personally.
 - Is it supposed to be smaller groups or is it supposed to be larger groups?
- What does it take to move into deeper relationship?
 - Having a balance – the 3, the 12, the masses.
 - Can’t just be with the same two or three, but you need the bigger communities.
 - It’s there you learn more about yourself.
- What is your motive in latching onto the outer circle?
 - Is it important to move beyond your immediate to the masses so that church no longer is just part of a build?
 - Reminds you of the mission.
- How do you keep yourself from becoming exclusive? How do you stop your group from becoming your identity?

- People look for different things in a community.
 - Church needs to know the different ways people are nurtured.
 - People are nurtured in different ways.
 - The church must actually *know* it's people.
 - "I'm here because I have to be"
 - Requires people to just experiment with things.
 - Find a common thread.
 - Don't dichotomize "spiritual" and "unspiritual" activities.
 - Doing life as being able to break down the "spiritual vs unspiritual" dichotomy.
 - Can just be.
 - Something you empower people to do you; you try, you fail; everyone will form a different kind of community.
 - You won't find one type of nurturing church, but different expressions of it.
- A lot of abuse happens at churches.
 - If you're a family, you should have protocols on how to deal with conflict; why don't we have that in the church?
 - How do we create an environment or culture to where we can approach leadership?
 - *Culture of Honor*
 - People are honest because they are honored.
 - Don't shame; empower.
 - Must be cultivated; cannot simply be preached.
 - Unseen in experience of Chinese and evangelical churches.
 - Shame
 - How do we be a church that doesn't shame people?
 - "What are you doing right? Are you living up to the expectation?"
 - God as "headmaster"
 - We need to have a healthy space for people to talk about the difficult topics.
 - We need to debunk what we've been doing.

Post-Church Musings (Group Context) – November 10, 2019

- Stage of life + Urban Context = transience in Hong Kong
- “Accountability is done in response to vulnerability.”
- Sunday service as focus of the church.
 - People know the church by the surface level.
 - “What you see is what you get”
 - “We could never do that on a Sunday” → caters to a specific crowd
- Small church model + larger gathering once per month
- No communication / collaboration with other churches
- Merged church → combined several smaller churches (Wellsprings Alliance)
 - Effort & commitment to a new identity
- Identity → “can’t combine because will lose myself”
 - Saving face → basing on untruth; maturity of audience
 - Trust in leaders
 - Inability to speak
- “If we the Church do not love each other in Christ through our most trying differences, then the world has no reason to look to us for the transforming presence of Christ.”

APPENDIX B

MILESTONE 2 – NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY

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Introduction

In his book *Church: Why Bother*, Philip Yancey recalls a retreat he attended led by American psychiatrist Scott Peck. At this retreat, Peck invited ten Jews, ten Christians, and ten Muslims to test out his theory of community. Yancey writes, “Peck believes that most people have it backwards: We think that community comes after diverse people resolve their conflicts...According to Peck, peace might come more naturally if the leaders learn to live in community *first*, and then work on resolving their conflicts.”¹ Yancey came away from that weekend thankful as he writes, “The Christian basis for community, the reconciling love of God, transcends all differences of nationality, race, class, age, and gender. Our commonality comes first; the issues that divide us come later.”²

Within the Christian church, something has been lost: a sense of belonging and community. Speaking in a Western context, Joseph Hellerman writes, “We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfilment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group – our church or our family, for example – which we belong.”³ As the church continues to grow, has the value of individualism become wrapped up in the narrative of Christianity around the world? What are the ingredients to creating and nurturing a diverse community within the church? How do we reclaim what has been lost? Through an analysis of biblical passages found in the New Testament, through tracing the development of globalized cities, and by analyzing key voices and movements in church history, we will dive into the ingredients that are needed to reclaim and nurture the church as a diverse community.

¹ Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), loc. 221-224.

² Ibid.

³ Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 3.

Biblical/Theological Foundation

The notion of the church as a community is found throughout Scripture. In asking the question, “What are the ingredients to creating and nurturing a diverse community within the church?” my focus will be on the following primary passages: Acts 2:42-47; 4:30-35, Galatians 3:26-29, and Ephesians 2:11-22.

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35: The Early Fellowship of Believers

No analysis of biblical community would be complete without peering into the initial formation of the early church described in the Book of Acts. David deSilva writes, “We find in the early church no unsavory characters disturbing the peace of Jerusalem or promoting the social agitation and division that accompanied other messianic movements. Instead, we find a model community resembling those most praised by ancient philosophers.”⁴ Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35 function as a snapshot of an idealized community founded upon the values of selflessness and humility. Luke describes the early meetings of the church to be centered around devotion to the apostles’ teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). It is important to note within the pairings the use of the word “and.” It is not an “either/or” scenario, but a “both/and.” There was “devotion to the apostles’ teaching” *and* “fellowship.” There was “the breaking of bread” *and* “prayer.” The early church continued to meet in the temple courts *and* in their homes.

Charles Ellicott breaks down four elements of life in the new society of the early church: devotion to the apostles’ teachings, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. He says that devotion to the apostles’ teaching references that “they grew in knowledge of the

⁴ David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 362. deSilva observes that the early church embodies the Greco-Roman and Jewish ideals of friendship and civic virtue (362). He specifically points out how the early church achieved Aristotle’s ideal that “all things are common property for friends” and the Deuteronomistic ideal of eliminating poverty among the people of God (362).

truth by attending to the *teaching* of the apostles.”⁵ One can argue that this devotion to their teachings was not to any formulated doctrine that they gave consent to, as there were no formalized scriptures from which the apostles could teach. As Christianity was a new faith, the theological nuances that would develop later likely did not exist at this point. Rather the initial teachings that the early church devoted themselves to came from those who had experienced firsthand the teachings and ministry of Christ.⁶

Listening to the apostles’ teaching was also accompanied by fellowship, which Ellicott references as “acts of common worship, acts of mutual kindness and benevolence.”⁷ The Greek word for “fellowship” in this instance is the word “*koinōnia*,” a word that bears the connotation of “partnership” or “participation or social intercourse.”⁸ Alexander Maclaren makes note that following Pentecost, the initial fellowship of three thousand would have cut off their associations to their nation and religious institutions, thus effectively driving them “together as sheep are when wolves are around.”⁹ From this description, one can imply that there was a shift in identity as the early fellowship of believers associated themselves with Christ.

The final two marks that Ellicott brings up is the breaking of bread and of prayer. The breaking of bread in the early church is associated with the commemorative act of the Eucharist and would later develop into the social “feasts of love.”¹⁰ In the same way, prayer

⁵ Charles Ellicott, *Ellicott’s Bible Commentary for English Readers Volume 3*, Delmarva Publications (2015), loc. 41740.

⁶ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: The Acts*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397-images.html> (accessed February 11, 2020).

⁷ Ellicott, loc.41740.

⁸ James Strong, *Strong’s Concordance*, BibleHub, <https://biblehub.com/greek/2842.htm> (accessed February 11, 2020).

⁹ Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*.

¹⁰ Ellicott, loc. 41740. The “feasts of love” or “Agape Meal” is a Christian fellowship meal that recalls the meals Jesus shared with His disciples. This type of meal is likely what Paul was referring to in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and Jude’s reference to the love feast in Jude 1:12.

included both private and public devotions. Ellicott writes, “These may have been the outpouring of the heart’s desires; but they may also have been what the disciples had been taught to pray.”¹¹

Regarding gatherings, it is also interesting to note that there is both a larger communal gathering (meeting in the temple courts) as well as a smaller group gathering (meeting in homes). Meeting in the temples every day was important, “for to worship God is the daily work of a true Christian, and where there is opportunity, the oftener it is done publicly the better.”¹² Meeting in homes implies “they associated as frequently as they could at other times.”¹³

When reading through these passages, there are several important marks of fellowship that the church in Acts had. They demonstrated generosity, they were of “one heart and mind,” they were together, they were missional, and they were devoted to one another. Ellicott makes note that these early meetings were “founded upon sympathy and self-denial” not by some forced obligation, but rather by “the spontaneous energy of love.”¹⁴

The mark of being of “one heart and mind” is significant for the early believers.

Ellicott writes:

The literal meaning of the word translated ‘singleness,’ which does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament, was the smoothness of a soil without stones. Thence it came to be used for evenness and simplicity, unity of character; thence for that unity showing itself in love; thence, by a further transition, for unalloyed benevolence, showing itself in act.¹⁵

¹¹ Ellicott, loc. 41740.

¹² Joseph Benson, *Benson Commentary*, BibleHub, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/acts/2.htm> (accessed February 11, 2020).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ellicott, loc 41771

¹⁵ Ibid., loc 41800.

It seems that the predominant binding force of this early community was love. Most people were motivated to care for one another and for the needs of the larger community out of love. It was love that drove the early believers to seek to be together in frequent meetings with one another and to be devoted to one another. It was love that caused the church to have a missional outlook and testify to Christ's resurrection (Acts 4:33). Love was not a theoretical concept but was one that actualized itself in the practices of the early church.

The church described in Acts may be considered to be "ideal" by many, but one must not overlook the weaknesses in it as well. Although love motivated many within the church, one cannot ignore the stories of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), the conflicts between the Hellenistic and Hebraic widows (Acts 6:1-7), and the underdeveloped missiology of the early church. These stories and ideas show that as the church continued to grow and people of different backgrounds joined the church, growing pains were all but guaranteed to ensue. How does the church reconcile the idea that our allegiances have shifted from our bonds of our old associations to the new bond in which we share with Christ? Maclaren writes, "We need to cultivate more of that sense of Christian brotherhood with all who hold the same Lord Christ, and to realize this truth: that they and we, however separate, are nearer one another than those nearest to us who do not share in our Christian faith."¹⁶ However, it is often the case that our churches are communities of self rather than the other. Rampant individualism causes us to create barriers where Christ destroys them.

In summary, Acts reveals several key ingredients that nurture community in the church: devotion to the apostles' teachings, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, and being of one heart and mind. With these ingredients in mind, what does "oneness" mean regarding the formation of Christian identity? Having left behind their previous associations

¹⁶ Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*.

to join in with a church of diverse believers, what does it mean then to be “one in Christ” and to cultivate that identity?

Galatians 3:26-29: One in Christ

Within this new community of believers, a new identity was created. Paul begins this section by saying that “you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (v 26-27). The language of family in this section places God as the head of this new family with Christ as the common bond. A shared identity in Christ is created through baptism, which implies a close and intimate relationship that is expressed as having “put on Christ.”¹⁷ The phrase “put on Christ” insinuates that one seeks “to grow into full unison and union with Him.”¹⁸

The new identity that is created is *in* and *through* Christ. Paul’s use of the phrase “one in Christ” denotes that there is no longer a barrier or segregation regarding ethnicity, social status, or gender. Rather, Christ becomes the central identity of those who believe in Him and are not to use their ethnic, social, or gender identity to discriminate against others within the church. Dr. Pablo Morales notes that within the Jewish identity, there was a feeling of inherent superiority over the Gentiles. This religious identity was defined by putting down others.¹⁹ At the same time, it was also true that under the Law, men had more privilege than women, but in Christ the playing field is now level.²⁰ Paul makes note of the social status of slaves and freemen saying that barrier is eliminated as well. James Dunn writes, “Paul’s

¹⁷ Ellicott, loc 68535.

¹⁸ Ibid., loc. 68559.

¹⁹ Pablo Morales "Key Components of a Culturally Relevant Multiethnic Church Model" (doctoral diss. George Fox University, 2018), <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/260>, (accessed 11 February 2020), 39.

²⁰ Benson, *Benson Commentary*.

choice of contrasts covers the full range of the most profound distinctions within human society – racial/cultural, social/economic, sexual/gender.”²¹ Adding to this, Ellicott observes that “all Christians alike, no matter what their race, status, or sex, stand on the same footing of sonship before God. There is a unity or solidarity in the Christian body. What is true of one is true of all.”²²

One of the marks of the Christian community is this new identity in Christ. Morales writes that “the Christian identity does not degrade people based on ethnicity, social status or gender.”²³ Christ forms an inclusive identity in Himself that welcomes all people regardless of their background. The various segregations that we see in our world are erased in Christ to where all are on equal ground before Him. Morales goes on to say that “in this new identity, there is a spiritual reality that transcends the human-made identities that lead to segregation.”²⁴ However, when the identity of the church is not founded upon Christ, the segregations and distinctions found in the world begin to infiltrate, causing division and leading toward a segregated church. While homogeneity often leads to uniformity, it does not promote unity.

Galatians adds another ingredient to the mixture: the importance of having a unified identity. So if the church is called to be unified, what does that entail? What is the difference between unity and uniformity?

²¹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A&C Black Publishers, 1993), 207.

²² Ellicott, loc 68559.

²³ Morales, 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Ephesians 2:11-22: Reconciliation in Christ – Unity vs. Uniformity

Like in his Letter to the Galatians, this passage begins with the same notion of Gentiles being outsiders at one time. Paul writes that they lived without hope and did not know the covenants of promise (2:12), but in Christ they were brought near by His blood. Paul talks about how Christ has made the two groups one by setting aside in His flesh the law with the purpose of creating a new humanity out of them (2:14-16). Derwin Gray writes, “Before King Jesus, the earth had two groups of humanity: Jews and Gentiles. After Jesus’ resurrection, a third ethnicity was born: The multicolored, multiethnic church. The church is not a weekend destination but a blood-bought, multicolored people.”²⁵

Union with Christ bridges the gap between different peoples and destroys the barriers that would otherwise be there. Christ’s purpose is to create a new humanity, one that reconciles *all* to Himself. Through Christ, *all* have access to the Father by one Spirit, showing the Trinitarian nature of Christian unity. Just as the Father, Son, and Spirit are all one in the same substance and each is distinct from one another, “the facts of human differentiation are not removed. Jews remain Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles. But inequality before God is abolished. There is a new unity in Christ.”²⁶

The unity Christ brings is *not* uniformity. Unity implies that there are differences that are being reconciled into a collective whole. This whole becomes reflective of all the various moving parts within it. Another word that can be used for “unity” in this case would be “harmony.” The New Testament refers to the concept of harmony with the word *henótēs*. The word *henótēs* is defined as “oneness (unity), especially the God-produced unity

²⁵ Derwin L. Gray, *The High-Definition Leader: Building Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 50.

²⁶ John Stott, *Reading Ephesians with John Stott*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press (2017), 59.

(oneness) between believers – i.e. the harmony from sharing likeness of nature with the Lord.”²⁷

Music is a powerful illustration for unity in terms of harmony. When listening to music, there are many moving parts that coalesce together to create the full composition. The parts are different, creating chords and rhythms that give life to a textured, unified piece. There is beauty that comes from the different parts working together under one vision and mission.²⁸

For the church, this vision is encapsulated in Paul’s words. He indicates that, with Christ as the cornerstone, we are being “built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit” (2:22). This reconciliation and building together in Christ means “putting to death the hostility that exists mutually between God and people.”²⁹ However, if the church continues to erect barriers between one another and chooses to identify with something that *isn’t* Christ, there will continue to be divisions. Uniformity of class, ethnicity, gender, and other categories may be easier to maintain, but this homogeneity is not the image that the Bible presents. Rather, the Bible presents the church as a place where people of all tongues and nations will one day bow and proclaim the name of Jesus as King (Philippians 2:6-11). The church is to be the bride of Christ and a reflection of His peace and reconciliation to *all* people, not an institution of division made in the image of humankind.

²⁷ Gary Hill & Gleason Archer, “Henótēs”, HELPS Ministries, Inc., accessed 11 February 2020 <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1775.htm>>

²⁸ This harmony is also referenced in Ephesians 4:15-16 where Paul uses the metaphor of a body. In this passage, he is referencing the need to be unified in that the whole body grows and builds itself up in love as each member does its part. This implies that there is a variety of jobs and gifts within the church that are essential to the health of the body and should be exercised.

²⁹ Stott, 59.

Summary

Throughout this section, important ingredients have been identified to restoring the church as a community. Through Acts, the organization of the early church has been identified including devotion to the apostles' teachings, devotion to fellowship and one another, the breaking of bread, prayer, and the importance of being of one mind. In Galatians, the concept of one's identity in Christ was explored as the church seeks to cultivate a unified identity among its member in and through Christ. Finally, through Ephesians, the importance of harmony in unity was explored. Keeping these ingredients in mind, how do they play out in a globalized context?

Historical Development

When one looks at the spread of Christianity, one can see that it is a religion of global proportions. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, the current percentage of the world that remains unevangelized is approximately 28.4% at around 2.2 billion people.³⁰ When one considers this spread, it becomes apparent that global Christianity encompasses many cultures and people groups. In an increasingly globalized world, how does one build meaningful community in a church shaped by ethnic and cultural diversity? This phenomenon is prevalent in global cities.

Due to the interconnected nature of our world, many cities have become global cities,³¹ creating a conglomeration of various culture within these city limits. Often drawn by potential economic gains, these cities become bastions of wealth that pull businesses and people from various parts of the world into one place. One such city is Hong Kong, which will be used as the primary case study of this study.³² This section will provide a brief overview of Hong Kong's history as an international city and its religious identity. The final section of this paper will extrapolate various themes that can be used to speak to the broader Christian world regarding the formation of community and identity.

³⁰Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, "Status of Global Christianity, 2019, in the Context of 1900-2050," Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/StatusofGlobalChristianity20191.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2020).

³¹ "Global cities" are cities of major economic importance in regard to finances and producer services that fuel the globalized economy. For additional information, see Saskia Sassen's book, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³² Hong Kong was chosen as the focus of this study as it is the author's current ministry context.

*Hong Kong: A Global City*³³

Walking through the streets of Hong Kong, one is met with a myriad of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Local cha chaan tangs³⁴ selling a traditional Hong Kong breakfast of macaroni soup and Hong Kong-style milk tea rest next to Japanese ramen shops and Korean barbeque restaurants. Local Chinese medicine dispensaries are located across the street from more Western style drugstores such as Watsons or Manning's. Pass through Tsim Sha Tsui and one will find the Nepalese run Mexican restaurant Tequila Jacks that serves as a watering hole for local and international university students on Tuesday nights with their \$10 Hong Kong Dollar Taco Tuesday deal.

By all accounts, Hong Kong is a global city that draws people from all over the world. It is a place of finance, tourism, and for 7.8 million people, it is a city that is called home. But how did Hong Kong rise to the place of prominence that it holds today? What has drawn people from all over the world to live and work in Hong Kong? To understand Hong Kong's current state, one must walk through the annals of history to Hong Kong's time as a British colony.

Hong Kong was first ceded to the British as a result of the First Opium War. Tim Buechsel writes, "Hong Kong was relinquished to Britain by the Qing Dynasty in 1842 under the Treaty of Nanking."³⁵ For the British, acquiring Hong Kong carried more value than simple territorial conquest. Law Wing Sang writes, "The British sought a place where they could establish an independent commercial and military base free from the bureaucratic Qing government and the *Cohong* system that restricted foreign trade to be conducted in Canton

³³ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the complete history of Hong Kong, John Carroll's *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007) is a good resource for an overview of Hong Kong's history.

³⁴ "Cha chaan tangs" refers to local Hong Kong-style restaurants.

³⁵ Tim Buechsel, "One Size Fits All? Uncovering Multiple Conversion Avenues for Effective Evangelism" (doctoral diss., George Fox University, 2013), 181

only.”³⁶ The goal of the British proved to be an economic one as they sought to “establish their own judicial system with which to govern the activities of their merchants, under the military protection of the British navy.”³⁷

Law Wing Sang argues that what makes the British-Chinese relationship in Hong Kong different from other imperial conquests was the collaborative nature of their relationship.³⁸ Law writes:

The overall effect of nineteenth-century European colonial expansion on this region was the inclusion of Chinese merchants in the newly arisen global networks; yet the dependence of the Europeans on the Chinese also helped boost the ability of some Chinese merchants to dominate intra-Asian trade, including trade with China’s hinterlands.³⁹

Hong Kong became a port of great importance for trade with China and other parts of Southeast Asia. Catherine Schenk writes that Hong Kong was profoundly affected by the inter-war period.⁴⁰ It was during this interwar period where Hong Kong “served as a safe place for migrants and refugees coming from Mainland China and Southeast Asia during crucial historical moments, most notably during the post-war periods (WWI and WWII) as well as during and after the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists of China.”⁴¹

The influx of refugees and immigrants from mainland China following the rise of the People’s Republic of China served as a catalyst for missionary and charities to establish

³⁶ Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), loc 173.

³⁷ Law, loc. 173.

³⁸ For more on this, one can refer to Law Wing Sang’s book, *Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese*.

³⁹ Law, loc. 333

⁴⁰ Catherine Schenk, “Economic History of Hong Kong,” Economic History Association, <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/economic-history-of-hong-kong/> (accessed February 20, 2020).

⁴¹ Buechsel, 182-183.

themselves in Hong Kong.⁴² Pan-Shiu Lai and Fuk-Tsang Ying write, “With the churches already established before 1949 and the newly arrived missionaries as well as churches newly established, Hong Kong became a labor-intensive missionary field.”⁴³ With the influx of churches and missionaries into Hong Kong, “other religious organizations, including Caritas, YMCA, YWCA, and the Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist churches engaged in similar outreach.”⁴⁴ With China essentially locked away in terms of missionary work, missionaries inevitably set up their base of operations in Hong Kong. Lai and Ying write, “The main reason for the rise in the Christian population was the recognition of the missionary value of Hong Kong and the resultant concentration of missionary resources.”⁴⁵

Simultaneously, the industrialization of Hong Kong pushed the city into the position of economic importance. Schenk writes, “Even during the period of self-sufficiency in the 1960s, Hong Kong’s imports of food and water from the PRC⁴⁶ were a vital source of foreign exchange revenue that ensured Hong Kong’s usefulness to the mainland.”⁴⁷ Hong Kong’s economic growth would further increase in its influence following the Open Door Policy announced by Deng Xiao-ping toward the end of 1978.⁴⁸ Schenk writes, “At the end of 1997, the cumulative value of Hong Kong’s direct investment in Guangdong was estimated at US\$48 billion, accounting for almost 80% of the total foreign direct investment there.”⁴⁹

⁴² Buechsel, 182-183

⁴³ Pan Chiu Lai and Fuk Tsang Ying, “Diasporic Chinese Communities and Protestantism in Hong Kong during the 1950s,” *Studies in World Christianity* 24, no 1 (2004): 144.

⁴⁴ Buechsel, 183.

⁴⁵ Lai and Ying, 145.

⁴⁶ “PRC” refers to the “People’s Republic of China.”

⁴⁷ Schenk, “Economic History of Hong Kong.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

It was not until 1997 that Hong Kong was officially handed back to China. Hong Kong was given back to China under the condition of a fifty-year buffer period to allow reintegration into mainland China. This was done under the moniker of “One Country-Two Systems.”⁵⁰ As such, foreign businesses have been able to continue their work in Hong Kong and foreign missionaries continue to use Hong Kong as a base of operations not only for missions in Mainland China, but also throughout Southeast Asia.

For one to look at the current state of Hong Kong, one can see that despite recent political protests, it remains a financial powerhouse. According to *Hong Kong Business*, “The number of overseas and mainland Chinese companies in Hong Kong rose 9.9% to 9,040 in 2019” and “the number of startups in Hong Kong surged 42.8% to 3,184 from 2017.”⁵¹ With the continued investment of foreign business into Hong Kong, one can see that the globalized nature of Hong Kong will continue to increase as well.

Concluding Remarks

With a myriad of cultures coming together in a great melting pot of people, the question becomes how the church will engage the many representatives of these nations. This problem is not relegated only to Hong Kong, but to the rest of the world as well. With the increased ability to immigrate from one country to the next, the landscape of the demographics of our neighborhoods are changing day by day. In many cases, homes are no longer located in homogenous neighborhoods, but rather diversity of thought, ethnicity, religion, and social class surround us. How the church chooses to meet these changing

⁵⁰ Through the “One Country-Two System” arrangement, Hong Kong has been allowed to maintain its own government, laws, and rights it had prior to 1997. It is expected to be fully reintegrated as part of Mainland China in 2047. Recent protests for democratic reforms have shown the unease that Hong Kongers have as the PRC begins this process.

⁵¹ Hong Kong Business, “Foreign companies in Hong Kong up 9.9% to 9,040 in 2019,” Hong Kong Business, <https://hongkongbusiness.hk/economy/news/foreign-companies-in-hong-kong-99-9040-in-2019> (accessed February 20, 2020).

landscapes will set the pace for how community is developed both within and outside of the church.⁵²

⁵² The final section of this paper will address the formation of community in more detail, in conjunction with the Theological Development and Key Voices of the problem.

Key Voices and Development

As Christianity developed, the way the Christian community was shaped changed as well. The identity of the early church was one that was marked by love and fellowship with one another built around an identity established in Jesus Christ. However, the way this identity manifested has been influenced by various figures and movements. By looking at St. Benedict's Rule of Life, the teachings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the development of the Emerging Church Movement, one can trace the key role that identity plays in establishing Christian community.

Benedictine Monasticism: A Rule for Life

The development of Christian monasticism began as a solitary ascetic hermitage in response to the growing power, influence, and corruption of church leaders under Emperor Constantine. Later, it developed into a community formed around a specific rule for life.⁵³ John Knox writes:

They were not part-time Christians. Their all-or-nothing attitudes, disenchantment with society, and desire to effectively influence the world (without being of the world) led them to renounce all creature comforts in order to utterly devote themselves to spiritual work such as praying, social services for the community, teaching, and spreading the Christian faith.⁵⁴

Much like the early church of Acts, there was a devotion to fellowship not only with fellow monks and with God, but also an outward missional approach that was mediated with an identity rooted firmly in their belief and complete devotion to Christ.

Although the various orders of monks initially were governed by different rules, it was Saint Benedict of Nursia who is “credited with creating a monastic rule of order that was

⁵³ John S. Knox, “The Monastic Movement: Origins & Purposes,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/930/the-monastic-movement-origins--purposes/> (accessed February 28, 2020).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

instituted and promoted as the standard for all of monasticism.”⁵⁵ The basis of the monk’s rules were to instruct monasteries about how to organize and govern their communities, but “Benedict’s rule adds three distinctive vows: obedience, stability (fidelity to the same monastic community until death), and conversion of life, which means dedicating oneself to the lifelong work of deepening repentance.”⁵⁶ While monastic living and vows were considered harsh and difficult to maintain, St. Benedict wrote in his rule, “We have therefore to establish a school of the Lord’s service, in the institution of which we hope we are going to establish nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.”⁵⁷

Part of the importance of the monastic life is the structure that it provides. In an increasingly postmodern world, stability is considered to be a fool’s game.⁵⁸ Zygmunt Bauman writes, “The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building but avoidance of fixation.”⁵⁹ Dreher adds, “to succeed today, you need to be free of all commitments, unbound by the past or the future, living in an everlasting present. The world changes so quickly that the person who is loyal to anything, even to her own identity, takes an enormous risk.”⁶⁰

Dreher writes, “To be part of a community is to share in its life. That inevitably makes demands on the individual that limits his freedom.”⁶¹ Part of the heavy emphasis within Benedictine monasticism lies in its vow of obedience: “Everyone in the monastery

⁵⁵ Knox, “The Monastic Movement.”

⁵⁶ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), *iBook*, 88.

⁵⁷ St. Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, https://www.solesmes.com/sites/default/files/upload/pdf/rule_of_st_benedict.pdf (accessed February 28, 2020).

⁵⁸ Dreher, 114

⁵⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist, or, A Short History of Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996), 24.

⁶⁰ Dreher, 114.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

depends on everyone else, and all decisions of importance must be made with others and consider their interests.”⁶² When one looks at the role community is supposed to play in the Christian life, it is to be one that looks to the needs of others before one’s own, an inherent self-sacrifice that is done in humility and in love (Philippians 2:1-4). Commitment to one another is difficult in a world and culture that values the individual over the communal. However, “To be a Christian, and to be a vowed member of a religious community, incurs certain obligations to others.”⁶³ The importance of belonging to a religious community is further expounded upon in the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Communion of Saints and Life Together

If one follows the family tree of literature regarding Christian community and its importance, one will inevitably be led to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Born in 1906 in Germany, Bonhoeffer would spend his life pursuing the question, “What is the church?”⁶⁴ It is this question that would guide Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* and his post-doctoral work, *Act and Being*.⁶⁵ Eventually, Bonhoeffer would pursue this question through a practical study of community in his book, *Life Together*.

Sanctorum Communio acted as a sociological study of the the church. Eric Metaxas writes, “Bonhoeffer would identify the church as neither a historical entity nor an institution, but as ‘Christ existing as church-community.’”⁶⁶ Writing extensively on the importance of identity, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Every concept of community is essentially related to a concept

⁶² Dreher, 117.

⁶³ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁴ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), *iBook*, 91.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 105.

of person... *The concepts of person, community, and God* are inseparably and essentially interrelated.”⁶⁷ The concept of personhood for Bonhoeffer’s early works lies in the observation that the Self is created in conjunction with one’s relationship to other people. Therefore, for the Christian, “God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human You is an image of the divine You.”⁶⁸ Put simply, the human self is a reflection of God and our relationships with one another comes out of that divine reality.

What sets the Christian community apart from other communities is “the Christian concept of community is that love for God involves submission, but that God’s love, in ruling, serves.”⁶⁹ Therefore, Christian community revolves around mutual submission to one another and to God’s rule, taking on the identity that Christ establishes in us when we take on the mantle of “Christian.”

Bonhoeffer’s theology of community was further explored in his book *Life Together*. His quest for discovering intentional community began with his work in youth ministry. Andrew Root writes about how Bonhoeffer would invite his confirmands to his flat “for games, conversation, and shared meals. He then pushed this intentional community deeper by taking them for excursions away from Berlin and into the forest.”⁷⁰ It was the call to lead the illegal seminary at Finkenwalde that allowed Bonhoeffer to consolidate his learning and observations from monasteries in Britain and apply them to future church leaders within the Confessing Church in Germany.

⁶⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 34.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 63. This observation was also established in the discussion of the early church community within Acts 2:42-47.

⁷⁰ Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 138.

Root writes, “All participants, including Bonhoeffer as principal, were asked to call each other ‘brothers,’ and these brothers were asked to spend significant time each day in meditation on Scripture, periods of quiet, and confessing their sin to one another.”⁷¹ Like monastic communities, Bonhoeffer instituted rhythms of life into the seminarians’ day to day life, but what was also unique was that “times of music, chess, and deep conversation were as central to the monastic rule of life. It was demanded that the young men meditate, but coupled with this were open spaces to discuss political topics, sing, and laugh.”⁷² For this community it was also imperative to not be cut off from other church associations, but to be deeply connected with the Confessing Church in the region.⁷³

Bonhoeffer’s experience in Finkenwalde led him to pen *Life Together*. The book is comprised of five chapters: Community, The Day with Others, The Day Alone, Ministry, and Confession and Communion.⁷⁴ Ultimately, for Bonhoeffer, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”⁷⁵ It is a gift, something that we cannot claim for our own.⁷⁶ Susan Rakoczy describes how Bonhoeffer contrasts Christian community with human community: “It is truth not desire, light not darkness, *agape* not *eros*, surrender of power to the Spirit not cultivation of personal power.”⁷⁷

⁷¹ Root, 138.

⁷² Ibid., 140.

⁷³ Ibid., 142.

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Susan Rakoczy, “The Witness of Community Life: Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* and the Taizé Community,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 127 (March 2007), 49.

Through Bonhoeffer, one can see the importance of commitment to one another and the identity that Christ creates within us as the divine reality. Creating a pseudo-monasticism at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer was able to apply principles learned from monastic communities to the greater church. Keeping these principles in mind, an overview of the Emerging Church will show further implications of these teachings.

The Emerging Church: Decentralization of the Church and “Vintage Christianity”

In his book *Letters to the Church*, Francis Chan asks the reader to engage in a thought experiment where one imagines themselves on a deserted island with nothing but a Bible. The reader has no experience of the church apart from what is found within the New Testament. Based on one’s reading of the Bible only, he asks the question of whether one’s current church experience matches what is found in the New Testament.⁷⁸

Disillusionment with the current state of the church and a desire to recapture what has been perceived as lost from the church in Acts led to the movement known as “The Emerging Church” in the Western world. Emerging Church communities can be described as “missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place in time.”⁷⁹ Although there are many expressions of what the Emerging Church looks like, when one reads through the literature regarding the Emerging Church, there are several narratives that consistently appear: a return to New Testament Christianity (or “vintage Christianity”),⁸⁰ “identifying with the life of Jesus, transforming secular space, and living as community.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2018), 11.

⁷⁹ Eddie Gibbs & Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 27.

⁸⁰ See Dan Kimball’s *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁸¹ Gibbs & Bolger, 43.

Fascination with the New Testament church compelled leaders within the Emerging Church movement to reconsider the modern expressions of church. For example, Frank Viola and George Barna's book *Pagan Christianity* seeks to trace the various practices found within the modern church back to their biblical roots, only to find that much of what is practiced today is not found within the Bible. Rather, many practices are the marriage between cultural pagan practices within the Roman Empire and Christianity as it rose in prominence following its recognition by Emperor Constantine.⁸² For the Emerging Church leaders, one of the primary ways of recapturing the New Testament church comes in the reemergence of house churches.

The concept of a house church is not new to the history of Christianity. As was discussed in the section on Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35, the early church began meeting in the temple courts *and* in homes. There was a dedication to one another to meet in fellowship. Viola and Barna note that under Emperor Constantine, church buildings were built across the Roman Empire due to his worship of the sun god.⁸³ Christianity had risen to power as a (if not *the*) major religion in the Roman Empire. When one considers this rise in power in conjunction with the power and status given to bishops (the office of leadership within the church that had been established and promoted by Ignatius of Antioch), it was only a matter of time before maintaining the establishment took priority over the community.⁸⁴

In contrast to the institutionalized church, Brian McLaren writes:

This emerging or emergence Christianity will be *decentralized* and *diverse* rather than centralized and uniform. In other words, it will have the shape of a movement rather than an institution. It will be drawn together, not by external uniformity of doctrine, hierarchy, polity, liturgy, or style, but by internal unity of way of life, mission, practices, and vision for the common good.⁸⁵

⁸² See Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2002).

⁸³ Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2002), 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

McLaren goes on to say he believes that the Emerging Church movement will be characterized as radically collaborative outside of existing institutions to seek the common good and embodying love.⁸⁶

What does it mean to identify with Jesus in the context of the Emerging Church? For the Emerging Church leaders, it means embracing the idea of the Gospel of the Kingdom and a missional approach to “doing church.” Gibbs and Bolder write, “In emerging churches, for example, the direction of church changed from a centripetal (flowing in) to a centrifugal (flowing out) dynamic. This in turn led to a shift in emphasis from attracting crowds to equipping, dispersing, and multiplying Christ followers as a central function of the church.”⁸⁷ The realization that the church’s reputation has served as a hindrance to bringing people into the church caused church leaders to rethink their approach.⁸⁸ Within the postmodern context, meeting in coffee shops, old movie theaters, pubs, and other public places has become common as a means of meeting people where they are comfortable and reclaiming secular spaces.⁸⁹

When speaking of the Emerging Church, the theme of “authentic” Christian community permeates the ideology behind the movement. Viola says an important part of the DNA of the church is the experience of authentic community, familial love, and the centrality

⁸⁵ Brian McLaren, “Three Christianities,” *Oneing: An Alternative Orthodoxy* 7, no. 2 (2019), 71-72, https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Oneing_Vol7No2_Online-Edition.pdf (accessed March 11, 2020).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

⁸⁷ Gibbs & Bolger, 49.

⁸⁸ In Dan Kimball’s book *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church*, he interviews many people about their experience with the church and their perception of it. What is interesting is that he finds many have a good view of Jesus, but they are disillusioned with the church. It must be said it is often a very human Jesus (i.e., Jesus is just a moral teacher, Jesus would “smoke weed with me”), so there is also an image of Jesus that needs to be deconstructed in the postmodern world.

⁸⁹ For a fuller discussion on the use of space and criticisms of it, see Allan Effa’s “Pub Congregations, Coffee House Communities, Tall-Steeple Churches, and Sacred Space: The Missional Church Movement and Architecture,” *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 4 (2015): 373-384, <https://journals-sagepub-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/0091829615590889> (accessed March 11, 2020).

of one's relationship to Jesus Christ as the basis of one's relationships *within* the church.⁹⁰

The key emphasis echoes Bonhoeffer's teachings that true community is only found through the centrality of Christ in one's relationships. In an effort to create authentic community within the church, there is pushback on the programmatic nature and institutionalization of the church in exchange for more intimate and organic forms of church.

From the Emerging Church, one can see that within the postmodern context there is a real need for community. The realization that "church" in the traditional sense had moved away from New Testament ideals forced leaders to rethink the methodology of the modern era. However, did the Emerging Church actually meet these needs? Or did it, like the modern church, fall short of reaching its ultimate goal of providing a space to worship God with other Christians in a true family of believers? In the final section, all of these pieces will be brought together.

⁹⁰ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2008), 45.

Synthesis and Conclusion: What's Next?

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to answer the question, “What are the ingredients to creating and nurturing a diverse community within the church?” From the biblical analysis, it was discovered that in Acts, the early church was devoted to the apostles’ teachings, to fellowship and one another, the breaking of bread, prayer, and being of one mind. Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Ephesians presented the importance of building one’s identity firmly in Christ and the importance of harmony in unity respectively. In the historical development, Hong Kong was used as a case study to show the globalized nature of our current world and posed the question of how the church will respond to diverse cultural contexts being brought together into one place. Finally, by tracing the development of the key voices of Benedictine Monasticism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Emerging Church, it was discovered that true Christian community is built around the person of Jesus Christ. In the following section, I will outline areas of agreement, tensions, disagreements, and pressure points, and gaps and limitations found during my research.

Areas of Agreement

During my research, two themes were prevalent in the literature regarding community: cultivating an identity in Christ and the use of language. In a time of global cities where people from many nations are gathered together in one place, one cannot help but ask, “How can the church form authentic community with people who are so different from one another?” From the examined literature, one thing becomes clear: for Christian community to be authentic (regardless of context), *it must be built around the person of Jesus Christ. As such, for leaders to facilitate community, they must cultivate a common identity in Christ through the Holy Spirit.* The New Testament church gives a snapshot of the tension and beauty that surrounds a church of multiple ethnicities, social classes, and cultures brought

together in a single identity. When one reads through Acts, the reason this fellowship of believers was able to have such deep connection in the beginning was ultimately their commitment to Christ. Christ bound the church together as a family. Frank Viola writes, “While the New Testament authors depict church with a variety of different images, their favorite image is the *family*. Familial terms like ‘new birth,’ ‘children of God,’ ‘son of God,’ ‘brethren,’ ‘fathers,’ ‘brothers,’ ‘sisters,’ and ‘household’ saturate the New Testament writings.”⁹¹

Language matters. James Davison Hunter writes, “The problem is language is never neutral, and its use, consciously or unconsciously, is never innocent.”⁹² Language is used to create a common identity in which we identify those who are close to us and those who are against us.⁹³ The language we use within the church today is critical to reclaiming the church not just as a community, but as the family of God. When the language we use promotes division rather than unity, we inevitably tie that into our identity. Do our churches identify with their locations, denominations, ethnicities, etc., or do they ultimately identify with Christ and lead its members into the family of God?

Tensions, Disagreements and Pressure Points

During my research, two major tensions were found throughout the literature: the idolization of the early church and conflicting visions and models of what church should look like.⁹⁴ These tensions are particularly poignant within the Emerging Church. The Emerging Church started with the vision to reclaim what was lost from the early church. There is a tendency to

⁹¹ Viola, *Reimagining Church*, 98.

⁹² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 163.

⁹³ See also David E. Fitch’s *The Church of Us Vs Them* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019) for a deeper analysis on how language and labels causes us to view people as the “Other.”

⁹⁴ By “idolization,” I mean the tendency to see the early church as having no flaws and that it is the preferred way of structuring church.

fall into a romanticized and idealized notion that the early church was the “Golden Age” of Christianity. However, one must realize that the church described in the New Testament had its own challenges. It was by no means perfect and it was one stop in the development of the church.

Regarding models and systems, the Emerging Church sought to incorporate a more organic style of church, though there were still hazards along the way. Writing in 1987, Charles Griffin warned of potential dangers with house church movements: elitism, faddism, individualism, separatism, extremism, emotionalism, indistinctiveness, self-centeredness, and denominationalism to name a few.⁹⁵ Even intentionally seeking to create authentic community in smaller formats such as a house church carries with it dangers. It is not so much about the size of a church that hinders it in creating community (although this *can* be a factor), but rather the ability to cultivate an identity of the church around Christ and recognizing the systems in place that prevent us from achieving community.⁹⁶

Speaking prophetically, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself.”⁹⁷ *Our* ideal church and *our* ideal community is not the church or community we should seek. The beauty of the church is that it comes in all shapes and sizes. It is expressed in different ways, but the One who binds the entire church together is Christ.

⁹⁵ Charles James Griffin, “‘Domus Ecclesiae’: An Examination of House Churches” (doctoral diss., Andrews University, 1987), <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1174&context=dmin> (accessed March 12, 2020), 95-96

⁹⁶ One of these systems is the problem of consumerism found within the church. The individualistic nature of consumerism acts as a barrier to creating community. Church leaders must ask themselves whether they are creating consumers (people who simply come to church, take what is given to them, and leave) or if they are creating disciples. For more, read Vincent J Miller’s *Consuming Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003) and Jason Clark’s “Evangelicalism and Capitalism” (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2018).

⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27,

Gaps and Limitations

As I researched the topic of community, one topic that was briefly touched upon was the use of story in cultivating a narrative identity. James K.A. Smith writes, “Our longing for an identity is bound up with finding a story.”⁹⁸ The tension lies in how we are introduced into the grand narrative of the Christian story and how we see ourselves in the greater scheme of salvation. Although the postmodern world has presented skepticism toward an overarching metanarrative, it has at the same time opened a longing to find one’s place within something greater. Cultures and communities are built around the stories that provide an identity. For our communities, how do they fit within the metanarrative of God’s salvation? This is an important question worth pursuing further, one that Alistair McGrath expounds upon in his book *Narrative Apologetics*.⁹⁹

Conclusion

My research has undertaken the task of parsing out what biblical community means. Based on the biblical witness of Scripture, a brief case study on the challenges globalization brings to our world, and a survey of the development of Christian communities throughout history, I have sought to identify the ingredients of Christian community. My research has shown that in our increasingly globalized world, if the church is to cultivate a loving, nurturing, and diverse community, church leaders need to realize the importance of cultivating an identity founded in Christ. As the church continues to move forward, discovering the power of story in the formation of Christian identity and communities is essential. For when our identities

⁹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 162

⁹⁹ Alistair McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019).

are founded upon Christ, we see one another and the rest of the world through His eyes: a family with open arms waiting to embrace those within and around us.

APPENDIX C

MILESTONE 3 – DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT

NPO STATEMENT

The local church is failing to be a nurturing community because it does not cultivate a common identity and narrative that invites people in all of their diversity to willingly join themselves to God's redemptive story of humanity.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

The scope of the NPO has shifted to identify how the narratives used within the church cultivate a collective identity. This was narrowed down as the root for how belonging should occur within the church. It was discovered in the Design Phase that belonging in and of itself is a byproduct of one's identity. When a collective identity is formed, it is more likely that people will feel a stronger sense of belonging and community. With this in mind, the question becomes how the church cultivates an identity in *Christ* in its congregation members that celebrates their uniqueness while also inviting them into the grand scheme of God's redemptive story.

NPO CONTEXT

The current context of the NPO is in a nondenominational international church in Hong Kong. The church in which the NPO is taking place has both a history and a reputation for being divisive in its leadership. Within the congregation, there are many fragments and factions that play against one another. However, at their recent Annual General Meeting (AGM), the church expressed its concern over the factions and how they want to move to being a more connected and unified body.

Economically, the church is primarily middle class to upper middle class. As it is an international church, there are people from different parts of the world who attend, though the dominant group represented are local Hong Kongers who have international experience (i.e., they studied abroad, their children attend international schools, they work for international companies, etc.). There is a noticeable generation gap, as the majority of the congregation consists of families, working adults, and retired adults. Noticeably, there are few young adults in the congregation.

ROOT CAUSES

One root cause of the NPO is the narrative that churches present to their congregation members. The language that is used matters because it sets the precedence for how the church sees itself. This is also influenced by the preconceived notions people in the congregation have of the church itself.

Creating a collective identity in an international city like Hong Kong is difficult because there are many roles and identities people bring with them. In a given international church congregation, there can be representatives from many parts of the world. When one adds to this the transient nature of Hong Kong due to career obligations, it can mean that the make-up of a congregation is always changing. By the time one finally feels they are part of a congregation, it is very possible that they may have to move on.

THREE BIG IDEAS

Using the concepts derived from the Design Workshop, the three “Big Ideas” are as follows:

- A mentor led cohort model that focuses on cultivating an identity in Christ.
- A workshop that focuses on “community listening” where healing and reconciliation from past hurts can occur.
- An immersive “life together” retreat with the intention of learning what it means to be actively involved in Christian community.

DEFINITION OF ‘DONE’

That the church would have a stronger realization of what it means to find their identity in Christ and what it means to connect that identity with the church community.

3 NAPKIN PITCHES¹

Identity Workshop and Cohort

- **Big Idea:** A mentor-led cohort that focuses on cultivating one’s identity in Christ and connecting their identity to God’s overarching narrative.
- **Audience:** For those within the church who have difficulty understanding what it means to find one’s identity in Christ.
- **NPO:** How does one cultivate an identity in Christ through community?
- **Benefit:** The user benefits by understanding how Christ is the foundation of their identity and they have other participants to journey with them in understanding that identity.

¹ For a further note on the Napkin Pitches, see APPENDIX VII.

- **Approach:** A small cohort will participate in an ongoing mentorship group that will teach them how to reconcile their various identities to Christ. It will help them to understand their own story in light of God's story.
- **Risks:** Poor mentorship and facilitation could be damaging to the cohort's identity; misconceptions of what it means to have one's identity in Christ.
- **Assumptions:** Identity is cultivated and encouraged in the context of community.
- **Benchmarks of Success:** The cohort members are able to see Christ as the foundation of their identity; the cohort members see how their story connects with God's overarching story.
- **Other Approaches:** This approach is set apart in that it is a cohort model that focuses on finding identity in the context of community. It also provides a way of tracing one's narrative and how it coincides with the greater story God is writing in humanity.

Community Listening Workshop

- **Big Idea:** Organizing a workshop that focuses on bringing healing and reconciliation to broken relationships within the church.
- **Audience:** Those who have been hurt by conflict within the church.
- **NPO:** What are the barriers that prevent community from forming in the church?
- **Benefit:** The user benefits in that it can restore broken relationships between church members and bring a sense of unity and healing among a congregation.
- **Approach:** This workshop would create an open space for the church to trace its narrative and the conflicts it has had in its past and present. The space would allow for processing past hurts with the intention of reconciling these hurts. The church would not just mourn its past failings, but also celebrate its successes as a means of moving forward.

- **Risks:** The biggest risk would be vilifying people within the congregation; the community listening becomes a public shaming of individuals.
- **Assumptions:** Reconciliation and healing is brought forth in the context of community.
- **Benchmarks of Success:** Past hurts and roots of bitterness are uprooted and a path to reconciliation is visible.
- **Other Approaches:** This approach is set apart in that it is part of a journey to reconciliation; post-listening sessions, there would be times to follow up on what was learned.

“2:42” Immersive Experience

- **Big Idea:** An immersive, missional experience that gives participants a taste of what community found in Acts 2:42-47 looks like.
- **Audience:** Anyone within and outside of the church who is curious about what community in the church looks like.
- **NPO:** What does “authentic” Christian community look like?
- **Benefit:** The users benefit in that they get an immersive experience of what Christian community can look like, with the hope that through follow up, they will integrate what they learn into their everyday life.
- **Approach:** The immersive experience would be treated as a mini retreat that would be modeled on the Acts 2:42 church. Participants will live together in a setting of communal Scripture reading, prayer, fellowship, worship, and sharing. There is also an aspect where the participants will partner with local mission partners and serve with them throughout the experience.

- **Risks:** There is no follow up to the experience; the participants see it as a one-off experience.
- **Assumptions:** “Belonging” is a byproduct of communal love cultivated in Christ.
- **Benchmarks of Success:** Participants integrate what they have learned into their everyday life; there is consistent follow up; there is more engagement in the missional identity of the church.
- **Other Approaches:** This approach is different in that the “retreat” is not focused solely on the individual, but on the community. It is not merely inward, but it is outward facing as well due to its missional nature.

DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

- **Stakeholder 1** – NGO founder; former discipleship pastor
- **Stakeholder 2** – NGO founder; former pastor; coach; mentor
- **Stakeholder 3** – community groups pastor
- **Stakeholder 4** – associate pastor
- **Stakeholder 5** – banker; small group leader; mission and outreach committee member
- **Stakeholder 6** – stay at home mom; small group leader
- **Stakeholder 7** – teacher; new arrival to Hong Kong

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

- **Interviewee 1** –engineer; small group member
- **Interviewee 2** – banker; small group leader; mission and outreach committee member
- **Interviewee 3** – former ministry worker

3–5 KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

Key texts that should be observed include:

- Acts 2:42 – 47
- Galatians 3:23 – 29
- Ephesians 2:14 – 22
- 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 1 Corinthians 13
- Ephesians 4

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor during Hitler’s Reich, working in an underground seminary to train pastors as well as taking a vocal stand against the Nazi regime. *Life Together* is the culmination of his experiences as leading the seminary and his reflections on what it means to live in Christian community. Bonhoeffer’s work is a classic reflection on different aspects of community, including the need for solitude, prayer, and fellowship.

Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

- Christena Cleveland is a social psychology who works as a professor at St. Catherine University. Her work *Disunity in Christ* explores why Christians tend to cluster themselves into groups and criticize those who disagree with us, despite the notion that are to be “one in Christ.” This book is helpful in identifying both the psychology behind group formation and the barriers that tend to divide Christians. In the end, she calls for a unified common identity in Christ.

Nouwen, Henri. “‘Who Are We?’ – Henri Nouwen on Our Christian Identity.” Read by Henri Nouwen. Audible. 2017.

- Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian. Nouwen’s work tends to include reflections on the meaning of Christian identity. In this recorded lecture, Nouwen reflects on what it means to see oneself as Christ’s “beloved.” He contrasts an identity in Christ with the identity the world gives (which is founded on belongings, education, experiences, and what others say). He professes through his own journey what it means to be “taken, blessed, broken, and given” by God.

Plass, Richard & Cofield, James. *The Relational Soul*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014.

- Richard Plass is the president of CrossPoint Ministry in Jeffersonville, Indiana and has a PhD from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in counseling. James Cofield is the director of CrossPoint Ministry, holding a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Relational Soul* brings together elements of psychology and spiritual formation to show the importance of relationship and community. They argue that this is imprinted in our design as ones who have been created in the image of a relational God. Their primary target is to help the reader to shed the reactive “False Self” for the receptive “True Self” in Christ.

APPENDIX I – DESIGN WORKSHOP

Design Workshop Description

The Design Workshop was completed on Saturday, October 24, 2020, at the researcher's apartment in Hong Kong. The workshop began at 11:00 am and concluded at 6:00 pm (for the full agenda and activities that were conducted, see APPENDIX IV). The stakeholders that were present included two directors for non-government organizations (NGOs), a community groups pastor, an associate pastor, a new arrival to Hong Kong who is currently working as a teacher, and two small group leaders at the church in which the research is taking place.

On a 1-5 Likert Scale, I would rate the workshop a 2 or 3 in regard to how I feel it went. There were parts of the workshop that went very well. The “Pain and Gain Map” for example generated a lot of conversation in revisiting the NPO. This was the most well-received session as the stakeholders actively engaged in conversation and provided new insights into the NPO.²

However, in the design section of the workshop, poor facilitation and communication led to a lack of clarity in how to approach the activities that were attempted. In hindsight, how I structured the 3-12-3 Brainstorm activity should have been done differently. For this activity, I asked the stakeholders to brainstorm words or phrases that they associated with biblical community. I then divided them into groups and had each group draw three cards that they were to use as the basis for their design product. Using Joseph Myers's levels of belonging, we worked our way up from Public Belonging to Social Belonging, to Personal Belonging, and finally to Intimate Belonging. After each round, new groups would be made and they would draw three new cards.³

² One of the new insights revolved around “belonging” in and of itself not being a biblical principle or value, but rather the effect of God pouring out His love for us. It is through the community formed out of God's love that gives the church a sense of belonging.

³ For example, we began with how to initiate biblical community in the “Public” level of belonging. Each group drew three cards and had 15 minutes to think of a design approach. After they presented, they would

While I thought that framing the activity using Myers's levels of belonging would provide a variety of ideas, the group later mentioned that they felt stifled and restricted by it. Adding to this that the levels of belonging were not as well communicated as I thought, this produced frustration and confusion. As such, the "Public" level of belonging ended up being a practice round for the activity. Moving forward, the stakeholders had a firmer grasp on how to proceed with the activity.

All in all, the workshop produced broader concepts that are usable to create big ideas and test for prototypes. However, upon reflection I would have structured the session differently by introducing the big ideas I was considering and getting feedback on how to proceed with those.

discard their cards, a new group would be formed, and they would draw three new cards to think of an idea in the "Social" level of belonging.

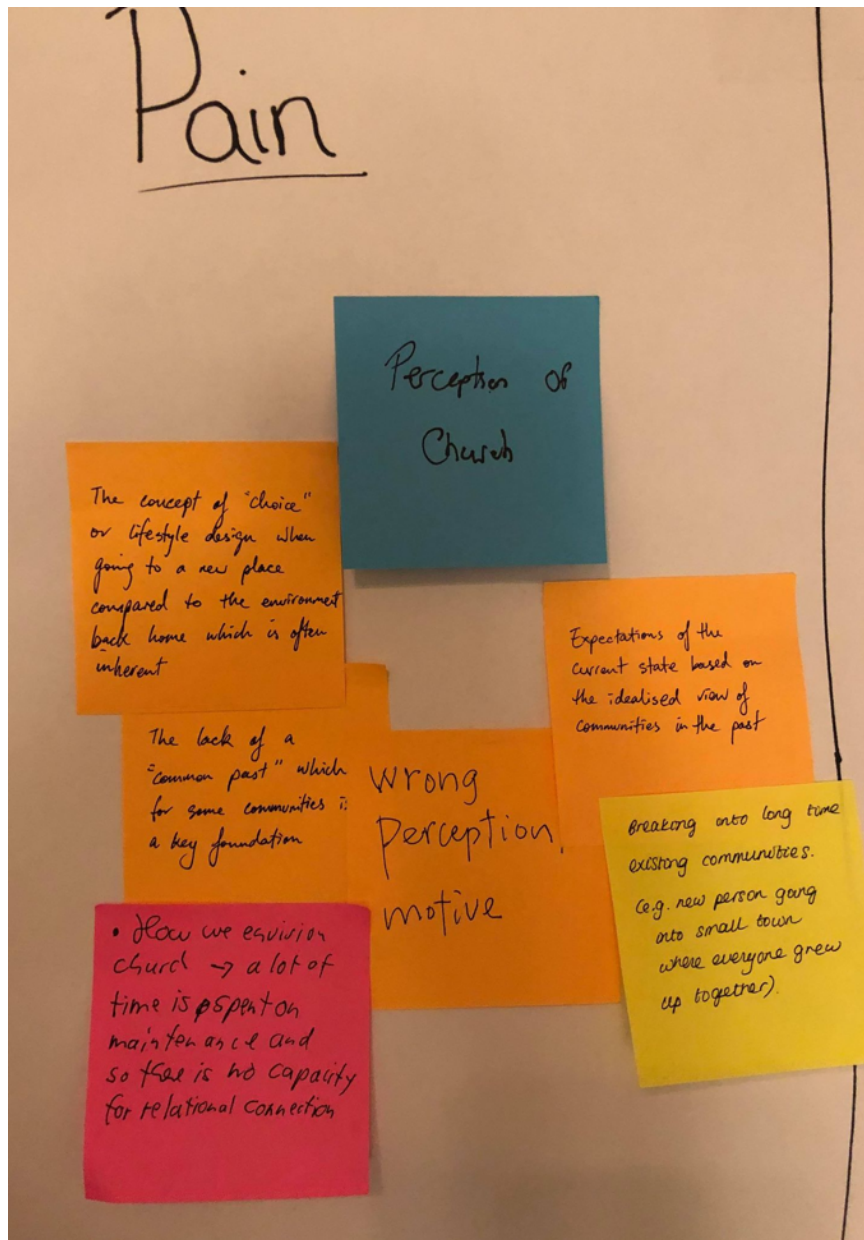
APPENDIX II – DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

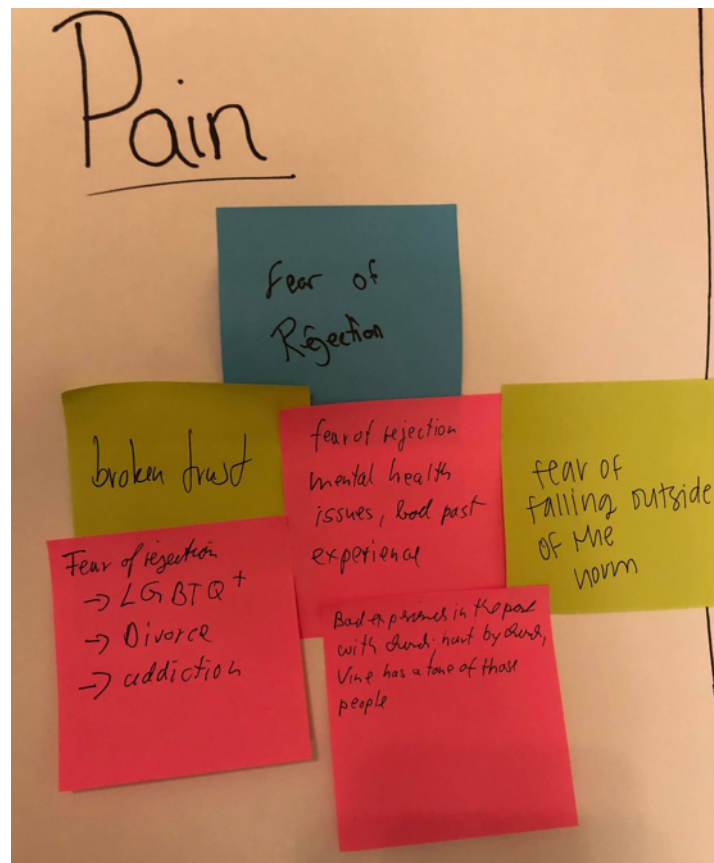
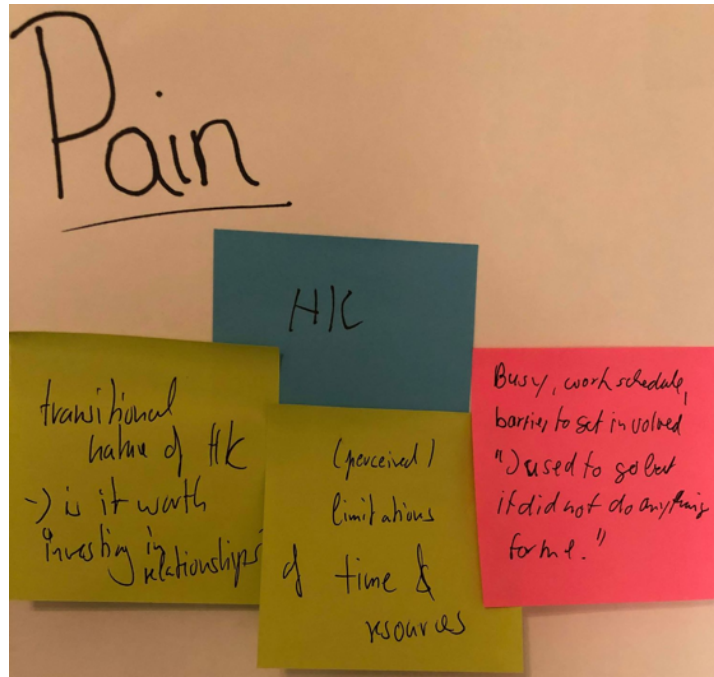
II.1 – PAIN AND GAIN CHART

PAIN THEMES

What are the barriers that prevent us from experiencing Christian community?

- Perception of Church
- The Nature of Hong Kong
- Fear of Rejection
- Self-Centeredness
- Teaching / Leadership
- Judgment / Fear of Vulnerability





Pain

Self-centered

as a newcomer at a ^(churches quite a large group) small group - no one in the group approaching you the entire time, other than on your way out.

Church is too impersonal

Not finding a natural fit with the church community

Fear of getting close to strangers

Surrender our comfort zones / self centered needs

high cost of living in HK makes w look at our own needs first

Pain

Teaching / Leadership

Shame focused teaching

When returning to a past community where your growth journey has differed, it's difficult for them to see you as your new self and connect that way

Over emphasis on caution over the teaching / content shared in the community

lack of a

- clear purpose
- common goal

• Senior Pastor leadership priorities → what they value and emphasize impacts the local body

Pain

Judgement /
Vulnerability

Fear of being judged
if we really are open about
our lives and struggles
→ perhaps being
vulnerable has been
fired.

having to
be
vulnerable

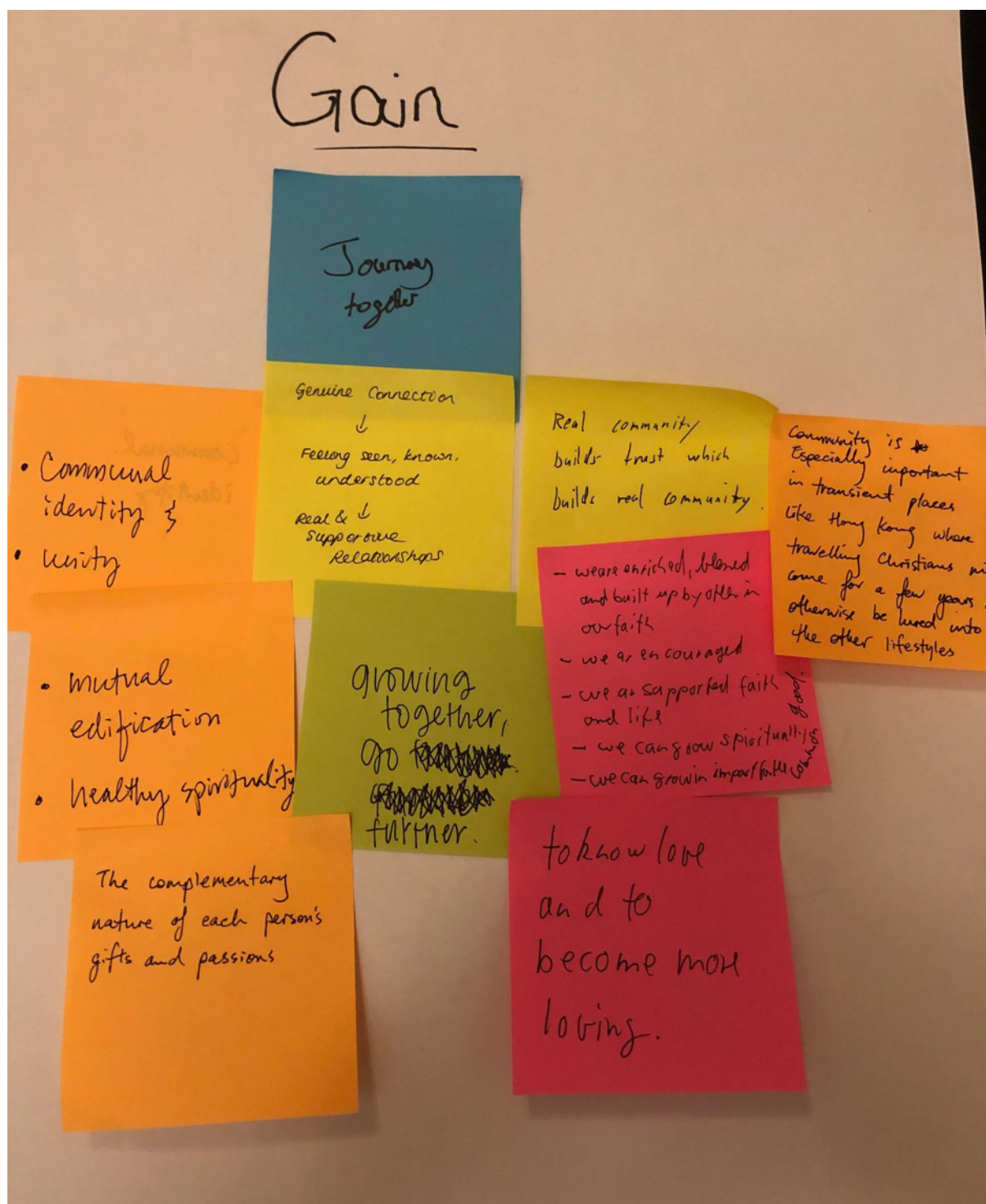
Past hurts we
have experienced

having to
explain / to
convince of
your past / worth

GAIN THEMES

What is to be gained if the NPO is met?

- Journey Together
- Reflection of God
- Ministry
- Healing and Restoration



Gain

Reflection
of
God

As a church we become
a picture of the Gospel,
reconciliation, love and
display
the eschatological
community
a foretaste of the kingdom

we would give
people a
glimpse of
His Kingdom

Being the beacon of
light in a society
that is increasingly
polarized. People will
look to the church for
acceptance and peace

a church that
represents the
heart of the
father

Of us live in community
Of us are church and
embrace our mission
we contribute to the
shalom of the city,
to the flourishing of people
we take care of our neighbor

a church
that are hands
and feet

a church that
draws others in
b/c it lives what
the word paints it
to be.

eternal
life

Open sharing of God's
work in each other's
lives will put the
focus back onto Jesus
rather than ourselves

Gain

Mind

Synergy: People can ~~do~~ accomplish more good together in a community than alone.
(But must be genuine community not alone-in-community)

Wider view of the world gained from others you might not interact w/ otherwise.

i.e. being in community and learning to relate to others who can be very different.

- Ministry Synergy ↑
- collective

Gain

Healing

RESTORATION

Accepting Community brings healing to past wounds

Healthy relationships can be experienced, and healing from problematic family patterns / r'ships can happen.

Countering many mental health issues

a safe place for people

Love for one another will override some of the pains we mentioned like cultural barriers, shame etc

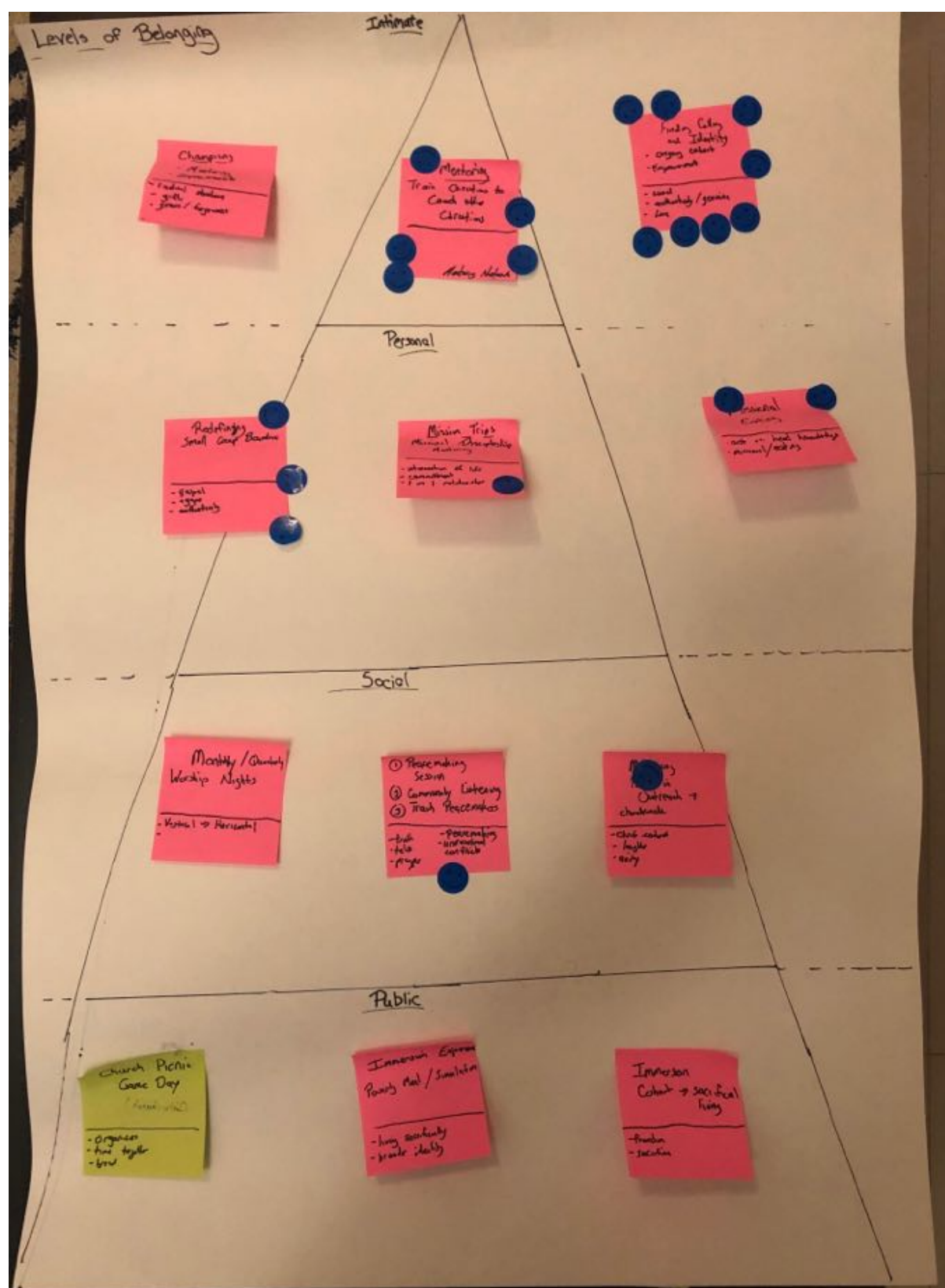
II.2 – INGREDIENTS OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

For this activity, the stakeholders wrote down what they considered to be essential aspects of Christian community. Below are the transcribed words and phrases they came up with (in no particular order):

- Lord's Supper
- Baptism
- Organizers/Coordinators
- Worship / Singing
- Studying the Word
- Praying Together
- Mutual Edification
- Love
- Freedom
- Mentoring Model
- Discipleship Movement
- Commitment to One Another
- Trust
- Freedom to Choose
- Unity of Hope
- Bread
- Unity in Diversity
- Loving Neighbor
- Use of Gifts
- Radical Obedience
- Ontological Sacrifice
- Transparency
- Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, etc.)
- Truth
- Prayer
- Agape Love
- Christ-Centered
- Gospel Proclaiming
- One on One Connections (outside of group time)
- Grace
- Honoring
- Breaking Bread
- Forgiveness
- Intersection of Life
- Authenticity
- Honesty
- Genuine
- Time Together
- Missional
- Sacrificial
- Common Mission

- Hospitable
- Laughing Together
- Telos
- Devoted to the Word
- Bearing with One Another

II.3 – LEVELS OF BELONGING



APPENDIX III – WORKSHOP FOLLOW-UP MESSAGE

Hello, everyone!

I wanted to express my thanks to each of you for your participation in the Design Workshop on October 24, 2020. In talking with each of you post-workshop, I'm thankful for all of the feedback, insights, challenges, and help that all provided. Any further feedback and corrections are welcome!

Below is a summary of the key points of our time together:

NPO Statement:

The local church is failing to be a nurturing community because it does not cultivate a common identity and narrative that invites people in all of their diversity to willingly join themselves to God's redemptive story of humanity.

Big Ideas:

- **Identity Workshop and Cohort** – a workshop that helps people trace the various identities they hold and connect it to God's overarching narrative. The hope is that participants in the workshop would come to a stronger understanding of their identity in Christ and through that, find a sense of connection to the local church. The workshop would also facilitate the creation of a cohort led by a trained mentor to help participants navigate the workshop and reflections that would accompany it.
- **Community Listening Workshop** – a workshop with the aim of providing a space for reconciliation within a congregation. The goal would be to identify past struggles and barriers within a congregation and give the church a space to both mourn its past hurts and celebrate the hope that Christ gives in reconciliation.
- **Immersive “Life Together” Retreat** – taking cues from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the purpose of this retreat would be to give participants a taste of what “life together” can be like in Christian community.

Definition of “Done”:

That the church would have a stronger realization of what it means to find their identity in Christ and what it means to connect that identity with the church community.

Benchmarks of Success:

- People become more confident in their identity in Christ.
- Reconciliation of past hurts occur.
- The church becomes a community that desires to welcome others into the Body of Christ and celebrates its diversity.

Key Insights:

“Belonging” is not the ultimate goal; affirming one's identity in Christ, recognizing it is an outpouring of God's love and bringing others into the community of faith is the goal.

Further Areas of Research:

- Mentorship
- Belonging as an outpouring of Christ's love

Thank you again!

APPENDIX IV - NPO DESIGN WORKSHOP SCHEDULE AND BREAKDOWN

NPO Design Workshop

Introductions and Refresher of the NPO: 11:00 - 11:20

General Statement

The church has become a gathering place rather than a community.

Original NPO

My local church has failed to be a nurturing community because it does not facilitate friendships among people of diverse backgrounds.

Focused NPO

My local church is failing to be a nurturing community because it does not cultivate a common identity and narrative that invites people in all of their diversity to willingly join themselves to God's redemptive story of humanity.

Our purpose today is to brainstorm possible solutions for how to address the problem of how we cultivate identity and narrative in order to form community within our churches.

Rules of Engagement:

- Give one another the space to talk.
- Respect one another's opinions.

Exercise One: Revisiting the NPO (Pain and Gain Map) – 11:20 – 12:00

We will start by picking apart the focused NPO statement with a “Pain and Gain” Map.

The Pains will identify the fears, risks, frustrations, and obstacles those impacted by the NPO need to overcome.

The Gains will identify the successes and what we hope will be changed when we address the NPO.

Put yourself in one of these pairs of shoes:

- You are someone who has recently moved to Hong Kong has started attending church. Even after being in the church for several months, you still feel disconnected. You’ve tried connecting in different ministries but have found it difficult to feel like you are part of the church.
- You are a new convert to Christianity and have been exploring churches. You don’t stay at any church too long because you feel like you don’t belong. The churches keep using lingo that you don’t understand, so you feel like you can’t fully connect or engage with the churches.
- You are on staff at a local church and notice that the congregation is divided over issues that have occurred in the past. Although the issues have been resolved on the surface, you can tell there is still something that is keeping the church from being unified.

Pain Questions:

- What are the barriers that prevent you from feeling as if you belong to the church?
- Are there groups of people that make you feel like you can’t fully join the church?
- What’s at stake for you?
- What experiences of community have you had in the past? How is that affecting how you see your current situation?

Themes: *Nature of HK, Fear of Rejection, Vulnerability, Leadership, Perception of Church, Impersonal Nature of Church*

Gain Questions

- What would it mean for you and others to belong to this church?
- What does the church have to gain?
- What do *you* have to gain?
- How will creating a sense of belonging impact you and others?

Exercise Two: Context Map – Identifying the Ingredients to Community – 12:00 – 1:00

What are the ingredients to building community?

Which ingredients are missing from our current communities? (dot voting)

What can be done to change these?

- transitions into “Explore Activities” and sets the stage for after lunch.

LUNCH BREAK – 1:00 – 1:45

What does “done” look like? – 1:45 – 2:00

Exercise Three: Spheres of Belonging – 2:00 – 3:30

How do we create community Publicly, Socially, Personally, and Intimately?

3 – 12 – 3 Brainstorm

- **3 minutes – Generate a Pool of Aspects**
 - What are the characteristics of each of the Four Spheres of Belonging?
 - What are the challenges of each sphere?
 - What are the potential gains in each sphere?
- **12 minutes – Develop Concepts**
 - Divide the group into pairs and each can choose three cards from the sphere
 - Twelve minutes to think of ideas to address belonging in that particular sphere.
 - Can create a rough sketch or ideas of a prototype
 - What does it look like physically? Digitally?
- **3 minutes – Presentations**
 - Maximum three minutes to present their concept

Repeat for the other spheres; change up the groups each time.

BREAK – 3:30 – 4:00

Exercise Four: Dot Voting – 4:00 – 4:15

- Each is given three dots to vote on which of the concepts from the 3-12-3 session should be the Big 3 ideas.

Exercise Five: Napkin Pitches – 4:15 – 5:15

- **NPO:** What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?
- **Approach:** What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?
- **Benefit:** How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?
- **Others:** How are others addressing this NPO? What sets this approach apart?
- **Risks:** Why might it fail?
- **Assumptions/hypotheses to test:** What critical hypothesis or assumption does each prototype ‘test’?
- **Benchmarks of success:** What information do you need to either confirm or disprove your hypothesis? Articulate the 2-3 benchmarks (or indicator, clue, criteria, test, metric, or milestones) that verify that the project is successfully addressing the NPO.

Debrief – 5:15 – 5:45

In light of what emerged today...

- *What should I be sure to examine?*
 - Mentoring techniques
 - Concept of Belonging – is it a result of something?
- *What are the potential blind spots that I best explore?*
 - Is our group skewed? – similar in ways that we think
 - How does a non-believer see things?
 - Framework of the session may have limited the scope
 - Does the passion of the project line up with the group’s thinking?
 - Limiting
 - Specificity
 - What are the relationships between the levels of belonging using the same ingredients rather than changing up the cards?
- *What are the potential pitfalls that I best avoid?*
 - Losing sight that community should not be simply inward focused; it should be.
- *What must I research before I begin prototyping?*
 - Belonging as an outpouring of Christ’s love
 - Belonging is founded upon Christ’s identity

Closing – 5:45 – 6:00

Prototype Ideas

Public:

- Interchurch Picnic / Game Day
- Immersion Experience – Poverty Meal / Sacrificial Living
- Immersion Cohort – Sacrificial Living Experience

Social

- Peacemaking / Reconciliation / Community Listening
- Community Worship Groups
- Service Outreach – Utilizing Gifts (Connecting Spiritual Gifts to Service) [app idea]

Personal

- Missional Eating
- Missional Discipleship
- Redefining Small Group Boundaries

Intimate

- Mentorship

APPENDIX V – PRE-WORKSHOP NPO RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

The following document was sent to the stakeholders of the Design Workshop prior to the session to catch people up with what was researched during the Discovery Phrase (Year 1) of the program.

Reclaiming the Church as Community

For many within the local church, “community” is something that is desired, but that is oftentimes lacking. This journey to discover the meaning and means of community within the church was sparked by my own experience of finding, losing, and rediscovering my own church community.

Question: *What are the ingredients to authentic, Christian community?*

Theological Foundation

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35: The Early Fellowship of Believers

- Elements of community found within the early church:
 - Devotion to the Apostles’ Teachings
 - Fellowship
 - Gatherings (both large and small)
 - Breaking of Bread
 - Prayer
 - “Oneness of Heart and Mind”
 - Marked by an “Ethic of Love”
- Identification with Christ as the foundation of the early church’s identity.
- The church itself was not perfect; there were still elements of disunity and exclusion found (Acts 5:1-11; Acts 6:1-7).
 - Individualism serves as a barrier to building community.

Galatians 3:26-29

- Identity founded upon Christ as the cornerstone of the Christian faith and community.
 - We no longer see ourselves primarily through race, ethnicity, social standing, gender, or culture.
 - These identities are not eliminated, but they are no longer the foundation.
- When the identity of the church is not founded upon Christ, it creates segregation within the congregation.

Ephesians 2:11-22: Reconciliation in Christ – Unity vs Uniformity

- Christ has unified Gentiles and Jews into one body and created a new humanity.
- Unity implies harmony; different parts working together to create a unique, cohesive piece.
- Uniformity implies stripping away one's identities to create a homogenous unit or only associating with those already within one's identities; however, this is not the picture of the church presented in Scripture.

Historical Background

Hong Kong: A Global City

- Hong Kong is classified as a “Global City” – a city of major economic importance that draws people from around the world.
- Historically, Hong Kong has been seen as an outpost that bridges the east and west.
- Colonized by the British following the Opium Wars.
- Served as a place for refugees fleeing the rise of the PRC and acted as a base of operations for many mission organizations.
- As a financial city, Hong Kong has become a melting pot of culture, which begs the question of how the church will act as a place of unity among those who come.

How will the church create a cohesive identity founded upon Christ that also honors the variety of cultures represented in Hong Kong?

Key Voices and Development

Benedictine Monasticism: A Rule for Life

- Monastic orders are governed by “Rules of Life” that act as a means of unifying those who join.
 - St. Benedict of Nursia's Rule:
 - *Obedience* to the Abbot
 - *Stability* – fidelity to the same monastic community until death
 - *Conversion of Life* – dedication to the lifelong work of deepening repentance
- In a postmodern world that often lacks stability, the idea of a Rule of Life is countercultural; it requires stability and a joining of the Self to the greater community.

- Biblical community looks to the needs of others rather than one's own needs; it requires sacrifice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Communion of Saints and Life Together

- One of Bonhoeffer's primary questions was, "What is the church?"
- *Sanctorum Communio* – "The Communion of Saints"
 - The concepts of person, community, and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated.
 - Personhood is created in conjunction with one's relationships to other people.
 - For Christians, the human self is a reflection of God and our relationships with one another comes out of that divine reality.
 - What sets *Christian* community apart is that it is built around mutual submission to one another.
- *Life Together*
 - Experience at the illegal seminary of Finkenwalde and his time in youth ministry served as the foundation of *Life Together*.
 - Everyone was expected to refer to one another as "brothers."
 - Instituted rhythms of life like a monastic community (meditation on Scripture, periods of quiet, confession, etc.)
 - Just as important were the light-hearted times.
 - Imperative for this community to be connected with the Confessing Church in the region.
 - Christian community is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.
 - Community is a gift.

The Emerging Church: Decentralization of the Church and "Vintage Christianity"

- Disillusionment with the current state of the church led to a desire to recapture what was lost in the book of Acts.
- Primary narratives included a return to "vintage Christianity", identifying with the life of Jesus, transforming secular space, and living as a community.
- Reemergence of house churches and smaller communities.
- "Decentralized and Diverse" rather than "Centralized and Uniform"
- Shift in focus from attracting crowds to equipping, dispersing, and multiplying Christ followers as a central function of the church.

What's Next? – Questions to Consider

How does the church cultivate an identity founded upon Christ and invite people to join their stories with God's greater story of redemption?

How does the church cultivate identity in the Public Space, the Social Space, the Personal Space, and the Intimate Space, both physically and digitally?

Spaces of Belonging - Joseph Myers

Belonging occurs at four different levels:

- Public – the broad, universal identity
 - Sharing a common *experience*.
 - Supporters of the “team” (e.g., fans of a basketball/football team)
- Social – the “casual” identity; “small talk” of our relationships.
 - “Neighbor Relationships”
 - Space to decide who grow into a “deeper” relationship with.
 - Allows us to display a reality we create of who we are while enabling others to see that process.
- Personal – the “private” experiences, feelings, and thoughts.
 - “Close friends”
 - Common definition people think of when they think “community”
- Intimate – the raw “naked” relationships marked by total vulnerability
 - Relationships you feel you can share anything.

“Healthy community – the goal humankind has sought since the beginning – is achieved when we hold harmonious connections within all four spaces. Harmony means more public belongings than social. More social than personal. And very few intimate.”

– Joseph Myers, The Search to Belong

What are the stories that we are telling our communities? How do these stories affect the way we build and structure our communities?

How do we invite people to join their stories to the overarching story of God's redemption of Creation?

What are the barriers that are preventing us from “Belonging” not just to the Church, but to Christ?

APPENDIX VI – ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DOCUMENTATION

Interview #1

Are there any of the big ideas that stick out to you?

- Identity Workshop and Cohort
 - Have someone involved in the leadership / input of the cohort who specializes in mental health.
 - Have someone who is a believer and is qualified
 - Possibly a biblical counselor
 - Someone who has studied the mind and knows how it works
 - When you start getting to the root of identity, there are people who have studied it and are able to recognize patterns.
 - These patterns may be common to all / most people
 - Could be a good resource in terms of understanding how the mind works.
 - What does an identity in Christ actually mean?
 - Seems to be a catchphrase and vague concept.
 - Definition of identity that matches or coincides with how humans function outside of the church.
 - How do people function socially?
 - Overarching Narrative
 - What God's been trying to do from the beginning of time to now
 - How does the overarching narrative address identity?
 - How does God define His *own* identity?
 - When it comes to identity, it's said it's unhealthy to find it in other people. What makes finding one's identity in Christ different?
 - Why is not okay to define ourselves with other people and those outside of ourselves, but it *is* okay to find ourselves in a God who appears to be outside of ourselves?
 - Important to keep in mind that it isn't a one off; it is beginning steps.
 - Plan for follow up is needed; it is a deeply rooted concept that can't be discerned in a short time.

Interview #2

Thinking about the “immersion group,” what if it was framed as a local immersive mission trip? The idea is to partner with one of the local mission partners in the church for a “Short Term Mission” (STM) for a weeklong intensive to serve with them on the field. But then there’s an aspect of during that week, the team is living together and “doing life” (i.e., cooking, worshipping, etc.) together as well.

The goal is to show that intentional community isn’t just between church members and you keep it locked in, but the goal is to move outward with it as well.

- Old church started with local STM at first, working with the indigenous community.
- Local trips give leaders an opportunity for discipleship.
- Ground rules need to be set
 - i.e., people can’t come in and leave
 - Did a similar trip in Hong Kong for a week working with a Lutheran church that did an English camp for disadvantaged kids (mostly ethnic minority students who are behind in their English).
 - One member kept coming in and out, therefore not immersing in the mission while the rest of the team lived in the retreat center nearby.

- ***Commitment***

How was the trip in Hong Kong structured?

- Team came from America to teach conversational English
- Bible based, so was more of a Vacation Bible School (VBS)
- Went for two weeks
- HK team acted as translators and crowd control
- Briefing sessions happened before school, during lunch, and after school
- After 4 pm, the HK team would play sports with the American team, showed them around HK, etc.

What were the positives of that experience?

- The team took it seriously apart from the one member and treated it like an STM.

What would you do differently?

- Make it a priority, because during the evenings and weekends, the HK team didn’t make it a priority to spend time with the American team.
- HK team needed a proper briefing session to say it is an STM on their part as well.
 - Many didn’t stay for the after school debrief
- Expectations need to be clear
- “Pre-Trip” is important – time spent in prayer and planning
- Follow-Up with the local communities being served and with the team is important as well.
 - ***Make sure it isn’t a “project mentality”; element where missions can act as a means of transformation, but only when it’s actively built on a relationship with God and it is a journey with others. The transformation can start, but without others it will likely stall out.***
- Core team of like-minded people need to be the catalyst.
- Discipleship model of missions
- Keep a team going to the same place instead of changing locations each year.

What do you think the “discipleship model” of missions would look like?

- Old church did an STM in Vietnam
- They wake up early, praise and worship, someone drives to get breakfast and coffee, then head to whatever is planned. They come back to the Air BnB with dinner, then praise and worship and debrief.
- Disciplined
- Discipleship focused because as each person debriefed, they would share what they saw and learnt that day.
- Everyone had a role – scribe, treasurer, navigator, etc.
 - ***Commitment to be involved / immersed.***
- Programs were set up with the local church in the mission destination. Spent three months planning and nine months learning the culture and equipping themselves as a team.
 - The planning time for the next trip is used for reflection.

How do you think this would help the church to center its identity on Christ?

- Monastic lifestyle
- Team bonds with each other and accepts the pattern of giving up their own lifestyle for a greater purpose
- The Sydney team went back “on fire”
 - ***How long does this “on fire” last?***
 - Still “on fire”
 - The core team was “always on fire”
 - Spent a lot of time together and were willing to do a lot for the church
 - People had no problem serving people or contributing
- The team went to Korea, which acted like an orientation camp of sorts.
 - Don’t agree with the trip style all the way, because the trip is more for the trip members than the local community. Better to keep in a constant location.

Issue with Sydney Church:

- Cliquey
- Clearly defined “core group” and “periphery group”
 - Caused a lot of the “periphery people” to leave
 - Major problem with this particular church
 - As people age, they become peripheral unless they continue serving
 - Can see the level of commitment required to be “in”

Interview #3

- “2:42: Immersive Experience”
 - As a former ministry worker, there should be a stronger application of service as a bonding agent to creating community.
 - Mission trips can bond members together and build community as you experience what the Lord cares about
 - Mercy ministry – visiting those in prison, caring for the poor
 - The end goal of these activities is not to strengthen the community, but it is a byproduct.
 - “Christian Community Boot Camp”
 - learning to love one another as you learn to love your family and friends
 - connects the intellectual with the practical.
- “Community Listening”
 - Needs to be done carefully
 - Have participated in them through debriefing situations as they arise.
 - Airing of grievances ended up being counterproductive
 - Requires heavy trust in who is facilitating it – they must be without bias and truly create a safe space.
 - Not sure how it would work in a larger group size
 - Must take into account there are different levels of hurt that need to be addressed in different levels.
 - Strict parameters would need to be set
 - This is not a therapy session; follow up would be a must to address issues.
 - **How would you structure this?**
 - It would be difficult to structure no matter what; it’s a risk.
 - From a corporate perspective, would need to be done in an anonymous way
 - Requires a leadership team with a lot of humility and the right mindset.

What do you disagree with?

- The hardest part of any of these is that we assume it’s a “one size fits all” solution when the reality is much different.
 - Take people’s personalities and cultures into account; can be very different.

What’s missing?

- How is the Identity Workshop accomplished practically?
- How does one find a personal identity in Christ and then find a shared identity in Christ in community?
 - How culture and identity have become skewed and separate the world’s cultural identity to your identity in Christ.
 - Identity workshop would need to have a focus to it.

APPENDIX VII – A NOTE ON THE “NAPKIN PITCHES”

The three Napkin Pitches that were presented serve a double function. Although each could be taken in isolation, they are meant to be taken as a progression. Before one can understand and appreciate Christian community, one must first have their identity established in Christ. When Christ becomes one's foundational identity, there must be reconciliation of what that means in the context of community. This would then lead into the practice of communal listening. The purpose of the practice of communal listening is to provide a space where conflict and reconciliation can occur. On a micro level, this can be used to provide a space of healing for the individual as they come to terms with his or her new identity in Christ. When reconciliation of one's previous identities with an identity of Christ begins, the individual can then proceed to coming to an understanding of what it means to join their life with the greater Christian community.

These three pitches can also be used on a macro level beyond the individual. They can also be applied to a local congregation. The church itself may be founded upon identities that are not built on Christ, or that initial narrative may have changed over time. The identity workshop can be used to recenter the church's identity. From here, it can move into a time of communal listening to reconcile outstanding conflicts that the church may not have dealt with. Finally, the 2:42 Experience can be used to provide a path for the church into understanding and recapturing the ethic of love the church in Acts initially held.

APPENDIX D

MILESTONE 4 – PROTOTYPE ITERATION REPORT

Introduction

The following report documents the findings of two prototypes developed to address my problem of interest: Many people do not feel like they belong in their local church. It will conclude with selecting which of the two prototypes is most viable to pursue further.

Prototype #1 – *Imago Dei*

Prototype Description

Imago Dei is a mentor-led cohort that focuses on exploring and cultivating one's identity in Christ and connecting their identity to God's overarching narrative. The prototype contains two parts:

- **Brochure.** The brochure serves as an advertisement and a means of piquing the interest of those who would be interested in participating in the cohort.
- **Syllabus.** The syllabus outlines in detail the focus of each module the cohort will progress through. It presents a description, a list of questions or topics that will be addressed, and texts the cohort will use.

Goldilocks Quality Strategy

The Goldilocks Quality Strategy was to have a well-formulated introduction to the cohort with a clear vision of the topics, activities, and reflections of the cohort.

Research Question

How does one cultivate Christian identity in the context of community?

Assessment Benchmark(s)

The assessment benchmarks of the prototype include:

- Interviewees have a clear picture of what to expect of the cohort.
- Interviewees would be interested in participating in the cohort.

Prototype Demographic Description

The interviewees were primarily working young adults between age 25 – 30 of Hong Kong, American, and Australian descent.

Summary

What Worked?

The participants found that presenting the main topic of the modules as questions was a good idea. They said this forced them to pose the questions to themselves. The questions also made it clear as to what they would be working through. The progression of the modules also showed the participants what they could expect going forward with the cohort. Overall, they also liked the basic design of the brochure and the syllabus and had positive reactions to it.

What Could Be Improved?

The biggest critique revolved around the language used in the brochure and syllabus. For those who are not mature Christians – and even those who are – the language may seem inaccessible or unclear.

What Matters to the Participants?

Overall, what matters most to the participants is that a cohort focused on identity draws our attention back to God's story and that healing can occur where our identities have diverged

from that story. Seeing and hearing real people's stories and feeling prepared to move from one module to the next is also important.

Important Discovery

In one of the interviews, the interviewee said something that resonated and encapsulated the need for a cohort like this: "We've been taught what to *do*, but we haven't been taught *who we are*."

Documentation

See Appendix I.

Prototype #2 – 2:42

Prototype Description

2:42 is a journey track and foundation course for churches and small group leaders to use in their contexts to foster and restore a sense of belonging and community. The prototype consists of a curriculum manual that walks leaders through what they could expect in each of the modules and the commitments their communities would make to one another as they use the curriculum.

Goldilocks Quality Strategy

The Goldilocks Quality Strategy is to give a full introduction to the participants about what they would find in the curriculum.

Research Question

The research question comes in two parts:

- What does “authentic” Christian community look like?
- How can we reclaim the church as a community?

Assessment Benchmark(s)

The assessment benchmarks of the prototype include:

- Participants come away with an understanding of what the community in Acts 2:42-47 could have looked like.
- Participants find value in the scope of the curriculum.
- Participants can integrate what they learn into their small groups or church communities.
- Participants would want to use the curriculum in their context.

Prototype Demographic Description

The interviewees were primarily working young adults between age 25 – 30 of Hong Kong, American, and Australian descent. Many have served on church staffs, as small group leaders, or have participated in small groups.

Summary

What Worked?

As the participants looked through the curriculum, one common theme that popped up is that the course is systematic in its nature. Every module builds well upon the previous one, laying a foundation for what is to come. The general design of the prototype was also praised, with some minor alterations suggested.

What Could Be Improved?

Most participants pointed out that there were some wording issues or that some ideas were not clearly communicated. There needs to be further refinement so that participants are not overwhelmed by information. It is also important to be clear about the expectations of the course's length. Content wise, the participants felt that the concept was complete, although some of the modules could be reworked or reordered.

What Matters to the Participants?

Many participants commented on the “Our Story” section as being important during the interview. Because the course was designed out of a personal experience, it gave a more personal touch to show the passion and heart behind the prototype. Participants also commented on how important it is for each of the modules to be backed by Scripture, showing that the modules are biblically mandated.

Important Discovery

Many participants mentioned they appreciate that the curriculum focuses on building a foundation and then building up from there. This ultimately begged the question of where our foundation is in our communities. Is it built on Christ? Or is it built on our own human structures and desires?

Documentation

See Appendix II.

Most Viable Prototype

As I consider the two prototypes, the one that appears to be the most viable is the first prototype: *Imago Dei*. Throughout the discovery and design process, the theme of one's identity has been found to be foundational to the formation of community. Jumping straight into "fixing" our communities bypasses the important foundational work of inviting individuals into a greater story.

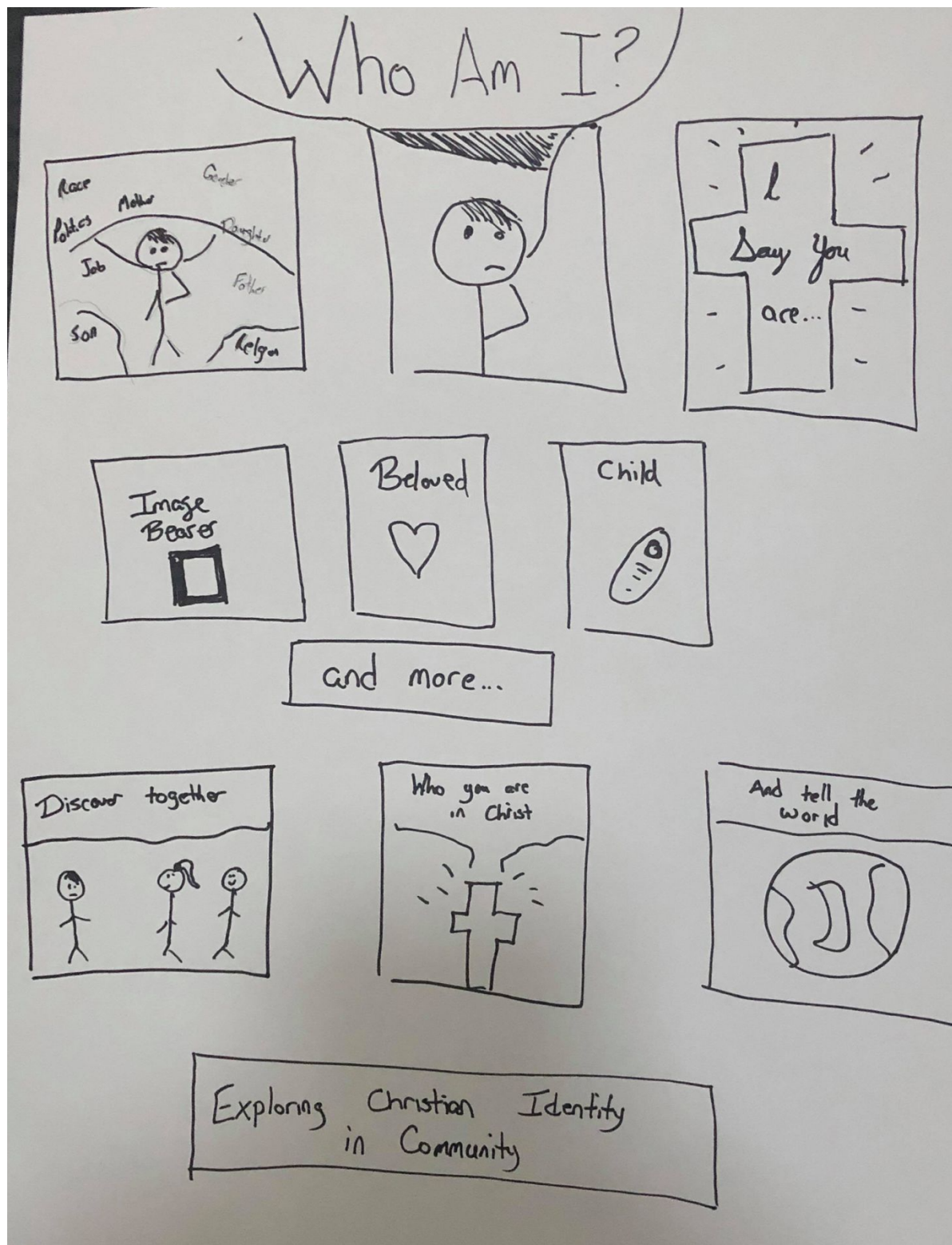
Lack of community within the church is a byproduct of a lack or misunderstanding of our common identity in Christ. As one of the interviewees mentioned, "We have been taught what to do, not who we are." The implications of Christian community stem from a correct understanding of who we are in Christ. Without Christ as our foundation, we end up building our collective identity on who the world says we should be. We draw our lines in the sand, build our group identities around class, nationality, ethnicity, gender, etc. and, more often than not, create homogenous communities.

2:42 is a curriculum I would like to pursue one day, but as a "next step" in the journey of our Christian identity. I can see it being a further iteration of the *Imago Dei* journey, but to move directly into it without the laying the groundwork of identity would only further the problem. I started this journey with the desire to reclaim the church as a community. Through the process of discovery and designing prototypes, I have discovered that the first step to this journey is to first reclaim our identity in Christ *in the context of community*. We were created *in* community, *by* community, and *for* community. From there, we can further explore what it means to live the Christian life as we work to recapture the sense of belonging and community within our churches.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I – PROTOTYPE #1 – *IMAGO DEI*

STORY BOARD



RECRUITING SCREENER

Who do you want to talk to?	What <i>exact criteria</i> will identify the people you want to talk to?	What screening questions will you ask?
Small Group Leaders	Currently leads or has led a small group in the past in a church.	Tell me about the small group that you lead / have led.
Pastors	Currently pastoring or has pastored a church in the past.	Which church do you pastor?
Church Members / Attendees	Currently a member of a church or is attending a church.	Which church do you attend?
Mix of Men and Women	At least three men and three women	Gender: Male or Female
Recent High School Graduates	Has graduated high school in the last two years.	When did you graduate high school?
Range of Ages (18 to 60 +)	Two aged 20 – 35 Two aged 35 – 50 Two aged 50 +	How old are you?

Who do you want to exclude?	What <i>exact criteria</i> will identify the people you want to exclude?	What screening questions will you ask?
Minors	Less than 18 years old	How old are you?
Non-Church Attendees	Does not currently or has never attended church	Which church do you attend?

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Imago Dei Prototype Interview Script

Welcome

Good morning / afternoon! Thank you so much for taking the time to give feedback on the prototype I've developed. Today, I'm just looking for candid feedback on the product. Just to remind you, this interview is going to be recorded to review later, but everything will remain confidential. Your identity will be removed from any notes that are taken during the interview. Before we start, I also want to double check that you've signed the consent form.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Open-Ended Interview Questions

- What kind of work do you do?
- How long have you been doing it?
- What is your role there?
- What other roles do you have?
- What role do you think is most important for you?
- How does this role affect the way you see yourself as a Christian?

Introduction to the Prototype

The way that we understand our identity in Christ plays a role in the way that we see ourselves and the way that we build community in the church. Keeping this in mind, before we can establish community, we need to cultivate a collective identity that invites people to join their story with the greater story of God. As such, I'm working on creating a course that will attempt to help people understand their identity in Christ and how they connect to God's story. This is still a work in progress, so some things are not complete. I'm looking to test the initial ideas for the course, not you. As you take a look through the materials, I would invite you to think aloud.

Tasks

- Read through the brochure
 - What is your initial reaction to the idea?
 - What stands out to you?
 - What do you think is missing?
- Give the interviewee the course syllabus
 - Which modules stick out to you?
 - What needs to be clarified?
 - What should be changed?
 - Is this a course you would take? Why or why not?

Debrief

- What worked?
- What could be improved?
- What matters to you?

Thank you for your time. Your feedback is very important to me in developing this course.

PROTOTYPE DOCUMENTATION

BROCHURE



WHAT IS IMAGO DEI?

Imago Dei – “Image of God” – is a course that aims to explore the meaning and implications of Christian identity in the context of community.

The course aims to be a “journey of discovery” that encourages the participants to openly explore their own personal narrative, to parse how they have come to an understanding of their identity, and to explore how that relates to the grand narrative of God.

Preconceptions of one’s view of their self impacts their view of God and how they see their role as Christians will be explored.

*“Jesus came to announce to us
that an identity based on success,
popularity and power is a false
identity – an illusion! Loudly and
clearly he says: ‘You are not what
the world makes you; but you are
children of God.’”*

– Henri Nouwen



COURSE MODULES

MODULE 1: WHAT IS CHRISTIAN IDENTITY?

MODULE 2: WHAT IS MY NARRATIVE?

MODULE 3: WHAT IS GOD’S NARRATIVE?

MODULE 4: WHERE DO I FIT IN?

MODULE 5: SO WHAT?

MODULE 6: FINAL REFLECTIONS

KEY FEATURES

- Cohort model of 5-8 people
- Led by Lead Mentor
- Weekly meet-ups and discussions
- Inclusive retreats as part of the course structure

BOOKS AND MATERIALS FOR COURSE

- *The Cure* - John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, Bill Thrall
- *The Story I Tell Myself* - Peter Ash
- *The Inner Voice of Love* - Henri Nouwen

SYLLABUS

Imago Dei

SYLLABUS

Contents

Modules 1 & 2 - 01
Modules 3 & 4 - 02
Modules 5 & 6 - 03
Required Texts - 04

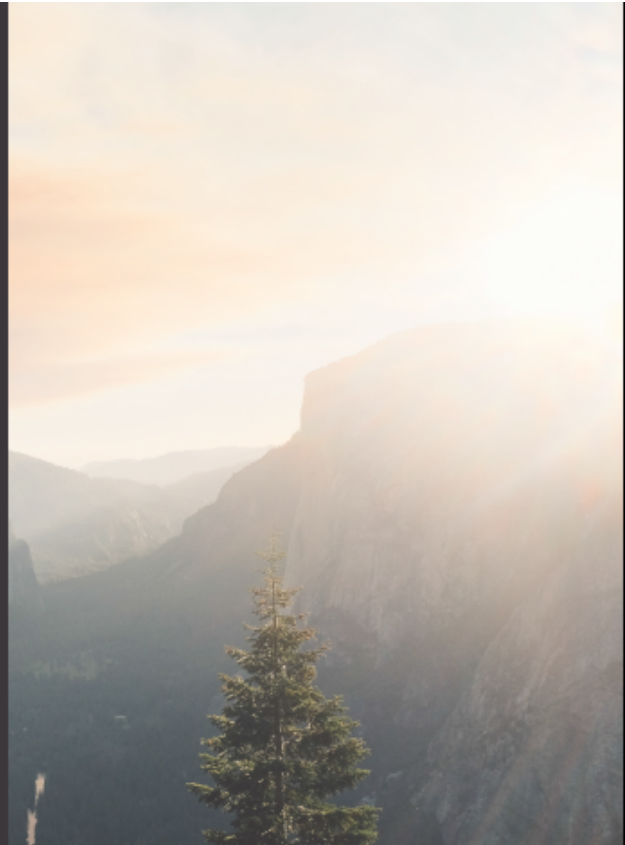
Module 1

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN IDENTITY?

Module 1 takes place over the course of a weekend retreat. The retreat serves as an introduction to the other members of the cohort as well as introducing the theme of Christian identity.

The retreat will focus on several main questions, including:

- What are my preconceptions of what "Identity in Christ" means?
- How do I see myself?
- What does it mean to find my identity in Christ?
- Why is my identity supposed to be rooted in Christ?
- Where is Christian identity found?
- Who am I in light of Jesus?



Module 2

WHAT IS MY NARRATIVE?

To understand one's identity, one must understand his or her own journey. Module 2 focuses on building a basic theology of narrative and the power that stories have in our lives. Recognizing our story – our past, our present, and our desires for the future – are instrumental in forming our identity.

Topics in Module 2 include:

- The Power of Story
- How the Past Informs Our Identity
- How our Communities Form Our Identity
- How Narrative Influences Our Worldview
- Charting Your Life Story
- Identifying the Themes of Your Life
- Sharing Your Narrative



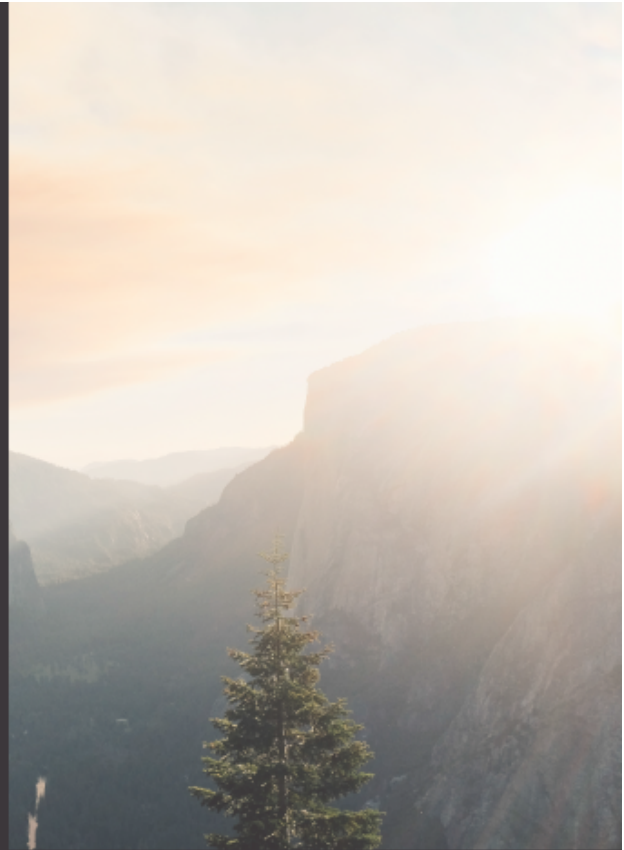
Module 3

WHAT IS GOD'S NARRATIVE?

Module 3 focuses primarily on identifying the major arcs of God's story. In charting God's metanarrative, His four-part story will be explored: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. In light of God's story, we can come to an understanding of how God has formed each of us.

Topics in Module 3 include:

- God's Four Part-Story
 - Creation
 - Fall
 - Redemption
 - Restoration
- Framing Our Storying within God's Story



Module 4

WHERE DO I FIT IN?

Having charted our individual stories and God's story, Module 4 seeks to ask the question of how we fit into God's grand story and how our own stories influence the way we see God.

Topics in Module 4 include:

- How does my story influence my perception of God?
- Who does *God* say I am?
- How does my story influence my perception of who God says I am?
- How do I fit into the broader Christian community?

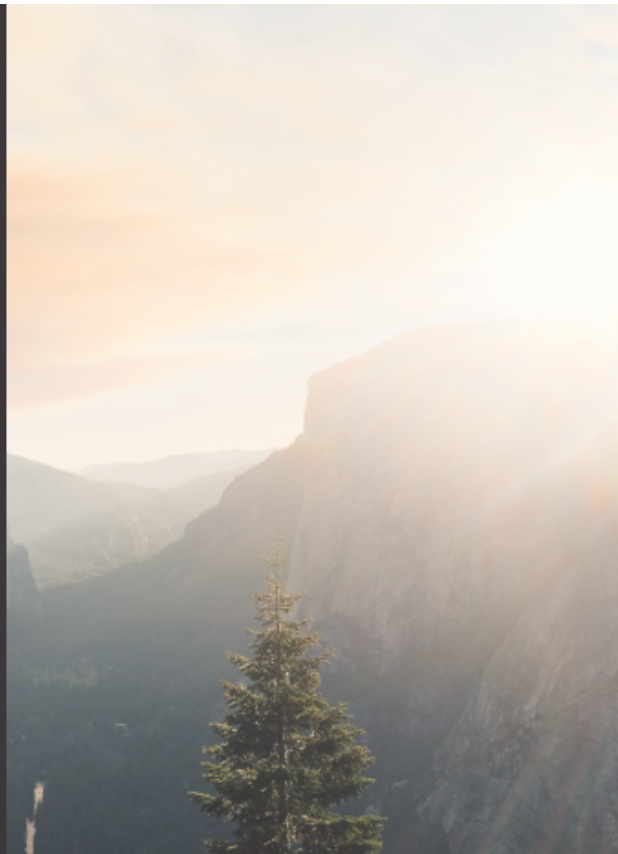
Module 5

SO WHAT?

After coming to an understanding of our Christian identity, the question of becomes, "So what?" How is our Christian identity supposed to transform our lives? What are the implications of what it means to find one's identity in Christ? While there are many paths one can choose, a handful of some of the key areas will be explored.

Topics in Module 5 include:

- Mission
- Vocation
- Church Participation
- Discipleship
- Reconciliation



Module 6

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND COMMISSIONING

After all is said and done, Module 6 is a time of personal and communal reflection on the journey the cohort has taken together through a final retreat. Each member of the cohort will be commissioned to live out their identity in Christ with one another and to reflect it in the world.

Topics in Module 6 include:

- What have you learned?
- What are the next steps?
- How do we continue to practice our Christian identity with one another?



Required Texts

The Cure - John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, Bill Thrall

The Story I Tell Myself - Peter Ash

The Inner Voice of Love - Henri Nouwen

TRUEFACE

THE CURE



What if God isn't
who you think He is
and neither are you

JOHN LYNCH | BRUCE McNICOL | BILL THRALL

The Story I Tell Myself

HOW SELF NARRATIVES
DEFINE OUR IDENTITY,
HOLD US BACK AND HOW
WE CAN CHANGE THEM

Peter Ash

Henri J. M. Nouwen

"One of the world's great spiritual writers." —*Christianity Today*

The
-
Inner
-
Voice



of
-
Love

A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom

INTERVIEW NOTES

Imago Dei - Prototype Feedback

Interviewee #1

What is your initial reaction to the prototype?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochure is simple • Clear and objective • Direct and to the point • Pictures communicate idea well • Syllabus is succinct and well-communicated
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modules are self-explanatory • Module 4 • Having questions in the description piques curiosity • Modules 1 & 4 appear similar • Lot of questions to ponder • Deep topics • Logical progression of topics
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images are the same in syllabus; can probably change them or different images
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity isn't something thought of often • We study a lot of who God is, but not much of who we are. • If someone brought up this topic, it would stir up a lot of thought. • Feels like there are a lack of resources on the topic of Christian identity. • <i>Life with Purpose</i> – “What’s our purpose in life?” • What’s the connection of identity and purpose? • We know our identity in real life, but it’s hard to know how our Christian identity connects to it – especially if you aren’t involved in church. • “We’re automatically part of a community in church, but I don’t see myself exactly where I should be yet.” • That’s also dependent on me exploring it.

Interviewee #2

What is your initial reaction to the idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable and interesting topic. • Inherent desire in humans to be part of community and understand how we fit into a larger divine narrative.
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course feels like a journey. • Modules build off of each other well. • As a participant, would feel encouraged to give my all. • Goal of course seems achievable.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to know more about the retreats. • More about what activities that will be incorporated into the course. • Provide a short synopsis or review of the books.
What worked?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting the topics as questions is intriguing. • Hope that the questions can be answered.
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rename “So What?” to “So What Now?” – promotes the idea of the journey cohorts are on. • Comes across clear in the syllabus on what the expectations are, but the brochure is not as clear. • From a design standpoint, color scheme and fonts in syllabus are better than brochure. • Use similar colors and fonts to create a more cohesive look.
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving each module feeling prepared to move on to the next. • Understanding identity may cause people to move at different paces. • Number of modules and how they are laid out would leave adequate space to process and grow. • Encouraging and authentic leadership would set the stage to enter the church with a renewed confidence in who Christ makes us through Himself

Interviewee #3

What is your initial reaction to the idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Really excited about it • Books seems interesting
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A at this time.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example of someone who has gone through this type of journey • Maybe own story; someone else's story • What does it look like to go through this journey? • Healing • Ministry time during the retreats about where our identities have been violated by others • Prophetic ministry – speaking into each other's lives
What worked?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles are clear • Book recommendations are solid sound interesting
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep an eye out for polishing titles and descriptions • Can take the narratives of people and not just God's narrative • Identify different narratives and how God intersects in their story
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having real people's stories and how God redeemed them would speak volumes • Seeing healing from people's pasts

Interviewee #4

What is your initial reaction to the idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive reaction • Feels like a comprehensive way to address Christian individual purpose and purpose within the body. • Like that it explores the larger kingdom story
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module 2 – loves the idea of the power of story and our overarching narrative • Module 6 – application; good that it isn't theoretical but that it tries to move into everyday life.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A at this time
What worked?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great design – succinct, to the point, soothing • Great quote in brochure • Asking the right questions • Breaking things down topically helps cohorts focus on learning truth systematically
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rephrase some of the language; comes across as too seminary-esque. • Some spelling errors • Add clarification on some questions; seems redundant in places • Clarify what is meant by “reconciliation” or give more leading points.
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing our eyes and attention back to the truth that God's story and ours are intertwined • We have inherent value & purpose

Interviewee #5

What is your initial reaction to the idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love the big picture goal is about God and community
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very organized and strategic • Accessible → seems anyone can lead others through the material, not just pastors.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
What worked?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Low Risk” for churches to try, so is attractive for church leaders
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include something about community in the title (e.g., “Imago Dei – Making Community through Understanding Christian Identity” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Helps people realize it is more than just a study on identity • Color scheme and graphics don’t catch attention
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would do this study in student ministry.

Interviewee #6

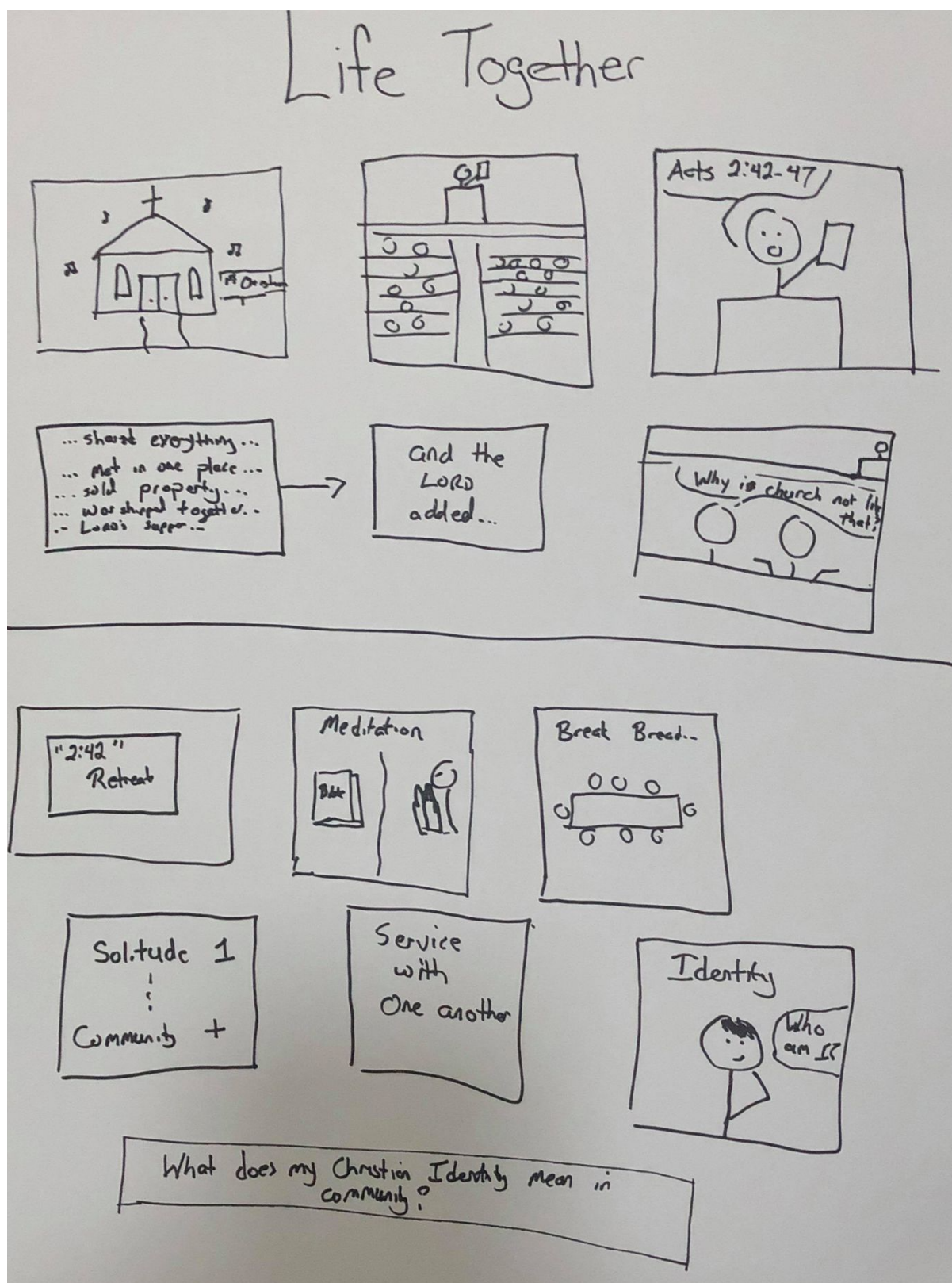
What is your initial reaction to the idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love the use of <i>The Cure</i>. • Great choice of texts • Nouwen is an amazing choice • Some of the visuals are cheesy, but serve their function
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well planned out and organized • Questions are imperative to the Christian walk and raise a sense of self-awareness and depth • Study on Christian identity is lacking in many aspects, so excited about it.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the Enneagram for Module 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has been useful to the interviewee in regard to helping them understand who they are
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use sources from people of color. • Order of the modules could be reworked <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Putting one's own identity first, then a discussion of God's identity, and then a talk about Christian identity bringing the two together. ○ Module One may not be the best to start with
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To live a life of integrity, worthy of bearing the image of God and honoring the same image in others. • To foster and nourish the wellness of others and bring them into the fullness of the understanding of themselves as image bearers.

OBSERVATION NOTES

- Interviewees appear interested as reading through the materials
- Thoughtful
- Causes the interviewees to reflect upon reading the module titles.
- “This isn’t something I’ve seen before.”
- “We are taught what to do, not who we are.”
- Some interviewees appear slightly emotional as they consider the implications of the course.
- “Course is strategic”
- “Systematic”
- “Love the concept of being on a journey”
- “Would use this in student ministry”

APPENDIX II – PROTOTYPE #2 – 2:42

STORYBOARD



RECRUITING SCREENER

Who do you want to talk to?	What <i>exact criteria</i> will identify the people you want to talk to?	What screening questions will you ask?
Small Group Leaders	Currently leads or has led a small group in the past in a church.	Tell me about the small group that you lead / have led.
Pastors	Currently pastoring or has pastored a church in the past.	Which church do you pastor?
Church Members / Attendees	Currently a member of a church or is attending a church.	Which church do you attend?
Mix of Men and Women	At least three men and three women	Gender: Male or Female
Recent High School Graduates	Has graduated high school in the last two years.	When did you graduate high school?
Range of Ages (18 to 60 +)	Two aged 20 – 35 Two aged 35 – 50 Two aged 50 +	How old are you?
Small Group Members	Currently attending a small group in a church.	Do you attend a small group at church
Former Small Group Members	Currently does not attend a small group	Do you attend a small group at church?

Who do you want to exclude?	What <i>exact criteria</i> will identify the people you want to exclude?	What screening questions will you ask?
Minors	Less than 18 years old	How old are you?
Non-Church Attendees	Does not currently or has never attended church	Which church do you attend?

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

2:42 Prototype Interview Script

Welcome

Good morning / afternoon! Thank you so much for taking the time to give feedback on the prototype I've developed. Today, I'm just looking for candid feedback on the product. Just to remind you, this interview is going to be recorded to review later, but everything will remain confidential. Your identity will be removed from any notes that are taken during the interview. Before we start, I also want to double check that you've signed the consent form.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Open-Ended Interview Questions

- What church do you attend?
- Are you part of a small group?
- What has your experience of community been like at your church?
- Where else have you found community?

Introduction to the Prototype

As part of the church, community is an essential part of our Christian life. We have experienced different levels of community within our churches. However, one theme that has been consistent in my research is that in some cases, our churches do not function as a community. In response to this, I'm developing a curriculum to be used as a journey track for churches to revitalize and recapture the missing elements of community they may face. This is still a work in progress, so some things are not complete. I'm looking to test the initial ideas for the course, not you. As you take a look through the materials, I would invite you to think aloud.

Tasks

- Read through the curriculum manual.
 - What is your initial reaction to the idea?
 - What stands out to you?
 - What do you think is missing?

Debrief

- What worked?
- What could be improved?
- What matters to you?

Thank you for your time. Your feedback is very important to me in developing this course.

PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

2:42

RECLAIMING THE CHURCH AS
A COMMUNITY

2:42 MINISTRIES



OVERVIEW OF THE 2:42 CURRICULUM

2:42 is a small group leader training curriculum that explores the implications of community found in the early church as described in Acts 2:42-47. It is a curriculum that builds upon itself with each module laying the foundation to the next.

Each module is titled as a statement that bears with it a commitment to a value in order to build community.

The curriculum contains nine modules that can be taken at a pace appropriate for your group:

- Module 1: Who Are We?
- Module 2: We are a Community of Joy
- Module 3: We are a Community of Love
- Module 4: We are a Community of Story
- Module 5: We are a Community of Unity
- Module 6: We are a Community of Space
- Module 7: We are a Community of Service
- Module 8: We are Community of Transformation
- Module 9: We are Family

*"THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES
TO THE APOSTLES' TEACHING
AND TO FELLOWSHIP, TO THE
BREAKING OF BREAD AND TO
PRAYER." - ACTS 2:42*

OUR STORY

2:42 has been a journey years in the making. It began with the feeling that something was missing in the local church. It was the realization that the church was saying one thing while its actions said the opposite. It was a culture that valued programs over relationships, uniformity over unity, and homogeneity over diversity.

Thus started a journey of discovery to unpack the question, "What is the Church?" Throughout this journey, we sought to discover the root causes of *why* the church is not the community or family it claims to be. We are still on this journey, but these are the insights we've discovered at this stage.

It's my prayer that as you, your leaders, and your congregations embark along this journey with us, that our churches will truly become the community and family we are called to be." - Dylan

MODULE 1: WHO ARE WE?

Module 1 serves as an introduction to what it means to be the Church. It begins with a retreat that serves as a reflective weekend on the implications of Acts 2:42-47 and sets the pace and expectations for what the cohort will experience throughout their training. It is also a means for church leadership to cast vision for what their particular church hopes to accomplish through the curriculum.

Key Questions

- Who are we as Christians?
- What is our church's story?
- What does it mean to be the "Church"?
- What are the values of Christian Community?
- What are the building blocks of Christian community?
- What are the barriers that stop us from achieving community?



MODULE 2: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF JOY

What does it mean to be "joyful"? Why is it so instrumental to building community? When we look at the early church, we see that joy was one of the foundations of its community life. Are our churches filled with joy today? In this module, we explore how to cultivate a community of joy.

Key Questions

- What is joy?
- Why is joy important?
- How do we cultivate joy in our communities?

MODULE 3: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF LOVE

Scripture teaches us that disciples of Jesus will be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). However, are we truly a community marked by our love for one another? What happens when we have people who are "unlovable" in our midst? Module 3 explores the concept of how love is present in the early church and throughout Scripture.

Key Questions

- What does the Bible teach us about love?
- How is love seen or not seen in our communities?
- How do we handle conflict with one another?



MODULE 4: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF STORY

Each member of our church has a story. We have a desire to be loved, and to be loved is to be known. In this module, we explore the power of story and narrative as a means of coming to a deeper knowledge and understanding of our small group members.

Key Questions

- What is your story?
- What is God's story?
- How has our past informed our identity?
- What are the themes in our lives?
- How do we share our stories?
- How do we journey with one another through our struggles?

MODULE 5: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF UNITY

We have a misconception that "unity" equals "uniformity" – that in order to be a community, God wants us to be exactly the same. However, Scripture teaches a completely different concept. In this module, we explore the implications of what "unity" entails.

Key Questions

- What is unity?
- What makes us unique in God's sight?
- How do we embrace one another's diversity?



MODULE 6: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF SPACE

"Space" does not just refer to a physical place. Rather, it is the all-encompassing culture we create within our groups and our churches. How we open our small groups for people to process their struggles, their fears, their joys, their questions, etc. says a lot about our community. In this module, we explore how to cultivate an environment that allows for people to be vulnerable.

Key Questions

- What is a "community of space"?
- Why is a "community of space" important?
- How do we cultivate a space for people to process the "hard questions"?
- How do we speak truth and life into people's lives in a spirit of love?

MODULE 7: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF SERVICE

An inherent (and often ignored aspect) of our community life is serving together. Whether it be through local outreach, international missions, or serving in church, we all have gifts as part of the Body of Christ we are expected to use. In this module, we look into the implications of mission for small groups.

Key Questions

- What is mission?
- Why do we serve?
- What are our gifts?
- How can we become involved in outreach?
- How can we connect with other groups to serve?

*DO NOT CONFORM TO THE
PATTERN OF THIS WORLD, BUT
BE TRANSFORMED BY THE
RENEWING OF YOUR MIND.
THEN YOU WILL BE ABLE TO
TEST AND APPROVE WHAT
GOD'S WILL IS—HIS GOOD,
PLEASING AND PERFECT WILL.
- ROMANS 12:2*



MODULE 8: WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF TRANSFORMATION

A key aspect of Christian theology is the idea of "sanctification" – the process of "becoming more like Christ." Transformation occurs in many ways facets, but each activity must be rooted in relationship with one another. Module 8 explores various spiritual disciplines, but in the context of communal relationships.

Key Questions

- How do we read Scripture in community?
- How do we pray together?
- How do we practice Sabbath together?
- How do we embrace solitude in community?
- What does it mean to "break bread" together?
- What does communal fasting look like?

MODULE 9: WE ARE A FAMILY

The final module ends with a charge to continue the journey of deepening community in our small groups. It is a time of reflection about the course and what the next steps for our communities will be. The journey isn't over. It is only beginning...

Key Questions

- **How have you and your groups been transformed through this process?**
- **What have been the big takeaways?**
- **What are the next steps?**



REQUIRED RESOURCES

Throughout the journey of this curriculum, we will make use of several resources. As you train together, you will go through the following sources:

- *The Cure* - John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, Bill Thrall
- *A Fellowship of Differents* - Scot McKnight
- *Life Together* - Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- *Faith in the Shadows* - Austin Fischer
- *Disunity in Christ* - Christena Cleveland
- *The Other Half of Church* - Michael Hendricks & Jim Wilder

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. - ACTS 2:42-47

INTERVIEW NOTES

2:42 – Prototype Feedback

Interviewee #1

What is your initial reaction to the prototype?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love the material layout. • Focus on community over the individual is great. • Easy to understand and anyone could lead people through the curriculum.
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material doesn't shy away from the topic of diversity. • Module topics are unique and not the typical topics.
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 2:42-47 connection is clear with each module to the interviewee, but not everyone may immediately recognize the connection between the modules and scripture. • Including Scripture in each module will show there is a biblical mandate behind each module.
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The phrase "progressive curriculum" in the overview may be misinterpreted as an association to "Progressive Christianity." • Could be a turn off to some if they associate the curriculum with Progressive Christianity.
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "Our Story" section is important; it helps to communicate the importance and passion behind the curriculum.

Interviewee #2

<p>What is your initial reaction to the prototype?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good follow-up to <i>Imago Dei</i> series. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Builds from individual identity to collective identity. • Reminded of Life-on-Life discipleship previous church used to do. • Is not a “graduation” type of course, but one that triggers the start of a lifelong journey. • Likes the symbolic icon of concentric circles. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Relates to the core of our theological conviction and Spirit, an inner circle of our values and permeating out as our expressions like ministries, services, etc.
<p>What stands out to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational topics of joy and love serve as an anchor for the rest of the modules. • Majority is not explicit about the “doing” – which is what a lot of discipleship programs are based on. • All of the modules are aimed at transforming the mind and the heart where the outcome will <i>lead</i> to the doing. • How long is each module intended to be?
<p>What do you think is missing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modules don’t explicitly talk about what “teaching” looks like in community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Part of Module 8? • Module 7 – concept of “everyday missions” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Servitude and missions as an informal but all-pervasive way of life ◦ Check out <i>Life on Mission</i> – Dustin Willis ◦ Check out <i>The Perfect Blend</i> – Chris Conrad • Module 5 – may be meaningful to also ask, “What are some things that challenged a community’s unity for you in the past?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Maybe wait until Module 6 when the concept of a safe space is established.
<p>What could be improved?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue font in the headings – maybe change to gray • Typo in Module 8 • Typo on author’s name

What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Would normally gravitate to Modules 7 & 8, so the buildup of our “being” before we talk about transformation and the expression is a good change.
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do we pursue the curriculum in a way that doesn’t result in people keeping to surface level platitudes if people do not consider their group a “safe space”?• If I see the curriculum as a platform for transformation in a community that has already experienced hurt and conflicts, would Module 1 immediately bring out some disagreements?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How do we lay the foundation of a safe space without diving into Module 6 from the get-go?

Interviewee #3

<p>What is your initial reaction to the prototype?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love the idea of this kind of course for small group leaders. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Need in the church to train those who are helping build up church members. • Makeup of the church goes beyond the staff or leadership team. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In personal experience, small group leaders often form cliques. ○ Leaders spend time with other leaders they are friends with; more outgoing leaders are often the “favorites”; we are not seen as one body that needs all of its parts to survive.
<p>What stands out to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name of the curriculum immediately gives the feeling that the course will be biblically based. • Modules are set up well to build upon one another and end with a goal in mind. • Module One sets the stage well to move forward. • Key questions for each module are good.
<p>What do you think is missing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module 7 asks the question, “What are our gifts?” and this could possibly be brought up earlier so they know what they bring to the table as they go through the rest of the modules. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Knowing their unique strengths may be beneficial for building confidence going forward.
<p>What could be improved?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wording in the first paragraph of the “Our Story” could read smoother.
<p>What matters to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent focus on following what Scripture has to say on each topic. • Important to feel like you’re fitting in to a part of God’s much bigger plan rather than just feeling like you have to do try your best to be all of these things. • Sense of grace is also important for when we fail.

Interviewee #4

What is your initial reaction to the prototype?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visually, the prototype looks great (bright, attention catching). • Margins are tight. • Further refine so it isn't as packed.
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The module content seems to cover well all aspects of the "church as family."
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept seems pretty complete.
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the wording needs to be refined in the "Our Story" section.
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "How do we embrace one another's diversity?" • Cultivating a community of space to aid vulnerability. • How to become involved in outreach.

Interviewee #5

What is your initial reaction to the prototype?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout and the themes of each section is cohesive and each module clearly builds on one another. • Really likes the premise of the entire concept.
What stands out to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure of how these modules are implemented is unclear. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Example: Texts at the end of the curriculum; are they required or recommended? • What are the timelines of each module?
What do you think is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity on expectations/format. • Feels vague. • Some of the wording needs to be clarified.
What could be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typos on the first and last pages. • Do a deep review of grammar/sentence structure.
What matters to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely important for leaders to have their own training or guides to this content. • Easy to implement something in a way it wasn't designed.

OBSERVATION NOTES

- Moments of confusion as participant read through curriculum.
- Obvious need to reread certain sections.
- Nodding head as reading through curriculum.
- “Systematic”
- “Foundational”
- “Could be a good follow-up to *Imago Dei*”
- Curious as to follow-up
- Need to know expectations on time and commitment to course
- “A lot of typos”
- “Our Story” is really important

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