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Healing Through Homecoming Rediscovering the Hospitality of Jesus as the Mission Tone of the Church

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

HEALING THROUGH HOMECOMING

REDISCOVERING THE HOSPITALITY OF JESUS AS THE MISSION TONE OF THE CHURCH



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

W MATTHEW RICE

PROJECT FACULTY:

DR. MINDY SMITH

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2023



CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

W. Matthew Rice

has been approved by
the Evaluation Committee on March 15, 2023
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

Evaluation Committee:

Primary Project Faculty: Melinda Smith, DMin

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Evaluation Committee Referee: Clifford Berger, DMin

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Dedication

While many have been a critical part of this journey, one person stands above the rest: my beautiful wife and partner in life and ministry, Bryn. Thank you for the sacrifice and encouragement to help make this educational journey a joy. And thank you for the inspiration over the last 29 years. Your love for Jesus and people, including those others often considered strangers and overlooked, is a continual reminder of the leveling power of the Cross and God's gracious kindness for all. You reflect the hospitality of Jesus more than anyone that I know.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to have studied with an amazing cohort. I learned so much from each one of you.

Thank you to Loren Kerns, Clifford Berger, Heather Rainey, Jennifer McNab, and the entire DMIN team, whose professionalism and enthusiasm made the experience a joy. And a very special thank you to Mindy Smith, whose care for our peer group enhanced the journey and mitigated many challenges by always being available to offer stellar, on-time advice and help. You're the best!

What an honor to study with Professor Leonard Sweet. You teach and impart with the brilliance of a first-rate scholar, the foresight of a prophetic voice in our times, the granular wisdom of a practitioner, the heart of a pastor, and, most importantly, the hunger and humility of a fellow follower of Jesus. Thank you for always reminding us that it's all about Him.

Thank you to my Life City Church staff and congregation. You have been my study partners along the way, as we continue to learn about hospitality in the laboratory of everyday relationships. I am honored to serve as your pastor.

Thank you to Tori Thatcher, who provided expert editing advice for the book portion of the project.

Finally, thank you to those around my table. My Mom and Dad, who always model the kindness of God. My wife, Bryn, whose love and partnership is my greatest possession. My children, Jordan, Sara, and Josiah, and their spouses, whose ardent support over the years, have encouraged me more than you could ever know. And to my grandbabies, Ezra, Israel, Elisha, and Elizabeth, for whom I pour out my heart, life, and prayers, knowing that the greatest movements of the Holy Spirit are not in our past but in our future. Go and change your world.

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Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called ‘Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts’. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using ‘just enough’ feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

This Project Portfolio addresses the following NPO: In an increasingly hostile culture, there is an opportunity to incarnate the hospitality of Jesus to a world in need of God's embrace; in doing so, the Church will rediscover and release the mission tone of Jesus, a kindness that heals as it welcomes people home and leads to Spirit-empowered turns. The key insight of my research is that the coming of Jesus is the ultimate expression of ancient hospitality, and when God's kindness permeates the mission tone of a church, it creates an environment where the gospel is heard, the Spirit's power is released, and broken people find their way home to a running Savior whose embrace heals and restores. I serve as lead pastor of Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio. The project includes a proposal and sample chapters for a book, *Healing through Homecoming, Rediscovering the Hospitality of Jesus as the Mission Tone of the Church*, and a podcast that will eventually be integrated into an eight-week discipleship class. The book will provide a systematic approach to the topic and create a space where the possibilities of hospitality as healing can be explored in more of a linear fashion. The podcast will provide a resource where the subject can "breathe" and "stretch out" through conversation and discussion.

Introduction

The Journey

This Project Portfolio includes a proposal, an introduction, and five sample chapters for a book, *Healing through Homecoming: Rediscovering the Hospitality of Jesus as the Mission Tone of the Church*. The book explores divine hospitality as expressed by the father in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 14). It focuses on ten “welcome points” in the story that provides a lens through which the Church can discern the welcoming work of the Holy Spirit in their contexts so that they can respond to a critical mission question: “What is Jesus Doing (WIJD) in our world?” This project addresses the NPO: In an increasingly hostile culture, there is an opportunity to incarnate the hospitality of Jesus to a world in need of God’s embrace; in doing so, the Church will rediscover and release the mission tone of Jesus, a kindness that heals as it welcomes people home and leads to Spirit-empowered turns. As for the rationale in choosing the book and podcast: both will eventually be integrated into an eight-week discipleship class for Life City Church, where I serve as lead pastor. The book will provide a systematic approach to the topic and create a space where the possibilities of hospitality as healing can be explored in more of a linear fashion. The podcast will provide a resource where the subject can “breathe” and “stretch out” through conversation and discussion.

DISCOVERY

At the beginning of the research journey, I served as the lead pastor of Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio - a suburb of Columbus. In the months leading up to the first semester, our church (along with others) experienced the unprecedented challenges associated with the Covid shutdown. When suddenly unable to meet physically, we scrambled to find ways to connect and care for our congregation. As we sought ways to move our Sunday gatherings online, I realized we were overly dependent on weekly corporate gatherings for spiritual growth. Although I am an ardent believer in the importance of weekly services, the sudden disruption revealed the need to broaden our approach to discipleship.

When I began the research journey, I felt it would be beneficial to explore new ways to create intentional spaces for discipleship in our church community. Although our congregation had small groups, many of the members were not engaged in them, and I sensed we needed to build a more robust discipleship approach that would facilitate deeper spiritual formation. The initial NPO stated: Our local church, while having clear paths to experience worship, connection, assimilation, and volunteer service, lacks a compelling and effective path for discipleship and spiritual formation.

Discovery Workshop

On October 29, 2020, I met with diverse stakeholders for the Discovery Workshop, including twelve men and women aged 19 to 68. We focused on the question: “How can our church build a better

culture of discipleship that is missional, relational, and incarnational, to include identifying critical elements of spiritual growth formation, the role of community, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the most effective means of format and delivery?"

The group agreed that there is often a lack of attention to discipleship and the process to facilitate it in local churches. And we discussed practical matters as to how to create space for mentoring relationships that would help navigate busy schedules while, at the same time, not sacrificing necessary doctrinal depth/teaching and relational connectivity.

I anticipated focusing on logistics; but surprisingly, much of the discussion focused on what the participants saw as the heart of discipleship: the need for meaningful connection (and sense of belonging) to God and other believers; transformational relationships with spiritual mentors; and validating relationships, where spiritual growth is modeled and encouraged. Participants agreed that they grew spiritually when challenged to grow in an environment where the Scriptures were faithfully taught and applied and where they felt safe, seen, and loved.

One-On-One Interviews

I interviewed a pastor of a growing church, a church consultant who had served as a Dean of Students at a Christian College, and a School of Discipleship instructor at a large church on the West Coast. Key insights included: discipleship is not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach; training leaders/mentors to assess where people are in their development and life stages is key to building relational connections vital to growth; it is vital to maintain Christ-like humility; and the scope of discipleship should include the communities our churches serve as we take an incarnational approach to ministry.

Key Discoveries

The information provided in the Discovery Workshop and interviews shared several themes. Churches must balance formality with informality. Discipleship should follow a systematic approach, where believers learn Scriptures and spiritual disciplines, but it must also be relational. Furthermore, spiritual transformation is highly dependent on safe mentoring relationships, where what is taught in the classroom is modeled and worked out "at the table" of real-life connections.

In the spring, I completed an NPO Topic Expertise Essay, *Making Disciples Marked by a New Testament DNA, and Biblical and Theological Foundations*. It explored scriptural foundations, historical development, and contemporary applications of discipleship. And while I felt like I was making progress while gleaning valuable insight to help deepen the discipleship culture in our church, I also sensed the topic was too broad for the DMIN project. So, I prayed for wisdom about narrowing my focus. My prayer was soon answered in an unexpected way.

Refining the NPO

In June 2021, after attending the Advance in Canon Beach, I found myself stuck in airports for several days. I missed a flight due to unusually long lines in Portland and experienced an unplanned

overnight stay at the Hilton, numerous flight delays, and the cancellation of my connecting flight out of Dulles International. At one point, I ended up in line with hundreds of tired and frustrated would-be passengers, waiting to talk to an airport representative about how our trips would be rerouted.

While standing in line, I suddenly felt a strong impression that if I paid attention, God would speak to me through what I was seeing and experiencing. As I watched the airline representatives engage with customers, I noticed they responded to the frustrated travelers with kindness. They didn't get upset. They listened. One came down the line offering snacks and drinks. And a text from the airline quickly followed, containing a link with information about complimentary hotel rooms and meal vouchers. I sensed the Holy Spirit speak to my spirit, that what I was seeing was a picture of what the Church must become in a post-Covid world.

When I returned home, I had one final assignment to close out the semester: an integration paper explaining how what I had learned in the first year impacted my ministry context. I shared what I saw at the airport and connected it to what we studied the first year. Several weeks later, Dr. Sweet provided feedback on my paper. He commented on the airport experience with three words that opened my eyes to a new paradigm about God and mission. He wrote: "Hospitality is healing." And he added: "As your story conveys . . . we tend to forget that the healing comes in many forms, but most powerfully and simply sometimes as just hospitality." Dr. Sweet's words resonated deeply in my spirit, and I sensed the leading of the Holy Spirit to refine my focus toward a particular aspect of New Testament discipleship: the healing power of hospitality.

DESIGN

Design Workshop

On October 26, 2021, I met with a diverse group of stakeholders in our local church to discuss and explore the following NPO:

NPO: In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith, and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers into a purposeful journey.

The stakeholders included an executive pastor, an associate pastor, a worship leader, two pastoral care ministers (couple), two small group Leaders (couple), and two young adult church members. We began the session by discussing the theological basis for hospitality. Then, I told the group that, through a series of brainstorming activities, we would work through questions about how we, as a local congregation, could prayerfully and practically work with the Holy Spirit to enhance the culture of welcome in our community. Questions included: What are we doing now? Who are the "strangers" we are called to reach? What can we do (that we haven't explored before)? And how does hospitality release the healing presence of Jesus?

We considered that, in the midst of a culture that is often hostile towards faith, the Church often reacts with hostility. However, hospitality is the correct "Jesus" response. And while kindness will not necessarily cure all cultural hostility, it will release healing. Participants in their 20's and 30s noted a growing "broken perspective of God" among many in their generation. And they resonated with the idea that robust and creative hospitality through the local church, where the kindness and welcome of Jesus are manifested in practical and straightforward ways, could facilitate the healing of a generational "broken perspective" of God and His Church.

We considered three concept pitches for potential prototypes. First, a hospitality ministry that would focus on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we would go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door. Second, A "Love Our City" Ministry that would create and sustain specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community. Third, an 8-week discipleship course designed to help stimulate a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate a book and a companion podcast to cast the vision and teach the concepts, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches.

One-On-One Interviews

Next, I conducted four one-on-one interviews that resulted in helpful insights. A Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality and author of several leading books about Christian hospitality stated that creating a hospitality culture involves asking: "When have I felt like a stranger?" She noted that by starting with this question, we open our hearts to experience the welcome of God in broken places. This, in turn, opens our hearts to the flow of God's empathy towards others so that we can show His hospitality from the place of our own healing.

A Professor of Church History, and an author of a book on practices of early Christianity that changed the world, stated that despite enormous challenges, Christianity grew at a steady rate of about 40% per decade for roughly 270 years, from about 5000 people to about 5 million. He said that one of the key reasons for this steady growth was Christian hospitality, which was unique against the background of Roman culture, which despised the poor and needy.

An experienced pastor shared: "All my life, I was taught about Jesus washing feet was to display his humility. But I think it was really to show hospitality." And a Pastor of a large church with a well-known healing ministry who oversees an international Christian relief ministry added, "What would happen if all those who claim to be Christians showed Christ's compassion to those around them, regardless of what those in need looked like, where they came from, or what they believed? Broken hearts would be healed, and broken perspectives, as you put it, about God would be restored."

MVP (Most Valuable Prototype)

After considering the results of the discovery workshop, I concluded that a book and a companion podcast was the most valuable prototype (MVP). I reasoned that the book would allow for a

systematic approach. On the other hand, a podcast provides a resource where a subject can "breathe" and "stretch out" through conversation and discussion. In addition, a podcast can be updated more easily than a book, which will provide a means to keep the topic fresh and relevant as our church grows.

On Tuesday, April 12, 2022, I met with a test group of seven church members to review two prototypes. The participants ranged in age from 20 - 79 and included men and women. All agreed that the book chapter was engaging and clearly explained hospitality and why the church needs to cultivate it. They also agreed that it set the stage for future chapters to address how to move forward in hospitality.

There were two important discoveries in the workshop. First, the topic resonated on a deep level. Participants all agreed that the Church must become more hospitable, agreeing it is central to the heart and mission of Jesus and, therefore, a vital element of discipleship. They also agreed that it has been sorely lacking in many western expressions of Christianity.

As for additional research pertinent to writing the book, I met with a former executive Vice President of church engagement at Zondervan, who later served as the director for publishing at Willow Creek and currently advises writers, assisting them in the publishing process. We discussed my initial writing plan, and he suggested a few self-publishing options. He also recommended I attend an upcoming Writer's Conference later that week in Michigan to learn more about the book-writing process and to connect with other writers, editors, and self-publishing professionals. Later that week, I attended the Maranatha Christian Writer's Conference in Norton Shores, Michigan, where I participated in sessions on the various options for publishing, including self-publishing, editing, and marketing processes, and learning how to craft a book for an intended audience.

DELIVERY

I set the following benchmark for the DMIN Project: A working outline, an Introduction, and three sample chapters of the book. The book's subject matter will be refined and completed in the months following graduation, with a target publishing date in September 2023. As for the podcast, I set a benchmark to produce a companion podcast accessible in February 2023. The podcast is currently accessible on the Life City YouTube channel.

Experience and Learning

When I first sensed the nudge to apply for the program, I was excited and hopeful that the experience would be life changing. It exceeded my expectations. The time with Dr. Sweet and the cohort, studying and learning together, was priceless. I am forever marked.

During the program, I experienced a significant transition in ministry. When I started the program, I was working as a bi-vocational pastor. Midway through the second year, our church merged with another congregation. Due to the merger and new growth, we tripled in size in the months to

follow. It became necessary to step out in faith and leave my job with the Department of Defense, where I had worked for thirteen years, to pastor the growing congregation full-time. During this season, it was a blessing to be in a cohort with so much experience and expertise and to sit in weekly chats with Dr. Sweet, whose timely wisdom was so valuable.

Writing the book was a stretching experience but one for which I am grateful. While working at the DoD, I wrote professionally for nearly 13 years. But writing a book was a new venture. As can be the case with something new, I spent a lot of time slogging through the process of learning to present a topic in 50,000 words, doing my best to keep it from feeling laborious while ensuring it was engaging, resonant and readable. Along the way, I was fortunate to find some amazing professionals to help with the development and editing process.

As for viable alternatives to approaching the NPO, the other two prototypes that I considered have great potential. And while they are not a part of this project, we have begun to work some of the ideas into the ministry of our local church.

Throughout the process, I learned that the stakeholders in our congregation resonate with the call to minister healing through hospitality. And I discovered how central the idea is to the grand story of Scripture. Through Jesus, God's kingdom is constantly coming to our world. Our job is to recognize the ways he is working and join him. And as we join him, we will find ourselves swept up into the story of hospitality that God is writing.

Next Steps

I will continue to research the effects of hospitality and healing. To this point, the book has focused on emotional healing. However, recent studies at Stanford University suggest that hospitality can also accelerate physical healing. I am excited to continue to research the amazing power of God's kindness. As for the next stages of the book's development, I will engage stakeholders to review sample chapters as they are written, complete the manuscript and send it for editing (May), secure a forward and endorsements (June), finalize cover art and descriptions (June 30), and send the package to the publisher (July). I hope to have the book published in September 2023.

I will continue to evaluate the project, gather data, and make further improvements after launch, ensuring that the book is put in places where it is easy to find, including online spaces like Amazon. The book will initially be self-published; however, I will remain open to and pursue traditional publishing possibilities.

Final Reflection

We tend to welcome others to the extent we are secure in our relationship with God as our Father. The more we experience the hospitality of Jesus, the more our hearts heal. And the more secure we become, the more we are open to love strangers that Jesus is welcoming home. When we receive the hospitality of Jesus for ourselves, it softens our tone and sharpens our mission to love like Jesus. As I have studied, I have experienced a fresh revelation of who Jesus is to me and those in my world. My heart has been healed by his kindness, and I have been challenged to share that

hospitality with others. I pray that Jesus would be glorified through this project and that His kindness would result in a million homecomings.

Doctoral Project

Presentation of the Project

The project submission is organized as follows: mock-up covers (front and back of the book), a book proposal, an introduction, and five sample chapters.

The companion podcast includes four episodes and is available on the Life City YouTube channel. An image relative to the podcast is in Appendix E.

Assessment of the Project

To assess the project, I established several benchmarks for the book: to meet the phases of a detailed development plan in a timely manner; to provide a sample chapter of the book to stakeholders in a feedback session, where they would judge the chapter against the following factors: readability, resonance, practical call to action, theological soundness, and whether they felt the writing led them closer to Jesus; to deliver as a final project, an outline of the book, and a fully edited version of an introduction and three sample chapters. Finally, I set a goal to sell 50 copies of the book by September 2023.

I met all phases of the development plan, which included meeting with an expert in the publishing field, attending a writer's conference, securing a self-publisher, and meeting with stakeholders to review a sample chapter. The stakeholders provided encouraging and constructive feedback that I relied upon when creating an outline and the final chapters submitted for the project. I also worked with a professional editor. And while my initial goal was to finalize an introduction and three sample chapters of the book, I completed an introduction and five sample chapters. The goal of selling 50 copies will be completed post-graduation.

As for the podcast, I set a benchmark to interview pastors and laymen about God's kindness and to make episodes available on the Life City Church platforms by February 2023. I met that goal. Four episodes are available on the Life City YouTube channel.

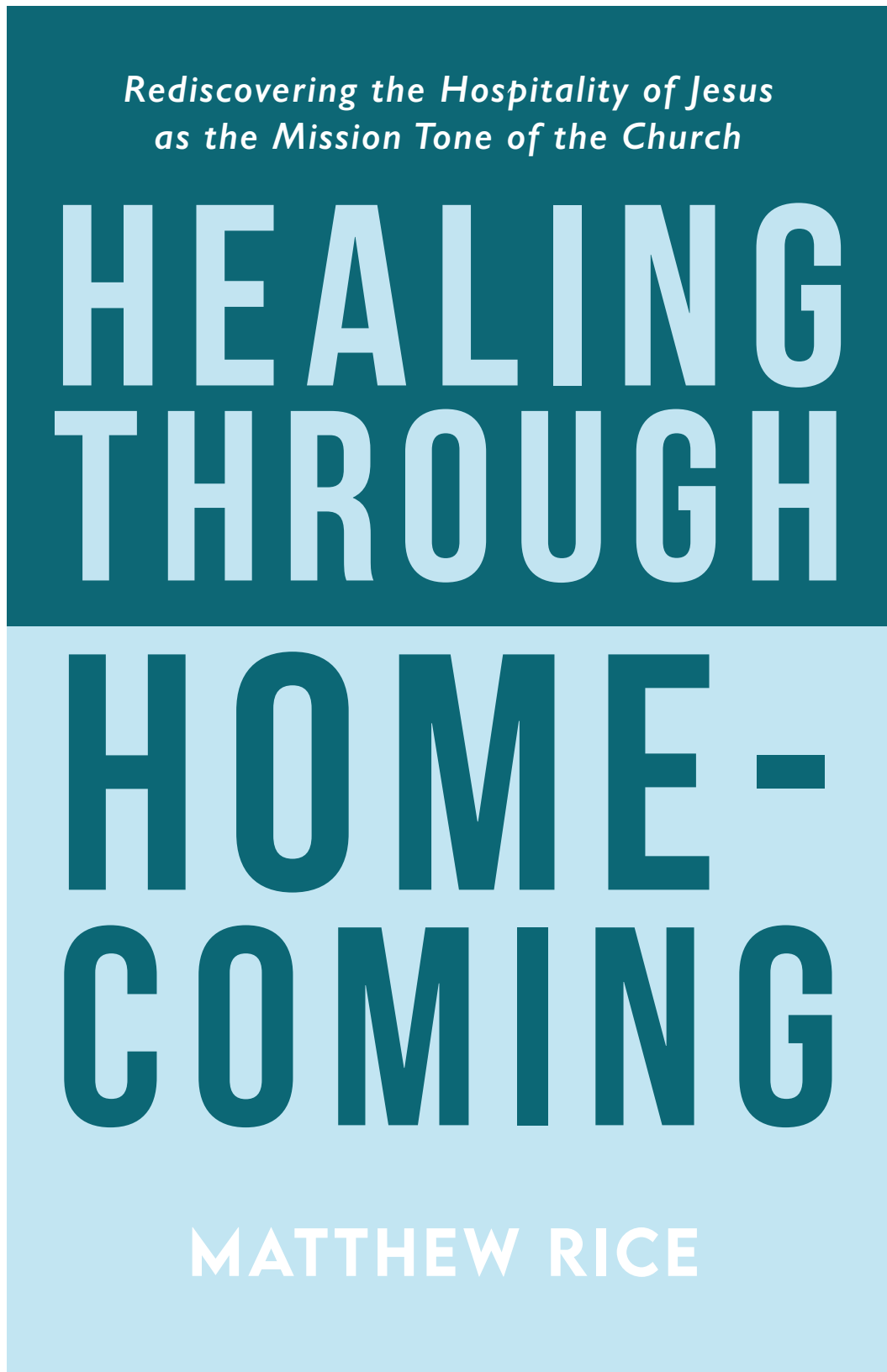


FIGURE 1: BOOK COVER MOCKUP (FRONT)

WE DON'T NEED A BETTER STRATEGY; WE NEED A BETTER WAY

Exploring the connection between the ancient practice of hospitality and healing, Matthew Rice presents the story of the Prodigal Son as a template of God's hospitality. In a world where the Church often meets the hostility of culture with more hostility, there is an opportunity to release healing through hospitality. How we live and share the good news must be the fruit of a fresh incarnation of Jesus, where His kindness and hospitality permeate all we become and do. Through biblical insights balanced with practical applications, *Healing through Homecoming* demonstrates how God's welcome can become the mission tone of the Church in a world longing for the beauty of heaven's soundtrack.

"This is a stand in endorsement. Rioriae sitent omnihicite eossimolenet fugit latus, veliquibus doluptati to imo eata as eaque lab il ipsaperiae."

— ENDORSER NAME A little description about the endorser

"This is a stand in endorsement. Samet aborepe ruptatur sequam, conem illandanda vella expedit aturemo luptasitis eles voluptatur sum."

— ENDORSER NAME A little description about the endorser



MATTHEW RICE

Matthew Rice serves as the lead pastor of Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio—a growing, Spirit-filled, multicultural Church with a heart to welcome people home to Jesus. Matt and his wife, Bryn, are parents of three grown children and Pop-Pops and Gigi to four grandbabies. He holds degrees in theology (MTS) and Law (JD) and is currently seeking a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree at Portland Seminary.



FIGURE 2: BOOK COVER MOCKUP (BACK)

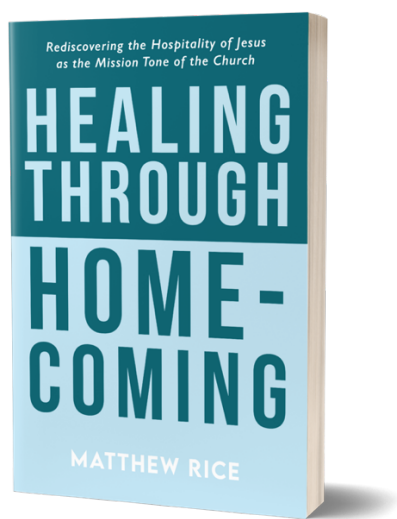


FIGURE 3: BOOK IMAGE

BOOK PROPOSAL

Healing Through Homecoming *Rediscovering the Hospitality of Jesus as the Mission Tone of the Church*

SNAPSHOT:

Healing through Homecoming uncovers how the story of a homesick son sets the stage for a better understanding of our relationship with God and compassionately engaging with the people in our communities.

Exploring the connection between the ancient practice of hospitality and healing, Matthew Rice sees in the story of the Prodigal Son a template of God's hospitality. In a world where the Church often meets the hostility of culture with more hostility, there is an opportunity to release healing through hospitality. How we live and share the good news must be the fruit of a fresh incarnation of Jesus, where His kindness and hospitality permeate all that we become and do. Through biblical insights balanced with practical applications, *Healing through Homecoming* demonstrates how God's welcome can become the mission tone of the Church in a world that longs for the beauty of heaven's soundtrack.

OVERVIEW:

"Hospitality is God's welcome into abundant life." – Amy Oden

The incarnation of Jesus was the greatest manifestation of hospitality in history. Jesus came as a host, looking for a world of strangers who were weary from their journey, welcoming them home—healing physical bodies, broken hearts, and marred perspectives of God. In Jesus, the Kingdom was coming, and the Kingdom was coming through a manifestation of God’s welcome. Jesus was the ultimate expression of Divine hospitality—a kindness that welcomes, heals, and transfigures as it leads to life-altering turnarounds. Through Jesus, God opened his door to a world of strangers that includes all of us.

The Church is called to be a fresh incarnation of Jesus in every generation, to share His grace and love with those in need, and help weary travelers find their way home. Today, we look for ways to protect our homes from strangers, but in ancient times, showing hospitality to strangers was considered a sacred duty that made society safer and more humane.

As society becomes more polarized and isolated, research shows that the influence of Christianity in America is trending downward. The Pinetops Foundation predicts that by 2050, over 40 million youth could walk away from the Christian faith. Statistics like these are hard to absorb, but sometimes we need a shaking to bring us to the point of a rediscovery of who God is.

During times of adversity, the Church often looks for a better strategy. But sometimes, we don’t need a better strategy; we need a better way. When Jesus said, “I am the way...” he made it clear that the way forward for the Church is always found in a person.

In *Healing through Hospitality*, Matthew Rice shares that rediscovering God’s hospitality is the key to sparking a new Jesus movement. Through looking at how Jesus showed hospitality through the lens of our current culture and the climate of Christianity in the US, Matt gives readers a hopeful roadmap for how to experience the hospitality of Jesus in their own lives and share it with those who need it most. Using the story of the Prodigal Son, Matt demonstrates how we can experience and become God’s welcome in ten specific ways that lead to healing.

In the Prodigal’s story, we find our own story. God’s kingdom is constantly coming to our world. Our job is to recognize the ways He is working and join him. And as we join Him, we will find ourselves swept up into the story of hospitality that God is writing – a story that brings healing in our own lives and those with whom we share God’s welcome.

AUTHOR BIO

While pursuing a career as a rock guitarist at eighteen, Matt had a powerful experience with the Holy Spirit where He felt called to preach the gospel. Since then, he has preached around the world, seeing thousands born again, baptized in the Holy Spirit, and healed. He serves as the lead pastor of Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio—a growing, Spirit-filled, multicultural Church with a heart to welcome people home to Jesus. Matt and his wife, Bryn, are parents of three grown children and Pop-Pops and Gigi to four grandbabies. He holds degrees in theology (MTS) and Law (JD) and is currently seeking a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree at Portland Seminary.

FEATURES AND BENEFITS

Readers of *Healing through Homecoming* will:

- Better understand the ancient practice of hospitality and how it can be translated in the modern age
- Gain a new perspective on the gospel by looking at Jesus' teachings and miracles through the lens of hospitality
- Recognize themselves in the story of the Prodigal Son and find renewed hope in their restoration story
- Discover ways to minister to the people in their community that reflect the loving-kindness of God
- See what the church can be to the broken and lost people trying to find their way home

COMPARATIVE TITLES

- *Gentle and Lowly* by Dave Ortlund

Gentle and Lowly explores God's heart for sinners claiming that the gospel flows from God's deepest heart for his people, a heart of tender love for the sinful and suffering. *Healing through Homecoming* also explores God's heart toward sinners, but Matt Rice studies the topic through the story of the Prodigal Son and the lens of homecoming.

- *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* by Rosaria Butterfield

In *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, Rosaria Butterfield shares about her experience of God through radical, ordinary hospitality. *Healing through Homecoming* similarly looks at the power of hospitality in the modern world; however, Matt Rice explores the topic from a historical, theological, and institutional standpoint in addition to the practical benefits of ordinary hospitality.

- *The Prodigal God* by Timothy Keller

In *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller uses the parable of the Prodigal Son to help readers experience the gospel in a new light. Matt Rice similarly uses the story of the Prodigal Son to help readers better understand God's unending love and kindness. *Healing through Homecoming*, though, translates the parable for individual meaning and what it means for the Church in the post-Christian age.

- *The Post Quarantine Church* by Thom S. Rainer

The Covid-19 pandemic permanently changed the Church, which is what Thom S. Rainer explores in his book *The Post Quarantine Church*. Specifically looking at ways that church leaders can adapt amidst all the changes, *The Post Quarantine Church* is a guidebook for what to do when the old ways don't work anymore. Similarly, *Healing through Homecoming* looks at the ways in which traditional church and evangelical practices aren't working and considers the question, "What now?" *Healing through Homecoming* differs

in that it is a book not just for church leaders but all individuals who feel like the church is not playing the role it was meant to play in the world.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Introduction

After a missed flight due to unusually long lines, an unplanned overnight stay at the Hilton, numerous flight delays, and the cancellation of my connecting flight home, I was tired, to say the least. While standing in line with other frustrated and weary travelers, I suddenly felt a strong impression that if I paid attention, the Holy Spirit would speak to me through what I was seeing and experiencing. I paused and started observing my surroundings. As I watched the airline representatives engage with customers, I noticed they responded to the frustrated travelers with kindness. I saw that the representatives had a singular focus—to help travelers get home.

I sensed the Holy Spirit saying that what I had seen was a prophetic picture of the way He is shaping the Church for the post-Covid world. It's no secret that the Church is facing unprecedented cultural storms, a shortage of laborers (with the slow return of members and volunteers to church), and a spike in tired and angry travelers trying to find their way "home." The lines are long, and conspiracy theories abound. But we're not called to drama. We're called to help people find their way home.

In this book, we'll continually engage with two questions: (1) How does God's hospitality heal us? (2) How does God want to use us to heal others as we partner with Him in showing hospitality?

PART 1 – THE MESSAGE OF HOSPITALITY

Chapter 1 – The Story of Hospitality

The story of the Prodigal Son is the story of God's hospitality. More than any other parable that Jesus told, it lays bare the passion of God's heart toward broken people. And while it is considered one of the most brilliantly crafted short stories of all time, it was not shared for the purpose of admiration. It was told for the purpose of transfiguration.

The story contains ten welcome points, where the father welcomed his son home. As we will see throughout the book, the ways the father responded would have been considered surprising at the least and, in some cases, even scandalous. Here, Jesus paints a picture of grace that heals and restores through welcome. As we consider the distinct ways the father engaged with his son, we will see the multifaceted ways in which the Holy Spirit is welcoming us and others home today.

This story was told for the benefit of those who identify as the prodigal as well as those who share the characteristics of the older brother. Most likely, we will identify with each brother many times throughout the course of our lives. You see, for both brothers, the story is about the compassion of the father and his desire for them to fully come home.

We tend to welcome others to the extent that we are secure in our relationship with God as our Father. And the more we experience the hospitality of Jesus, the more our hearts heal, the more secure we become, and the more our hearts open to love the strangers that Jesus seeks to welcome through us. When we receive the hospitality of Jesus for ourselves, it softens our tone and sharpens our mission to express the love of Jesus to others.

Hospitality makes us feel fully loved and at home, not based on something we did or deserved but simply because you are welcome. Jesus, the author of this story and the author of our faith, invites us to join him in His ministry of hospitality. As we continually experience the power of His homecoming, he leads us to join him in the field, where he is constantly running to welcome a world of prodigals home.

Hospitality is not just the way we do our mission. It is the mission.

Chapter 2 – The Purpose of Hospitality

In the story of the Prodigal, Jesus describes the story of God’s redemption as a return home. In doing so, he suggests that the controlling metaphor for Divine redemption in the scriptures is a homecoming.

Home is a powerful concept that transcends time and culture. It is meant to evoke safety, security, comfort, and love – the place where we find our identity and purpose. But some have not had positive experiences with home. And perhaps you are reading these words with conflicted emotions, longing for home as a place of refuge but, either in the past or present, unable to find it. For many, “home” has not been a safe place. And the reason that’s so traumatic is because home was not designed to be a place of pain, neglect, or conditional belonging.

I have a theory that the longing for home is so universal because we are all trying to return to mankind’s original home, a place where we are intimately connected to our Creator. And the feelings we often attach to the nostalgic places in our lives—our childhood homes, playgrounds, or elementary schools—are expressions of something far more significant. A desire for a place for which all of our hearts ache.

Even amid struggle, there seems to be an enduring longing in all of us for a “home” that is a safe place. Jesus provides that ideal place for all of us. A place where in our return to Him, there is healing in the form of homecoming—a hospitality that welcomes and makes us whole.

In scripture, the Church is referred to as the house of God –the place where Jesus dwells and continually works to build an environment where the followers of Jesus extend the power of homecoming to a world of weary travelers.

Chapter 3 – The Tone of Hospitality

...the kindness of God leads us to repentance.

– Romans 2:4

As a young musician, I learned that you could perform the greatest song in the world, but if the tone is poor, nobody will want to listen to it.

The gospel is the greatest story ever told. But it is often hard to hear because the tone of the messengers sounds like anything but good news.

Tone matters in music. Tone matters in mission.

As I poured over the gospels, paying close attention to how Jesus interacted with people, I saw that he ministered with a tone of kindness. One can see the welcoming nature of Jesus everywhere throughout scripture. In many of the healing accounts, in addition to healing physical bodies, He also did little things that created environments where people experienced a sense of welcome—the kind of welcome that heals bodies *and* hearts. He healed lepers through touch. And he ministered to outcasts over dinner. It wasn't just what Jesus did; it was the way he did it that was compelling – preaching good news with a welcoming tone of kindness.

Paul writes that the kindness of God leads us to repentance, a word that means to turn. And when the Church leans into the kindness of Jesus, it taps into a tone that perfectly fits the gospel's message, a sound that leads to life-changing turnarounds.

PART 2 – GOD'S WELCOME

Chapter 4 – Seen

But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . .

– Luke 15:20

Welcome point #1: Divine hospitality sees us through the eyes of the Father.

It is tempting to rush the Prodigal's story. That's what I did for years when I read it, moving quickly through the father's movements in the field as I saw him running, embracing, and kissing his son. I blurred it all together. But in doing so, I missed crucial details, including the heart of the narrative—that the father first "saw" his son.

The father will run, embrace, and kiss his son. He will restore him with a robe, a ring, and sandals. And he will call for a fatted calf to be slain and for a great celebration. But first? He will *see* him.

Regardless of how muddy we are, one person always "sees" our true identity. And he runs to embrace us so we can see what He sees about us.

Home is where we are seen for who we are, not for what we've done.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we see people like God sees them. Proverbs 29:18 says that "Where there is a vision, the people perish." This passage is often cited when talking about getting a vision for an organization or one's life. But we can also apply it to how we see others. There is redemptive power in seeing broken people through the lens of the cross and the power of the resurrection.

The church that welcomes is the church that "sees."

If we are to be the church that welcomes people by "seeing" them, we must see through our Father's eyes and call people into a new identity in Christ. How do we know when we doing this well? We are there for people, even when they are not there for us. We care for people, even when they fail

to acknowledge our presence. And we walk with people through developing seasons, encouraging them, praying for them, and helping them to see who they are in Jesus. God's vision for prodigals transcends stigma, disarms shame, and conveys hope to all of us, regardless of how muddy we are on our returns.

Chapter 5 – Pursued

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and . . . he ran to his son.

– Luke 15:20

Welcome point #2: Divine hospitality pursues us faster than we can return to God.

Uncertain, insecure, vulnerable—this was how the Prodigal felt on his long walk home. Imagine his surprise when he sees his father running toward him—picking up the hem of his robe and running like a child. After everything the Prodigal has done, all the ways he tried to distance himself from his father, love and kindness are all he gets in return.

This is how God welcomes us. While we are still a long way off from Him, He pursues us with His love and kindness. Part of our brokenness is the lingering belief that we are not valuable enough to be pursued, especially if people knew what we've done or where we've been. But here, Jesus paints the picture of God as a father who knows our failures and still runs after us, who makes up the distance faster than we can return to Him, simply because He longs to be with us.

When we think about the presence of God, we often think about our desire to experience God's presence. But the Bible reveals a God who longs for *our* presence. We see evidence of this throughout Scripture. God walked and talked with Adam in the cool of the day. When Abraham was wandering and wondering about the promises of God in his life, God came and had dinner with him. When the nation of Israel was enslaved in Egypt, God came personally to deliver them through powerful signs and wonders. When it came time to save the world, God wrapped himself in flesh and blood and came to save. And on the birthday of the Church, the Holy Spirit came personally to rest on each individual follower of Jesus. One might say that in each example, God came because He was the only one qualified to do the job. That's true. But there is another reason. He came because he wanted to come. He came because He wanted to be with us.

Home is the place where we experience a running welcome.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we run to broken people – faster than they can return.

Chapter 6 – Embraced

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

– Luke 15:20

Welcome Point #3 – Divine hospitality embraces us at our lowest.

Part of our brokenness is a persistent notion that we are not worthy of God's embrace. We often look at our condition—how we are dressed, look, and smell after time in the hog-pit and our long journeys home. But Jesus paints the picture of God as a father who is not ashamed to embrace us

in our messiness and even to get messy himself. The prodigal comes home dirty, which means the father cannot help but get dirty in a passionate embrace. And isn't that what Christ did at the cross? He ran to us and embraced our sins, dirt, and tattered garments. Paul writes that he literally "became sin" for us so that we could be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It is not unreasonable to assume that the prodigal son had not experienced his father's embrace in a long time. Right or wrong, being held by Dad can be seen as something to be left behind on the complicated journey to manhood. At the least, we know that any intimacy with his father had broken down by the time he asks for an early inheritance, an act that amounted to saying, "I wish that you were dead." But at this moment, the father will reconnect with his son through an embrace. Touch speaks. It can speak where words fail. And through wrapping his arms around his son, the father sought to heal the heart, cleanse the mind, shift the atmosphere, and say, "I've got you."

According to Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a professor, and author who was a leading expert in Middle Eastern New Testament studies, there was a protective element to the embrace. Jewish law allowed for an early inheritance. However, it did so with strict caveats, including requirements prohibiting the sale of land while the father was alive. And yet, the son sold the land while his father was very much alive—still fit enough to run across a field and throw a party. Of course, a sale like this would have been public knowledge, and the salacious news would have spread like a brushfire throughout the surrounding community, shocking the sensibilities of all who heard.

Bailey suggests that the sale of the land would have called for a qetsatsah ceremony. The word qetsatsah was an Aramaic word meaning "to cut off." If a qetsatsah ceremony was enacted before the boy left for a far country, he is no longer welcome in the community to which he is returning. If he managed to escape before a ceremony could take place, he would have good reason to believe the villagers will enact one upon his return. By draping himself over his son, the father is saying to the son and everyone watching, "you are not cut off; you are embraced."

The truth is, the toxic cocktail of other people's negative opinions and our own raggedy, mud-caked sense of unworthiness can make us feel like we are strangers in the very place where Jesus welcomes us. All of us, at times, feel like a stranger to the things of God. And often, the church is the last place we want to be because it can be so unwelcoming, fueling our sense of unworthiness. But the father's embrace shows that the church should be a safe, welcoming place.

Home is a warm embrace when weariness, loneliness, and shame have been our only companions.

As the Church, we tap into the Spirit's tone when we extend God's embrace. The Church should be a place where prodigals are welcomed and protected when they are at their lowest, reminding them that Jesus has taken their shame and they don't have to carry it anymore.

Chapter 7 – Heard

And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

– Luke 15:21

Welcome point #4: Divine hospitality listens, especially to those who haven’t been heard in a long time.

That the father listened is the most underappreciated part of the story. I reviewed a dozen Bible commentaries and couldn’t find a scholar that mentioned it. To be fair, the passage doesn’t explicitly state that the father “listened.” But the evidence that he listened is there. The son expresses his belief that he is not worthy of being called the father’s son. And the father responds by calling for the best robe, a signet ring, and sandals for his feet. In upcoming chapters, we will explore the significance of these objects and see that each communicates the idea of a total reinstatement as a son in the house. The father’s response shows that he was listening intently.

This “listening point” is the central transition point in the story. The father listened and immediately moved from showing acceptance to acts of restoration. Seeing, running, embracing, and kissing were ways of saying, “You are accepted here.” But after the father listened to his son’s speech, he shifted into the next gear and called for a robe, a ring, and new sandals. These are more than tokens of acceptance. These are acts of restoration; things that say: “You are not just welcome here; you are at home here. You are not a guest; you are a son.”

Listening is an essential part of God’s hospitality both to and through us. When we are heard, we experience healing in those places where old wounds tell us that we are not valuable, not worthy, or not enough. As we become increasingly aware of God’s desire to hear us, our prayer becomes more joyful, relational, and confident. And the more confident we become in prayer, the more we focus on others. Those who experience the healing that comes from being heard naturally become “listening missionaries” toward others, eager to share the unique healing power that comes from being heard.

In *Giving Blood*, Leonard Sweet cites Ralph Lewis, who notes of the 125 incidents of Jesus’ encounters with people, “roughly 54 percent of those encounters were initiated by the hearers, where Jesus responded to His audience’s questions, objections, doubts, and welcomed their involvement.” In these instances, Jesus listened to broken people before ministering to them. It seems listening—in and of itself—is a ministry that brings healing.

Home is being listened to even when the world around you tries to silence you. Healing through homecoming means intentionally listening to the unheard and reminding them that their voice matters.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we listen to those who feel unheard.

What if we became the Church of the listening room? A place where we provide listening ears to those who have been told their voices don’t matter.

Chapter 8 – Clothed

“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him.”

– Luke 15:22

Welcome point #5: Divine hospitality clothes us in the father’s garments.

What is significant about the “best robe?” Craig Keener, Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, writes, “The best robe in the house would belong to the father himself.” By calling for his robe, the father sends a message: When you see this kid come down the hall or across the fields, you are to treat him like you would treat me.

To this point in the story, the father has acted in ways that tell the son, “You are accepted here (seen, pursued, and embraced). But after listening, there is a pivot in the story from acceptance to restoration, where the father moves toward giving him back his original status. It is one thing to be accepted; it is another thing to be restored.

Much of our brokenness is rooted in false identities that we have adopted because we don’t know who we are. Here, the father called for the best robe—his own robe. And by clothing his son in his robe, he was healing the shame that caused him to look elsewhere for his identity.

One can’t help but think of the seminal story of shame and covering found in the third chapter of Genesis, Chapter 3. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, and they became conscious of their own nakedness. They immediately covered themselves with fig leaves and went into hiding. But God finds Adam, and when he does, he asks him a question: “*Who told you that you were naked?*” (Genesis 3:11).

The God who interrupts the “death” sentences of prodigals will step into the narrative, take back the pen, and talk to Adam about his nakedness. He will not deny his failures, but he will take “what is” and weave it into a hopeful story of “what will be.” God will tell Eve that her seed will eventually crush the head of the serpent. And then He will stop talking and call for a robe – and invoke the power of a redemptive image that heals.

“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21).

...which brings us back to the story of the Prodigal. When the father calls for the best robe to cover his son, he takes back the pen and writes a hopeful new chapter to what had been a tragic story. To the original listeners, the image of being clothed in a wealthy Father’s robe would have communicated several “healing” ideas—a restored status, the invitation to play, and the healing power of celebration.

Home is being covered in the finest garments, having our shame replaced by inherent worth and belonging. Healing through homecoming is recognizing that there is more than enough of the Father’s robe to go around.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we clothe people in Jesus – inviting them to find their identity in Him so they can walk in a restored status, where play and celebration lead to new chapters.

Chapter 9 – Trusted

But the father said to his servants, “Quick! . . . Put a ring on his finger . . .”

– Luke 15:22

Welcome point #6: Divine hospitality trusts us even when our pasts should disqualify us.

In the story of the Prodigal, the father calls for a ring to be given to his son. But this is no ordinary ring. It is a signet ring used in ancient times to direct money and assets. In those days, when people with wealth desired to make purchases or enter contracts, they would dip the face of their signet rings into warm wax. And then, they would press the ring onto a document that formalized the transfer. The seal created by the ring was final and binding.

The Prodigal took an early inheritance into a foreign land, where he squandered it in wild and careless living. This kid has shown that he cannot be trusted with money. And now, the father calls for a ring, giving him the authority to direct the family wealth.

You talk about the worst credit risk in the history of stories and literature. I can't think of an example close to the financial trainwreck Jesus described. Dave Ramsey would be appalled. And yet, the father does the unthinkable—he shows hospitality to his son by welcoming him home with a ring. He trusts his son to represent him; the trust he extends communicates to his son that this is where he belongs. He has been marked as redeemed, empowered, and worthy.

We have all felt unqualified at one time or another. And often, our pasts whisper in our ears that we have no right to be ambassadors for God's kingdom because of how we've missed the mark in our lives. But when we return home, God gives us His signet ring. Not only have we been saved by Him, but we've also been empowered to walk in God's love on earth—to bring other people home and empower them through God's love. God has entrusted you with His image, His mission, and His love. When He looks at you, He doesn't see your resume. He sees the seal. He sees that you belong to Him.

Home is being trusted with the family ring, which reminds us that failures should not hold us back from embracing the plans and purposes God has for us.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we help people grow in their callings. Everyone has a calling to fulfill and gifts to steward. We are tempted to disqualify some because of their past. But in the story of the Prodigal, we see that rings trump resumes. While helping people grow into their callings certainly involves discipleship and maturity, we must be careful to create cultures of empowerment. Welcoming people home involves getting them back into the family business, reminding them that Jesus has placed a ring on their finger so they can release the riches of heaven by serving others.

Chapter 10 – Sent

“Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”

– Luke 15:22

Welcome point #7: Divine hospitality sends us on a journey to discover and live out our purpose.

What is significant about the sandals? Craig Keener points out that “slaves did not normally wear sandals, though they carried and tied a master’s sandals.” And he observes that this amounts to the father saying, “No, I won’t receive you back as a servant. I’ll receive you only as a son.”

With each item of clothing, Jesus provides images that speak to total restoration.

God sends us out as his children to represent Him on this earth. Despite our past failures or sin, He doesn’t wish to hide us in the back until He isn’t ashamed of us anymore; He sends us out immediately to share the love of Jesus.

We see this many times in the New Testament as Jesus heals people’s hearts and bodies. He tells them to go out and share the good news with people in their community. Most of the time, the people He healed were social outcasts – strangers. But that is the beauty of the gospel: no hierarchy or power on earth holds a candle to the righteous acceptance of the Father.

As a pastor, I’ve met many people who didn’t feel ready to share their faith. They felt that because they weren’t as mature as others, they weren’t ready to share what God had done for them. But the reality is that you are an expert on God’s impact on your life. And your testimony is often a more powerful witness than the most sophisticated theological arguments.

Home is about being fitted with shoes that free us to fulfill God’s call to welcome others home.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we fit prodigals with new shoes that tell a new story – the story of redemption and restoration in their lives.

Chapter 11 – Fed

“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast . . .”

– Luke 15:23

Welcome point #8: Divine hospitality feeds our bodies and spirits.

Restaurants are great, but there’s something about a homecooked meal that is incomparable. The fact that it is a gift, an act of service from the host, and you can taste the time and effort they spent making the meal—there’s nothing like it. The Prodigal Son went from desiring the slop the pigs were eating to having his father make him a homecooked meal with his prized calf.

The fattened calf was an animal that was carefully looked after for some special occasion, and its use here shows the father felt there could never be a more important event. This displays even more the love and kindness of the father. After not being able to share a meal with his son for a long while, he decided their first meal back together under the same roof would be the best of the best.

Community is built around tables; connections are made while sharing food. Eating together has been a form of hospitality and connection since the beginning of time. Ancient Jewish hospitality customs included feeding the guest. This was one of the first requirements before you could even ask their name or where they were from. We experience so much healing and life through eating, and when we eat together in the community, we feed our bodies and our souls.

Jesus had many miracles involving food, including feeding the five thousand—He fed every man, woman, and child, and there were still leftovers. This shows how deeply He cares about us, our needs, and making sure we are living abundantly.

Home is sharing a meal with people who love you. Healing through homecoming is inviting others to share a meal with you.

As the Church, we tap into the Spirit's tone when we extend the Lord's table.

Chapter 12 – Celebrated

“Let's have a feast and celebrate.”

– Luke 15:23

Welcome point #9: Divine hospitality celebrates.

The Bible is full of Scripture that talks about God rejoicing over us and calling His followers to celebrate. In fact, Jesus' first recorded miracle was at a party—turning water into wine. Jesus cares about celebrations and bringing people together to connect with each other.

The father knew it wouldn't be a true homecoming without a celebration.

Celebration is an often-overlooked practice within Christianity. In Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, he said, “Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees.” When we fail to celebrate, we are more prone to experiencing the self-righteous religious monotony that the Pharisees and the older brother experienced.

Celebration and reflecting on the joy of our faith and God's goodness break cycles of self-righteousness and self-pity that we might get trapped in.

Home is about being celebrated.

As the Church, we tap into the Spirit's tone when we throw the party.

Chapter 13 – Defended

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

– Luke 15:31-32

Welcome point #10: Divine hospitality defends the defenseless.

A party breaks out. But it is eventually broken up by an irate older brother. The story ends with the father on the porch, pleading with the oldest son to celebrate his brother’s homecoming.

For the Pharisees, who are represented by the older brother in the story, this is a call to repentance. Just like the older brother in the story, the Pharisees self-righteousness fill their hearts with self-pity and indignation at the lack of punishment and shunning shown to sinners. Of the older brother, Ted E. Bowling writes, “Just like these Jewish religious leaders, the elder brother was living and judging by the letter of the law, not by its spirit. By all appearances, the elder brother was righteous, but inside, where a person’s character forms, he was teeming with hypocrisy and sin.” For those of us who have been a part of the Church for some time, if we’re not careful, our hearts may become embittered toward others trying to find their way home amidst brokenness. Pride and self-righteousness can sometimes keep us from fully realizing the kindness of our Father, even to the point of blocking other people from experiencing home through the Church.

I wonder if we are sometimes angry because we have not adequately experienced God’s welcome for ourselves? Perhaps we are more like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son than we care to admit, whose failure to welcome his little brother home was rooted in his failure to fully embrace his father’s welcome for himself. He didn’t consider that everything his father possessed was already available to Him. Unfortunately, we are often perceived as irate and unwelcoming to the world we have been called to reach with the good news of Jesus. Our ways don’t always reflect the nature of Jesus. And we often are angry, meeting the hostility of culture with more hostility.

But through the father’s response of defending his youngest son, we see another example of how we experience healing through homecoming. The father wasn’t keeping track of rights and wrongs; he wasn’t tallying the deeds of his sons to see who came out on top. The father welcomed both of his sons, allowing them to experience all he had. Not only does he defend the youngest son in response to his eldest’s complaints, but he also invites his eldest to participate in the celebration.

Home is a safe place where we are defended. Healing through homecoming is encouraging others no matter where they are on their journey.

As the Church, we tap into the tone of the Spirit when we remain grateful for God’s mercy in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Conclusion

To be accepted is one thing. But to be welcomed home is everything.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we see the father reinstate and fully redeem his son despite the son's past mistakes. Through the ten welcome points in the story, we see our own redemption story. We are seen, pursued, embraced, heard, clothed, trusted, sent, fed, celebrated, and defended through God's welcome.

As we continue to experience the power of home, we will meet other travelers along our way who may be lost or may not know they'll be accepted upon their return. As the Church, we should reflect God's welcome to everyone we encounter, demonstrating that they can be forgiven for their past mistakes and welcomed home to a place where there is complete restoration.

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Healing Through Homecoming

Rediscovering the Hospitality of Jesus as the Mission Tone of the Church

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Introduction

I was supposed to be at home. Instead, I was in a long line at the airport in Washington, DC, hoping somebody could help me get back to Columbus, Ohio.

The last twenty-four hours had been a mess—a missed flight due to unusually long lines in Portland, an unplanned overnight stay at the Hilton, numerous flight delays, and the cancellation of my connecting flight out of Dulles International. As a result, I found myself in line with hundreds of tired and frustrated would-be passengers, waiting to talk to an airport representative about how our trips would be rerouted.

As we bonded in our frustration, many travelers became quite animated. Some floated conspiracy theories, wondering whether awful weather in Cleveland, the "official reason" given for the delay, was legitimate. The sense that we were being played for profit was palpable and growing.

There is nothing more enticing than a good conspiracy theory, and I, too, began to wonder whether the weather was that bad in Cleveland. But to be honest, the reason for the delays didn't matter much to me. I was more concerned with the pressure of a deadline.

The purpose of my trip had been to attend an academic advance in Cannon Beach, Oregon. I was nearing the end of the first year of a doctoral program at Portland Seminary, where I was studying Semiotics, Church, and Culture with Dr. Leonard Sweet and a cohort of pastors and church leaders. Now that the advance was over, I had one last task to close the semester: I had to write a paper explaining how what I had learned in the first year impacted my ministry context.

At that time, I was a bi-vocational pastor, working for the Department of Defense by day and serving as a lead pastor during the evenings and weekends and any other time I could eke out. Extra time was hard to come by. I had requested three days off work (after the advance) to ensure I had enough time to complete the assignment. But now, those days were being spent slugging through airports. I was feeling the crunch.

While standing in line, I suddenly felt a strong impression that if I paid attention, God would speak to me through what I was seeing and experiencing. I paused and started observing my surroundings. As I watched the airline representatives engage with customers, I noticed they responded to the frustrated travelers with kindness. They didn't get upset. They listened. One came down the line offering snacks and drinks. And a text from the airline quickly followed, containing a link with information about complimentary hotel rooms and meal vouchers.

As I got closer to the service desk, I watched as booking representatives took the time to hear and respond to each person's story. They spoke respectfully with a young man who had been deployed to Iraq, assuring him that they would get him on his way as soon as possible. They calmed a teenage girl traveling alone, helping her find her way to the shuttle. And they located the luggage of the man who needed to retrieve his medicine. By listening, they entered each person's story and connected in a calming and reassuring way.

I saw that the representatives had a singular focus—to help travelers get home.

I eventually made it to the front of the line, where a representative kindly rerouted my trip. And then, I headed to a hotel for a few hours of sleep. I tossed and turned throughout the night. I couldn't stop thinking about what I had seen. And with each mental replay, I sensed the Holy Spirit saying that what I had seen was a prophetic picture of the way He was shaping the Church for the post-Covid world.

It's no secret that the Church is facing unprecedented cultural storms, a shortage of laborers (with the slow return of members and volunteers to church), and a spike in tired and angry travelers trying to find their way "home." The lines are long, and conspiracy theories abound. But we're not called to drama. We're called to help people find their way home.

It took another sixteen hours, but I finally returned to Columbus. Thankfully, I was able to complete the paper quickly. I simply shared what I saw at the airport and related it to what we studied the first year.

Several weeks later, Dr. Sweet provided feedback on my paper. He commented on the airport experience with three simple words that opened my eyes to a new paradigm about God and mission. He wrote: "Hospitality is healing." And he added: "As your story conveys . . . we tend to forget that the healing comes in many forms, but most powerfully and simply sometimes as just hospitality."

At that time, I was familiar with the passages in the New Testament that speak to the importance of hospitality, such as 1 Peter 4:9 "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling" (NKJV). And I knew that Paul went so far as to make hospitality a requirement for church leadership (see 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7-8). I could see that hospitality was crucial to the Church's DNA and mission, but the idea that God *heals* through hospitality was new and intriguing.

I began to ask myself questions.

Are there other places where the scriptures mention hospitality? If hospitality heals, what does it heal, and how does it heal? To what extent does healing play in our spiritual journey as disciples of Jesus? And what effect would a focus on Spirit-empowered hospitality have on the mission of making disciples and reaching our communities?

I dove into the scriptures, books, and teaching videos—anything I could find—to search for streams that might lead to rivers of revelation. I soon discovered that hospitality was a rich, theological tributary that flows through the story of Scripture. I saw hospitality as an ancient practice embedded into the culture of the biblical patriarchs. It was an unwritten social contract where people were expected to welcome traveling strangers into their homes to care for them during their journeys.

Today, we look for ways to protect our homes from strangers. But in nomadic cultures, showing hospitality to strangers was considered a sacred duty that made society safer and more humane. Hosts would see strangers coming down the road and invite them to stay in their homes. They would then provide food and protection. In some cases, they would even minister healing, binding up wounds that the traveler or his livestock had suffered along the way. Once the traveler was refreshed, the host would send the traveler on his way.

While hospitality involves showing love to friends, in its purest form, it is about showing love to strangers, an idea that has always been close to the heart of God. In the Old Covenant, the strangers were foreigners in the nations surrounding Israel, about whom God said: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33-34). And in the New Testament, the word translated hospitality is a Greek word, *philoxenia*, which literally means to “show love to strangers.”¹

But what rocked me the most was something I had never seen before about Jesus—that the incarnation was really the ultimate expression of hospitality. I had never looked at the arrival of Christ through the lens of ancient hospitality. Once I saw it, I couldn’t unsee it. Jesus is hospitality personified. Suddenly, the pieces of the Jesus story began to come together in a fresh way that restoked the fires of passion for God and compassion for people. Through Jesus, God opened his door to a world of strangers to welcome them home.

Amy Oden, a professor of Early Church History and Spirituality who has written extensively on biblical hospitality, notes in her book *God’s Welcome* that the ministry of Jesus was the Divine expression of hospitality and that the best way to describe it is simply as “God’s welcome.” Oden writes: “Gospel hospitality is God’s welcome into abundant life, where all our welcome is rooted.”² And, as she further explains, this welcome permeates every facet of our world:

God's welcome happens every day, in big and small ways. There is no place in our lives that God is not at work, welcoming us into abundant life. Jesus says it again and again, "The reign of God is near!" We might translate it, "God's welcome is right here!" We can live in God's welcome, not just at Church, not just in Bible study, but in our everyday lives, in work and play, in joy and sorrow. God's welcome is, at its base, our experience of God's grace, pulling us ever deeper into God's own life.³

Jesus was a host, looking for a world of strangers who were weary from their journey, welcoming them home—healing physical bodies, broken hearts, and marred perspectives of God. In Jesus, the Kingdom was coming. And the Kingdom was coming through a manifestation of God’s welcome. Jesus was the ultimate expression of Divine hospitality—a kindness that welcomes, heals, and transfigures.

The way Jesus ministered was revolutionary then and continues to be revolutionary today. Inviting in those who have been “othered,” taking care of the sick, engaging with people from different political and socioeconomic backgrounds, building friendships with a vast array of

¹ “G5381 - Philoxenia - Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV),” Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5381/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

² Amy Oden, *God's Welcome*: (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 6. Kindle Edition.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

people, feeding the hungry. His hospitality—marked by love and kindness—is what drew people to Him.

His body, the Church, is meant to be His expression on the earth, to share His grace and love with those in need. Some Christians and churches do this really well, but the church is often known for being exclusive, self-righteous, and hypocritical. In a world where the Church sometimes meets the hostility of culture with more hostility, there is an opportunity to release healing through hospitality.

The Pinetops Foundation, a Christian research organization, predicts that by the year 2050, over 40 million youth will have been disaffected from Christianity. That's over 1 million per year! And in December 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that the influence of Christianity in America is trending downward. According to the study, the number of self-identified Christians dropped 12 percentage points since 2012, from 77 percent to 65 percent.⁴ There is a significant movement away from faith among younger generations, particularly Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). Daniel A. Cox, a senior fellow in polling and public opinion at the American Enterprise Institute and the director of the Survey Center on American Life, writes:

In terms of identity, Generation Z is the least religious generation yet. More than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly more significant proportion than among millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent). Fewer than one in five (18 percent) baby boomers and only 9 percent of the silent generation are religiously unaffiliated.⁵

Statistics like these are hard to absorb. As a pastor who ministers to young people and believes that the most effective days of evangelism are ahead, these statistics are heartbreaking. But sometimes, we need a "shaking" to bring us to the point of a hopeful rediscovery of who God is.

I believe that part of what is driving the exodus is that our expression of faith has often been about everything but Jesus and, in many cases, angry and isolating. But there seems to be a growing hunger to experience the authentic presence of Jesus, including His heart and His ways, especially among emerging generations.

According to a new Barna Study, "77 percent of Teens in the U.S. are at least somewhat motivated to keep learning about Jesus throughout their lives."⁶ Just this week, reports from Asbury University show that a fresh revival is breaking out among the students. Currently, the movement appears to be growing unabated, with crowds spilling over into multiple chapels on

⁴ Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

⁵ Daniel A. Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America," Survey Center of American Life, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>

⁶ The Open Generation, How U.S. Teens & Young Adults Relate to Jesus, View the Bible, and Make an Impact (Barna Group, 2022), 16.

campus and reports of similar awakenings taking place at other universities. The meetings are simple, consisting of worship, heartfelt repentance, and a desire to experience the presence of God.

I believe this is a hopeful sign and a gracious invitation to experience a fresh move of the Holy Spirit that exalts Christ and embraces his ways. A movement that could stem the tide of the exodus as it releases the hospitality of Jesus and welcomes generations home.

When we experience God's hospitality, it brings healing, and the love of God to us becomes the love of God that ministers through us. We are called to represent the hospitality of Jesus to the people around us in need of God's embrace to welcome them home, and in doing so, we offer and experience healing and transformation. We can learn so much about divine hospitality through Jesus' teachings and actions. The story that he tells of the prodigal son particularly points to the ways that God's love welcomes and transforms us.

The Prodigal Son is a story about an proud young man who asked his father for an early inheritance. The son left for a foreign land, where he wasted the inheritance in wild living. He finds himself in poverty and feeding pigs for a living. He is so hungry the pig food looks appetizing, but he is not allowed to eat from the bag. In a moment of clarity, he comes to his senses and returns to his father's house. He doesn't expect much. He knows he has destroyed his relationship with his father and that things will never be the same again. But he hopes his father will hire him as a day worker. When he returns, he encounters a welcome he could never imagine. The father:

- Sees his son
- Runs to him.
- Embraces and Kisses him
- Listens to him
- Calls for the best robe to be placed on his shoulders
- Calls for a ring to be placed on his finger
- Calls for sandals to be placed on his feet
- Throws a party to celebrate that his son was once dead but is now alive
- Defends his son when his brother questions his warm welcome

In the story of the Prodigal, we find a template of God's welcome to a world of prodigals—an outline that shows how Jesus ministers hospitality to all of us. This template of hospitality helps us discern *the ways* of God so that we can be sensitive to *the way* God is working in our life or someone else's. There are ten hospitality points in the story, and each point reveals something about the welcome of God. A welcome we are called to live and give. I strongly believe hospitality is the key to the mission success of the Church in the post-Covid world. How we live and share the good news must be the fruit of a fresh incarnation of Jesus, where his kindness and hospitality permeate all that we do. God's kingdom is constantly coming to our world. Our job is to recognize the ways he is working and join him. And as we join him, we will find ourselves swept up into the story of hospitality that God is writing.

PART 1: THE MESSAGE OF HOSPITALITY

1

The Story of Hospitality

This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them. So Jesus told them this story . . .

– Luke 15:2-3 NLT

He's still a long way off when his father sees him. His head is hung low. His clothes – the little he has left – are filthy and torn. When he left home, he left arrogant; head held high, and probably with "his boys." You know, the clingers with you on your way up but who mysteriously vanish when the funds dry up.

Now, he returns, barely recognizable and alone. But the old man recognizes him. If age has caused his eyes to dim, it doesn't affect his vision now. He sees through the facade of caked mud and frayed garments and sprints across the field, falling on the son's neck and kissing him.

Despite this lavish outpouring of acceptance, the son cannot accept that he is completely welcome, as evidenced by what he says at that moment:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” (Lk 15:18-19).

The son has been fully embraced. But he can't see it. So, he sticks with his prepared speech, believing his only move is to bargain – saying in essence to his father, "if you let me back in, I'll pay you back."

Because that's how shame works.

But the father stops the son before he can choke out his final prepared line – “*Make me like one of your hired servants.*” The father interrupts the son’s words with images, calling for a robe, a ring, and sandals to be put on his son.

The son is in a state of shock as he’s clothed in his father’s prized belongings and as his father begins planning a party in his honor. *I didn’t do anything to deserve this.*

After celebrating for a bit, feeling overwhelmed by the attention, the son steps outside for some fresh air. He hears his brother and father talking in the distance, unaware of his presence.

His brother is livid, saying, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

His father responds, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The prodigal returns to the party, astounded by his father’s mercy.⁷

The Author of Hospitality

Jesus tells this story to a crowd when He is under fire from the religious leaders, who are upset that he is “eating with sinners.” In Jesus’s day, who people ate with was important, especially among the religious Jews, who saw eating with sinners as an unholy act.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees by telling this story.

The story of the Prodigal Son is the story of God’s hospitality. More than any other parable that Jesus told, it lays bare the passion of God’s heart toward broken people—His broken people. And while it is considered one of the most brilliantly crafted short stories of all time, it was not shared for the purpose of admiration. It was told for the purpose of transformation.

The story, I believe was told for the benefit of those who identify as the prodigal as well as those who identify as the older brother. Most likely, we will identify with each brother many times throughout the course of our lives. You see, for both brothers the story of the prodigal son is a story about the compassion of the father and his desire for them to fully come home.

It’s not hard to imagine first-century listeners, especially those in the crowd living under the weight of their own failures, hanging on every word, rooting for the prodigal, and hoping that the father would grant the simple request—“*Make me like one of your hired servants.*” But as the story unfolds and stunning images of God’s grace are portrayed, a picture better than they could ever imagine emerges. The Heavenly Father, represented by the father in the story, is not only a

⁷ Story is paraphrased with some liberties taken.

God of great mercy, who doesn't give us what we deserve, but a God of amazing grace, who freely restores us in ways we could never imagine.

Something happens when we see ourselves in the story as the prodigal. When we allow the Holy Spirit to write our name into the narrative, we become the prodigal and feel the father's embrace. Then, He begins to work on our story, moving deeply in our hearts.

For the Pharisees, who are represented by the older brother in the story, this is a gentle rebuke. Just like the older brother in the story, the Pharisees self-righteousness fill their hearts with self-pity and indignation at the lack of punishment and shunning shown to sinners. Of the older brother, pastor Ted E. Bowling writes, "Just like these Jewish religious leaders, the elder brother was living and judging by the letter of the law, not by its spirit. By all appearances, the elder brother was righteous, but inside, where a person's character forms, he was teeming with hypocrisy and sin."⁸ For those of us who have been a part of the Church for some time, if we're not careful, our hearts may become embittered toward others who are trying to find their way home amidst brokenness. Pride and self-righteousness can sometimes keep us from fully realizing the kindness of our Father even to the point of blocking other people from experiencing home through the Church.

I wonder if we are sometimes angry because we have not adequately experienced God's welcome for ourselves? Perhaps we are more like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son than we care to admit, whose failure to welcome his little brother home was rooted in his failure to fully embrace his father's welcome for himself. He didn't consider that everything his father possessed was already available to Him. Unfortunately, we are often perceived as irate and unwelcoming to the world we have been called to reach with the good news of Jesus. Our ways don't always reflect the nature of Jesus. And we often are angry, meeting the hostility of culture with more hostility.

We tend to welcome others to the extent we are secure in our relationship with God as our Father. And the more we experience the hospitality of Jesus, the more our hearts heal, the more secure we become, and the more our hearts open to love the strangers that Jesus is welcoming home. When we receive the hospitality of Jesus for ourselves, it softens our tone and sharpens our mission to love like Jesus.

Hospitality, to me, means feeling fully loved and at home, not based on something you did or deserved but simply because you are welcome. Jesus, the author of this story and the author of our faith, invites us into His hospitality and once we come home, we are then invited to extend His hospitality to others and celebrate their homecomings. Hospitality is not just the way we do mission. It is the mission.

The Barna Group, an international evangelical polling firm, recently reported that the majority of Generation Z age Christians are having ongoing faith conversations with non-Christians, and

⁸ Ted E. Bowling, "The Elder Brother: What the Bible says about older brother of the prodigal son," Bible Tools, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/12214/Older-Brother-of-Prodigal-Son.htm>.

nearly half of non-Christian teens (47%) are at least somewhat interested in learning more about what Christianity means for their life.⁹

Gen Z Christians believe how they live their life should be their primary witness to non-Christians. And their non-Christian counterparts agree, preferring to talk about matters of faith with those whose "actions speak louder than words." These ideas don't just reflect a generational preference. They reflect the central teaching of Jesus Himself, who said to his followers: "let your good deeds shine out for all to see so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16 NLT).

I believe The Barna study provides another way to look at the exodus, letting us know that, while many are leaving the faith, there is still a strong interest in God. It also suggests that when our ways reflect the ways and welcome of Jesus, people's hearts are open to hearing what we have to say and to hear our stories of coming home.

A Story in Process

Have you ever thought of your life and mission as a story being written?

David writes about God, "You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed" (Psalm 139:16 NLT). Some interpret passages like this through a lens of Divine determinism—the idea that God works in our lives without our ability to choose our next steps. But there are too many Scriptural references for me to believe we are not created with free will—the ability to choose to accept or reject God's leading. One of the clearest is in Deuteronomy 30:19, where God says to his people, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

We were all created with the ability to choose life. And we were all created with the capacity to choose who writes our story. As we continually give Jesus the pen, we experience those moments that were "laid out before a single day had passed."

I am a lead pastor of a growing congregation. I love what I do. I love spending time with people. I love encouraging people in the walk with God. And I look forward to preaching and teaching from the Scriptures every weekend. But if you knew me in 1988, when I was a senior in High School, you would have never picked me to do what I do today.

At the beginning of my junior year of high school, I left a private Christian school to return to the school I had attended until sixth grade. There were a lot of familiar faces. But reconnecting was much harder than I thought it would be. This was surprising because I had never struggled with making friends. But trying to reconnect with people whose relationships had been solidified over time was difficult.

⁹ Reviving Evangelism in the Next Generation—United States, July 26, 2021, <https://barna.gloo.us/journals/reviving-evangelism-next-gen-us>.

I feared rejection. And I found myself scared to talk to others. Of course, the less you talk, the harder it is to start talking. And soon, I felt like I was trapped in a social prison of fear and anxiety—one from which I did not know how to escape.

To top it off, in my senior year, I was voted the “most shy” in my class for the superlatives page of the yearbook. There I was, with the “best in class,”—most athletic, smartest, most likely to succeed—representing the other side of the aisle. It was as if somebody said, “you know we should really do something to acknowledge the most dysfunctional among us. How about honoring those who are scared to talk to others?”

I can laugh about it now. But at the time, it was a defining moment. So much so that when I went to Ohio State the next fall, I looked for a major that didn’t require taking a speech class. My social anxiety had become my identity.

And then, shortly after graduation, God ran across the field and found me. Through a series of spiritual events and new relationships, God welcomed me home in a way that healed past wounds and set my course for the future. The first seminal event occurred shortly after graduation when I knelt beside my bed and surrendered my heart to Jesus. I had grown up in church and prayed the “sinner’s prayer” hundreds of times (especially during youth camp), but this time it was different. I knew I needed the forgiveness that only Christ can offer, and I was ready to give my life to Him without reservation. So, I prayed and surrendered to Jesus as the Lord of my life.

We don’t base our faith on feelings. And everyone’s experience with God is unique. But after I prayed that prayer, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. I felt clean inside and knew God had given me a brand-new life.

And then, on a Sunday night in August, I experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that was undeniable. My friend and I had just returned from getting pizza. Before he left, he said, “let’s pray.” Not wanting to appear unspiritual, I agreed. But I just wanted to get home. So, I was praying his prayer would be short. What happened next was entirely unexpected. I wasn’t expecting a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit. I just wanted to go home. And then, it happened.

Suddenly, the presence of the Holy Spirit powerfully filled my entire being. I felt an overwhelming love wash over my heart, and a heavenly language I had never thought of, let alone spoken, come into my mind. As I spoke these words, power that felt like electricity shot through my body. The experience was so awesome it should have been scary, but I was at complete peace.

In the weeks to come, God seemed so near to me. His presence continued to welcome me and heal broken areas of my heart. I couldn’t shake the sense that I was called to preach the gospel. I knew this meant I would have to confront my fears of rejection and public speaking. But, as I continued to surrender my future to God, he took the pen and began writing a story in my life that brought me to healing and beyond over the last thirty-five years.

Let Jesus Pick Up the Pen

One of my favorite examples of Jesus writing His story through someone's life is in John 8. The Pharisees drag a woman who was "caught in adultery" to Jesus. Of course, one can't help but wonder where the "man" caught in adultery is. As they say, "it takes two to tango," and her partner in crime is conspicuously absent. If she was "caught in the act," wouldn't they have had the opportunity to catch the other actor as well? But I digress.

The experts in the law thought they had created the perfect scenario to trap Jesus – a teacher committed to the integrity of the Divine law and personal redemption. They lay out the case. "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" (John 8:4-5 NLT).

Jesus bends down and writes in the dust. When they continue to press, Jesus stands up and says, "He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone." And then he bends down again and continues writing. As He writes, a sudden conviction falls on the crowd. The stone throwers drop their stones and walk away, from the oldest to the youngest. And then Jesus tells the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

For years, bible scholars have wondered, "What did Jesus write in the sand?" And there have been some interesting theories. I heard someone suggest that he wrote the ten commandments. Another was a bit more creative, suggesting that Jesus started to write the names of the stone throwers and the details of their personal sins. I have often thought that he may have written the "rest of the story," including the name of the male adulterer who was conveniently missing from the trial.

Of course, all of this is speculation. If it had been important to know what was written, the details would have been included in the passage. I finally concluded: It's not important *what* Jesus wrote, but it's important *that* He wrote.

Through the simple act of writing in the sand, Jesus provides an image of Himself as one who kneels to write in dirty places. One can't help but think of the image of God in the beginning, when he knelt in the muddy banks of Eden and formed mankind from the dirt.

Why did Jesus write in the sand? To reveal Himself as the God who still writes in the dirt. As if to say to a woman whose life was wrecked, "It doesn't matter what brought you to my feet, what matters is that, at any time in your journey, I can kneel in the mud of your life and write a new story."

Here, Jesus healed a woman caught in adultery and shame. And through His kindness, he welcomed her home. Through hospitality, he released healing to her soul. From dirt to a new beginning. That's the essence of the woman's story. That's the essence of the Prodigal's story. And that can be the essence of our story, too, if we'll give Jesus the pen and let Him write.

2

The Purpose of Hospitality

My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

– John 14:23

Home.

What comes to mind when you hear that word? Perhaps you think about the house you grew up in or the community in which you spent your formative years. We attach the word “home” to all types of things. We might talk about our hometown, home church, or home cooking. Or a homespun tale. The idea of home is common in sports. We talk about the home team advantage, the idea that there is a definite edge for the team playing in their stadium or ballpark. And in baseball, home is everything, as a team scores only when they round the bases and make it home.

Home is a powerful concept that transcends time and culture. It is meant to evoke safety, security, comfort, and love. Many have not had positive experiences with home. And perhaps you are reading these words with conflicted emotions, longing for home as a place of refuge but, either in the past or present, unable to find it. For many, “home” was not a safe place. And the reason that’s so traumatic is because home was not designed to be a place of pain, neglect, or conditional belonging.

I have a theory that the reason home is so universal is that we are all trying to return to mankind’s original home, a place where we are intimately connected to our Creator. And the feelings we attach to the nostalgic places in our lives—our childhood homes or elementary schools—are expressions of something far more significant. A desire for a place for which all of our hearts ache.

And yet, even amid struggle, there seems to be an enduring longing in all of us for a “home” that is a safe place. Jesus provides that ideal place for all of us. A place where in our return to Him, there is healing in the form of homecoming—a hospitality that welcomes and makes us whole.

I grew up near Lancaster, Ohio, in a 2000-square-foot brick ranch built in 1973. Something is enduring about the “homeyness” of that house. Perhaps it’s the rich catalog of memories. Or perhaps it is the people still living there. My parents are both eighty years old and have been blessed with remarkably good health. They still host most family events, which now involve fitting five grandchildren, their spouses, and four great-grandchildren into their humble home on birthdays, holidays, and most Sunday nights. They do it with great joy. Home is about a place. But it’s mostly about the people who live and love and, by their lives, extend hospitality to all who come.

For me, my childhood was a place where I was safe and protected and where my identity was forged in the stories told around the table. Most importantly, it was a place I was loved and where I affirmed to believe that there was a place for me.

Sometimes, during challenging seasons in life, I dream about my childhood home. And while there isn’t always a clear-cut message in these dreams, my gut tells me that they are primarily

about tapping into an intuitive longing to find that place called “home” in the midst of whatever chaos I am enduring—a knowing that if I can find my way back to “home,” I can find the safety, wisdom, and centering needed to move forward.

Home as the Place Before the Hog Pit

The story of the prodigal challenges us to think about salvation differently. When we think about salvation, we usually think about what we are saved *from*, but the story of the prodigal is more about what we are saved *for*. Our salvation stories often begin with our hog-pits—where we were when Jesus found us. But the story of the Prodigal challenges us to think about where we were before we ended up covered in mud. To think about the place of our origin.

Why is this important? Because knowing that we have been created for more is one of the strongest catalysts for personal change. We tend to define our worth by our place of origin. But the prodigal’s story didn’t begin in a hog-pit, and neither did yours.

Our story began in a garden surrounded by unimaginable beauty. There, our first parents had a place of honor and authority, where they were charged to rule and take dominion. And they had a relationship with the Creator of the garden, walking with Him in the cool of the day. This was home.

It wasn’t until sin entered in that everything fell apart. And as mankind was banished from the garden because of their sin, they lost not only their innocence but also their sense of home.

But the banishment was only temporary. There was a hopeful promise on the eviction notice. Soon, there would come a son who would carry sin and crush the head of the serpent—a second Adam, who, through His suffering in a garden and on a tree, would run to broken people still covered in mud to embrace them and welcome them home.

In the story of the Prodigal, Jesus describes the story of redemption as a return home. In doing so, he suggests that the controlling metaphor in all of scripture for redemption is a homecoming.

When we think about salvation, we might consider several important concepts, including forgiveness, healing, and restoration, but those aspects of salvation find ultimate fulfillment in a grand homecoming narrative. We are not just saved from sin; we are invited to come home—to the place we belong.

In his last hours, when Jesus prepares his disciples for his coming crucifixion, he comforts them, interestingly, with words about home. He says:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am . . . Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. (John 14:1-3, 23)

Here, Jesus shares a stunning revelation that the cure for a troubled heart is the healing that comes by coming home to Him. This home is not just a place; it is a person, Himself. In her book, *Keeping Place*, Jen Pollock Michel writes, “Jesus insisted on the permanence of his presence in the language of home: “I will not leave you as orphans. . . . If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:18, 23).”¹⁰ She adds that “Jesus Christ makes possible the end of human estrangement,” and that “Our anxiety to belong, our desire to be received, our hope for intimate embrace: these are met in the homemaking God of Abraham, who speaks the yes of his promises in Jesus Christ. He seeks and saves the wandering lost.”¹¹

In 1 Peter, Peter writes that the Church is the “house of God” (1 Peter 2:5). And Paul writes that followers of Jesus collectively and individually are the “temple” of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Everything about the mission of Jesus is about welcoming people to an “at home” relationship with Jesus—the God who is with us and in us, welcoming people through radical hospitality that heals.

Home as a Place of Healing

In the story of the Prodigal, we see the father healing through hospitality.

But what is healing?

According to one medical dictionary, healing is “the restoration to a normal mental or physical condition, esp. of an inflammation or a wound.”¹²

Healing presupposes the existence of a wound.

The history of humanity is the story of wounds. The first set of wounds was created by original sin, a self-inflicted act in the garden of Eden, where our first parents chose forbidden fruit over a loving father. This wound spawned trillions of individual wounds spread out over time and generations. Peter wrote that sinful desires “war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). Today, not only do we live with the effects of the original wound, but we live with the effects of our personal transgressions. We also carry wounds inflicted by the sins of others.

On the cross, Jesus carried the wounds of the world in his own wounds. Isaiah wrote:

¹⁰ Jen Pollock Michel, *Keeping Place* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 35-36. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Healing: Taber's Medical Dictionary.” Taber's Medical Dictionary, accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.tabers.com/tabersonline/view/Tabers-Dictionary/745360/all/healing>.

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-5 KJV)

Christ releases healing to our wounds through His wounds.

If we are not careful, we can become so focused on the healing part of our story that we miss what God has for us beyond healing. There is a place beyond healing where the wounds that defined us no longer do. And where we find our identity in the wounds of Christ—healing wounds that have the power to not only free us from the past but to restore us so we can live into our original design.

On the day of Christ's resurrection, the people He handpicked to turn the world upside down were hiding behind closed doors. When Jesus walks through the walls, he offers no long lectures or rebukes. He speaks peace and shows his friends his wounds. In speaking peace, he is speaking healing to their troubled souls. But there is a place beyond healing. And Jesus shows them His wounds again, this time speaking to their call to fulfill their original design:

“Peace be with you,” he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord!” (John 20:19-20 NLT).

The wounds of Jesus minister peace and healing. They also speak to our identity and calling to fulfill our original design.

We see the same dynamic in the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus writes a happy ending to a bitter chapter—saying, “neither do I condemn you.” But He goes further. He commits to writing new chapters where he releases her into a purposeful future—saying, “Go and sin no more.”

The word translated as “sin” is the Greek word *Hamartia*. It means “to miss the mark.” When we think about sin, we usually think about doing things we shouldn’t do. But sin is much bigger. It’s about missing marks, failing to fulfill the purpose that God created us to fulfill.

So, when Jesus said to the woman, “go and sin no more,” He was saying, “Go and hit your marks.”

And he is saying the same thing to us today: Go and sin no more. Hit your marks!

Jesus came to save us “from our sins” (Matthew 1:21). This certainly includes receiving forgiveness for the areas where we miss our marks. But, more importantly, Jesus came to write new chapters in the dirt of our lives, where we experience the power of His resurrection and live in our purpose, where we, by God’s grace, hit the marks God created us to live into.

Paul had this in mind when he wrote, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:4, KJV). So, here's my question for you. What would

it look like for you to live healed? To live into your original design? In your thinking? In your relationships? In your vocation? And in your mission?

That's what the story of hospitality is about—a father welcoming us home so that He can repurpose old narratives and write in His purposes in and through our lives.

Always Going Home

The longer I walk with Jesus, the more I realize that coming home to Jesus is not a one-time event. It is a continual process where we experience greater depths of God's hospitality in our lives.

I am not suggesting that we live insecurely in our relationship with Jesus. When we are born again, we are brought into a secure relationship with God through Christ. And in that sense, we are already "home" as children of God.

But there is a process of sanctification, where the Holy Spirit continually works in our hearts to reveal Jesus to us so that his ways become our ways. Here, we are constantly coming home.

They say you can measure the age of a tree by cutting the trunk and measuring the rings. These rings are called annual growth rings. And in addition to telling the age of a tree, they, in many ways, tell the tree's story. By looking at the character of the rings, one can determine what the weather was like in a certain season and see how much the tree grew. The rings make up the inner character of the tree; they tell the tree's story.¹³

There are growth rings in our souls. In some seasons, the climate is favorable; in others, it is harsher. In some seasons, we grow bigger and stronger; in others, we merely survive. But in every season, if we'll continue to come home to Jesus, we'll experience deeper healing and greater reach in our purpose.

As you read, recognize that the welcome points of God are supposed to be continuously experienced as we grow and go into all God has for us.

¹³ "Tree Rings Provide Snapshots of Earth's Past Climate - Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet." NASA, January 27, 2017. <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2540/tree-rings-provide-snapshots-of-earths-past-climate/>.

3

The Tone of Hospitality

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

– Matthew 11:28-30 ESV

Before I was a preacher, I was a rock guitarist. In my early teenage years, I didn't want to be the next Billy Graham; I wanted to be the next Eddie Van Halen.

In 1978, Eddie released what many consider to be the most groundbreaking instrumental rock guitar solo of all time. In a one-minute and forty-two-second piece, he revolutionized how a generation of players approached the instrument, playing with spellbinding techniques at speeds never heard before. But it wasn't just what he played that set him apart; it was the sound of his instrument.

In a 2015 interview with the Smithsonian Institute before his death, Eddie talked about the evolution of his early guitar sound, which involved buying cheap “second” guitar bodies, dipping pickups in wax to eliminate feedback, and modifying a 100-Watt Marshall Amplifier so he could play with high sustain at lower volumes. Throughout the process, he destroyed a lot of equipment. But for Eddie, it was worth it because he eventually found his unique signature tone.

Eddie's innovations sparked a revolution in the music industry. Today, every major electric guitar manufacturer has a model that mirrors the specs of the prototype he created in his bedroom. However, changing the industry was never his intention. He was a musician—a tone-chaser—pursuing a sound so incredible that people couldn't help but want to listen to what he played.

I first heard *Eruption* when I was fourteen. I wanted to play like Eddie. But, more importantly, I wanted my guitar tone to sound like his. So, I became a tone-chaser too. And when I later had the opportunity to record with a band, we spent almost as much time working on the tone of our instruments as playing the parts of the songs. Because we knew that you could have the most amazing song in the world, but if the tone wasn't good, nobody would want to listen to it.

Tone matters. It can repel or attract. It can diminish or enhance.

Tone is vital to the music we listen to. But it is even more crucial to the mission we are called to fulfill. The gospel is the greatest story ever told. But is it possible that many are unable to listen because the tone is not right?

Much has been written about “Soteriology”—the segment of theology that focuses on what we should preach, the substance of the gospel's message. But we must also have a robust theology of tone—a “Toneology”—that focuses on how the Spirit sounds as he empowers and shapes our lives to share the message with power.

The Tone of the Spirit

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses the metaphor of fruit-bearing to describe the progressive work of the Holy Spirit in believers. He writes: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Paul is not giving us a list of character traits we must strive to achieve in our power. But he is describing the fruit that comes from a dynamic relationship with Jesus, the kind of tone produced as we learn to yield to the Holy Spirit and walk in His ways.

In the middle of Paul’s list is “kindness.” The word is translated from the Greek word “*chrestos*.” It means to be “fit for use, good, virtuous, mild, and pleasant (in contrast to what is hard, harsh, bitter).”¹⁴

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (ESV).

A yoke was a harness used to join two oxen to leverage their combined power for work. Once yoked, the animals might be hooked to a plow or cart and driven to get things done.

In this verse, Jesus says my yoke is “easy.” What is interesting is that the word translated as “easy” is *Chrestos*. This suggests that the yoke Jesus calls us to wear and work with Him under is “kindness.” The implications are monumental, especially for a Church laboring to find its mission tone in an increasingly hostile world. In a culture that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, it is easy to embrace a yoke of frustration and anger. But that is not Jesus’ yoke. And could it be that we often gravitate towards meeting hostility with more hostility because we are “weary and heavy laden” and need “rest” for our souls? Are we wearing ourselves out fighting cultural wars with weapons that are “carnal” rather than resting in the Spirit and fighting spiritual battles with weapons that are “mighty through God?”

If the yoke of Jesus is kindness, He will lead us in ways that are kind to people. Kindness is the mission tone of Jesus.

As I poured over the gospels, paying close attention to the ways Jesus interacted with people, I saw the welcoming nature of Jesus everywhere – the hospitable “extras” in the stories. For example, in many of the healing accounts, I saw that, in addition to healing physical bodies, He also did little things that created environments where people experienced a sense of welcome – the kind of welcome that heals bodies *and* hearts.

In one instance, a leper came and knelt before Jesus. Jesus could have merely prayed for him, but He went further—He healed his body by physically touching him. In another instance, a

¹⁴ “G5543 - *Chrēstos* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (NIV),” Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5543/niv/mgnt/0-1/>.

woman with a severe hemorrhage pressed into a crowd and touched the hem of Jesus's garment. When she touched Jesus, her body was instantly healed. That these miracles involved physical touch is significant.

Both the leper and the woman were considered unclean under Jewish law. And because of their uncleanness, they were not permitted to touch other people physically. By touching the leper and allowing the woman to touch him, it was as if Jesus was saying, "Not only do I want to heal your bodies, but I also want to heal you from the stigma that has accompanied your suffering." One might say the leper and the woman were a certain type of stranger in their society, the "Untouchables." And by healing them through touch, Jesus not only healed their bodies, He restored their dignity and healed a much deeper condition—their shame.

Kindness is about shirking the expectations of culture and going to the places other people overlook. It's about having difficult conversations, not shying away from someone else's pain or loss, meeting people where they are, meeting the needs of someone who is struggling. Jesus' kindness transcended social and political boundaries; that is the tone of hospitality that we are striving for.

Several years ago, someone gave me a book, *"Conspiracy of Kindness," A Unique Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus*. In it, Steve Sjogren tells the story of planting the Cincinnati Vineyard Church. The church started with thirty-seven people and soon grew into the thousands by employing "servant evangelism"—an outreach strategy that encouraged church members to demonstrate "the kindness of God by offering to do some act of humble service with no strings attached."¹⁵

Sjogren and his church shared the love of Jesus through practical acts of kindness like delivering food to shut-ins, free car washes, and paying for the use of washers and dryers at laundromats. They offered free coffee at bus stops, lawn clean-up, free tutoring, and community meals. Soon, their kindness became contagious, and their church grew into the thousands. Although their church had systems in place to help connect with and minister to people, they didn't rely on systems to do what only a personal touch can do: touch hearts through the supernatural power of kindness.

While writing this chapter, I got a text notifying me that a long-time member of our congregation went to be with the Lord. I rushed to the hospital to sit with his wife and daughter. As they talked about John, they cried and laughed and talked about his love for his family and the Lord. I didn't do anything but offer hugs and a listening ear. As I did, I sensed the Holy Spirit speak to me: "This is the heart of my kingdom—being there for another and showing kindness during times when people need presence, comfort, and love."

Paul wrote that "it is the kindness of God that leads [us] to repentance" (Romans 2:4 NASB). Kindness releases Jesus, who heals hearts, cuts through cultural hostility, and empowers people to make life-changing turns.

¹⁵ Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 18. Kindle Edition.

Kindness affects everyone involved—the giver, the receiver, and those who are watching.

Kindness is the driving force behind the story of hospitality because it brings light where there's darkness, connection where there's hostility, and a sense of home where there's wandering.

Recently, a couple in our church, Anthony and Kristin, experienced the power of God's kindness by following a simple nudge of the Holy Spirit.

Light in the Darkness

Anthony and Kristin pulled into the parking lot of an upscale restaurant in Savannah, Georgia. It was the first night of a long-anticipated vacation with their three children. And they were excited to meet up with some old friends who would be joining them over the next week.

The restaurant had a good reputation for food and atmosphere, and they were looking forward to a relaxing time.

That's not what happened.

The restaurant was packed. And due to several no-shows on the staff, only two servers were working.

The concierge led their group of ten to a side room, where they waited...and waited some more. When their server finally entered the room, she was in a foul mood. She took their drink orders with a terse "I don't want to be here" vibe. Kristin had never felt more unwelcome.

They expected more, especially at a restaurant that promises a great dining experience and charges for it. Their friend responded like most of us would, saying, "I'm going to call the front desk and demand another server."

But Kristin felt a nudge in her spirit. "Let's not call," she said, "I feel like we are supposed to love on our waitress and change the environment."

When the server returned, Kristin asked, "Is everything ok?" and said, "We want to let you know that this room is a room of peace. We want you to feel like you can relax and enjoy yourself while waiting on us."

The waitress teared up. And then she poured out her heart. She said she had been given 48-hour notice to move out of her apartment. That was a day ago. And now she had 24 hours to move. She had planned on taking the night off from work but was required to come due to no-shows. She pointed up and said, "Seriously, God, what else are you going to do to me?"

As Kristin listened, she was relieved they hadn't added to her stress. And she said, "We want to pay you a tip in advance." Kristin gave her \$100.

Their friend, who had initially wanted to ask for a new server, asked the server if he could send her a tip through her Venmo account. When she left the room, he said to Anthony and Kristin, "I feel in my spirit that I am supposed to give her \$500." He immediately sent it via VENMO.

They could see the server across the restaurant, standing at the front desk. She burst into tears when she was notified that she had received the tip.

Before they left, their friend felt led to send another \$500 tip.

The next day, Kristin received a message from a stranger on Facebook messenger from the server's mother. She was so overwhelmed by the kindness shown to her daughter that she searched diligently to find them on Facebook to thank them. She said her daughter had come home the night before and told her about the tip. She said she had been praying for her daughter for years. And she said that her daughter was so moved that she had been crying non-stop for twenty-four hours.

But their kindness had not only affected the server. It also made a deep impression on Anthony and Kristin's children. They later asked their kids: "What was your favorite part of vacation? Each said, "The night we gave the money to the waitress."

Paul writes that our bodies are the "temple of the Holy Spirit." This means that, as believers, the Holy Spirit has come to live within us. But we are not created to be a temple where God simply dwells. We are created to be temples from which the presence of God overflows and works in our world. When we follow the leading of the Spirit, we are not just doing good things; we are doing God-things that release the presence of Jesus. When we take His yoke of kindness upon us, He is present in the things that we are doing.

That's what was happening at the restaurant in Savannah. Although the server had a pressing financial need, what she really needed was a healing encounter with God. When Anthony and Kristin showed kindness through a tip, they released something more valuable than \$1,100. They released the presence of Jesus, who let the server know how valuable she was to Him.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16 ESV).

Jesus is the light. And as we manifest his goodness through "good works," the light of the world shines to the world around us. Perhaps the purest expression of manifesting Jesus is expressing love through being kind to others. In a world shrouded in darkness, our best move is to turn on the light—to shine. Like a lighthouse leading weary travelers home.

Connection in Hostility

In the days leading up to the crucifixion, the hostility towards Jesus was at a fevered pitch. The religious and political leaders were conspiring as to how to put Jesus to death, and the smell of betrayal among Jesus's inner circle was in the air. But Jesus never reacted. He always responded.

Days before his crucifixion, Jesus grabbed a towel and a water basin and washed his disciples' feet. This must have sent shock waves through the room, as washing feet was reserved for the lowest of servants. But for Jesus, washing feet was the perfect thing to do when the heat of hospitality was rising.

But Jesus was doing more than just cleaning dirty feet. He was setting the tone for his mission that would be carried out by the men in the room with him – a tone of service and kindness. Jesus made this clear. After washing their feet, Jesus said to them, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In his book *Resilient Faith*, Gerald Sittser writes about how the early Christian church grew from approximately five thousand people in AD 40 to roughly five million by 4000 AD. The growth was amazingly consistent despite brutal persecution.

While researching biblical hospitality, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Sittser. When I asked him about the reasons for the consistent growth of the church during this period, he said a major factor was the hospitality Christians showed to outsiders. In a culture that despised the poor and the outcasts, the Church showed kindness by caring for the sick and the impoverished. They dignified the undignified by “washing the feet” of their neighbors. And this response was so different; it created a compelling tone through which they shared the gospel.

Sittser writes, “Christianity infiltrated cities, one relationship at a time, one apartment building at a time, one marketplace at a time as if releasing white blood cells into the bloodstream of the Roman Empire.”¹⁶ To underscore his point of the unique power of Christian kindness, he shares the story of Polycarp, who, during that time served as the Bishop of Smyrna.

As the story goes, a mob, whose thirst for Christian blood had already been whetted, demanded the death of the leader of the church in Smyrna. Polycarp’s friends advised him to withdraw from the city, as if to test whether or not martyrdom was his divinely appointed destiny. So Polycarp withdrew to a farm for a few days, “doing nothing else night and day but pray for all men and for the churches throughout the world, as was his constant habit.” Officials tracked him down. Before surrendering, Polycarp welcomed them, offered them food, and prayed for them. Only then did he allow them to transport him to the city. Upon arrival, Polycarp was ushered into the arena, where a proconsul and an angry mob awaited him.

When they tried to burn Polycarp at the stake, his body would not burn. Although he was eventually killed by the sword, the fact that Polycarp became supernaturally “fireproof” is amazing. But what’s more astounding is that his heart was supernaturally “hostility-proof.” Instead of answering hostility with more hostility, he responded with radical, Spirit-empowered hospitality—offering food and prayer to those who came to capture him. This kind of kindness established a tone that distinguished the messengers and the message. It has the power to do the same thing today.

¹⁶ Gerald L. Sittser, *Resilient Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 113. Kindle Edition.

A Sense of Home in the Wandering

We might not all have the same giftings, but we can all follow Jesus down the path of kindness in our own creative, heartfelt ways. And we can yield to it every day by simply saying, “Lord, show me someone who needs the love of Jesus today.” The kindness of God can manifest in a trillion different ways. And it is as unique and multifaceted as we are.

When we are kind, we carry the tone of hospitality; we give the other person a sense of home—of safety, belonging, love. The reality is, we don’t know where people are at in their prodigal story, and no matter where they are at, we should always seek to extend the kindness of the father. Whether they are weary from their wandering or angry at their lack of good fortune everyone is in desperate need of kindness in the hostile world we live in.

When we see the story of the prodigal son through the eyes of his father, we see that kindness was the natural manifestation of the overflowing love he had for his son. A love that wasn’t conditional or circumstantial.

The father was waiting at the door thinking about his son. When he had a moment to spare, he would usually go to the door where he had the best view of a path to the house and wait for as long as he could. Usually his efforts proved fruitless, which is why when he finally saw someone on the path, he thought he might be dreaming. But he certainly wasn’t, and he knew that the man coming toward his house was his beloved son.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he starts running. This is the moment he’s been waiting for ever since his son left home. He has wanted his son to understand the unending love he has for him, he’s wanted to shower him with gifts, protect him from the harshness of the world, and have meals with him. He has missed talking with him and trying to figure out how his mind works. He has missed his son, dearly.

After what feels like an eternity, when he finally reaches his son, he embraces him tightly, remembering all the times over the last few years that he wished his son was there so he could embrace him. He starts crying tears of joy and disbelief. He thought he had lost him forever but now all those meals he missed with him, all the conversations, all the jokes and laughter, all the arguments, all the co-laboring in the fields, everything he thought he lost was now right in front of him.

When his son started speaking, he broke the father’s heart saying, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” The father’s response is indicative of the compassion he has for his son. He doesn’t say “I forgive you” or “you’ll have to work your way into my favor;” instead, he says “Quick! Bring the best robe and

put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate."

He so desperately wanted his son to feel at home again. He so desperately wanted to communicate to his son that this is where he belonged. That he is his son and that is all that matters to him. He displayed to his son through his words and his actions that he was proud to have him back home in his arms and he was proud to be the son's father. This is the outpouring of kindness.

PART 2: GOD'S WELCOME

4

Seen

But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . .

– Luke 15:20

It is tempting to rush the Prodigal's story. That's what I did for years when I read it, moving quickly through the father's movements in the field as I saw him running, embracing, and kissing his son. I blurred it all together. But in doing so, I missed crucial details, including the heart of the narrative—that the father first “saw” his son.

The father will run to embrace and kiss him. He will restore him with a robe, a ring, and sandals. And he will call for a fatted calf to be slain and for a great celebration. But first?

He will “see” him.

“His father saw him...” Those four words heal in deep places. Although the son was still “a long way off,” both in distance and soul condition, his father doesn't see a screw-up, a failure, or—what some might expect him to see—an enemy. The father saw “him.” He saw his son. And he had compassion for him.

That the father “saw” his son and had “compassion” for him is the heart of the story. And at the heart of our story is that God sees us and has compassion when we are still far off.

We often read the story of the Prodigal as analogous to the point in our life where we first come to Jesus to receive forgiveness of our sins. And while the parable speaks to that part of our faith journey, it also speaks to our ongoing relationship with God.

As I continue to walk with Jesus, I often find myself waking up in hog pits. Some are new situations where I have yielded to the wrong voices, and I now find myself up to my neck in the mud, having disappointed people and myself. Others are situations and ways of living that I have not seen to be muddy until the Holy Spirit, in His kindness, opens my eyes to the next level of sanctification in my life, which involves forsaking an act or attitude that has been a part of my ways for a long time.

Regardless of how and when we end up in the mud, one person always “sees” us through the eyes of compassion. A God who runs to embrace us so that we can see what He sees about us. God's hospitality always begins by seeing people, even when they are far off. It's how He always begins the process of welcoming us home. And it's how He works in us to be His co-hosts to a million parties.

Losing Sight of Who We Are

It is often said that the prodigal lost everything that mattered—his money, reputation, and place in his father’s house. And all that’s true. But the most significant loss was his sense of identity. He could no longer see who he was anymore.

But God takes the loss of our sense of identity personally. And the direction of the prodigal’s story begins to move upward when Jesus says the son “came to himself.” He said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough to spare, and I perish with hunger.” To this point, everything in the narrative has been about the young man’s downward slide. But now, there is a sudden moment of upward clarity as he begins to see himself differently—through the eyes of his original identity.

The son’s vision is imperfect in that he cannot see the extent to which his father will welcome him. But he experiences a spark of hope. It’s like someone jumps into the hog pit, shakes him, and says, “What are you doing here? Remember who you are. You’re better than this! Go home!”

Jesus said that “no man comes to the Father except the Spirit draw him.” And in the part of the story where we see son “coming to himself,” we see how the Spirit of God begins His redemptive works in our lives—while we are still in foreign lands, covered in mud, laboring to feed pigs; hungry, tired, and without hope.

I love that the return home begins with the son “coming to himself,” waking up to the idea that there is something better for him because of who he is. Every redemptive journey begins with a glimpse of who we are.

Identity awakenings are usually progressive. The son comes to himself in the hog pit, but the details are fuzzy. He knows he doesn’t belong in the mud. And while he thinks there might be a place for him in his father’s house, he’s not quite sure what that will look like. So, he does what we usually do. He aims low. Very low. He prepares a speech for his father that falls way short of asking for a complete restoration. He sees himself through the lens of his own failures. And all he can hope for is a minimum wage business relationship. He determines that he will say to this father: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”

He doesn’t see the whole picture. But he sees enough to return. So, he begins the long journey home, unsure of what to expect. He will soon discover that what’s important is not what he sees but what his father sees.

Through the Eyes of a Father

We are created with a need to be seen. It’s one of the reasons we dress up with masks and capes when we’re three and with degrees and achievements and other trappings of success when we’re thirty. We want to be noticed and valued. To be the hero in somebody’s story. To be someone others can be proud of. To be cherished. To be loved.

There is something life-giving and transforming when we know that someone who matters to us “sees” us. Why is this? Because the desire to be seen and affirmed was built into humanity's DNA in the first moments of creation.

I believe the first thing Adam saw after being created was God looking at him. Consider the creation account in Genesis 2:7, which states, “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Can you see it? Here, God breathes into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. And at that moment, when Adam comes to life, he is face to face with God.

We know from later verses that God “saw” all he made and said it was “very good.” It’s not a stretch to suggest that in man’s first moments, God caught Adam’s eyes to let him know, “I see you, and I want you to know that you're good.”

Is it possible that our desire to be seen was birthed at that moment when our first father caught the eyes of His Father? That the need to be seen and affirmed is the most primal of all instincts because it was a part of mankind’s first moments? And that, in all of our quests to be seen, we ultimately long for the approving gaze of a God who takes delight in us? I think so.

My life changed the day I saw my oldest son’s first ultrasound. Up to that point, I was excited at the prospect of becoming a dad, but when I saw him, a love burst forth in my heart that I had never experienced. He looked like a guppy swimming around, but he was my guppy. I instantly loved him with all my heart, even before he had a name. Today, Jordan is twenty-six. Being a dad to him and his sister and brother has been the greatest joy of my life. If I had to choose a life experience that has nourished my perspective of God more than any other, it would be becoming a dad.

When God speaks of himself as a “father,” he is not speaking metaphorically. He is speaking literally. In Luke 3:38, at the conclusion of a long line of “begets” showing the family line of Jesus, Adam is called the “son of God.” And Jesus often referred to God as our father, teaching us to pray, not to some distant deity but to “Our Father in heaven.”

So, it is reasonable to conclude that all the feelings that natural fathers feel towards their children are the feelings God experiences when He “sees” us. He is there for us, even when we are not there for Him. He cares for us and takes care of us, even when we fail to acknowledge his presence. And He has a vision for our future, which means he is committed to our development, often allowing us to go through fires of refinement for our better good.

I am a grandpa now . . . actually, a “Pop-Pops” (a term that makes me feel younger). I have a glass desk in my home office. As I write, my three-year-old grandson, Izzy, is playing with a toy under my desk. I love to watch Izzy. I enjoy his cuteness. And now, as I watch him under my desk, he suddenly realizes I am looking at him. We lock eyes. A big smile crosses his face as he begins to talk excitedly and meticulously about the toy he has in his hand. I haven’t said a word. But Izzy lights up simply because I see him.

We have all heard heartbreaking stories of people who felt unseen by those that mattered most. All of us—despite our accomplishments—are like little kids under glass desks, longing to be seen by those who matter most.

If we are to be the church that welcomes people by “seeing” them, we must see through our Father's eyes. How do we know when we doing this well? We are there for people, even when they are not there for us. We care for people, even when they fail to acknowledge our presence. And we walk with people through developing seasons, encouraging them and praying for them. When we see through the eyes of our Father, then we will see people for their identity as beloved children of God. Our vision will transcend stigma, disarm shame, and convey hope to those who might be stuck in the hog pits.

Vision that Transcends Stigma

When I think about God showing hospitality to unseen strangers, I think about the time Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding for a long time. The account is found in Mark 5:24-29.

And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I will be made well.” And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. (ESV)

She has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. The doctors cannot help her. Some have even taken advantage, prescribing treatments that made her condition worse while taking her money...all her money.

If anyone has a reason to be bitter or give up, it's her. But when she hears about Jesus, she experiences a surge of hope. She even begins to speak a new story over her life, repeatedly saying, “If I can only get to Jesus and touch his clothes, I'll be healed.”

But when she finally gets to Jesus, he is swamped by a crowd. She is desperate. So, she dives into the mass of flesh and presses through until she sees the hem of Jesus' garment. She grabs it firmly. The hem is a bundle of cords found at the end of Jesus's tallit. The Tallit is a prayer shawl. Every Jewish male was required to wear one, as the cords represented every one of the laws that a Jew was required to keep.

A surge of otherworldly power flows into her body when she grabs the hem. Immediately, twelve years of chronic bleeding stops cold. Then everything stops. The crowd stops. Jesus stops. Her heart stops.

Jesus looks perplexed. He scans the crowd. “Who touched me?”

The disciples reply dismissively: “What do you mean, who touched you? Look at this huge crowd—they’re all pressing up against you” (Mark 5:31 TPT).

But she is not perplexed. She knows exactly what happened. And she’s terrified. Knowing she will be discovered, she gives up. “Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth” (Mark 5:33).

So, here’s what’s amazing. She is frightened in what should be the most incredible, joy-filled moment of her life. Instead of seeing healing as an expression of God’s love, she is terrified.

There are thirty-seven recorded miracles of Jesus in the gospels. This is the only account where the person who received the miracle responded with fear. In most instances, people react with great joy, like the man who went leaping, running, and praising God. But not this woman. She throws herself down before Jesus and “tells the whole truth”—as if she did something wrong that she needed to confess and for which she needed mercy.

Why is she so afraid? I think I know. Under Jewish law, a woman with a bleeding condition was bound to the requirements of Leviticus 15:25–33:

When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period. Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean, as during her period. Anyone who touches them will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

The woman had not just been sick. She has been unsafe. For twelve years, anyone she touched became unclean. Think about it: If she was married, she couldn’t touch her husband without making him unclean. And if she had children, they would also be unclean if she touched them. Can you imagine the pain of being unable to hold your little ones?

In this case, getting to Jesus involved touching hundreds in a crowd and turning a festive occasion into a super spreader event, with her playing the part of “unclean patient zero.”

Now she is at the feet of Jesus and has been exposed.

Sometimes, stigma is more powerful than sickness. And while physical miracles can heal sickness, they often cannot heal the lingering effects of stigma. What is stigma? It’s a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. It can also be defined as a mark of shame or discredit—a stain.¹⁷ In the woman’s case, the stigma of being unclean has defined her to everyone she knows. She is not to be touched—a person to be avoided.

¹⁷ “Stigma Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster, accessed January 31, 2023.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stigma>.

The stigmas attached to us are often more devastating than the actual circumstance or quality associated with them. Like the fallout that often lingers beyond a nuclear blast, stigmas hang around and stick to us long after “the event” is over.

Let’s consider the woman’s reaction. She has just been healed by Jesus, an act that communicates God’s care and acceptance. But the way she sees herself still dominates her thinking. The idea that she should not be touched and that she is unsafe has so shaped her identity that she cannot accept this amazing expression of God’s love. So, she cowers in fear in the presence of her savior—healed of her bleeding but trapped in a false identity.

But Jesus has not come to condemn her. He has come to save her, every part of her. He is the healer of broken bodies, but He is also the healer of broken hearts. He is the ultimate story shaper. And so, Jesus quickly flips the script, buries the stigma, and takes back her story with one word.

He calls her “Daughter.”

Jesus sees her . . . the real her. And by calling her daughter, He invites her to see herself as He sees her.

She had likely been called many names over the last thirteen years: sick, easy target, unclean, unsafe, unworthy. People love to define others by their issues. But Jesus never approaches us based on easy categories rooted in conditions or bad decisions. He always defines people based on their relationship to Him. Jesus sees who we really are and has compassion.

And by calling her “daughter,” He called her to become who she already was.

God sees through what others can’t get over. When the prodigal came to the edge of his father’s property, others would have seen the tattered garments of a rebellious son who had shamed his family. The father simply saw his son. When the woman pressed through the crowd, others would have seen an untouchable whose reckless act had likely infected the crowd. But Jesus simply saw a daughter. And when Jesus looks at us, he sees through our reputations and labels. He never allows a stigma to affect his love for us, or His vision for our lives.

If we are to be the church of hospitality, we must be a John 3:17 church that sees beyond labels and reputations. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (NKJV). In our preaching and discipleship, we must embody the spirit of Christ, who came not to “condemn” the world but to save it. Behind every stigma and label, there is a child deeply loved by God. Our job is to “see” them through the eyes of Jesus and to help them find their way home.

Vision that Disarms Shame

Hospitality begins with seeing. It is means of God’s grace, where He welcomes prodigals like us home to the place we belong through a vision that transcends our shame. We are called to live fully into what God sees in us. And we are also called to see what God sees in others—to be the Church that extends hospitality by seeing through the eyes of Jesus.

The story of the Prodigal Son's return teaches us that we often miss God's best because we focus on our worst. We cling to the tattered garments of yesterday's hog pits, defining ourselves by seasons of failure. But as we see in the story, our Father has provided us with nothing less than His robe, ring, and sandals. There's no need to bargain for second best. No need to live in the hurts and shame of yesterday's garments. No need to live like a toiling servant in our Father's house. The image of homecoming reminds us that through the hospitality of Jesus, we can experience a restored identity as sons and daughters of God.

Vision that Conveys a Hope and a Future

On August 14, 1982, Maritza, a young Honduran girl, climbed aboard a tugboat leaving Honduras for New York. She hoped to escape abuse and make a fresh start in America for her children and herself. That night she stood alone on the deck and prayed, "God, I beg you, please, lighten the way for me to get into this country. Make it easy for me to bring my kids and give them a better future. Help me, God, and give me a signal and let me know that everything is going to be ok. Otherwise, I'll return home." Suddenly, after asking for a sign, she saw a bright star fall into the water. She was filled with happiness and knew she would be ok. She knew that she had seen.¹⁸

Maritza arrived in New York, where she worked seven days a week for \$120 a week. She eventually went to school and worked her way up in the fashion industry. Her kids joined her in America, and she saw the blessing of God in the years to come, eventually landing in Ohio.

Maritza's story reminds us of a God who sees. A God who says, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

When I think about the power of being seen, I think about the woman with an issue of blood, whose life was radically changed when Jesus saw a daughter where others saw an outcast. But I also think about Maritza, who, today, is the grandmother of my son-in-law Brandon and the great-grandmother of Izzy—the little guy who smiles at me from under my glass desk.

Scripture is full of stories where God saw strangers and changed their lives. But in my world, I see the power of being seen when I look at Izzy. He is here because when a young woman asked for a sign, God dropped a star into the water, letting her know, "I see you."

Lord, in a world that is consumed with labels and stigmas, make us different. Anoint our eyes to see people the way you see them so that we may run with you through fields to welcome prodigal's home.

¹⁸ "Tugboat," YouTube, June 26, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvRghD33zHw>.

9

Trusted

But the father said to his servants, “Quick! . . . Put a ring on his finger . . .”

- Luke 15:22

In the story of the Prodigal, the father calls for a ring to be given to his son. But this is no ordinary ring. Instead, it is a signet ring used in ancient times to direct money and assets.¹⁹ In those days, when people with wealth desired to make purchases or enter contracts, they would dip the face of their signet rings into warm wax. And then, they would press the ring onto a document that formalized the transfer. The seal created by the ring was final and binding.

Craig Keener, Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, writes in the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* that the ring would have been a “symbol of reinstatement to sonship in a well-to-do house.”²⁰ The signet ring, similar to modern signatory rights on a checking account, gave the wearer the power to direct the estate's resources. To think that the son who wasted his inheritance is now being given access to the family wealth is staggering.

That the father calls for a ring might be the most shocking part of the Prodigal's story.

The Prodigal took an early inheritance into a foreign land, where he squandered it in wild and careless living. This kid has shown that he cannot be trusted with money. And now, the father calls for a ring, giving him the authority to direct the family wealth.

That’s astounding.

You want to forgive the Prodigal? Fine.

You want to embarrass yourself by pulling up the loins of your robe, running across the field like a kid in the street, throwing yourself on your son’s neck, and covering him with kisses? Go for it.

You want to call for your best robe to be thrown over his shoulders, to let everyone know that he is in your good graces again? Sure. It’s your reputation, and you can do with it as you please.

But to give that boy a ring that gives him access to the money!

That’s crazy!

You talk about the worst credit risk in the history of stories and literature. I can't think of an example close to the financial trainwreck Jesus described. Dave Ramsey would be appalled.

¹⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992). Kindle Edition.

²⁰ Ibid.

And yet, the father does the unthinkable—he shows hospitality to his son by welcoming him home with a ring. He trusts his son to represent him; the trust he extends communicates to his son that this is where he belongs. He has been marked as redeemed, empowered, and worthy.

From Repentant to Redeemed

In the book *Jesus Speaks*, Leonard Sweet notes that the Greek word "metanoia" is usually translated in the New Testament as "repentance."²¹ He writes that "Some have translated it as a "turnaround," a 180-degree change of direction," but "That is almost...as if Jesus only takes us on a detour." He concludes:

The Aramaic of metanoia really means a “returning home.” When Jesus restores the original image of God in us, when we become new creatures in Christ, when “old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17 NKJV), we are learning how to be the original humans God made us to be. We are returning home.²²

Home is all about belonging. It's where we feel a familiar embrace. In our relationship with God, it's where we find our true identities as sons and daughters. And it's where the Father gives us back our rings so that we can join Him in the fields, shoulder to shoulder, feeling His strength, learning His ways, working, creating, and playing together, experiencing “the place where we belong.”

When I think about healing through belonging, I think about the restoration of the apostle Peter.

I have always been intrigued by the way Jesus restored him after his denial. If you remember, Peter told Jesus before the crucifixion that “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.” Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me” (Matthew 26:34-35). Of course, Jesus was right, and the upcoming scene played out exactly like He said it would.

After the resurrection, Peter goes fishing with some of the disciples. And after a night with no bites on the line, a stranger shows up on the shore who recommends that they throw the net out one more time. When Peter complies, the net overflows with fish.

Peter suddenly recognizes the stranger. It's Jesus. And Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to shore. Jesus is already cooking a homecooked meal—showing heaven's hospitality to old friends, who are still traumatized over what they have experienced. They watched their savior die a brutal death, and now they are likely terrified that they will be next.

²¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Speaks* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 8. Kindle Edition.

²² *Ibid*, 8-9.

But Peter is more than just afraid. He is laboring under the weight of a crushing spirit of failure. He denied Jesus when it mattered most. And perhaps he has gone back to fishing because he doesn't feel like he belongs as a disciple anymore. Failure can work like that.

After breakfast, a healing conversation begins. Jesus says, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” Peter said, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Jesus says, “Feed My lambs.” Jesus asks him a second time, “Do you love Me?” And Peter says, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.” When Jesus asks one more time, “Do you love me?” Peter is grieved and says, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus says, “Feed my Sheep” (John 21:15-17).

Feed My Lambs.

Tend My Sheep.

Feed My Sheep.

Here, Jesus provides three affirmations of calling to overcome three denials.

Jesus' affirmations kind of sound like “Quick...bring a ring and put it on his finger,” don't they? Here, Jesus is not telling Peter he must work to get back into His graces. He has already been welcomed home (as evidenced by a home-cooked meal). No, Jesus is restoring him for the same reason the father called for a ring—to let him know that despite his questionable resume, Peter still belongs here.

Like many, Peter struggled with a spirit of failure. I think that's why he sometimes challenged Jesus and felt the need to prove himself constantly. But the best thing that ever happened to Peter was to fail in the presence of a savior who looks at bad resumes and still calls for rings—not as a reward for doing well, but as a means of saying, "welcome home, kid." This upward call says, "You belong here, not because you deserve it, but because you're mine."

Peter ran differently after this moment because he knew that he belonged.

One thing I've noticed throughout my time around other Christians is how often their past failures or pain play a role in their redemption stories and present purpose. In my own life, I saw God redeem my crippling shyness to a position where I vulnerably and publicly share parts of my story every week. If you would have told me that in high school, I would have laughed (quietly to myself). I'm sure Peter felt similarly. He probably thought Jesus would want nothing to do with him after the betrayal. God steps into our pain and redeems us fully. Then our pain turns into praise.

From Unqualified to Empowered

Jesus came healing, casting out demons, and preaching forgiveness and redemption. As a result, the needy, the oppressed, the weary, the outcasts, and sinners followed Him by the thousands. Saviors tend to draw people that need saving.

It was one thing for needy and sinful people to come to Jesus for help. It was another thing for Jesus to turn them around quickly and send them forth as His ambassadors.

But that's precisely what Jesus did.

Consider what we know about Jesus' twelve disciples. When Peter first met Jesus, he told him he was a "sinful man" and asked Jesus to "depart" from him (Luke 5:8). John and James have anger issues, once suggesting to Jesus that he "call down fire from heaven" on a Samaritan village for their failure, of all things, to "welcome" Jesus (Luke 9:54). Matthew had been a tax collector, considered the worst type of sinner (Matthew 9:9). And don't get me started on Judas. I think we can confidently say that the people Jesus sent were just like the Prodigal—people with bad resumes. Despite this, in Luke 9, Jesus gives his twelve disciples authority to heal the sick and cast out demons.

Then, in Luke 10, he sends seventy-two followers to do the same. If the twelve people closest to Jesus came from shady backgrounds, I can't imagine what type of damning material would be on the resumes of the seventy-two. It certainly looks like Jesus is scraping the bottom of the barrel for co-laborers. These are the types of people about whom we would usually say they "need more time," "aren't ready," or "cannot be trusted." And yet, Jesus essentially does what the father did when he called for a ring by sending His followers to represent Him as His ambassadors. He gave people with questionable resumes the authority to act on His behalf.

That's astounding when you think about it. It's also incredibly hopeful for prodigals like you and me. That Jesus continued to call people with bad resumes is seen in Paul's words to the church at Corinth:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

This is not the kind of language we usually think of when we think of "pastoral encouragement." Paul tells the church members that they were *not* considered wise, influential, or of noble birth when they came to Jesus. And to emphasize his point, he adds that they were considered lowly, despised, and foolish. In order to feel the weight of Paul's words, it is helpful to know that the Greek word translated "foolish" could be translated as "morally worthless, a scoundrel, ignorant and stupid."

Ouch.

But Paul is making a critical theological point regarding the gracious welcome of God. He essentially says, “You all have questionable resumes, but God has still given you rings.” Despite their pasts, they have been called to be co-laborers in the father’s business. They are “chosen” to shame the wise and the strong and to nullify the things that are so that “no flesh could glory in God’s presence.”

Paul can write these words convincingly. Because if there is anyone who has a questionable resume, it’s him. He was not one of the original followers of Jesus. He was a prodigal of the worst kind—a religious assassin bent on killing as many Christians as possible. But everything changed the day Jesus ran to him on the road to Damascus . . . and gave him a ring.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” (Acts 9:3-6)

Saul (who later changed his name to Paul) is led into Damascus, where he waits for three days. Meanwhile, Jesus appears in a vision to a disciple named Ananias and says, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (Acts 9:11-12).

Ananias is minding his business, and then suddenly he’s in a vision. Jesus gives him a name (Saul of Tarsus), an address (Judas’ house on Straight Street), a backstory (Saul is blind but has seen a vision of Ananias coming to heal him), and an instruction (Go!). All that detail, and still Ananias hesitates. Why? Paul’s reputation as a murderer of Christians is so notorious that it will cause Ananias to doubt the wisdom of God, even when it comes to him in a vision.

That’s the power of a resume. If we are not careful, a questionable past can cause us to question God’s call on others and even ourselves.

But notice that Jesus assures Ananias in a very particular way. He says, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Here, Jesus lets Ananias know that he is safe to proceed because, while Paul may look like a prodigal now, he’s getting ready to be fitted with a ring that will change the world.

Rings always trump resumes.

We have all felt unqualified at one time or another. And often our pasts whisper in our ears that we have no right to be ambassadors for God’s kingdom because of how we’ve missed the

mark in our lives. But God has given us His signet ring. Not only have we been saved by Him, but we've also been empowered to be the embodiment of God's love on earth—to bring other people home and empower them through God's love. God has entrusted you with His image, His mission, His love. When He looks at you, He doesn't see your resume, He sees your seal, He sees that you belong to Him.

Is that what you see when you look at others? Do you see the seal of God's love on their life? Or do you look at people's resumes? Our role as the Church is not to be a job interviewer, studying people's histories and backgrounds to see if they'd be a good fit. Our role is to welcome them home. To extend the same trust that the Father gave us when we were at our lowest. Our role is to place rings on the fingers of everyone who enters through Church doors, telling them that they belong.

From Weary to Worthy

When Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." he was not trying to check tasks off a list. Unfortunately, our view of God's work is often just that—a cold, dead, passionless, duty-driven series of events that feel more like chores than releasing the currency of heaven. But when Jesus invites us to yoke up with Him, he is saying, "Let me put my ring on your finger, so I can mentor you into the life that you were created to live."

The invitation to work with Jesus is the invitation to intimacy, transformation, and empowerment. Something happens in our souls when we enter a working partnership with Jesus—we learn His ways. And as we do, His ways become our ways—His gentleness, our gentleness, and His humility, our humility. But the most significant reason we experience rest under the yoke is not the divine distribution of work. It's the depth of discipleship we experience while working intimately with Jesus. The yoke of Jesus is a sacred place where we move from working "for" God to working "with" God as the Spirit begins to work through us. The result? We are progressively formed in Jesus' image.

If you want a picture of perfect rest, look at Eden before the fall. Adam and Eve were working, but they were not toiling. They were playing in their purpose, naming animals, tending the garden, and hanging out with God in the evening. This was the kind of restful work that Jesus was talking about, where our work is energized as we live as the image bearers of God.

Do you ever feel the pressure to bear other types of images? Images like success, perfection, fame, wisdom, and, perhaps the worst, the "self-made" man or woman? How do you feel at the end of the day? Tired? Weary? Heavy laden? Can I encourage you to look to Jesus and lay those images down? You and I were created to bear only one image—the image of a loving Father, who alone has the right to define us.

Why does God give rings to Prodigals like us? To teach us to bear the image of God so that we can welcome others home. The call to bear the yoke of Jesus is to learn from the only One with the power to define us. It often involves painful seasons, but as we stay under the yoke and learn from Jesus, we'll thrive and be transformed into the image of the One to whom we belong.

Hospitality is Belonging

I recently interviewed Glenn Kaiser, a friend who is best known as the front man for the Resurrection Band, one of the earliest Christian Rock bands that helped pioneer Contemporary Christian Music. However, many don't know that he and his wife, Wendy, have lived for the last 50 years in Jesus People USA (JPUSA), a church community that shares a 10-story building in Uptown Chicago. The community was birthed in 1972 when "a bus full of young Christian hippies decided to set down roots in Chicago to boldly share the gospel message."²³ Today, JPUSA is a vibrant church of around 200 that give their lives to intentional community and ministering the love of Christ to their neighbors.

Growing up, I played guitar in a rock band. I was heavily influenced by Glenn, but not just because of his incredible musicianship. What really got to me was the message he preached during the concerts—a call to live as sold-out disciples of Jesus. And the lifestyle the band modeled, serving and loving people that many would consider “the least,” formed so much of my understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus.

As I started to research the healing power of God's hospitality, I wanted to talk to people who have lived the message in practical, everyday ways. Glenn, who is also a pastor in his community, was one of the first people that came to mind. In our conversation, I asked him if he could share a story of healing hospitality. He told me about his friend, Tom.

Years ago, Tom and a friend were "doing dope hand over fist." They hadn't bathed in five days and had traveled south to attend a rock concert. They stayed the night at the friend's mother's house. And when they arrived at 2:00 AM, she was still up, waiting for them. She welcomed them into her home, where she had prepared their beds with clean sheets. The next morning, she made a big breakfast before they left for the concert.

Tom was deeply moved by the kindness that was shown. And after they left, he looked at his buddy and said, "What's up with your mother?" His friend replied simply, "She's a very serious Christian." Those words touched Tom's heart. Later, he became a Christian and eventually a pastor at JPUSA, in some part because of the hospitality of his friend's mom.²⁴

When we think about wearing rings and fulfilling our callings, we usually think about the "great things" we will do for God. And while the call of God includes moments and seasons where God does spectacular stuff, most of the time, ministry looks like making breakfast for those who haven't bathed in five days.

The rings that Jesus gives have the power to move heaven and earth. But they are not given for our glory. Instead, they are given so that we can join Jesus in the family business of washing

²³ "Our History," The History of Jesus People, accessed January 31, 2023.
<https://jesuspeoplechicago.org/our-history>.

²⁴ Glenn Kaiser, interview by author, Pickerington, OH, December 7, 2022.

feet and ministering hospitality that heals—so that others can feel the transforming power of belonging.

So, let's be the church that puts the ring on it.

...that refuses to give one inch to a spirit a failure.

... that refuses to allow bad resumes to keep us from going “all in” on the family business.

...that refuses to disqualify others because of their questionable pasts.

...that focuses on one mission—making disciples that know Jesus and live into his ways.

...that exchanges platforms for tables, where we have dinner with sinners and make breakfast for prodigals.

Let's create a *Yoke-up Culture* that follows Spirit nudges of kindness wherever those trails lead so that others can know they belong here too.

Lord, in a world that is weary and wary, form us into your image and help us take up your yoke of kindness. Help us extend your trust to those who come home, not judging them by their pasts but welcoming them, making sure they know they belong.

Project Launch Plan

Doctoral Project Description

NPO STATEMENT

In an increasingly hostile culture, there is an opportunity to incarnate the hospitality of Jesus to a world in need of God's embrace; in doing so, the Church will rediscover and release the mission tone of Jesus, a kindness that heals as it welcomes people home and leads to Spirit-empowered turns.

DOCTORAL PROJECT

BOOK

Healing through Homecoming: Rediscovering the hospitality of Jesus as the mission tone of the Church is a book exploring Divine hospitality as expressed by the father in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 14). The book will focus on ten "welcome points" in the Prodigal's story that provides a lens through which the Church can discern the welcoming work of the Holy Spirit in their contexts so that they can respond to a critical mission question: "What is Jesus Doing (WIJD) in our world?" The ways the father engaged with the son reveal incarnational points through which the Holy Spirit continually seeks to manifest Jesus in action and tone through the Church.

The book is written to *inform*, synthesizing nearly two years of academic research into the practice of ancient hospitality in a scriptural context, probing applications within the first and second testaments and throughout church history. And it is written to *equip*, identifying the nexus between the biblical story and the readers' everyday story, with the hope that they will see avenues through which Jesus is currently leading them to partner with Him through redemptive acts of hospitality. Although rooted in academic research, the book is written in a popular style to reach the broadest range of readers.

PODCAST

The Kindness Podcast contains interviews with guests representing diverse perspectives, including pastors, church members, and Glenn Kaiser, a pioneer in the Christian Rock world (Resurrection Band). He has served for 40 years as a leader in Jesus People USA in uptown Chicago, a communal living ministry that ministers healing hospitality to their neighbors daily, providing a unique, granular perspective on the healing power of everyday hospitality.

POST PROJECT DISCIPLESHIP CLASS

The book and the Podcast will eventually be integrated into an eight-week discipleship class for Life City Church, where I serve as Lead Pastor. The book will provide a systematic approach to the topic and create a space where the possibilities of hospitality as healing can be explored in more of a linear fashion. The podcast will provide a resource where the subject can "breathe" and "stretch out" through conversation and discussion.

Audience

My target audience is followers of Jesus, who sense there is a deeper “heart” component to their discipleship journey and are hungry to release healing through acts of kindness as they cultivate a culture of hospitality in their communities. They are engaged in their churches but desire to be a part of changes to structures and mission approaches. This group includes younger people (Millennials and Gen Z) who desire to share their faith but want it to feel organic, inviting, and with the heart of Christ. It also includes older, engaged church members who have been active for many years but are concerned for their children and the younger generations who are leaving the faith.

In addition, the book is written for those who long for a fresh Jesus movement in today’s world. This includes pastors and ministry leaders who long for an outpouring of the Spirit in their lives and congregations that focuses on a “return to our first love” – for God and people. When God’s kindness permeates the mission tone of a church, it creates an environment where the gospel is heard, the Spirit’s power is released, and broken people find their way home to a running savior whose embrace heals and restores.

Development Plan

TABLE 1: DEVELOPMENT PLAN (BOOK)

<u>Date (2023)</u>	<u>Milestones</u>
<u>May 31.</u>	<u>Complete the Manuscript</u> I completed an Introduction and five chapters of the book for the DMIN project. I will complete the remaining chapters by May 31, 2023.
<u>May 31</u>	<u>Send the completed manuscript for final editing.</u> Assessment: The manuscript will consist of approximately 55,000 words and include completed chapters ready for editing.
<u>Jun 20</u>	<u>Secure Forward and endorsements.</u> I am in the process of reaching out to potential endorsers for the book. The list includes pastors, authors, and experts in the topic, whose endorsements will be included in marketing for the book and the book, itself. Assessment: I will secure a person to write the forward to the book and receive at least eight endorsements.
<u>June 30</u>	<u>Finalize cover art and descriptions.</u>

<u>July 30</u>	<u>Send the final, edited manuscript, forward and endorsements, and cover art to Westbow Press for publication.</u>
<u>August 1 and beyond.</u>	<p><u>Marketing Phases</u></p> <p>I will assemble a launch team for the book to help with promotion and reviews.</p> <p>I will create a website and an advertising video for the book.</p> <p>Assessment: My goal is to presell 200 books before the launch date. I will focus initially on advertising the book to church members and my church and ministry networks. After the book is released, Westbow press will make the book available in softcover, hardcover, and e-book formats (with distribution on Amazon). I will explore social media advertising options, including focused paid advertisements. I will also include make the book available at speaking engagements and podcasts. My goal will be to sell an additional 300 books the first year.</p>
September	Book Release through Westbow Press.
October	<p>Integration into a Life City Church Discipleship Course</p> <p>Assessment: At least 200 people go through the class in the first year it is offered, and that the book is a fruitful tool for spiritual formation.</p>

TABLE 2: DEVELOPMENT PLAN (PODCAST)

<u>Date (2023)</u>	<u>Milestones</u>
May 31	Upload Podcast Episodes to the Life City YouTube Channel
October	<p>Integration into a Life City Church Discipleship Course</p> <p>Assessment: At least 200 people go through the class in the first year it is offered, and the podcast episodes are a fruitful tool for spiritual formation.</p>

Development Process

I will continue to evaluate the Project, gather data, and make further improvements after launch, as follows:

1. I will ensure that the book is put in places where people can access it and purchase it and track which places are the most successful.
2. I will include a survey at the end of the Life City discipleship class that allows for feedback on the book's effectiveness in the class context.
3. The book will be self-published, but I will pursue traditional publishing possibilities.

Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

PERSONAL RESEARCH MANIFESTO

I will be a learner who relies on God, the Scriptures, the wisdom of others, and personal experience to discover solutions that help people live and thrive in the presence of God.

NPO STATEMENT

Our local church, while having clear paths to experience worship, connection, and assimilation and volunteer service, lacks a compelling and effective path for discipleship and spiritual formation.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

By the end of this doctorate program, we will have developed a pilot discipleship program that is missional, relational, and incarnational, and which provides a compelling and effective path for discipleship and spiritual formation in our local church community. At this point in the development process, it is difficult to estimate the exact scope and cost relative to the final product. The scope and constraints, including necessary expenses and resources, will be evaluated and incorporated as the process moves forward.

NPO CONTEXT

I pastor a church in Pickerington, Ohio - a suburb of Columbus. According to a recent article in Forbes Magazine, the Columbus metropolitan area is one of the fastest-growing cities in America.²⁵ At the time of the article's writing, in 2018, it was the fourth hottest housing market in America.²⁶ Currently, the metropolitan area numbers at approximately 2.12 million.²⁷ Our local congregation is a non-denominational church that we planted in our living room in December 2011. Today, we have approximately 250 members. The congregation is mostly suburban and multiethnic, with a balanced mix of individuals and families of all ages.

ROOT CAUSES

Several root causes are present when a local church has an underdeveloped discipleship culture. There is a lack of theological understanding as to what biblical discipleship is and how it should

²⁵ Adam A. Millsap, "Columbus, Ohio Is Booming But Will It Last?," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, August 6, 2018), last modified August 6, 2018, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adammillsap/2018/08/06/columbus-ohio-is-booming-but-will-it-last/>.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ "Columbus Metro Population Growth Continues," *ColumbusUnderground.com*, last modified March 27, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.columbusunderground.com/columbus-metro-population-growth-continues-bw1>.

function within the context of a local church community. There is also usually no clear path for those who long to grow in the faith, which is accessible to people of different cultures, backgrounds, and levels of growth, and that is relationally and emotionally safe. As identified by the workshop participants, the church, in general, doesn't always create relational spaces where believers can, through intentional relationships, feel seen, loved, and challenged to grow – essential elements for a positive and healthy discipleship environment. In our case, we have been more attractional in the first leg of our journey, focusing on gathering. However, it is important that we also add an emphasis on intentional discipleship to our church culture.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholders in my discovery session included a couple who serves as youth pastors; a church media production Lead and his wife; a young adult worship leader; a couple who serve as associate pastors; a small group leader; and a couple who serve as small group leaders.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Interviewees included: (1) a Lead Pastor of a growing congregation; (2) a Church Consultant who has pastored, served as an Academic Dean of a Bible College, and is a consultant in church revitalization; (3) a Discipleship Instructor at a School of Discipleship in a large church.

3-5 KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

The following scriptures will serve as foundational texts throughout this project:

Matthew 28:19-20

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And, surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (NIV).

Jeremiah 29:11

¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (NIV).

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every

day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (NIV).

Romans 12:1-3

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² 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 (NIV).

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (NIV).

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

Some of the primary voices I will explore during this project will be Dr. Leonard Sweet, from whose work, *So Beautiful: So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, I have drawn the essential components of discipleship: missional, relational, and incarnational; Dallas Willard, scholar, and author; Bill Hull, author of numerous books on discipleship, including the Disciple-making Church; Richard Foster, author, and teacher on spiritual disciplines; and others referenced in the Working Bibliography below. Other research areas will include trends in the Church and Culture that impact discipleship; studies on how people grow in faith; case studies on effective disciple-making churches and movements; and the intersection of education and technology.

APPENDIX A

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

My Discovery Workshop session took place on October 29, 2020, at Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio, from 9 am-1:00 pm. The following people were in attendance:

- Youth Pastors (Couple - Ages 24)
- Media Production Lead (Male - Age 21)
- Worship Leader (Female - Age 20)
- Worship Leader (Male - Age 19)
- Small-Group Leader (Male - Age 49)
- Assistant Pastors (Couple - Ages 65)
- Assistant Pastor of Discipleship (Male - Age 58)
- Small-Group Leaders (Couple - Ages 68)

The session followed the predetermined format as given in our DMIN 750 syllabus assignments. The question the group came ready to discuss was. "How can our church build a better culture of discipleship that is missional, relational, and incarnational, to include identifying critical elements of spiritual growth formation, the role of community, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the most effective means of format and delivery?"

CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE DISCOVERY WORKSHOP

The group completed four exercises in which we discussed several issues related to our current discipleship culture and the kind of culture we would like to build. Following are the activities we engaged in and our findings:

Activity One: NPO Definition and Audience

In this activity, we defined the focus of our workshop in terms of a Need, Opportunity, or Opportunity (NPO) as: "How can our church can build a better culture of discipleship that is missional, relational, and incarnational, to include identifying critical elements of spiritual growth formation, the role of community, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the most effective means of format and delivery?" In answering this question, the group identified the following as essential features of each category:

Missional

Being missional involves:

- Helping people discover their mission and identity in Christ;
- Helping people share their faith in Christ;
- Understanding God's vision for the church;
- A missional tone that is invitational (not forced) and flexible;
- Creating an atmosphere of evangelistic hospitality that promotes the love of Christ in community;
- Teaching/mentoring that is accessible to people at all levels of spirituality (taking into account various stages of life and spiritual growth).

Relational

Being relational involves:

- Connecting with God and others on a personal level;
- An emphasis on sacrificial relationships that flow from the revelation of being deeply loved by God;
- Connection and vulnerability with God amid safe environments and safe people, who can help us grow through mentoring and encouraging, peer relationships;
- Emphasizing the ideas of voluntary connections (that are not forced or legalistic).

Incarnational

Being incarnational involves:

- Developing an environment that is culturally accessible and easily digestible to people of various backgrounds and settings;
- Emphasizing the scriptural idea of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit - "Jesus in us" - who is present wherever we, as the Body of Christ, go;
- Teaching and mentoring that is modeled and not just taught;
- An emphasis on manifesting Jesus in "our worlds" - relationally, vocationally, and culturally.

As to who is impacted by the NPO and who should we focus on, the group identified the following:

- New believers in our community;
- The Un-discipled in our community;
- Our local community of mission - those who will be reached and ministered to by a well disciplined church in Pickerington and surrounding areas.

As to what social/cultural factors shape this NPO, the group identified the following:

- People are extremely busy. Making disciples takes time, and demands for time are ever increasing, especially for families with school age children (sports, activities, etc.);
- Discipleship involves personal connection, and, unfortunately, we live in a culture that doesn't always prioritize authentic personal connection (social media connections are too often impersonal and surface);
- There often seems to be a lack of spiritual hunger (although it could be that the Church is not properly "setting the table");
- People don't always see the importance of discipleship (perhaps because the Church has not properly emphasized and taught it);

- The rugged individualism embedded in our American culture can work against a core value at the root of discipleship – that believers should be mentored/disciplined in the context of community;
- Lack of identity in Christ. Perhaps some don't see their need to grow because they don't understand the value of what Christ has – and is doing – within them;
- Lack of the necessary commitment of leaders required to disciple others. Making disciples often involves having the kind of commitment that is necessary to work with messy situations.

As to the evidence that this project is worth the investment, the group identified the following:

- There is an opportunity for people to be integrated into the rich life of the local church community;
- There is an opportunity for believers to grow in Christ and experience His transformation in their concepts of mission, relationship, and incarnational living;
- There is an opportunity to deconstruct the unbiblical Sacred/Secular dichotomy that exists in the minds of many, and to ground believers in the idea that everything they do is spiritual, to be done in God's presence and for His glory;
- So many are limping through life rather than experiencing the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, but discipleship moves people Godward, where everyday life becomes the sacred adventure it was always intended to be;
- Safe structures don't always exist, but by building a healthy discipleship culture, we have the opportunity to create safe environments that engender growth;
- The New Creation in Jesus is not always realized, at least to the degree it should be, but healthy discipleship creates an opportunity for people to become grounded in who they are in Christ – the foundation of all spiritual growth;
- A "shame culture" (in the world and the church) exists in this generation, but through healthy discipleship we can help people move from shame to grace, and to a reliance on the empowering grace of God;
- Gifted people often experience hurt and are shut down (and, as a result, their callings are not developed), but through discipleship, we can help people grow in their gifts, character, and their ability to overcome the hurts that often sideline believers;
- The Scriptures emphasize discipleship, and the command to "Go and make disciples" is at the heart of Jesus's mission (Matthew 28:19-20) – an endeavor He promised to empower with all of heaven's backing (Acts 1:8);
- The power of past revivals like the Methodist movement, where the ministers like John Wesley made use of disciple making groups to establish the work of God;
- God's design (people are created to receive and grow – both naturally, mentally, and spiritually), which is illustrated in:
 - a. The example of Christ – who personally disciplined 12;
 - b. The example of discipleship in the book of Acts;
 - c. The influence and positive Kingdom impact of well-disciplined believers.

Next, we restated and agreed upon a primary target audience using the formula:

"Considering Pickerington and the surrounding communities we've discovered a lack of effective discipleship that is missional, relational, and incarnational, which is caused by a lack of attention to it; if solved, it would mean a fresh expansion of the fullness of God's kingdom in our church and community."

Activity Two: Understanding Those Impacted by the NPO - Empathy Map

In this session, we asked: If our NPO were solved, what would it mean for the audience(s)?” We considered what those affected would say, think, feel and do if they were discipled in an environment that is missional, relational, and incarnational.

Say (What would people who are impacted say?)

They would:

- Speak in line with the Word - the Scriptures;
- Speak the truth into their lives and the lives of others;
- Speak encouraging words;
- Speak in a way that embraces transparency and transformation.

Think (What would people who are impacted think?)

They would:

- Think about how their words and actions can build better connections to God and people;
- Be more spiritually minded;
- Be more mission minded.

Feel (What would people who are impacted feel?)

They would be more:

- Confident;
- Belonging;
- Restful;
- Secure.

Do (What would people who are impacted do?)

They would live more:

- Generous;
- Sacrificial;
- Authentic;
- Compassionate.

Activity Three - Finding the Root Cause - 5 Whys

Here, we explored why the NPO is a problem. We asked the group a series

of “why” questions to identify root causes. The group came up with the following issues that are often present in church communities:

- There is often a lack of meaningful connection (and sense of belonging) to God and other believers - essential ingredients for healthy discipleship;
- There is often a lack of transformational connection - the kind of life change that grows from relationship with Jesus and spiritual mentors;
- There is often a lack of validating relationships, where spiritual growth is modeled and encouraged - an essential ingredient for healthy discipleship;
- There is often a lack of feeling seen - an essential ingredient for healthy discipleship;
- There is often a lack of feeling loved - an essential ingredient for healthy discipleship;

- There is often a lack of feeling challenged to grow - an essential ingredient for healthy discipleship;
- There is often a lack of priority on discipleship in the local church;
- There is often no clear path towards spiritual growth (practical steps that are accessible to people of different cultures, backgrounds, and levels of growth);
- There is often a lack of attention to the discipleship and the process to facilitate it.

Activity. Four: Putting it Together - NPO Statement

Here, we identified the key takeaways from each activity and recorded them on a flipchart. We discussed points of friction, clarification, and questions that arose as a group. I led the group in completing this statement, using what was identified in the activities:

Considering _____(audience),
 we've discovered _____(NPO),
 which is caused by _____(root cause).
 If solved, it would mean _____(outcome).

"Considering Pickerington and surrounding communities (audience) we've discovered a lack of effective discipleship (NPO), which is caused by many things, but principally a lack of attention to building and executing a biblical pathway towards discipleship that is missional, relational, and incarnational. If solved, it would mean our church would experience the fullness of God's kingdom in our personal lives, church community, and in the communities that God has called us to reach."

We also discussed possible delivery formats that would help navigate busy schedules while, at the same time, not sacrifice necessary doctrinal depth/teaching and relational connectivity. A possible hybrid approach consisting of online classes (produced in-house and uploaded to an online site like "Thinkific.com"), personal mentoring through participation in bi-weekly cohorts, and elements of planned service and outreach could be a viable solution.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DISCOVERIES

I sent a copy of the Discovery Workshop report to three interviewees before speaking with them. All agreed with the group's insights provided in the Discovery Sessions. Each had some additional, valuable thoughts to share.

The Lead Pastor noted that the key to building a strong discipleship culture is to create a healthy missional and relational environment. He also stressed the importance of assessing where people are in their walk with the Lord. He stated that discipleship, while incorporating general commonalities, should not be approached with a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. Training leaders/mentors to assess where people are in their development and stage in life is key to building relational connections vital to growth.

The Church Consultant added that while discipleship should have a clear formal path, it should never be reduced to a “class.” It must be relational in its approach and make room for real-life care and mentoring (and not just linear classroom training). He noted the importance of maintaining Christ-like humility and emphasizing personal character. And he offered a great example of living incarnationally. In the last church that he pastored, he volunteered as a chaplain for the local police department. This provided meaningful opportunities to disciple officers and others outside of his congregation. When he left the pastorate and the community, the police department held a gathering to thank him, not for pastoring his local congregation, but for caring for the members of their department, most of which did not attend his local church. He stated that discipleship takes place in the context of relationships, and that we should seek to disciple our communities, and not just our congregations, through intentional acts of service.

Finally, the School of Discipleship Instructor added that discipleship should never reflect a “business model.” He has spent several years teaching official discipleship classes but noted that personal transformation often takes place outside of the classroom over coffee - one-on-one. He is sensitive to the idea that if church leaders aren’t careful, discipleship can become another program - a mere tool in the church’s assimilation belt - and if that’s the case, it will cease to be the kind of personal, relational, and transformational endeavor that Jesus intends it to be.

SYNTHESIS

The information provided in the Discovery Workshop and One-on-One Interviews shared a number of important themes, including:

- It is vital to have a sound theological understanding of what discipleship is and how it is to function within the context of a local church community;
- Healthy discipleship is missional, relational, and incarnational;
- There must be a clear path that is easily accessible to people of different cultures, backgrounds, and levels of growth;
- People must feel seen, loved, and challenged to grow.

In addition, churches must be careful to balance formality with informality. Discipleship should include a systematic approach, where believers learn the Scriptures and spiritual disciplines through teaching and courses. But discipleship must also be relational, personal, and not always so linear. Young believers need spiritual parents who can walk with them. Spiritual transformation is highly dependent on safe, mentoring relationships, where what is taught in the classroom is modeled and worked out “at the table” of real-life connections. A possible hybrid approach consisting of online classes (produced in-house and uploaded to an online site like “Thinkific.com”); relational, personal mentoring through participation in bi-weekly cohorts; and planned service and outreach elements could be a possible solution moving forward.

NEXT STEPS

There are some areas of further academic research to explore, including the theological foundations of discipleship, beginning with the Great Commission and the practical outworking of Jesus's command in the early Church. It will be prudent to also study modern models that are effective in different cultural settings, while identifying transferable principles that would work best in our context. Additionally, I will be looking into developing a format that respects busy schedules while, at the same time, does not sacrifice necessary doctrinal depth/teaching and relational connectivity. As mentioned, a possible hybrid approach consisting of online classes (produced in-house and uploaded to an online site like "Thinkific.com"); relational, personal mentoring through participation in a bi-weekly cohort; and elements of planned service and outreach could be a possible solution.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

- helping people discover their identity + mission in Christ
- witnessing
- accessible to all levels of "spirituality," "revelation," "knowledge"
- God's vision for church
- invitational + flexible

relational

- flexible
- is the person connected to God personally?
- empowering/equipping
- sacrificial/die to self
- vulnerable
- connection
- choice/voluntary
- compassionate

incarnational

- culturally accessible/digestible
- revelation of Holy Spirit + Jesus in you
- modeled
- personal responsibility + practice
- layers/progression of revelation/teaching

We've o
which is r

If solved
the fullness o
(outc

Why is this all worth talking about/solving?

- lives not integrated w/ church
- lives not transforming to the kingdom
- sacred/secular dichotomy still exists
- limping through life
- safe structures don't exist
- new creation not realized
- shame culture (in world + church) still exists
- gifted people hurt + shut down
 - callings not manifested

says

- the word
- truth
- encouraging
- transparency

feels

- confident
- belonging
- restful
- secure

does

- generous
- sacrificial
- authentic
- compassionate

which is caused by lack of attention
(root cause)

If solved, it would mean
the fullness of the kingdom,
(outcome)

says

- the word
- truth
- encouraging
- transparency

thinks

- connection to God + people
interwined
- spiritually minded
- mission minded

feels

- confident
- belonging
- restful
- secure

does

- generous
- sacrificial
- authentic
- compassionate

Evidence of worth/ value?

What Evidence Does have
that disciples is worth doing?

1. The promises in the word of God.
2. The history of the effects of past Revivals

Evidence?
Gods design / God says
personal experience

2. What is the evidence of
this is worth doing?

- 1) Outcomes
- 2) The words (tells us)
- 3) Jesus Christ as our
savior etc.

What evidence is there
that this is worth the
investment?

The book of Acts
"Everyone in the land was
Evangelized..."

What evidence is there
that this is worth the
investment?

Outcomes - people have been
saved from the world.

History - how many have been
saved from the world since the
first time.

What evidence reveals
this will be worth
the investment?

1. Repentant believers
2. Disciples believers
influence

Cultural factors that inhibit discipleship?

Factors that inhibit discipleship?

Culture against cannot see for themselves - self-centered

desires of family values of achievement

What of some other cultures?

Q: Uneducated / poor / illiterate

What social or cultural factors shape this problem (inhibits discipleship)?

1. Too Busy
2. Inverted Priorities
3. Don't see the importance

Q: People are unable to see what is in front of them, focusing on the future and what they want to do.

What social/cultural factors shape this problem?

The typical individualism present in western culture. Also the lack of identity in individual leaders means harm to potential disciples.

Q: People are unable to see what is in front of them, focusing on the future and what they want to do.

What social/cultural factors shape this problem?

The typical individualism present in western culture. Also the lack of identity in individual leaders means harm to potential disciples.

specific

Who is responsible? Should be for everyone, especially those who are in a position of power.

Q: People are unable to see what is in front of them, focusing on the future and what they want to do.

spirit-led

Q: People are unable to see what is in front of them, focusing on the future and what they want to do.

key issue
trying to address?

what

[illegible]

what is the Key Issue?
To ~~be~~ Disciple people to
fulfill Matthew 28:18-20.
Winning souls and teaching
~~the~~ people to be empowered
to fulfill their destiny.
What is impacted? Every one!
Satanic People can matter
The lost is broken
The world is broken so we must

how to

What is the key issue and why is it important?

Inspiring and equipping individuals to fulfil their mission (calling)

Important because success will create passion and passion changes the world.

4) WHAT IS THE KEY ISSUE
WE ARE TRYING TO ADDRESS?

5) Providing adequate financial
resources is a way that
enhances personal innovation.

6) 2) Take down of impact
- leaders, managers, and followers
believe

What is the day we are working to achieve?
 What is it in present?
 How do we Organize Control and act in a
 way that builds the church spirit unity.
 1st - organize because I don't want to be a
 "rock house" of just many Old, 16th century, 17th
 century different ppl from each other to build people.
 What is required to build a church and
 make it a way of God -

- 1) HOW DO WE AS A CHURCH
MAKE DISCIPLES
- 2) IT IS WHAT WE HAVE
BLEN COMMUNION TO DO
BY JESUS
- 3) ALL ARE MEMBERS
- 4) OUR LEADERS

What is the Key
issue we are trying
to address + why?

1. How to make
discipleship Available
to everyone
2. So every person
has a chance to
influence their world
for Christ

Sum of a cycle that
entails concerning on
both ends (both takes on
turning) their risks
describing practice
through extreme relationship
and behavior, testing out
product growth.

^
echo!

why

What is the key issue we
are trying to address - why is
it important?
Lack of meaningful connection
to people and God.
Transformational connection?
Validating connection?
non-substantial
Seen, loved, challenged

key issue: Conduct a survey
call to action: conduct the
survey

Why? People not knowing
exactly how to do about it.

ship track

er track

care

mission/gifts

period?

Christ
P "spiritualify."

compassionate

al

hings

Considering our community (audience),
-LCC
-pickerington
-clous

We've discovered a lack of effective discipleship (NPO),
(MRE)

which is caused by lack of attention
(root cause)

If solved, it would mean
the fullness of the kingdom,
(outcome)

Says

- the word
- truth
- encouraging
- transparency

thinks

- connection to God + people intertwined
- spiritually minded
- mission minded

Evidence of worth/ value?

What Evidence Does have
that disciples is worth doing?

1. The promises in the word of God.
2. The history of the effects of past Revivals

Evidence?
Gods design / God says
personal experience

2. What is the evidence of
this is worth doing?

- 1) Outcomes
- 2) The words (tells us)
- 3) Jesus Christ as our
savior etc.

What evidence is there
that this is worth the
investment?

The book of Acts
"Everyone in the land was
Evangelized..."

What evidence is there
that this is worth the
investment?

Outcomes - faith, love, thankfulness
Sanctification of the members

Testimony - those taking kindly who challenge
others to grow and are ready to give
up all for Christ

What evidence reveals
this will be worth
the investment?

1. Repentant believers
2. Discipled believers
influence

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DOCUMENTATION

Interviewee 1 – Lead Pastor – (Church in Columbus Metropolitan Area)

- ***Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report;***
- Noted the key to building a strong discipleship culture is to create a healthy missional and relational environment;
- Stated it is vital to develop a means of assessing where individuals are in their walk with the Lord. Discipleship, while incorporating general commonalities regarding foundational Scriptural truths, should not be approached with a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach;
- Shared that all of his small group leaders are required to go through a course, “Real Life Discipleship” prior to leading a group and said this has been a game changer in helping develop leaders who will disciple others;
- Training leaders/mentors to assess where people are in their development and stage in life is key to building relational connections vital to growth;
- Agreed that there is an opportunity for discipleship to be delivered through a hybrid approach consisting of online classes, personal mentoring through a bi-weekly cohort, and an element of planned outreach. He is extremely interested in seeing where this study leads.

Interviewee 2 – Church Consultant (Former Pastor and Academic Dean)

- ***Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report;***
- Added that, while discipleship should have a clear formal path, it should never be reduced to a “class.” It must be relational in its approach and requires personal investment into people’s lives, which are often messy;
- Noted the importance of maintaining Christ-like humility and emphasizing growth in the character and nature of Jesus, and not just the mere acquisition of spiritual knowledge;
- Offered a great example of living incarnationally, where, in the last church that he pastored, he volunteered as a chaplain for the local police department; he had meaningful opportunities to disciple officers and others, who were outside of his “Sunday morning: congregation and said this helped to create an environment where discipleship, in the context of one’s vocation – outside of Sunday mornings – became a part of the church culture;
- Agreed that there is an opportunity for discipleship to be delivered through a hybrid approach consisting of online classes, personal mentoring through a bi-weekly cohort, and an element of planned outreach.

Interviewee 3 – School of Discipleship Instructor (Large Church in Southern California)

- ***Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report;***
- Added the importance of not allowing our discipleship efforts to reflect a “business model” of church growth only. He has spent several years teaching a formal discipleship class, where students spend more than one year devoted to a curriculum that helps them grow in their faith. However, he stressed that if church leaders aren’t careful, discipleship can become another program – a mere tool in the church’s assimilation chest – and cease to be the personal, relational, and powerful transformational endeavor that Christ intended;
- Agreed that there is an opportunity for discipleship to be delivered through a hybrid approach consisting of online classes, personal mentoring through a bi-weekly cohort, and an element of planned outreach.

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

INTRODUCTION

The word "disciple" or some variation of the term appears 266 times in the New Testament.²⁸ The principal Scripture regarding discipleship is found in Matthew 28:18-20. It is often referred to as the Great Commission. In it, Jesus states, "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."²⁹ This paper explores the scriptural foundations, the historical development, and some of the contemporary applications of discipleship. And it observes that the Church in the Western world possesses a golden opportunity to return to a discipleship-based mission with a distinctive New Testament DNA that is missional, relational, and incarnational, and that creates intentional practical environments where the Holy Spirit uses mentors to help followers of Jesus grow progressively into His image.

SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

New Testament Discipleship in the Biblical World

Discipleship is a process of spiritual formation where believers become more like Jesus.³⁰ It is marked by radical obedience to Christ, as noted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stated: "The call goes out, and without any further ado the obedient deed of the one called follows."³¹ Making disciples is dependent on leaders who are strong in the Lord, clear in a vision for discipleship, and strategic in approach to developing those under their care. It is also dependent on a clear and workable plan

²⁸ Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Spiritual Formation is ... How to Grow in Jesus with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2018), 22.

²⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

³⁰ Earley and Dempsey, *Spiritual Formation is*, 4.

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship* by Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 1906-1945 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 57.

to implement discipleship that contains a New Testament DNA – discipleship that is missional, relational, incarnational, and supernatural.

This section examines the Great Commission and several other vital passages which provide insight into this DNA of New Testament discipleship, answering the question, “What should discipleship look like?” This study demonstrates effective discipleship is rooted in Jesus’ commandment to go into all nations and make missional *Jesus-style* followers whose lives are being progressively transformed into the image of Jesus Christ through mentoring relationships. And it demonstrates the local Church is the incubator of transformation, where, as the community breathes in the Missional (God’s Power) and Relational (God’s Presence), it “comes alive and exhales the risen incarnate life of Christ” in supernatural ways.³²

Textual Discussions

THE GREAT COMMISSION - TO MAKE DISCIPLES: MATTHEW 28:19

Jesus’ parting words to his followers before his ascension sets the stage for his future work through their lives. Jesus says:

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.

At the core of the passage is a commandment to “go and make disciples.”³³ Here, Jesus makes it clear that discipleship is not a part of his mission – it is the mission. As Bill Hull, Adjunct Faculty Mentor at Biola University and leader of the Bonhoeffer Project (a group devoted to the creation of disciple-making leaders), states in his book, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*: “Discipleship isn’t just one of the things the church does; it is what the church does.”³⁴

³² Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2009), 161-162, Kindle Edition.

³³ Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV).

³⁴ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (The Navigators Reference Library 1) (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 54, Kindle Edition

The Greek word translated "disciple" (μαθητής) in this passage means to be a *pupil*, with the implication of being an adherent of the teacher.³⁵ In the New Testament world, discipleship involved an intimate and personal relationship between teacher and student. As Leon Morris, former Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, notes, in "the first century, a disciple did not enroll with such-and-such a school, but with such-and-such a teacher."³⁶

There are several important aspects of the passage which give us insight into the DNA of New Testament discipleship. First, the command to "go and make disciples" flows directly from God's authority.³⁷ By leading with the words, "All authority has been given unto me, therefore go..." (Matthew 28:19), Jesus stresses that making disciples is rooted in His work of salvation at the cross and resurrection and is, therefore, the ultimate expression of God's redemptive plan. It is not to be a mere natural endeavor to be accomplished in one's abilities, but a supernatural activity directed and empowered by heaven in furtherance of God's eternal plan.

Second, making disciples involves "going," but not necessarily to a far-off mission field. Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, notes in his commentary on Matthew, while making disciples "will require many to leave their homelands," Jesus' "main focus remains on the task of all believers to duplicate themselves wherever they may be."³⁸ The idea is reflected in the *International Standard Version*, which translates the passage as, "Therefore, as you go, disciple people in all nations." Obeying this command of Jesus should flow naturally from the rhythm of life and relationships. In the context of a local church community, it involves training people to see the opportunities to engage in discipleship in their everyday lives, with people who are close to them – "as they go."

Third, every disciple should mature to the point he or she makes disciples. Prior to the Great Commission, Jesus has been the lone teacher. Jesus, then, delegates discipleship responsibility to his students. Their mission will be different from other discipleship relationships in that they will not accrue personal followers. Instead, they will disciple others to follow Jesus. As Craig Keener, professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, notes about this arrangement:

³⁵ W. Arndt, F.W. Danker, W. Bauer, & F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.

³⁶ L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 746.

³⁷ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1265.

³⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Vol. 22) (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 431.

"Making disciples' was the sort of thing rabbis would do, but Jesus' followers are to make disciples for Jesus, not for themselves."³⁹

Fourth, making disciples involves specific and clear markers: (1) baptism, which serves as a means of initiating people into the faith, and (2) teaching followers to adhere to the commandments of Jesus.⁴⁰ Discipleship teaching focuses on personal heart transformation and deployment into the mission. Bill Hull writes in his book, *The Complete Book on Discipleship*, a well-taught disciple "gains an awareness that he lives among lost and broken people and that God's kingdom grows best organically through relationships."⁴¹

Fifth, discipleship is to be global in its scope - they were commanded to go and "make disciples of *all nations*." And while going global often involves sending missionaries to far-off regions, it also involves local churches being faithful to reach the world at their doorstep - their communities. The Greek word translated "nations" (ἔθνος) means "a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, nation, people."⁴² Leonard Sweet, a distinguished professor at several universities and author of over sixty books, writes in his book, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*:

In spite of modernity's individualization of the Gospel, the unit of discipleship has always been *ta ethne*. That's why the divine design is for a global/local church, where millions of "locals" contribute their uniqueness to one truly global, catholic entity. Or as Paul puts it, as the Gospel is "incarnated" into the various *ta ethne* of the world, the body of Christ is built up into its full stature.⁴³

³⁹ C.S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 34.

⁴² Arndt, Danker, Bauer & Gingrich, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 276.

⁴³ Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, 221.

Many metropolitan areas in the United States are populated by diverse ethnic communities, which means a local church can incarnate and “go to the nations” in their own zip code by being Jesus in the various ethnic communities in their regions.

Finally, Jesus promises to be present with his Church as they make disciples: “And, surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Here, after appealing to His full authority (Matthew 28:18), Jesus goes one step further and promises to be fully present with them as they make disciples.⁴⁴

In this seminal passage, Jesus reveals critical markers for discipleship. It is empowered by his presence and authority. And when done correctly, mentors focus on making radical followers of Jesus who are immersed in his teaching and ways.

JESUS: THE GOAL OF DISCIPLESHIP - ROMANS 8:29

What is the goal of discipleship? To be formed into the image of Christ. Paul writes, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:29). The Greek word translated “conformed” (σύμμορφος) means to form into a similar nature or style.⁴⁵ Being “Spirit-shaped” into an incarnational “Jesus-style” lifestyle is a critical characteristic for New Testament discipleship. New Testament scholar Leon Morris writes in his commentary on Romans: “It is God’s plan that his people become like his Son, not that they should muddle along in a modest respectability.”⁴⁶

The process of divine forming is deeply embedded in the human story. It is seen in creation and throughout the Scriptures. When it comes to working in the lives of people, God creates and recreates through the act of formation. In the beginning, God “made” mankind in his “image” by “forming” (Genesis 1:26; 2:7). And when humanity found itself broken after the fall, God showed Jeremiah a potter who took a broken vessel and “formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him” (Jeremiah 18:4). In a clear New Testament parallel, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go and “make” disciples as they are “formed” by the Spirit into the “image” of Christ. Paul writes to the believers at Rome: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind.” To the followers of Jesus at Corinth, he writes: “And we all, who with

⁴⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1271.

⁴⁵ Arndt, Danker, Bauer & Gingrich, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 958.

⁴⁶ L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 333.

unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being *transformed* into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV).

New Testament discipleship is not about mere behavior modification. It's about being Spirit-shaped. What's the goal of discipleship? An everyday incarnation of Jesus in the life of the disciple that incarnates Jesus in his or her world.

THE LOCAL CHURCH: THE INCUBATOR OF DISCIPLESHIP - ACTS 2:42-47

In Acts 2:42-47, one sees the local Church is the incubator for discipleship.

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.⁴⁷

Here, the scriptures reveal an atmosphere of relational discipleship that facilitated a continual experience of God's presence and a Jesus-style generosity. The result was a fresh inflow of new disciples.

Sweet writes, "Missional and Relational are the two lungs of the Church. When the one lung breathes in the Missional (God's Power) and the other lung breathes in the Relational (God's Presence), the body comes alive and exhales the risen incarnate life of Christ."⁴⁸ One sees the convergence in this passage. As the community breathed in and out, disciples were made and multiplied.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

When Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), he made it clear that making disciples is not part of the mission of the Church; it is the mission. Pastors and Church leaders must commit to discipleship as the central mission and seek to understand what Jesus envisioned when he cast a vision for making disciples.

The Scriptures reveal that discipleship is a process of spiritual formation where believers become Jesus-style followers, whose lives are being progressively transformed into the image of Christ. Paul writes that believers are predestined to be "conformed" (σύμμορφος) into Jesus' image (Romans

⁴⁷ Acts 2:42-47 (NIV).

⁴⁸ Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, 161-162.

8:29). The word translated “conformed” means to form into a similar nature or style.⁴⁹ Church leaders should minister with this picture of transformation in mind, noting that the most critical metric for Church growth is not the number of people in attendance, but the depth to which believers under their care are being “Spirit-shaped” into an incarnational “Jesus-style” lifestyle.

The local Church is the incubator of transformation and the organism through which discipleship is implemented. Practically speaking, this involves leaders creating a culture of spiritual vitality that reflects New Testament characteristics of relational mentoring. Jesus said this would involve specific and clear markers in the journey of His followers: (1) baptism, which serves as a means of initiating people into the faith, and (2) continual teaching that empower followers to adhere to the commandments of Jesus. In Acts 2:42-47, the followers of Jesus are seen devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. They also gave generously, met together consistently, and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. This dynamic atmosphere is a picture of relational discipleship that facilitated a continual experience of God's presence and growth – both in personal transformation and the size of the movement.

Today, Church leaders have an opportunity to prayerfully create similar spaces and structures where the followers of Jesus breathe in the Missional (God's Power) and Relational (God's Presence) and come alive to exhale the risen incarnate life of Christ” in supernatural ways in their communities. In doing so, they can fulfill the mission of Jesus through discipleship that bears the marks of New Testament DNA.

Section 2: Topic History and Key Voices

Topic History

DISCIPLESHIP LEADING UP TO THE TIME OF CHRIST

The New Testament word most commonly translated “disciple” (μαθητής) is of secular Greek origin. The most influential Greek philosophers, including Plato, Socrates, and Herodotus, all used the word to refer to a “learner” or “diligent student.”⁵⁰ As time passed, the word was expanded in Greek culture to include the idea of one being an “adherent” of a great teacher. These ideas would have influenced the meaning of the word “disciple” during the time of Jesus.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Arndt, Danker, Bauer & Gingrich, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 958.

⁵⁰ Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 53.

⁵¹ Ibid, 54.

To understand what Jesus meant when he used the term "disciple," one must consider not only the Greek definition of μαθητής but also the Semitic culture in which Jesus and his followers were raised. The Hebrew word that was equivalent to the Greek μαθητής was "talmidhl." It literally meant "taught one."⁵² There was a strong tradition of teacher-student relationships within Hebrew culture. This played out in the common, relational spaces where Jesus was raised, such as families, elders at the gates, and wise men who were stewards of Israel's traditions.⁵³ The Old Testament history informed the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus was replete with examples of "disciples" who not only learned information from their teachers but, similar to the ideas embedded in the Greek word μαθητής, adhered to their teacher's ways and teachings.⁵⁴

A good example is the relationship Joshua (the Leader who led Israel into their Promised Land after their time in the wilderness) had with his mentor, Moses. Joshua observed and learned how to lead difficult people while seeing Moses make mistakes (e.g., slamming the Ten Commandment tablets to the ground in Exodus 32:19, and striking the rock when God had commanded that he speak to it in Numbers 20:10-13). He also sat outside Moses' tent and listened as he cried out for God's mercy to be shown to His people (Exodus 17:8-16).⁵⁵ This close teacher-student relationship provided a picture of how the Holy Spirit uses mentoring relationships to shape people for their part in the progressive divine mission. It would have certainly informed Jesus and his followers' understanding of the kind of close mentoring relationships inherent to discipleship.

DISCIPLESHIP DURING THE TIME OF CHRIST

By the time Jesus started his ministry, four schools of religious thought and discipleship had appeared in Palestine: the Pharisees, the Separatists, the Zealots, and the disciples of John the Baptist,⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid, 55.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid 58.

The Pharisees were a non-priestly sect whose passionate brand of discipleship was focused on protecting the law and written and oral religions.⁵⁷ They developed formal rabbinical schools, and several of their rabbis became highly influential teachers. Gamaliel, who was Paul's teacher prior to his conversion, reportedly had a thousand who followed him and committed themselves to master the Torah as his disciples.⁵⁸

The Separatists, which included the Essenes, were a sect of people so disillusioned with what they perceived as the intolerable spiritual condition of the Jewish religious establishment that they established reclusive desert communities.⁵⁹ They were known for their strict rules and demanding requirements for membership.⁶⁰ This monastic and separatist group functioned under extensive rules and very demanding entrance requirements, and they focused heavily on prayer. Although not as academically oriented as the Pharisees, they were highly committed to scripture.⁶¹

The Zealots were less academic and focused on military-style solutions to the problems associated with the Roman occupation, which often involved followers gathering around a charismatic leader whom they would proclaim as King.⁶² Many Zealots were attracted to the ministry of Jesus, seeing him as the one who could lead them to overthrow the Roman empire.⁶³

John the Baptist spearheaded a movement that attracted disciples to repentance, baptism, and an expectation of a coming Messiah. His ministry found fulfillment in introducing Jesus as the Messiah, and many of his disciples left John to follow Jesus. An essential feature of his discipleship method

⁵⁷ Ibid, 59-60.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 60-61.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 62.

⁶³ Ibid.

was making disciples for Jesus rather than himself – a critical element of the discipleship model that would later emerge in the early Church.

While these groups had differing ideologies, they shared common characteristics relevant to discipleship. Hull notes five features of these types of movements: disciples followed a teacher, memorized the teacher's words, learned the teacher's ways of ministry, imitated the teacher's life and character, and raised disciples.⁶⁴ It was in this world that Jesus emerged as the ultimate disciple-maker.

According to Bobby Harrington and Robert Patrick, authors of *the Disciple Maker's Handbook*, Jesus practiced intentional, relational discipleship with a unique and radical emphasis on agape love and service. Hull provides several features characterized by Jesus' followers: they followed Jesus, learned His words, learned His ways of ministry, imitated His life and character, and taught others to do the same.⁶⁵ Hull notes while Jesus's method of discipleship shared commonalities with others, it was distinctive in some ways. For example, unlike the Pharisees, who mentored budding scholars, Jesus chose observant Jews from the trades – fishing, farming, carpentry, and commerce.⁶⁶ Jesus created an extraordinary movement from what would have been considered ordinary followers.

Charles and Win Arn, authors of *the Master's Plan for Making Disciples*, note that the particulars of Jesus' strategy continued on after his ascension as His disciples made disciples. They point out that this resulted in the explosive growth of the early Church, as illustrated in the following scriptures: "The number of disciples was multiplying" (Acts 6:1 NKJV); "And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7 NKJV).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid, 63.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 68.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1998), 24, Kindle Edition.

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

Although a full treatment of the story of discipleship during the first two thousand years of church history is beyond the scope of this paper, there are a few examples of individuals and movements worth noting. Hull writes that early church leaders like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna encouraged discipleship-related practices like prayer, fasting, giving, and connectivity.⁶⁸

After Christianity was made the official state religion of the Roman Empire in 325 A.D., the Church became more formalized in structure and, as a result, less focused, at least on a macro-level, on personal, relational discipleship. However, there were some key voices during this era, in what became known as the Monastic Movement, which sought to restore vital aspects of discipleship.⁶⁹

Benedict of Nursia (480-550) produced *the Rule of St. Benedict* that taught that the path to spiritual maturity comes from a balance of study, prayer, and work. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) eschewed materialism and sought to minister to the poor.⁷⁰ And Dominic (1174-1221), an Augustinian monk, stressed the importance of effective preaching to correct teachers who were in error.⁷¹ Their methods were often extreme and legalistic, especially by today's standards. However, as Hull notes, "The monastic movement infused the slow-moving and corrupt machine called the church with fresh ideas and spiritual energy."⁷² As a result, some of the most essential elements of spiritual formation - the goal of discipleship - were maintained.

Martin Luther (1483-1586) sparked the Protestant Reformation and emphasized, among other things, the primacy of Scripture over tradition and the idea that every believer is a priest who can go directly to God through Jesus Christ.⁷³ These important doctrinal concepts are at the root of

⁶⁸Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 74-75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 88.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 84.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 85.

⁷² *Ibid*, 87.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 95.

New Testament discipleship. John Calvin and other reformers echoed these themes and highlighted a personal relationship with God through Christ.⁷⁴

One of the most important influences on modern discipleship is John Wesley (1703-1791). Not only did he spearhead a powerful revival movement that touched large groups of people in England and America, but he also developed small accountability groups that provided a place where converts could grow in their faith through the study of the scriptures, personal encouragement, and reaching out to share Jesus beyond the group.⁷⁵ Author and pastor Winfield Bevins writes in his book, *Marks of a Movement*: "One of the great lessons we are reminded of by the Wesleyan revival is that the Church's purpose is to make and multiply disciples. Perhaps more than anything, it was the intentional discipleship systems that contributed to the growth and longevity of the movement."⁷⁶ Of this movement, Wesley said, "This revival of religion has spread to such a degree, as neither we nor our fathers had known. How extensive has it been! There is scarce a considerable town in the kingdom, where some have not been made witnesses of it."⁷⁷

Hull identifies three historically recent discipleship movements at work today in the Western Church.⁷⁸ The first, Classic Discipleship, gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century. Groups like the Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ emphasized practices like one-on-one mentoring, scripture memorization, disciplined Bible study, and sharing the Gospel.⁷⁹ The second, the Spiritual Formation movement, has sought to recapture ancient exercises practiced by Jesus, his disciples, and the monastics, including "silence, solitude, frugality, meditation on Scripture, and

⁷⁴ Ibid, 97.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 104.

⁷⁶ Winfield Bevins, *Marks of a Movement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 99, Kindle Edition.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 141.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 19-20.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

filling instead of emptying the mind."⁸⁰ The third, Environmental Discipleship, focuses on relational health. Hull writes: "One of the least-developed concepts in discipleship has been how the environment of a group determines what grows or dies within that environment."⁸¹ This movement focuses on discipling followers of Jesus while paying attention to things like personal acceptance, the integrity of relationships, and trust.⁸²

Today, Hull sees a new form of discipleship emerging from these three movements and now "converging to create a new, full-bodied discipleship, with the potential to transform the Church in the next twenty-five years" – a Jesus-style discipleship which he believes will result in the spiritual transformation of millions who are presently outside of Christ.⁸³

Contemporary Voices that Speak to the DNA of New Testament Discipleship

THE NEED FOR A RETURN TO A JESUS STYLE DISCIPLESHIP

According to the Pinetops Foundation, a private foundation that looks to find innovative solutions to long-term, structural problems facing the Church, one million young people leave the Church every year, a crisis that they describe as "the most significant domestic evangelism challenge in American history."⁸⁴ James White, a professor of Theology and Culture at Gordon-Conwell, writes in his book *Meet Generation Z* that "of the 85 percent of American adults who were raised Christian, nearly a quarter of them no longer identify with Christianity."⁸⁵ He notes former Christians now

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ PINETOPS FOUNDATION, THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY: THE AMERICAN CHURCH IN 2050, <https://www.greatopportunity.org>

⁸⁵ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 23, Kindle Edition.

represent 19.2 percent of the U.S. adult population, and for every convert to Christianity, there are four former Christians.⁸⁶

Sweet writes about this steep spiritual decline in his book, *Rings of Fire*: "The twenty-first-century church in the West has a reproduction crisis."⁸⁷ He adds, "We cannot reproduce the faith in our children, our communities, our churches, and our world," and "When any species can no longer reproduce itself, we classify it as endangered."⁸⁸ He notes:

This is the time for the Church to find itself, to learn to be itself, and for new panoramas and pathways to address the world's most urgent challenges. We can get ahead of social change. We can be a player in the formation of the future. But only those who are the most nimble and fleet-footed in the face of change are positioned to make the greatest contributions for the future.⁸⁹

A growing number of voices believe the answer to the reproduction crisis is a return to the original mission of the Church: making disciples of Jesus in the way that he practiced and intended for His Church to continue – a Jesus-Style discipleship.

Robby Gallaty and Chris Swain are pastors at Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee. They research issues involving discipleship and practice what they discover in a local church context. In their book, *Replicate*, they write about the need for a more robust discipleship movement: "While we are reaching people, we are struggling to keep them in Church."⁹⁰ In the year 2000, they stated, the average church member attended Church in person 3.2 times a month, and that seventeen years later, the number dropped to 1.8 times.⁹¹ They write that the solution is

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 8, Kindle Edition.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Robby Gallaty and Chris Swain, *Replicate* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2020), 24, Kindle Edition.

to focus on discipleship and "by encouraging believers to pursue discipling relationships that are "accountable, meaningful, and transparent, our churches will see fewer people leave, and more people stay and serve."⁹²

Lance Ford and Rob Wagner, authors of *The Starfish and the Spirit*, agree, writing, "Most churches and faith groups, large or small, already have the inherent competency and capacity to flourish," but what is needed is "an understanding of how to unleash the latent wisdom, understanding, talents, and joy that will fuel their tasks and journey."⁹³ They advocate for reimagining the Church as a decentralized network of multiplying disciples who fill a region with the fullness of Jesus.⁹⁴ Perhaps it is time to reimagine and re-engage through the lens of Jesus' words to His first followers: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

Robert Coleman, professor, and author notes in his book, *the Master Plan of Evangelism*, when Jesus called a few men to follow him, he was not concerned with "programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow."⁹⁵ And Hull, applying Coleman's point to today's context, writes the Discipleship Jesus modeled shouldn't just be one of the things the Church does; it should be what the Church does."⁹⁶ Will Mancini, author and Church growth expert expresses the same sentiment in his book, *Innovating Discipleship: Four Paths to Real Discipleship Results*: "Jesus' disciples are to fill the entire planet, and Jesus' teachings are to fill the entire disciple."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 26.

⁹³ Lance Ford, Rob Wegner, and Alan Hirsch, Alan, *The Starfish and the Spirit (Exponential Series)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 8, Kindle Edition.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁹⁵ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1993), 21, Kindle Edition.

⁹⁶ Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 24.

⁹⁷ Will Mancini, *Innovating Discipleship: Four Paths to Real Discipleship Results* (Church Unique Intentional Leader Series Book 1, 2013), loc 190, Kindle Edition.

Gallaty and Swain write that today, "Most evangelistic tactics move people toward making a decision or a convert; however, Jesus and His disciples focused on making disciples."⁹⁸ In their estimation, less than .005 percent of U.S. churches qualify as what they refer to as "multiplying churches" that exist to raise and send out disciples to impact the community and the world."⁹⁹ They quote Derwin Gray, pastor of Transformation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, who said, "The apostle Paul wouldn't understand the invitations issued after services today." Raise a hand, walk an aisle, say a prayer, and "repeat after me" would have been foreign concepts to the apostle."¹⁰⁰ A prayer of faith must be followed by a process that develops and deepens a walk of faith.

Gallaty and Swain see signs of a positive shift towards a focus on New Testament discipleship, pointing to the ministry of Steve Murrell, author of the book, *WikiChurch*, as an example. Murrell planted a church, Victory Manila, in 1984. It has grown to fifteen satellite locations with forty-eight preaching pastors who minister to almost sixty thousand people.¹⁰¹ The strength of the movement is in the "eight thousand discipleship groups that meet in coffee shops, offices, dormitories, parks, homes, and on the steps outside the church on Sunday mornings and throughout the week."¹⁰²

Hull is also hopeful and foresees "a major shift in many churches of the Western world—a shift from clergy-centered ministry to a ministry of lay people equipped for service."¹⁰³ And he anticipates a new, emerging full-bodied discipleship, which he says, has the potential to transform the Church in the next twenty-five years – a transition that will result in the "transformation of millions now outside of Christ."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Gallaty and Swain, *Replicate*, 112.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid, 109-110.

¹⁰³ Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1984, 2004), 168-169, Kindle Edition.

¹⁰⁴ Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 20-22.

THE DNA OF A JESUS STYLE DISCIPLESHIP

It is clear that the Church must return to making disciples as their primary focus. But what would such a return look like? What did Jesus have in mind when He said, "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19)? According to Sweet, nothing less than an increasing manifestation of Jesus within the lives of His followers. He writes: "We are not called to be an imitator of Jesus, but an planter and an interpreter of Jesus for the world in which we find ourselves. We are not called to mimic the Messiah, but to manifest Christ in the world."¹⁰⁵ He adds that the follower of Jesus is "to be in such a relationship with Christ that you begin to share his life, his Spirit, and his presence."¹⁰⁶

In his book, *The Great Omission*, the late author and professor Dallas Willard writes that "the presence of the Holy Spirit can always be recognized by the way He moves us toward what Jesus would be and do (John 16:7-15)."¹⁰⁷ And, in the context of a true New Testament Jesus style discipleship, he writes that followers of Jesus should "inwardly experience the heavenly sweetness and power of life—the love, joy, and peace—that Jesus knew, that is the work of the Spirit in us."¹⁰⁸ Both Sweet and Willard make it clear that when discipleship is done right, it results in an experience of Jesus's life manifesting in and through the follower's everyday life.

Making Jesus-style disciples, then, is about helping people who are born of the Spirit walk in the Spirit by yielding to the Spirit. To work out what the Holy Spirit is working within them (Philippians 2:13). Discipleship is not about sweat and stress but about discovering one's spiritual DNA and living authentically. It's not about trying to become somebody new; it's about becoming who you already are.

Sweet identifies three specific strands of this DNA – a "keystone species of words that encode the secret to a disciple's life, a life of followership."¹⁰⁹ He writes that "The First Secret of Life is ...

¹⁰⁵ Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, 212.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 24, Kindle Edition

¹⁰⁸ Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Missional. The Second Secret of Life is ... Relational. The Third Secret of Life is ... Incarnational."¹¹⁰ And he notes this Missional, Relational, Incarnational (MRI)-shaped life is at the core of Matthew's Great Commission to make disciples: "As you are going": That's the Missional "Make disciples": That's the Relational "Of all cultures": That's the Incarnational."¹¹¹

What did Jesus mean when he said, "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19)?" At the least he was urging the Church to produce followers who are missional, relational, and incarnational.

First, making disciples means developing followers of Jesus who are equipped to live out the right mission.¹¹² According to White: "What is killing the church today is having the mission focused on keeping Christians within the church happy, well-fed, and growing," but "the mission cannot be about us—it must be about those who have not crossed the line of faith."¹¹³

Mancini suggests that one of Jesus's greatest and most underappreciated accomplishments was to establish a culture of mission that has continued for generations. He writes, "On the strength of the culture of mission that Jesus instilled in his disciples, his Way took over the Roman world and established itself in large portions of Africa and Asia in a few centuries."¹¹⁴ Jesus' followers must be as proactive about the mission of making disciples today.

J.T. English, pastor of Storyline Fellowship in Arvada Colorado, agrees, writing in his book, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*, that followers of Jesus should be taught to ask the following questions: "What are you learning, and who are you teaching it to?" They should be given "intentional pathways into serving in the local church, their homes and neighborhoods, the workplace, and ultimately the nations."¹¹⁵ And, according to Gallaty and Swain,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 32.

¹¹² Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 46-47, Kindle Edition.

¹¹³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 153.

¹¹⁴ Will Mancini and Cory Hartman, *Future Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 104, Kindle Edition.

the going should be organic and practical, with followers of Jesus viewing their ordinary, everyday life as a mission: "You don't need a stamped passport to share the Gospel with lost people. You can walk across the street in your neighborhood and foster a friendship with your neighbors for an open door down the road to share your faith."¹¹⁶

Second, making disciples involves mentoring followers of Jesus to grow in the right kind of relationships.¹¹⁷ Sweet notes at the heart of the universe rules a relational God.¹¹⁸ Therefore, making disciples must be focused on helping followers of Jesus experience "a daily walk of grace, wonder, intimacy, sadness at failure, repentance, renewal, forgiveness, longing, gratitude, and companionship" in their relationship with God, resulting in healthy, loving relationships with others.¹¹⁹ Sweet writes, "You don't grow as a disciple of Jesus by sitting in a church building soaking up the ink of a tablet, with its static statutes and impersonal instructions. You grow as a disciple by eating at a table."¹²⁰ Authentic "table" relationships with others provide the kind of deep connection, fellowship, and interactions that feed the soul and grow the Spirit. Peter Scazzero, a pastor and author of several books related to Church health, writes in his book, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*, love is the measure of spiritual maturity, and in discipleship, "our aim must be to equip our people to love like Jesus at home, work, school, with friends, in their neighborhoods."¹²¹ David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, writers of *Faith for Exiles*, state: "In our qualitative interviews, we discovered that people don't learn to follow Jesus simply by having lots of great head knowledge about him (although having the right beliefs matters, as we'll see). Experiencing Jesus is found

¹¹⁵ J.T. English, *Deep Discipleship*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group), 186-187, Kindle Edition.

¹¹⁶ Gallaty and Swain, *Replicate*, 56.

¹¹⁷ Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 47.

¹¹⁸ Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, 97.

¹¹⁹ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 14, Kindle Edition.

¹²⁰ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 161-162, Kindle Edition.

¹²¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 139-140, Kindle Edition.

along a relational pathway with family, friends, and other people who love and experience Jesus. We are loved into loving Jesus."¹²²

Third, making disciples means mentoring followers of Jesus to live incarnationallly.¹²³ Sweet writes that "God took a nosedive into raw human experience and spoke to us in a language we could all understand—the material language of a human life, the language of a person named Jesus of Nazareth," and "because God chose to save the world by participating in its life, incarnation and atonement can never be separated."¹²⁴

Incarnation and discipleship also cannot be separated. Jim Putman, the pastor of Real-Life Ministries, one of the fastest-growing churches in America, notes in his book, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples*, discipleship must play out in four main spheres of life: relationship to God, the Church, home life, and the world. In each space, a disciple learns to yield to the Holy Spirit to work transformation in that area.¹²⁵ He states when Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19), He drew a big circle that encompasses all of a person's life: their private thoughts, their family relationships, their integrity on the job, and in the most challenging struggles of personal character, like forgiveness, loving difficult people and living the sacrificial life.¹²⁶ As noted by Dave Early and Rod Dempsey, professors at Liberty University and authors of *Disciple Making Is . . . How to live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*, "The growth and development of the believer is both internal (becoming like Christ in word, thought, and attitude) and external

¹²² David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 54, Kindle Edition.

¹²³ Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 47.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 162.

¹²⁵ Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 104, Kindle Edition.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

(becoming like Christ in action)."¹²⁷ As believers grow and mature, they are then to join Christ in transforming their entire world.¹²⁸

Living incarnationally now involves navigating a world transformed by COVID-19. Thomas Rainer, founder and CEO of Church Answers, notes that the quarantine was not just a time when many church leaders discovered how to stream worship services online but also when a multiplicity of new ministries exploded. He writes, "People who had never before heard the church's name were reached, and that "prayer ministries were foremost among the emerging ministries with unparalleled impact in the digital world."¹²⁹ Carey Nieuwhof, a pastor and host of an influential leadership podcast, suggests church leaders in a post-pandemic world must seize the opportunity to increase their influence in the digital world, and if they see the digital ministries of the Church as simply an "add-on" again, they will "completely miss the future. He writes: "Everyone you want to reach is online. It's time for the Church to finally act like it."¹³⁰ This suggests that the forms of discipleship in the future will, at the least, involve a new and more robust hybrid approach of in-person and online interactions.

PRACTICAL ELEMENTS OF A JESUS STYLE DISCIPLESHIP

Finally, some of the literature suggests that making disciples involves a practical process that is intentional and involves distinct stages of spiritual growth and spheres of influence.¹³¹ Putman highlights five spiritual growth stages: pre-believers, who have yet to discover faith in Christ, and four critical sanctification stages, where believers are mentored to deepen their relationship with Jesus: "the infant stage to the child stage, to the young adult stage, and finally to the parent stage,

¹²⁷ Dave Early and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is . . .* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 42, Kindle Edition.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Thomas Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Kindle Edition, 2020), 62.

¹³⁰ Carey Nieuwhof, *So Many Church Leaders are Still Making this Mistake in 2021*, <https://careynieuwhof.com/so-many-church-leaders-are-still-making-this-mistake-in-2021-are-you/>

¹³¹ Jim Putman and Bob Harrington. *DiscipleShift* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 60.

in which they disciple someone else through these same stages."¹³² Putnam argues disciples-makers should start with the assumption that God is already working in every person's heart and then ask God to help them see and seize opportunities to disciple them from one stage to another by (1) sharing and applying Scripture in a practical way, (2) connecting relationally, (3) training for ministry, and (4) releasing them to disciple others.¹³³

In his book, *Planting Missional Churches*, Ed Stetzer, Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission and Evangelism at Wheaton College, and Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, recommends using small groups as primary vehicles for discipleship—"to connect individuals to the church of God that is being transformed into the image of God and participating in the mission of God."¹³⁴ Putman agrees and advocates using groups who utilize the Bible-storying method, called 'Orality,' to facilitate spiritual growth. He meets with his pastoral team at the beginning of each year to choose a biblical story they think is relevant to their community. Later, during group meetings, members discuss the story, while the group leader asks questions that draw out the important truths like, "What new thing did you discover in the story that you did not know before?" "What did you learn about God?" "What did you learn about people?" "Which person is most like you in the story?" "What will you take away from this discussion?" "What will you do with what you have learned?" This approach leads to discussion and application moments, where mentors can help apply the word to real-life situations.¹³⁵

Kevin Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, writes in his book, *Hearers and Doers*, "the Church today ministers most practically when it teaches people to read the Bible theologically, that is, to hear and do God's word."¹³⁶ Greg Ogden, who served as a pastor and director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary,

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, 29.

¹³⁴ Ed Stetzer and Daniel I'm, *Planting Missional Churches, Your Guide to Starting Churches that Multiply*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), loc 5201, Kindle Edition.

¹³⁵ Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples*, 140.

¹³⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastors Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2019), loc 175, Kindle Edition.

agrees, writing in his book, *Discipleship Essentials*: “Transformation occurs when we grapple with the truth of God’s Word in the context of transparent relationships.”¹³⁷

Putnam’s story-based approach is working in nearly 700 small groups that meet weekly in his Church. And it provides a practical and reproducible method for discipleship which reflects the MRI of Jesus-style discipleship. It is missional (focused on discipling people for their mission), relational (taking place face-to-face in small relational groups), and incarnational (focused on applying the story of Jesus to the story of people’s everyday lives, where Jesus can live in and through them in their worlds).

Section 3: Synthesis and Conclusion

AREAS OF AGREEMENT OR CONSENSUS

How the Church can approach fulfilling Jesus’ command to make disciples with a New Testament DNA is a vital question today. The literature reviewed offers several vital themes.

First, there is a growing conviction that the survival of the Church in the West is dependent on a return to an exclusive focus on a model of Jesus-style discipleship. One million youth leave the Church each year, and of the 85 percent of American adults who were raised Christian, nearly a quarter no longer identify with Christianity. Former Christians now represent 19.2 percent of the U.S. adult population, and for every convert to Christianity, there are four former believers. Without question, the western Church is in the midst of a serious reproduction crisis. The literature suggests the solution is to encourage believers to return to a model of New Testament discipleship resulting in mission-oriented relationships that are accountable, meaningful, and transparent. Doing so will unleash the latent wisdom, understanding, talents of the Church, and it will result in a major shift from clergy-centered ministry to a ministry of laypeople equipped for service. Some, including Bill Hull, see a fresh discipleship movement already emerging, which they believe will result in millions coming to faith in Jesus.

Second, to be effective, discipleship must contain a certain New Testament DNA, which is characterized by an increasing manifestation of Jesus within the lives of His followers. When discipleship is done right, it results in an experience of Jesus’s life manifesting in and through the follower’s everyday life. Making disciples is about helping people who are born of the Spirit walk in the Spirit by yielding to the Spirit. It is about helping followers of Jesus discover their spiritual DNA and living authentically. This involves living missionally, where the follower of Jesus prioritizes the mission of Jesus – to go and make disciples. It also involves living relationally, where one experiences a walk of grace and intimacy in his or her relationship with God that results in healthy,

¹³⁷ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials (The Essentials Set) (p. XII)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), loc 113, Kindle Edition.

loving relationships with others. Sweet notes a disciple grows in maturity by "eating with others at tables," which he applies literally and figuratively to communicate the idea that spiritual growth occurs in relationships with others. Deep connection, fellowship, and interactions seed the soul, grow the Spirit, and serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth. Making disciples involves mentoring followers of Jesus to live incarnationally, where the disciple learns to manifest Jesus in the main spheres of life: relationship to God, the Church, home life, and the world. As believers grow and mature, they are then to join Christ in transforming their entire world.

Third, making disciples involves a practical process that is intentional and involves distinct stages of spiritual growth and spheres of influence. Some of the literature suggests small groups are primary vehicles for discipleship, where participants experience spiritual growth in the context of mission, relationships, and incarnational opportunities. It also maintains discipleship occurs most effectively when leaders teach people to read the Bible theologically, resulting in a lifestyle where one hears and does God's word. Finally, an emerging opportunity for discipleship involves the intersection of in-person and online interactions in a post-pandemic world and how it could affect the effectiveness of discipleship moving forward.

ONGOING TENSIONS, DISAGREEMENTS, OR PRESSURE POINTS

Although not significantly pronounced in the literature reviewed, there appears to be some underlying tension as to the practical role of mentors in the discipleship process. While all the authors reviewed would likely agree discipleship involves a mentoring relationship with another more mature believer, some, like Stetzer and Putman, emphasize the mentoring role to a greater degree. Stetzer and Hull specifically advocate using small groups in the local Church to facilitate mentoring relationships. And Putman agrees, noting there are five spiritual growth stages while encouraging a system where trained spiritual parents disciple believers from one stage to another. His Church also uses an exclusive standardized approach toward small groups called "Orality" to facilitate spiritual growth. In contrast, some of the authors seem to focus more on the working of the Holy Spirit in the disciple, with little reference to the practical details about what discipleship looks like in an everyday relationship with a mentor. And while mentors are not in any way discouraged in their writings, the mentoring role is mostly undefined. One should be careful not to draw hard conclusions from silence. But the lack of detail suggests those whose works focus mostly on the characteristics of the individual's spiritual growth without addressing the "how to's" of the mentoring process would be less stringent about the practicalities of the mentor-discipleship relationship. This leaves an open question for the project researcher as to the best approach to the mentor-disciple relationship in his context.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Due to the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the literature reviewed did not contain references to lessons learned about discipleship in the digital world during the pandemic. As suggested by Rainer and Nieuwhof, disciple-making will now involve a new and more robust hybrid approach of in-person and online interactions. This is an emerging area of literature and practice

which will likely expand significantly in the coming months and years and which will be extremely valuable for the project researcher.

CONCLUSION

Discipleship is a process of spiritual formation with a specific DNA, where believers become more like Jesus. It is grounded in Jesus' commandment to go into all nations and make radical "Jesus-style" followers whose lives are being progressively transformed into the image of Jesus Christ - the goal of discipleship. The researcher has considered the scriptural foundations, the historical development, and some of the contemporary applications of discipleship. From the literature reviewed, it is clear that the Church, particularly in the West, must return to a discipleship-based mission that is missional, relational, and incarnational, and that creates intentional, practical environments where the Holy Spirit uses mentors to help followers of Jesus grow progressively into His image.

The local Church is the incubator the Holy Spirit uses to facilitate spiritual transformation. And in the post-pandemic world, there is an opportunity to build on lessons learned during the shutdown and to create formats for discipleship utilizing a hybrid of in-person and online formats. As members of the community continually experience God's presence and are formed consistent with the nature of Jesus, there is a supernatural drawing power that will result in a fresh inflow of new disciples to be made. And when this dynamic occurs, the Lord will add to His Church those who "are being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

NPO STATEMENT

NPO: In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers into a purposeful journey.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

When implementing ministries of hospitality, healthy constraints and boundaries must be in place. This includes ensuring safety protocols for dealing with children and other vulnerable groups and maintaining a leadership sensitivity to overwork and personal burnout of staff and volunteers. In addition, it is essential to be sensitive to financial/budget concerns and to keep the character and the message of Jesus at the center of all efforts.

NPO CONTEXT

Life City Church is in Pickerington, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. According to a recent article in Forbes Magazine, the Columbus metropolitan area is one of the fastest-growing cities in America.¹³⁸ At the time of the article's writing in 2018, it was the fourth hottest housing market in America.¹³⁹ Currently, the metropolitan area numbers at approximately 2.12 million.¹⁴⁰ Life City is a non-denominational church that started in our living

¹³⁸ Adam A. Millsap, "Columbus, Ohio Is Booming But Will It Last?," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, August 6, 2018), last modified August 6, 2018, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adammillsap/2018/08/06/columbus-ohio-is-booming-but-will-it-last/>.

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ "Columbus Metro Population Growth Continues," *ColumbusUnderground.com*, last modified March 27, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.columbusunderground.com/columbus-metro-population-growth-continues-bw1>.

room in December 2011. Last year, we merged with another congregation. And today, approximately 400 members call Life City home. The congregation is primarily suburban and multiethnic, with a balanced mix of individuals and families of all ages.

ROOT CAUSES

Western culture is increasingly hostile towards faith. Unfortunately, the Church often reacts with similar hostility. Hospitality is the correct "Jesus" response. And while kindness will not necessarily cure all cultural hostility, it will release healing. There is a real opportunity to touch lives in our community through developing a culture of Spirit-filled kindness in our congregation.

THREE BIG IDEAS

1. A Hospitality Ministry that focuses on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door.
2. A "Love Our City" Ministry that creates and sustains specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community.
3. An 8-week discipleship course that helps create a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate a book and podcast to cast the vision and teach the concepts, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches during the eight weeks.

DEFINITION OF 'DONE'

Ensuring one of our big ideas is up and running, with key people and a plan in place to evaluate and grow in perspective, effectiveness, and reach.

3 CONCEPT PITCHES

1. A Hospitality Ministry that focuses on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

A: The need to be seen and to feel a part of the community. This is, in and of itself, healing.

Approach: What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?

A: Through intentional acts of kindness, we let people know they are seen and valued.

Benefit: How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?

A: We see multiple users here: the person showing kindness and the one receiving kindness. The person showing kindness experiences the blessing, healing, and transformation that comes through giving. The user receives the same through receiving kindness. The local church benefits by developing a culture that is more like Jesus, which brings glory to God and empowers the mission. Members to God and one another in meaningful relationships.

Others: How are others addressing this NPO? What sets this approach apart?

A: Our understanding of this approach is still in its infancy. Several church models utilize methods to facilitate these goals, which we will examine.

Risks: Why might it fail?

A: It could fail if we fail to find the proper amount of focus (as compared to the other activities of the community) to be given, considering our current resources, including time, manpower, and finances. If we do too little, it might not have enough strength to be as effective as it should be. If we do too much, it could result in overpromising and burnout.

Assumptions/hypotheses to test: What critical hypothesis or assumption does each prototype 'test'?

A: That hospitality is at the core of the message of the Gospel, and when practiced, it heals hearts and opens up people's receptivity to the Gospel.

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.

A:

1. A tangible shift in our church culture towards making hospitality the foundational mission “tone” and strategy in preaching the Gospel of Jesus and making disciples.
 2. People being disciplined in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
 3. “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.
2. A "Love Our City" Ministry that creates and sustains specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

A: The need for people outside of our faith community to experience the hospitality of Jesus through His people – to be seen and valued because they are so deeply loved.

Approach: What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?

A: Through intentional acts of kindness, we let people know that they are seen and valued by God and us.

Benefit: How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?

A: We see multiple users here: the person showing kindness and the one receiving kindness. The person showing kindness experiences the blessing, healing, and transformation that comes through giving. The user receives the same through receiving kindness. The local church

benefits by developing a culture that is more like Jesus, which brings glory to God and empowers the mission. Members to God and one another in meaningful relationships.

Others: How are others addressing this NPO? What sets this approach apart?

A: Our understanding of this approach is still in its infancy. Several church models utilize methods to facilitate these goals, which we will examine.

Risks: Why might it fail?

A: It could fail if we fail to find the proper amount of focus (as compared to the other activities of the community) to be given, considering our current resources, including time, manpower, and finances. If we do too little, it might not have enough strength to be as effective as it should be. If we do too much, it could result in overpromising and burn out.

Assumptions/hypotheses to test: What critical hypothesis or assumption does each prototype 'test'?

A: That hospitality is at the core of the message of the Gospel, and when practiced it heals hearts and opens up people's receptivity to the Gospel.

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.

A:

1. A tangible shift in our church culture towards making hospitality the foundational mission "tone" and strategy in preaching the Gospel of Jesus and making disciples.
2. People being discipled in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
3. "Strangers" experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

3. An 8-week discipleship course that helps create a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate a book and a companion podcast to cast the vision and teach the concepts, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches during the eight weeks.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

A: That the best way to facilitate the ministry of hospitality is to equip church members and create a culture that is bigger than one outreach.

Approach: What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?

A: Through equipping members to engage in intentional acts of kindness, we empower them to let people know that they are seen and valued by God and us.

Benefit: How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?

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Articulate the 2-3 benchmarks (or indicator, clue, criteria, test, metric, or milestones) that verify that the project is successfully addressing the NPO.

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2. People being discipled in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
3. “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholders included an executive pastor, an associate pastor, a worship leader, two pastoral care ministers (couple), two small group Leaders (couple), and two young adult church members.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

1. Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality, Contemplative Scholar, and Noted Author (of several important books about Christian Hospitality)
2. Professor of Church History and Author of a book on how the practices of early Christianity changed the world).
3. Lead Pastor with over 30 years in Hospitality Ministry (Columbus, Ohio Area)
4. Pastor of a large local c

APPENDICES

DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

On October 26, 2021, at 9 AM, I met with a diverse group of stakeholders at Life City Church in Pickerington, Ohio, to discuss and explore how we can better reimagine and implement biblical hospitality in our local church.

The stakeholders included an executive pastor, an associate pastor, a worship leader, two pastoral care ministers (couple), two small group Leaders (couple), and two young adult church members. We engaged in the following activities: 1. Introduction: a brief background on biblical hospitality; 2. Reimagine the NPO: an activity in which we reviewed and reconsidered the NPO (utilizing post-up and diagram activities); 3. Explore: activities in which we explored different ways to address the NPO (utilizing post-up and diagram activities); 4. Closing: activities in which we considered three Big Ideas and Concept Pitches (used the forced ranking activity); 5. Debrief: an activity in which we explore knowledge gaps that require further research.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with five being "strongly agree," I rate the following areas at a level 5: 1. Workshop members were engaged and creative; 2. The workshop generated practical ideas that were new and achievable; 3. The Concept Pitches provided a good starting point for prototyping. There are several reasons for this high rating. First, stakeholders are motivated to reach more people. Second, the idea of biblical hospitality as a means to touch lives immediately resonated with each stakeholder. Third, the workshop construction provided a means to generate diverse ideas quickly. The workshop was considered a success.

DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

BACKGROUND

On October 26, 2021, I met with a diverse group of stakeholders in our local church to discuss and explore the following Need/Problem/Opportunity (NPO) Statement.

NPO: In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith, and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers into a purposeful journey.

We began by giving the group some theological background to the idea of biblical hospitality and healing. We read Hebrew 13:2 (Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers...). Next, we briefly traced the concept from ancient cultures to Abraham's lunch with the three visitors (Genesis 18), to God's warning to Israel to not exploit or oppress the sojourner (Exodus 21), and then to the ministry of Jesus, which was the ultimate manifestation of hospitality – God's welcome to a world of strangers. Finally, we touched on the hospitality of the early Church.

Then, I told the group that, through a series of brainstorming activities, we would work through questions about how we, as a local congregation, could prayerfully and practically work with the Holy Spirit to enhance the culture of welcome in our community. Questions included: What are we doing now? Who are the "strangers" we are called to reach? What can we do (that we haven't explored before)? And how does hospitality release the healing presence of Jesus?

REVISITING THE NPO ACTIVITY

In this first activity, we provided our stakeholders an opportunity to invite curiosity and energy around solving the NPO by exploring its context, scope and constraints, root causes, and intended outcome that results from addressing the NPO afresh. We explored the NPO with fresh eyes through the post-up and affinity diagram activities, discussing the context, scope and constraints, and root causes, and intended outcomes.

CONTEXT

We considered that we are a church in Pickerington, Ohio – a suburb of Columbus. According to a recent article in Forbes Magazine, the Columbus metropolitan area is one of the fastest-growing cities in America.¹⁴¹ At the time of the article's writing, in 2018, it was the fourth hottest housing market in America.¹⁴² Currently, the metropolitan area numbers at approximately 2.12 million.¹⁴³ Our local congregation is a non-denominational church planted in our living room in December 2011. Last year, we merged with another congregation. And today, we have approximately 400 members. The congregation is mostly suburban and multiethnic, with a balanced mix of individuals and families of all ages.

SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

We considered healthy constraints for hospitality ministries, like ensuring boundaries are in place, including safety protocols for dealing with children and other vulnerable groups, and maintaining sensitivity to overwork and personal burnout. And we talked about the need to be sensitive to financial/budget concerns and keeping the character and the message of Jesus at the center of all efforts.

ROOT CAUSES AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

We considered that, amid a culture that is often hostile towards faith, the Church often reacts with hostility. However, hospitality is the correct "Jesus" response. And while kindness will not necessarily cure all

¹⁴¹ Adam A. Millsap, "Columbus, Ohio Is Booming But Will It Last?," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, August 6, 2018), last modified August 6, 2018, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adammillsap/2018/08/06/columbus-ohio-is-booming-but-will-it-last/>.

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ "Columbus Metro Population Growth Continues," *ColumbusUnderground.com*, last modified March 27, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.columbusunderground.com/columbus-metro-population-growth-continues-bw1>.

cultural hostility, it will release healing in the midst of it. There is an opportunity to touch lives in our community through developing a culture of Spirit-filled kindness in our congregation. We affirmed the NPO, as written.

EXPLORE ACTIVITY

In this section of the workshop, we engaged in the post-up and affinity diagram activities to identify different ways to address the NPO. We asked the following questions about how we, as a local congregation, could prayerfully and practically work with the Holy Spirit to enhance the culture of welcome in our community.

WHAT ARE WE DOING NOW?

- Quarterly events where we provide free activities and food to the community (ex. Fun in the Sun; Fall Fest).
- Work with Jericho Ministries – an outreach that provides food and clothing to families in Columbus.
- Hospitality ministries on Sunday mornings (Greeting, Visitor-Follow up, Parking Team)
- Benevolence Fund (Provides money and resources to those in need)
- Pastoral Care (Hospital and Shut-In visitation)
- Sunday morning connection team (that focuses on meeting new people before and after services)
-

WHO ARE THE ‘STRANGERS’ WE ARE CALLED TO REACH?

- Vulnerable communities (physical challenges; shut-ins; prison ministries; hospital
- Immigrants (The Columbus metropolitan area is growing quickly in part through immigration. How can we show hospitality to them?)
- Church Strangers (We discussed that, while people attend services every Sunday morning, they often feel like strangers because relationships are only "on the surface").
- Untapped opportunities (Ex. The Pickerington Youth Soccer League uses our front field for practices; perhaps we could have an event where we provide free hot dogs and drinks to families while they practice).

WHAT CAN WE DO (THAT WE HAVEN'T EXPLORED BEFORE)?

Some general approaches:

- Need-Based
 - Food pantry
 - Assisting current outreaches (similar to helping Jericho) with finances and volunteers
 - Working with "Didemi," a local organization that sells returned items from Amazon and Target at a fraction of the cost to churches, who can then provide them to people in need.
- Communities of Interest
 - Ministry to nursing homes (ex. Christmas caroling and cards)
 - Host an art festival
 - Open our recording studio to train young people how to write and record songs.
 - College campus small groups
 - Community of Interests small groups
- Those Outside of Our Church Community (In General)
- Acts of kindness outreach (the Steve Sjogren model)

Some specific approaches to various communities:

- Immigrants
 - Cultural nights
 - Focused small groups
 - Job Help
 - English as a Second Language classes
- Church “Strangers”
 - Look at our small groups to ensure they are facilitating connection
 - Offer things like date nights
 - Design smaller events focused on communities of interest
 - Mom’s day out
- Untapped opportunities

- The Pickerington Youth Soccer League uses our front field for practices; perhaps we could have an event where we provide free hot dogs and drinks to families while they practice.

HOW DOES HOSPITALITY RELEASE THE PRESENCE OF JESUS?

We discussed: "The next 30 years will represent the largest mission opportunity in the history of America. It is the largest and fastest numerical shift in religious affiliation in the history of this country. Even in the most optimistic scenarios, Christian affiliation in the U.S. shrinks dramatically. In our base case, over 1 million youth at least nominally in the Church today will choose to leave each year for the next three decades. Thirty-five million youth raised in families that call themselves Christians will say that they are not by 2050."¹⁴⁴

Our workshop participants in their 20's and 30s noted a growing "broken perspective of God" among many in their generation. And they resonated with the idea that robust and creative hospitality through the local church, where the kindness and welcome of Jesus are manifested in practical and straightforward ways, could facilitate the healing of a generational "broken perspective" of God and His Church.

CLOSING ACTIVITIES

THREE BIG IDEAS AND CONCEPT PITCHES

We used the forced ranking activity to articulate three preliminary "big ideas." Below are the ideas and the concept pitches for each:

1. A Hospitality Ministry that focuses on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

A: The need to be seen and to feel a part of the community. This is, in and of itself, healing.

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.greatopportunity.org>

Approach: What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?

A: Through intentional acts of kindness, we let people know that they are seen and valued.

Benefit: How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?

A: We see multiple users here: the person showing kindness and the person receiving kindness. The person showing kindness experiences the blessing, healing, and transformation that comes through giving. The user receives the same through receiving hospitality. The local church benefits by developing a culture that is more like Jesus, which brings glory to God and empowers the mission. Members to God and one another in meaningful relationships.

Others: How are others addressing this NPO? What sets this approach apart?

A: Our understanding of this approach is still in its infancy. Several church models utilize methods to facilitate these goals, which we will examine.

Risks: Why might it fail?

A: It could fail if we fail to find the proper amount of focus (as compared to the other activities of the community) to be given, considering our current resources, including time, manpower, and finances. If we do too little, it might not have enough strength to be as effective as it should be. If we do too much, it could result in overpromising and burn out.

Assumptions/hypotheses to test: What critical hypothesis or assumption does each prototype 'test'?

A: That hospitality is at the core of the message of the Gospel, and when practiced, it heals hearts and opens up people's receptivity to the Gospel.

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 successfully addresses the NPO.

A:

- A tangible shift in our church culture towards making hospitality the foundational mission “tone” and strategy in preaching the Gospel of Jesus and making disciples.
- People being discipled in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
- “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

2. A "Love Our City" Ministry that creates and sustains specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

A: The need for people outside of our faith community to experience the hospitality of Jesus through His people – to be seen and valued because they are so deeply loved.

Approach: What is our approach to meeting that need, and how is it novel?

A: Through intentional acts of kindness, we let people know that they are seen and valued by God and us.

Benefit: How does the user benefit? How do you benefit?

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3. An 8-week discipleship course that helps create a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate a book and podcast to cast the vision and teach the concepts, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches during the eight weeks.

NPO: What is the unmet need/problem/opportunity we are addressing?

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- “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

DEBRIEF

Finally, we explored knowledge gaps that require further research. We asked, in light of what emerged today...

1. What should I be sure to examine?

A: The integration between hospitality and healing.

2. What are the potential blind spots that I best explore? And What are the potential pitfalls that I best avoid?

A: The healthy constraints for ministries of hospitality, like ensuring boundaries are in place, including safety protocols for dealing with children and other vulnerable groups, and maintaining sensitivity to overwork and personal burnout. And we talked about the need to be sensitive to financial/budget concerns and keeping the character and the message of Jesus at the center of all efforts.

3. What *must* I research before I begin prototyping?

A: Real-life examples where hospitality is being modeled successfully in a local church context.

A: Real life, inspirational stories where hospitality has resulted in healing.

A: How to best approach a book and podcast from the user's perspective. Here, the user is a local church member for whom we desire to 1. Tap into their desire to change their world through hospitality, 2. Get them to buy into the ways we can accomplish the goal as a Christian Community, and 3. Case a vision for showing hospitality that is inspiring and practical.

We closed out by asking if any of the stakeholders had questions and invited further input by email. We thanked them for their help in the research.

ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

Dear [Name]

Thank you again for participating in our Discovery Workshop. Following is a summary of our discoveries.

NPO: In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith, and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome a of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers into a purposeful journey.

Three Big Ideas (to Implement):

4. A Hospitality Ministry that focuses on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door.
5. A "Love Our City" Ministry that creates and sustains specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community.

6. An 8-week discipleship course that helps create a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate curriculum and teaching, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches during the eight weeks.

Definition of Done: Ensuring one of our big ideas is up and running, with key people and a plan in place to evaluate and grow in perspective, effectiveness, and reach.

Benchmarks of Success:

- A tangible shift in our church culture towards making hospitality the foundational mission “tone” and strategy in preaching the Gospel of Jesus and making disciples.
- People being discipled in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
- “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

Key Insights: The coming of Jesus was the greatest manifestation of the ancient practice of hospitality in history. He sought out a world of strangers and welcomed them – greeting, restoring, dwelling with them, and then sending them forth to extend His table to all nations. His hospitality released supernatural healing for physical bodies, broken hearts (“anointed to heal the brokenhearted”), and broken perspectives of God. The latter is intriguing, especially considering the well-documented Millennial/Gen Z exit from evangelical churches (Pinetops reports “1 million a year”). Workshop participants in their 20’s and 30s really resonated with this idea and felt there is an opportunity to heal a generational “broken perspective” of Jesus and His Church as we rediscover, reimagine, and bathe the Gospel in the hospitality of Christ.

Further Research:

- Up to date, local demographics to understand our neighbors and to identify vulnerable communities for outreach opportunities.
- A deeper dive into our church community to identify Sunday morning 'strangers,' and to find ways to better extend Jesus' welcome to them.
- Local success stories (learn from those doing hospitality well).

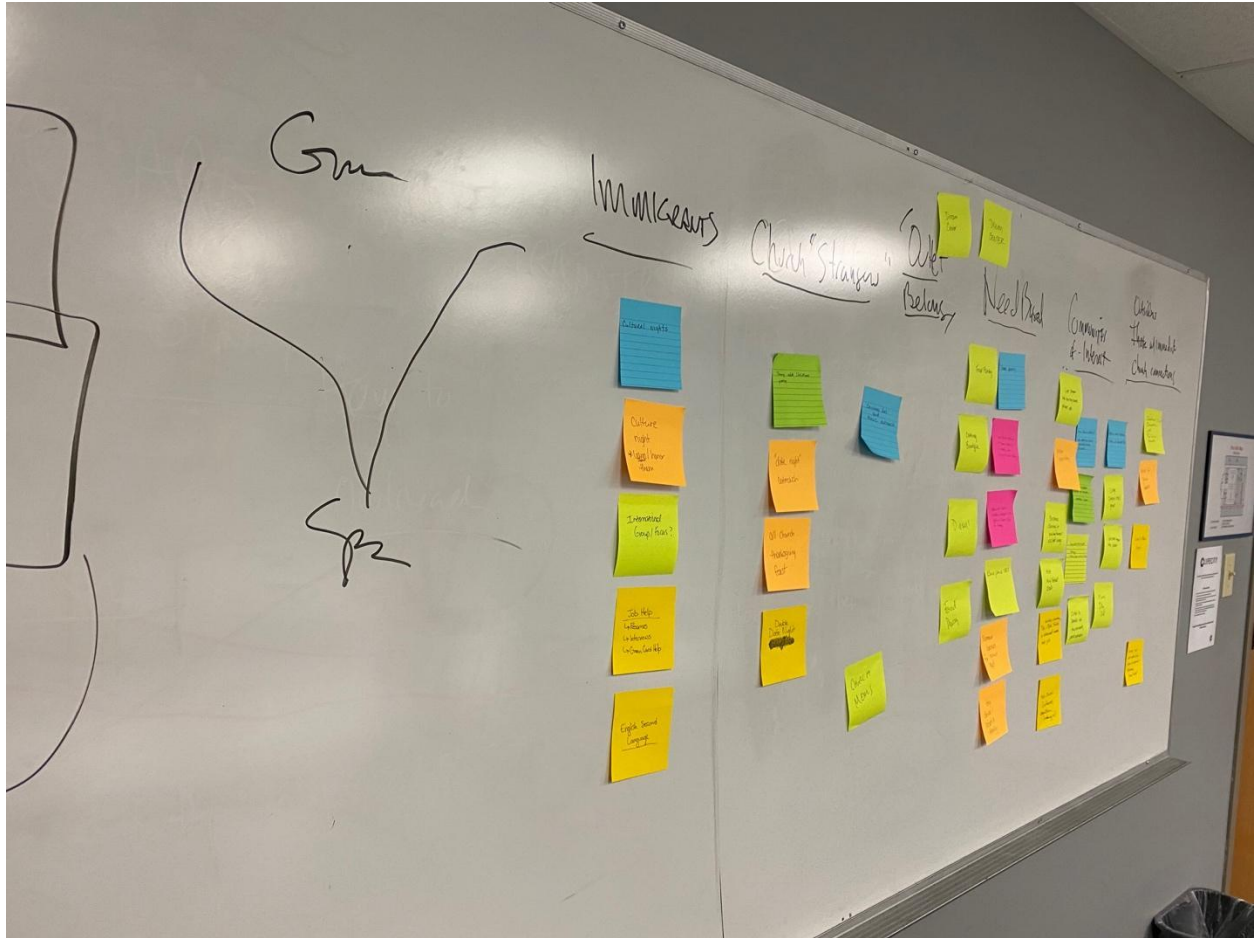
- Opportunities to partner with local "hospitality" ministries (no need to reinvent the wheel).
- How does hospitality heal? ("The Healing Power of Kindness" Stanford Medicine: The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education <http://ccare.stanford.edu/the-huffington-post/the-healing-power-of-kindness/>).

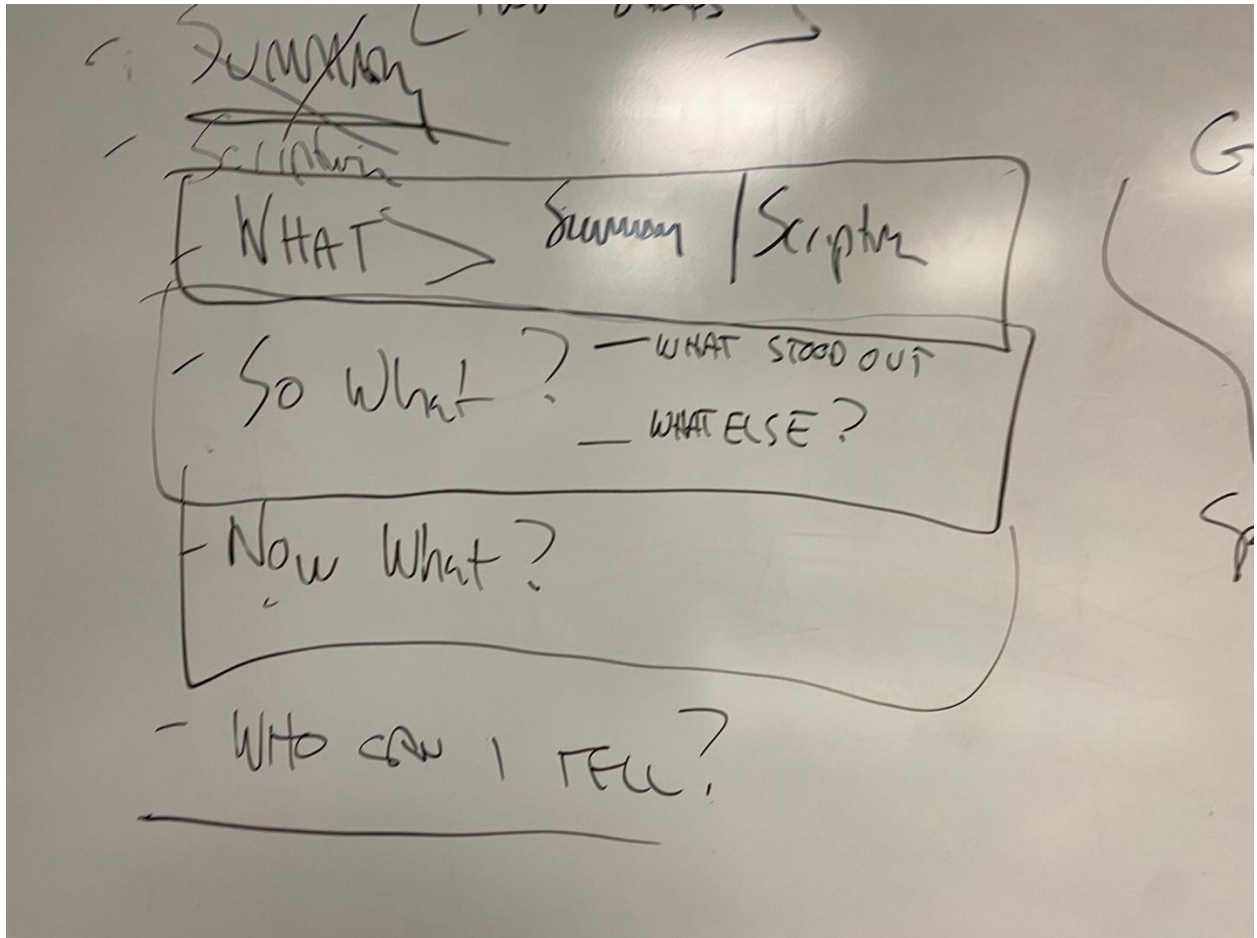
Please let me know if you have any additional feedback or corrections. Again, thank you for sharing your time and ideas.

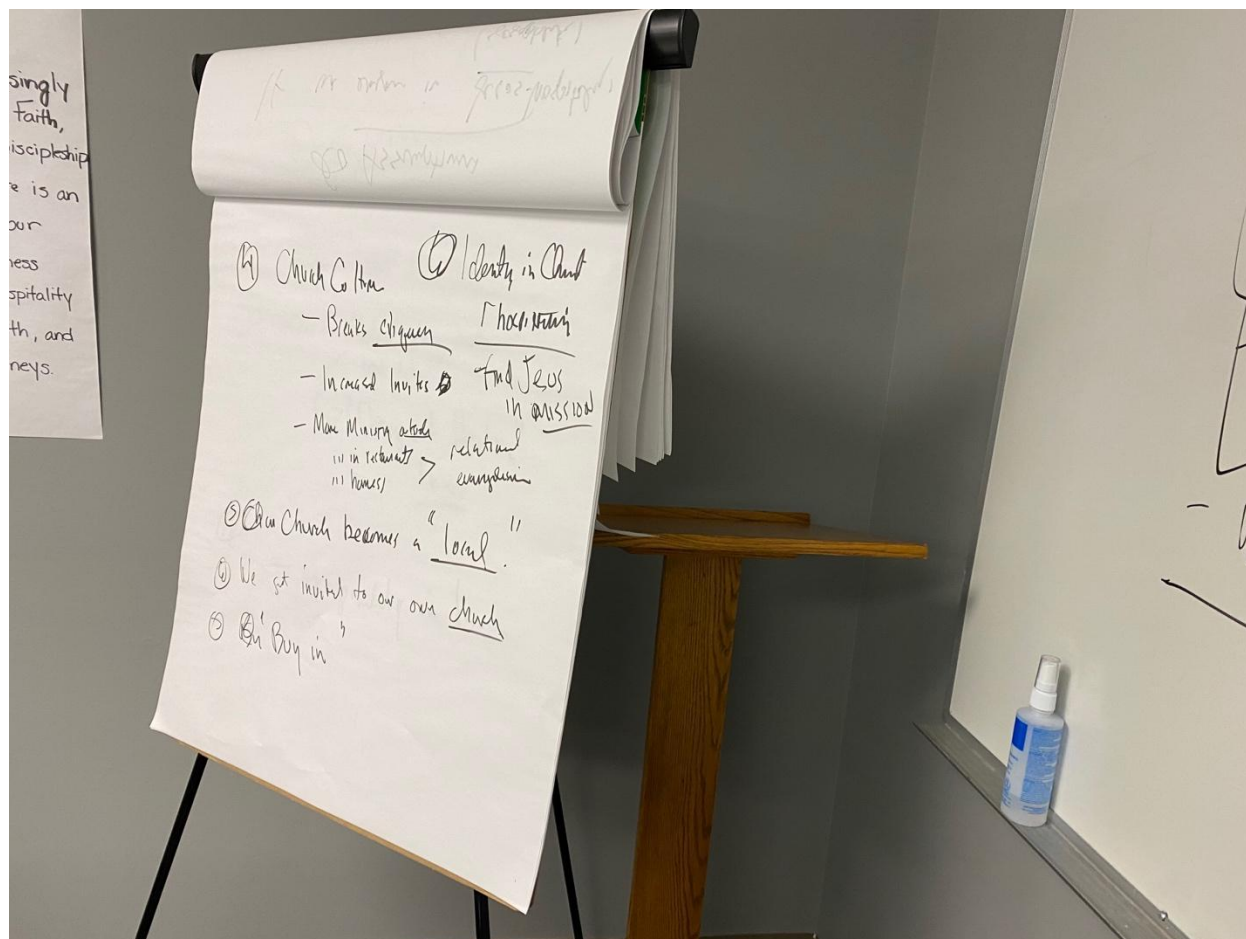








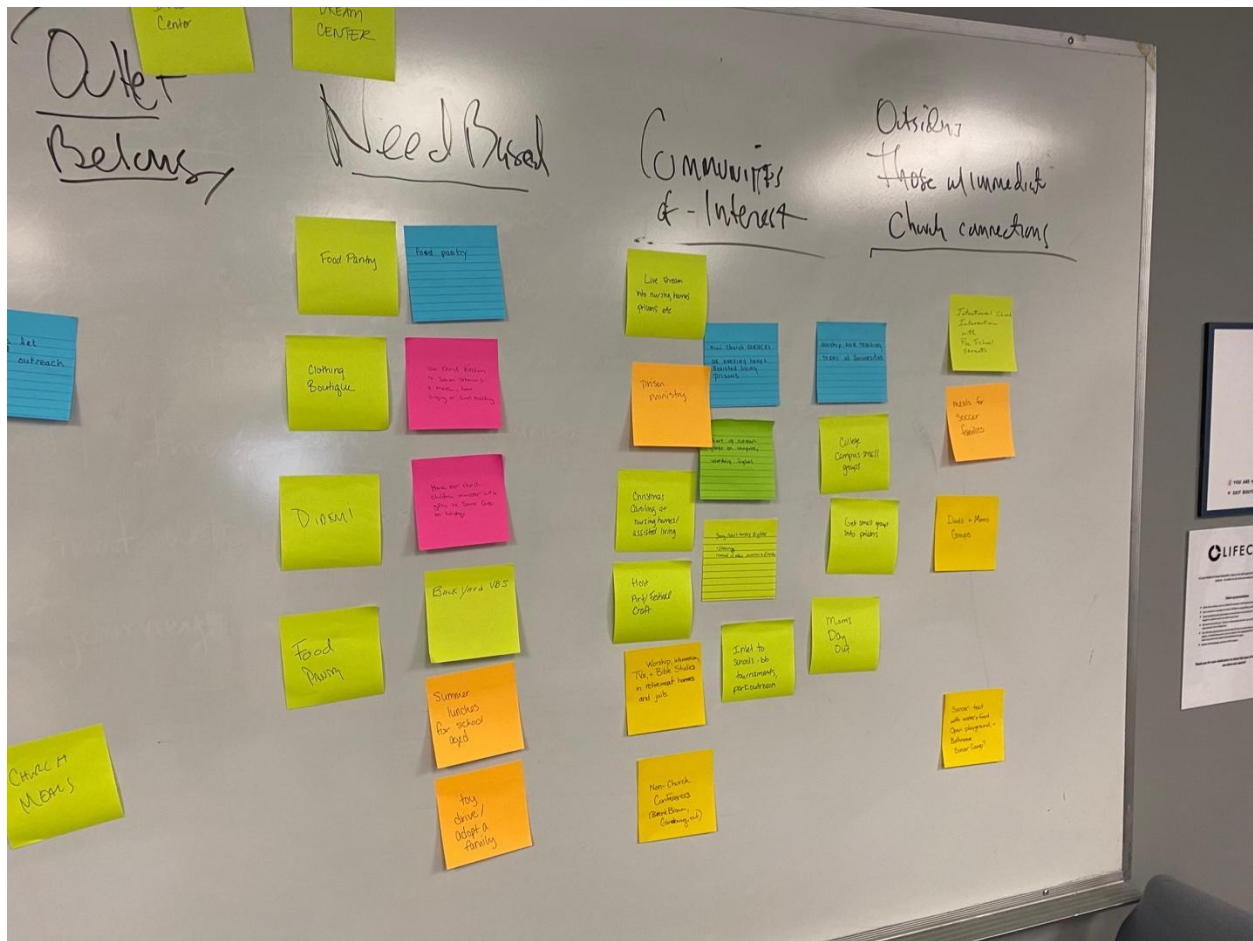


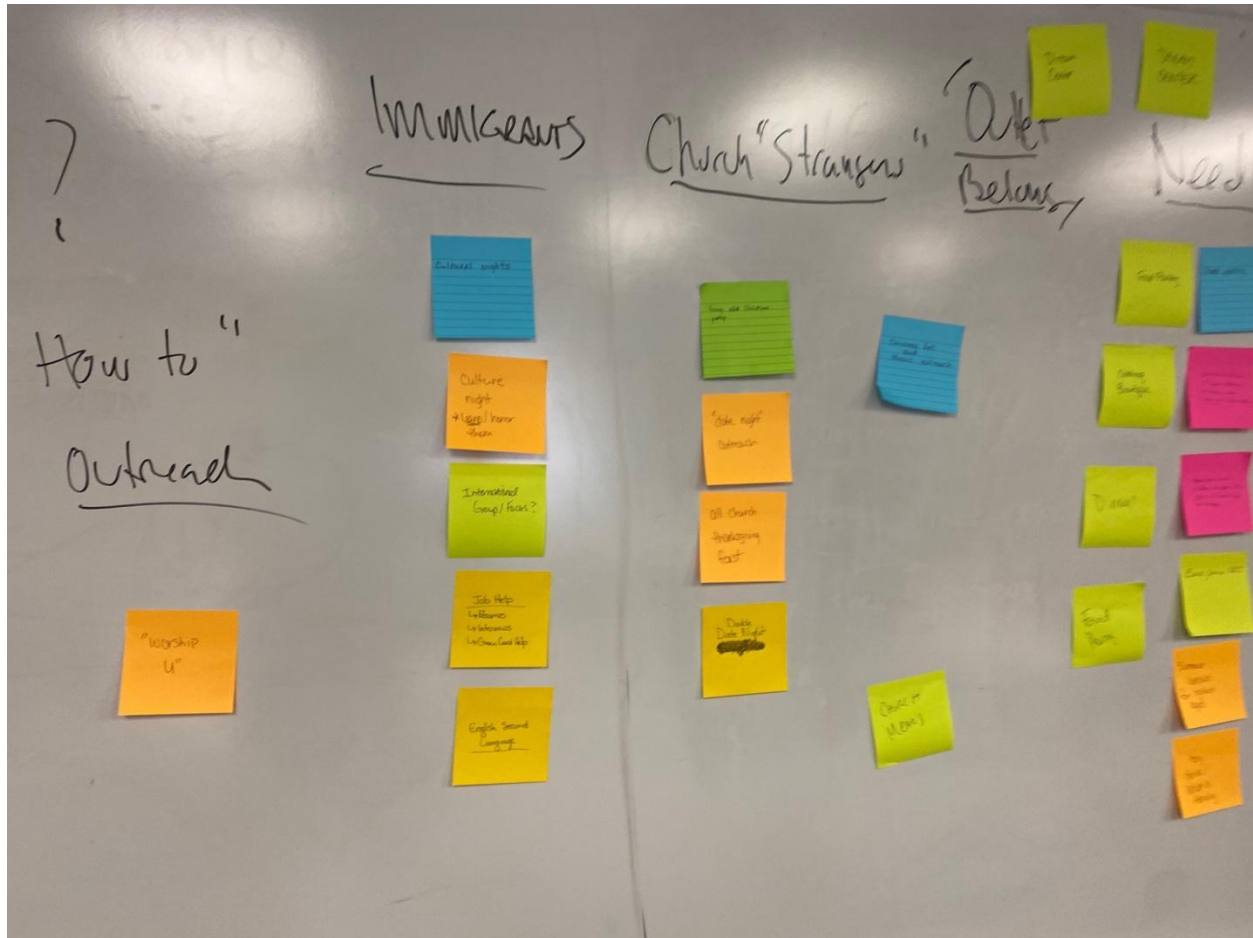


NPO

In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith, and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing in our community through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture of hospitality that welcomes, restores, dwells with, and sends people forth on their journeys.

- (2) Church Culture
- Breaks chiquen
 - Increased love
 - New plans





WHAT CAN WE DO?

Engaging
Culture

'How to'
Outreach

School
of
ministry

"Worship
U"

LIFETIME
AC

WHAT CAN W

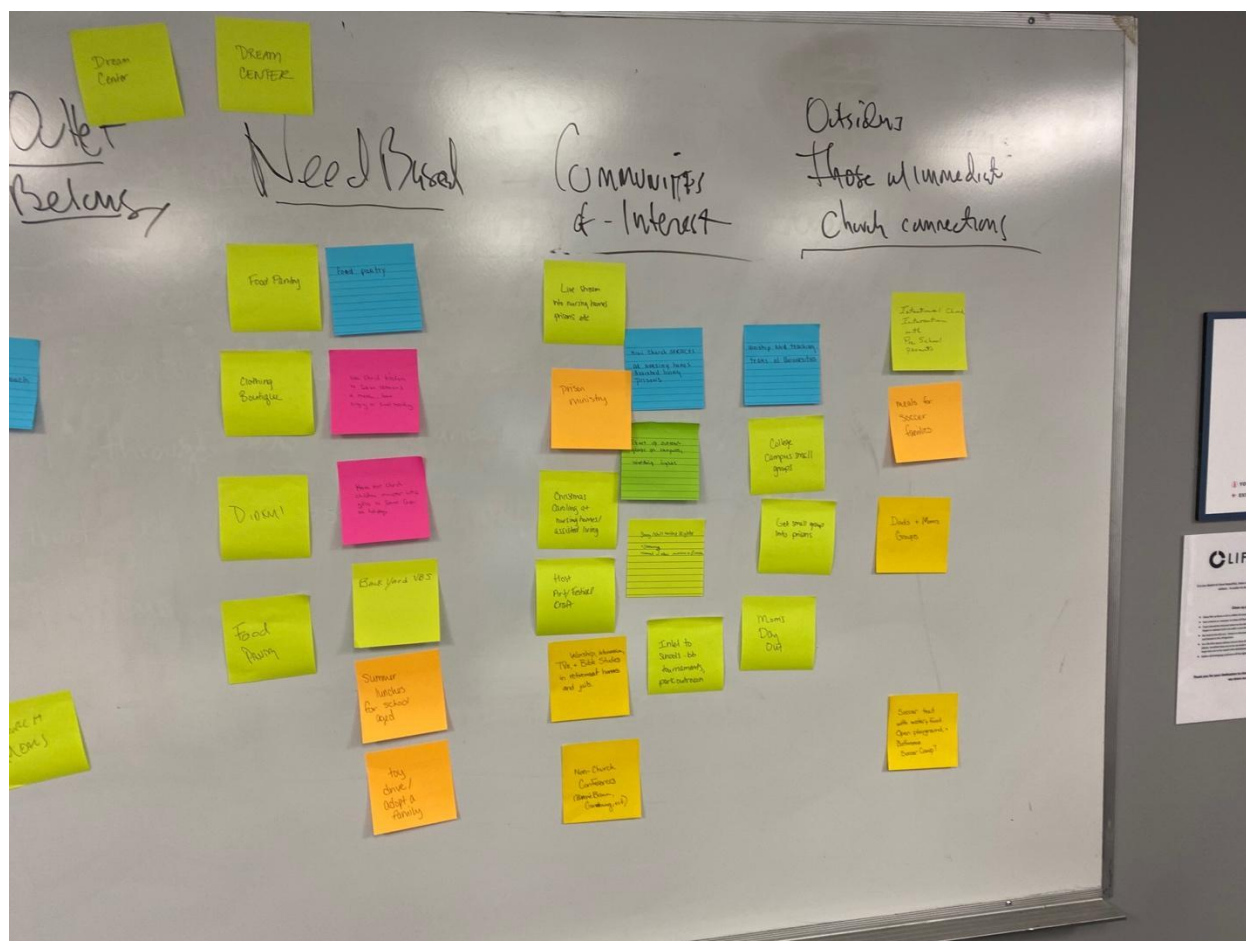
Life Time
Academy

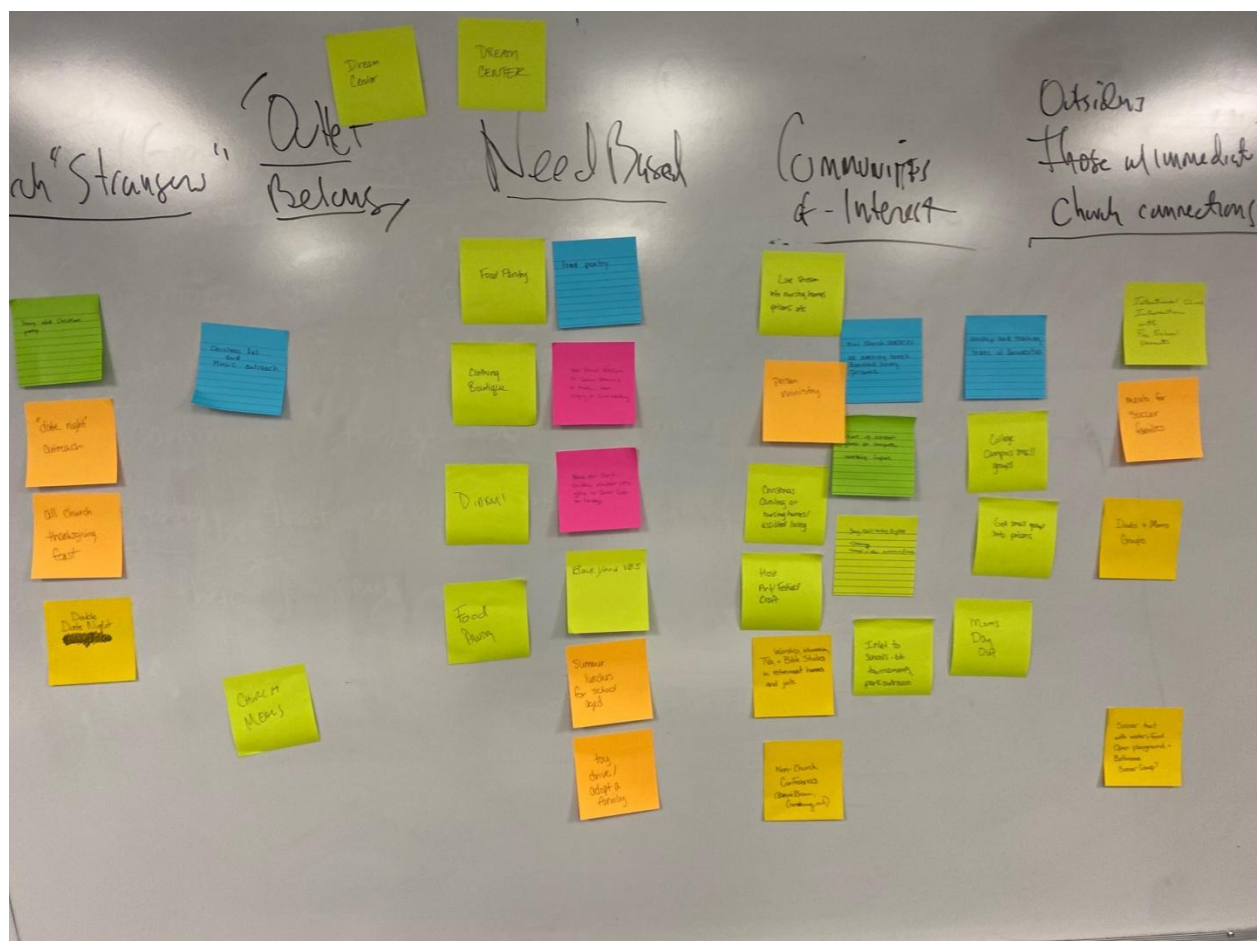
CURRICULAR
Shift

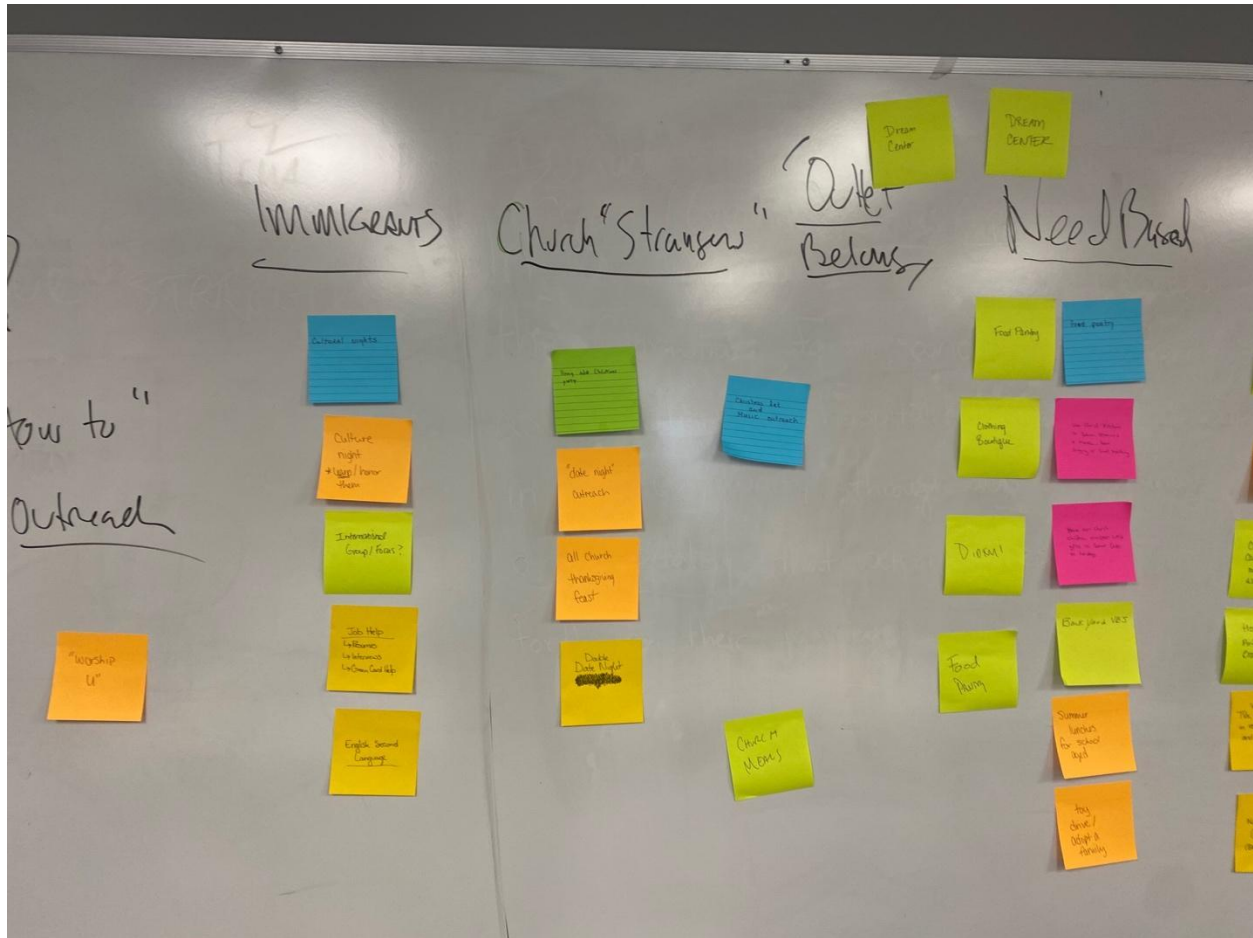
Spencer
@ 2 hr
Focus group

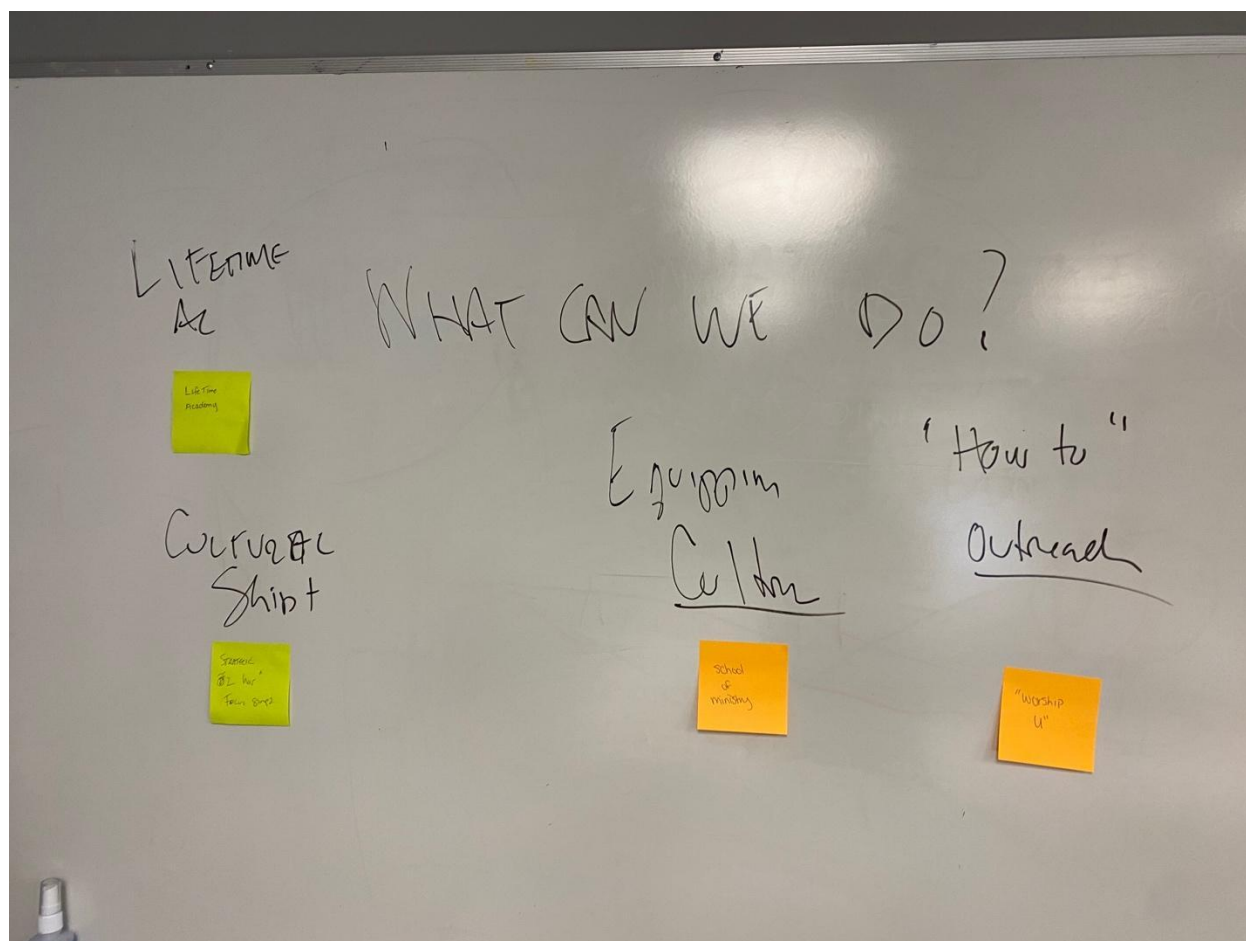
Equip
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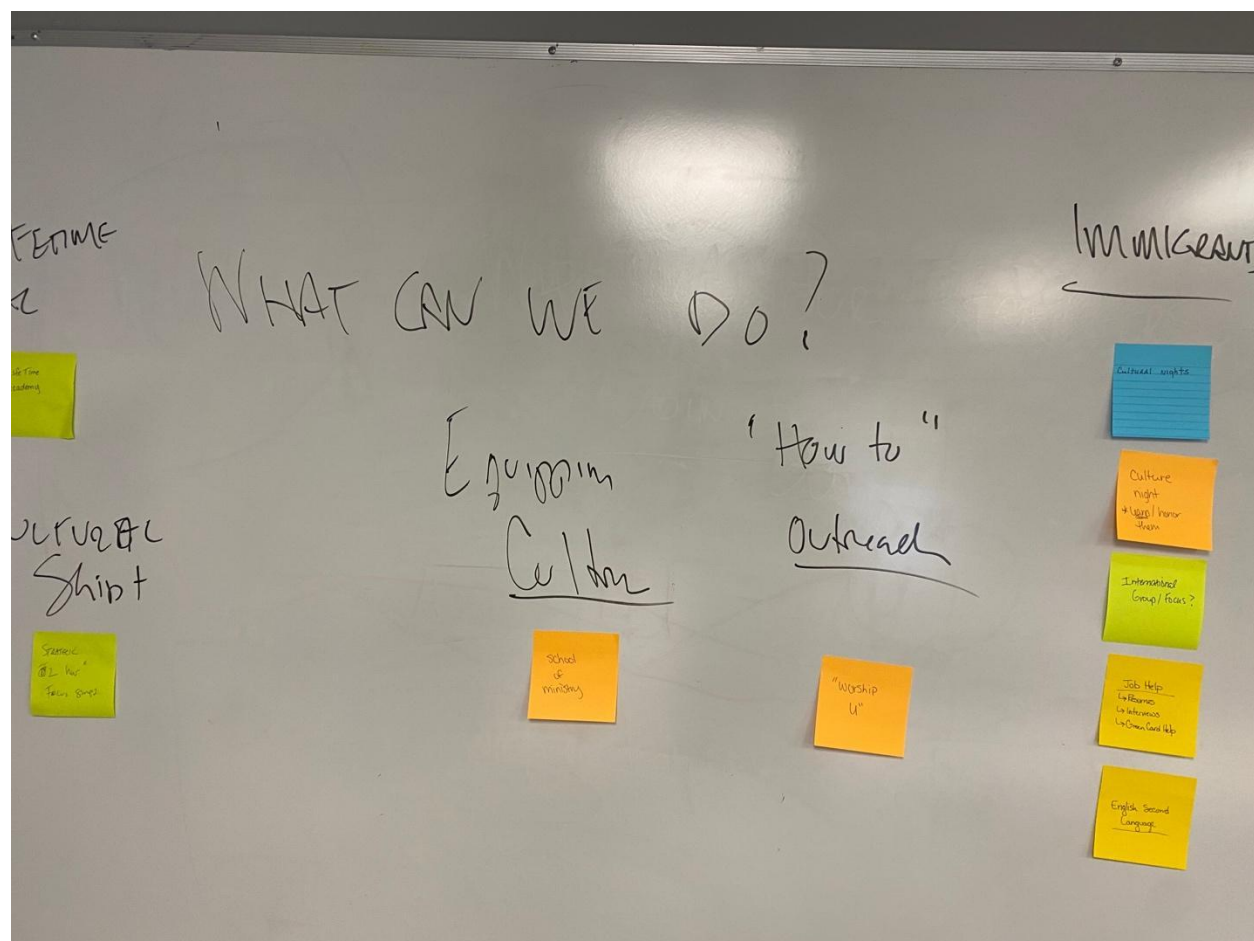
School
&
ministry

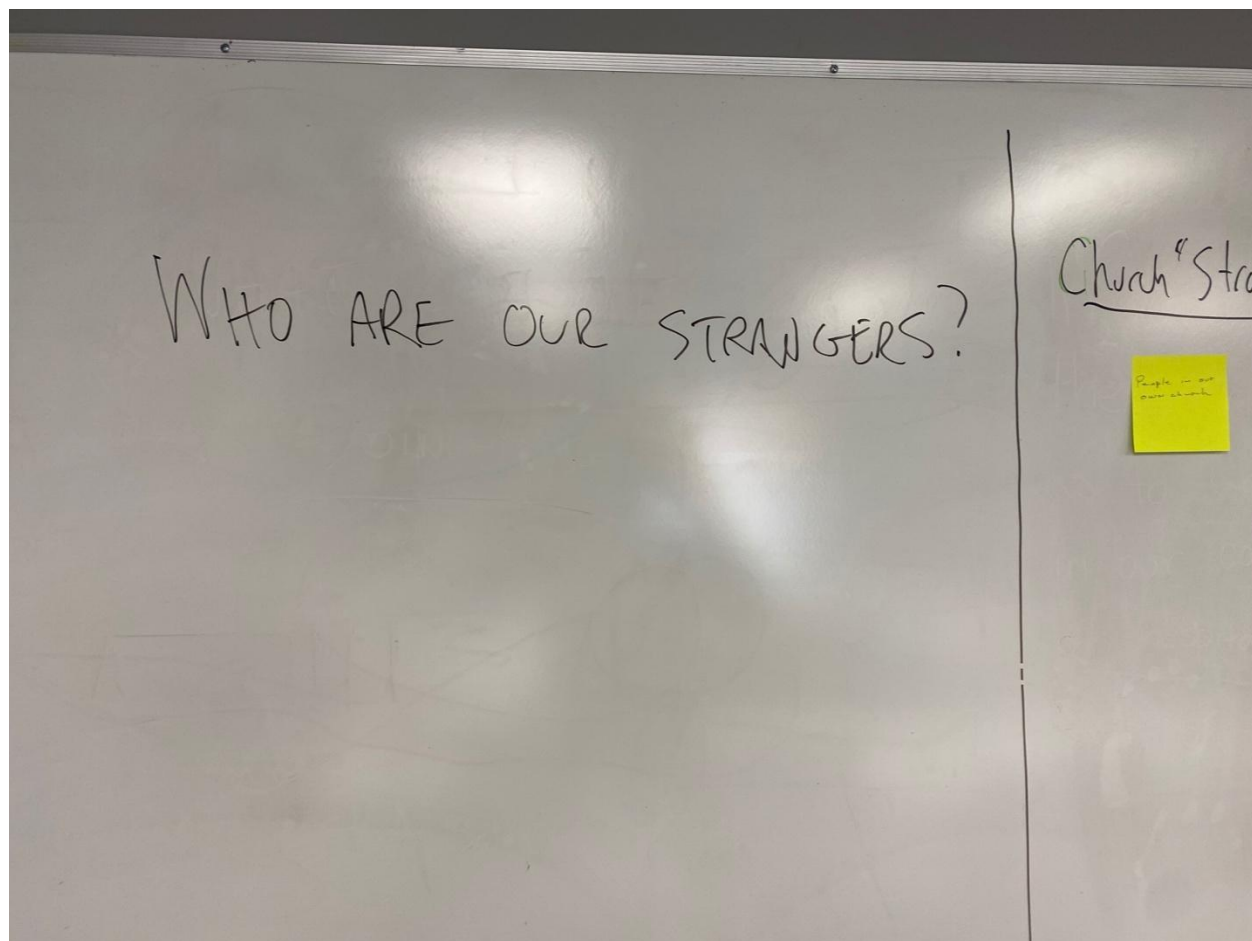


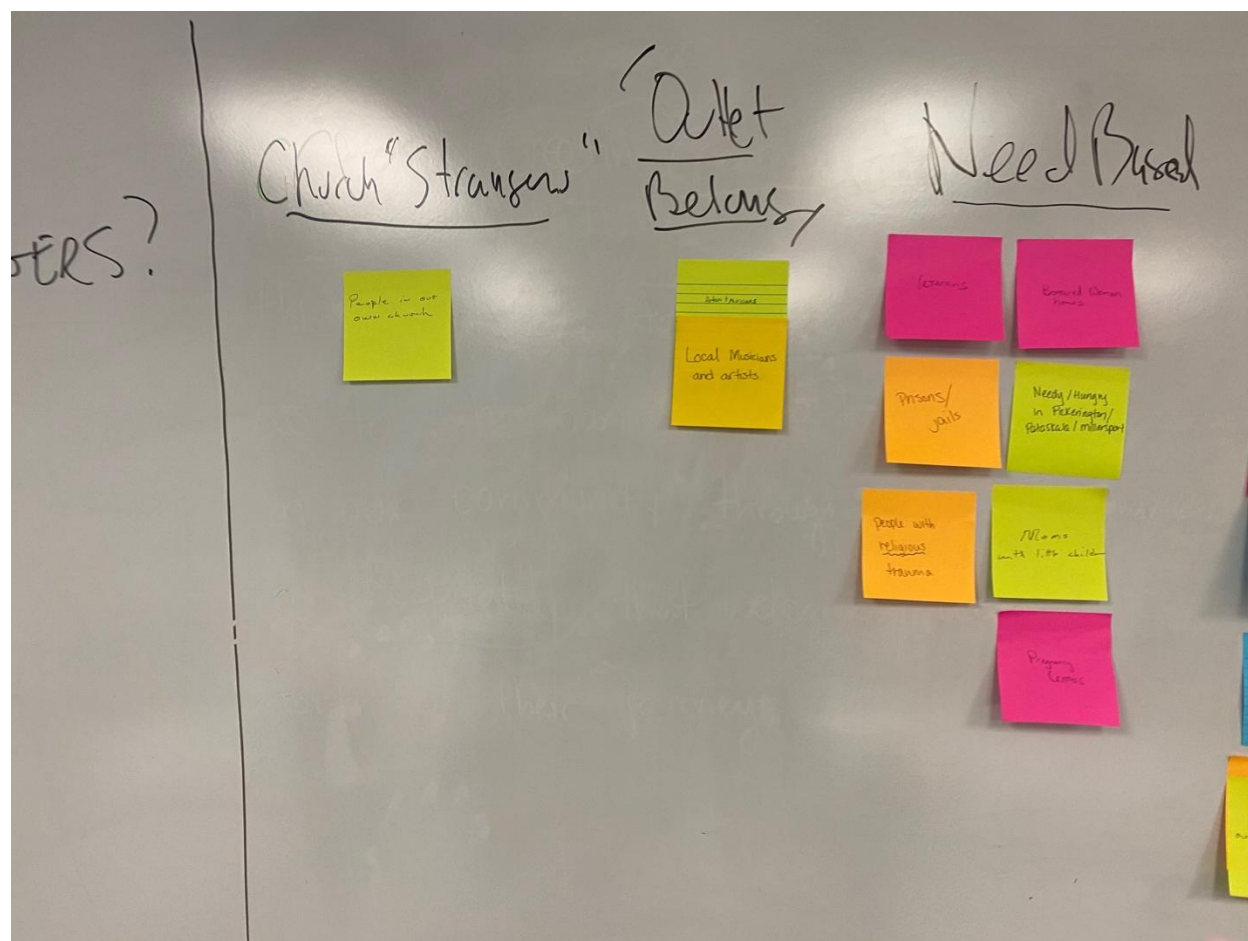


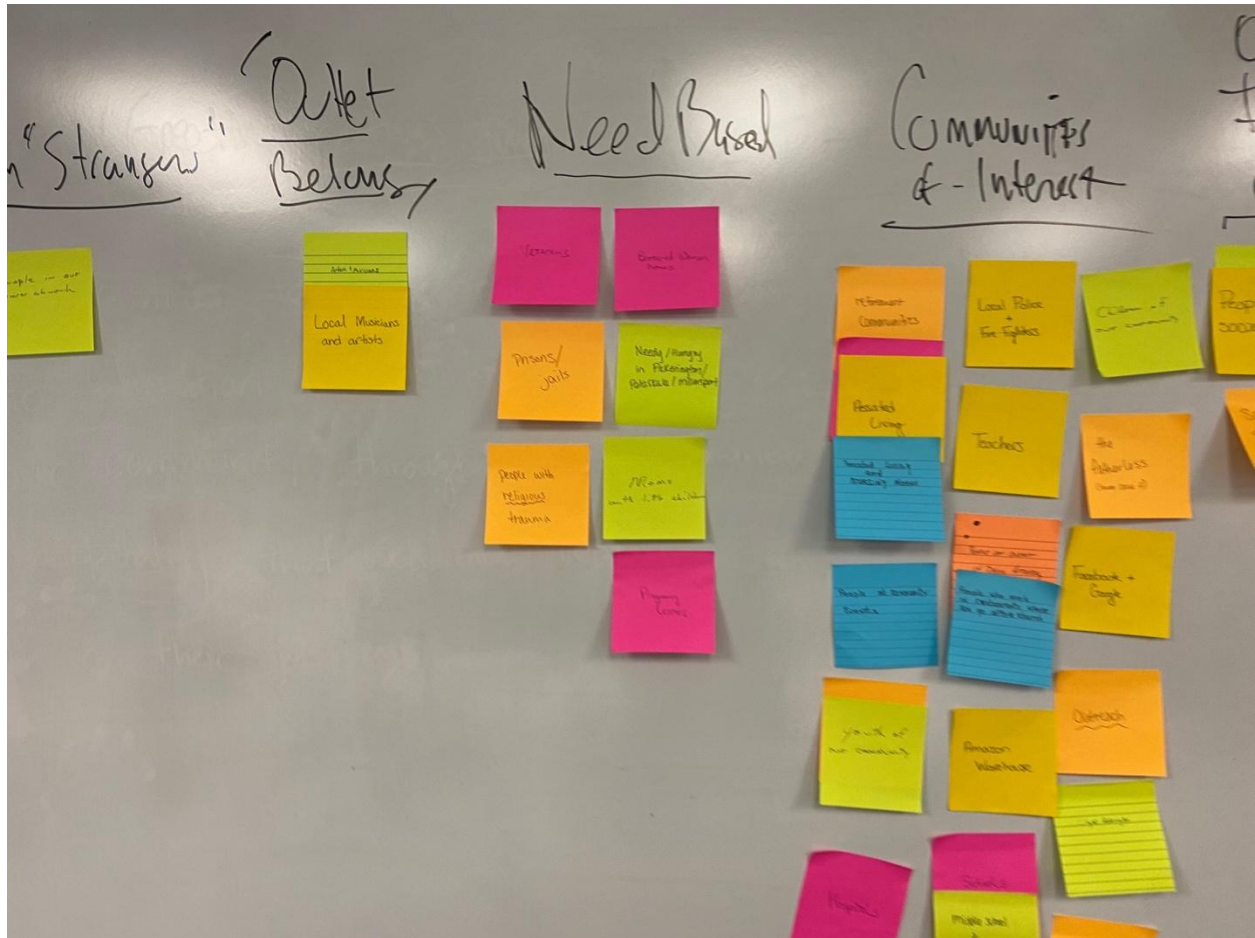


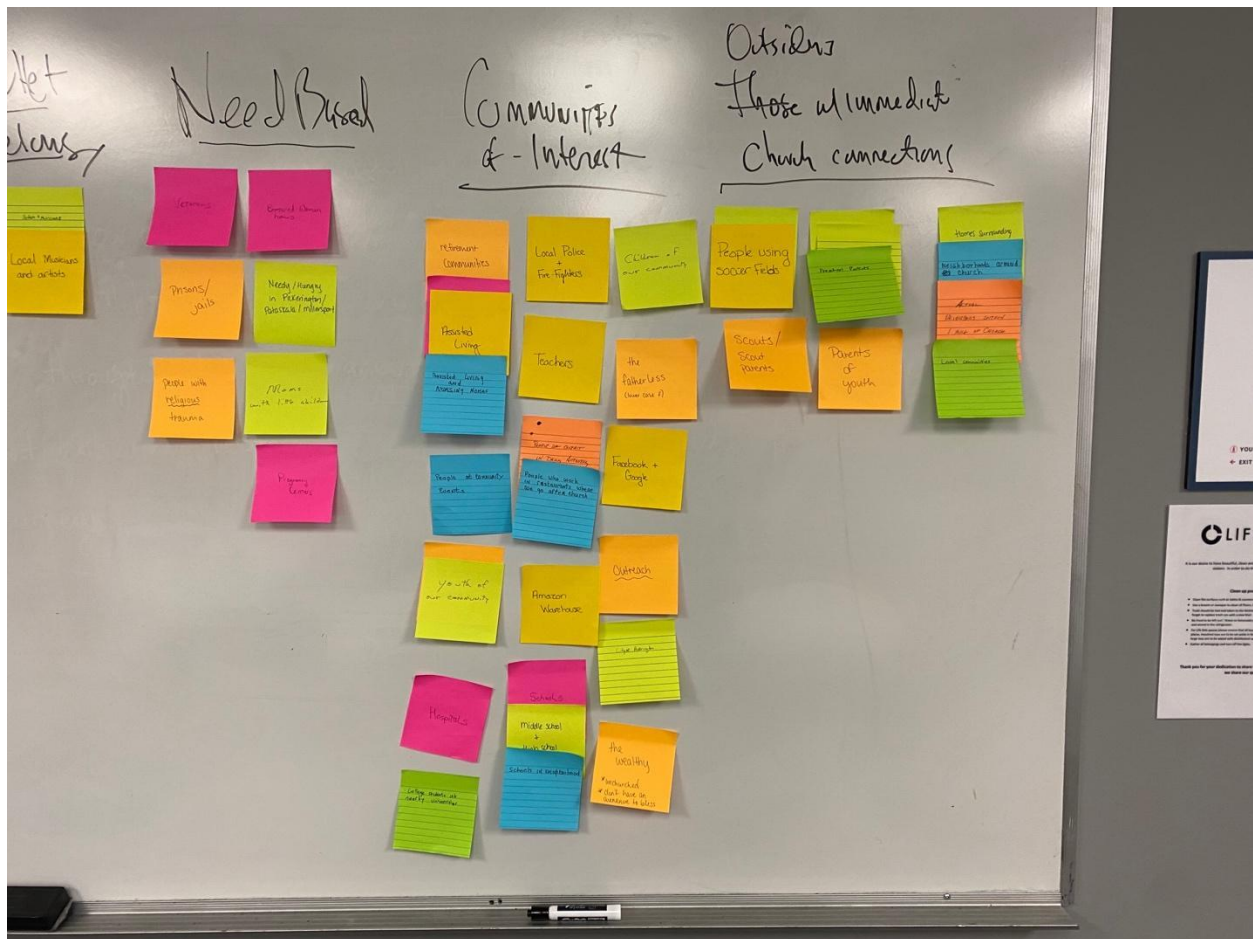


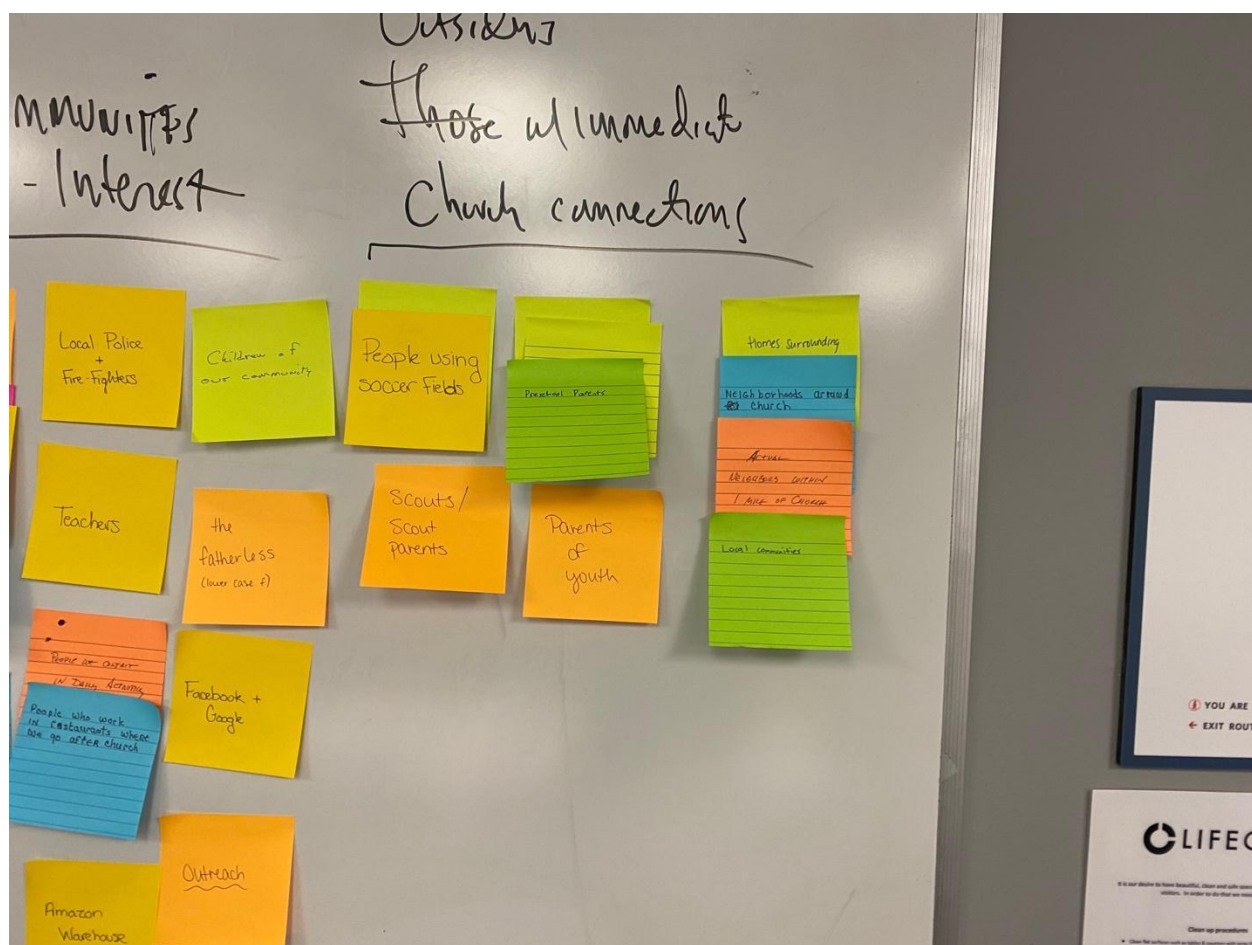












1
(in-real)

Discipleship (Growth in Hospitality)

In between

Deeper Relationship building

Restoration (Healing)

After Ministry

Healing Rooms

Placing Elder Tim and Bishop Mel in the kit

Small groups /

Large Follow-ups

Planned church activities for those who don't want to leave

Practical assistance to those in need

Team Dinner

On hand to help anyone who needs it

On standing for ministry

Availability through ONLINE SERVICES (apparel)

Small groups /

Large Follow-ups

Planned church activities for those who don't want to leave

Practical assistance to those in need

Team Dinner

On hand to help anyone who needs it

On standing for ministry

Fire Ex First

YOU ARE HERE

EXIT ROUTE

FIRE EXTINGUISHER

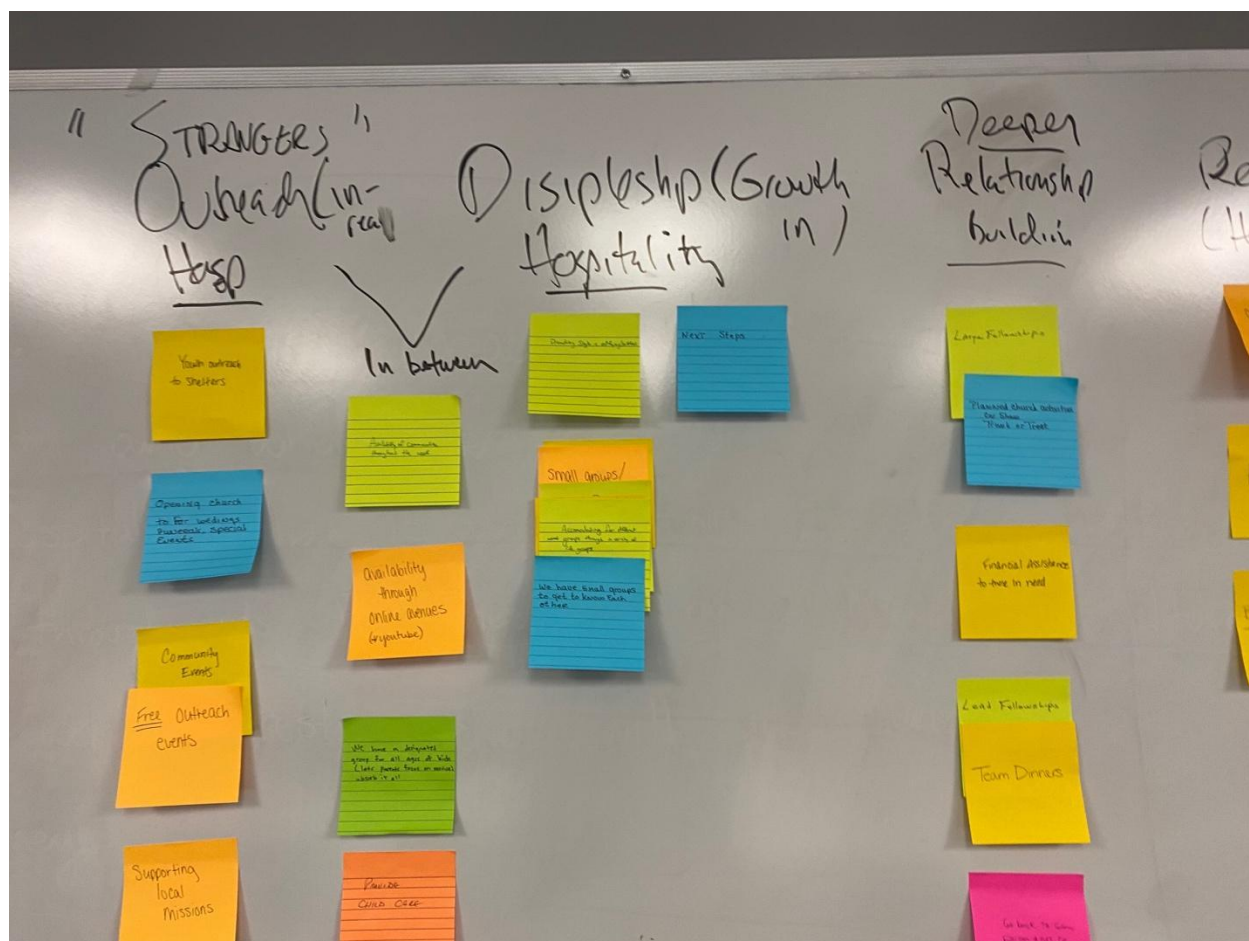
PULL STATION

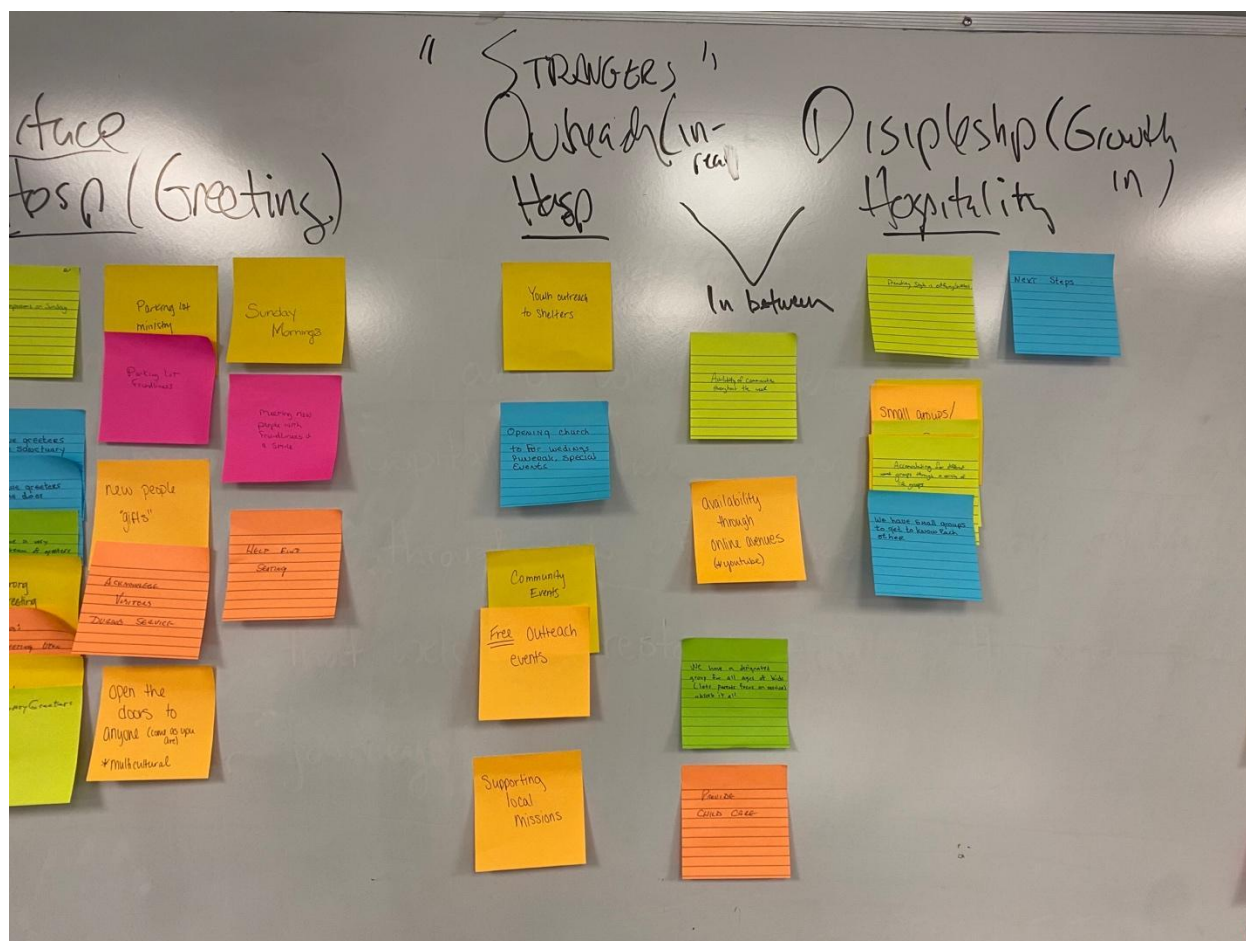
TORNADO SHELTER

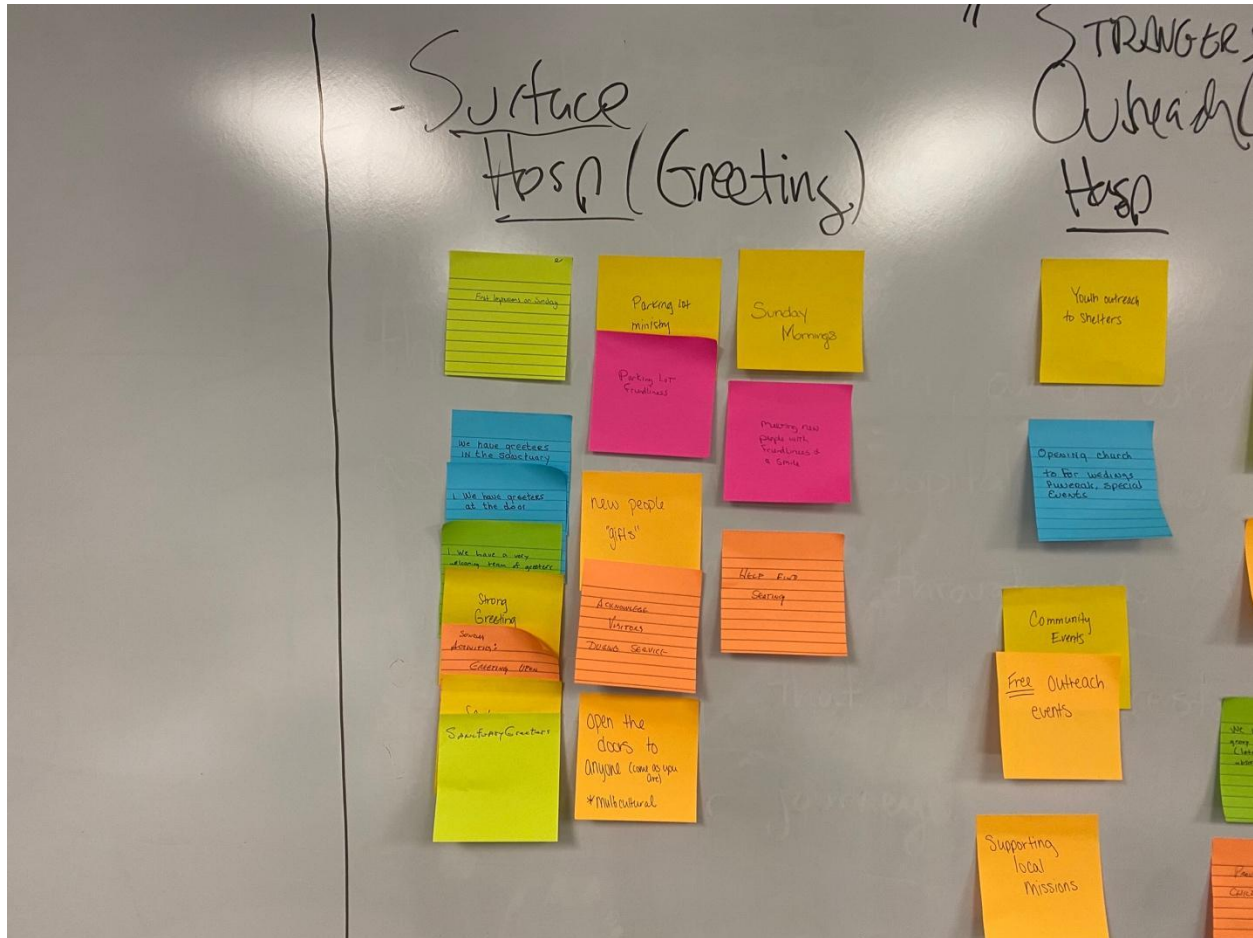
LIFECITY

Check-up procedures

Thank you for your contribution to make the lives of those who believe in our mission better







ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTATION

The following workshop summary was sent to each interviewee prior to interviews:

Discovery Workshop Findings

NPO: In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith, and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers into a purposeful journey.

Three Big Ideas (to Implement):

7. A Hospitality Ministry that focuses on the "strangers" in our congregation, where we go beyond the usual surface-level hospitality of coffee and donuts and greeting at the door.
8. A "Love Our City" Ministry that creates and sustains specific "hospitality" outreaches to vulnerable groups in our local community.
9. An 8-week discipleship course that helps create a culture of hospitality. The format would integrate curriculum and teaching, small group interaction, and a strategic mission component, where participants engage in several hospitality outreaches during the eight weeks.

Definition of Done: Ensuring one of our big ideas is up and running, with key people and a plan in place to evaluate and grow in perspective, effectiveness, and reach.

Benchmarks of Success:

- A tangible shift in our church culture towards making hospitality the foundational mission “tone” and strategy in preaching the Gospel of Jesus and making disciples.
- People being disciplined in hospitality as the central mission approach for sharing the Gospel.
- “Strangers” experiencing the welcome and healing presence of Jesus, resulting in salvations and transformed lives.

Key Insights: The coming of Jesus was the greatest manifestation of the ancient practice of hospitality in history. He sought out a world of strangers and welcomed them – greeting, restoring, dwelling with them, and then sending them forth to extend His table to all nations. His hospitality released supernatural healing for physical bodies, broken hearts (“anointed to heal the brokenhearted”), and broken perspectives of God. The latter is intriguing, especially considering the well-documented Millennial/Gen Z exit from evangelical churches

(Pinetops reports “1 million a year”). Workshop participants in their 20’s and 30s really resonated with this idea and felt there is an opportunity to heal a generational “broken perspective” of Jesus and His Church as we rediscover, reimagine, and bathe the Gospel in the hospitality of Christ.

Further Research:

- Up to date, local demographics to understand our neighbors and to identify vulnerable communities for outreach opportunities.
- A deeper dive into our church community to identify Sunday morning 'strangers,' and to find ways to better extend Jesus' welcome to them.
- Local success stories (learn from those doing hospitality well).
- Opportunities to partner with local "hospitality" ministries (no need to reinvent the wheel).
- How does hospitality heal? (“The Healing Power of Kindness” Stanford Medicine: The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education <http://ccare.stanford.edu/the-huffington-post/the-healing-power-of-kindness/>).

INTERVIEWS

Interview 1 – Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality, contemplative scholar, and noted author (of several important books about Christian hospitality)

- Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report.
- Noted that hospitality is simply defined as God’s welcome to a world of strangers.
- Noted that the idea of hospitality as healing should be considered broadly in light of the Greek word "Sozo," which presents God's work of salvation. She added that this healing occurs as God welcomes us into the Divine life, where His life heals every part of us.

- Noted that instead of judging the culture for their hostility, we should instead examine our own ways. She said the Church has too often created a hostile culture to which the overall culture is responding.
- Stated that creating a culture of hospitality involves asking ourselves the question: "When have I felt like a stranger." By starting there, we open our hearts to experience the welcome of God in broken places. This, in turn, opens our hearts to the flow of God's empathy towards others so that we can then show His hospitality from the place of our own healing.
- Noted that the whole process of extending hospitality is a process of repentance – turning. As we engage, we can't help but be changed. Opening our hearts literally opens us up to transformation, where the nature of Jesus moving through us and to us leaves an indelible mark.
- Observe that the “strangers” to whom we are called to show hospitality are groups like immigrants, the mentally ill, those in prison, the chronically ill, and the outcasts. But, as we consider these groups, we should consider that we all are strangers. And from this place of recognition of being strangers, we can receive healing and show compassion to others.
- Noted that a culture of authenticity, where people can be free to receive God's gracious welcome, despite their coming as "strangers," is the atmosphere that God's welcome creates and thrives.
- Noted that showing hospitality involves developing eyes to see what God is already doing among strangers. We often think that we have to take God to people. However, showing hospitality, and evangelism, in general, is about finding out what God is already doing and working with the Holy Spirit to nudge people in the direction of Jesus -- to extend His gracious welcome.

Interview 2 – Professor of Church History and author of a book on how the practices of Early Christianity changed the world).

- Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report.
- Noted the following about the first three hundred years of Christianity: outside of Israel and the trade routes, many of the ideas central to Christianity, including monotheism, a coming Messiah, and the nexus between religion and morality, would have been foreign. Most were influenced by Roman and

Greek ideas that equated moral change with philosophy and saw religious worship as transactional. Despite these challenges, Christianity grew at a steady rate of about 40% per decade for roughly 270 years, from about 5000 to about 5 million. This growth was not necessarily fast, but it was steady.

- Noted that one of the key reasons for this steady growth was Christian hospitality, which was unique against the background of Roman culture. The Romans despised the vulnerable, sick, and poor, having no use for them. The Christians, who lived alongside of them, developed as a part of their "habitus," ministries to the sick and impoverished. This hospitality touched hearts and attracted converts.
- Noted that another feature of hospitality in the early Church was embedded in the method of discipleship, which involved mature believers sponsoring those who were interested in becoming members of the Church. Sponsors would mentor throughout catechumen, a 2-3 year process prior to baptism, where they would help new believers move into a meaningful experience of faith. This included learning the story of redemption (the narrative arch of Christianity), basic Christian doctrines, practices like prayer, and engaging in Christian hospitality like caring for the poor, taking care of widows, etc. The process was highly relational, rigorous, and transformational to such a degree that once most believers were baptized, their lives were radically changed.
- Noted that so much of what passes for discipleship today is substantively shallow and that reimagining and implementing some of these practices, while not a cure-all or perfect method, could be beneficial in strengthening the mission of the Church today.
- Provided several recommended resources for future study on hospitality.

Interview 3 – Lead Pastor with over 30 years in hospitality ministry (Columbus, Ohio Area).

- Agrees with all conclusions and insights in the Discovery Group Report.
- Noted that it is really clear that Jesus is “hospitality embodied.”
- Noted that it seems the number one issue in ministry today is helping deal with rejection. The prisons are full of men without a father figure, and nobody can make you feel accepted or rejected than a father

figure. Jesus came to show us the love of a Father that redeems than refuses us and that in that ultimate expression of hospitality, there is healing.

- Shared a few stories of when he had experienced healing from hospitality during times of depression:
 - "About 20 years ago, a person pulled up to the church and asked to talk. When we went inside, he asked another man and me to take off our shoes and socks. Then, he washed our feet, prayed for us. There was something to that. I have experienced a lot of acts of kindness, many of which I can't remember all the details, but I will never forget that young man washing my feet. It reminded me that I am worth something and deemed precious."
 - "About ten years ago, when I was at a low place, a man in our congregation came up to me and asked me to bring a pair of shoes to him. He said he wanted to take them home, shine them, and bring them back to me. I resisted, but he insisted, so I did it. And over the next ten or twelve weeks, he took a pair of my shoes each week and brought them back looking brand new. This random act of kindness was hospitality to my heart that brought healing."
 - He added: "All my life, I was taught about Jesus washing feet was to display his humility. But I think it was really to show hospitality. When Jesus bowed himself down and washed their feet, he was about telling his disciples: 'you are worth so much to me.'"
- When asked what advice he would give to pastors who are just starting to utilize compassion ministries, he said to "focus more on the small individual things, and not on the big numbers (dollars)." He noted there is a critical discipleship component that can get lost if all outreach is on an extensive and massive scale and where church members only donate money. The Holy Spirit changes hearts as we engage in hospitality, and utilizing outreaches where members are encouraged to love people directly changes hearts.
- When asked for his thoughts on this connection between biblical hospitality (Hebrews 13:2) and the flow of Divine healing? He said there is apparent emotional healing in both giver and receiver. He also noted several scientific studies that show kindness has an effect on physical healing, as well, and that acts of compassion can relieve stress.

- When talking about his Sunday morning hospitality team, he noted that the number one thing he stresses to his teams is being kind and helpful.
- When asked about his thoughts on whether the Holy Spirit could use compassion ministries to heal a generational "broken perspective" of God (while maintaining a strong emphasis on biblical truth and the call to repentance and faith in Jesus), he said "Whether we like it or not, Church and God are synonymous in America. He added that when the Church looks more like Jesus, it heals hearts." The question we should always ask is, "would Jesus do this?" Or "Would Jesus not do this?" The power of the Holy Spirit is most perfectly seen in hearts and lives that are transformed to be like Jesus.

Interview 4 – Lead Pastor of a large local church with a well-known healing ministry, who oversees numerous large-scale hospitality outreaches, including an international Christian relief ministry.

- As to the availability of Divine healing today: "Divine healing is not a promise so much as it is a fact. It is part of the redemptive ministry of Christ on the cross. Healing for the body and mind is just as much a part of the gospel message as salvation for the soul. God has healed, is healing, and will never stop healing people as long as the need exists."
- As to an example of the healing that he has witnessed: "I will never forget the first one. During the meeting in 1979, I prayed for a woman who returned the next night with a man she introduced as one of her doctors. He testified that he had removed all the woman's reproductive organs some time before, but he also said that not only had those organs been miraculously restored, but the woman was three months pregnant.
- As to the importance of hospitality: "God consistently admonishes His people to care for three groups: strangers, orphans, and widows. These are people who are perhaps more likely to be overlooked or forgotten than other groups. They are also some of the most vulnerable in any population. They are not hard to find—they are everywhere."
- As to a few examples of hospitality ministries that are a part of his ministry: "Bridge of Hope is an outreach that involves our church and many of our partners reaching out with emergency food, water, medical supplies, and other aid to those who have been affected by manmade disasters, such as the

genocide in Sudan, and to places that have been devastated by natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, and other circumstances.

The Women's Clinic of Columbus is an outreach effort to provide pregnancy tests, ultrasound images, and scriptural advice to women who need help with the issues surrounding pregnancy. We have saved multiplied thousands of babies from the American holocaust of abortion through this outreach.

We emphasize special week-long street evangelism efforts with our local church bodies on our campuses, as well as our college. Many people in our communities have come to know Jesus as a result of these outreaches.

We distributed 2.3 million meals in more than 50 cities impacted most by Covid-19 in 2020 and distributed 3,895,000 pounds of fresh groceries in our local communities during the pandemic.

We sponsor an initiative every year called The Big Give that results in toys being distributed to thousands of families who would otherwise have no hope of providing gifts to their children at Christmas.

- As to how these types of compassion ministries open doors to preach the Gospel—in communities and in individual lives: "In some cases, people's lives are directly affected with the gospel, resulting in their salvation. In other cases, such as food aid or gift-giving, inevitably, some people are motivated to find out more about the church that has extended a hand to them by means of giving."
- As to what advice he would give to pastors who are just starting to integrate ministries of hospitality: "Every local church has a *topos*—a specific position of opportunity given to it by God. This involves their impact on their own community as well as the world. Jesus told us to go to Jerusalem as well as to the ends of the earth. We should not do one to the exclusion of the other. Sometimes the ends of the earth are the marginalized and forgotten people who are right next door.

Start somewhere. If you are hesitant about becoming involved in world missions, partner with an organization, such as Bridge of Hope, that already has a proven track record in doing that. Regarding your own community, ask God to show you what you can do and how you can become involved to

provide maximum impact for the gospel. I caution every pastor to avoid doing something just because someone else is doing it. Get alone with God and ask for His blueprint of what you can do that will be sustainable and enable you and your congregation to experience success in this area.

- As to the connection between hospitality and the flow of Divine healing: “Every benefit God has provided for us is a result of His compassion. Jesus did not go to the cross because of some kind of obligation, and certainly not because it was a religious routine He had to fulfill. It was the greatest display of compassion the world has ever seen. Our efforts on behalf of others should never be because “it is our job” or, “this is what is required of me” or, “I don’t have a choice about it.” Compassion moved Jesus. It should be a prime motivator for us as His people. Time after time in our services, the Holy Spirit will direct me to minister to someone without knowing who they are or what their need is. Invariably, they will receive exactly what they need or desire—all because the Spirit knows what they need and how to position them to receive it. Divine healing is a factor in many of these cases.”
- As to the effect that Spirit-led hospitality has on healing “broken hearts” and broken perspectives about God: “God desires a relationship with all of us. He has opened the door to the possibility of that relationship by Christ’s selfless act of sacrifice on the cross. What would happen if all those who claim to be Christians showed Christ’s compassion to those around them, regardless of what those in need looked like, where they came from, or what they believed? Broken hearts would be healed, and broken perspectives, as you put it, about God would be restored. People would come to believe that God is not the hateful and vindictive deity that religion has so often portrayed. Instead, they would realize that God loves them and cares for them—and the irrefutable truth of this would be because His people love them and care for them. Keep in mind, Spirit-led hospitality and compassion does not involve compromising godly morals and values or refusing to tell people the truth. Sometimes the reasons people’s hearts have been broken is because of their rejection of godly principles and their repudiation of a righteous lifestyle. In these cases, no heart healing can truly happen unless and until repentance enters into the equation.
- As to thoughts about how the Holy Spirit could use compassion ministries to heal a generational "broken perspective" of God (while maintaining a strong emphasis on biblical truth and the call to repentance

and faith in Jesus): “The greatest ministry of compassion in which we can become engaged is to do everything we can to encourage and support the proclamation of the true, saving, life-affirming, Christ-exalting, cross-acknowledging, darkness-dissipating, unfiltered and unvarnished gospel. We should certainly welcome everyone to fellowship with us, regardless of whether their perspective of God has been broken or not, or regardless of how that perspective became broken. I suspect that in many cases, the reason people have an idea about God that is not biblical is because they have never heard the Bible preached, but have instead only heard some form or alternative that is becoming more and more common in pulpits and churches these days. The true gospel message is only inclusive in this sense—everyone is offered the opportunity for salvation through the blood of Christ. It is definitely not inclusive in the sense that anyone can call themselves a Christian even if they espouse or engage in lifestyles that are contrary to the Bible. 1 Corinthians 6:9-19 says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” Please notice it includes the covetous and the revilers (gossipers) along with idolaters and homosexuals. People should feel welcome in our churches regardless of their past. But people who hold on to sin should not feel comfortable continuing to hold on to ungodly behavior while being part of a church. What they should feel in that case is the convicting power of the Holy Spirit that leads them to repentance. Any church where habitual and continual sinners feel comfortable is not worthy to be called a church. One of the reasons young people have rejected church is because those in leadership in churches have done such a poor job of modeling what a Christian is supposed to be in front of them. Another reason is that the church has allowed the culture to infiltrate the church instead of the other way around. To quote the late Pastor John Osteen, “The world has become so churchy and the church so worldly that it is hard to tell the difference.” Another reason is that the power of God is ignored, if not denied outright. Young people who are looking for an alternative to the world will not settle for a church experience where they see the same pathologies they are trying to escape, except with a lot of religious rules and restrictions attached. They are looking for something that is real, and fake anything won’t satisfy them. Young people, especially, are finely tuned to detect

hypocrisy and duplicity wherever it is found, and they will not hesitate to call it out, by their actions if not by their words. And so they stay away from church in droves.”

Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report

Introduction

On Tuesday, April 12, 2022, I met with a test group consisting of seven members to review two prototypes dealing with the topic of hospitality as healing. The prototypes are a part of the journey toward a final project that will result in an eight-week discipleship class to be taught to members of our local congregation. This paper will include the findings of the test group and an academic essay on hospitality and healing. It will also identify the most valuable prototype for the Project.

Prototype Summary and Findings

Prototype Description

The first prototype is a low-fidelity book outline with a full table of contents and a sample chapter. The second prototype is a sample podcast interview.

NPO Statement

In a culture that is increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith and where there is a lack of discipleship as to Christian hospitality, there is an opportunity to release healing through acts of kindness and by cultivating a culture where we extend the welcome of Jesus by greeting, restoring, dwelling with, and sending strangers on a purposeful journey.

Research Question

How can we equip followers of Jesus in our local church to understand the ministry and the supernatural power of hospitality and to discern when and where the Holy Spirit is calling them to practice it and release healing in practical ways? An additional question within this question is what does hospitality have the power to do or not do?

Assessment Benchmarks

A prototype book and companion podcast which sets the stage for a discussion about hospitality and its power to move the user forward walking in Spirit-led hospitality in practical ways.

Participant Description

The participants included an executive pastor, an associate pastor, a pastoral care minister, two small group Leaders (couple), and two worship leaders, who are also young adult church members.

Summarize what you learned:

Participants were provided a copy of the low-fidelity book outline, which included a full table of contents and a sample chapter. Next, they listened to a sample podcast interview in which a pastor shared a story of how an act of hospitality had brought healing to his life. (Appendix 1). They were provided surveys related to the book and podcast. After completing the surveys, the group discussed the prototypes and research questions (Appendix 2 and 3).

What worked?

As for the book, the participants offered encouraging feedback. All agreed that the book chapter was engaging and it clearly explained what hospitality is and why the church needs to grow in it. They also agreed it set the stage for future chapters to address how to move forward in

hospitality. One commented she was interested in reading more and said it is a book that “the church needs to read.” Another said the sample “kept him intrigued.”

As for the podcast, all participants shared high marks. One loved the “conversational tone;” another said that it was “engaging and personal,” and another liked how it presented “a real-life experience that showed the power of hospitality.”

What could be improved?

As someone who never quite feels like they are “done” writing and who is constantly making last-minute changes until I have to “press submit,” I felt the book chapter was like the first suit Tony Stark made in Iron Man 1 – enough to get out of the terrorist’s lair but not enough to fly home. Going in, I felt like it was a decent first draft, but it was a little long in parts. Also, I felt like I was struggling to get some sections to fit and flow together in a tight “that makes sense” way that seems effortless to the reader rather than an “I can see that connection” after a verbal explanation (which of course, you would not be able to provide to an actual reader).

I received some helpful, constructive feedback along these lines. For example, one participant felt the personal story was a little long and needed to connect better to the subject matter. Another suggested trimming anecdotes of unnecessary details without neutering my personal style/voice. And another suggested the roadmap at the end could be more succinct. I have already started reworking the chapter with these considerations in mind.

As for the sample podcast, everyone loved the guest and the simple conversational tone.

What matters to the participants?

Book

Most participants prefer reading books in the 200-page range that include a balance of Scripture and personal stories. Regarding writing style, most did not have a favorite non-fiction author; however, a few identified preferred authors, which I will consider regarding pacing and engagement.

They also valued writing which is simple, clear, and focused on significant subject matter. According to one participant, he doesn't want to have to "work" really hard to read," adding the ideas should be "focused and to the point." Another shared, "I love when someone can take an intense and complicated topic and make it understandable without losing weight. Personal stories, current events, and metaphors play a role."

Podcast

Most participants listen to podcasts. Three listen every day. The group values podcasts that are engaging, personal and relevant. Favorite podcasts include the following: Building a Storyboard, 6 Figure Creative, Joe Rogan, The Bible Project, Ian Cron's Typology, Curt Thompson's Fully Known, and Carey Nieuwhof's Leadership Podcast. I will review these podcasts closely regarding style and engagement and incorporate aspects into the final project podcast.

What was your important discovery?

There were two important discoveries. First, the topic resonates on a deep level. Participants all said the Church must become more hospitable, agreeing it is central to the heart and mission of Jesus and, therefore, a vital element of discipleship. They also agreed that it has been sorely lacking in many western expressions of Christianity.

Second, I am convinced that a book with a companion podcast is the best “one-two punch” to communicate the information. A book allows a systematic approach to the topic, while a podcast provides a setting where the subject can “breathe” and “stretch out” through conversation and discussion. When used together, they can cover more of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual ground than either resource could alone.

Background Research Essay on the Emerging Solution

When we hear the word “hospitality,” we usually think about making people feel welcome at special events by providing food, drinks, and an inviting atmosphere. The hospitality industry, which includes hotels, catering, restaurants, and event coordinators, is one of the biggest in the world. In fact, the global hotel sector is predicted to generate over \$1 trillion in 2022.¹⁴⁵ Hospitality is hot, trendy, and profitable.

But hospitality in the ancient world was much different. It was not driven by profit. Instead, it was rooted in an unwritten and universally accepted social contract, wherein people were expected to care for traveling strangers for free.

Most early cultures were nomadic and often required to travel through areas where they had no acquaintances, let alone friends. As a result, they had to rely on the kindness of people who lived in regions. Locals would act as hosts and welcome travelers into their homes, providing protection, meals, lodging, and even caring for animals – all free of charge. As noted by Christine Pohl, a professor emerita of Christian ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary, hospitality was not

¹⁴⁵ “Market size of the hospitality industry worldwide in 2020, with a forecast for 2021,” *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1247012/global-market-size-of-the-hospitality-industry/>

just about being nice; it was considered a sacred societal duty. She writes, "In a number of ancient civilizations, hospitality was viewed as a pillar on which all morality rested; it encompassed "the good."¹⁴⁶

Amy Oden, a professor of Early Church History and Spirituality and former Dean of Wesley Theological Seminary, provides a good overall view of the way hospitality played out, observing that there were four dimensions: greeting, restoring, dwelling together, and sending forth.¹⁴⁷

First, the host would *actively greet* the stranger. This was not a passive activity; it was proactive and involved being always ready to welcome travelers.¹⁴⁸ This might include a greeting with a bow or kiss, as guests were enthusiastically invited to stay at one's home.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K. Kindle Edition. W., B., Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), Kindle Locations 87-88

¹⁴⁷ Amy Oden, "Hospitality in the Christian Tradition," *Seedbed*, July 8, 2015, YouTube video, 8:32 Minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkEnggF6oFo>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Douglas K. Wilson, "[Hospitality](#)," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Second, the host would *minister restoration* to the guest. This might include washing feet, healing to wounds, or providing food and shelter. Hosts would often extend their social capital, connecting guests with friends who could provide assistance.¹⁵⁰

Third, the hosts would *dwell with* the guest, which would involve listening to the traveler's story and providing security.¹⁵¹

Finally, the host would help *send the guest* on their journey by providing things needed for the next leg of their journey.¹⁵²

The Hospitality of Jesus

When thinking about these four dimensions of hospitality, one can't help but think about how the coming of Jesus was the greatest manifestation of hospitality in history. He sought out a world of strangers and welcomed them – greeting, restoring, dwelling with them, and then sending them forth as ambassadors to extend His table to all nations. And His hospitality released supernatural healing for physical bodies, broken hearts, and marred perspectives of God.

Jesus' approach to hospitality was not casual. It emerged from a deep compassion for people. Arthur Sutherland, Assistant Professor of Theology at Loyola College, notes that "the Gospel writers used the rare word *splagchnizomai* to describe what Jesus felt when he encountered

¹⁵⁰ Oden, "Hospitality in the Christian Tradition."

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Ibid.

those on the margins (Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41; 8:2; Luke 7:13).”¹⁵³ *Splagchnizomai* is translated as "compassion" in the cited passages, and it means "to be moved as to one's bowels.”¹⁵⁴ Today, we might talk of "a feeling in the gut.”¹⁵⁵ Sutherland observes that the term was “used twice in parables associated with hospitality (the good Samaritan and the prodigal son),” and he notes that the writers wanted us to see that “Jesus took into himself the pain and "dis-ease" of those on the borders of life.”¹⁵⁶ For Jesus, hospitality was deeply personal, and it released the essence of His life, which ministered healing to body and soul.

Hospitality was a Conduit of Jesus’ Healing Presence

When we think about the healing ministry of Jesus, we usually think about how he ministered to people’s physical needs – blind eyes, deaf ears, and lame feet. But Jesus was also anointed to heal the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1). His hospitality was marked by the kind ways that he interacted with broken people, and it had a restoring effect on the whole person. Let’s consider some examples:

¹⁵³ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN. Abingdon Press, Kindle Edition, 2006), 82.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Jesus touched those who were considered *untouchable*, like the leper who was required by the Law to live outside the community because of the severity of his condition (Leviticus 13:46/Matthew 8:3). His touch brought physical healing, but it certainly went deeper than the skin. Jesus was likely the first person to touch him in a long time, and it let the man know that he was accepted, valued, and loved.

Jesus forgave those considered *unforgivable*, like the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). By refusing to condemn her and, instead, calling her to a fresh start (“Go, and sin no more”), He silenced the angry mob and her inner voice of shame.

Jesus restored the *unrestorable*, like the demoniac in Gadara, whose behavior was so erratic, he was forced to live on the outskirts of town (Mark 5:1-20). Here, Jesus not only cast out a demon, but he also ensured the man was dignified in the process. After the miracle, the man was seen “seated, and clothed, and in his right mind.”

These are just a few examples of some of the “strangers” Jesus interacted with, and how his kindness and ways released healing to body and soul. In his book, *4 Chair Discipling*, Dann Spader, a noted author and leading voice on modern discipleship movements, notes that Jesus “was always drawn to the neediest, not to the sharpest,” and that while his opponents called him “friend of sinners” as a term of derision, Jesus wore it as a “badge of honor.”¹⁵⁷ By showing hospitality, Jesus let people know they were not his projects – they were his people.

Hospitality Extends the Jesus Story in Our World

¹⁵⁷ Dann Spader, *4 Chair Discipling (Like Jesus Series)* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition, 2014) 15.

Jesus's ministry of hospitality did not end at His Ascension, but it was continued through His first followers. Paul encouraged believers in Rome to be "given to hospitality" (Rom 12:3) and wrote that Church leaders should be "hospitable" (Titus 1:8). And Peter said the followers of Jesus should be "hospitable to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9).

In one of the most intriguing passages in the New Testament, the author of Hebrews writes, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2, NIV). The word translated hospitality in this passage is the compound Greek word *philoxenia*. It is made up of two words: *Philos*, which refers to "brotherly love," and *Xenos*, which means "a stranger." When these words are combined as *Philoxenia*, it means "to show love to strangers."¹⁵⁸ These passages make it clear that the hospitality was hardwired into the DNA of the mission.

Amy Oden writes that for early Christians, hospitality was seen as "God's welcome, a welcome that is deep and wide."¹⁵⁹ In her book, *And You Welcomed Me, A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, she notes that early documents show that this welcome had a strong spiritual element to it: She writes, "Prayers of healing and safe travel are frequent, as are

¹⁵⁸ Strong's Concordance, Blue Letter Bible, accessed on April 26, 2022, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5381/kjv/tr/0-1/>

¹⁵⁹ Amy Oden. *God's Welcome* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press. Kindle Edition, 2008) 9.

prayers of gratitude. Sometimes hospitality means including the stranger in worship, Eucharist, or other liturgical acts.”¹⁶⁰

In his book *Ordinary*, Tony Merida, Author and Pastor, points out that Christianity spread in the first century through extended household (Oikos) evangelism done informally by Christians, noting “the early church used their home in remarkably effective and gracious ways.”¹⁶¹ By opening their homes and hearts to strangers, the early disciples followed in their Rabbi’s footsteps and ministered healing hospitality. And by doing so, they showed future generations Jesus’ hospitality is not only a part of the mission; it is the mission.

Today, the Jesus story is still being written, and His ministry of hospitality should be at the heart of everything we are doing. Amy Oden, writes:

As Christian people, we have food to share with a world that is hungry, even famished. Spiritual wanderers—those spiritually starved and denied—show up at our doors, not because they like our buildings or even because they like us, but because they are hungry. Hungry for forgiveness, for rest and peace. Hungry for mercy and grace. Hungry to explore and grow. Hungry for the good news of new life, of abundant life. Hungry for God to do a new thing.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: TN: Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition) 14.

¹⁶¹ Tony Merida, *Ordinary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2015), kindle location, 844 of 2478.

¹⁶² Oden, *God's Welcome*, 10.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be ambassadors of heaven's kindness, who yield to the Holy Spirit in real-time. Henri Nouwen, a renowned theologian, wrote, "...if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality."¹⁶³ Leonard Sweet notes, "The gospel is God's hospitality; God invites strangers to enjoy a meal and treats us as honored guests and family members. We are guests at God's table, just as the world we seek to reach are God's guests."¹⁶⁴ As disciples of Jesus, we are called to "be Jesus" to our world. Nothing less. Nothing more.

From WWJD to WIJD

Several years ago, a popular slogan made its way through the evangelical world – "What would Jesus do? (WWJD)." We bought the bracelets and the t-shirts, and, in many ways, WWJD helped recover a necessary focus on prioritizing the ways of Jesus. However, WWJD was phrased in a way that implies there is distance between Jesus and us, in that it encourages us to think along the lines of "what would Jesus do *if he were here*." The problem with that line of thinking is that Jesus *is here*. He is presently living on the inside of believers, and He is seeking to move through our lives right now. As Paul wrote: "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (Philippians 2:13).

¹⁶³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), 45.

¹⁶⁴ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (p. 142) (Nashville, TN: The Navigators. Kindle Edition), 142.

I think the better question is, "What is Jesus doing (WIJD)? In the same way that Jesus "saw what the Father was doing, "acted, and released healing, we are called to see what Jesus is doing, act it out, and release healing (John 5:19/Ephesians 1:18). When we are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we allow Jesus to express Himself through us in real-time, and we become a bridge between heaven and earth. Paul must have had this idea in mind when he wrote, "it is no longer I that live, but Christ that lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

The Scriptures are to be the lens through which we know Jesus and discern His present movements. As Leonard Sweet wrote, "The past is key in defining truth, but in conversation with present and future. What was and what truly is are harbingers of what will be."¹⁶⁵ WWJD is a good question, but only if it leads us to ask the more pressing question, "What is Jesus doing now?" Or, more specifically, how is the Spirit leading me to show hospitality and kindness to someone today through me?

We find the Spirit's groove as we watch the Spirit move. As Theo-semioticians, we are called to read the signs, understand the times, and know what to do. This starts with embracing a conviction that if Jesus showed hospitality during his earthly ministry, He longs to do it today through us. Sweet writes: "Jesus leaves behind signs like breadcrumbs, which we must discern in order to follow and catch up to him on the road to mission."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook. Kindle Edition, 2010), 73.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 78.

As we learn to read the signs and listen eagerly for real-time leadings, promptings, and nudges, the Church will minister the healing hospitality to our world.

The Critical Need for Resources that Explore Hospitality as Healing

While much has been written on hospitality and healing, separately, there is little that explores the connection between the two; specifically, how hospitality releases healing. But hospitality as healing is an idea whose time has come. This is true, especially in the West, where segments of evangelicalism are often seen as anything but hospitable. They often react to cultural hostility with more hostility. And instead of offering healing, they deepen relational divides and compromise the effectiveness of the mission to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

The Church does not need a new strategy; it just needs to embrace a better way – the Jesus way of loving people to life. As noted by Leonard Sweet, the Church in the west faces a new mission field, where "a third of the US population are now religiously unaffiliated or "Nones."¹⁶⁷ He stresses "the current model of doing church is not a joyful or triumphant one," and that the "church of the future must move from fortress church to field church...from an insider mentality (it's-all-about-us) to an outsider focus (let's-get-over-ourselves) that tracks what Jesus is doing in the world"¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Leonard Sweet, "Red Skies, White Elephants, Gray Rhinos, and Black Swans" In *10 Essential Conversations Exploring Our Future as the Church*, 32-40 (London: Penguin Books, 2012) 34.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

The best way to effect meaningful change in our world is by preaching the good news while being good to people. In their book, *REJESUS, Remaking the Church in our Founder's Image*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, leading voices on discipleship, note there are two versions of Christianity at work in America today: the Christianity of the culture war, and the Christianity of Jesus.¹⁶⁹ They write “The Christianity of the culture war is focused on winning,” while “The Christianity of Jesus is focused on witnessing,” and that the Church must embrace the latter. They note this involves being like Jesus, who was a “friend of sinners.”¹⁷⁰ They cite a study of young people who showed “...far from being antagonistic about faith in Jesus, they were open to such faith but suspicious that the church had anything to teach them about it.” They conclude, “They believed the church is an organized religion with a political agenda, is negative and judgmental in outlook....”¹⁷¹

To Frost's and Hirsch's point – the Church must immerse itself in the ways of Jesus so that we can reflect His image, for it is only as we lift Jesus up, that He draws all men unto Himself. (John 12:32). As we lean back into the Scriptures, noting how Jesus welcomed strangers, we can swing forward in the Spirit, putting Jesus first. And, as we do so, we'll release the healing presence of Jesus.

¹⁶⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *REJESUS: Remaking the Church in Our Founder's Image [Revised & Updated Edition]* (Cody WY, 100 Movements Publishing. Kindle Edition), 50.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 227.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

The next phase of research and product development will explore some important questions:

- How can hospitality be reimagined in our current cultural context?
- How is hospitality central to an incarnational model of discipleship?
- How does hospitality heal the soul, both in the host and the recipient?
- To what extent does hospitality release physical healing?
- To what extent could hospitality be a catalyst to a grassroots Jesus movement and spark the next Great Awakening?

MVP (Most Valuable Prototype)

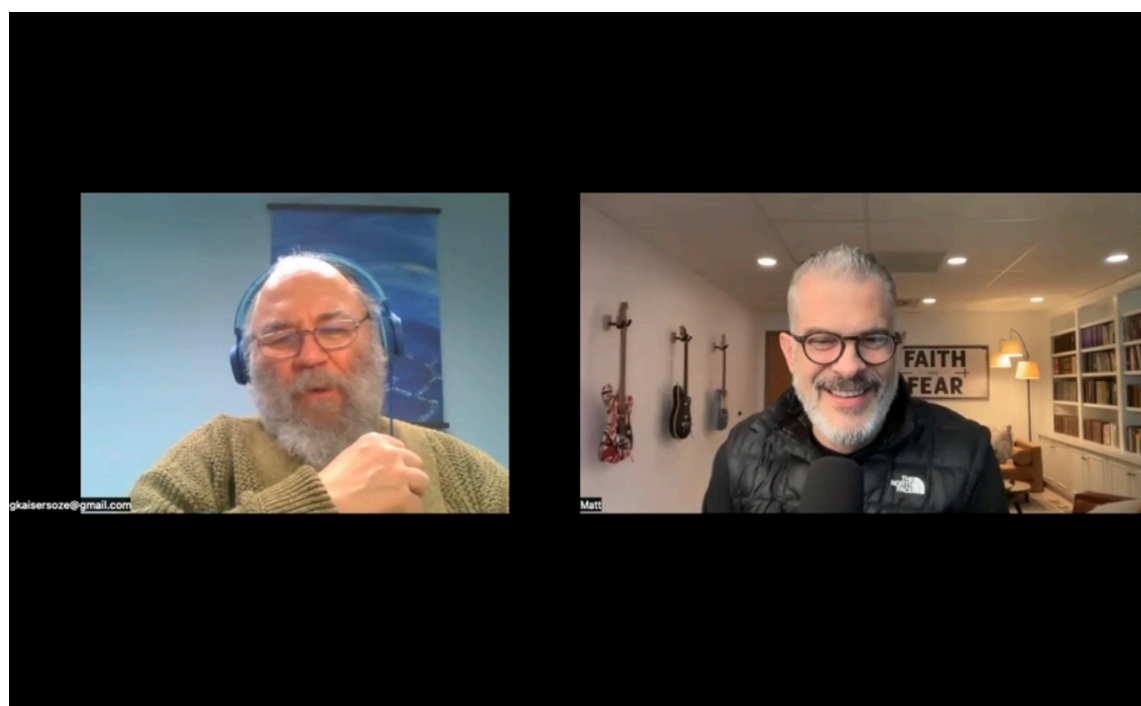
After considering the results of the testing session and the research, I have concluded that a book and a companion podcast is the most valuable prototype (MVP). Although the book and the podcast might technically be considered two separate prototypes, both will be critical to the final project – an eight-week discipleship class for Life City Church, where I serve as lead pastor. Therefore, they should be considered two parts of one prototype.

There are benefits to utilizing the book and the podcast. The book will allow for a systematic approach and provide a space where hospitality as healing can be explored in a linear fashion that is fixed and visual. On the other hand, a podcast provides a resource where a subject can "breathe" and "stretch out" through conversation and discussion. In addition, a podcast can be updated more easily than a book, which will provide a means to keep the topic fresh and relevant as our church grows.

In the testing session, participants liked the book and the podcast, noting that utilizing both allows for a more comprehensive approach to the topic. It also allows different types of learners to engage. For example, some people prefer reading; others do not but would be open to listening to a conversation.

As to viability, I feel confident in my skill set to write and interview. And since the project will benefit our church, I will have ample time and available resources necessary to complete the project. Together, the book and the podcast will help fulfill the goal of moving our congregation towards incarnating a Jesus hospitality that releases healing.

Appendix E—Project Appendix Documentation



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