DEVELOPING A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE URBAN

CONTEXT OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS, IN COOPERATION

WITH FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS

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by

Bryan James Leonard

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APPROVAL SHEET

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For the glory of God

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PREFACE

       I would like to thank Dr. John Klaassen, Garrick Bailey, and the other staff and faculty members of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who helped to make this project a reality. I would also like to thank First Christian Church of Decatur, Illinois for their financial support and encouragement during this study, as well as the people of Community Table who walked with me through the project. May God be glorified and lives transformed through the outcomes of our ministry together.

       I would also like to recognize the support and encouragement of my father-in-law, Gary Burlington, who helped me think and articulate my thoughts: you have had such an influence on me. I must also acknowledge friends Nate Weathers, Marlin Baker, Rob Shoaff, and David Newman: you provided great insights and encouraged me from the start with your friendship.

       Finally, I want to recognize the great sacrifice of my wife, Mary, and our children, Hannah, Lydia, Mia, and Dominic, to allow me to pursue doctoral studies and this project. Mary, I love you so much. There is no one I would rather be with in mission.

<div align="right">Bryan Leonard</div>

Decatur, Illinois

May 2022

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The apostle John records, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" in reference to Jesus Christ (John 1:1).[1] John continues, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). In this passage, John points to the power of Jesus's proximity in ministry. Jesus, as the incarnate son of God, chose to be present with humanity in a way the world had never before experienced. Christians, by extension as followers of Christ, model the proximity of Christ as the church in community with one another. In addition, following Christ's example to be present with people for God's glory is the call of missions. This missionary call, to reach and disciple in proximity, has motivated many generations of people to cross geographic and cultural distances. The ministry of proximity is critical in urban neighborhoods where Christian churches often struggle to engage the density and diversity of the urban context. This project sought to develop a community of believers who would be on mission to engage, invite, and disciple people in a journey of faith in Jesus, in the context of Decatur, Illinois.

Context

This ministry project took place in the context of Decatur, Illinois, where First Christian Church (FCC) is located and engages in community outreach. There are five issues relevant to Decatur as a ministry context.

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[1] All Scripture quotations are from the English Version Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

First, Decatur is a city in decline. According to the "City and Town Populations Report 2010–2019," the population of Decatur decreased from 76,122 in 2010 to 70,746 in 2019. This decrease of 7.1 percent made Decatur the third fastest shrinking city in the US.[2] The city's population decrease is due to several issues. Recent economic struggles have produced significant job lay-offs and transfers. High occurrences of murders and other violent crimes paired with poor school performance have decreased the desirability of living in the city and driven down property values. As a result, many people with means have moved out of the urban neighborhoods or the city altogether. The vacuum of investment and stability once provided by these families has intensified the problem, bringing about a communal self-fulfilling prophecy and causing more families to move, and thus the stigma to deepen. The individuals and families left behind are stuck due to financial or other limitations.[3]

Second, Decatur is clearly separated and distinguished from the towns around it. While Decatur is defined by failing schools, high crime rates, and unsightly neighborhoods, the surrounding communities are prosperous, safe, and well-educated. According to 2019 estimates by the US Census Bureau, 21.1 percent of Decatur's population lives under the National Poverty Level.[4] While the surrounding towns average 2.8 percent. Another significant difference is the composition of the respective

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[2] United States Census Bureau, "City and Town Population Totals 2010–2019," July 27, 2020, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-total-cities-and-towns.html.

[3] B. J. Leonard, "How We Partnered with Our Community to Reach Our City," *Christian Standard* 154, no. 9 (September 2019): 37.

[4] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Decatur City, Illinois," accessed July 22, 2020, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/decaturcityillinois/IPE120218. The National Poverty Level is $25,701 for a family of 4. $12,784 for a single person. United States Census Bureau, "Poverty Thresholds 2018," accessed July 30, 2020, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html. Decatur's percentage of people living under the National Poverty Level (21.1 percent) is nearly double the national average of 11.8 percent. United States Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2018," accessed July 26, 2020, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2019/demo/p60-266.html.

populations. 28.6 percent of Decatur's population are minorities,[5] while only 6.6 percent of the population in surrounding towns are minorities. Most notably, the percentage of black people in Decatur in 2019 was 20.5 percent, with only 1.5 percent in surrounding towns.[6] These social and racial differences combine to create clear boundaries, which are apparent throughout the community, including churches. FCC and the city's other large churches are comprised of predominantly white upper middle-class congregants from suburban settings. To their credit, these large churches were well-suited to Decatur's white, upper-middle class majority during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, even during this time the community's identity was shifting toward a more urban, lower-class majority. Therefore, while the existing large churches were at one time contextualized to a majority of the community, they are not contextualized to the community's growing urban neighborhoods, which have few or no churches engaging them appropriately. Churches and missional communities can be developed specifically to engage people living in the city's depressed urban neighborhoods without prejudice toward the community's middle- and upper-class individuals and the churches that reach them.

Third, during the period of time when many stable families began leaving the city for surrounding areas, many churches also left for spaces outside the city. This departure was a mirror of the larger posture toward the city. Currently, the community's seven largest churches are an average of 3.3 miles from the inner city. This lack of proximity has implications for people living in the city who do not have reliable transportation and no access to public transportation on Sundays. People interested in attending a local church may be forced to walk distances of a half mile or more. This is especially difficult during inclement weather. In 2010, FCC made a conscious decision to

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[5] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Decatur City, Illinois."

[6] DataUSA, "Mt. Zion IL," accessed February 17, 2020, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/mount-zion-il; DataUSA, "Forsyth IL," accessed February 17, 2020. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/forsyth-il.

remain at its current property in the city rather than moving. While FCC is not located in the inner city, it is still located in Decatur proper.

Fourth, of the prominent churches in Decatur, including FCC, many of who attend do not live in close proximity to the inner city. This distance results in a lack of connection points between church attenders and the unreached in the inner city. This disconnection is illustrated by differing neighborhoods (or towns), differing schools, and differing family and recreational spaces. Many who attend from these prominent congregations have a desire to help and reach those in the city. Although their motives are genuine, the differences in culture often create a patronizing effect on the people they are attempting to reach. This lack of connections negatively affects their ability to be present with and relate to unreached people in the city. This challenge is a topic of continual address by ministry leaders at FCC.

Fifth, with the exception of one church, Decatur's largest and most influential churches are in decline. Since 2015, these churches have declined by 10.4 percent in average weekly attendance. 1-2 percent of this decline can be explained by participation in online church experiences. Leadership in these churches attribute the decline to the shifting population and changing cultural trends. The overall decline in attendance among the city's largest churches, including FCC, is evidence of the city's changing population. While many churches have focused heavily on reaching white-collar professionals with children, this population is slowly shrinking. It is reflective of the fact that the city's decrease in population is occurring almost exclusively among middle-class white families, which is the primary target group of the majority of the city's churches. Meanwhile, the population of those unreached by FCC and other large churches is growing. Pastors of these churches agree that traditional methods of evangelism and discipleship for suburban

families are losing their effectiveness and are completely ineffective in the urban context. Together, they lament their inability to reach, engage, and disciple the city.[7]

The second, third and fourth issues combine to create significant barriers between established churches like FCC and people living in the city who are not a part of a church. Like patients seeking and needing a hospital built behind layers of walls who have neither the strength nor the means to access it, people desperately need the church but cannot access it. Those living in urban neighborhoods cannot easily get to church buildings, have few opportunities to interact with and build friendships with church members, and will likely not fit into established churches due to cultural differences. Many residents of the inner city who are low income or minorities feel out of place at churches of predominately upper-middle class white people. The landscape of ministry is changing in a profound manner. The progressing situation could be described as a crisis for the church and community. However, David Bosch observes the state of crisis as the point where danger and opportunity meet.[8] A new missional paradigm, empowered by the Holy Spirit, has the potential to reach the city of Decatur in new and profound ways.

The vast majority of Decatur's most prominent churches have relocated their buildings well outside the city center and even into neighboring communities. While several small churches and ministries are located in Decatur's depressed urban neighborhoods, they are grossly under-proportionate to the inner city's population and needs. The issue is that Decatur churches have either left Decatur or are made up of congregants who live outside Decatur. Therefore, the vast majority of churches in Decatur are completely inaccessible to the people of the inner city and are not engaging the inner city due to their lack of geographic, social, and cultural proximity.

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[7] Church Survey, completed by lead pastors at their monthly meeting February 27, 2020. This survey was completed prior to the implications of COVID-19 on churches in the Decatur community.

[8] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.

In 2004, FCC made a commitment to reaching the community of Decatur. The commitment began with the local public elementary school, which precipitated the launching of an after-school program in FCC's building. Interactions with students and families led the church's leadership to adopt an inner-city Decatur neighborhood known as The Block, where many families from the school live. Ministry in The Block is closely tied to a house where FCC's Missions Pastor lives and the ministry of presence with residents. While FCC is deeply committed to ministry at the school and in The Block and have extended many invitations to those in the community, few residents of the inner city have successfully made FCC their church home. This is not for lack of desire on FCC's part, but the result of the previously mentioned factors.

The most effective ministry approach in The Block is creating open environments in the neighborhood where relational interactions can naturally take place. These environments have allowed people from FCC and residents of The Block to meet each other, identify commonalities, and establish friendships. In Fall 2019, these friendships resulted in the formation of a weekly gathering called Community Table, where ten to twenty people gather together to share a meal, study and apply Scripture, and pray. Community Table is a racially and socially diverse group comprised of residents of The Block and members of FCC who are committed to ministry in the inner-city.

Community Table embodies many aspects of a faith community, as a group of people who share a common faith and meet together regularly for encouragement, Bible study, and prayer. Participants encourage one another, help one another, and hold one another accountable within the context of their devotion to Jesus Christ. While participants vary in their spiritual experiences and maturity, there is a common sense of journeying together in faith through life's joys and challenges. The group's interactions exist outside of the weekly gatherings to create a depth of support and involvement in one another's lives. However, Community Table is still lacking a missional identity to actively reach,

disciple, and invite in other participants. This missional component is still to be developed for a wide-reaching impact to take place.

Rationale

The lack of relevant, healthy, and accessible churches in Decatur for residents in urban neighborhoods impacts the church's ability to reach the city and ultimately the salvation of people living there. The most effective means of making disciples in urban neighborhoods is through contextualized missional communities and churches on mission within the neighborhoods. While Community Table is a group of people on a path of discipleship, enjoying community, and growing together, all of the group's members are not yet mission-minded. Individual group members, along with the group's nature and function, must be developed to missionally engage the community and make new disciples. If Community Table and other faith communities like it can be developed to missionally engage their neighborhoods, then Decatur's urban neighborhoods can be reached more effectively.

Based on the contextual issues described and the urban environment that exists, several reasons reveal the need for the development of missional communities, which are groups of people who consider themselves to be missionaries and are personally on mission to reach and disciple people in their context.

First, the city and its population are changing. With an increasing population of minorities, those living in poverty, and those who have had negative church experiences, the segment of the city's population being reached and engaged by existing churches is decreasing. While existing churches find themselves competing for this decreasing population, new missional communities can be developed for the expressed purpose of reaching and discipling people other churches are not currently engaging, and therefore will not be in direct competition with the city's existing churches.

Second, in connection to the changing population, most churches in the Decatur area are not currently engaging social and cultural trends, such as racial reconciliation,

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addressing poverty, and the growing disparity between Christian values and common social values. These trends require relevant voices that speak the truths of Scripture and respond to current questions in the context of personal relationships of authenticity.[9] Environments like Community Table, and the personal relationships they facilitate, allow these topics to be discussed and the gospel message transmitted within contextualized personal relationships. These relationships provide a relevant context for displaying how the gospel challenges and changes lives. In addition, because these missional faith communities are formed in the midst of the cultural and social dynamics of the urban context, they are naturally effective in engaging and reaching people in the urban context.

Third, the development of missional communities intentionally seeks to close the gap of separation between those living in urban neighborhoods and their experience or perception of "church." Individualism, in its rampant and atomized sense, along with the experiences of broken relationships, leaves many people hungry and searching for authentic relationships. In addition, few churches and gatherings of Christians meet in urban neighborhoods. Community Table's relational nature and meeting location in the Block neighborhood has already proven to create a relevance of proximity. A missional community that models authentic relationships with diverse leadership and culturally relevant communication fosters relevance to people in the city, including minorities. This is illustrated by the apostle Paul's effectiveness in starting growing churches of indigenous disciples in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Ephesus (Acts 16:13-40; 19:1-10; 20:17-21; Phil 1:1-16; 1 Thess 1:1-9).

Fourth, because of the city's decline, both in economy and population, the sustainability of traditional church methods and financial requirements is coming into question. Churches requiring significant financial resources to fund large buildings and staffs may come under strain as the city's economy continues to break down and giving

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[9] Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1962), 12.

decreases. The formation of building-free and staff-free house churches resulting from missional communities will create a means for congregational formation and ministry strategy that can survive in financially poor contexts.[10] This approach may effectively serve as the "lifeboat" for the existence of the church in the Decatur community in the future.

Community Table is a budding faith community that is racially, generationally, and socially diverse. Due to its relational design, its location in The Block, and its unifying nature, Community Table has the components to effectively reach and engage people who FCC and other churches have failed to effectively engage. The project of developing Community Table into a missional community and its potential replication is vital to reaching and transforming the community of Decatur through life-on-life discipling relationships that exhibit the gospel and form new Christian leaders in the urban context. Developing missional communities also create a foundation to potentially start new churches that are culturally and missionally contextualized to the urban context.

Looking at continuing trends in Decatur, it is imperative that new perspectives and strategies of ministry be developed. This project addressed the previously mentioned issues by creating a means of reaching and discipling people by building and improving upon the work of FCC and other churches in the community. The project is biblically grounded in its fulfillment of the Great Commission and the requirement for people to be sent in the name of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20; Rom 10:14-15). Thousands of people in Decatur are currently unengaged by the church and urgently need the development of missional communities that will be relevant to them.

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[10] Karl Vaters, "How to Have a Church Where Money Is Never a Problem," *Christianity Today*, January 22, 2016, https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2016/january/how-to-have-church-where-money-is-never-problem.html.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois, in cooperation with First Christian Church of Decatur, Illinois.

Goals

The development of a missional community was guided by four goals. The goals were based on developing a core team of participants who could most effectively reach and disciple people living in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois.

1. The first goal was to assess the current missiological understanding and commitment of the core participants within Community Table.

2. The second goal was to develop an eight-session curriculum that equipped the core participants to develop missional values and strategies.

3. The third goal was to equip the core participants to live out missional values and strategies.

4. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to reach and disciple people in the urban context of Decatur.

A specific research methodology was created that measured the successful completion of these four goals. Each goal was contingent upon the successful completion of the previous goal. The methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of four goals. The first goal was to assess the current missiological understanding of the core participants within the current faith community, Community Table. This goal was measured by administering the Missional Understanding Survey (MUS)[11] to core participants who are committed attenders of Community Table, have influence in the lives of other people in the group, and exhibit a desire to reach and disciple people. This

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[11] See appendix 1. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

group was surveyed regarding current missional competencies and practices relevant to the urban context. This goal was considered successfully met when the core participants completed the MUS and the survey was analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of the missional competencies and practices among core participants.

The second goal was to develop a eight-session curriculum that equipped the core participants to develop missional values and strategies. The curriculum covered the basic missional issues such as engaging current urban issues, Bible study, contextualization, articulating the gospel, and personal discipleship. The curriculum was taught by myself in collaboration with other leaders from within Community Table. This goal was measured by an expert panel of three missional pastors/practitioners who utilized a rubric that evaluated the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.[12] This goal was successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to equip the participants to develop greater understanding and practice of missional values and strategies. This goal was measured by re-administering the MUS as a post assessment survey to gauge the original participants' understanding of and commitment to missional living. This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores. Additionally, I followed up with the people who participated in the missional curriculum on a weekly basis for four weeks. At these meetings, I used a predetermined set of evaluative questions designed to help participants think practically about missional strategies and create accountability to apply them.[13] Participants discussed people they wanted to reach and practical steps they used

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[12] See appendix 2.

[13] See appendix 3.

to reach, engage, and disciple them. This goal was successfully met after four weeks of follow up conversations with each of the participants.

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to reach and disciple people in the urban context of Decatur. This goal was measured by the expert panel of three missional pastors/practitioners who utilized a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the plan, components of relational development, training elements, provision of evangelistic resources, and action steps.[14] This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. In addition, the core participants of the missional curriculum experienced the process of teaching and equipping the group and are poised to either take over leadership of the group or start and lead new missional communities.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

Contextualization. Scott Moreau builds upon the work of David Hesselgrave in defining *contextualization* as "the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole—not only the message but also the means of living out our faith in the local setting—understandable."[15] Building on Moreau's work, Timothy Tennent proposes the narrowing definition of contextualization as "the goal of a process whereby the universal good news of Jesus Christ is authentically experienced in the particularities of a local context."[16]

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[14] See appendix 4.

[15] Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 36.

[16] Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 198, referencing "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225-27.

Core participants. Core participants are people who attend Community Table regularly and exhibit spiritual and evangelistic interest.

Discipleship. This project uses the term *discipleship* in the context of a specific approach. The generic term is used often and widely to describe the process by which disciples of Jesus grow in their understanding, commitment, and followership through the studying Scripture, prayer, and obedience. In the American Christian settings, this term is often associated with participation in classes, group gatherings, and other programmed mechanisms of discipleship offered by local churches. However, the context of Decatur's inner-city and other similar urban contexts requires an approach to discipleship that is very personal, based in shared rhythms of life, and has the expectation of replication to the next generation of disciple. Urban ministry practitioners often refer to this approach as "life-on-life discipleship" because it takes place between a single person investing in and discipling another person through conversations and exhibiting the praxis of Christian faith in daily life.

Faith community This project defines *a faith community* as a group of people who share common faith, commitment to growth, and practices of meeting together.

Inner-city. This project uses the term *inner-city* to describe both location as the area that conforms geographically to the political limits of the old central city at the core of the metropolis, as defined in 1990 by Maurice Yeats,[17] and a distressed urban or suburban area of concentrated poverty and low income, as defined by the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City.[18] The term "inner-city," therefore, both denotes a geographic

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[17] M. Yeats, *The North American City*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 262.

[18] Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, accessed July 14, 2020, http://www.icic.org. An earlier definition from ICIC defined *inner city* as "a core urban area that currently has higher unemployment and poverty rates and lower median income levels than the surrounding Metropolitan Statistical Area." This definition blends both a location-based and socio-economic descriptor. Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz discuss "inner city" as a descriptor of a collection of kinship groups, ethnic enclaves, and complex interactions in process rather than being confined to specific geographic locations inside a city. Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 165-67.

location and connotes any context exhibiting urban characteristics. The Block neighborhood is characterized as *inner-city.*

Mission. This project shares the perspective of Christopher J. H. Wright in identifying mission as "God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."[19] Bosch notes the term "mission" presupposes a sender, one being sent, those to whom one is being sent, and an assignment.[20] Therefore, mission is the movement of God to bring redemption and restoration to his world. Bruce Riley Ashford joins Wright in making a clear distinction between *mission* and *missions.* Missions, therefore, are the human participations in the mission of God seeking to increase his renown, proclaim his gospel, advance his church, and bear witness to the truth of his word.[21]

Missional. This project uses the adjective *missional* to denote something that is characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes, or dynamics in mission. Therefore, as Wright notes, a *missional* perception or role implies an identity or role connected to God's ultimate intention of mission.[22]

Missional community. This project uses the term *missional community* to define the identity and function of a group of people who consider themselves to be missionaries and are intentionally on mission to reach and disciple people who are in their context. Jeff Vanderstelt defines a missional community as "a family of missionary servants who make disciples who make disciples."[23] Mike Breen defines the function of a

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[19] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 22-23.

[20] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 1.

[21] Bruce Riley Ashford, ed., *Theology and the Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2011), 2.

[22] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 24-25.

[23] Jeff Vanderstelt, "What Is a Missional Community?," *Desiring God Blog*, August 10, 2011, http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/what-is-a-missional-community.

missional community as existing "in Christian community, to reach either a particular neighborhood or network of relationships."[24]

   Urban. This project refers to the complex understanding of *urban* as a developed or built up area defined by high population density, ethnic and cultural diversity, and often, illustrations of socioeconomic disparity manifested in the social pathologies of violence, poverty, broken families, and addiction.[25] Therefore, *urban* can be used interchangeably with the term *inner-city* in regard to its geographic definition of location or characteristics within a city. However, the term *urban* also defines culture and influence, as illustrated by the fact that while sometimes neglected by larger society, urban centers often influence policies, entertainment, and cultural systems. [26] One defining theme of urban contexts is the presence of many different people and subcultures in a shared space, which creates diversified experiences and the opportunity for subcultures to influence one another.

   One limitation applied to this project. This project took place in the Block neighborhood, which derives its name from the "The U Block," as unofficially used in the 1990s and early 2000s and used by First Christian Church's "Adopt a Block" ministry to refer to the sections of Edward, Union, and Church streets north of Grand Avenue and south of the railroad tracks in the larger GM Square neighborhood of Decatur. While residents from surrounding neighborhoods are welcome to attend programming, a majority of participants are from the Block neighborhood.

   Two delimitations applied to this project. The first delimitation is this project focused on the development of the existing faith community of Community Table into a missional community, rather than establishing a new missional community. The rationale

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[24] Mike Breen, "What Is a Missional Community?" *Verge Network*, December 31, 2010, http://www.vergenetwork.org/2010/12/31/mike-breen-what-is-a-missional-community-printable/.

[25] Michael Mata, "Transformational Urban Youth Ministry" (class notes, CY502, Fuller Youth Institute, Fuller Theological Seminary, April 28, 2010).

[26] Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 18-21.

for this delimitation was that Community Table was in an ideal position to be developed and replicated. Community Table is also unique as the first known faith community of its kind in the city, and therefore a template for others.

The second delimitation was the purpose of this project to determine how to carry out processes of evangelism and discipleship within a missional community prior to potentially establishing a new church plant or additional site for an existing church such as FCC. While developing a missional community lays a solid foundation for planting a church or new site, those actions are outside the purpose or intended scope of this project.

Conclusion

In the midst of an environment where many churches in Decatur have jettisoned their proximity and presence in the urban context, God placed Community Table in a strategic location and time to reach people in a relevant way. Creating a curriculum for developing a missional community and its implementation within Community Table was a vital step in reaching and transforming the urban neighborhoods of Decatur. The following chapters display the necessity of developing a missional community based on Scripture, missiological best practices, and insights gained from the social sciences.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR
DEVELOPING A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

Four passages from the Old and New Testaments reveal that God calls his people to represent and make him known in their local settings and uses his people as agents of his mission to bring about spiritual transformation. Disciples are made as God's people bear witness to Christ and display their faith.

The Presence of God's People for Transformation and Witness (Jer 29:4-11)

Jeremiah 29:4-11 reveals God's plan to use the residential investment of his people, while in captivity in Babylon, to bring about transformation for his glory. Through Jeremiah, God announces to his people that they are to establish families and make their home in the city of their exile. God's people are also to pray for and seek the welfare of the community into which God has brought them. By fulfilling God's instructions, his people would establish their identity of influence in Babylon and set the stage for an expanding witness to the nations.

The Identity of God's People in Relation to the Nations

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles reveals God's plan to use his people as an expression of the Abrahamic covenant. God's covenant with Abraham promised not only to bless him and make him into a great nation, but to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen 12:2-3). God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham after Isaac is born, stating, "In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 22:17-18). Abraham's descendants experienced God's protection and blessing at points throughout

their history, but when they displayed disobedience and disrespect to God, it resulted in their discipline (Deut 8:5-6). During the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord brought the Babylonians as agents of his judgement against his recalcitrant people, and they were taken as captives to Babylon. The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people as his plan established God's sovereignty outside the promised land. Jewish scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann notes that these events reflect "YHWH is the universal God, the ruler of all kingdoms."[1] God's people must understand he is capable of maintaining his covenant regardless of location. Even in a foreign land God would maintain his covenant promises to his people.

Jeremiah's letter is written to the exiles in the midst of their uncertain future while in a foreign nation. God's people were the just recipients of forewarned judgment for their sin. It was the Lord, not Nebuchadnezzar, who took them into exile (Jer 29:4). Christopher Wright observes that Israel was not in captivity because God could not defeat his enemies, but because God in his sovereignty had chosen to discipline his people and use their presence for a purpose.[2] God addresses his people as those "whom I have sent into exile" (הִגְלֵיתִי־אֲשֶׁר 29:4). God's people must understand his sovereignty over all events in human history and his ability to maintain his covenant regardless of location. Terrence Fretheim observes that the theological assumption here is that God is not absent from life in exile. God would be present and active in their daily lives, even among the people who had conquered them.[3] Walter Bruggemann notes one task of Jeremiah's letter was to "help his community to face the loss of the old world of king and temple, and to

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[1] Yehezkel Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel*, vol. 4, *Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1977), 14.

[2] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 85-86.

[3] Terrence Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 402, 409.

receive a new world defined by the worship and mission of YHWH."[4] Even though many of the physical objects and landmarks that served as reminders of God's covenant were no longer visible in Babylon, his covenant remained intact.

The period of enforced separation from the homeland marked a significant shift, as God's people refined their identity under his sovereignty. Before God's people could fully represent him to the nations, they first had to acknowledge their identity as his people. Kaufmann notes this identity was particularly important as God's people adapted themselves to the pagan culture but rejected its idolatry.[5] This realized identity equipped God's people to worship him and represent him in the foreign lands in Babylon and beyond. Norman Gottwald reflects, "Jeremiah's letter reads like a description of the Jewish experience through the twenty-five hundred years since. The most distinctive feature of Judaism is that it succeeded in surviving political uprootedness and ritual alteration; it became thereby a religion in permanent exile."[6] With the distinct faith of God's people established and affirmed, they would be poised to bear witness to his glory and represent his covenant to the communities where they lived for generations to come. As the family of Abraham, God's people were established not only to worship him but through their worship to be a light to the nations (Isa 49:6).

**The Residence and Mission of
God's People (Jer 29:4-7)**

Jeremiah describes movement of focus from Jerusalem to Babylon (Jer 29:1, 4). Wright observes, "The whole history of the Old Testament had gone in the opposite direction: from the land of Babel (Gen 11) to Jerusalem; from God calling Abraham out

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[4] Walter Brueggenmann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 12.

[5] Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel*, 25.

[6] Norman K Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1959), 369.

of the land of Babylon to God establishing his people in the land of Jerusalem. But now the plot was reversing."[7] The posture of Israel's fundamental influence was shifting. Wright observes in addition to a centripetal attraction that brought the nations "to declare in Zion the name of the Lord, and in Jerusalem his praise" (Ps 101:18-22), God was also creating a centrifugal force that would send his people as his witnesses to distant lands to declare his glory among the nations (Isa 66:18-19). God's "register of the nations" described in Psalm 87, includes those "who know me," born in foreign lands (v. 4). The nations include Babylon, Rehab (Egypt), and distant lands such as Tyre and Cush.[8] God's people were participants in his far-reaching mission to other lands.

Through Jeremiah, God urged the exiles to embrace the reality of their circumstances by settling down and making Babylon their home. God instructs them to "build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce" (Jer 29:5). The way in which God's people are instructed to "build" (בָּנָה) and "plant" (נָטַע) in the process of putting down roots in their new community could be defined as residential investment. Building houses and planting gardens added economic, aesthetic, and functional value to the community. In addition, Wright notes the instructions to "build" and "plant" reflect the priestly duties serving and keeping in relation to the tabernacle and temple.[9] Even in exile, God's people carried the functions of being a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:5-6). Gerald Keown, Pamela Scalise, and Thomas Smothers observe "build" and "plant" as "a small beginning of God's plan to build and plant nations and kingdoms." [10] Building houses and planting gardens were not merely functional tasks, but were sacred activities

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[7] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 290-91.

[8] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 488-91.

[9] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 415.

[10] Gerald Lynwood Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 27 (Waco, TX: Word, 1995), 71.

that would now take place in a foreign land, opening the way for the mission to the Gentiles as announced by Isaiah (Isa 42:1-9; 49:6; 51:4-6) and laying a foundation for the Jewish diaspora. [11]

Rather than taking a tenuous posture of focusing on mere survival, God instructs the exiles to "increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jer 29:6). The word "increase" (רבו) echoes the instructions given at creation (Gen 1:28) associated with flourishing life. Wright observes that Jeremiah 29:6 is also a clear echo of the Abrahamic covenant. God's people would not die out, but rather continue to thrive and increase in number, which fulfills the intentional echo of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:5; 22:17). Wright states, "The promise of God to Abraham [was] so foundational to their very existence. They need not fear, for God would uphold his covenant established with Abraham and carried on through his people, even in a foreign land."[12] God would surely bless his people in the midst of their residence in Babylon and use their presence to bless others.

The Abrahamic covenant is also echoed in God's instruction given to the exiles to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). Fretheim notes the word "welfare" (שָׁלֹום) communicates blessing as a comprehensive sense of well-being that touches every aspect of their lives. [13] God's instruction to "seek" (דְּרַשׁ) Babylon's welfare communicated both an intentional and continual action with priority.[14] R. E. Clements observes that the Babylonians allowed their deportees to remain in tightly-knit communities.[15] Therefore, God's people could have easily taken a posture of closing

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[11] Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 71.

[12] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 99.

[13] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 403.

[14] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), s.v. "דָּרַשׁ," Logos Bible Software.

[15] R. E. Clements *Jeremiah*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 171.

themselves off and focusing inward for survival rather than interacting with the city. Yet, God instructs his people to bless the city, and even pray for it. As Eldin Villafane notes, seeking the welfare of an urban area such as Babylon and the other cities in which God's people would find themselves required the "critical engagement" of presence rather than assimilation, revolution, or escapism.[16]

The influence and blessing of God's people must include prayer. Wright explains, "Prayer is a missional responsibility—always."[17] The instruction to pray to the Lord on behalf of Babylon (Jer 29:7) is a reflection of God's heart for the nations. Freitheim concurs, "Such prayers assume God desires to be present and active in a focused way in the lives of the exiles and in the lives of the Babylonians. This is the image of a Creator God who is active in the world even in the lives of people who do not acknowledge him as Lord."[18] Through the investment of prayer, God uses his people to influence and transform others. As Wright notes, "By seeking the welfare of Babylon and praying for it, they would not only be the *beneficiaries* of God's promise to Abraham, as they increased, but they would also be *agents* of God's promise to Abraham that through his descendants the nations would be blessed."[19] Israel not only had a promise of safety and flourishing for the future, but a mission for the present as a fulfillment of God's wider intentions among the nations. God maintained his mission through his people, even in exile, and enlisted their participation of blessing and prayer for influencing the nations.

God's people had been set apart in their national identity to influence the nations. In Exodus 19 God refers to the whole of Israel as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

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[16] Edlin Villafane, *Seek the Peace of City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

[17] Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 294.

[18] Fretheim, *Jeremiah,* 410.

[19] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 99-100.

To be holy (קָדוֹשׁ) meant to be different as "set apart" or "chosen."[20] In being set apart, Israel's values, conduct, and worship were different from the nations around them. Their national role and responsibilities as a kingdom of priests was defined by the religious and social role of the priests in Israel's context who stood as mediators between God and his people. Wright states, "The priesthood of the people of God is thus a missional function that stands in continuity with their Abrahamic election. . . . Just as Israel's priests were called and chosen to be the servants of God and his people, so Israel as a whole is called and chosen to be the servant of God and all peoples."[21] God's people are priests within the nation of Babylon, seeking its blessing and interceding on its behalf. God's people had been set apart or elected for God's purposes among the Babylonians and the nations. As Walter Kaiser observes, "Election was not a call to privilege but a choosing for service to God. As such, the priestly character of the nation of Israel came into view almost from the beginning of its existence as a nation. The people were God's ministers, his preachers, and his prophets to their own nation as well as to the other nations." [22] Israel's task as a nation was a mediatorial role, as God's people related to the nations and people groups around them.

A significant aspect of Israel's influence on Babylon and the nations was their posture toward their new neighbors. The Jews would certainly have had cause for combative attitudes and behavior toward Babylon as their aggressor and captor. Language is given to this perspective in Psalm 137, written as a community lament over their captivity in Babylon, with language describing their weeping, the approval of Babylon's destruction, and death of infants as repayment for what Babylon had done to God's people. Yet, as Daniel L. Smith explains, Jeremiah's instruction to "build houses, plant gardens,

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[20] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, "קָדוֹשׁ."

[21] Wright, *Mission of God*, 331.

[22] Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 14-15.

and give their sons and daughters in marriage" reflects God's instruction for war in Deuteronomy 20, where soldiers who had just built a home, planted a garden, or become engaged must not go to war.[23] Keown, Scalise, and Smothers note, "God instructs the exilic community to refrain from revolt against Babylon and invites them to invest their lives in a new realm of divine blessing for themselves and others."[24] Smith refers to the instructed posture as "nonviolent social resistance."[25] God's people are not to take a malicious or freedom-seeking position toward Babylon, as Hananiah advocated (Jer 28:10-14), but instead a position of concern for and influence upon the city that laid a foundation for future generations to be a light to the nations.

Through the Babylonian exile, God placed his people in position to influence the nations. In studies regarding the Jewish Diaspora in Greco-Roman Antiquity, scholars have widely observed that when permitted to return from Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus in 538 BC, many Jewish exiles remained voluntarily in Babylonia where Jewish communities continued to exist and flourish for centuries.[26] Jewish historian Josephus proposed that those in exile dispersed, eventually representing about 7 percent of the Roman Empire, noting Strabo wrote in AD 70 AD, "It is hard to find a single place on the habitable earth that has not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by it."[27] Rainer Riesner notes the evidence in antiquity of the Jewish religion, its strict monotheism, the possession of revelatory holy scriptures, and the stress on ethics within

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[23] Daniel L. Smith, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 59.

[24] Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 72.

[25] Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone, 1989), 132.

[26] Tessa Rajak, "The Jewish Diaspora in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *Interpretation* 72, no. 2 (2018): 149-50.

[27] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 7, quoted in Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 29-30,

Judaism exercised a considerable attraction to Gentiles in Hellenistic-Roman times.[28] Eckhard Schnabel concludes, "Israel has the function of a witness: being God's people is to witness, through word and deed, to the character and reality of YHWH."[29] This witness would have manifested in the diaspora. God's exilic dispersion of his people and their resulting influence played an important supporting role in laying the foundation for the global spread of the Early Church.

The spreading influence of God's people laid a foundation for the unfolding of the events of Pentecost in Acts 2 and the growth of the Early Church. The extent of Jewish settlements and others listed by Philo include many of the nations cited in Acts 2:9-11.[30] As Thomas Schreiner notes, the significance of the many languages spoken through the 120 believers in Acts 2:4 pertains to the gathering of the Jewish Diaspora and Gentile proselytes from a wide array of regions, who would have been present in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:9-11).[31] Hollis Read refers to the "remarkable concurrence of circumstances" that aligned the presence of representatives from so many nations on the day of Pentecost.[32] God's overarching mission through the Early Church is visible hundreds of years prior to its birth.

God displayed his universal sovereignty over history and mission to all nations through Israel's exile and the succeeding generations of his people. Wright states, "There was a future for the coming generation of God's people which (as we now know) would

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[28] Rainer Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 223-24.

[29] Eckhard Schnabel, "Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 1 (March 2002): 40.

[30] Rajak, "The Jewish Diaspora in Greco-Roman Antiquity," 150.

[31] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, Handbooks on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 12.

[32] Hollis Read, *The Hand of God in History: Divine Providence Illustrated in the Extension and Establishment of Christianity Throughout the World* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter, 1870), 18.

eventually be a future and a hope for the nations."[33] God's exilic dispersion of his people, their residential blessing, the manifestation of their witness and their resulting influence in the ancient world played an important role in laying the foundation for the spread of the Early Church. Through the salvific work of Christ and the later witness of his disciples, the church as God's people inherited and continued what God had begun through Abraham's family. The story of God's mission would continue to unfold as followers of Christ would bear witness to his life, death, and resurrection beginning in Jerusalem and spreading to the ends of the earth.

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**Disciples of Christ as Witnesses in the
Local Context (Acts 1:3-11)**

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Acts 1:3-11 communicates the mission of God to reach people through Spirit-empowered disciples who bear witness to the resurrection and lordship of Christ. This witness includes mission in the disciples' local contexts of Jerusalem and the Jewish homeland of Judea, then stretches to Samaria and the ends of the earth. By bearing witness to the risen Christ, Jesus's disciples invite both Jews and Gentiles into fulfillment of God's promises and ongoing participation in his kingdom.

Witnesses of Christ's Lordship

Jesus informs his followers they would be witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and moving out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This is a reiteration of Jesus's instructions given in Luke 24:47-49. As witnesses, the apostles and disciples after them were sent by Christ as his witnesses to proclaim the gospel of salvation through him. R. B. Rackham notes, "The apostles had simply to bear witness to the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord."[34] Their witness, as illustrated in Acts, communicates that the

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[33] Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 297.

[34] R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition*, 7th ed., Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen, 1916), 7.

gospel is meant for Jews and Gentiles, as the continuation of God's purpose in history. I. Howard Marshall concludes that Acts can be understood as "standing in continuity with the mighty acts of God recorded in the Old Testament and with the ministry of Jesus."[35] Acts portrays the mission of the church as flowing from the mission of God and the ministry of Christ for the unfolding story of salvation for the Jews and beyond.

At the core of their witness, Jesus's disciples give testimony of his resurrection from the dead. Luke, the author of Acts, intentionally notes that Jesus "presented himself alive to [the apostles] after his suffering by many proofs" (Acts 1:3). F. F. Bruce notes that "suffering" ($\pi\alpha\theta\epsilon\iota\nu$) is used absolutely to refer to Jesus's passion, which included death.[36] The resurrection of Christ is essential to the message and consequent transformation of his followers. The apostle Paul declared the centrality of Christ's resurrection when he stated, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain . . . because we testified about God that he raised Christ" (1 Cor 15:14-15). Keener notes the function of a witness ($\mu\alpha\rho\tau\nu\varsigma$) was connected to legal contexts where a witness was called upon to verify an account. Followers of Jesus served as witnesses by verifying they had seen the risen Christ, thus validating the gospel story, developing a divine Christology, and proclaiming forgiveness of sins and new life (Acts 2:22-39).[37]

As witnesses of Christ's lordship, his disciples are also witnesses of his kingdom. Jesus spoke often about the kingdom of God ($\beta\alpha\sigma\iota\lambda\epsilon\iota\alpha\varsigma$ $\tau\sigma\upsilon$ $\theta\epsilon\sigma\upsilon$) (Acts 1:3). The kingdom is understood not in a territorial sense, but in the sense of kingship, royal rule, and God's universal sovereignty. Bruce observes, "In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is represented as having 'drawn nigh' in the coming of Christ. In Acts,

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[35] I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 23.

[36] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1952), 67.

[37] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:694-97.

we find the Kingdom closely associated with the story of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and exaltation."[38] Therefore, when the disciples bore witness of Christ's lordship they were proclaiming "the good news of the Kingdom." Eckhard Schnabel identifies the important distinction that God's kingdom and membership in God's people were no longer dependent upon biological descent. The people of God's kingdom are constituted not by privilege of birth but by the reality of fruit, as taught by Jesus (Matt 3:8-10; 7:15-23; 12:39-42; 21:43).[39] This "witness" or "testimony" would have been familiar to Christian Jews as an echo of God's plan for his expanding kingdom delivered through Isaiah (Isa 43:10-12; 55:1-7; 56:3-8; 66:21). Marshall notes, "The Kingdom of God sums up the theme of Jesus's earthly ministry (Luke 4:43) and signifies the saving, sovereign action of God through him. This continues as the theme of the witness of the church."[40]

Not only would the disciples serve as witnesses of Jesus's death and resurrection, and heralds of his kingdom, but also witnesses of his ascension (πορευομαι) (Acts 1:10), which conveyed great eschatological implications because the angels instructed the apostles that Jesus would return in the same way (Acts 1:11). Earlier, the apostles asked Jesus when he would then restore the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6). Their question is only misunderstood in timing, not content. The ascension of Jesus is a guarantee he will return and fully restore the kingdom. The expectation of Christ's return (παρουσια) creates the foundation of hope and perspective on which the disciples are to act as witnesses of Jesus and frames the transition from Jesus's presence to the disciple's mission. David Peterson observes Jesus's ascension is essentially the transfer of prophetic

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[38] Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 67.

[39] Schnabel, "Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," 42-46.

[40] Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale), 57.

responsibility to the apostles as witnesses, with the promise of the Spirit's enabling power for the work of their witness.[41]

Empowered by the Spirit

What distinguishes the disciples of Jesus as witnesses is their direct and immediate testimony about Jesus, empowered by God's Spirit. The primary activity of the Spirit observed in Acts is the empowering of witnesses for the testimony they were commissioned to bear. Jesus informs his disciples they would receive power ($\delta \upsilon \nu \alpha \mu \iota \varsigma$) when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). This power was intended for the task of witnessing. Keener notes that Luke's pneumatology emphasizes the Spirit's empowering of the church for mission, as God's people are dependent upon his power to fulfill the tasks he assigns.[42] In fact, it was essential for the disciples to "wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). The disciples cannot attempt the mission in their own strength but are fully effective with the Spirit's working through them. R. F. O'Toole explains, "When the witnesses are persecuted, [the Spirit] encourages, supports, and protects. When they preach, he preaches; when they are heard, he is heard."[43]

The empowering of the Holy Spirit was promised first to the apostles, but the task of witness is not confined to them. Marshall notes that the personal experience of the living power of Christ entitled all believers to be regarded as witnesses. Therefore, the Spirit is continually active in the church.[44] Joseph Fitzmyer observes the continuing and active indwelling of the Spirit is supported by Jesus's promise, "surely I will be with you to the very end of the age (Matt 28:20)," and the outpouring of the Spirit which allowed

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[41] David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 101.

[42] Keener, *Acts,* 1:676, 689.

[43] R. F. O'Toole, "Activity of the Risen Jesus in Luke-Acts," *Biblica* 62, no. 2 (1981): 498.

[44] I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles,* New Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 59, 67.

later disciples to give testimony and "speak the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:29-31)."[45] Keener notes that while the witnesses specifically addressed in Acts 1:8 are the Twelve, their commission becomes paradigmatic for other, later witnesses. Acts 2:38-39 implies that all believers, including these later witnesses, are empowered by the Spirit to advance the mission of witnessing. The empowering of all believers is evidenced by the later accounts of "ordinary" disciples carrying out the Spirit-empowered tasks of preaching and evangelism (11:19-21), healing prayer (22:12), and speaking the Word of God (4:31).[46] C. K. Barrett notes the Holy Spirit is intended for the work of the church.[47] Amidst the changing of specific characters through the narrative of Acts, the theme of Spirit-empowered witnesses is the cohesive narrative of the Early Church. Osvaldo Padilla observes, "Luke presents early Christianity as inexorably moving forward in its mission of the gospel. This unstoppable surge can only occur because *God* is the ultimate source of the church."[48]

From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

According to Jesus's instructions, the first stage of the disciples' witness began in their local context of Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). Therefore, as the nascent church began in Jerusalem its first and natural mission was to its home city. James Scott observes the Spirit-impelled mission begins in Jerusalem and radiates outward in a geographic perspective relative to Jerusalem. Scott concludes, "Each movement outward, however,

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[45] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles,* The Anchor Bible, vol. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 205.

[46] Keener, *Acts*, 1:689.

[47] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary on the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1994), 78.

[48] Osvaldo Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 97.

also circles back to Jerusalem (Acts 12:25, 15:2, 19:21)."[49] By beginning in Jerusalem with the people of Israel, the Early Church was continuing the mission of Jesus. Just as the Spirit had empowered Jesus, it would empower the disciples to carry on the mission "to proclaim good news to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19)."[50] Jerusalem was not excluded from the Spirit-empowered mission of the church. Schnabel notes that Jesus's commission to go to "all nations" (παντα τα εθνη) in Matthew 28:19 clearly includes Israel: "The rejection of Jesus's message by the Jewish leaders does not mean the good news of God's kingdom can no longer be preached in Israel: The evangelistic ministry of the early Christian missionaries among Jews demonstrates how they understood the great commission."[51] James Dunn concurs that the hope and mission of Israel had not yet been completely fulfilled. Therefore, it was essential for the apostles to maintain the continuity of the mission by witnessing first in their local context of Jerusalem.[52]

J. W. Packer observes that while Jesus instructed his disciples to see all the world as their mission field, the mission begins at home in Jerusalem.[53] The city of Jerusalem and its surrounding Judean area is a familiar home for many of Jesus's first disciples. While a number of the apostles were originally from near the Galilean town of Bethsaida (Matt 4:18-22; John 1:43-44), they were well acquainted with Jerusalem.

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[49] James M. Scott, "Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations," in Adna and Kvalbein, *The Mission of the Early Church*, 99-101.

[50] Jesus read this passage of Isa 61:1-2 as a reference to his fulfillment of God's redemption of Israel.

[51] Schnabel, "Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," 47.

[52] James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 11.

[53] J. W. Packer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 22.

Jerusalem's common language and its ethnic and cultural dynamics were familiar through their frequent interactions with the city and their shared Jewish heritage. Adolf Harnack suggests the first disciples were aided in the task of witnessing by the common knowledge and worship of YHWH, providing foundation for faith in Christ through the language of the Hebrew Bible.[54] The disciples also had the aid of existing relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances in Jerusalem. These relationships are a pathway for communicating the witness of the risen Christ as Lord. J. D. Payne emphasizes when relationships are present, using them for sharing the gospel message with unreached people is an essential means of making new disciples and starting new churches, as illustrated repeatedly in Acts.[55]

However, the home context of Jerusalem and Judea also posed challenges to the disciples' witness. Jerusalem was the city that crucified Jesus. Israel had a history of false religious piety and tradition that had rejected Christ as the Messiah. Family and friends had known the disciples prior to their faith in Christ and might discredit their witness. Even Jesus struggled to do ministry in his own hometown (Mark 6:1-6). Beyond Judea was the task of witnessing in Samaria. The inclusion of Samaria marks a shift from primarily topographic to primarily cultural distinctions. However, these cultural challenges had proven to be overcome by Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well and the many others who came to believe from the Samaritan town of Sychar (John 4:1-42). Barrett observes that despite the challenges of ministering in their home context and engaging Samaritan culture, Jesus's disciples were a community that believed itself to be under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.[56] Jesus's disciples boldly

[54] Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffatt (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972), 9.

[55] J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 34-35.

[56] Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 74.

carried out his mission in their local context through the efficacy of their witness in the Spirit and the vibrancy of fellowship as the community of believers.

Jesus's instructions to be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) is a continuation of the mission in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and a commission for witness for later generations. Barrett observes, "The church from the beginning, though at the beginning located only in Jerusalem, is in principle a universal society."[57] Keener highlights the mission summarized in Acts 1:8 as representing the move "from heritage to mission." Keener continues, "Acts marks an obvious geographic shift from Jerusalem to Rome, theologically underlying the movement of the narrative."[58] The focus shifts from Israel's promised savior to the Gentile mission. Schreiner observes Jesus's unique fulfillment as the Lord's servant in Isaiah's prophecy to not only restore Israel, but be a light to the nations that the Lord's salvation may reach the end of the earth (Isa 49:6) and notes the restored Israel includes gentiles.[59] The grafting of gentile Christians through the growing church (Rom 11:17-24) was part of Israel's restoration and the expanding witness.

Jesus's instructions to his disciples set the mission of witnessing on a global trajectory by instilling in them the ability to witness in any context. This trajectory is seen in the unfolding of the narrative of Acts. Bruce observes the whole of Acts 1:8, including the promise of the Spirit, the gift of power, and the geographical instructions, forms a summary of the narrative of Acts.[60] Marshall similarly identifies the primary narrative of witness in Jerusalem in Acts 1:1-5:42, witness in Judea and Samaria in Acts 6:1-11:18,

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[57] Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 108.

[58] Keener, *Acts*, 1:697.

[59] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 8-9.

[60] Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 71.

and witness to the ends of the earth in Acts 11:19-28:31.[61] However, the task of witnessing was not fulfilled at the end of Acts. Marshall proposes, "While some have thought *to the ends of the earth* designates Rome, it is much more probable it has a wider sense. The end of Acts does not mark the completion of the task, but simply the completion of the first phase."[62] Keener agrees that Paul's ministry in Rome does not exhaust the gentile mission, nor the "ends of the earth." Instead, "it predicts this mission's completion in a proleptic way."[63] The world-wide mission established in Acts 1:3-11 is possible by linking the power of the Holy Spirit with the task of witnessing.

God's mission to use his people as witnesses in their local communities and then to specifically be witnesses of Christ laid the foundation for the news to spread throughout the world. The witness of Jesus's disciples established a paradigm for the spread and growth of the church. As churches grew and multiplied, gatherings of witnesses formed in various cities and regions like Thessalonica where new believers joined the mission and the Word of the Lord sounded forth to reach the unreached.

The Local Church as Agent for Transformation
(1 Thess 1:1-10)

First Thessalonians 1:1-10 exhibits the transformational power of a community of believers on mission to bear witness with a gospel perspective. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church, he recognizes the visible effects of their faith, their missional motivation, and their witness to gospel-powered transformation. In the midst of their persecution, Paul encourages the Thessalonian Christians to endure in their faith and witness by pointing out their clear election by God (1:4) and testifying to the power of their changed lives as a witness spreading to other communities (1:7-9).

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[61] Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (NT Guide), 21.

[62] Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale), 61.

[63] Keener, *Acts,* 1:703.

**Missional Church in the
Thessalonian Context**

Acts 17:1-9 describes Paul's brief yet turbulent visit to Thessalonica. Upon

entering the city, Paul spent three sabbath days teaching and reasoning in the local Jewish

synagogue. While Paul and Silas were successful in persuading some Jews and a great

number of Gentiles to acknowledge the Christ, including some women of high status, they

were quickly met with effective and violent opposition. While Paul and Silas escaped the

city in time, Jason and other new followers of Christ in Thessalonica suffered at the hands

of the angry mob. After only a few short weeks, Paul was ejected from Thessalonica,

with no prospect of returning in person to the nascent gathering of Christians in the city.

Gary Shogren notes how Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians was written in the midst

of this grave predicament:

> The apostles had been thrown out of town and were banned from returning. . . . Now,
> how could they keep in touch with their newly planted church? In the case of these
> letters, there were exceptional circumstances: the church was only a few months
> old; it was undergoing fierce harassment; persecution had cut off their lines of
> communication to the apostles; Satan himself was conspiring to keep the apostles
> and the church apart. The Thessalonian church urgently needed a word of
> encouragement from its founders.[64]

This environment of persecution and uncertainty is the context which precipitated Paul's

letter. In fact, Charles Cousar observes persecution as a continuing theme throughout

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church.[65] Jeffrey Weima points to 1 Thessalonians

1:2-10 as the "thanksgiving" section of the letter, which communicates the letter's major

themes of endurance and witness.[66] God was at work through the church in Thessalonica.

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[64] Gary Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New
Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 17.

[65] Charles Cousar identifies the Greek noun θλιψις translated "affliction" or "persecution"
along with its cognate verbal form θλιψω appear four times in 1 Thess (1:6, 3:3, 4, 7). Charles B. Cousar,
Reading Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary (Macon,
GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 200.

[66] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New
Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 73.

Paul and his writing companions knew the Thessalonian converts would be exposed to persecution of one sort or another. As Bruce notes, persecution would come upon the believers in the form of mockery at the least and physical violence at the worst. Paul wondered how the new believers would stand up under such opposition. Bruce envisions, "The missionaries could hope that the memory of their preaching and the impact of their personal example would help the converts to stand firm."[67]

Jeffrey Weima captures the many challenges Thessalonica posed to the newly-formed church. As home to many different cults and religions, including the great popularity of various mystery religions, Thessalonica was a religiously pluralistic environment, creating many competitors to the Christ proclaimed by Paul.[68] However, Bruce suggests that the greatest threat to the Thessalonian Church came in the charge of subversion. The arraignment brought against Jason and the brothers in Acts 17:6-7 implies subversive or seditious activity. These men were proclaiming a rival emperor: Jesus. Putting forward a rival to the emperor in Rome was a dangerous and punishable act.[69] Schreiner notes, "Christians were a distinct minority, and both 1 and 2 Thessalonians portrays the minority status reflected in the persecution the believers encountered."[70] Persecution was a common experience for the Thessalonian believers, as they experienced pressure and opposition from surrounding idol culture, Judaism (1 Thess 2:14-15) and the Roman civil authorities. Yet, Schreiner notes, "The vibrancy and authenticity of their faith could not be denied, for they endured persecution joyfully."[71]

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[67] F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 45 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 20.

[68] Jeffery A. D. Weima, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 4-5.

[69] Weima, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, 4-5.

[70] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 339.

[71] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 340.

In the midst of persecution and pressure the Thessalonian church displayed great courage and witness as they modeled the faith of the apostles and served as a model for other followers of Christ (1:7). The church embodied the core characteristics of a missional community as they labored for the gospel, explicitly displaying their faith and witnessing to the Christ's lordship. Their missional DNA is observed in their motivation for ministry, experience of the gospel's power, visible and transforming faith, explicit witness, and gospel perspective. These missional characteristics were fundamental to the spreading of the gospel in Thessalonica and beyond.

Missional Motivation

The Thessalonian believers exhibited a missional motivation for their labor, evangelism, and sacrifice. Paul recognized the motivation of the new believers in his letter to them. After the initial greeting, Paul begins the introduction: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2-3). Shogren notes the "three Christian activities: work, labor, and endurance [steadfastness], which are inspired by the three divine graces of faith, love, and hope."[72] The difficult aspects of ministry were motivated by a deep connection to Christ as Lord and redeemer. As Bruce observes, the phrase "of our Lord Jesus Christ" (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), which ties together and gives motivation to the Thessalonians' work, labor, and patient hope, is objective genitive after "of hope" (ἐλπίδος).[73] It is in Christ that his people find hope, and their hope will be fully realized at his return. The Thessalonians' hard work and sacrifice was worth pursuing and glorifying Christ.

Missional motivation is a central theme throughout Paul's first and second letters to the Thessalonian church. While Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 speak

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[72] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 51.

[73] Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 12.

most explicitly about labor, suffering, and steadfastness in humility, it is a reoccurring theme throughout both letters (1 Thess 3:1-5; 4:9-12; 5:12-14; 2 Thess 1:3-4). Andy Johnson observes the terms "work" (ἔργον) and "labor" (κόπος) connote low-status activity, reflecting a pattern of life that is burdensome because they require exertion and hardship. Johnson observes the theme throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians in such exertion and hardship which is depicted as having "a cruciform character, that is, as laborious activity connected with proclaiming and embodying the gospel for the sake of others."[74] The Thessalonians were motivated to become like Christ in their ministry to one another and those outside the church.

The Thessalonians also modeled and shared in the missional motivation of those who brought the gospel message to them. Paul and the other missionaries came to Thessalonica with the evangelistic motive of proclaiming Jesus as Christ (Acts 17:3). Therefore, as Paul observed, the Thessalonian believers "became imitators" of the missionaries (1 Thess 1:6-7). James Ware notes the language of imitation and modeling faith in 1:6-8 as an indicator that the Thessalonians "imitated that which evangelistic Christians like Paul, Silas, and Timothy were doing" and were thus motivated and inspired by the same goal of evangelism.[75]

Experience of the Gospel's Power

The Thessalonians experienced the transforming power of the gospel as both recipients and agents of transformation. Paul declares, "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). Paul points to the visible evidence of the actions of ministry (1:3), imitation (1:6), declaring the Word of the Lord (1:8), and turning (1:9) of their conversion and experience of the

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[74] Andy Johnson, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The Two Horizon New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 39.

[75] James P. Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation: 1 Thessalonians 1, 5–8," *Zeitschrift Neutestamentlicche Wissenscchaft* 83, nos. 1-2 (1992): 127.

Holy Spirit. Shogren notes, "The changed lives of the Thessalonians are the most effective proof that the Spirit has worked in them—no one saw the Spirit, but the effects of his presence are obvious."[76] Paul also affirms the experience of God's power through highlighting the coming of the gospel to the Thessalonians with "full conviction" (πληροφορία πολλῇ), referring to the truth of the gospel's message. Bruce notes the conviction of the Thessalonians was deeply seeded and long-lasting as opposed to "temporary persuasion produced by the spectacular or based on sensation."[77]

The gospel and its proclamation through the Holy Spirit are often associated with power (δύναμις) in the New Testament (Acts 1:8; Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:18). Shogren notes the "power" described in 1:5 could be the "efficacious message" of the gospel message that powerfully changed lives or "the powerful miraculous deeds that confirmed the message."[78] As Williams states, whether illustrated in the "power" of the Spirit through "signs, wonders and various miracles" (Heb 2:4; 2 Cor 12:12) or through the visibly changed lives of the Thessalonians, the power of the Holy Spirit was at work.[79] The gospel's power characterized the missional identity of the Thessalonian church and its posture toward the community around it.

Visible Faith through Life Change

Paul describes the visible faith of the Thessalonians by noting their tangible acts (1:3), stating how they "became an example to all the believers" (1:7) and recalling how they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9). As Shogren observes, the expressions of "faith," "love," and "hope" are not merely inward

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[76] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 63.

[77] Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 14.

[78] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 63.

[79] David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 29.

invisible attitudes or inward qualities with no bearing on daily activities, but "are vibrant realities that express themselves visibly."[80] Ware notes the significance of how the Thessalonian believers became an "example" (τύπον) for others by virtue of the fact they so quickly received the word of the Lord and in turn it sounded forth from them.[81]

The visibility of the Thessalonians' faith was also manifested in their acts of repentance, as noted in how they turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1:9). As Weima notes, Paul's language of repentance and life change conveyed by the words "turn" (ἐπιστρέφω), "serve" (δουλεύω), and "the living and true God" (ζάω καί ἀληθινός θεός) reflect powerful meaning from the Old Testament for making a decisive turn to the monotheistic worship of God alone in total worship. The turning of the Thessalonians to God was a fulfillment of the echo of God's call for Israel to turn back to him.[82] Bruce suggests that turning from idols was the experience for many new believers. Idol worship was such a core aspect of culture, and the abandonment of these practices would have made a stark difference in someone's visible life.[83]

The visible faith of the Thessalonians was an example to other believers (1:7). As Shogren observes, after receiving the Word and becoming imitators of Christ (1:6), the Thessalonian believers "quickly become the caliber of Christian that others could imitate; they 'became the pattern' for other believers in the region. It was natural for the Thessalonians to be examples of gospel life, once they had truly received it."[84] The power of the Thessalonians' example is affirmed in its own right with Paul's statement marked with the qualifier "so that" (ὥστε) Paul did not need to say anything (1:8). Weima

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[80] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 59.

[81] Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation," 126-31.

[82] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "1-2 Thessalonians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 872.

[83] F. F. Bruce, *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 247.

[84] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 51.

notes that the function of Paul's thanksgiving in verses 2-10 was not only a pastoral function of reestablishing his relationship with the Thessalonian believers and encouraging them, but also a paraenetic function as a challenge for the readers to live up to the praise he is giving them and their growing reputation as examples.[85]

Explicit Witness

One characteristic that defined the Thessalonian church as missional was their explicit witness of the gospel. The Thessalonians did not stop at merely receiving the gospel message and becoming imitators of the letter's authors and ultimately Christ (1:5-6), but quickly replicated a witness and pattern of life for other followers of Christ to observe (1:7). Ware states, "The Thessalonians not only received the apostle's message, but were also themselves active in communicating it to others."[86] This process of receiving, accepting, and passing on the gospel fueled its quick spread in a matter of only months.

The explicit witness of the Thessalonian believers is captured in Paul's description of how "the word of the Lord sounded forth" from them (1:8). Shogren proposes "the word of the Lord" is a traditional label for the gospel message about Jesus.[87] This is supported by Ware, who argues that the New Testament use of "word of the Lord" or "word of God" refers to the active transmission of the gospel. Thus, the reception of the Word of God by the Thessalonian believers occurred "in such a way it did not stop with them, but continued to sound forth from them, by virtue of its own inherent power."[88] The description that the gospel message "sounded forth" (ἐξήχηται) is the perfect indicative of ἐξηχέω, suggesting an echo like thunder or sounding out as a

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[85] Weima, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 9.

[86] Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation," 127.

[87] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 68.

[88] Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation," 130.

trumpet.[89] Marshall notes that ἐξηχέω conveys a dynamic evangelistic mission of conveying the gospel message to the unreached: "It cannot be doubted that early Christianity was a missionary movement and that evangelism was practiced. The church could not have spread and grown in the way it did purely spontaneously without the gospel being deliberately communicated to those who had not yet heard it."[90] The message of Jesus was clearly and loudly communicated in such a way that it reached out beyond the city of Thessalonica itself to the point the reputation of their faith required no comment or defense by Paul, but spoke for itself (1:8).

Thessalonica's religious environment and geographic location was positioned for the message to ring out from the believers within the city and even to other cities. As Schriener observes, Thessalonica was a well-populated city of influence and transit as Macedonia's capital along the *Via Egnatia* and with a harbor on the Aegean Sea. Like many of the urban centers where Paul's church plants grew, Thessalonica had potential for great influence and movement of the gospel message.[91] In addition, the pluralistic religious setting created an opportunity to witness against the false gods. The turning of the Thessalonians from idols to serve "the living in true God" was a bold statement of witness in the midst of an idol-worshipping society. John Calvin notes, "The Apostle, in ascribing to God the epithets true and living, indirectly censures idols as being dead and worthless inventions, and as being falsely call gods."[92] The Thessalonians had the

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[89] Cleon Rogers, Jr., and Cleon Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 472.

[90] I. Howard Marshall, "Who Were the Evangelists," in Adna and Kvalbein, *The Mission of the Early Church*, 252-59.

[91] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 339.

[92] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: T. Constable Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 245.

opportunity to bear witness to the one true God and the risen Christ, serving as a light in the midst of darkness and spurring on the lights of others.

Gospel Perspective

The Thessalonian church, under Paul's instruction and influence, exhibits a gospel perspective toward life and ministry that fueled and maintained their missional identity. Angus Paddison observes, "Paul's words are the words of an apostle aware that God in Christ's revelation is the ultimate authority."[93] The gospel perspective of the Thessalonians edifies the active work of the Christ's church. David Williams highlights the unique introduction Paul uses in addressing the Thessalonian believers as being "in [ἐν] God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," which denotes their unique relationship and belonging to God. This powerful image of the church brought into being by God gave them a perspective and sustained them in the midst of a hostile and challenging environment.[94] Despite the chaos and unrest that occurred outside the church and sought to destroy it, the church was firmly held by God.[95] Wayne Meeks notes the term "chosen" also served to help create the collective identity of the believers in developing a unique culture as they identified themselves as a group or movement.[96] The unifying force of shared faith and new identity also served to overcome otherwise distinct separations. Bruce notes that the "church of the Thessalonians" (ἐκκλησία Θεσσαλονικέων) as a church of the New Testament age "has no national frontiers; it

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[93] Angus Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics and 1 Thessalonians*, Society for New Testament Studies: Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2005), 62.

[94] Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 23.

[95] Paul reaffirms their status of belonging in 1:4: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you."

[96] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 85-86.

comprises Jewish and Gentile believers without distinction."[97] The gospel perspective brings together people from across ethnic, national, and social distinctions and unifies them under the Lordship of Christ as a part of his church.

The gospel perspective of the Thessalonians is a sacrificial perspective. Shogren observes how the Thessalonians had passed through extraordinary opposition and testing, thus elevating their labor of love. Jason or others who had to post bail or experienced a loss of income because of their faith may have been laboring simply to survive.[98] Yet the Thessalonian believers maintained a spirit of sacrificial love, fueled by their missional perspective to show love, bearing witness to Christ and their hope in him. Richard Ascough proposes the triad of "faith," "hope," and "love" and their prompting of "work," "labor," and "steadfastness" reflect the corporate values of the Thessalonians, which underlines the strength of their commitment to the Christian life.[99] The gospel perspective inspired the believers to work hard and sacrifice in ministry.

The Thessalonian believers also display a sacrificial gospel perspective as they "received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1:7). Despite their suffering, they had "received" or "welcomed" (δέχομαι) the gospel message. Williams identifies the juxtaposition of suffering and joy in 1 Thessalonians 1, noting that joy is the distinguishing mark of the Christians because the basis of this joy is found in God.[100]

The gospel perspective of the Thessalonians is an eternal perspective. The eternal perspective of the Thessalonian believers was visible to Paul as he clearly points out their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus" (1:3). The Thessalonians understood their work and labor in an eternal perspective. While

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[97] Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 7.

[98] Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 60.

[99] Richard Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associates*: *The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 169-71.

[100] Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 31.

the work of faith and labor of loving others was challenging, they were worthwhile tasks in light of the hope found in Christ. Williams concludes the steadfastness (ὑπομονή) of the Thessalonians characterizes those who are unswerving in purpose; not as a passive virtue but an active and trusting endurance. Williams maintains that the endurance of the Thessalonians was "rooted in both the past and present" and sprang from their "consciousness of the grace of God in Christ that enfolded them and sustained them for what still lay ahead."[101]

The Thessalonians' eternal perspective is also exhibited in their active waiting for Jesus (1:10). The Thessalonians exhibited amazing faith amidst their challenging context, as Paul encouraged them to wait expectantly for Jesus's appearance. Their gospel perspective enabled them to see beyond their immediate circumstances to see eternal hope. Calvin reflects on the Thessalonian perspective described in 1:10:

> For as it is only confidence in the Divine goodness that induces us to serve God, so it is only the expectation of final redemption that keeps us from giving way. Let everyone, therefore, that would persevere in a course of holy life, apply this whole mind to an expectation of Christ's coming. It is also worthy of notice, that he uses the "waiting for Christ", instead of the hope of everlasting salvation. For, unquestionably, without Christ we are ruined and thrown into despair, but when Christ shews himself, life and prosperity do at the same time shine upon us.[102]

Schreiner agrees, writing, "The Thessalonians were not only serving the true God, but they had put their hope entirely in him, and thus they were longing and waiting for the return of his Son, Jesus Christ."[103] Reflecting on the Thessalonian perspective, Craig Keener concludes, "Jesus's resurrection was the advance installment of the resurrection of all the righteous dead at the end of the age."[104]

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[101] Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 27.

[102] Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 246.

[103] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 341.

[104] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 585.

The gospel perspective is a missional perspective. For the Thessalonians, the mission of witnessing remained at the forefront of their lives. They received the gospel from Paul and his companions and immediately began showing and sharing the gospel through their words and lifestyle (1:8). Kane notes, "The presence of God's people in the world is a witness to the one true God."[105] The presence of the Thessalonian believers (1:6-7) opened the door for proclamation of "the word of the Lord" (1:8). As Johnson notes, Paul's language of "work" and "labor," "imitation" and "turning," portrays the Thessalonian audience "right up front as engaging in a pattern of life in which they are participants in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God."[106]

The Thessalonians considered themselves to be missionaries and intentionally sought to reach and disciple those living in their local context of Thessalonica in such a powerful manner that even those outside their local context in Macedonia and Achaia observed it (1:7). The Thessalonians' missional perspective, grounded in the Word of the Lord, allowed them to work diligently, love selflessly, and remain steadfast, despite much affliction in representing the risen Christ.

While the transmission of the gospel message was rapid in Thessalonica and moving outward, at the core of the movement was the explicit communication of the message and model of transformed lives provided from one person to another. This model of discipleship from one person to another through bearing witness to Christ and laboring to invest in the lives of others is observed elsewhere in the New Testament and especially though Paul's discipling relationships with churches and individuals.

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[105] Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective*, 25-26.

[106] Johnson, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 39.

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A Pattern of Gospel Witness One Person
to Another (2 Tim 2:1-2)

Second Timothy 2:1-2 provides an example of a life-on-life discipling relationship that encourages the passing on of faith to future generations. In Paul's second personalized letter to his disciple Timothy, he encourages Timothy to remain strong in his commitment to faith and to take what he has learned and entrust it to the next generation of disciple makers. By taking the "deposit" of the gospel invested in him and entrusting it to faithful men who will teach it to others, Timothy would establish and carry on a pattern of discipleship for successive generations.

Paul writes to Timothy, speaking encouragement and Christ-centered perspective into his individual life and exhorting him to speak into the lives of others. Paul states, "You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:1-2). C. K. Barrett identifies 2 Timothy 2:1-2 as the beginning of Paul's charge to boldly face opposition and carry on the ministry of the church.[107]

John Stott notes the harsh environment in which Paul wrote to Timothy. The emperor Nero was determined to destroy the Christian church, many believers in Asia had turned away from Paul's teachings (2 Tim 1:15), and there was a battle for truth as Christianity seemed to be on the verge of destruction.[108] Harnack describes the "sound teaching" identified and exhorted by Paul in the Pastoral Epistles is the orthodox doctrine which is in stark contrast with the common place words of heretics, which is said to spread and eat "like a gangrene" (2 Tim 2:16-17).[109] The first portion of Paul's letter to Timothy ends with Paul's heart-breaking awareness of the turning of believers in Asia

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[107] C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 36.

[108] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy: Guard the Gospel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP: 1973), 21

[109] Harnack *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, 113-14.

away from him and his witness to the gospel (2 Tim 1:15). Barrett observes a sense of urgency as Paul instructs Timothy toward strict discipline and opposition to the prevalence of error and wickedness threatening the church. Therefore, above all, it is imperative that Timothy should do the work of an evangelist.[110]

As Paul comes to the end of his life, he urges Timothy to take the "deposit" of the gospel invested in him and entrust it to faithful men who will intentionally teach it to others who will carry on the pattern of discipleship. Paul's final letter to Timothy was genuine and timely. Stott poetically describes,

> We imagine the apostle "Paul the aged," languishing in some dark, dank dungeon in Rome, from which there is to be no escape but death. His own apostolic labours are over. "I have finished the race," he can say. But now he must make provision for the faith he has done, and especially for its transmission (uncontaminated, unalloyed) to future generations. So he sends Timothy this most solemn charge. He is to preserve what he has received, at whatever cost, and to hand it on to faithful men who in their turn will be able to teach others also.[111]

Paul charges Timothy to continue a legacy of discipleship. Schreiner observes, "Now that Paul is going to be with the Lord, Timothy must take up the challenge and pass on the gospel to those who are reliable and trustworthy [who] will pass on the faith to others. Faithful teaching will produce new links in the chain generation after generation!"[112] Paul confidently entrusted the transmission of the gospel to future generations.

Personal Encouragement for Ministry

Paul urges Timothy to stand firm in the midst of the landslide of apostasy and false teaching around him. Stott notes the repeated use of the phrase σὺ οὖν or σὺ δὲ in Paul's letter to communicate "you then" (2:1), "you, however" (3:10), and "but as for you" (3:14, 4:5), which summon Timothy to stand in contrast to the surrounding

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[110] Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 100.

[111] Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* 13.

[112] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 400.

environment and resist the prevailing mood.[113] Craig Smith observes, "Throughout 2 Timothy, Paul is concerned that Timothy overthrow the influence of the false teachers by his teaching and lifestyle (2 Tim 2:2, 15-19, 24-26; 3:6-9, 13-17)."[114] A combined approach of teaching and living out the content of the teaching was essential to overcoming false teaching. Stott conveys, "It was as if Paul was saying 'Never mind what other people may be thinking or saying or doing. As for you, Timothy, be strong.'"[115] Gordon Fee agrees that the emphatic "you then" is intended to contrast Phygelus, Hermogenes, and the others in Asia who had turned away from Paul (2 Tim 1:15) and communicate the urgency that Timothy fulfill his essential role of holding to the gospel and the ministry of entrusting it to others.[116]

Timothy needed a source of strength to stand against opposition and entrust the gospel to future generations. Paul instructs Timothy, "be strengthened" (ἐνδυναμόω). This reassurance, given in the present, imperfect, passive voice,[117] is an encouragement from Paul to "become strong and empowered" for the task.[118] Fee notes that the passive voice implies Timothy is being strengthened by God.[119] Robert Gundry agrees and adds, "The present command to 'be getting strengthened' looks to God as the source of power through his Spirit for guarding the gospel from misrepresentation by false teaching and

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[113] Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* 49.

[114] Craig A. Smith, *Timothy's Task, Paul's Prospect: A New Reading of 2 Timothy*, New Testament Monographs 12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 184.

[115] Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* 49.

[116] Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 239.

[117] Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key*, 501.

[118] Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 263.

[119] Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 239.

bad behavior."[120] Timothy needs the continual process of being strengthened in his

present situation, but the strength originates in God and is given as grace in Christ Jesus.

As Schreiner observes, Timothy "needs the strength and the grace that is in Christ (2 Tim

2:2). The task is too great for Timothy, so divine enabling is needed."[121]

Paul connects Timothy's calling and the calling of all disciples to "the grace

that is in Christ Jesus" (2:1). Paul reminds Timothy to find the source of his strength for

ministry not in his own nature but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. C. Michael Moss

notes that Timothy's strength for ministry is found in the power of grace "located

squarely 'in Christ Jesus.' In fellowship with Jesus one finds grace."[122] Paul understands

the challenging environment where Timothy is carrying out his pastoral duties and

implores him to anchor himself in the grace found in Christ Jesus. Stott notes, "It is not

only for salvation that we are dependent on grace (1:9), but for service also."[123] In

reference to 2:1, Fee adds, "Grace is the means by which we are saved and by which we

are enabled to walk in God's will, [and] that same grace is the sphere in which all of the

Christian life is lived."[124] Christ is central to a stable and long-lasting ministry.

One essential perspective for understanding Paul's instructions to Timothy is

the depth of their relationship. Luke Timothy Johnson observes,

> This is not the official correspondence of a founder to his church but the personal, indeed poignant, communication from a spiritual father to one he calls "beloved child" (1:2). The text of the letter is interlaced with allusions to share perceptions, values, and even desires. Paul holds Timothy close to him in memory (1:3) as one who knows his family history (1:5; 3:15). They share knowledge (1:15), past

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[120] Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse by Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 852.

[121] Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 400.

[122] C. Michael Moss, *1, 2 Timothy & Titus*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 204.

[123] Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 50.

[124] Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 240.

experiences (1:13, 2:2) and present troubles (1:14-15). Much between them need not be spelled out but only referenced.[125]

Paul's instructions to Timothy occur within the context of a deeply personal mentoring relationship. Timothy had traveled with Paul, witnessing his ministry, participating with him, and ministering on Paul's behalf (Acts 16:1-3; 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4). Paul had discipled Timothy through seasons of life and ministry transitions. Smith notes that Paul's use of "you" in 2 Timothy 2:1 is an intensive form of the personal pronoun which combines with "my child" to emphasize the intimacy of their teacher/student relationship.[126] For Timothy, Paul was more than a teacher, but a father figure.

The Good Deposit

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he entreats him to "guard the deposit entrusted to you" (1 Tim 6:20), referring to the precious gospel Timothy was now committed to preserving and passing on.[127] The deposit which Paul entrusts to Timothy consisted of years of instruction and modeling faith. Paul stated, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men" (2:2). Paul's deposit becomes Timothy's deposit, and what had been entrusted to Paul (1 Tim 1:11) and then to Timothy (1 Tim 6:20, 2 Tim 1:14) is now to be entrusted by Timothy to faithful men who will go on to teach others (2 Tim 2:2). Paul was persuaded that Christ would himself keep it safe "until that Day" when Paul would give an account of his stewardship. What Christ had entrusted to Paul, Paul was now entrusting to Timothy, who would be sustained by the same assurance. Stott declares, "There is great encouragement here. Ultimately, it is God

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[125] Luke Timothy Johnson, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 11.

[126] Craig A. Smith, *2 Timothy*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016), 54.

[127] The theme of guarding the gospel deposit entrusted to Timothy is revisited and affirmed by Paul in 2 Tim 1:8-14 in which Paul instructs Timothy: "Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in the suffering for the gospel by the power of God. . . . Follow the pattern of the of the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."

himself who is the guarantor of the gospel."[128] Therefore, what Christ had entrusted to Paul and Paul to Timothy would be guaranteed by God to successfully be entrusted to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2).

Paul invested the "deposit" of the gospel into Timothy by allowing Timothy to see his personal life and faith. Stott notes, "The deposit consists of certain 'sound words' (1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13) which Timothy had heard from Paul's own lips."[129] The communication from Paul had been personal and direct over the years. Stott observes that Paul's use of the aorist tense of "what you have heard" (ἃ ἤκουσας) in 2 Timothy 2:2 "seems to refer not to a single public occasion on which Timothy heard his teaching, but rather to the totality of his instruction over the years."[130] The deposit was not merely the content of a single sermon or teaching cumulative lessons and teachings.

Timothy had years of observation and experience from Paul's life upon which to reflect. Paul later writes in his letter to Timothy, "You, however, have followed my teaching, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me" (2 Tim 3:10-11). Timothy had witnessed and participated in Paul's ministry firsthand. The real experiences of sacrifice, breakthroughs, persecutions, and sufferings exposed Paul's authentic faith. Johnson notes that when Paul includes "my teaching, my conduct, my aim of life," he joins "three interrelated aspects of the philosopher's mission: what he teaches, how he lives it, and his intentions." Paul alludes to his entire way of life and exemplifies the inner qualities appropriate to be the "Lord's servant."[131] Timothy had seen Paul's faith and how God

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128 Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 46-47.

129 Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 50.

130 Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 50.

131 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 417.

had been faithful. Paul can state confidently that Timothy had seen his ministry at every level and witnessed God's faithfulness through persecution (2 Tim 3:11).

Paul exhorted Timothy to do more than hold the faith and guard the deposit (2 Tim 1:13-14); he is also to entrust it to others. As Stott observes, the gospel was now committed to Timothy: "It was now his turn to assume responsibility for it, to preach and teach it, to defend it against attack and against falsification, and to ensure its accurate transmission to the generations yet to come."[132] Keener highlights the common practice of passing on traditions and ideas among Jewish rabbis and Greek philosophical schools.[133] However, Paul's passing of the gospel to Timothy differs from Jewish rabbis and Greek philosophers because Paul clearly states the gospel was passed to him by Christ himself (Gal 1:11-12; 2 Tim 1:12) and thus is timeless and unaltered by generations.

Life-on-Life Discipleship

In the midst of challenging ministry environments, the most powerful and effective means of entrusting the gospel is personally passing it from one person to another. The journey of one disciple of Jesus making a disciple and training him up to disciple others, as Paul did with Timothy, is life-on-life discipleship. Paul invested deeply and personally in Timothy and now asks Timothy to do the same. Barrett observes, "The truth of the gospel has been committed by Paul to Timothy; in the same way Timothy must hand it on to others. . . . It is by the divine word, the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, that the church lives, hence [Paul's] care that the word should be passed on."[134] Paul participates in life-on-life discipleship by allowing Timothy to witness his life, entrusting the gospel to Timothy, and instructing him to do likewise.

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[132] Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 21.

[133] Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 626.

[134] Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 100.

A crucial component of life-on-life discipleship by passing on the gospel to the next generation of disciples is identifying those who will be discipled. Timothy is to "entrust" what he has "heard" from Paul to "faithful men" (2 Tim 2:2). Moss notes the verb "entrust" (παρατίθημι) is closely related to the noun "deposit" (παραθήκη), as seen in 2 Timothy 1:14. Therefore, as Moss states, "Timothy is to see the gospel as a sacred trust which must be passed on."[135] Timothy is responsible not only for the content of what is being entrusted but also the selection of who this deposit will be entrusted to. As Smith observes, Paul's exhortation to Timothy to find faithful (πιστός) men whose character is not only one of faith in God but also "reliable."[136] Timothy must discern who will be faithful to the gospel as well as capable of communicating it and fostering growth in others. The disciples must be capable of discipling others through their ability "to teach" (διδάσκω), in contrast to merely telling (2 Tim 2:2). Johnson notes the use of the future "will be" (ἔσονται) makes clear that the personal character of being faithful is not the same as the skill or ability to teach others; for that task, the people need to be "competent" (ἱκανοί).[137] The next generation of disciple-makers must be both well-taught and competent to teach others. Paul's implied emphasis on teaching as ongoing instruction within the discipleship process echoes Jesus's inclusion of teaching in his command to go and make disciples (Matt 28:19-20). Timothy must discern those men who will be both reliable in character and competent teachers.

Paul's commission to Timothy to discern "faithful men" in which to entrust the gospel is an indiscriminatory process. Paul uses the word "who" (ὅστις), which is a relative pronoun referring to an indefinite entity, event, or state—"whoever, whichever,

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[135] Moss, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, 204.

[136] Smith, *2 Timothy*, 57.

[137] Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 365.

whatever."[138] Paul has no prejudice or preconceived ideas of who the faithful men would be. The only qualifying prescription for being faithful is the ability to faithfully and reliably reach and teach others as he had been discipled. Similar non-biased language is used by Jesus—"Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:50)—and by Paul, quoting the prophet Joel—"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32; Rom 10:13). Therefore, anyone who would faithfully entrust the deposit of the gospel into the lives of others through teaching was a prime candidate, regardless of ethnicity or social standing. As Fee observes, "The emphasis is on their reliable character, not their status."[139] This non-discriminating passing of gospel truth from one person and generation to another enabled the church to cross social, cultural, generational, ethnic, and geographic boundaries, as exhibited throughout the narrative of Acts. The life-on-life discipleship approach advocated by Paul to Timothy, including the presence of "The Grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:1), exhibits how the gospel message transcends its carriers. Timothy is reminded that God is the guarantor of the gospel and as generations will continue and pass, Christ remains.

Paul's charge is for Timothy to continue the cycle of discipleship by finding faithful men and serving as an example they could imitate, just as Paul had been an example to Timothy. John MacArthur notes that while Paul only mentions four generations of teachers, the idea is that of a continuing process. MacArthur states, "The gospel was to be "promulgated from generation to generation. . . . In every generation, God raises up new links in this living chain of faithful men to pass on the good news of Jesus Christ to the people of their day."[140] The people of Timothy's day desperately

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[138] J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. "ὅστις," Logos Bible Software.

[139] Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 240.

[140] John MacArthur, *2 Timothy*, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 22.

needed not only a faithful defender of the gospel entrusted to him, but also a faithful dispenser of the gospel into the lives of other faithful men who would do likewise, creating a cycle of discipleship carried on to future generations of disciples.

Conclusion

The passages surveyed (Jer 29:4-11; Acts 1:3-11; 1 Thess 1:1-10; 2 Tim 2:1-2) reveal God's mission from both the Old and New Testament to use his people in their local settings as agents of his mission to bring about spiritual transformation. As God's people intentionally bear witness to Christ and display their faith, disciples are made. Jeremiah 29:4-11 exhibits how the people of God influence the community around them through their presence and witness. Acts 1:3-11 commissions disciples of Christ as the church as witnesses to his lordship. First Thessalonians 1:1-10 exhibits a missional gathering of disciples in a particular community whose witness sounded forth for God's glory. Second Timothy 2:1-2 describes a pattern of gospel witness from one person to another as life-on-life discipleship with instructions to entrust the witness to future generations.

The institutional reliance and individualist nature of current Western society has created both a fear and inability of Christians to bear explicit witness to others and an expectation that churches are responsible for making disciples. At the same time, many people living in depressed urban contexts in the West have lost connection to and hope in the church as an institution because it is sparsely relevant. These urban contexts desperately need individuals, communities, and disciples of Christ who will make faith relevant. Disciples of Christ must understand their identity as witnesses to Christ's lordship and as disciple-makers. Personal mission is not an option for believers in Christ. Rather, personal mission is the mandate of Scripture. There is no more important mission than to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and no more powerful transformation than becoming his disciple.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES IN
DEVELOPING A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY
IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

A missional community that incorporates life-on-life disciple-making is a powerful means for engaging and reaching the urban context. Missional communities can appropriately contextualize the gospel message to people living in the urban context. Missional communities are also well-suited to address poverty in the lives of their participants, specifically by responding to the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In addition, missional communities that incorporate a life-on-life discipleship model and equip members to personally make disciples will carry on a legacy of disciple-making. The development and implementation of missional communities in urban neighborhoods serve as a foundation for potentially planting relevant and accessible churches that will continue the mission of making disciples.

This chapter will define both an urban context for ministry and the identity and function of a missional community. These definitions will be followed by a description of the personality and ministry of Community Table in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois. Then the chapter will explain the powerful ways missional communities such as Community Table reach and engage the urban context. These methods of ministry include a missional community's ability to contextualize the gospel in the urban context through incarnational ministry, address the complex dynamics of poverty such as ACEs, promote life-on-life disciple-making relationships, and lay a foundation for planting urban churches.

Defining the Urban Context

While some sections or aspects of a city's urban center may flourish, the urban context is largely defined for this project by depressed neighborhoods affected by poverty and trauma that are largely unengaged by churches. As an example, the Block neighborhood, where FCC serves and Community Table now meets, contains almost exclusively low-income families, is marred by violence and decay, and has very few residents engaged by or connected to a local church. The churches and ministries located in or near the neighborhood are inadequate to its needs and population. The challenges of the urban context warrant the development of missional communities to display the gospel and the church as relevant and accessible in the neighborhood.

The urban context is a challenging environment for mission. Roger Gench reflects on the urban mission, noting the "formidable issues endemic to city life: homelessness, scarcity of living wage jobs, racism, mental illness, crime, and educational and economic disparities."[1] Alan McMahan observes, "The urban center was largely vacated by post-World War II white evangelicals as they fled on the newly constructed superhighways to the relative comfort, security, and homogeneity of the suburbs. As a result, the evangelical community has lost a strategic advantage."[2] This assessment along with the experiences of other urban ministry practitioners aptly describes the Block neighborhood. Fruitful ministry in the urban context must contextualize the gospel message for people living there, address the relevant issues of both the individual people and their neighborhoods, and create a means for continuing discipleship.

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[1] Roger J. Gench, *Theology from the Trenches: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Louisville: John Knox, 2014), 1.

[2] Alan McMahan, "The Strategic Nature of Urban Ministry," in *Reaching the City: Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Tereso C. Casino, Gary Fujino, and Timothy R. Sisk, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 20 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 1.

Defining a Missional Community

A missional community is a community of believers who meet together for Bible study, prayer, fellowship and accountability to faithfulness with the explicit mission of reaching people in their local context through intentionally exhibiting their faith.[3] While a missional community can function as a local church if its members self-identify as an autonomous church, it can also function as a conduit to an existing local church. In both cases, missional communities are driven by the missional values of members and its corporate identity to communicate the gospel message and make disciples. Ideally, a missional community in a specific neighborhood is comprised mostly of residents of the neighborhood along with people on mission to reach the neighborhood through intentional relationships.

Identity

Reggie McNeal explains how missional communities are different from congregational and programmatic modalities of church and how they have come to be a viable and growing expression of church:

> Missional communities are not clergy dependent; they have a rhythm that is unique to them and express themselves in ways that reflect the life in their center. They grow in habitats beyond the reach of the institutional church, in environments that will not sustain the traditional practices of church. Missional communities are not focused on their corporate vision. They don't implore their members for support. They have no life beyond the life of the people who constitute the community. . . . Their scorecard is simple–are people of the community experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised and are they sharing it with others?[4]

McNeal is intentional to explain that while the rhythms, celebrations, activities, and values of missional communities are different expressions of the church than their

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[3] This description is based on the definitions in chap. 1 of this project.

[4] Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xx.

congregational counterparts, missional communities are not for all believers and are certainly not the replacement for centuries of church practice.[5]

Missional communities share many characteristics with missional house churches and in some cases are one in the same. J. D. Payne provides a helpful definition for the orientation of missional churches:

> Missional is an adjective that derives from the understanding of God as a missionary God who has redeemed the church and called them to join in the mission (*missio Dei*) of making disciples among the nations of the world. A missional church is one that maintains an outward focus. A missional church does not have missions as simply a program or event, but rather, a missional church exists for the mission of God. Missional churches understand their contexts and function to be missionaries wherever they are located. A missional church submits to God's mission and follows the Spirit's leadership in Jesus' plan for building his church.[6]

Payne also notes missional house churches often identify the church as people rather than an institution, stress active participation with every member as a minister, value deep community among members, and hold a high view of Scripture and an evangelical understanding of salvation resulting in commitment to a local church community.[7] In general, missional communities hold these convictions and values.

One essential distinction for missional communities is to understand how they participate in identity, function as part of the universal church, and relate to local churches, whether as an independent church or as a conduit to a local church. Missional communities are certainly part of the universal church, which Gregg Allison defines as "all members of Christ's church whom are the visible representation of the body of Christ on earth . . . composed of all Christians both in heaven and on earth."[8] Members of a missional

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[5] McNeal, *Missional Communities*, xxi.

[6] J. D. Payne, *Kingdom Expressions: Trends Influencing the Advancement of the Gospel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 83.

[7] J. D. Payne, *Missional House Churches*: *Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008), 37-43, 53-55.

[8] Gregg R. Allison, *Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), s.v. "universal church."

community fellowship, worship, and serve as followers and representatives of Christ and his church. Some missional communities do not identify themselves as independent churches but rather as conduits to local churches, but they share defining characteristics of local churches including fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism. Payne defines a local church simply as "members of [Christ's} body in a specific location."[9] Missional communities can effectively engage their specific location to make disciples and teach them to obey God's Word, identify and equip people for the work of ministry, and gather people for prayer and breaking bread in fellowship.

Charles Brock argues a gathering of believers is not a church until they have "a Christ-sustained self-reliance" to make its own decisions, support itself, and express itself in its indigenous culture.[10] Payne adds that a gathering is not a church until they have "self-identified" as a local expression of the body of Christ.[11] This self-identification occurs as the group covenants together and assigns their own leadership.[12] Some missional communities covenant together to fully identify themselves as churches, and their members consider the missional community rather than a traditional congregational church gathering their church home. Other missional communities exist with a missional purpose but do so as a conduit to existing local churches. As people are reached and discipleship begins those relationships are used to help new disciples connect to local churches.

Autonomy

One important characteristic of missional communities is their autonomy. This autonomy is exercised through a congregational identity of leadership and function. Allison

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[9] J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 21.

[10] Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 89-93.

[11] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 86.

[12] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 58.

explains that, within the realm of congregationalism, the concept of autonomy is essential as it allows the local church to be independent and self-governing.[13] He also recognizes the congregational principle *ubi Christus ibi ecclesia* ("wherever Christ is, there is the church."[14] For missional communities, the presence of Christ in the neighborhood or place of gathering provides ample reason to gather in his name with an affinity for inviting others into his presence for his glory. The autonomy of a missional community enriches relevance to its members and its surrounding community by allowing it to agilely exploit opportunities for development and uniquely address pertinent issues in its realm.

　　While autonomy provides a missional community with the agency to address relevant issues and agilely contextualize ministry, it also leaves the group susceptible to heresy and syncretism. As Allison identifies, divinely ordained leaders, under submission to Christ guard against the dangers of heresy by paying close attention to the health and direction of the group. While the leaders hold special positions of responsibility and oversight for the group, missional communities are built on the foundation of ministry involvement by all of its members. Allison observes the theological support of the priesthood of all believers as grounds for participation in ministry, active commitment to biblical teaching, and mutually seeking God's will for the church.[15] Part of the DNA of missional communities is the mutual journey of mission, sacrificial living, and biblical fellowship the group experiences together in community, made possible through their unique autonomy and every member ministry.

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[13] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 277.

[14] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 277, quoting Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 8.

[15] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 283.

Leadership

Another defining characteristic of missional communities is their structure of leadership that serves as a mechanism for leadership development. McNeal observes that rather than multiple layers of leadership, missional communities are served by flatter leadership structures that are distributive in nature through simple and shared leadership. The key to this difference is that missional community culture does not require clergy leadership and operates as a team of leaders. All participants in a missional community are expected to contribute in some way, and leadership for various tasks of facilitating community life, hospitality, and spiritual formation typically flows to those most gifted and interested in those functions.[16] Peyton Jones proposes a team approach for church planting that closely resembles the leadership structure of missional communities. The team approach contributes to a greater discipleship capacity, shares responsibilities of mission and management, allows multiple types of leaders to use their gifts, and has a leadership structure that fosters rapid multiplication as leaders are able to take a break when needed and kingdom advancement replaces competition[17]

As missional communities are established and grow, leaders can grow up from within. While leaders growing up in missional communities may not have the skill set to lead the complicated ministries of established churches with long histories, Payne advocates for the abilities of growing leaders in their native context.[18] The relational and communal nature of missional communities allows them to serve as an environment for both identifying and testing leadership skills. Since every member is involved in ministry, everyone has a capacity for some level of leadership tied to serving the group.

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[16] McNeal, *Missional Communities*, 31.

[17] Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 129-30.

[18] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting,* 48.

McNeal also illuminates the essential nature of leadership development in missional communities, noting that the focus is holistic, unique to the person, and includes a strong presence of personal accountability.[19] McNeal states, "For most [leaders] it begins with apprentice training. Leaders typically are indigenous to the group, the neighborhood, and the project. . . . Leadership resides in the person, not the position."[20]

While McNeal and Payne describe missional churches that exist to fulfill the experience and community of church for some believers, missional communities can also exist specifically as an outreach by an established church or group of believers from several established churches in addition to their congregational experience of church. In the case of an outreach of an established church, the missional community is established and sent with the intentional missional purpose of contextualizing the gospel and ministry methods to reach people in a specific context. The missional community is not intended to exclusively replace participant involvement in a church, but rather to enrich the faith of the participants while reaching unreached people and serving as a conduit for new believers to join a local church. As the group grows and new leadership is developed, the group may choose to plant or multiply into new groups. The underlying purpose for the group is to create accessibility to a faith community and contextualize the gospel in the local context.

Describing Community Table

Mission is the foundational purpose of Community Table. The goal of the gathering is to enjoy and model Christian fellowship as a faith community, reach the neighborhood through exhibiting and inviting people into faith, and encourage connection to a church. This mission will be achieved most powerfully as a result of recognizing the missional responsibility of Community Table and its individual members.

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[19] McNeal, *Missional Communities*, 32-33.

[20] McNeal, *Missional Communities*, 32.

Foundations and Identity

Community Table was started by members of FCC to reach the Block Neighborhood through proximity and relationships in the neighborhood.[21] The Community Table gathering takes place in my home, which is owned by FCC as a center of outreach in the neighborhood. The initial members of Community Table were members of FCC and several other churches, along with residents from the neighborhood. Those members who remain from FCC are mature followers of Christ. Other participants are new in their journey of faith and not yet part of a local congregation. Several members of other churches have joined Community Table either for Christian fellowship or as a means of connecting people they knew in the neighborhood to a faith community. Some members of Community Table attend churches other than FCC for cultural or linguistic reasons. Other participants are not yet devoted followers of Christ or members of a church.

Community Table's identity is girded by the relationships of its members. While Community Table takes place in the Block Neighborhood and is comprised of people from the Block Neighborhood, the bond and posture of its members in loving relationships sets it apart from other relationships in the neighborhood. John Hammett observes one of the defining marks of Christian community is love for one another as the people of God. He notes, "Because the church is the people of the God who is himself love, its members must be characterized by love."[22] Hammett describes the relationship the Holy Spirit creates among believers: "He makes them aware that they share new life in Christ, which must radically alter how they relate to one another."[23] The relationship of Community Table's members, one to another, serves as an expression of Christian community that stands in contrast to the impetuous and inconsistent relationships that often

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[21] The identity and location of the Block Neighborhood is first introduced in chap. 1.

[22] John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 40.

[23] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 41.

characterize the urban context. As people search for healthy and loving relationships, they are drawn to the light of authentic fellowship, acceptance, care, and accountability.

Community Table strives to remain relevant to the neighborhood and its residents yet is distinct from the common urban experience in its biblical and loving nature. The members of Community Table speak and look like those in the neighborhood, though their authentic relationships set them apart from the neighborhood in an appealing and wondrous way, displaying the distinct nature of the church in relevant proximity within the urban context. Community Table creates a natural environment for speaking into the culture and shared experiences of the surrounding community. However, as a Christ-centered community of believers, members of Community Table speak and act in a manner distinctively different than the surrounding community.

Community Table is not currently functioning as a church plant. FCC has identified many of the cultural, social, and geographic obstacles that keep residents of the Block Neighborhood from attending FCC and therefore support the presence and efforts of Community Table to contextualize the gospel and reach the neighborhood. As Community Table grows and matures, there is potential for it to transition into a missional church plant in the future. This decision would require consensus by both the FCC leadership team and members of Community Table. At this point of transition, Community Table would self-identify as a church and become similar to a missional house church in its autonomy of ministry, weekly gathering, leadership development, self-sustaining nature, and desire to plant future churches.[24] Currently, Community Table differs from a missional house church in that it has not self-identified as a church and therefore does not hold identified worship services or operate with financial independence by taking up offerings, and it continues to serve as a conduit to existing churches in the community. As Community Table grows, if leadership does not choose to transition it into a church

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[24] Payne, *Missional House Churches*, 8-10.

plant, then its leaders would likely establish new groups in other parts of the Block

Neighborhood as a continued outreach in the community.

Leadership

The leadership team of Community Table is comprised of participants of FCC

and other local churches who initially started the group. The leadership team meets for

prayer and discussion of direction on missional approaches, programming, discipleship

goals, and addressing necessary issues of action. The team is heavily influenced by my

leadership because I represented FCC in starting Community Table and live in the Block

neighborhood. However, leadership is intentionally being dispersed to other members of

the group and spread outside the initial team members, with the goal of sustained

leadership outside myself.

Currently, accountability and correction within Community Table are based on

the authority of the Bible to speak into matters of life and the credibility and value of

shared relationships. Someone from the leadership team entreats the person in sin to

examine his or her life and make changes in alignment with Scripture. For example,

someone who was displaying a recognizable sin was invited into a personal conversation

with a leader to discuss the position of Scripture and the implications for his influence

within the group. The authority of Scripture and the credibility of the friendship allowed

the person in error to hear with an open heart and take steps of repentance. The person

was invited to continue attending the gathering but informed that the consistent and

continuing stance of Scripture will be taught. Accountability and discipline vary based on

the person's declaration of discipleship and position of leadership. There is accountability

to a biblical lifestyle for those who profess to be followers of Christ. This higher

accountability, one to another, for those in leadership, reflects the level of accountability

noted in Scripture (1 Tim 3:1-7; Jas 3:1). For participants living in sin who do not

recognize the authority of Scripture, the appeal to repentance comes solely from the

credibility of friendship and fellowship. However, most participants in Community Table have a baseline of recognition for the authority of the Bible in application to lifestyle.

As Community Table continues as a faith community and strives to become a missional community, it will operate as a part of Christ's universal church, representing Christ's lordship and his eternal kingdom. Community Table will also continue to have elements of teaching, fellowship, worship, service, evangelism, autonomous leadership, and submission to the authority of Scripture. At an appropriate and prayerfully discerned time, Community Table will either grow to multiply more groups like it or transition into an autonomous local church.

<div align="center">

Contextualizing the Gospel in the Urban Context

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Missional communities located in urban neighborhoods and comprised of people from the neighborhood can appropriately contextualize the gospel message to those living in urban contexts. Members of the missional community can clearly and relevantly communicate the gospel as neighbors. Missional communities also embody incarnational ministry specific to the urban context and in doing so fulfill the evangelical mission amidst the changing American culture.

Communicating the Gospel as Neighbors

Communication of the gospel is key to transformation. Timothy Keller notes that a key component of effective ministry is a proper and full definition of the gospel. He describes the gospel as *the good news* that we have been saved from the punishment from God that we rightly deserve because Jesus Christ fixed our relationship with God by giving up his own life.[25] However, the gospel must be properly contextualized to the urban context for the message to be received and lives to be transformed. Scott Moreau identifies the tension within the contextualization process: Christians have biblical

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[25] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 29-30.

revelation that is universally true and applicable while seeking to communicate this revelation in a culturally appropriate manner. Moreau states, "Contextualization means that the message is defined by Sripture but shaped by culture."[26] Keller agrees, explaining that it is critical for a ministry to appreciate, understand, and identify with the cultural context of each local community and city to engage it and, at the same time, be able to critique and challenge it.[27] Keller explains that contextualization allows ministries to communicate the gospel clearly and strikingly in its local community, distinguishing it from its opposites and counterfeits. [28] As Craig Ott implores, "We must move as a hermeneutical community in an epistemological spiral from the bible to social theory, to praxis, and back to the bible. . . . and thus discern appropriate practices to engage cultures with the transforming power of the gospel."[29] Contextualizing the gospel to the urban context requires the distinction between essentials of the gospel and expediencies of the urban context. Therefore, communicators of the gospel must be attentive to the cultural realities of the urban context to appropriately contextualize it.

Despite the challenges of contextualizing the gospel, missional communities have powerful doorways for engaging the urban context. McMahan explains the urban context is ripe with opportunities for disciple-making because of the reality of cities as homes to high densities of people. The density of people and proximity of diverse groups creates opportunities for the exchange of ideas, increased receptivity, opportunities to display faith in meeting needs, doorways to reaching new people, and the opportunities to

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[26] Scott A. Moreau, "Contextualization: From an Adapted Message to and Adapted Life," in *The Changing Face of World Missions*, ed. Douglas McConnell, Michael Pocock, and Gailyn Van Rheenen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 350.

[27] Keller, *Center Church*, 21-22.

[28] Keller, *Center Church*, 22.

[29] Craig Ott, "Missionary Methods: The Questions that Still Dog Us," in *Missionary Methods: Research, Reflections, and Realities*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 21, ed. Craig Ott and J. D. Payne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 201.

influence culture.[30] As Larry Caldwell and Enoch Wan note, effective urban ministries must engage in "the process of contextualizing to reflect the new multifaceted and complex urban realities of demographic density, ethnic and cultural diversity, religious plurality, and abject poverty in the inner city."[31] Missional communities reflect these urban realities through their location in urban neighborhoods, the diversity and unique experiences of their participants, and natural awareness of relevant urban issues, allowing them to contextualize the gospel message to those in urban settings. As neighbors, their urban experience is the context from which and to which they speak.

For participants in an urban missional community, people living in the urban context are neighbors, friends, coworkers, and family. Keller notes that the most important source for contextual learning is through real time spent in close conversation, listening and relating to the lives and cultures of people.[32] Keller adds, "If we are living in the culture and developing friendships with people, contextualization should be natural and organic."[33] Through friendships and presence in the neighborhood, members of the missional community are in place for natural contextualization of the gospel.

While churches that are contextualized to homogeneous environments—such as suburban or rural communities or groups such as middle and upper-class populations—may have a genuine desire to reach urban neighborhoods, the dissonance is often too great for effective relational connections. Urban mission practitioners can develop approaches to engage the urban context without prejudice toward people in non-urban contexts nor the churches engaging them. Missional community members have an

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[30] McMahan, "The Strategic Nature of Urban Ministry," 2-13.

[31] Larry W. Caldwell and Enoch Wan, "Riots in the City: Replacing Nineteenth Century Urban Training Models with Relevant 'Urbanized' Training Models for the Twenty-first Century," in Casino, Fujino, and Sisk, *Reaching the City*, 97.

[32] Keller, *Center Church*, 121-22.

[33] Keller, *Center Church*, 122.

enhanced ability to understand and navigate social dynamics not as mere theories but as lived realities, which they can contextualize accordingly.

Launching and developing a missional community for the purpose of contextualizing the gospel requires missional commitment from its initial members. While one or two individuals or couples who serve as agents of mission in establishing a missional community in a specific neighborhood may not be completely native to the urban context, through immersion, culture can be learned and experienced to the point of fruitful ministry. This ministry results in the addition of new members from the neighborhood who can naturally reach the urban context. For residents of the neighborhood, "urbanization" is unnecessary because they are already indigenous members of their community. Paul Hiebert identifies cultures as compromising the three dimensions of knowledge, feelings, and values.[34] Participants in a missional community have an autochthonous knowledge of the urban context, share the feelings associated with the urban experience, and are intuitively familiar with the values that shape urban culture. Hiebert goes on to emphasize the importance of identification in lifestyles, roles, and attitudes for mission.[35] By sharing in the lifestyles of the urban context, fulfilling natural roles within the community, and identifying with experiences common to neighbors, participants in a missional community can model kingdom values and infuse lifestyle, roles, and attitudes with the implications of the gospel.

Incarnational Mission

The gospel is most effectively communicated and received when it can be modeled and applied to relevant aspects of life. Roger Greenway notes, "The comprehensiveness of the city requires the proclamation of the gospel and the application

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[34] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 91.

[35] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 108-10.

of the principles of Christ's lordship to all areas of community life."[36] Missional communities that meet and operate in the urban context embody Christ's lordship in all areas of life by taking on an incarnational model of mission. Incarnational mission is based on the example of Christ's incarnation, as Jesus "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus communicated the good news not only through his teaching but through his very life. The Second Vatican decree advocated for the Roman Catholic Church to pursue incarnational models of mission for the sake of contextualizing the Christian life, stating, "The Church, in order to be able to offer all [people] the mystery of salvation and life brought by God, must implant herself into these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind himself, in virtue of his incarnation."[37] Fruitful urban ministry models the incarnational posture of Christ by practically living the good news of God's kingdom.

Incarnational mission allows the gospel to be contextualized by creating and applying models of ministry that are unique to the specific context of application. Manuel Ortiz challenges the application of universal models of ministry: "In order to be disciple makers for the Lord in the city, we need to know our communities well enough and become identified with them deeply enough to be the Lord's continuing incarnation there."[38] The incarnational nature of missional communities in an urban neighborhood defines the neighborhood as home, giving it value, dignity, texture, and ownership as a basis for communicating and representing the gospel and for developing ministry. Missional communities minister out of authentic understanding and empathy from shared

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[36] Roger S. Greenway, "Confronting Urban Contexts with the Gospel," in *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*, ed. Roger Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 45.

[37] The Second Vatican Council, "Ad Gentes: On Mission Activity of the Church: Chapter II," December 11, 1962. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

[38] Manuel Ortiz, "Being Disciples: Incarnational Christians in the City," in Greenway, *Discipling the City*, 87.

experiences with the neighborhood. Vinay Samuel describes mission as "witness and a journey within the world."[39] Samuel states that mission "should show that Christian faith is translatable."[40] The incarnational nature of a missional community allows its members to minister from within its neighborhood by exhibiting implications of the gospel such as compassion, patience, generosity, forgiveness, confession, and eternal hope.

People living in the urban context need to not only hear the gospel contextualized in their language but also to see how the actions and relationships of daily life are informed by the gospel. As Ott notes, incarnational methods of mission serve as a means of contextualizing not only the message of the gospel but also the life of the church in specific cultures.[41] Missional communities that embody incarnational methods of mission in urban neighborhoods also contextualize gospel-rooted approaches to relationships, family, and personal values. Interactions between neighbors and friends exhibit models of parenting, work, marriage, conflict resolution, and hospitality that reflect the compassion, forgiveness, love, sacrifice, and hope of the gospel.

Fulfilling the Evangelical Mission

Amid the decline of evangelicalism in America, missional communities in the urban context have a unique ability to fulfill and expand the evangelical mission, especially to residents in their neighborhoods. Payne recognizes that, by most definitions, an evangelical as "someone who professes to have had a conversion (regenerate) experience by grace through faith in Christ and believes in the importance of telling others about the

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[39] Vinay Samuel, "Mission as Transformation," in *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 229.

[40] Samuel, "Mission as Transformation," 229.

[41] Craig Ott, Stephen J. Struss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 102.

good news of this salvation."[42] The Association of Religion and Data Archives (ARDA)

defines Evangelical Protestantism as "a movement in Protestantism emphasizing one's

personal relationship with Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the importance of

sharing one's faith with non-believers. Evangelical Protestantism is usually seen as more

theologically and socially conservative then Mainline Protestantism."[43] However, Payne

notes his discomfort with the definition used by the ARDA in determining the

representation of evangelicals in America. He proposes the definition is both too broad

for a realistic understanding and too narrow by not including historically African-American

denominations.[44] There is uncertainty about the growth of evangelicalism in America. In

fact, Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer conclude, "Most [evangelical] churches are dwindling.

Most denominations are not growing. The population in the United States is exploding. . . .

But the church is losing ground. We are in a steep state of decline."[45] This decline is

observed most dynamically in young adults, as a recent Barna Group survey indicates

that the number of young adults aged 18–29 who withdrew from the church grew from 59

percent in 2011 to 64 percent in 2019.[46] Evangelicalism seems to be losing its

attractiveness.

In addition, challenges against the cultural identity of evangelicalism and

evangelical institutions have continued to mount in recent years. As Thomas Kidd notes,

"To [many] observers 'evangelical' carries as much racial and political freight as

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[42] J. D. Payne, "Examining Evangelical Concentrations and International Migrations in the US and Canada: A Call for More and Better Research," in Casino, Fujino, and Sisk, *Reflections on Urban Mission*, 142.

[43] The Association of Religious and Data Archives, "Evangelical Protestantism," accessed November 20, 2021, https://www.thearda.com/learningcenter/religiondictionary.asp#E.

[44] Payne, "Examining Evangelical Concentrations and International Migrations," 143.

[45] Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church? Redeeming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 8.

[46] Barna Group, "Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64%," September 4, 2019, https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/.

theological significance."[47] The responses of many come in the form of perceived ideologies such as those proposed by Nicholas Woltzerstorff, suggesting that in our time, American political empire and evangelicals have increasingly come to be one in the same.[48] John Dickerson observes that the American church is entering a great evangelical recession with overall numbers shrinking, financial fuel drying up, and political fervor dividing the movement from within. Dickerson states, "In addition to these internal crises, the outside host culture is quickly turning antagonistic and hostile toward evangelicals."[49] With ambiguous classification and recent challenges to its image, the perception of evangelicalism in North America is struggling to remain relevant in certain contexts such as urban neighborhoods comprised of minorities and people in poverty.

While churches and organizations that carry the formal institutional banner of evangelicalism may come under fire at the expense of their influence and witness, missional communities can carry on the mission at the heart of evangelicalism without its associated baggage. In their very identity and purpose, missional communities embody the shared values and effective ministry of people "who profess to have had a conversion (regenerate) experience by grace through faith in Christ and believe in the importance of telling others about the good news of this salvation," as noted by Payne.[50] However, the organic and locally unique identity of the missional community is defined by its individual members rather than a denominational or institutional affiliation. As Kidd notes, true evangelicals are not defined by partisan commitments but by cherishing the Bible as the inspired Word of God, seeing conversion and personal commitment to Christ

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[47] Thomas Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 151.

[48] Nicholas Woltzerstorff, *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Heltzel (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 8.

[49] John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 12.

[50] Payne, "Examining Evangelical Concentrations and International Migrations," 142.

as essential features of a believer's life, resulting in praying, studying the Bible, participating in mission, and ministering to the "least of these."[51] These are the defining characteristics of a missional community and its members.

Ed Stetzer credits the ebb of evangelistic fervor, which is the core of evangelicalism, to "the unwillingness or inability of Christians in America to adapt evangelistic efforts to new realities around them."[52] Missional communities can contextualize the gospel to the new realities of the urban context by discovering or rediscovering their mission to go to people in their local neighborhood. By taking on an incarnational posture of "go and be" rather than "come and see," those in the missional community can embody relevance to the urban context around them. Equipped with a natural understanding of the local culture and relating within the neighborhood as neighbors, friends, and family, members of a missional community can appropriately represent Christ in word and deed as a light in their neighborhood. As Stetzer notes, "By renewing our sense as a sent people, we have made great headway in a recovery of Paul's instructions to believers to live as ambassadors for the kingdom of God (2 Cor 5:20)."[53]

Missional communities located in urban neighborhoods and comprised of people from the neighborhoods they engage are a powerful force for contextualizing the gospel message as neighbors through incarnational ministry. The relevance of the practical and observable faith displayed by members of the missional community allows people near to them to see and experience a genuine pursuit of and obedience to Christ. In addition, the incarnational ministry of missional communities specific to their urban context embodies the core values of evangelicalism.

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[51] Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?*, 156.

[52] Ed Stetzer, "Issues in the Future of Evangelicalism," *The Exchange with Ed Stetzer*, June 29, 2016, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2016/june/issues-in-future-of-evangelicalism.html.

[53] Stetzer, "Issues in the Future of Evangelicalism."

Engaging in Mission by Addressing Poverty

Missional communities exhibit the relevance of the gospel by addressing poverty within the lives of people in their neighborhood and supporting life change. Due to the relevance of missional communities in urban neighborhoods through their proximity and relationships, missional communities can address poverty one individual or family at a time as a platform for evangelism and discipleship. Addressing poverty includes responding to the complicated and lasting effects of ACEs and creating a foundation for healing. By creating safe and stable environments for reflection, support, and improvement, missional communities are a powerful force for confronting and overcoming the challenges of poverty.

**Defining Poverty and the Priority
of Evangelism**

With a theological foundation intact and relevant neighborhood relationships in place, missional communities are positioned to address poverty and support vital life changes. However, it is essential to prioritize evangelism as the central motivation and goal of engagement. Addressing poverty is a powerful means of ministry engagement, opening the door for evangelism. David Hesselgrave discusses how social action relates to evangelism: "Traditional Prioritism sustains the time-honored distinction between the primary mission of the church and secondary supporting ministries," giving priority to the great commission.[54]

However, because something is classified as secondary does not diminish its importance. John Stott made an important contribution by observing, "Social action is a partner of evangelism. As partners, the two belong to each other and are yet independent. . . . Both are expressions of unfeigned love. Evangelism and compassionate service belong

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[54] David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 121.

together in the mission of God."[55] Having compassion for the poor and providing a means of holistic well-being is characterized by both God the Father (Ps 146:5-9; Mic 6:8; Matt 6:3-4; Jas 1:27) and Jesus the Son (Matt 5:42; Luke 14:12-14). Therefore, as participants in God's mission, missional communities should also take compassionate action toward helping the poor.

Missional communities must also be compassionate in their definition of poverty. Reflecting on Luke 4:18 and its reference to Isaiah 61:1, Hesselgrave defines poverty as "the pious poor [who are] humble, meek, and godly" and later as "a humble recognition of need for God and his grace."[56] However, this definition assumes a pre-existing knowledge of God and his grace. It also proposes the pious are somehow deserving in their piety, a posture often taken by the scribes and Pharisees and corrected by Jesus (Matt 6:1; 23:25-26), while others are undeserving. The causes and presence of poverty are not so easily divided into right and wrong. Robert Lupton reflects on the truly worthy poor and notes that it is difficult to find a person who is worthy of help because of their exhibition of dependability, purity, gratitude, hard work, and other values that mirror the values of those who desire to give. Rather, Lupton concludes, "Maybe to be truly poor means to be prideless, impatient, manipulative, desperate, grasping at every straw, and clutching the immediate with little energy left for future plans. But truly worthy? Are any of us *truly* worthy?"[57] Lupton's reflections highlight the complexity of poverty and the danger in making sweeping determinations of situations that warrant assistance. By defining the deserving poor exclusively as those who humble themselves, Hesselgrave's

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[55] John R. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*: *Updated and Expanded by John R. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 27.

[56] Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 130, 136.

[57] Robert Lupton, *Theirs Is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America*, ed. Barbara R. Thompson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 60-61.

position fails to acknowledge people who have been humbled and humiliated by systemic oppression, the sins of others, mental illness, disabilities, and circumstantial losses.

Conn and Ortiz note the word most connected to urban poverty is *powerlessness*, stating the poor are rendered weak and helpless with no means of freeing themselves.[58] Greenway adds that the manifestations of poverty are "symptoms of a whole network of problems that are social and economic, religious and political, familial and personal in nature."[59] The causes and perpetuators of poverty in America's urban context often include inadequate housing, lack of education, broken family and relational structures, and minimal financial resources exacerbated by limited access to jobs, poor health matched with a lack of access to healthcare, and chaotic decision-making, functioning together as a cycle that not only keeps people in poverty but also perpetuates poverty into future generations. A report given to the US Congress on poverty recognized there are multiple needs functioning as "drivers of poverty—both economic and social."[60] Those who are in poverty experience a lack of resources and opportunities for holistic stability.

The biblical recognition of poverty as lacking what is needed is displayed in word χρεία, meaning "need" or "that which is lacking and particularly needed," as exhibited in Matthew 6:32, Mark 2:25, John 13:29, and Romans 12:13, and could also be used to describe the situation of the man in need in the story told by Jesus recorded in Luke 10:29-37.[61] The word χρεία identifies someone with "an observable need, lack, or

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[58] Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City & the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 326.

[59] Greenway, "Confronting Urban Contexts," 36.

[60] Joseph Dalaker, "Demographic and Social Characteristics of Persons in Poverty: 2018," *Congressional Research Service*, presented March 26, 2020, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R46294.pdf.

[61] J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. "χρεία," Logos Bible Software.

difficulty" as used in 1 John 3:17.[62] The early church identified and addressed such needs with generosity (Acts 2:45). There was an expectation among Christian believers to "share with those in need" (Eph 4:28) and to "help in cases of urgent need" (Titus 3:14).

Therefore, a wider understanding of poverty identifies its nature of depletion, instability, and chaos, manifesting both immediate need and lack of resources for future needs. In biblical terms, poverty is the absence of *shalom* or holistic wellbeing. This understanding of poverty recognizes material or financial poverty as only one component and even a symptom of a larger, more complex situation. Hesselgrave is correct in observing literal and spiritual poverty frequently go together.[63] People experiencing poverty are often exclusively consumed with meeting immediate physical needs such as food, housing, and safety, thus preventing attention to spiritual needs. In addition, the disappointment, chaos, and broken relationships largely associated with poverty in the urban context are likely to result in coping through substance abuse, violence, and further unhealthy relationships, thus deepening the trench of chaos and instability. Therefore, a full and compassionate understanding of poverty is a doorway to providing temporary relief of immediate material needs, safety, dignity, and hope for the future.

The dynamics of poverty are neither distant nor hidden from a missional community in the urban context. Instead, the intricacies of poverty are continually visible and addressed. David Claerbaut reflects on the invisibility and immobility of those in poverty: "The perpetuation of poverty by society results partly from is invisibility. This invisibility is exacerbated by the immobility of the poor."[64] Roger Greenway and Timothy Monsma identify the immobility of the poor often forces them to remain in their own

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[62] Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 884-85.

[63] Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict,* 136.

[64] David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 69.

neighborhoods.[65] Missional communities are forced to continually confront and operate in the midst of the causes and effects of poverty due to their location within impoverished neighborhoods and inclusion of people in poverty. Through visibility of those in poverty and accessibility by those in poverty, missional communities provide tangible, relevant, and sustainable solutions.

Missional communities can uniquely address poverty one person or family at a time. Unlike impersonal and undifferentiated social programs, missional communities can specifically observe and meet needs through the conduit of a compassionate relationship. Ortiz states, "Compassion calls for standing with people in their suffering and pain. It is incarnational in the sense of being in intimate touch with hurting humanity. Compassion is a solidarity that is internal and external."[66] Therefore, missional communities form relationships for fruitful ministry that address the challenges of the urban context by providing temporary relief of immediate material needs, safety, dignity, and hope for the future and can create a platform for expressing the gospel.

Relationships form the best conduit for providing assistance in the midst of poverty and exhibiting gospel principles. Financial aid that is merely given impetuously does not deepen a missional relationship, but simply satisfies a temporary need. Rather than institutionalized relief programs with applications and impersonal bureaucracy, missional communities can function like the early church in observing and meeting needs within the community of believers and those around them (Acts 4:32-37). Conn and Ortiz describe the importance of redistributing financial resources to those in poverty, but stress the imperative of personal relationships in the process. Giving within the context of a personal relationship reduces a sense of entitlement resulting in abuse and fosters

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[65] Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Mission's New Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 175.

[66] Ortiz, "Being Disciples," 90.

reciprocity of sharing resources.[67] Missional communities provide relationships for proper redistribution of financial and other resources as well as a context for accountability, follow-up, and financial mentoring when necessary. Addressing the deeper issues in poverty requires the discernment, empathy, compassionate accountability, and encouragement provided through personal relationships.

In addition, missional communities incorporate those in poverty in ministering to others experiencing the effects of poverty. Ortiz contrasts the transformative power of ministry to the poor with ministry of the poor, noting that incorporating the poor into the family of God to take their place in Christ's kingdom for Christ's mission is the most powerful means of bringing about change in urban neighborhoods.[68] Missional communities in urban neighborhoods are uniquely comprised and positioned to address poverty while including the poor in ministering to others. By providing opportunities to share with and help others, missional communities instill dignity and belonging into the lives of those who have often felt invisible and excluded.

Missional communities and their individual members can engage those in poverty living in their neighborhood as a means of gospel mission. Incarnational mission in the form of living and serving in an urban neighborhood gives credibility to the gospel message as tangible needs are observed and addressed. As Ott reflects, "To minister as Christ ministered will mean living out the gospel in word and deed, caring for people as whole people. God did not just send a message; he sent his Son. It will never be adequate to simply deliver a message in an isolated or disengaged manner, disregarding the needs of the hearers."[69] By meeting urgent and basic needs, members can temporarily calm the chaos in a family's life and create margin for evangelistic conversations by pointing to

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[67] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 338.

[68] Ortiz, "Being Disciples," 97.

[69] Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 99.

illustrations of God's compassion. Keller notes that the gospel gives a view in light of the brokenness of the world and the hope of Christ. The gospel reminds all people that they were once separated from God and saved through grace.[70] The gospel gives people a reason and a hope to experience dignity and wholeness.

By establishing consistent, life-giving friendships of biblical encouragement, members can come alongside neighbors to create greater stability. Missional community members can also provide empathy and the fruit of practical experience in the midst of systemic sin as the perpetuators of poverty. As Stetzer observes, the gospel expressed through the power of its truth and kindness possesses the greatest leverage for transformation.[71] Members of a missional community can model the gospel through healthy and redeemed relationships, appropriate boundaries, and positive decision-making as illustrated in Scripture. These perspectives offer veritable help and a pattern for future health. Therefore, missional communities address poverty by stabilizing a platform for exhibiting the gospel and appealing to the need for spiritual reconciliation to God.

Addressing the Effects of Adverse
Childhood Experiences

Researchers and ministry practitioners acknowledge there are many contributing factors to the poverty. On such contributor, known as Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) exists as both a result of the current state of poverty and a perpetuator of poverty into future individuals and families. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study defined ACE as exposures to childhood abuse such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse, and household dysfunctions during childhood such as exposures to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother or stepmother, and criminal behavior in the household. The study noted, "Insofar as abuse and other potentially damaging childhood

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[70] Keller, *Center Church*, 51.

[71] Stetzer, "Issues in the Future of Evangelicalism."

experiences contribute to the development of [adult health risk behaviors and disease], these childhood exposures should be recognized as the basic causes of morbidity and mortality in adult life."[72] The American Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines ACEs as "experiences that occur before the age 18, including abuse and household dysfunction, and cause extreme distress resulting in long-term medical, mental health, and behavioral implications.[73] Brett Zyromski et al. observe, "Children who grow up in a home where there is significant mental health issues, violence, incarceration, addiction, poverty, abusive parenting, or neglectful adult supervision will experience repeated, pervasive, life-altering traumas linked to the leading causes of death in adults."[74] In addition, a longitudinal survey completed by Elizabeth Schilling, Robert Aseltine, and Susan Gore examined the transition from adolescence into adulthood for children who experienced ACEs and noted evidence that "the impact of major childhood adversities persists well into adulthood."[75] ACEs create deep and long-lasting impacts in every area of a child's life that continue into adulthood and sow the seeds of continuing poverty and dysfunction.

Research also found that as the number of ACEs increased in an individual's life the likelihood of depressive disorders, suicidality, PTSD, and anxiety disorders also increased.[76] The presence of ACEs lay a foundation for the manifestation of future instability, poverty, poor health, and death. A study completed by Eli Marie Wiig et al.

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[72] Vincent J. Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1998): 246, 248.

[73] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences," accessed May 19, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html.

[74] Brett Zyromski et al., "Beyond Complex Trauma: An Existential View of Adverse Childhood Experiences," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 57, no. 3 (October 2018): 156-57.

[75] Elizabeth A. Schilling, Robert H. Aseltine, and Susan Gore, "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Health in Young Adults: A Longitudinal Survey," *BMC Public Health* 7 (March 2007): 1.

[76] Zyromski et al., "Beyond Complex Trauma," 163.

also found parenting was particularly challenging for substance-dependent mothers who had grown up experiencing ACEs resulting from parents who themselves had substance use disorders, proliferating the challenges by creating a second generation of individuals with ACEs who "face an accumulation of risk factors because of biological, psychological, social and environmental vulnerability."[77] Therefore, the cycle of poverty that often creates ACEs also continues them into the next generation, thus perpetuating and often deepening the experience of poverty. In the strategy to build resilience, Elizabeth Crouch et al. observe that data emphasizes the importance of a two-generation approach in helping families cope with ACEs. Programs and exposures that teach parenting skills and child development to families affected by ACEs not only provide healing for parents, but also reduce the risk of repeating ACEs generationally, thus "breaking the cycle" of childhood trauma.[78]

Despite the severity and complexity of ACEs and their impact upon individuals, missional communities that are accessible and welcoming toward people who have experienced ACEs have the ability to significantly aid in the development of stability to cease and prevent ACEs as well as to provide a safe and trusting environment for working through and healing from past ACEs. With proper support and healthy community there is hope for victims of ACEs to set new trajectories in life. The study by Schilling, Aseltine, and Gore revealed that, especially for young adults and young parents, the fluidity and malleability of roles during this period offers a potential "turning point" for healthy trajectories if positive influences are present.[79] Missional communities can provide healthy environments for such turning points.

[77] Eli Marie Wiig et al., "Substance-Dependent Women Becoming Mothers: Breaking the Cycle of Adverse Childhood Experiences," *Child and Family Social Work* 22 no. 1 (February 2017): 26-27.

[78] Elizabeth Crouch et al., "Safe, Stable, and Nurtured: Protective Factors against Poor Physical and Mental Health Outcomes Following Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma* 12, no. 2 (June 2019): 166, 172.

[79] Schilling, Aseltine, and Gore, "Adverse Childhood Experiences," 7-8.

Wiig et al. note that people who have experienced ACEs and are now in poverty need help to build supportive social networks to heal from their experiences and break the cycle of ACEs across generations. The researchers propose the best healing is provided when the social networks can provide guidance in various areas of life, help in moments of crisis, role models, and safe and supportive contexts for discussing their traumatic experiences.[80] Mark Bellis et al. define these healing factors as "community resilience assets," which have the ability to counteract the outcomes of ACEs. In addition to safe networks, role models and encouragement, Bellis et al. add friendship and a sense of equity as community resilience assets.[81] Bessel Van Der Kolk identifies that trauma is often associated with secrets. However, to deal with the trauma within, people cannot keep it a secret. Healing occurs when people can expose and discuss their trauma.[82] Van Der Kolk also believes that for trauma victims to regain control and find healing they must revisit the trauma, which is best done in the context of a safe and supportive group.[83] He states, "Study after study show having a good support network constitutes the single most powerful protection against becoming traumatized. . . . Traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships."[84] Unlocking the secrets of past and present trauma is a gradual process that requires time and a safe and trusted environment for exposing pain. Missional communities can provide supportive networks of nurturing relationships for victims of trauma to safely revisit and share the secrets of their experiences in a healthy manner.

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[80] Wiig et al., "Substance-Dependent Women," 33.

[81] Mark A. Bellis et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Sources of Childhood Resilience: A Retrospective Study of their Combined Relationships with Child Health and Educational Attendance," *BMC Public Health* 18, no. 1 (June 2018): 10-11.

[82] Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 125-26.

[83] Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 204.

[84] Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 210.

One significant asset provided by gatherings of positive relationships is the modeling and development of positive coping skills, particularly the ability to engage in problem-focused (PF) coping by addressing issues and finding resolution. Julia L. Sheffler et al. observe that the development of PF coping skills versus avoidant emotion-focused (AEF) coping that simply avoids problems rather than addressing them is "one important and modifiable pathway" between early adversity experiences and the development of better health and stability later in life.[85] The formation of healthy coping skills is effectively fostered through participation in stable groups with people who model them. Missional communities provide a context for resilience assets such as stability, friendships, safety, mentoring relationships and positive coping skills to be modeled, shared, and developed by those in the group.

Getting out of poverty is lonely. As Wiig et al. observed, parents who had been exposed to ACEs and made the decision to seek healthier environments for their own children "struggled with feelings of loneliness, after having distanced themselves from their previous social networks and family."[86] Many had no contact with their former partner, parents, or siblings who were still living in chaos, violence, and unpredictability.[87] Missional communities can fill the void of loneliness by becoming a safe and stable support network for individuals and families trying to get out of chaos and destructive environments. Through life-giving friendships and care, God's people can care for the "orphans and widows" of our day.

Missional communities are primely positioned and oriented to provide community and care for people exposed to ACEs. The compassionate posture of a group's mission and its individual members foster an environment of safety and trust. In addition,

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[85] Julia L. Sheffler et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Coping Strategies: Identifying Pathways to Resiliency in Adulthood," *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 32, no. 5 (2019): 596, 602-3, 605.

[86] Wiig et al., "Substance-Dependent Women," 30.

[87] Wiig et al., "Substance-Dependent Women," 30.

the communal aspect of missional communities with members checking in and relating regularly in the neighborhood build ongoing stability and encouraging accountability. The communal gatherings also create an environment for modeling parenting skills and observing child development. As mature members of a missional community disciple and mentor other members, it provides both role models and a platform for discussing the challenges of life, relationships, and family responsibilities. While coming alongside people in poverty contributed to by ACEs is difficult and does not fully replace the effectiveness of clinical counseling and therapy, when necessary, missional communities can be a powerful tool in addressing this aspect of poverty.

Poverty in the urban context can present challenges in the forms of ACEs, economic instability, drug abuse, and other social pathologies. Those seeking to engage the urban context through contextualizing the gospel and creating evangelistic platforms are reminded their mission is not solely theirs but ultimately Christ's. Andreas J. Köstenberger reminds those in mission that believers need to consciously identify themselves with Jesus' lordship in mission and salvation.[88] The urban context is certainly included under the ultimate control and direction of Christ's mission (Matt 28:18-20). Köstenberger encourages, "As believers carry out the mission, we are assured that all the resources needed for this outreach will be provided, and God's purposes will triumph."[89] Therefore, missional communities rooted in the urban context join with Christ's victorious mission, thus having power over the clutches of poverty.

Missional communities and their members in urban neighborhoods can engage those in poverty as a means of gospel mission. By meeting urgent and basic needs, members can temporarily calm the chaos in a family's life and create margin for

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[88] Andreas J. Köstenberger and T. Desmond Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, 2nd ed., Studies in Biblical Theology 53, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2020), 258-59.

[89] Köstenberger and Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 259.

evangelistic conversations by pointing to illustrations of God's compassion. By establishing consistent life-giving friendships of biblical encouragement members can come alongside neighbors to create greater stability. Members of the missional community can also provide empathy and the fruit of practical experience in the midst of systemic sin as the perpetuators of poverty. Members can also model healthy relationships, appropriate boundaries, and positive decision-making as illustrated in Scripture. Therefore, communities address poverty as a means to stabilizing a platform for exhibiting the gospel. Missional house communities also provide a safe and nurturing community for people who have experienced trauma. While ACEs leave victims struggling to find consistency, identity, and peace, the stable and compassionate environment of a missional community's close gathering fosters opportunities for safely sharing about trauma and taking steps toward healing.

Multiplication through Life-on-Life Discipleship

Life-on-life discipleship is a powerful force for spreading and deepening the presence of the gospel in urban neighborhoods. People living in urban neighborhoods are often unreached and unengaged by programmatic approaches to discipleship due to the inconsistency created by poverty and the cultural and social differences of neighborhood life. Life-on-life discipling relationships that occur as part of a missional community in the urban context are an effective way of contextualizing the gospel to specific people and their life-settings because discipleship takes place in the context of life where faith is personalized and modeled. The deep relationships fostered through life-on-life discipleship also provide stability through the challenges and distractions of life while pursuing Christ. In addition, life-on-life discipleship creates a context and momentum for continuing cycles of discipleship in the urban context by modeling discipleship for the next generation of disciple-makers.

Life-on-life discipleship is a specific approach to discipleship that occurs largely in the context of personal relationships where daily life is observed and practical faith is

modeled. The relationship of Paul to Timothy and Paul's explicit instructions in 2 Timothy 2:1-2 to carry on a legacy of discipling relationships provides an archetype for life-on-life discipleship. The life-on-life approach exists in contrast to the institutional or programmatic methods of discipleship in many churches that are often driven by participation in classes, advancement in impersonal systems and consumption of written or video content. The life-on-life approach to discipleship does not exist in contempt of or prejudice toward programmatic discipleship strategies but recognizes the specific needs of those being discipled and personalizes the approach.

Discipleship in the Context of Life

Life-on-life discipleship involves sharing life together in personal and practical ways for the purpose of modeling and instilling faith in Christ. It affords the disciple and disciple-maker the ability to see and do life together. Life-on-life discipleship is a powerful medium for transformational growth because it encompasses all aspects of life. The disciple is invited into the life of the disciple-maker on an intimate level as the faith of the disciple-maker is displayed through observations of marriage, parenting, neighboring, generosity, serving, finances, and friendship. The disciple observes the disciple-maker's pattern of life with opportunities to learn, ask questions, and practice alongside the disciple-maker. The disciple-maker not only teaches but more importantly models active and comprehensive faith. Conn and Ortiz note the credibility of urban ministry practitioners increases dramatically when those being discipled can examine their family life and daily walk, in addition to their preaching and teaching.[90] The disciple-maker's life is an open book, therefore providing a context for friendship, listening, correction, and discussion.

Life-on-life discipleship also provides a practical context for exhibiting biblical obedience. Eckhard Schnabel observes, "Biblical narratives are the paradigms that provide

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[90] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 440.

us with models for our own faithful and authentic response to God's revelation."[91] Therefore, missional communities that foster intentional discipling relationships are a unique opportunity to not only read and discuss biblical narratives, but to observe the forming of faithful and authentic responses through the interactions of life. Conn and Ortiz state that mentoring is one of the most effective ways to both disciple new believers and develop urban leaders because the Bible is incarnated into actual life situations as a "life-learning curriculum. . . . The mentor supports and facilitates the clarification and realization of the mentee's [preferred future]. He is a teacher, sponsor, guide, model and counselor."[92] While Conn and Ortiz do not use the terminology of "life-on-life discipleship," it is synonymous with their purpose and function of mentoring relationships. Life-on-life discipleship provides a powerful model of biblical obedience.

In addition, life-on-life discipleship accommodates personalized discipleship that specifically addresses the dynamics of the disciple's past, current context, and specific needs. Rick Richardson observes that many people in current Western culture have a "breach of trust with Christians, the Church, or God."[93] Trust is best gained through personal interactions of friendship by sharing life. Through the friendships of life-on-life discipleship, accountability, teaching, and modeling of specific areas of life can all be personalized to the individual disciple. The life-on-life approach is especially fruitful in the urban context where young people are hungry for strong role models and a great diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and experiences are present. Craig Van Gelder identifies the challenges of urban contexts in the form of pluralism: "Truth claims become both relative and situational in the face of a growing number of alternatives [resulting in] an endless

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[91] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 394.

[92] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 430.

[93] Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 66.

expansion of alternatives and competing truth claims."[94] Van Gelder proposes the solution is to point to the grand narrative of God's sovereignty, creation, redemption, and purpose for life.[95] The unchanging attributes of God and His mission can be made personal in the life of the disciple. No matter what a person has experienced or what voices are present in the urban context, a life-on-life discipling relationship is relevant and powerful.

Given the strengths of life-on-life discipleship in providing a means of exhibiting practical faith, speaking into every area of life, and accommodating personalized discipleship, this approach has clear advantages over institutionalized discipleship. In addition, many residents of the urban context may have an aversion to systems and programs due to generational or personal experiences of failure or abuse and strategies often break down in the midst of inconsistency and instability. Ortiz notes the inefficiency of ministry programs in the urban context and points to building meaningful relationships: "Programs tend to move away from one-to-one relationships. Personal relationships cannot be replaced by sophisticated strategies."[96] Roland Allen observes that Christ trained a few leaders close to him in two or three years as they observed him healing and teaching. Yet, the institutional approaches of schooling, examination, and appointment are not discipled as Jesus discipled those closest to him.[97] Life-on-life discipleship includes an essential element of observing and participating in ministry in the context of relationship as participants share life and ministry together.

[94] Craig Van Gelder, "Secularization and the City," in Greenway, *Discipling the City*, 76.

[95] Van Gelder, "Secularization and the City," 80-82.

[96] Ortiz, "Being Disciples: Incarnational Christians in the City," 97.

[97] Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes which Hinder It* (London: World Dominion Press, 1927), 24.

Providing Stability

New disciples in the urban context face an array of challenges and attacks upon their decision to follow Christ. For many new disciples, the season following baptism is marked with hardship and discouragement. Challenges often include the existence of negative messages and toxic relationships that pull people away from Christ, the results of trauma that hinder growth, the memories and easily accessed temptations of past sins that create shame, doubt, and negative cycles, and the absence of positive role models to light a way forward. In addition to these significant challenges are Satan's attacks and the ridicule of former peers. As Dhati Lewis observes, new disciples desperately need someone to walk alongside them in daily life through the natural seasons of grief and doubt when they have no confidence in themselves.[98] Life-on-life discipling relationships provide a means of stability during the vulnerable season just after a person begins a journey of faith in Christ and a source of direction for the journey ahead. The disciple-maker serves as a defense against Satan's attacks to exploit past temptations and trauma, an ally in taking future steps of faith, and an advocate for pursuing biblical trust and obedience. The four crucial mentoring responsibilities of the disciple-maker in the life of a new disciple just after baptism are to encourage the person in their new life as a follower of Christ, to pray with and for them, to help them fall deeper in love with Jesus by looking at Scripture together, and to help them discern their next step of faithful pursuit of God's will. The life-on-life discipling relationships created through a missional community serve as a lifeline through the early stages of someone's discipleship.

One of the greatest barriers to making disciples in the urban culture is the centrality of obedience and purity in Christian faith. Many potential disciples doubt their ability to pursue obedience and many more give up or succumb to past guilt soon after beginning a walk with Christ. Conn and Ortiz identify the challenging moral environment of the urban context. They note the most difficult aspect of discipleship in the urban context

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[98] Dhati Lewis, *Among Wolves: Disciple-Making in the City* (Nashville: B & H, 2017), 99-100.

is the priority of holiness.[99] Hiebert reflects on the necessary steps for helping new believers overcome the undermining nature of their former actions and attitudes which have previously been informed by their cultural heritage. He proposes that to appropriately examine former beliefs and customs through critical evaluation and see complete transformation from former destructive ways the person must deal biblically with all areas of life.[100] Life-on-life discipleship creates a nurturing environment for critical evaluation with a caring and wise mentor who models new beliefs and customs. The life-on-life discipling environment also provides both an example of and reason for Christian morality. Those being discipled experience an opportunity to see the fruit of discipline, obedience, and purity first-hand. As Conn and Ortiz argue, a life-on-life discipling relationship "provides emerging disciples and leaders with a model of what it means to be sanctified to God for his glory."[101] By modeling an honest, personalized, and hopeful expression of faith in Christ, disciple-makers provide the greatest reason for biblical morality and purity.

The urban context is often characterized by an underlying sense of hopelessness. For those making disciples in the urban context, the offer of hope, life, and forgiveness stands in stark contrast to the hopelessness and death experienced on the streets. As Keller notes, "Contextualization means showing how only in Christ can the baseline narratives of a culture be resolved."[102] Life-on-life discipleship models and invites transformation that transcends broken culture. Van Gelder highlights the challenge of faith communities and individual Christians to exhibit wholeness and continuity in the midst of fragmentation, offer healing from brokenness, and point to ultimate hope and purpose in the midst of

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[99] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 435.

[100] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 186-87.

[101] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 435.

[102] Keller, *Center Church*, 259.

temporal materialism.[103] Life-on-life discipling relationships allow people to see faith and community lived out in meaningful and tangible ways that transcend pluralistic tenets and offer hope for the future.

Creating Disciple-Making Cycles

Life-on-life discipleship is transformational for not only the disciple but also future disciples because it includes an expectation that disciples will become disciple-makers. In fact, disciples are expected to immediately begin viewing relationships with those around them as a means for showing and sharing their faith in Christ. The training, modeling, and expectation that disciples will go on to disciple others ensures that the cycle of discipleship continues and propels communication of the gospel toward the next generation of disciples. Greenway explains that disciple making was key to Jesus' work in bringing about salvation for the world. Jesus made disciples for the purpose of sending them to make disciples. All disciples were expected to be witnesses of Christ's lordship to an unbelieving world, giving the spread of the church explosive power.[104] Greenway contends, "This is the key to what the church needs today in terms of discipleship and renewal for mission. The world's great cities will not pose such obstacles if we adopt no lesser goal than what Jesus and his disciples [did] for mission."[105] Missional communities that practice life-on-life discipleship foster relationships that serve as conduits for discipling the next generation of Christ-followers.

Life-on-life discipleship and the formation of disciple-making cycles are built upon the missional ideology that every follower of Christ is engaged in ministry. Value is given to making time to minister to others by fostering discipling relationships. Members of the missional community model faith, obedience, sacrifice, and discipleship as each

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[103] Van Gelder, "Secularization and the City," 82-84.

[104] Greenway, "Confronting Urban Contexts," 46-47.

[105] Greenway, "Confronting Urban Contexts," 47.

member engages in one or more intentional discipling relationships and model the expectation those disciples will disciple others. John Stott held that all Christians are called into ministry, noting that for some it means cross-cultural missionary service or ordained pastoral ministry. But ministry—serving God and others—is the calling of all disciples of Christ.[106] Life-on-life discipleship promotes not only the concept of every member ministry, but a personal responsibility for reaching and discipling others.

The life-on-life discipleship model is not only a powerful tool for making new disciples in the urban context but is also transformational for the disciple-makers. Rather than leaning heavily into programs that require paid staff or outside volunteers to present generic discipleship content, the members of the missional community are encouraged and equipped to make disciples, which deepens and broadens their faith and ministry abilities. While it is time and energy intensive at the outset, making life-on-life discipleship a core part of the group's DNA has a significant impact on the biblical maturity, depth of commitment and leadership development of the group's members. As missional communities create a culture of life-on-life discipleship, a climate is established for group members to discover their giftings and affirm their calling to ministry. In addition, discipling others forces the disciple-maker to take responsibility for their faith, grow in their own maturity, and seek biblical answers to the practical challenges of life. Richardson argues that disciple-making requires people to first confront self-centered spirituality in themselves: "Only the transformation of our own lives will allow us to authentically challenge others."[107] Lewis agrees, stating that life-on-life disciple-making occurs when disciples recognize and embrace their responsibility as brothers and sisters within God's family to engage and care for their younger siblings through intentional discipling

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[106] Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 54.

[107] Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 109-10.

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relationships.[108] The process of taking responsibility for another person's faith development is formative. With their commitment established, their giftings identified, and their skills sharpened, these disciple-makers are positioned for faithful and fruitful contributions in other aspects of God's kingdom. Life-on-life discipleship is transformational for both the disciple and the disciple-maker as they journey and mature together in faith and ministry.

Finally, the experience of life-on-life discipleship serves as both a template and a body of experience for future disciple-making relationships. The personalization of the discipling process and specific content to the people involved allows the disciple to have a positive experience being discipled and the replication for future generations of discipleship. As the disciple-maker builds a relationship they learn about the disciple, gain understanding of the contours of the disciple's faith journey, and discern individual needs. The disciple-maker then matches up aspects of their own context and faith journey to facilitate growth so the disciple can be nurtured and challenged. The experience of nurture and challenge builds confidence in the disciple to replicate the experience for another person. The experience of the disciple-making process also provides tools for making disciples and knowledge of what to expect during the disciple-making process in pursuit of developing future generations of disciples. Confidence, experience, and practical tools set the stage for the disciple to become a disciple-maker and continue the legacy of life-on-life discipleship as the cycle continues.

Laying a Foundation for Planting Churches

The need for healthy churches in the urban context is both urgent and terrifying. For decades, churches have grown in suburban and rural settings while urban neighborhoods, despite growing at an astounding rate, have remained largely unengaged and unreached by local congregations. Thank God for the few churches and parachurch

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[108] Lewis, *Among Wolves*, 51-53.

ministries that have remained faithful beacons of the gospel in the urban context. However, the vacuum of gospel influence and accessible biblical worship in the urban neighborhoods of cities is still appalling. Mark Gottdiener, Ray Hutchinson, and Michael Ryan observe that we live in an urbanizing world, noting that between 2000 and 2030, the urban population of the world is expected to increase from three billion to more than five billion persons—some 60 percent of the total world population.[109] This significant growth of urban areas includes American cities. Yet, as Lewis argues, "This massive shift in population and increase in diversity has taken place with little or no impact or influence from the evangelical church."[110] Urban church plants close the gap of evangelistic impact and missional influence in unreached cities.

Missional communities located in the urban context and comprised of people from the urban context serve as excellent foundations for planting urban churches that relevantly reach, engage, and disciple urban residents who are often unreached. These missional communities that transition into urban church plants are essential for creating indigenous disciple-makers and contextualized gatherings for people to grow in and share their faith. By carrying out the essential ecclesiastical functions of a church, transitioning to an autonomous church, and sustaining their foundational missional principles, missional communities in urban neighborhoods that become church plants can engage the urban context with relevance, compassion, indigenous disciple-makers, and longevity for continued mission.

Defining a Missional Church Plant

Before defining a *missional church plant* that seeks to be a sustainable and healthy church it is crucial to define the identity of a *church*. Payne summarizes the

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[109] Mark Gottdiener, Ray Hutchinson, and Michael T. Ryan, *The New Urban Sociology,* 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

[110] Lewis, *Among Wolves*, 1.

identity of the church as "citizens of God's divine kingdom expressing love for the king, love for others in the kingdom, and love for those outside the kingdom."[111] While this understanding of *church* certainly characterizes the foundational elements of many existing congregations, it does not limit a church plant to the models or methods of these congregations. Payne challenges the common conceptions of what constitutes a church, such as buildings, programs, and paid staff, by examining how ecclesiology affects the goals of church planting. He argues a local church is simply the local expression of the universal body of Christ that "comes into existence when people repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus, are baptized and agree to unite together (self-identify) as followers of Jesus in community with one another."[112]

A church in essence is people. Allison explains, "The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit."[113] He goes on to specifically state, "In contrast with some common notions today, [a church] is not a building."[114] Consequently, it is essential when defining a church plant to not minimize the desired goals to establishing a building, event, or institution. In fact, Jones proposes the pursuits of buildings, large gatherings, offerings, and paid staff are antithetical to the mission and purpose of the church to reach and disciple people which began in Acts and continues today.[115] The single and driving identity of a church is its people as disciples and disciple-makers of Christ.

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[111] Payne, *Missional House Churches*, 27-28.

[112] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 22.

[113] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

[114] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 30.

[115] Peyton Jones, *Church Zero: Raising 1st Century Churches Out of the Ashes of the 21st Century Church* (Colorado Spring: David Cook, 2013), 26.

Therefore, with the definition of a *church* firmly established as disciples of Jesus who gather as a local expression of his body under the new covenant, the trajectory and desired goals of planting a church are established as acts which make and gather disciples. Aubrey Malphurs defines church planting as "An exhausting but exciting venture of faith that involves the planned process of beginning and growing new local churches, based on Jesus' promise and in obedience to his Great Commission."[116] Jones expands upon Malphurs' definition by focusing specifically on the Great Commission. Jones summarizes the key principles of Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-47, and John 20:21 into the five principles of make disciples, baptize them in the name of the triune God, teach them to obey Christ's commands, go to all nations, and preach, and argues that when these principles are carried out church plants will be a natural result.[117] A new church plant is both the result of and vehicle for disciple-making.

When examining the effectiveness of planting missional churches, it is important to remember that church planting is not the primary focus of efforts, but rather making disciples. Therefore, new churches are the effect of making disciples. Payne reminds, "We are called to sow the gospel seed and allow the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people to birth churches in their unique cultures."[118] Jones agrees, stating, "Christ never commanded his disciples to plant churches, because it's not what He wanted them to focus on. Focusing on the church to be planted leads to church starting, whereas focusing on the Great Commission [of making disciples] itself leads to church planting."[119] Payne observes the birth and multiplication of churches naturally comes after disciples are made, stating that biblical church planting is "evangelism that results in new disciples, who then

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[116] Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Guide to New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 19.

[117] Jones, *Church Plantology*, 12-13.

[118] Payne, *Missional House Churches*, 134.

[119] Jones, *Church Plantology*, 12.

gather together and self-identify as the local expression of the universal body of Christ. Churches are supposed to be birthed from disciple making."[120] Missional church plants are the natural fruit of missional disciple-making.

Without the motivation of reaching the unreached and making new disciples, church plants can quickly become an exercise in gathering existing disciples into new spaces. As Jeff Christopherson and Mac Lake propose, missional church plants should never lose sight of the unreached and advancement of God's kingdom for the sake of focusing on gathering people.[121] Christopherson and Lake argue that rather than gauging success based on the size of gatherings or perception by the community, church plants should instead pursue the goals of reaching and discipling new believers, developing new disciple-makers, fostering new communities of faith where new believers can meet, and catalyzing transformation in the communities where disciples are being made.[122] Like the good shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep to pursue the one, missional church plants value and pursue the lost over gathering the saved.

Jones describes the stark differences between what he terms "church starting," which begins with the church itself as the goal, and what is truly church planting, which is the natural result of making disciples. He proposes the requirements of church starting include raising hundreds of thousands of dollars, recruiting enough people to ensure critical mass, renting or purchasing a meeting space, developing attractive branding, and advertising for launch day. Jones states, "What has been accomplished is a 'pop up' church that appears on Sundays and disappears the other six days of the week."[123] The church starting approach focuses primarily on the Sunday service as the sole event and

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[120] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 17-18.

[121] Jeff Christopherson and Mac Lake, *Kingdom First: Starting Churches That Shape Movements* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 22-23.

[122] Christopherson and Lake, *Kingdom First,* 28-31.

[123] Jones, *Church Plantology*, 4.

fails to enter the lives of the unreached. In contrast, Jones proposes church planting begins with intense prayer and a focus on bringing the gospel to the lost. Team members are primarily missionaries who enter the rhythms of the community, meet people, and make disciples. Disciple-makers and new disciples speak into the life of the community, at times confronting relevant issues in the culture, and await divine opportunities.[124] This wider approach to church planting dissolves the limitations of focusing on gathering people for a weekly event.

Therefore, a missional church plant is the people of God, covenanting together as a local expression of the body of Christ, resulting from and carrying on the mission of making disciples. With this understanding, a missional community of believers in the urban context who have already engaged in connecting with people and making disciples is poised to lay the foundation for a healthy urban church plant by carrying on the missional principles which defined the group. While a missional community includes a regular gathering and other organizational characteristics, its identity is found in the members who comprise it and the people those members seek to reach.

Identifying Ecclesiastical Foundations

Missional communities possess the potential for supporting the transition into a church plant by carrying out many ecclesiastical functions of an autonomous church. By creating biblical community among its members, defining leaders, and carrying out the ministries synonymous with a local congregation, a missional community lays the foundation for existence as a self-identifying expression of the body of Christ. However, as Payne proposes, the determining factor of recognition as a new and autonomous church is based in the group's self-identification as a church, not the essentiality of its functions.[125] As he describes, these functions are "something the church *does*, not what

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[124] Jones, *Church Plantology*, 5.

[125] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 25-26.

the church *is*. . . . This distinction is intentional. The church's essence and actions are different."[126] Therefore, these ecclesiastical functions of a missional community are not essential from the beginning for existence of a church that *is*, but they are important aspects of a church *to come*.

Missional communities naturally embody many functions of existing churches. Hammet describes the five ministries of the church as teaching, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism, and relates these ministries to the very nature of the church.[127] Allison adds that churches "pursue purity and unity, exercise church discipline, and celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. . . . These communities regularly gather to worship the triune God, proclaim his Word, engage non-Christians with the gospel, disciple their members, and care for people through prayer and giving."[128] While the number of people, location, and resources available to a missional community may vary from those of an established church, the ministries of the church are still possible.

Missional communities are well equipped to fulfill the ministries of teaching the Word through biblical study together, the fellowship of believers, and serving one another through community life and evangelistic mission through intentional outreach into their local community. The organic and affable nature of missional communities make them ideal for teaching with accountability while also welcoming and nurturing new believers. The logistics and abilities of technology, singers, and musicians associated with the traditional expectations of worship in most established churches may inhibit some members of a missional community to recognize its validity. However, these expectations of worship are connected more to preference than principal. Singing along to music played on a computer or other device can account for worship along with other approaches to

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[126] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 27.

[127] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 253, 246.

[128] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29-30.

worship such as verbally thanking God, reflecting on his goodness, and publicly declaring his greatness, which are attainable for missional communities. As Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im propose, the objective of worship is to enable believers to encounter God and unbelievers to observe the divine–human encounter.[129] The objective of encountering God is possible even in smaller simpler gatherings. In addition, the intimate and organic nature of the ministries carried out by a missional community are both powerful and appealing to some people who have been missed by the more institutional approaches of larger churches.

Local churches are often defined by their ecclesial acts of liturgy and community life such as the acts of baptism by immersion and taking the Lord's Supper. While baptism and the Lord's Supper are especially visible and closely held ecclesial values, both are possible for missional communities to functionally pursue and accommodate as a part of their gatherings. However, these functions will likely look different than the perceptions or previous experiences participants hold from their past, causing them to prefer these acts to be conducted in the context of an established church's worship service. Payne discusses the ordinances of communion and baptism given by Jesus to his church and the importance of modeling these ordinances for new believers.[130] However, he also recognizes the assumption that our own cultural understanding of these functions is normative. Therefore, there is freedom to pursue the leading of God's Word and Spirit to determine the specific implementation of these ordinances.[131] Missional communities may choose to baptize new believers using an existing church's building or a local body of water at the discretion of the group members. Similarly, as long as reverence is given to the sacrifice and sanctifying work of Christ, a missional community can celebrate the Lord's

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[129] Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches that Multiply* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 270.

[130] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 27.

[131] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 28.

Supper using a frequency and method chosen by its members. The presence and expression of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper in a missional community set the stage of teaching and practice for those ordinances to continue into the life of a new church plant.

At first consideration, other functions of a local church such as weddings and funerals may seem less likely within the context of a missional community due to the functionality of church buildings in providing larger spaces. However, especially for committed members of a missional community, the group and location's more intimate context and specific people may be preferred for weddings and funerals. Whether as a missional community or later as a church plant, the group may choose to meet in a larger space, which serves as a reminder that a missional community or missional church plant is not defined by its meeting space but by its people and mission. The unique nature of a missional community's congregational orientation qualifies it to provide affirmation of a marriage blessed by God or a life faithfully lived for His glory.

Another important event in the communal life of both a missional community and missional church plant is ordination. Hammett explains that while ordination is traditionally a denominational activity, "first and most important, ordination allows a church to affirm the gifts, character, and calling of those it recognizes as qualified to serve as elders and deacons. . . . God confirms individual leading by corporate affirmation."[132] Therefore, while it seems inappropriate for a missional community to ordain leaders for ministry in a different congregation, it is the most appropriate body to affirm a person's gifts, calling, and leadership within their own group. As Payne observes, "There is little in the bible to support much of the ordination processes that have developed over church history. . . . Examining Spirit-filled people according to the biblical requirements (both of lifestyle and belief), prayer and laying on of hands by the church as

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[132] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 239.

a sign of affirmation and call for service is sufficient."[133] The identity and intimate fellowship of a missional community qualify it to recognize and celebrate events in its communal life such as ordination and manifest its autonomy as a self-identifying expression of the body of Christ.

Missional communities are also a doorway to a future church plant by giving participants a positive representation of the general experience of being part of a local church. Hammett summarizes the characteristics that define the essence of the church, highlighting identity and purpose over methods and programs. He observes that the church centers on God as those who are called to be God's people and who seek to please him. Hammett adds that the church is an organized assembly with recognized membership and leaders and is a purposeful assembly with action and mission that is called together in unity.[134] Missional communities share the essence of the church by centering on God and honoring him by assembling as his people for action and mission. However, like local congregations, the ability and purity of attaining to this essence is determined by the temperament and posture of each individual gathering. A healthy missional community will certainly provide a positive experience of Christian community, devotion, and mission. Even if participants of a missional community move on to another missional community, church plant, or established church, they will carry the expectations, skills, and attitudes for fruitful ministry and participation. For those who remain a part of the missional community through a transition into a church plant, their experience in ministry and biblical community will enable them to fruitfully contribute to the life and ministry of the nascent church, providing stability and unity.

One important consideration for missional communities that lay a foundation for potential church plants is the existence and exercise of authority by those in leadership.

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[133] Payne *Apostolic Church Planting*, 72.

[134] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 75-77.

Just as in a church plant, leaders must be recognized, held accountable to biblical principles, and trusted by members of the missional community. Regarding a transition to a church plant, the missional community's leadership team exercises authority in determining if the group should transition into a church plant and will be crucial to any endeavor to do so. Allison discusses the essential role of authority, citing 1 Thessalonians 5:12 as a model for elders to exercise authority over its members in leading the church.[135] Therefore, within a missional community, the authority of those in leadership should be respected in their sphere of responsibility to teach, lead, pray, and shepherd the group, just as elders would carry these same functions in a church. Allison notes, "Elders engage together in leading the church. . . . [but] most importantly, Jesus Christ exercises ultimate lordship authority as the head of his body, the church."[136] As Hammett adds, "joining the church should be a momentous step in which the individual surrenders a degree of personal autonomy, accepting the discipline of the body and accepting responsibilities for and commitments to the corporate body."[137] Committed members of a missional community respect the authority of those in leadership, which creates a framework for a healthy structure of leadership in the new church plant.

Authority becomes especially pertinent in the exercise of discipline. Allison observes that there is an expectation that followers of Christ live lives pursuing holiness. Therefore, discipline is an essential function of church leadership as "a proleptic and declarative sign of the divine eschatological judgement, meted out by Jesus Christ through the church against its sinful members and sinful situations."[138] Allison adds the important definition that "church discipline is to be undertaken with the goal that the

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[135] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 220.

[136] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 220, 253.

[137] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 79.

[138] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 181-82.

offending Christian will acknowledge sin, confess it, and repent. . . . restoration is the intended purpose."[139] Payne argues that gatherings of Christians and even churches can exist early on without practicing corrective discipline, but should be taught about formative and corrective discipline as soon as possible.[140] In all cases, discipline within a missional community is a function of recognized leadership and developed authority within the missional community. Like autonomy and leadership development, discipline that is effectively carried out is the mark of a healthy and biblically founded fellowship. The existence of an established leadership team with structures of accountability and recognition of biblical authority in a missional community provides an excellent foundation for transitioning into an autonomous church plant.

Transitioning to an Autonomous
Church Plant

Missional communities that make disciples and provide Christian fellowship in unreached neighborhoods in the urban context are prime for transitioning into autonomous church plants. Payne summarizes church planting simply as "evangelism that results in new churches."[141] Jones notes the actions associated with the Great Commission are transformational, and states, "Every time these things are done, church plants are left in our wake. Church planting is what inevitably happens when you focus on [making new disciples]."[142] Therefore, while some missional communities may not set out with the goal of planting a church, the specific goal of reaching the unreached and making disciples may result in planting a church. As Conn and Ortiz note, a missional community that practices life-on-life discipleship follows the biblical pattern of "training their people to

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[139] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 188.

[140] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting,* 27.

[141] Payne, *Missional House Churches*, 13.

[142] Jones, *Church Plantology*, 13.

reproduce the church in the city and equipping their members to become the major force in this move. [Missional communities] take on the challenge of urban mission and find the responsibility for the growth of the church and the reproduction of the church."[143]

Missional communities that grow in establishment and size may have the desire and ability to organize themselves and begin carrying out the full functions of an autonomous church. At this point the missional community no longer serves as a conduit to other congregations but forms and grows its own indigenous congregation. While the goal of the missional community remains reaching and engaging unreached people and making disciples, a shift in identity takes place. Brock describes how an indigenous church has a self-reliance that gives it the ability to grow within the culture where it finds itself, without outside support or control.[144] He goes on to describe the marks of self-reliance as self-governing to make decisions under the lordship of Christ, self-supporting to provide for its own needs, self-teaching to expect and participate in the reading of scripture, self-expressing to fellowship and worship with its own personality, and self-propagating to consider how, when, and where to plant other new churches.[145] Payne argues that the identity of self-reliance through self-governance and self-expression are vital for the group to remain healthy through the beginning stages of existence as a church.[146] Out of this new identity, the missional community will take a series of steps toward becoming an autonomous church. These steps are dictated by whether the missional community was established as an outreach of an existing church or independent of all other local churches.

For missional communities that were established as an intentional outreach of an existing church it is essential that both the church and the missional community are in

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[143] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 457.

[144] Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting*, 89.

[145] Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting*, 90-95.

[146] Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 87-88.

clear agreement about the transition to becoming an autonomous church. A church that intentionally launches and supports a missional community could be considered the "sponsoring church."[147] The sponsoring church commissions a small team of committed, mature believers who have skills for contextualizing the gospel in the urban context to live, work, and serve as missionaries in a specific neighborhood. This group of missionaries serve as the leadership team of the forming missional community while also building relationships with neighbors. This team exists with accountability to the sponsoring church which speaks into the fundamental gospel message communicated by the missional community but understands the methods within the neighborhood are unique to and best determined by the missional community's leadership team. The sponsoring church also acknowledges the potential for the missional community to one day become an autonomous church plant within the neighborhood, thus becoming a "sister church" of the sponsoring church.

When the missional community grows in both depth of maturity and attendance of neighborhood residents, the leadership team and members of the missional community along with the leaders of the sponsoring church must be in complete agreement of using the missional community as a core team for planting a new church with its own recognized forms of worship and ministry. This shift in identity requires an intentional decision by the missional community's leadership and members, and the leadership of the existing church, to pursue the missional community's autonomy. The new plant must be recognized as an autonomous church which will govern and sustain itself as the sponsoring church changes its posture from that of a parent to that of a peer. The leadership and members of the new church plant take on the ecclesiastical functions of meeting for teaching, liturgy, fellowship, and ministry as a self-expressing manifestation of the body of Christ. Those

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[147] Stetzer and Im use the language of "sponsoring church" to describe the relationship between an existing church that sends a team for planting and a new church plant. Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 45-46.

men who have been recognized by the missional community members and likely previously affirmed by the sponsoring church as having biblical qualities of leadership take on the role of elders in the new church. As the new church meets and exists, both the new church and the sponsoring church celebrate the glory of God's mission and provision to extend His kingdom.

For missional communities that were established by a group of mature believers as an outreach to a specific neighborhood without formal connections to an existing church, the transition to an autonomous church is more organic than the transition from being an outreach of another church. A missional community that is independent from another church already possesses the autonomy to self-identify itself as an expression of the church and begins carrying out the essential functions of a local church to reach, disciple, and gather new followers of Jesus. Payne notes, "There are many ways to plant a church; however, the model in the scriptures is one that begins with evangelism and ends with new churches following the Lord in obedience."[148] Therefore, the primary requirement and validation of transitioning into an autonomous church is that new disciples are being made, thus necessitating a gathering for believers. As Stetzer and Im note, mere dissatisfaction with existing churches or the unfulfillment of personal preferences are not compelling reasons for planting a new church.[149] The leadership and members of the missional community must sense a calling from God to establish a church that will carry on the ministry of reaching their community by making disciples.

The missional community becomes a church when its members covenant together as a self-expression of the body of Christ. As a result, members of the missional community who were previously active members of other churches in the community commit to the new church plant as their ecclesiastical home. Men who had been recognized

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[148] J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 4.

[149] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 48.

by members of the missional community as having biblical qualities of leadership and served in leadership of the group, transition into the role of elders in the new church. Members of the new church plant continue and expand their functions of meeting for teaching, liturgy, fellowship, and ministry. Since missional communities share so many characteristics with missional house churches, missional communities that transition into a new church plant in their neighborhood may be similar in form to a house church or network of house churches, thus being aided by literature and resources created through the house church movement.[150]

While no local church has any direct authority over the missional community nor its transition into a church plant, it is still both considerate and prudent to inform the local churches from which any members are coming of the new church plant. This provides opportunities for awareness, encouragement, and prayer support. As Payne notes, the life of a disciple and disciple-maker is a life of constant spiritual warfare. Therefore, the need for prayer and emotional support are essential.[151] Church planters must not overlook the importance of such solidarity in their mission and the new church will benefit from seeking the affirmation and encouragement of the larger body of Christ.

Sustaining Missional Principles

When a missional community transitions into an autonomous church, it is essential for it to maintain the powerful characteristics of missional motivation and orientation that established and grew it as a missional community. As Craig Van Gelder proposes, a missional orientation is a reclaiming of the full identity of the church.[152]

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[150] For potential resources see Payne, *Missional House Churches*; and Wolfgang Simson, *The House Church Book: Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2009).

[151] Payne, *Discovering Church Planting*, 77-79.

[152] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), xvii.

Becoming a replica of existing congregations and worship services is antithetical to the purpose and methods of reaching and discipling unengaged people. McNeal observes, "In missional communities the focus of the gathering is what happens away from the gathering. Everyday life is the core curriculum. The gathering celebrates and debriefs the participant's lives and missional engagement with the people around them."[153] Therefore, in addition to a commitment to biblical teaching and obedience, it is essential for the missional church plant to sustain its missional principles throughout its life as a church.

The central missional principle that must be sustained through the church plant's existence is the identity and compulsion of the Great Commission. Members of the new church must remain convicted and active in personally making disciples. Stefan Paas notes the explosive growth and multiplication of new churches when members are personally and sacrificially on a mission to share the gospel with others. He observes that these members possess a "contagious joy of having discovered what Christianity it all about (holiness, personal conversion, spiritual experience, etc.) and a mission of evangelizing [their context] by the application of this newly found gospel resulting in individual conversions and new churches."[154] Therefore, missional church plants in the urban context must sustain the Great Commission as its central identity, all-inclusive motivation, and every-member expectation.

Missional communities that focus on disciple-making develop crucial patterns of disciple-making for sustaining healthy church plants. These patterns and expectations of disciple-making can be understood as part of the new church's DNA. Keller notes that missional churches must equip laypeople for mission through evangelistic witness, public life, and vocation, arguing that all people need theological education to "think Christianly"

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153 McNeal, *Missional Communities*, 30.

154 Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 88.

about everything and to act with Christian distinctiveness.[155] If people take on the mission of reaching an urban neighborhood and making disciples there, then churches will be planted and reproduce. In addition, these new disciples and the churches they are formed into will possess the cultural and social DNA of the neighborhood and thus better contextualize the gospel and the church to neighborhood. However, it must be noted disciple-making DNA cannot be achieved once and naturally sustained. Payne notes one of the greatest challenges cited by leaders of missional house churches was leading the churches to be outwardly focused rather than drawing inward. Evangelism is challenging work and must remain at the forefront of vision and accountability.[156]

Missional church plants must never relegate the Great Commission to a peripheral program or optional task for a select few. Once the focus shifts to merely maintaining or growing the gathering, the group's identity and members lose their missional foundation. The leadership of the church plant cannot abandon the missional vehicle which brought them to the point of planting the church. Stetzer and Im remind, "Missional church planters focus on the Great Commission by reaching the unchurched, not by seeking to attract area Christians."[157] Sustained attention to the Great Commission maintains the focus and power of making disciples.

Following the evangelistic mandate of the Great Commission also maintains the new church's relevance which it had established in its community. As Christopherson and Lake remark, "When churches are planted *for* evangelism, they often find themselves culturally mismatched and fail to gain an indigenous foothold. When churches are [planted] *from* evangelism, they seem instinctively to know how to move forward, with great

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[155] Keller, *Center Church,* 259-60.

[156] Payne, *Missional House Churches*, 127.

[157] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 7.

credibility, in a sea of networks and relationships."[158] The acts of contextualizing the gospel, addressing poverty, and continuing life-on-life discipling relationships under the motivation of the Great Commission ensure the new church will remain relevant to the culture and contours of its urban community.

Another missional principle that must be sustained is the recognition of leadership from within the community. A challenge encountered by many residents of urban neighborhoods is the experience of entering a congregational gathering to discover there is no one like them in leadership. For a person of color or low socio-economic status to visibly observe that the leadership team is strictly white or upper-class is both discouraging and off-putting. Sid Smith reflects upon the obstacles experienced by black people in attending churches with all white leadership teams. He notes the challenges include a communication of distrust toward black people, a lack of cultural relevance in worship practices, and the defeat of a theology of healthy multi-ethnic relationships.[159] Smith proposes that shared leadership in cross-cultural ministry can provide an effective channel for reaching multi-racial communities.[160] Therefore, an urban church plant that has transitioned from a missional community must sustain its commitment to diversity in its leadership. As Robert Linthicum notes, communities of believers in the urban context fulfill the vital role of community identity, which is "the process that enables the church to actually be the church within its neighborhood."[161]

A closely connected principle to the preservation of diversity among leadership of a missional church plant is sustaining the development of new lay leadership. Linthicum

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[158] Christopherson and Lake, *Kingdom First*, 2.

[159] Sid Smith, *Church Planting in the Black Community* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1989), 16-18.

[160] Smith, *Church Planting in the Black Community*, 19.

[161] Robert C. Linthicum, "Authentic Strategies for Urban Ministry," in Greenway, *Discipling the City*, 118.

observes missional communities are a natural ground for leadership development as new people are identified, discipled, and given opportunities for the practice of leadership within the missional community. These leaders naturally begin to apply the theology and practice of leadership in other areas of life and identity within the larger community.[162] This practice of developing leaders must be maintained into the existence of the church.

For the gospel to be contextualized, poverty to be addressed, and life-on-life discipleship to take place, missional churches must hold firmly to the value of lay leadership. One the greatest potentials for limiting the multiplication of missional churches is their paradigm of leadership. A group's ability to multiply and grow new leaders is largely dependent upon how those in leadership and others view the role of leadership. Payne proposes many churches and church leaders have a maintenance mentality rather than a multiplication mentality. This mentality is compounded by a top-down leadership approach and the assumption that highly educated professional clergy are necessary for church health.[163] Therefore, in this mentality, the lay-involvement which is needed for the continued growth and multiplication of churches is severely limited. For this reason, Payne suggests that "professional church leaders should be seen as the exception, rather than the norm."[164] Development of lay leaders is essential to planting missional churches in the urban context because their nature requires multiplication as new disciples are made. As Allen proposes, the key to overcoming and erasing many of the present obstacles to spontaneous expansion of the church is the equipment of small native congregations with full power and authority. This allows local churches of Christians to use their wisdom and

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[162] Linthicum, "Authentic Strategies for Urban Ministry," 118-21.

[163] J. D. Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach to North American Church Multiplication Movements of Robert E. Logan in Light of the Missiology of Roland Allen" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 278.

[164] Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach," 278.

understanding of local culture to make appropriate decisions and drive growth.[165]
Missional plants in the urban context that carry on the legacy of developing lay leaders
for all levels of ministry will continue to reap the fruit of expanding mission.

The final principle that must be sustained from the nature of the missional
community into the existence of a church plant is multiplication. The missional community
was founded on multiplying missional practitioners and new disciples and creating a new
gathering place in an under-engaged location. Payne recognizes that the gospel was
designed to be spread from person to person through relationships and natural
connections.[166] He argues new believers should be equipped, empowered, and released
into their communities to make disciples.[167] Therefore, the pursuit of and expectation of
multiplication is an essential part of any missional community that transitions into a
missional church plant.

The church plant must carry on this motivation and practice of multiplication
by continually looking to the horizon of where new disciples and new gatherings can be
made. Payne argues the presupposition that the greatest multiplication in the North
American church will take place through congregations that are yet to be planted.[168] He
observes, "Most established congregations and many recently planted congregations are
entrenched in theological and cultural paradigms that are counter-multiplication."[169]
Therefore, Payne argues new congregations must be planted with a robust ecclesiology
and pneumatology along with a philosophy of reproduction, leadership multiplication,

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[165] Rolland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder It* (London: World Dominion Press, 1927), 3.

[166] Payne, *Discovering Church Planting*, 100.

[167] Payne, *Discovering Church Planting*, 101.

[168] Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach," 250.

[169] J. D. Payne "Suggested Shifts in Preparation for the Spontaneous Expansion of the North American Church," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 14, no. 1 (January 2003): 47.

and the practice of missionary faith.[170] The urgency to plant new churches in the urban context with a philosophy to reach new neighborhoods through multiplication continues to increase. Therefore, churches with an imagination and expectation for multiplication will continue the principle of kingdom expansion for God's glory.

The principle of multiplication in the new church plant will be sustained through the presence of a philosophy of multiplication that permeates the church's identity. Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson identify five principles of reproducing that begin in missional communities that must be carried into existence as a church. They propose that, for reproduction to take place, every leader must have an apprentice, reproduction should be proactive as tied to the mission of reaching new people rather than being tied to necessity of capacity, reproduction should be about leader readiness rather than group size, reproduction should be about God's kingdom rather than human accomplishments, and leaders must acknowledge God can use a diversity of churches, gatherings, and groups to grow His church.[171] A missional church plant that embodies the principles of multiplication will naturally reproduce disciples and more churches.

Conclusion

Missional communities located in urban neighborhoods are a powerful means of transforming lives and communities for God's glory. Developing devoted followers of Jesus who can display the transformational work of Christ in their daily lives and engage and disciple others as indigenous members of the neighborhood is key to reaching the urban context. These urban disciples naturally contextualize the gospel for new generations of disciples to be made. Addressing poverty one individual or family at a time by providing safe and stable environments for meeting physical needs and healing from past traumas

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[170] Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach," 251.

[171] Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Church Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 24-29.

creates future stability and a platform for communicating the relevance of the gospel. Life-on-life discipleship that models faith and entrusts the deposit of the gospel to be shared with the next generation of disciples ensures the mission will continue, to the glory of God. Furthermore, the existence of missional communities that make disciples in urban neighborhoods lay a foundation for planting new urban churches that relevantly embody the gospel and carry on a mission of multiplication for reaching other neighborhoods. Missional communities are truly a powerful tool used by God to reach the lost and expand His church.

CHAPTER 4

MISSIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
AND IMPLEMENTATION

The project to develop the Community Table gathering in Decatur, Illinois,
into a missional community began in July 2021 and was completed in October 2021. The
original plan was to complete this project in twenty-four weeks; however, growing concern
regarding the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on the ability of groups to meet together
caused the leadership of Community Table, the expert panel, and The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary faculty advisor for the project to recommend an accelerated
completion of preparing and teaching the lessons to minimize in-person gatherings for the
project. In hindsight, decreasing the number of weeks the group met was wise, as
consistent meetings were difficult for several members. Consequently, sixteen weeks
were dedicated to the development and completion of this project.

Although the project began in July 2021 with members of Community Table
meeting beginning in August 2021, Community Table existed as a group prior to the
project. Through the winter months of 2019 into 2020, Community Table had been a
thriving group both from the Block Neighborhood and the larger community, meeting
together to study the Bible, fellowship, spur one another on in faith, and pray together.
However, the presence and effects of COVID -19 halted the gatherings and created
barriers to meeting in person. The last official gathering of Community Table was March
4, 2020. While a weekly video check-in on Zoom continued during the spring of 2020,
participants soon lost interest. In addition, the closing of schools, changing of working
hours, increasing racial tensions, and the presence of new relational and emotional strains
greatly affected the core team and target group of Community Table. People moved,

phone numbers changed, and relationships waned. Therefore, communicating to and regathering Community Table members proved challenging. Though, the calling sensed by existing members of Community Table to reach and disciple the Block Neighborhood continued.

As a way of reconnecting with neighborhood residents, several Community Table members began holding a weekly event during the summer of 2021 called Open Yard. Open Yard took place on Wednesday evenings at the ministry house in the Block Neighborhood. Children, teens, and adults played basketball and other games while others did activities and talked. Popcorn, other food, and occasionally a meal was served. The informal atmosphere and outdoor venue created an ideal environment for meeting neighbors, establishing and re-establishing friendships, and encouraging one another. While there was no formal Bible study at Open Yard, faith was discussed as an element of life, and prayer for stated needs was encouraged.

During week 1 of the project, the expert panel of missional practitioners were contacted via e-mail.[1] The e-mail included an explanation of the goals of this project, a draft of the Missional Understanding Survey (MUS), and the proposed outline for the missional curriculum. The panel responded with helpful feedback during week 2, and updated outlines were developed during week 3 for an eight-lesson curriculum.

During weeks 4-6, the first drafts of lessons 1-3 of the missional curriculum were created and submitted to the expert panel for initial feedback and evaluation, with lesson 4 submitted during week 7. The expert panel responded with critiques and suggestions, and revisions to the lessons were made according to their recommendations.

During weeks 4-6, core members of Community Table from past meetings and new members who had expressed interest were contacted and informed of the times and

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[1] The missional panel consisted of Gary Burlington, former missions professor and observer at Community Table; David Newman, doctoral student and missional practitioner in La Mirada, CA; and Rob Shoaff, former missionary in international urban ministry.

dates of the gatherings. Contact came first in the form of a home visit during weeks 4-5, then through a second home visit and delivery of an informational letter that explained the schedule and details of the eight-lesson Bible study curriculum. [2] The letter to participants was drafted to communicate the details of regathering Community Table for the fall. The contents of the letter included the meeting dates, meeting times, and a note that meals and childcare would be provided. The letter also explained the Missional Curriculum lessons presented at Community Table and that participants would be requested to take the MUS. The goal of the letter was to engage and re-engage with past and potential members of Community Table with an invitation to join the gathering in the fall of 2021. The letter was delivered to residents of the Block Neighborhood during the home visits and also distributed on August 18 at the last night of Open Yard.

Wednesday, August 18, during week 6 was the last Open Yard for the summer. Everyone in attendance was invited to attend the Community Cookout the following week on Wednesday, August 25. Those in attendance were also given a copy of the "Letter to Participants" that had been distributed to neighbors in the Block and those who had participated in Community Table in the past.

On Wednesday, August 25, the core members of Community Table and several guests, including those who had attended Open Yard, gathered outdoors for a meal and fellowship. The cookout served as the first Community Table event of the fall. The cookout provided an opportunity to reconnect as neighbors and friends after a long period of being disconnected, as well as an opportunity for new members to be introduced and build relationships. Those in attendance were reacquainted or met for the first time as they shared the meal together. Nine people were in attendance. Two individuals were absent due to conflicting family events and two families were unable to attend due to exposure to people who had tested positive for COVID -19.

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[2] See appendix 5.

The cookout took place at the ministry house where I live, in the Block Neighborhood. The ministry house is where past Community Table gatherings have been held. At the conclusion of the meal, members moved into the dining room of my home to sit around the large table where Community Table is typically held. I provided an explanation of the format for the following five weeks, including the provision of meals each week and childcare for families with children. I also explained the nightly schedule with fellowship, sharing the meal together, checking in from the previous week, presentation of one or two lessons, discussion, closing prayer, and the plan for childcare. After the explanation, each member shared personal updates and prayer requests. The group then spent 25 minutes in a powerful time of prayer for one another and the Block Neighborhood. Next, I distributed the MUS for each member to complete, and those who had already completed it assisted several members who required help reading the questions. I concluded the evening by thanking each person for their commitment to Community Table and shared my excitement for our upcoming time together in fellowship, Bible study, discussion, and prayer.

Those who committed to join Community Table for the fall were surveyed during weeks 5–7, with most members completing the MUS during week 7 at the Community Table cookout. While the survey was anonymous, participants used the last four digits of their phone number to provide data for a comparative analysis between pre- and post-curriculum surveys. Each member of Community Table's core team was given a physical copy of the MUS with a request to complete the survey.[3] The results were received and evaluated during week 7, allowing me to finalize the development of the missional curriculum.

During week 6, an important decision was made resulting in modifications to the lesson schedule and timeline for developing the eight lessons in the curriculum. Core

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[3] See appendix 1.

members of Community Table voiced concern that eight weeks of meeting weekly for lessons beginning September 8 followed by three weeks of meeting for review and discussion beginning November 3 would be difficult and uncertain given the rapid spread of COVID -19 in the Decatur community and many public gatherings being limited or cancelled. This observation of urgency was affirmed by the expert panel and the SBTS faculty advisor overseeing the project. Therefore, the decision was made to begin teaching the missional curriculum on Wednesday, September 1, and include two lessons on the evenings of September 8, 22, and 29, condensing the meeting time to five evenings. A final decision regarding the format and schedule of follow-up discussions was postponed until September 22 when the group met. The decision to expedite the presentation of the lessons also resulted in abbreviating several lessons to make them fit the allotted time.

The first lesson of the missional curriculum[4] was presented the evening of September 1, during week 8 of the project. Eight people were in attendance, including one person who was unable to participate in the cookout the previous week. Two core members of Community Table were unable to attend due to extenuating family circumstances. In addition to completing the lesson and shared meal, the group completed a time of checking in, which included sharing about the previous week and prayer for one another.

Lessons 2 and 3 of the curriculum were presented the evening of September 8, during week 9 of the project. Twelve people were in attendance, including two from the community cookout and two additional participants. Both lessons, a meal, and group check-in were completed in the allotted time of two hours.

The evening lessons 2 and 3 were presented provided important observations that led to several shifts in the format of the following weeks. It was observed that participants desired to share and receive prayer, but the initial thirty minutes during the meal was not adequate for everyone to share and people were hesitant to talk while eating.

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[4] See appendix 7.

Therefore, the check-in time and review from the previous week took twenty minutes longer planned and the rest of the lesson time was rushed and did not leave adequate time for discussion and prayer at the end.

Therefore, changes were made to the format and schedule of the gathering. It was announced that doors would open at 5:00 p.m. so participants could arrive and talk with one another. At 5:20 p.m., "check-in" cards were distributed to each participant with prompting questions for discussion and prayer and participants were encouraged to find another person to check-in and pray with. The meal was served at 5:30 p.m. I completed the review of previous weeks and presented initial information for the lesson as people ate the meal. The group took a break at 6:30 p.m. before starting the next section or lesson. These shifts to the schedule proved to be helpful in arranging the lesson and review and providing adequate time for prayer and discussion at the end.

During weeks 8–10, the first drafts of lessons 5–8 of the missional curriculum were created and submitted to the expert panel for initial feedback and evaluation. The expert panel responded during week 10 with critiques and suggestions. Revisions to the lessons were made according to their recommendations. Given the content of lesson 8 pertaining to issues of racial division and steps toward racial reconciliation, additional research was completed and added to the final draft of lesson during week 11.

During week 11, the expert panel completed the Curriculum Evaluation Rubric for the entire curriculum and submitted it. Sufficient marks were achieved for the biblical accuracy, scope of the content, pedagogy, and practicality of the application.[5] The expert panel was graciously thanked for their participation and feedback.

Lesson 4 of the missional curriculum was presented the evening of September 15, during week 10 of the project. Eight people were in attendance, with two participants absent because they were traveling, one was sick, and one was called in to work. The

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[5] See appendix 6 for the completed curriculum rubric.

format for the check-in, meal, and lesson was modified from the previous weeks and all components were completed in the allotted time of two hours. The shift in format created an improved environment for enjoying the meal together and discussion of the presented material. The group agreed unanimously that the shift was positive.

Lessons 5–6 of the missional curriculum were presented the evening of September 22, during week 11 of the project. Nine people were in attendance, with three participants unable to attend due to family or home emergencies. All nine attenders had participated in at least two prior weeks of lesson presentation. The format of the evening followed the pattern from the previous week. Participants arrived and checked in with one another and prayed. The basic review of the previous weeks was followed by prayer for the meal and the evening. While participants ate, lesson 5 was presented followed by a short break. Lesson 6 was then presented, followed by a discussion and prayer time for the evening. All components of the gathering and both lessons were completed in the allotted time of two hours.

Lessons 7–8 of the missional curriculum were presented the evening of September 29, during week 12 of the project. Nine people were in attendance, with one person unable to attend due to having COVID -19 and four absent due to work or family emergencies. One new attender came to observe the format of the Bible study, discussion, and group interaction to implement in their own neighborhood group. Another new attender is a resident of the Block Neighborhood who came to faith in Christ the previous week as the result of the prayers of group members.[6] With great joy, the Community Table group welcomed him to the gathering. The time together included an intentional checking in with one another, sharing a meal, the presentation of lesson 7, a time of discussion, the presentation of lesson 8, further discussion of specific prayer requests, and lifting one

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[6] During lesson 1 on September 1, as an example of how group members can pray for another person to come to faith, I shared my experiences praying for a resident of the Block neighborhood named Domingo, and asking God for opportunities to invite him to begin a journey of faith. On September 24, Domingo accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior and began an intentional walk of faith with Him.

another's requests in prayer around the table. All components of the gathering and both lessons were completed in the allotted time of two hours.

A review and discussion of all eight lessons was conducted on October 6, during week 13. Eleven people were in attendance, including new person who came the previous week, and three people from the neighborhood who came for the first time. Two people were unable to attend due to COVID -19 quarantine, one person due to a family member in the hospital, and one person due to work. During the meal and check-in, the group discussed the predetermined set of evaluative questions designed to help participants think practically about missional strategies and create accountability to apply them.[7] After the meal and check-in, the group reviewed and discussed the main points of each lesson. Group members reflected on their prayers, personal connection to God, and missional interactions with unreached people. The group was especially interested to discuss the nature of the local church, the power of life-on-life discipleship, and how members of a missional community can support one another and model racial unity. Group members committed to pray during the coming week seeking God's leading for the future of Community Table and regather the following Wednesday to pray and discuss the future. A former resident of the neighborhood prayed to close the time together. Then, group members who had attended regularly completed the post-curriculum survey. All components of the gathering, including the meal, review, and survey were completed in the allotted time of two hours.

The core participants of Community Table met on October 13, during week 14, to check-in and discuss the future of Community Table. Nine people were present, with four regular attenders absent. Group members checked in during the meal using the predetermined set of evaluative questions. The group then discussed the most valuable gleanings of the missional curriculum lessons, which included the mandate to make

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[7] See appendix 3.

disciples, the importance of meeting people where they are in life, the power of prayer in evangelism, the strength of a foundation in biblical study, the importance of conversation, and a missional community's unique abilities to reach people and help them grow in faith. Group members noted that the strengths of Community Table include the racial, generational, social, and cultural diversity of the group, its accommodation of children, its organic nature, deep friendships, open conversations, biblical study, and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

With the previous lessons learned and characteristics observed, group members determined together to use Community Table as a biblical gathering for encouraging one another in faith and mission and for inviting and welcoming others to join. As one participant remarked, "We are a diverse and welcoming group of people who dig into the Bible together and apply it to real life. We are what people are looking for! We should invite others to be a part of this."

During week 14, the notes from the discussion on October 13 were compiled and a ministry plan was developed that reflected the group's shared vision, mission, and strategy for Community Table moving forward. The Ministry Plan was then submitted to the expert panel along with the evaluation rubric for their assessment.

During week 15, the expert panel assessed the Ministry Plan using the evaluation rubric and provided feedback. This feedback was used to affirm the ministry plan before its presentation at Community Table during week 16.

Community Table gathered on October 20, during week 15 to share a meal, check in with one another, study the Bible together, pray for one another, and encourage one another in missional living. Seven people were present, with no new people and many attenders absent. For the first time, the number of participants who walked was greater than those who drove from other parts of the community. Group members checked in during the meal using the predetermined set of evaluative questions, read and discussed Acts 1 together, and prayed for one another.

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Community Table gathered for the last week of the project on October 27, during week 16. Twelve people were in attendance, including a young woman who is new to the group and to faith in Jesus. She and her son had been homeless the week before and she came at the invitation of an existing group member. The group committed to supporting her and her son as they moved toward stability. The gathering included a shared meal, check in using the predetermined set of evaluative questions, a continued reading and discussion of Acts 1–2, prayer and encouragement for one another, and a celebration of everything God had done. The group also discussed plans for their neighborhood outreach event scheduled for November 13, 2021. At the end of the gathering time, the Ministry Plan was presented and approved by the group.

Community Table continued meeting together in the weeks following the conclusion of the project. Their commitment to making disciples continued, and the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Missional Curriculum

Chapter 3 highlighted the powerful ways a missional community can engage the urban context by modeling and catalyzing life-on-life discipleship, contextualizing the gospel, addressing components of poverty, and laying a foundation for potential church plants. Discussions with past and potential Community Table members and feedback from the panel of missional practitioners affirmed the findings of chapter 3 and introduced additional topics necessary for equipping group members to engage in mission through life-on-life discipleship. A curriculum of lessons was created to introduce, reinforce, and discuss missional topics for develop Community Table into a missional community.[8] The curriculum was divided into eight lessons. The eight lessons were designed to be taught in five consecutive Wednesday evenings with a duration no longer than two hours at each gathering.

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[8] See appendix 7 for the curriculum lessons.

Curriculum Implementation

  The curriculum was taught on five consecutive Wednesday evenings during September 2021 at my home in the Block. The gatherings lasted two hours from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. However, many participants chose to arrive before 5:30 p.m. for fellowship and stayed beyond 7:30 p.m. for discussion and to help clean up. The gatherings included a meal and fellowship, a time of check-in for members to reflect upon their prior week, presentation of the lesson or lessons, discussion, and a time of prayer for one another and the application of the lesson content. Childcare was provided from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. and a meal was served each Wednesday evening during the five weeks of lessons in September. The meal, check-in time, review, discussions, and group prayer time were designed to build relationships and promote application.

Lesson 1

  Lesson 1 was created to establish a biblical foundation for mission and to model the format for the gathering. Time and attention were given to welcome each member, model the fellowship and check-in time during the meal, and commitment to pray for one another and pray for the application of what was learned. Participants experienced a clear communication of the gospel as well as the biblical mandate for mission to make disciples. Cards with an explanation of the gospel and the biblical mandate for mission were given to each participant. As application, the leaders clearly communicated the expectation of group members to begin thinking of, praying for, and seeking opportunities to talk with individuals who are not walking with Christ, with the understanding that participants would report on their selected person and their experiences the following week during the check-in time.

  Lesson 1 served as a foundation to the following seven lessons presented in the succeeding evenings. This lesson also provided time for questions and answers for participants with remarks or concerns. Participants were engaged throughout the meal, check-in time, group prayer time, and the lesson. Participants made constructive

contributions to the topic of the lesson and were forthcoming in sharing their personal struggles and fears about witnessing to people who are not walking with Christ.

Lesson 2

The objective of lesson 2 was for participants to hear and understand the concept of contextualizing the gospel message and begin making practical applications of engaging their local context with the gospel message. The format for the gathering followed the example from week 1 with the welcome, introductions, and check-in time during the meal. Lesson 2 included a thorough review of the previous week, including a review of the themes and implications of the gospel message and the biblical mandate for mission. With this gospel foundation and missional commission, participants learned how they can communicate and model the gospel message in a way that engages people so they can connect to it. Key themes of lesson 2 included understanding, entering into, and engaging culture as the process of contextualization.

Lesson 3

In lesson 3, participants were taught about the fundamental changes of values and goals that take place in someone's life when they commit to following Christ. The basis for the lesson content and discussion was Acts 2:37-47, highlighting the crowd members in Jerusalem who believed, confessed, repented, and were baptized and then pursued a life of prayer, teaching from the Word, and fellowship together. The group then discussed the spiritual, relational, financial, emotional, and social transformations that take place in a believer's life as a result of submitting to Jesus Christ. Group members agreed in observing holistic life change.

After lesson 3, participants provided helpful feedback for organizing the gathering time and presenting the information in the way that would promote better reception and interaction of the content. The group recommended doing the welcome and check-in time prior to beginning the meal so lesson content could be presented as

participants ate, with discussion after the presentation of the content. This shift in format proved to be beneficial for future gatherings.

Lesson 4

The purpose of lesson 4 was to discuss the biblical perspectives of covenant marriage and sexuality. The topics of marriage and the biblical definition and purpose of sexuality are very relevant in the current culture of the participants. Relationships that involve sexual intercourse outside marriage and affect family structures are prevalent in the urban context. In addition, the larger culture quickly embraces and encourages sexual relationships contrary to biblical commands while the number of healthy and God-honoring marriages are in steep decline. Several group members admitted to never observing an example of a healthy and intact marriage outside of Community Table and never hearing a reasonable or biblically based argument against homosexuality. The objective of the lesson was for participants to hear and be able to articulate a clear understanding of biblical marriage and sexuality that is orthodox and conservative while also compassionate toward people living in contrast to biblical truth and trusting in God's ability to transform people.

Since sexual sin is so prevalent in current culture, it was important for participants to obtain a biblical understanding of sin, how believers ought to observe and confront other believers who are living in sin, and how believers are instructed to interact with unbelievers who are living in sin. Therefore, although the lesson directly addressed marriage and sexuality, it also laid a foundation for understanding how to address sin in general. This foundation of addressing sin was established by the principles of recognizing the authority of God and His Word, humility, compassion, and trust in God's ability to transform people. Therefore, participants learned they should personally submit to the authority of the Bible in their own lives while compassionately loving and inviting people who are living far from God to begin walking with Him and trust He will transform them just as He is transforming us.

The study and discussion of covenant marriage included the creation of marriage in Genesis 2 and Paul's instructions in Ephesians 5. Emphasis was placed on the nature of a covenant as a promise of commitment rather than a contractual agreement.

The study and discussion of biblical sexuality also referenced Genesis 2, noting the creation of the male and female bodies for joining together resulting in the establishment of sexual interactions for marriage. The study clearly noted passages of Scripture that command the exclusivity of sexual interactions in marriage. In a similar fashion, the study noted passages from the Old and New Testaments forbidding and condemning homosexual interactions. The underlying reminder throughout both discussions was that God created people, sexuality, relationships, and families. As a perfect creator and loving Father, God knows and desires what is best for His people. The study seemed to be well-received by the participants, as everyone present continued to attend in future weeks and one participant discontinued a lesbian relationship she had been engaged in prior to meeting.

Lesson 4 concluded with a special time of prayer for the people participants knew personally and the many people in society who are not living in God's intended purpose for marriage and sexuality. This was followed by a reminder of God's love for people and His ability to transform people. Several participants approached me after the lesson to express their appreciation for a clear and concise presentation of the biblical passages pertain to marriage and sexuality.

Lesson 5

The curriculum in lesson 5 communicated the power of life-on-life discipleship. After a thorough review of the content from the previous lessons, the group had an interactive discussion about the foundational goals and process of discipleship. From this foundation, I presented a robust definition of life-on-life discipleship, then provided a biblical example of life-on-life discipleship through the ministry of Paul in Acts and specifically his discipling relationship with Timothy observed in 1 and 2 Timothy. In the

spirit of 2 Timothy 2:1-2, participants concluded the lesson by identifying one person they could begin to personally disciple and committed to the relationship to prayer. Giving updates on these discipling relationships became part of the discussion conducted by the group each week during the check-in time.

Lesson 6

Lesson 6 provided a foundation for discussion on the essence, identity, and function of a local church, as well as the role and identity of missional communities. The objective was for participants to hear and understand the defining characteristics of a local church's identity, function, and expression as the body of Christ, as well as their personal role and responsibility as a part of a local church. The lesson also allowed those present to hear and understand how a missional community participates either as an aspect of an existing local church or lays the foundation for a self-identifying expression of the local church. A significant aspect of the lesson was the presentation and discussion of the community diagram.[9] Participants recognized the giving and receiving of friendship and encouragement, meeting needs, fruit of Bible study, and sharing of unique perspective. One vital aspect of the time together for the group was to gain a clear understanding of Community Table's options for identity. The definitions of a faith community, a missional community as conduit to an existing church, and a church or missional community identifying as a church were clearly presented.

Lesson 7

Lesson 7 acknowledged the existence of poverty in the lives of many residents in the community of Decatur and presented concepts and methods for practically addressing poverty as a missional community. The lesson included a basic presentation of the complexity of poverty, including seven interrelated components of the cyclical nature

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[9] See appendix 8 for the community diagram.

of poverty. The lesson also included a basic discussion of adverse childhood experiences, their lasting effects, and the ways missional communities can be a catalyst for stability, encouragement, and healing. This aspect of the discussion was powerful because several participants had experienced adverse childhood experiences.

Lesson 8

Lesson 8 provided essential information and discussion for group members to understand the role of individual Christians and the local church in the process of racial reconciliation. Drawing largely on the fundamentals of Christian unity and the community diagram presented in lesson 6, participants discovered together how the local church has the most powerful reasons to pursue and achieve racial reconciliation. The content and discussions of the lesson specifically addressed racism, systemic racism, Critical Race Theory and current cultural trends from a biblical perspective. The lesson concluded with a discussion of practical steps to practicing the one another's of the New Testament across racial differences and how to model Christian unity.

Curriculum Evaluation

The eight lessons of the missional curriculum were submitted to the panel of missional practitioners to receive feedback and approval before being taught. The panel evaluated the curriculum using a rubric to assess biblical accuracy, scope, pedagogy, and practicality. The goal to develop a missional curriculum was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. The components of the evaluation rubric indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level on the first attempt, negating the requirement for a second submission of the curriculum.[10] However, the panel provided helpful commentary and feedback for

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[10] See appendix 6 for the completed curriculum evaluation rubric.

improving and presenting the curriculum. Using the feedback provided by the panel of missional practitioners, the curriculum was updated and prepared for presentation.

Review and Discussion

The evening of review and discussion served as an effective capstone for the missional curriculum. While there was no new information presented, the personal reflection on the previous content by participants was a powerful tool for internalizing key themes and encouraging missional formation. Participants were asked questions regarding their recollection and comprehension of the main points from the eight lessons and ample time was given to discuss and reflect upon the material. The review and discussion were guided by a Curriculum Review Outline.[11] The outline included the predetermined set of evaluative questions. The group easily recalled the main themes from each lesson and those who missed certain weeks heard and discussed the content.

Ministry Plan Discussions

The capstone activity to the missional curriculum was the development of a Ministry Plan. The Community Table group committed to pray during the week leading up to the discussion and several members fasted. During the discussion, each member had the opportunity to express the aspects of the curriculum and the group's identity that were fundamental to the group's existence, as well as their sense for the direction God was leading the group. Group members were given the opportunity to decide the goals, frequency, timing, and format of future gatherings. Group members shared openly about their desire to continue meeting and growing together, but more so their passion for seeing other people come to faith and being a missional presence in the Block Neighborhood. The group also discussed necessary components and logistics for managing and facilitating the group gatherings and ministry events. All the content from the discussion was carefully

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[11] See appendix 9 for the curriculum review outline.

recorded and organized into a ministry plan. The Community Table Ministry Plan detailed the mission, core values, identity, ministry strategies, key components, and future trajectory of Community Table's ongoing ministry to make disciples and reach the Block Neighborhood.[12]

Bible Study Discussions

The Community Table group agreed together that the Bible is the foundation of discussion and decision-making for the group. Therefore, the group determined to regularly participate together in reading and discussing the Bible during gatherings. Given the recent emphasis on mission, multiplication, and the nature of the church, the group decided to begin in Acts. The approach to the Bible studies was influenced by the Discovery Bible Study method, which uses the Bible alone as its study material, incorporates review of the previous gathering, and is framed by discussion questions pertaining to personal application, obedience, and sharing biblical truth with others. The gathering times followed a template that included the predetermined set of evaluative questions, verse-by-verse reading and discussion, and a time of commitment and prayer.[13]

The first Bible study discussion of Acts 1 served as a biblical foundation for the missional curriculum lessons presented earlier in the fall. Participants recognized Jesus' missional instructions to be his witnesses, the promise of the Holy Spirit's empowering of believers, and the power of prayer. Group members committed to praying for open doors for sharing faith and evangelistic boldness.

The second Bible study discussion of Acts 1 and the introductory verses of Acts 2 resulted in a recognition of God's sovereignty and the reality of transformation in the lives of people who become disciples of Jesus. The group's discussion was enriched by the comments of the young woman who had been homeless only days before attending

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[12] See appendix 10 for the ministry plan.

[13] See appendix 11 for the Bible study template.

Community Table. Her newness to faith and honest questions brought an added layer of joy and discovery to the Bible study. In addition, her presence served as a catalyst for existing group members to recommit to disciple-making. The Bible study ended with a commitment to missional practices and prayer.

Missional Understanding Survey

The MUS contained sixteen questions completed anonymously. Three of the sixteen questions addressed participants' biblical and philosophical foundation for mission. Four questions addressed the basic components of a personal missional lifestyle in relevance to the culture of the Block Neighborhood and the community of Decatur. Three questions assessed the participants' understanding of the identity and missional functions of a corporate body of believers. One question specifically assessed the participants' understanding of a missional community. Two questions pertained to the presence of personal missional commitments resulting in explicitly evangelistic actions. The final three questions addressed the frequency of missional activities involving spiritual formation and missional interactions with unreached people.

Responses for the first ten questions assessing the participants' understanding of missional principles were determined by a six-point Forced Likert scale. Responses pertaining to the frequency of missional activities was determined by a four-point Relative Frequency scale for frequency of actions. The numerical value of these thirteen questions was added to obtain a score. The total score for each topic was then analyzed. Responses regarding the understanding of a missional community and recent presence of personal missional actions were determined by closed questions. Responses were tabulated and analyzed based on the scores.

Pre-Curriculum Assessment

The MUS was administered to the members of Community Table who gathered for the Community Cookout during the week prior to the first week of presenting the

curriculum. Thirteen people completed the pre-curriculum survey. Several people struggled

with questions due to their ability to read and required assistance completing the survey.

As anticipated, most participants held a high regard for the gospel message and a biblical

lifestyle but held significant fears about how to talk to another person about faith,

especially family members and close friends. A descriptive analysis of the pre-curriculum

MUS revealed a diversity of responses. Table 1 displays the mean, median, mode, and

standard deviation of each of the ten topics addressed in the MUS administered before the

implementation stage of the missional curriculum lessons.

Table 1. Missional Understanding Survey pre-curriculum assessment results

Core Topics	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Gospel Message	4.500	4.5	4.5	0.813
Mandate for Mission	4.000	4.0	4.0	0.500
Contextualizing the gospel	3.375	4.0	4.0	1.408
The essence of the Local Church	3.875	4.0	4.0	1.165
Life changes	4.500	4.5	4.5	0.500
Covenant Marriage	4.500	5.0	5.0	1.414
Sexuality	4.000	40.0	4.0	1.224
Life on Life Discipleship	4.125	4.0	3.0	0.829
Addressing Poverty	4.125	4.0	4.0	0.927
Racial Reconciliation	4.000	4.0	4.0	0.866
Missional Practices	4-point scale			
Personal connection to God	3.000	3.0	3.0	0.707
Time of Prayer	3.375	4.0	2.0	0.856
Talking about Faith	2.625	2.0	2.0	0.857

The MUS administered before the presentation of the curriculum revealed the

participants had neither a strong nor unified understanding of missional concepts and

practices. Participants exhibited the lowest understandings in the areas of contextualizing

the gospel, the essence of the local church, biblical sexuality, and the role of individual

Christians and churches in the process of racial reconciliation. Participants exhibited the

strongest understanding in articulating the gospel message, the transformations in someone's life after coming to faith in Jesus, and the concept of marriage as a covenant.

In the pre-assessment results of the MUS, the average standard deviation in all ten topics was .9646, indicating that participants shared various degrees of understanding in the ten topic areas of missional concepts and values. However, the average standard deviation in the four greatest topics of deviation was 1.303. This deviation indicated that participants held greatly varying degrees of confidence and the most divergent understanding relating to the areas of contextualizing the gospel, the essence and mission of the local church, covenant marriage, and biblical sexuality.

The MUS questions pertaining to the presence and frequency of practices pertaining to missional commitment and spiritual formation indicated a clear margin for improvement. Only two of the eight participants stated they had intentionally and explicitly spoken to an unreached person about Jesus in the two weeks prior to the survey. However, seven out of eight noted praying for an unreached person they knew in the month prior. The disparity in scores revealed an evangelistic desire for the unreached to come to faith but a lack of tools or confidence to personally evangelize. As support, only four of the eight participants reported understanding the nature of a missional community. Regarding the frequency of spiritual and missional practices, only two of eight reported connecting to God daily through Bible reading and reflection and five reported praying daily, while two participants reported only connecting to God and praying sometimes. Five of eight participants reported only talking about faith with others sometimes, which again indicated a disconnect between personal faith and evangelism.

During the presentation of the curriculum, special emphasis was given to communicating and discussing the process of contextualizing the gospel, the essence of the local church and the practical application of missional living. The curriculum specifically addressed and encouraged the connection between personal faith and

evangelistic practices of explicitly engaging the unreached. In addition, lengthened time for group questions and discussion was added during the lessons pertaining to biblical sexuality and racial reconciliation. However, the goal was to see an increase in knowledge in all ten subject areas and practical application of the missional principles.

Post-Curriculum Assessment

As a conclusion to the missional curriculum lessons and the review and discussion times, the MUS was administered again as a post-assessment during week 13. Of the thirteen people who completed the MUS as a pre-assessment to the curriculum, five were unable to attend four or more of the lessons due to health concerns or family situations. These five people were also absent on the evening the post-assessment survey was administered. Therefore, it was determined that only the surveys from the eight participants who completed the pre- and post-curriculum surveys and missed two or less lessons should be compiled and used for the comparative analysis. The other five pre-surveys were excluded from the comparative analysis.

The results of the MUS administered post-curriculum revealed that the participants' missional understanding significantly increased, as observed by the overall mean of each missional topic. The mean of increase from the pre-assessment to post-assessment was 1.48 on the six-point scale measuring missional understanding and 0.6 on the four-point scale measuring missional activities. However, administering the MUS at a future time to reassess the missional understanding and commitments of participants would be beneficial to gain an even better perspective on missional development among participants. I plan to do so in late Spring 2022.

Table 2 displays the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of the MUS administered at the completion of the six weeks of missional curriculum and discussion presented at Community Table.

Table 2. Biblical membership evaluation survey post- curriculum assessment results

Core Topics	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Gospel Message	5.875	6.0	6.0	0.330
Mandate for Mission	5.125	5.0	5.0	0.599
Contextualizing the Gospel	5.625	6.0	6.0	0.695
The essence of the Local Church	5.750	6.0	6.0	0.661
Life changes	5.750	6.0	6.0	0.433
Covenant Marriage	5.625	6.0	6.0	0.695
Sexuality	5.250	5.0	5.0	0.661
Life on Life Discipleship	5.500	5.5	5.6	0.500
Addressing Poverty	5.750	6.0	6.0	0.433
Racial reconciliation	5.625	6.0	6.0	0.484
Missional Practices	4-point scale			
Personal connection to God	3.550	4.0	4.0	0.707
Time of Prayer	3.750	4.0	4.0	0.433
Talking about Faith	3.500	3.5	4.3	0.500

The third goal of the project was to equip participants of Community Table to develop greater understanding and commitment to missional principles. The measure for this goal included the post-curriculum survey which provided samples for a t-test.[14] The third goal of achieving greater understanding and commitment to missional principles was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-curriculum survey scores: $t_{(7)} = -5.795$, $p = .0003$ for the survey questions pertaining to the understanding of missional topics rated on the six-point scale. Similarly, a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre and post-curriculum survey scores: $t_{(7)} = -2.701$, $p = .015$ for the survey questions pertaining to personal faith and missional practices rated on the four-point scale. Analysis on both scales revealed an improvement between the pre-and post-curriculum assessment scores. The statistical increase observed by the survey scores indicated a greater level of understanding and commitment to missional principles among participants, resulting in an enhanced engagement in mission.

[14] See appendix 12 for the full t-test results.

The most significant increases in the mean scores occurred regarding the participants' understanding of contextualizing the gospel and understanding of the mission of the local church. The mean also increased on the topics of understanding the basics of the gospel message, life-on-life discipleship, addressing poverty, and participating in racial reconciliation. The lower scores of standard deviation in nine of the ten topics and specifically the four topics that had scored higher during the pre-assessment revealed that participants had a more consistent understanding than before the curriculum presentation. The topics of the biblical mandate for mission and covenantal marriage revealed the least amount of change as a reflection of a strong understanding of these topics prior to the presentation of the curriculum.

It must be noted that of the eight participants who completed the post-assessment, only four attended all eight lessons as they were presented. These four consistent participants scored an average of 5.816 on the ten questions pertaining specifically to missional understanding, in contrast to the other participants who missed at least one lesson scoring an average of 5.375. Consistency in participation resulted in greater intake of the lesson content and maximized opportunity to discuss and internalize the content.

The MUS questions pertaining to the presence and frequency of practices pertaining to missional commitment and spiritual formation indicated clear improvement. Seven of the eight participants stated they had intentionally and explicitly spoken to an unreached person about Jesus in the two weeks prior to the post-curriculum survey and all eight noted praying for an unreached person they knew. These scores indicated the gap had been closed on evangelistic prayer correlating to evangelistic action from the mere two participants in the pre-curriculum survey who indicated they had done both evangelistic actions. As anecdotal support, three people who began attending Community Table during the later weeks of the project were the result of evangelistic actions of group

members. In addition, all eight participants reported understanding the nature of a missional community.

Regarding the frequency of spiritual and missional practices, five of eight participants reported connecting to God daily through Bible reading and reflection and six reported praying daily, while the other two participants reported connecting to God and praying often. A significant improvement was also exhibited in personal evangelistic encounters initiated by participants. The survey results stated that four of the eight participants talked about faith daily and the other four talked about faith often.

The post-curriculum survey indicated participants grew substantially in their understanding and application of missional values from before the curriculum. It must be noted that, on the pre-curriculum survey, three participants either disagreed or disagreed strongly that they could contextualize the gospel and define the essence of the church. Three others only agreed somewhat in their ability to contextualize the gospel and define the church. These same participants indicated on the post-curriculum survey that they agreed strongly and very strongly that they could contextualize the gospel and define the essence of the local church. Similarly, on the pre-curriculum assessment four participants indicated they had only connected with God sometimes during the previous month and only sometimes talked about faith to others. The post-curriculum assessment indicated that these same participants had connected with God often and talked about their faith either often or every day during the previous month.

The increase of understanding and application in the topics of contextualizing the gospel, defining the essence of the church, connecting with God, and talking to others about faith indicated that the lessons and discussion resulted in tremendous shifts of faith. In addition, these shifts were not merely intellectual, but were demonstrated in increased missional practice by participants. This missional practice resulted in the invitation and discipleship of those who attended later in the fall and came to faith through the group. Community Table experienced an electric sense of excitement as group members heard

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and discussed the content of the lessons, prayed for others to come to faith, and witnessed those people coming to faith and joining the group to continue growing in faith. There was a resounding sense that God was doing something powerful through Community Table.

The post-curriculum survey also gave participants the opportunity to provide subjective feedback on why they participate in Community Table, how their faith has grown during their participation at Community Table, and how they observe Community Table functioning with biblical values as a missional community. Participants responded by highlighting their growth in the areas of evangelistic fervor, understanding of the gospel, belief in the power of prayer, and ability to address current issues from a biblical perspective. Participants also reported experiencing a strong sense of biblical community through racial and social diversity, welcoming others into a safe space, and practicing biblical relationships with one another. Finally, participants observed Community Table as a missional community committed to faith, rooted in Scripture, modeling accountability, on mission to make disciples corporately and individually.

Ministry Plan

The power of a curriculum is not found in its presentation but in the implementation of its principles in practical application. Based on the key principles of abiding with God, disciple-making, contextualizing the gospel, participation as the body of Christ, and addressing current issues in culture, the members of Community Table developed a ministry plan including a shared mission, set of core values, ministry strategy, and components for maintaining the identity and directing the ministry of group. The ministry plan included the explicit mission of the group's members to support one another in reaching and discipling other people through relationships and the focus of programmatic ministry efforts in the Block Neighborhood. The Ministry Plan also communicated the core values of multiplying disciples, leaders, and groups as a necessary result of growth. The formation of the plan was heavily influenced by the comments and

commitments shared during the group discussion in week 14 of the project. Therefore, the plan reflected the unique calling and values of the group.

The Ministry Plan included fourteen passages of Scripture that provide the foundation for Community Table's commitment to mission, evangelism, disciple-making, unity, care for one another, reliance on the Holy Spirit, prayer, and biblical obedience. The plan also included a clear definition of the group's concerted identity at the time of writing as a missional community that was a conduit to existing local churches rather than a self-identifying expression of the body of Christ as an autonomous church. The group agreed to remain aware of God's leading and open to the potential of one day transitioning into a missional church plant. With the mission, identity, values, and strategy defined, the ministry plan also proposed a timeline for the growth and multiplication of Community Table as well as potential obstacles and threats to the ministry's health and mission.

The Ministry Plan was assessed and approved by the expert panel using the Ministry Plan Evaluation Tool as a rubric for measuring the scriptural, theological, and practical viability of the plan for implementation.[15] Additions and revisions were made based on the feedback of the expert panel. The Ministry Plan was then presented in its final form to the members of Community Table for consideration and approval. After discussing and approving the Ministry Plan, the group mutually committed to its mission and prayed for God's blessing over the ministry's future.

The Challenges of Communication and Gathering

Over eight years of working in the Block Neighborhood, ministry leaders have learned the importance of personal visits and repeated reminders. Block residents are relational and accustomed to conversations on their front porch. Community Table organizers were well-received by residents. However, communication in the neighborhood

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[15] See appendix 13 for the compiled results from the panel.

and with the participants of Community Table was difficult. Many residents of the Block live in a perpetual state of crisis and chaos. The experience of chaos causes many residents to have an outlook limited to the immediacy of a single day that delegitimizes the use of calendars and planning. Intentions for spiritual formation are pure, but attendance of time-specific events and programs is difficult. Rather than becoming frustrated with the inconsistency of people's lives and attendance, I developed the phrase "The spirit is willing, but the circumstances are weak," recognizing the genuine desire for people to attend. Even with home visits and text reminders each Wednesday, consistent attendance was limited to only five people, including myself, who attended all five evenings of the lesson presentation. Of the thirteen individuals who completed the MUS as a pre-curriculum survey, only eight completed the post-curriculum survey.

In addition, the uncertain and tenuous atmosphere associated with COVID -19 created significant challenges for gathering. Two families who participated in Community Table tested positive for COVID -19 in September, while two other families were affected by the necessity of quarantining. One family with a child who is immunocompromised was prevented from having both parents present at the Community Table. Even families who were not sick experienced indirect results of COVID -19, which attenuated their margin for attending Community Table. Several participants were required to work extensive overtime due to a decreased workforce. Other participants were prevented from attending due to the mental illness of a family member or loss of work. Participants noted stress, anxiety, family strains, and overall fatigue as obstacles to attending. However, for those who attended Community Table consistently, the experience of learning and growing together was beneficial.

Conclusion

Disciple-making in the Block Neighborhood and larger community of Decatur is difficult. Therefore, a new season of gathering and missional development was needed at Community Table. This missional development was accomplished through the missional

curriculum presented to the members of Community Table. Great attention and preparation were employed to communicate with participants, organize gatherings, develop lessons, and present lessons to the members of Community Table. The panel of missional experts provided insightful considerations during the writing and presentation stages of the lessons. Attention was also given to the rhythms of receptivity displayed by the participants. A significant aspect of the groups' interactions and curriculum was discussion, which signaled understanding and laid a foundation for personal application.

The total number of people who attended Community Table and those who attended consistently over the five weeks of presenting the missional curriculum lessons surpassed the expectations of the group leaders. Considering the dynamics of health precautions, single-parent households, and inconsistent life-circumstances caused the organizers of Community Table to expect only a small number of consistent participants. The level of commitment and conviction exhibited by participants was a testament to God's work in their hearts and lives.

The MUS provided quantitative data for evaluating the strengths and deficiencies of the group's missional understanding and practice before and after the presentation of the eight-lesson curriculum. The MUS pre-curriculum assessment results indicated participants had a desire to engage and disciple others but lacked the appropriate tools and boldness to do so. These results were crucial to creating a curriculum that improved the missional understanding of the group members individually and corporately. Based on the results of the assessment, additional emphasis and time was given to explaining the process of contextualizing the gospel, the essence of the local church and the practical application of missional living. The curriculum specifically addressed and encouraged the connection between personal faith and evangelistic practices of explicitly engaging the unreached. This strategic approach to lesson writing and presentation ensured the goals of the project would be achieved.

The missional curriculum successfully communicated the crucial truth of the gospel message, the biblical mandate for mission, and the essence of the local church. The curriculum also provided strategic and practical guidance for forming a deep and personal connection with God, contextualizing the gospel, praying for the unreached, engaging people in evangelistic conversations, and engaging in life-on-life discipleship. Finally, the curriculum provided a biblical framework for marriage, sexuality, life-transformation, addressing poverty, racial reconciliation, and the identity of a local church as an expression of the body of Christ.

The MUS post-curriculum assessment results indicated an overall gain in knowledge and commitment regarding the ten topics addressed in the missional curriculum as well as the key points of missional application. Therefore, the project to develop a missional community was successful in producing a group of people, growing in faith together, who are equipped and committed to making disciples, recognizing the power and application of the gospel, and multiplying their kingdom impact by personally investing in the discipleship of other people.

The intentional margin for and engagement in discussion and Bible study allowed participants to encounter the biblical content and key themes for themselves and process the implications for life change in a nurturing community. The goal of using the discussion and Bible study as a conduit to personal and practical application was achieved as participants grew not only in their missional conviction but engagement with unreached people. This application of missional concepts resulted in several people coming to faith during the period of the project's implementation. In addition, the discussion and Bible study solidified key missional themes which were then expressed during the group's forming of the Ministry Plan. This Ministry Plan will guide the group's values, identity, and strategy for mission in the future, as the group strives to make disciples.

The fruit of the ten weeks of gathering included new and deepened friendships, a refreshing experience of diversity, strategies for contextualizing the gospel, nascent

discipling relationships, passionate times of prayer, the adding of new followers of Jesus, establishment of spiritual disciplines, and renewed commitments to make disciples. God was certainly honored during the group's time together and the direction of its path. The growth observed in each member and the new participants who were the result of group members reaching out and discipling others brings a great deal of joy and fulfillment to my heart.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Introduction

Developing a missional community in an urban setting is challenging. The spiritual toxicity of an environment characterized by endemic poverty and physical, sexual, and psychological trauma are formidable obstacles to success. The severities of these obstacles are coupled with the cultural irrelevance of established churches outside the urban context. Yet, developing a missional community in the urban context is a powerful way to reach the unreached and expand God's kingdom. Even if the benchmarks of the earthly definition of success are not achieved quickly, the pursuit of making disciples honors God.

The reward for the time, energy, and sacrifices given to developing a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois, in cooperation with First Christian Church paid dividends of faith. Residents not only came to faith in Jesus but also accepted the challenge of making new disciples as mission for his kingdom. Further, despite the complications posed by the COVID-19 virus, participants grew in their faith and the seeds of the gospel were sown into the lives of people who were far from Christ.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois, in cooperation with the existing ministry outreach of First Christian Church of Decatur, Illinois. To fulfill the purpose of the project, several unique challenges had to be simultaneously addressed and answered. While these challenges added difficulty to the project, they enriched the quality of the project's outcomes.

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The first dynamic addressed by the project was developing a missional community by transitioning Community Table from its existence as a faith community to a missional community. Because Community Table had existed prior to the start of the project as a faith community, existing attitudes and expectations needed to be adapted to develop the group's identity and its individual members to have a missional posture. It must be noted that this process of transition is different than launching a new missional community that would begin with a missional posture. However, the group willingly embraced its new missional identity as an appropriate fulfillment of its existence.

The second essential dynamic of fulfilling the purpose of the project was to maintain a presence and identity in the urban context of Decatur. First Christian Church intentionally sought to minister in the Block Neighborhood in urban Decatur; Community Table began as an aspect of that ministry. However, one challenge was the potential for Community Table to simply become a group of outsiders meeting for their own faith development and viewing the Block Neighborhood merely as a place to come from the outside to do ministry. It was essential for Community Table to share the identity and culture of the Block Neighborhood to appropriately contextualize the gospel and be a place where residents of the neighborhood could feel at home to grow in their faith. At times, the ratio of outsiders to residents tilted too heavily in favor of outsiders. To address that issue, outsiders took a careful inventory of their own cultural predispositions and intentionally suppressed those that did not bear on the essentials of the gospel and might form barriers to a welcoming and supportive environment for those from within the neighborhood.

The third challenge of fulfilling the project's purpose was to maintain a cooperative relationship with First Christian Church while also remaining culturally relevant and appropriately positioned to reach the Block Neighborhood. The leadership team of First Christian Church was aware of the church's limitations to engage and reach the Block Neighborhood. Therefore, autonomy was given to Community Table to

appropriately contextualize the gospel and carry out relevant ministry. Several participants who attended Community Table came with histories of hurt and disappointment from previous church experiences, including experiences at First Christian Church. The leadership of Community Table addressed these histories by teaching that all congregations are imperfect and capable of hurting or disappointing people. However, these congregations are the local expression of the beautiful and sacred bride of Christ. Therefore, members of Community Table recognized the good will of First Christian Church displayed in encouraging Community Table's existence while First Christian Church recognized the intentional autonomy of Community Table as a vehicle to advance the mission of the gospel in the Block Neighborhood. The cooperative relationship was honored and both entities reaped a fruitful harvest of new disciples and growth among existing disciples. While there were certainly challenges in developing Community Table into a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, the purpose of the project was accomplished for the glory of God.

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Evaluation of the Project's Goals

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Four goals determined the successful completion of the project to develop a missional community in the Block Neighborhood. Although the path to accomplishing these goals was different at times than expected, they were successfully met.

Goal 1

The first goal of this project was to assess the missiological understanding and commitments of the core participants at Community Table. This goal was met during weeks 6 and 7 when participants completed the MUS as a pre-assessment to the missional curriculum.

Goal 2

The second goal of this project was to develop an eight-session curriculum that equipped the core participants to develop missional values and strategies. This goal was

accomplished through the eight-session missional curriculum that was developed and evaluated by the expert panel. This goal was achieved because the evaluation criterion assessed by the expert panel exceeded 90 percent of the sufficient level. In addition, the comments and suggestions provided by the expert panel combined with the previous knowledge of the participants and neighborhood proved to be effective in developing potent lessons for missional living. Participants reflected that the topics of the curriculum were both relevant and appropriately challenging.

Goal 3

The third goal of this project was to equip the core participants to live out missional values and strategies. The goal was successfully met as indicted by the t-test analysis of the post-assessment completion of the Missional Understanding Survey.[1] The post-curriculum assessment of the MUS revealed that participants demonstrated a higher level of understanding of missional concepts and a higher level of commitment and application of missional practices. While the content of the curriculum was significantly helpful in providing a foundation of knowledge and resources for equipping the participants to make disciples, the conversations and opportunities for encouragement that resulted from discussing the curriculum together later proved to be equally beneficial in spurring participants toward greater missional living. As participants reflected upon the curriculum, they expressed how they needed not only the missional content, but support and accountability to apply the content. Therefore, the evenings of review, Bible study, and prayer that followed the five weeks of studying the curriculum were of great value in further equipping and solidifying the participants for missional living. With this observation in mind, adequate time for discussion, reflection, and continued encouragement are essential to lasting effectiveness.

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[1] See appendix 12 for results of t-test.

Goal 4

The fourth goal of the project was to develop a ministry plan to reach and disciple people in the urban context of Decatur. During weeks 13-15 of the project the core members of Community Table discussed and determined a ministry plan for directing Community Table in the future. This ministry plan was submitted to the expert panel during week 15 of the project. This goal to develop a ministry plan was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators assessed by the expert panel exceeded the sufficiency level. At the time of writing this project, the ministry plan is still directing the identity, purpose, and direction of Community Table.

Strengths of the Project

This section addresses five strengths in regard to this project. Some strengths were expected as the group began to gather and the curriculum was developed. However, other strengths emerged unexpectedly as the group developed and the curriculum was implemented.

Sense of Community

After not gathering in person for more than sixteen months, I expected people to appreciate the opportunity to gather and see one another in person. Though, I also expected people to be slow to reengage in relationships and form community. I was surprised to observe the group almost immediately engaged in community with one another in the forms of transparency, support for one another, and accountability. Participants exhibited great joy and encouragement from being together. From the beginning, Community Table reflected Dietrich Bonhoeffer's description of Christian community: "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. . . . They receive and meet each other as one meets with the Lord, in

reverence, humility, and joy."[2] Participants were glad to be together, deepen friendships, and make personal sacrifices to care for one another. Even amidst the challenges of COVID-19, inconsistent attendance, and the introduction of new participants along the way, the identity of the group remained intimate yet welcoming.

I attribute the depth of community in part to the intentional times of prayer during each gathering, especially on the first evening. These times of prayer for one another, the families represented, and the neighborhood formed a common bond of Christian brotherhood that solidified the community. The sense of community was also enriched by welcoming open communication regarding issues of racial tensions, past traumas, and personal struggles. These conversations were respected and protected by group members, which created relationships of trust and care for one another.

Reaching and Including the Unchurched

While one benefit of participation in a faith-centered group is a sense of community that draws people together, a danger is that it can sometimes draw people away from relationships outside the group with the unchurched. However, the members of Community Table remained committed to maintaining and deepening relationships with unchurched people. From the first gathering and lesson 1, the group emphasized the commission of Christ to make disciples through intentional engagements and conversations. Group members identified, thought about, prayed for, and consciously spoke to people who were not followers of Christ with the goal of helping them begin a journey with him. This intentionality resulted in two people joining the group who had been the evangelistic focus of other group members' prayers, conversations, and invitations.

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[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 19-20.

The group's commitment to reaching and including unchurched people was also illustrated through their willingness to embrace change for the sake of remaining relevant and reaching more people. Group members took on responsibilities such as providing meals, helping with childcare, doing home visits, and adapting to guests. These actions displayed a genuine desire to reach the unreached, which was fueled in part by continual reminders of the believer's commission to go and make disciples of all people.

Fostering Diversity

Since participants of Community Table had been a racially diverse group in the past, as a partial reflection of the neighborhood, I expected the gathering to be diverse again. Yet, Community Table was not only a gathering that reflected diversity, but also fostered racial, social, and generational diversity. Seven of the nine evenings, the majority of participants were people of color. Every gathering included participants in their teens and participants in their 60s or 70s. Several gatherings included people who had immigrated from Mexico or Liberia and spoke English as their second language. The group included participants with PhDs, GEDs, histories of incarceration, homelessness, vocational ministry, drug abuse, experiences of being abused, and wealth. Community Table was a glimpse of the diverse and unified body of Christ, gathered for his glory.

I attribute the fostering of diversity in part to the intentional times of studying and discussing the biblical understanding of personal and corporate identity in Christ. These studies and discussions of redemption, mission, the essence of the church, biblical sexuality, addressing poverty, and racial reconciliation allowed participants to openly engage difficult and divisive topics in a safe and shared space. Participants felt welcomed and safe to invite others. I also attribute the fostering of diversity to the influence of several mature people of color who modeled humility, open conversation, and a temperate posture rather than being either reticent or outspoken. These key leaders set an authentic tone for the group that enriched conversations and interactions and allowed people to safely experience a diversity of perspectives.

Biblical Obedience Leading
to Transformation

Another strength of the project was an earnest pursuit of biblical obedience that

resulted in tangible life changes. Participants of Community Table came from a diversity

of faith maturities. While some participants had experiences of long and deep journeys of

faith with Christ and vocational ministry experience, others began their journey of faith

with Christ just prior to or even during the weeks of meeting. Yet, all participants were

united in an earnest pursuit of and progress in biblical obedience. Participants made verbal

commitments to begin praying for and engaging the unreached, leave unholy relationships,

and pursue Christ-honoring practices. While the results of the *t*-test analysis of the pre-

and post-curriculum surveys indicated satisfactory improvement, the anecdotal indictors

of improvement were astounding. Several participants talked to other people about faith

and invited them to Community Table, resulting in several new members. Two participants

were baptized with a third person strongly considering it. One participant left a homosexual

relationship, while another confessed an impure relationship and forged mediums of

accountability toward purity. A couple that was living together made a joint decision to

move out of their shared house until marriage. These transformative decisions were

directly connected to the biblical studies, applications, and accountability fostered at

Community Table and are a testament to the power of Scripture.

Addressing Poverty

As discussed in chapter 3 and lesson 7 of the missional curriculum, an essential

function of a missional community in the urban context is to address poverty. Coming

alongside people in poverty with tangible assistance, biblical hope, and a healing

community is a powerful way of contextualizing the gospel. The members of Community

Table welcomed several people in the midst of cycles of poverty and addressed their

situations with dignity and wisdom.

Even before the lessons on addressing poverty were presented, members of

Community Table supported one another by providing a network of resources and care.

One participant was in deep need of a wheelchair ramp for her husband. Another participant located an existing structure and organized it to be moved while other participants used their network to have the ramp adapted and helped the gentleman move into the house while the ramp was in process. Community Table also embraced a single mother who had recently been homeless and provided a safe environment to process her ACEs.[3] In addition, Community Table provided parenting support, encouraged her as she found work and an apartment, and threw her a house-warming party. The members of Community Table also prayerfully supported a teenager who had previously been abused to talk to authorities and transition into a healthier situation. The project of developing a missional community in the Block Neighborhood resulted in the formation of a group that addressed poverty in a powerful and gospel-centered manner.

Weaknesses of the Project

The weaknesses of this project must be identified and addressed to promote a healthy trajectory of growth and multiplication for Community Table or in the case of developing a missional community in another neighborhood. This project had three main weaknesses pertaining to the length of the available time for meeting, unmet expectations of participants, and underdevelopment of the key themes of life-on-life discipleship and multiplication.

Length of Time Together

Due to the presence of COVID-19 and the continuing threat to meeting in person, it was decided to abbreviate the length of time Community Table would meet in the fall. Rather than meeting for eight consecutive weeks of presenting the missional curriculum starting in mid-September through the end of October and using four weeks in November for discussion and review, Community Table met beginning the last week of

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[3] See chap. 3, sec. "Addressing the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences," which provides a definition and discussion of ACEs.

August, presented the eight lessons during the five weeks of September, and limited discussion to two weeks in October. In retrospect, this decision was prudent as participants were limited in attendance by COVID-19 and similar groups ceased meeting in late October.

The abbreviation resulted in two significant weaknesses to the project. First, since the missional curriculum lessons were condensed to fit into five sessions, less time was given to explaining and discussing the key concepts. Lessons 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 were all given only half an evening for presentation and discussion, which limited participants' ability to comprehend and internalize the material. This presentation schedule also increased the pace of presenting the lessons. If the lessons had been taught on eight evenings, the material would have been better absorbed.

The second weakness resulting from expediting and condensing the lesson presentation was a hurried lesson-writing process. I was forced to write, submit, and re-write lessons at a quicker pace, which compromised the quality of the lessons and the ability to react to the unique contours of the group members and environment. For example, during week 9 of the project, I presented lessons 2 and 3 of the missional curriculum while also writing lessons 5-8. Therefore, insights gained from teaching lessons 2 and 3 had to be quickly applied to writing lessons 5-6, which had already been mostly written. The hurried and scattered process of reflecting on how lesson 1 had been received, while teaching lessons 2 and 3 and writing lessons 5-8, created significant challenges that likely compromised the quality of the lessons. If possible, the original plan of having three full weeks of preparation time prior to teaching the first lesson, then having a full week to reflect on previous lessons and write a single lesson would be advantageous and highly recommended.

Unmet Expectations of Participants

During the conceptual stages of planning the project there were expectations of who would attend. These expectations included the participation of several key members

of Community Table from the past who had served as great leaders, contributors, and ambassadors for the group in welcoming participants and modeling mature faith. However, several of these contributors did not attend Community Table during the project while others attended sporadically. This lack of attendance compromised the credibility of the group while also creating a noticeable vacuum of mature Christian leadership and example. Therefore, as the leader and facilitator of the project, I had to assume greater sole leadership and influence than desired with less support from other credible leaders.

In addition, there was an overall absence of consistent participation. Several participants or members of their family contracted COVID-19 while others were forced to work extended hours or encountered family crises. This inconsistency was evidenced by the limitation of the post-curriculum survey to only eight people. I expected a larger number of consistent participants who could complete the pre-and post-curriculum surveys. In addition, I had hoped and expected a higher percentage of consistent participants to be residents of the Block Neighborhood as an indication that the neighborhood was being reached and residents were being equipped to make disciples. However, it seemed the residents were especially impacted by inconsistency and instability resulting from the fragile environment that poverty creates. While every gathering included at least one neighborhood resident and two gatherings had a higher number of neighborhood residents than non-residents, the overall expectation was not met.

The absence and inconsistency of participation was especially prevalent among the men of the group. I had expected several men to serve as stable role models for the group and provide consistent input, but these men were largely absent as women were the consistent strength of the group. However, for the few men who attended a limited number of times, their modeling of the Christian lifestyle and their contribution to the faith of others was noticeable. I propose that if these men and other participants been more consistent in their attendance, contribution to the group conversation, and completion of the curriculum, the project would have been stronger.

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Underdeveloped Commitment to Life-on-
Life Discipleship and Multiplication

In the midst of challenging and threatening ministry environments, the most powerful and effective means of transmitting the gospel is passing it from one person to another. The third observable weakness of the project was an underdeveloped commitment to life-on-life discipleship and multiplication. Despite the significant emphasis on the principles of pursuing life-on-life discipling relationships and spreading outward, group members seemed weak in their practical application of the principles. Only two participants reported starting intentional discipling relationships with another person and the group did not seem eager to consider launching new groups in the future.

The cause of the weakness of underdeveloped commitment to life-on-life discipling relationships is best explained by a lack of accountability to start such relationships and the level of maturity among most group members. While participants clearly affirmed the conceptual effectiveness of discipling relationships, most participants were unable to move from concept to application. Greater discussion of application and accountability would have likely closed the gap between concept and practical implementation. I also believe the maturity of most participants was a limiting factor. Most participants were challenged to develop daily rhythms of Bible reading, reflection, prayer, and discussion of faith with others. Thus, their priorities of faith development were comprised largely with their own development rather than the development of others. I anticipate that presenting the curriculum at a future time with participants who have already completed the experience once will reap a greater harvest of developing life-on-life discipling relationships.

The curriculum and discussions also emphasized the necessity of multiplication as disciples make disciples and new contextualized gatherings are started in new locations. The group discovered the principles of spreading outward rather than building upward and remaining mobile and adaptable rather than stationary and rigid, as illustrated by the spreading and sending of the churches in Acts. However, while group members were

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eager to explore how Community Table might grow and develop as a single group, they were hesitant in discussions of sending leaders and members in the future to establish new groups. I attribute this weakness to the maturity of the group. Participants were still growing in relationship together and formation as a group. The thought of losing group members by sending may have seemed antithetical to the experience of community. In addition, I recognize the principle of multiplication through sending could be considered a "second-level" principle, which is built upon the principles of personal faith development and disciple-making, and thus may be better received in future seasons of the group's and group members' maturity when the topic can be presented again.

Key Principles Learned during the Project

During the season of preparing for and implementing the project, I and the other members of Community Table learned or were reminded of several key principles pertaining to ministry in the urban context, starting and sustaining faith-centered gatherings, and fostering transformation. These principles are beneficial and applicable in a diversity of ministry settings, but especially in developing a missional community of disciple-makers in an urban context.

Instability Is a Strong Force

Throughout the implementation of the project, the leadership, group, and individual group members were continually opposed by the results of instability. The presence of the COVID-19 virus, the challenges of poverty, and the effects of ACEs, including the complex needs of caring for children with ACEs, created a significant strain on the emotional, relational, and social dynamics of the group. The Community Table group met these needs and complex dynamics with great patience and sensitivity, but the results of instability must be acknowledged and anticipated for future endeavors.

Therefore, a missional community in an urban context can only support and disciple a limited number of people in poverty, especially those with high occurrences of

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ACEs. Because the effects of ACEs in an individual's life can quickly overwhelm a group, there must be people to bring support and stability so the group does not descend into discouragement and futility. A recommended ratio is four stable individuals or families for each individual or family that exhibits significant instability. This ratio allows support to be provided and appropriate needs to be met to bring healing and stability.

Components of Transformation

The project revealed three components, that when present and balanced, lead to transformation in the lives of the participants. The components were biblical study, setting goals for practical application, and support from the community group outside of the weekly gathering. One participant in particular spurred on this process by sending out daily devotions and reminders of the biblical principles studied in previous gatherings and the commitments group members had made. When present together, these components provided the substance, motivation, and reinforcement for transformation, as visible in the lives of the participants.

When participants come to a dedicated time of studying Scripture and can observe the earnest study and submission of others, it promotes a posture of submission to biblical authority and creates an environment for change. Then, as group members are encouraged to identify biblical principles and communicate how they will actualize them personally in daily life, it creates a collegial structure of accountability. Finally, these verbal commitments to the practical application of biblical principles in daily life are affirmed and galvanized through the continual contact of encouraging and challenging text messages, phone calls, devotions, and personal conversations.

The presence of balance of biblical study, emphasis on practical application, and support provided throughout the week also protected the gathering time from becoming distracted by peripheral issues that could have threatened the group's unity and welcoming nature. Unfortunately, groups like Community Table can easily lose their focus and begin to concentrate discussion on issues like racial or social injustice or specific political

positions. However, the grounding of Scripture, as the foundation which discussions flow from and application strives toward, is a significant safeguard against such distractions or disunity.

Adapting to the Neighborhood Over Time

The project revealed how missional communities can take on the specific personality of its community and therefore adapt its ministry accordingly. Timothy Monsma notes that no one model is best for evangelizing a city or specific neighborhood. Approaches must be varied according to the needs of each city, neighborhood, or specific group to be reached.[4] Only intimate knowledge and experience in a neighborhood or with a specific group will reveal a method appropriate for starting and growing a missional community. Community Table gathered this intimate knowledge and body of experience from its formation over years of presence and interaction in the Block Neighborhood and from the members who were residents in the neighborhood. This knowledge and body of experience naturally laid the foundation for a healthy and contextualized missional community. The process of adapting to the neighborhood cannot be instantly achieved or even rushed. Relationships, trust, and insights take time.

**The Transformational Power of
Relationships of Giving
and Receiving**

Group members were also transformed through the participation of giving and receiving in community, as a reflection of being a body with many members (1 Cor 12:12-20). No one group member was minimized to merely being a contributor to others nor merely a recipient from others. All members of the group brought and received encouragement, friendship, meeting needs, prayer, friendship, perspective, and insights

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[4] Timothy M. Monsma, "Matching Goals and Methods to Advance the Gospel," in *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*, ed. Roger Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 65.

from studying the Bible.[5] Fostering an environment of shared giving and receiving by all members created a collective sense of belonging and participation. Everyone had something to contribute to others in the group, which affirmed dignity and purpose of their participation. Freely giving and receiving also enriched the diversity of the group by giving all participants a chance to share their perspective and by creating open channels for dialogue about issues such as race, economic disparity, and issues in the community.

When reflecting on the ineffectiveness of past ministry endeavors by First Christian Church in the Block Neighborhood, I realized people were divided into either contributors or recipients. Without the opportunity to contribute to the benefit of others, people were reduced to recipients and robbed of their dignity and purpose as potential members of the community. As an anecdotal example, when Community Table hosted the housewarming party for the single mother who had previously been homeless, another woman from the neighborhood who had experience as a single mom provided a journal with advice and encouragement. Both women connected and were encouraged in a way that would not have taken place in prior top-down interactions. Fostering an environment of freely giving and receiving by all members for the mutual benefit of all members for God's glory reflects the identity and function of the church.

What I Would Do Differently

With the wisdom of experience gained through developing and implementing the project and the observation of both the strengths and weaknesses of the project, there are several important actions, challenges, and attitudes I would execute differently if given the opportunity to do the project in the same or similar context. These preferred differences pertain largely to timing and ways I could have better developed the group and equipped members for disciple-making and interactions together. The project was a

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[5] See appendix 8.

success because participants achieved greater confidence and skills for making disciples and practicing the one another's of Scripture, but the project could be improved upon.

**Complete the Project Apart
from a Global Pandemic**

As mentioned throughout chapter 4 and the reflection on the project, the presence of COVID-19 significantly limited the length of time allowed and participants included in the project. The complete effects of COVID-19 are uncertain, but the direct and some indirect complications to meeting were clearly observable. Therefore, if given the opportunity to complete the project apart from the effects of COVID-19 or other disruptive pandemic, the project would be improved by a greater length of meeting time with enhanced attendance and more concentrated participation and application.

Extend the Time

Based on the aforementioned weaknesses of the project and principles learned, I would extend the time of completing the project. Allowing time to meet with key leaders before the start of the group sessions would provide greater group stability. More sessions together would enhance group development and training at the front end of the project. In addition, the ability to present and discuss a single lesson each evening of the study and additional sessions at the conclusion of the curriculum presentation would provide greater opportunities for reviewing, internalizing the material, and encouraging people to actualize missional principles in daily life.

Ideally, the project would be twenty-six weeks in length. The first eight weeks would be spent solely on preparation for the initial gatherings, meeting with key leaders, communicating with potential group members, and outlining the missional curriculum. The next four weeks would be dedicated meeting with the members to pray, establish rhythms, build friendships, and provide practical insights for helping one another as a way of addressing poverty. The next eight weeks would be the presentation of the eight lessons of the missional curriculum, giving a dedicated evening to each lesson. The

missional curriculum would be followed by four weeks of discussion and review as well as formation of the ministry plan. The final two weeks of the project would be a strategic study of Acts with a missional lens. This timing could fit well into a six-month rhythm with the first eight weeks being completed during a summer and late fall, allowing the eighteen weeks of group gathering to take place during a fall or spring season as a mirror to the school year.

Provide Greater Structure

Due to the group dynamics observed during the project, I would intentionally provide greater structure for the group. This increased structure would include establishing clearer expectations of timing, group identity, and roles of individuals within the group. Greater organization of meals, childcare, and expectations of group leaders would likely improve the cohesiveness of the group and experience of gatherings without compromising the organic and neighborhood-focused identity of the group.

While it is important to establish that no single person is set aside as the lone qualified "expert" to lead the Bible study, and all people are invited to encounter Scripture and share gleanings from its richness, we learned that group leadership is needed for decisions on how to respond to specific situations of need, pastoral care, disagreement, or the necessity to make a report to an agency. In these types of situations, as well as the general function of the group, people are looking for a pastor to shepherd and care for the group. Designation of these leaders and their roles brings structure and stability. With this importance of structure in mind, I would approach a future project by provided training and discussion with the key leaders prior to the start of the gatherings to prepare them and ensure we are unified in philosophy and process.

Provide Specific Training on ACEs

A significant aspect of providing greater structure for developing a missional community in an urban context is proactively anticipating the challenges of ACEs and

providing appropriate awareness and training for participants. While the topic of ACEs was covered and discussed during the lesson on addressing poverty, in future projects I would proactively teach and discuss how to respond when participants reference ACEs. At Community Table we encountered several situations such as participants crying out for help in the midst of their instability, a minor confiding in participants they may have been sexually abused, and participants openly admitting to abusing their children, that created uncertainty among group members. As mentioned in the previous point, discussing with and training core team members on establishing boundaries and policies of reporting or other action when people share about ACEs would be beneficial for group stability.

Place a Greater Emphasis on
Life-on-Life Discipleship

As a result of observing the weakness of an underdeveloped commitment to fostering life-on-life discipling relationships, I would place an even greater emphasis during the group gatherings, missional curriculum lessons, review, and even the Bible studies. Life-on-life discipleship, as discussed in chapter 3, is at the core of missional living and defines a missional community. A high level of commitment to and actualization of personal disciple-making would be a catalyst for growth in numbers of new disciples and depth of missional momentum for the group as a whole.

If given the opportunity to do the project again, I would incorporate the theme of life-on-life discipleship throughout the group's gatherings. I would introduce the idea as a key theme for the group even before presentation of the missional curriculum lessons. I would then tie the theme of life-on-life discipleship to the content in lesson 1 that speaks to the foundations of the gospel message and the commission to make disciples. Therefore, the theme of life-on-life discipleship would be introduced much sooner in the season of gathering and could be connected to the expectations of practical application. Earlier introduction would also allow the theme of life-on-life discipleship to be a congruent thread

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through the lessons and discussion. This consistent and lasting emphasis would hopefully result in deeper and more widespread application of life-on-life disciple-making.

Theological Reflections

The Bible clearly communicates the commission for all disciples to make disciples. This commission is ascertained through Jesus' instructions to his disciples (Matt 29:19-20; Acts 1:8) and the missional example of his disciples (Acts 5:42; 1 Thess 1:6-8; 2 Tim 2:1-2). God is a missionary God who uses His people as a light to reach others as witnesses of His glory (Isa 49:6). Through this project I gained a wider and deeper understanding of God's ultimate sovereignty over His mission and the transformational power of the gospel.

God Is Sovereign

A project of this nature requires faith in God's sovereignty. While I worked hard to prepare lessons and organize the gatherings, so much of what happened was out of my control. I was forced to rely completely on God's perfect timing and provision for the group as a whole and the individual lives of the participants. Had the project taken place earlier or later than the time it did, the outcome may have been very different. People attended, studied the Bible, received teaching with open hearts, and made significant life changes because God willed it and made it possible. As I reflect upon the course of weeks and months the project was implemented, I see God's perfect sovereignty displayed in the counsel to shorten the season of meeting and the perfect timing of when the group did meet.

The project of developing Community Table into a missional community also served as a reminder that God himself is the guarantor of the transmission of the gospel. God's sovereignty is exhibited as each generation of disciples is entrusted with the gospel and the instruction to entrust it to the next generation of disciple-makers. As the late John Stott encourages,

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We may see the evangelical faith, the faith of the gospel, everywhere spoken against, and the apostolic message of the New Testament ridiculed. We may have to watch an increasing apostasy in the church, as our generation abandons the faith of its fathers. Do not be afraid! God will never allow the light of the gospel to be finally extinguished. True, he has committed it to us, frail and fallible creatures. He has placed his treasure in brittle, earthenware vessels. And we must play our part in guarding and defending the truth. Nevertheless, in entrusting the deposit to our hands, he has not taken his own hands off it. He is himself its final guardian, and he will preserve the truth which he has committed to the church. We know this because we know him in whom we have trusted and continue to trust.[6]

Despite the challenges of losing attendance due to COVID-19 and the perpetual inconsistency and distractions encountered by many participants, a majority of group members experienced transformation in the forms of beginning new journeys of faith resulting in baptism, developing relationships of accountability, making life-changing decisions, and actively pursuing disciple-making relationships.

God Grows His Church

This project also revealed to me and other group members that the church is designed by God to grow. God empowers His people through the working of the Holy Spirit to make disciples (Acts 1:8, 6:7; Eph 4:11-13). J. D. Payne observes, "By Her very nature, the Church is designed to grow and reproduce."[7] Throughout the project, the group commented often on how growth and reproduction should be natural traits of the church. Payne also notes Robert Logan's assessment that the church will grow and reproduce "unless we do something that hinders that from the beginning."[8] Despite the challenges of earthly imperfection and Satan's attacks, God grows His church for His glory.

This empowerment for growth was exhibited by my personal belief and excitement that God could do a transformational work in the Block Neighborhood and

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[6] John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy: Guard the Gospel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP: 1973), 47.

[7] J. D. Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach to North American Church Multiplication Movements of Robert E. Logan in Light of the Missiology of Roland Allen" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 244.

[8] Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, "Expanded Vision for Church Multiplication," quoted in Payne, "An Evaluation of the Systems Approach," 244.

was reinforced by group members who joined this belief. A majority of group members had either rarely attended an established church or been hurt by an established church. Yet, they were excited to explore the possibility of what God might do through Community Table. These members expressed their deep love for the universal church and their desire to see it grow, even at their personal expense or sacrifice. There was a shared belief that God was willing and capable of doing something extraordinary in the future with Community Table.

The Gospel Is Transformational

Despite the many organizational, educational, and practical details of managing and leading Community Table that required my attention, I witnessed how the message of hope, life, and mission in Jesus Christ is transformational for people. It was overwhelming to see participants make life-altering decisions regarding their relationships, sexual attraction, living accommodations, stewardship of financial resources, and level of accountability. As an example, my family chose to accept an additional foster child because of the conviction of our shared study and the encouragement of group members. Several participants walked away from sinful practices and lifestyles to embrace God-honoring obedience. Other participants who were entrenched in difficult and discouraging situations received hope as they turned to faith in Jesus Christ. Group members witnessed first-hand Paul's words to the Thessalonian church how participants "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:9-10). The gospel is truly transformational when it is received and allowed to take root in someone's life.

Personal Reflections

The preparation for, development, and implementation of this project was one of the greatest joys of my life. The opportunity to personally develop a missional community in the neighborhood God called my family and I to live in was very

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meaningful. The project allowed me to reflect upon years of reading, listening, and thinking about missional activities and put them into practice. The project also revealed several of my personal strengths and weaknesses in ministry. I am certain I will be more aware, successfully experienced, and better equipped to future projects and ministry. Three important personal reflections regarding realistic expectations, faithfulness, and fruitfulness have precipitated during the development and implementation of the project.

Maintaining Realistic Expectations

The first reflection pertains to the importance of being realistic in ministry. I must thank my wife, who was my ministry partner in doing this project, for helping me grow in being realistic in ministry, and thus patient with people and processes. My natural posture is to be optimistic about people's ability to participate as well as their commitment to faith and ministry. My wife, Mary, helped me to be realistic about the constraints created by COVID-19, the challenges people face to participating in gatherings, and what people are sensibly willing to do. This realistic posture helped me remain judicious in planning gatherings and drew my attention to important details such as organizing meals and childcare. Obviously, this realistic posture is balanced by an acknowledgement of God's sovereign ability to defy logical or expected outcomes.

Striving to Be Faithful

The second and third reflections are based on the themes of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Timothy Keller describes how faithfulness in ministry is displayed through Godly character and deep commitment to the work of teaching and pastoring, regardless of the amount of earthly success observed.[9] Faithfulness to Community Table and ministry in the Block meant laboring in the midst of discouragement and reasonable doubt in the presence of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. I personally faced moments of potential

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[9] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 13.

doubt that anyone would attend Community Table or be discipled through its ministry. But even in those moments I was encouraged by the faithful servants in Scripture who were faithful to the call of ministry to represent the Lord by making disciples. I was also reminded of Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit comes upon his witnesses with power, thus validating their ministry of witness (Acts 1:8). Similarly, Paul encourages those in ministry to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). A resolve toward faithfulness is essential to ministry in the urban context.

Striving to Be Fruitful

Developing Community Table as a missional community in the Block also provided a unique opportunity to reflect upon the mission of fruitfulness. Keller goes on to explain that an essential evaluation for ministry is fruitfulness; the combination of hard work, skill, and God's provision that results in visible "fruit" of transformation and growth in those being discipled.[10] Jesus told his disciples that a sign of their authenticity was that they would "bear much fruit" (John 15:8). Paul described the fruitful labor of some disciples to plant while others watered or reaped the harvest of what God had grown (1 Cor 3:6-7). Mary and I often reflected upon our decision to move our family to the Block to do incarnational ministry, stating we did not want to merely live in the neighborhood but see the fruit of changed lives. This sentiment was carried to the development and implementation of Community Table. We were certainly being faithful in opening our house, curating a welcoming environment, and explicitly communicating the message of Scripture. However, we earnestly prayed and labored for the trajectory of people's lives to be drawn toward Christ as a result of our ministry. For urban ministry practitioners, and especially those seeking to establish a new endeavor in the urban context, along with

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[10] Keller, *Center Church*, 13.

being faithful in the call of ministry, we must seek to be skillful in working the gardens God has called us to tend.

Conclusion

The project to develop a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois, in cooperation with First Christian Church, proved to be both challenging and fulfilling. The timing and nature of the project was relevant and appropriate to the timeline of Community Table's growth and needs. The project provided an opportunity to enrich Community Table's identity and expand its mission. Participants grew in their personal faith and connection to God, as well as their commitment to God's mission of making disciples. The fruit of this new generation of disciple-makers is still in process. In addition, several participants made significant life decisions which will change the trajectory of their lives along with their families. Most importantly, at least two participants began a journey of faith with Jesus and were baptized. The results of Community Table's ministry were eternal in consequence.

By God's grace, the presence and ministry of Community Table will continue in the Block Neighborhood for many years and its members will continue to make disciples. It is my hope to teach the missional curriculum again and again at Community Table and potentially other gatherings as a catalyst for spurring on missional practices. I pray that a legacy of disciple-making through the authentic sharing of lives will transform the Block Neighborhood and even spread to other neighborhoods as missional communities contextualize the gospel, address dynamics of poverty, and develop environments for life-on-life discipleship. If God chooses, Community Table and other missional communities like it will grow into one or more thriving urban church plants, or at the least serve as a pipeline of new urban disciples to established churches.

I am grateful God allowed me to be a part of his work in reaching the lost and equipping the saints through the journey of this project. I learned a great deal about myself, God's Word, and his sovereignty. I must acknowledge the sustaining presence of

God's provision and the faithful prayers of many people throughout the seasons of ministry in the Block. I am reminded that I am only a small part of God's larger story of redemption and kingdom expansion in our community, and I am thankful He has used me and Community Table to make disciples for the sake of magnifying His glory.

APPENDIX 1

MISSIONAL UNDERSTANDING EVALUATION

The following evaluation was completed by core participants of Community Table before implementation of the missional curriculum. This survey evaluated their understanding of personal faith, evangelistic urgency, the power of the gospel, vision to see others reached, and the purpose of a missional community.

MISSIONAL UNDERSTANDING SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding and practices of missional living of the participant. This research is being conducted by Bryan J. Leonard for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. *Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.*

Community Table is committed to providing a healthy faith community for those who participate. This survey will help you and the leadership of Community Table assess your understanding of personal faith, evangelistic urgency, the power of the gospel, vision to see others reached, and the purpose of a missional community.

Because ministry is relational, we prefer that you include your name below, rather than completing the survey anonymously. If you prefer to be anonymous, however, please use the last four digits of your social security number or phone number for future reference.

Date: _____

Name (or 4 digit code): _____

Directions: Based on the following scale, circle the response that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD= Strongly Disagree,
D= Disagree,
DS= Disagree Somewhat,
AS= Agree Somewhat,
A= Agree,
SA= Strongly Agree

1. I am comfortable and equipped to clearly articulate the basic aspects of the gospel message.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

2. I can reference and cite specific biblical passages that communicate the importance of missions and its mandate for all believers.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

3. I can define and appropriately engage in the process of "contextualizing the gospel."　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

4. I fully understand and can define the essence of the church.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

5. I can articulate the fundamental changes that take place in someone's life relationally, financially, emotionally, and socially when they commit to following Christ.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

6. I have a strong grasp on the biblical concept of marriage as a covenant.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

7. I am comfortable and equipped to articulate a biblical concept of sexuality.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

8. I fully understand and can articulate the goals and process of life-on-life discipleship.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

9. I fully understand the role of individual Christians and the local church in addressing poverty.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

10. I fully understand the role of individual Christians and the local church in the process of racial reconciliation.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

Directions: Circle the response that best represents the following statements:

11. I have intentionally and explicitly talked about Christ with someone who is not following Christ in the last two weeks.

<div align="center">Yes   No</div>

12. I have prayed for a specific person who is not walking with Christ in the last month.

<div align="center">Yes   No</div>

13. I understand what a "Missional Community" is.

<div align="center">Yes   No</div>

Directions: Based on the following scale, circle the response that best represents your participation:
ED = Almost Every Day,   O = Often,   S = Sometimes,   N = Never

I have a time of personally connecting to God through Bible reading and study	ED	O	S	N
I have a time of prayer	ED	O	S	N
I talk about my faith with others	ED	O	S	N

Directions: Please answer the following

I participate in Community Table for the following reasons:

I have grown in my faith during my time at Community Table in the following ways:

I observe Community Table exhibiting biblical community in the following ways:

The members of Community Table can better exhibit evangelistic actions in the following ways:

APPENDIX 2

MISSIONAL CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric was used by the expert panel to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the missional curriculum.

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each lesson was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each lesson was faithful to the theology of the Bible.					
Scope					
The content of the curriculum sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
The curriculum sufficiently covers a biblical pedagogical methodology.					
Pedagogy					
Each lesson was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each lesson provides opportunities for participant interaction with the material.					
Practicality					
The curriculum clearly details how to become more missionally minded.					
At the end of the course, participants will be able to embody missional values and strategies.					

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 3

MISSIONAL EVALUATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire was used for the four weeks of check in with the core participants of Community Table who have participated in the eight sessions of missional curriculum. These questions was used to initiate conversation, self-reflection, and application of the core concepts of the curriculum.

MISSIONAL EVALUATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Who have you evangelistically prayed for during the past week and how have you seen God at work in their life (opportunities to talk about faith)?

2. What promptings, opportunities, conversations, or events involving other people have occurred this week to provide an open door for conversations about faith or explicitly share the gospel?

3. What fears or roadblocks have you encountered this week that have kept you from having conversations about faith?

4. How has your faith and/or obedience grown this week?

5. How can this community support you, encourage you, or keep you accountable to actively living out your faith?

APPENDIX 4

MINISTRY PLAN EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric was used by the panel of three missional pastors/practitioners to evaluate the functionality of the plan, components of relational development, training elements, provision of evangelistic resources, and action steps.

Name of Evaluator: _____   Date: _____

Ministry Plan Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The goals of the ministry plan to make disciples, reach the community and replicate missional communities are clearly stated.					
The need to multiply missional leaders is clearly stated in the ministry plan.					
The material presented in the ministry plan is faithful to the Bible.					
The material presented in the ministry plan is theologically sound.					
The components of the ministry plan are well-organized and concise.					
A timeline for implementing the ministry plan is clearly stated.					
The values for guiding the ministry plan are clearly stated and explained.					
Obstacles that may hinder implementing the ministry plan have been stated.					
Overall, I believe the plan, when executed will promote growth and multiplication of missional communities in Decatur.					

Additional notes:

APPENDIX 5

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

The following letter was distributed to former members of Community Table and others who were interested in joining Community Table for the fall 2021. The letter provided the schedule of the upcoming gatherings as well as the scope and sequence of the missional curriculum lessons.

August 18, 2021

To the members of Community Table

Hello Friends,

The last 18 months have certainly been a roller-coaster of challenges and emotions. However, I still hold to the joy, depth of relationships, and experience of Christ-centered community we experienced in early spring of 2020 before we were forced to take a break from meeting due to COVID. I miss our times around the table eating together, studying the Bible together, and praying for one another. I know some of you have not yet experienced this time around the table and I'm looking forward to having you.

I believe God has something amazing in store for each of us, as well as our neighborhood and our community. We will resume Community Table on **Wednesday, August 25th** with a Cookout from **5:30pm – 7:00pm at our house: 1541 N Church St.** This gathering will include a time of prayer for our families and our community. Our normal bible study format will begin Wednesday September 1st. Dinner will begin each week at 5:30pm. However, feel free to come any time after 5:00pm for fellowship, prayer, and to help prepare.

As many of you know, I (BJ) have been working on completion of a degree in missions and evangelism. Along with fellowship and prayer, the Bible study portion of our time together each week will include a missional curriculum I have developed as part of my educational program. The curriculum is designed to help us all better understand our faith and give us tools to live out our faith and share it with others. I am excited to share with you and learn from you as we study and apply God's word together.

The missional curriculum will be 5 weeks in length and include a survey at the beginning and end of the 5 weeks to help us see how much we have learned and grown. This survey will be confidential, and only I will see the responses. Following the 5 weeks of the missional curriculum there will be several weeks of follow-up and discussion. As much as possible, **it will be helpful to attend each week of the study** to get the most out of the content and discussion together. To help make this possible, there will be a free **meal and childcare between 5:00pm – 7:45pm provided each week September 1 – October 13.**

Below is the Community Table schedule:

Wed August 25 – Community Table Cookout, Prayer, and Surveys handed out

Wed September 1 – Dinner and Bible Study 1

Wed September 8 – Dinner and Bible Study 2

Wed September 15 – Dinner and Bible Study 3

Wed September 22 – Dinner and Bible Study 4

Wed September 29 – Dinner and Bible Study 5

Wed October 6 – Dinner and Discussion

Wed October 13 – Dinner and Discussion

Please let me know if you have any questions or ideas.

BJ Leonard

APPENDIX 6

COMPLETED CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric was completed by the expert panel to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the missional curriculum.

Missional Curriculum Evaluation					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each lesson was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Rob				x	From beginning to end the lessons were developed around the through scripture.
David			x		
Gary				x	The lessons laid a foundation for deeper study in the future.
Each lesson was faithful to the theology of the Bible.					
Rob			x		
David				x	Careful creation of biblically-centered curriculum that addresses issues relevant in the urban context.
Gary				x	Care was taken to be true to biblical theology.
Scope					
The content of the curriculum sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
Rob			x		
David				x	Precise in teaching intended topics in a way that was easy to understand.
Gary				x	Within the constraints of time and abilities of the participants
The curriculum sufficiently covers a biblical pedagogical methodology.					
Rob			x		
David			x		
Gary			x		
Pedagogy					
Each lesson was clear, containing a big idea.					
Rob			x		
David				x	Every lesson's main idea was clearly expressed.
Gary				x	Students were able to remember and articulate the main theme in more than one way.
Each lesson provides opportunities for participant interaction with the material.					
Rob			x		
David			x		
Gary				x	There was much verbal reflection and application to life.

Practicality					
The curriculum clearly details how to become more missionally minded.					
Rob			x		
David		x			Challenging questions were given to think critically.
Gary			x		The focus was constantly on how to communicate the gospel to others, especially the unreached.
At the end of the course, participants will be able to embody missional values and strategies					
Rob			x		
David			x		Participants were invited to live this.
Gary			x		Missional values and strategies were already in play by the end.

APPENDIX 7

MISSIONAL CURRICULUM

The following eight lesson outlines guided the content and discussion of the missional curriculum during the five evenings of presentation during September 2021. The lesson outlines include the lesson objective, schedule, main points, specific content, discussion questions, and any handouts that were distributed to participants.

Eight Lesson Course Schedule

Lesson 1 – The Basics of the Gospel Message and Biblical Commission

Lesson 2 – Contextualizing the Gospel Message

Lesson 3 – Biblical Values and Missional Lifestyle

Lesson 4 – Covenantal Marriage and Biblical Sexuality

Lesson 5 – Biblical Life-on-Life Discipleship

Lesson 6 – The Local Church as the Body of Christ

Lesson 7 – Addressing Poverty One Family at a Time

Lesson 8 – Racial Reconciliation Within the Body of Christ

Lesson 1: The Basics of the Gospel Message and Biblical Commission

Lesson 1 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the basic aspects of the Gospel Message, be exposed to specific Biblical passages that communicate the mandate of missions; be challenged to begin thinking of, praying for, and seeking opportunities to talk with individuals who are not walking with Christ; and be invited to begin connecting with God through daily Bible reading/reflection and prayer as a foundation for Christian witness.

Welcome, Prayer, Meal, Introduction to the group: Introduce the group, goals of next 10 weeks (8 curriculum and 2 check-in), hand out note paper (look at once) – 30 minutes

A. The Essence of the Gospel Message – 15 minutes

Clear and concise definition of the Gospel: The Gospel is **The** good news that we have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.[1]

Let's break it down into parts:

We are Created by God, who is perfect

Sin results in brokenness, alienation and death

Jesus entered into our broken world, saved us from the penalty of our sin, and made us whole through his life, his own death and new life

Because we are forgiven, we can follow Christ

Close your eyes and listen to what God has done: Where does your purpose and meaning come from? Is it the possessions you have? What you have accomplished? What other people think of you? You know, deep down inside that you have value and purpose. Where does that come from? It comes from God because he created you, loves you and calls you to whole life.

However, there is also a sense of brokenness and alienation. We experience separation from others, from God, and even separation from ourselves. We may feel guilty or disconnected. This is the result of Sin; When we and other people choose our own way instead of God's perfect way we sin. Sin has entered God's perfect world through the free choices of people. We are the victims of sin and contributors to it. Sin has broken our world and resulted in death and alienation. Sin alienates us from God and our true nature as God's good creation.

God is perfect (his perfection sets him apart, which means He is Holy) and His perfect nature demands holiness. God's demand for holiness is absolute. To be near God we must be holy just as He is holy (Lev. 19:2), and we deserve His wrath when we fail. All men

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[1] Based on Timothy Keller's explanation of the gospel in *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 29-36.

deserve this judgment (Rom. 3:23), but in His grace the Father has provided His Son, whose perfect conformity to the Lord's standard is given freely to us, if we trust in Him alone (Rom 6:23, 2 Cor. 5:21).

Therefore, through Christ we have been forgiven by our perfect, holy, and loving God. His perfection is not compromised and our sin is completely paid for.

But there is also another dimension to what Jesus did for us. Jesus died, was buried, and came back to life. In the same way, we have new life in Jesus. In Jesus, we are no longer broken and alienated. Jesus reunites us with God, with others, and even with ourselves. We can experience personal wholeness, restoration of relationships, joy and purpose for our lives, and true reconciliation and unity. This is a choice made possible through Jesus: We can choose to reject what Jesus has done or repent and follow him.

In Jesus, we have value as God's beloved child and purpose for our lives to enjoy his love, and, live in gratitude and mission for what he has done. We are restored to a good relationship with God and restored to the wholeness of a new life personally and in community with other believers.

Any questions or comments?

B. The Mandate of Missions – 15 minutes

So, this is The Good News – We have been saved by Jesus. Nothing that we have done or that has been done to us can separate us from the love of God, shown through Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

We aren't just recipients of this love, but messengers of it.

Think about a bucket – it is poured into, that's it.

Now think about a pipeline – it is fed into and passes along to others.

We pass along the good news that we have received.

This is not an option. It is a command: After Jesus has died and come back to life he made two important statements to his followers. The first:

Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus said to them "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations (peoples), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let's break it down:

All authority has been given to me – Jesus is Lord. He is perfect. He died and rose.

In that authority Go – This is a command. As you go in life….Make disciples, Baptize, Teach

Make disciples – Make followers of Jesus

of all Nations – All "peoples" or "groups of people" across the ocean, across the street, across the table. No one is excluded.

Baptizing them – Repentance, new life (Acts 2:38) in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Teaching – Sharing and showing God's word, Modeling observance, Application to Life

And surely I am with you always – The same presence and power that raised Jesus from the dead is with us as we go and make disciples. Don't worry. Don't fear. Don't hesitate. Just go.

Any questions or comments?

This mission is not merely ours to fulfill. God has given us this mandate, and we join Him.

He doesn't help us in our mission. We are joining His mission.

Mission is the movement of God to bring redemption and restoration to His world. As Christopher Wright observes, "This is God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."[2]

David Bosch notes that in God's mission there is a sender (God), one being sent (Us with God's help), those to whom one is being sent (the people God is preparing), and an assignment (the message of God's love).[3] **God is in every part of the mission.**

Mission is the movement of God to bring redemption and restoration to His world.

Missions, therefore, are the human participations in the mission of God seeking to increase His renown, proclaim his gospel, advance his church, and bear witness to the truth of his word.[4]

Any questions or comments?

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[2] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 22-23

[3] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 1

[4] Bruce Riley Ashford, ed., *Theology and the Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2011), 2.

<u>**C. How to Show and Share the Gospel**</u> – 25 minutes

So we join God's mission with our lives to show and share the Gospel with people who aren't yet following Him. **How do we do this?**

We look to the second instruction Jesus gave to his followers after he had come back to life.

Jesus was about to return to heaven and his disciples ask him "What's the plan?

Acts 1:8 Jesus said "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Let's break it down:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you – Dynamite: The Holy Spirit provides the power for witnessing. He provides everything that is needed. The power is on both sides: In what you say and in what the person hears/thinks/feels/reacts. It's not up to us.

You will be my witnesses – We simply share what we have seen/experienced.

The disciples said "Jesus came back to life." We say "My life is different. _____ life is different." We share from our personal experience. I love the way Nate puts it "I can show you how Jesus changed my life."

Jesus doesn't say how successful we will be. Obedience is success. You are a witness – done.

In Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth: Everywhere!

What the disciples were thinking – they had reasons to question

In Jerusalem – at home

Judea – in your community, where you speak the language and know the culture (Contextualization next week)

Samaria – Across borders, different people, with enemies

To the ends of the earth – to places you have never been or imagined, no place is left out.

Q – What are some reasons why we don't tell people what Jesus has done?

Most reasons begin with "I'm afraid…": **Fear, the biggest hurdle is often Fear.**

The Bottom Line: God is on a mission. God commands us to join Him. We are being obedient when we are witnesses of Christ and being disobedient when we refuse to.

Any other questions or comments?

Steps to being a witness about what Jesus has done (Sharing Jesus)

1. Connection to God first: Daily Bible reading and reflection (Not task but abiding with God),

The Bible is our Father's words, written down. They are a letter from home. They are both a love letter from our Father to us and a guide to life. These words remind us of God's character and our character as His people. The letter also reminds us of how things will be one day when we are home together.

From the beginning experience God with you. Think about Him, Read His word. Rest in Him. Find your Identity in Him. Talk to Him (prayer – talking to the Father) Then work of mission as outgrowth of abiding.

2. **Talk about your faith and Jesus as a natural part of relationships and life.**

If we are connected to God, He is part of our lives. Our lives show to people.

Conversation: Domingo "What did you do yesterday?" **Me** "I went to church" **– That counts!** Or **Domingo** "What do you do in the morning before you go to work?" **Me** "I like to get up early and take a few moments of quiet to read the bible and think and pray about the day ahead." **That's it. If he wants to ask questions he can.**

It happens in the context of a relationship. As you get to know someone you learn their story and they learn your story. Jesus is a part of your story.

If someone asks you what is important to you, you tell them what is important to you.

If someone is joyful, you tell them what makes you joyful.

If someone is struggling, you tell them where you turn during your struggles.

Think about story: Hear their story, Share your story/Share God's story, Invite into God's story

Example: Loved one dies. I share about when my grandma died. She passed faith on to me and it changed me. "I believe the bible when it promises that God loved her and loves me and that I will see her again one day." Then I can invite "Do you want to hear about this promise for yourself?". But even if I don't invite, I have still witnessed. They have heard.

Fear is addressed through the relational approach, knowing God is working and being obedient.

Addressing Fear of Rejection: Book: ***Share Jesus without Fear***

Fay states, "We need to get away from the "win them" mentality. Its not a competition. We don't win or lose people. We share obediently and that is the win. When people reject your message, it is not you they reject; they are rejecting Jesus and God's word, and it is only for that moment. Even if they reject it, they have heard it."[5]

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[5] William Fay, *Share Jesus without Fear* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 2-3.

I say its like kids taking medicine. "That tastes bad", but they took it and it can start to work.

You didn't fail because you were obedient. God can use it. What he can't use is your sin of silence. There is no success or failure in God's kingdom when people choose obedience.[6]

Relationship: We pay attention to the speed of the relationship. Don't be pushy or try to force something. Begin thinking and praying for someone. Look for opportunities within a relationship to talk about faith, either in conversation, or if invited, in an explicit bible study.

Story: 5 years ago when we moved in I started praying for a good relationship with my neighbor Domingo. We built a true friendship and I learned about him. Then I began praying for an opportunity to talk about faith. I talked a little about my faith naturally. He shared about some challenges in his life. I told him how my trust was in Jesus. He changed the subject. A friend of his invited him to church, so he went and loved it. Domingo asked me to come over and read the bible with him, so I did. His life is different now. I didn't change him. God did. I was just obedient to talk through the doors God opened. That's it!

Any questions or comments?

<u>Application</u> – 5 minutes

Thinking and Praying for people: Praying God would make a connection in their life (maybe He uses us or maybe someone else). Remember, we are praying for steps toward faith, not simply church or program attendance.

Start tonight as a part of our time together – **Moment to think about a specific person – Moment to pray for that person**

Continue to think about and pray for that person: Pray for God to soften their hearts, open up opportunities and give you the courage to talk, and that God would use those words to lead them to faith in Him.

Also, I have two cards for you. Please take them home and put them somewhere you can see them each day (mirror) to think about them.

- **The Gospel**
- **Jesus' instructions to join His mission – try to read these verses each day.** I encourage you to memorize these two commands from Jesus. We will say them each week as we discuss.

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[6] Fay, *Share Jesus without Fear,* 17-18.

This Week:

- **Connecting to God through Daily Bible Reading and Reflection (Abiding)**
- **Daily Thinking and Praying for someone else, Talk about Faith in conversation**
- **Read through the 2 verses – let them get inside you and direct you**
- **We will discuss this each week during our meal, so come prepared to check in and share your experiences.**

Any questions or comments?

We have about 30 more minutes to hang out, fellowship, and clean up.

Cards distributed to participants during Lesson 1

We are Created by God who is Perfect (Holy)

Genesis 1, 5:1-2; Psalm 139:1-16; James 3:8-9
Leviticus 19:2

Sin results in brokenness, alienation and death
Isaiah 59:2; Romans 3:23, 6:23, Ephesians 2:12

Jesus saved us and restored us

through his own death and new life

Romans 5:6-8, 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18

Because we are forgiven, we can follow Jesus

John 3:16, 5:24; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 2:24

Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus said to them "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations (peoples), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Acts 1:8 Jesus said "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Lesson 2 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the concept of contextualizing the gospel message and begin to make practical applications of engaging their local context with the gospel message.

Welcome, Prayer, Check-in and Discussion - Led by Wendy - 30 minutes

How has your week been?

How is your Daily Bible and Reflection (Abiding) going? Anything you want to share from your time of connecting with God?

Where did you hang up your verse and Gospel reminder cards?

How is it going Thinking and Praying for someone who is not walking with Jesus?

Wendy: Share about the people she is praying for/situation

How have you seen God at work this week?

Is there anything we can pray specifically about?

Any volunteers to pray about any of the things we mentioned around the table - **Pray**

Review of Previous Week – Abbey - 10 minutes

- The Gospel message is **The good news that** we have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.

- **Does anyone remember the image of the bucket? Does anyone remember the pipe?**
- The Bible gives clear commands and instructions that followers of Jesus are to be messengers of what He has done by witnessing to the difference Jesus has made in our lives and inviting people to follow him and experience wholeness. By inviting people to follow Jesus and walking along with them we are making disciples. **We are not buckets. We are pipelines.**

- **Review Verses: Matthew 28:18-20** Jesus said to them "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations (peoples), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

- **Acts 1:8** Jesus said "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

- **Our witness to others and inviting others to connect with God grows FIRST out of our connection to God (abiding).**

- We obediently share and trust God to initiate change in people's lives. The power of transformation is not from us – remember God provides the power for salvation.

- We can then think about, pray for, and even look for opportunities to talk to people without fear.

- Even if we only mention our belief in God or the practices of our faith it is witnessing – We have been obedient.

Prayer by Marlin to deepen and solidify these foundational truths in our lives.

BJ - Today **HOW** WE can communicate and model the Gospel message in a way that engages people and they can connect to it. **This process is called Contextualization.**

<u>**What does it mean to Contextualize?**</u> – 10 minutes Need Whiteboard or large notepad

Explain Culture: Collections and systems of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, foods, art and roles that exhibit as learned behaviors that are shared by a specific group of people. **Example:** Culture is different in Decatur, Los Angeles, Liberia, China.

Contextualization Definition: When Christians adapt the message, communication method, and practice of the Christian faith so it can be communicated effectively to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole— the message of the bible AND the means of living out Christian faith—understandable, without losing the core meaning.[7] Q - If someone wanted to communicate the gospel in China…. What?

The gospel must be properly contextualized for the message to be received and lives transformed.

Timothy Keller illustrates it like this: Imagine you are building a new highway and need to remove a large boulder. The experts know you must drill a small hole into the center of the boulder, place explosives down in the hole, then detonate the explosives. Both actions are important: **If you simply put the explosives on the outside of the rock** you will just have a big explosion with no results. **If you only drill the small hole you will just have a small hole.**

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[7] Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 36.

Christians and churches often error on one action or the other: They "blast away" by confronting the sins of culture and no one listens. Or they simply "drill down" by affirming and reflecting the culture and saying things that people find acceptable they never get to the Gospel.

To effectively reach people in a culture, we must both enter it sympathetically and respectfully AND clearly speak the truth of the Gospel. We "drill" first, then "place the dynamite" with intentionality and precision, in this order.[8]

Any questions or comments?

How to enter the Culture (Drill Down) – 10 minutes

Step 1: Step in Get yourself in the questions, hopes, experiences, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions.[9] Talk to people. There is no good substitute for simply spending time with people because we become aware of their unique situations and concerns and we will begin to see God's answers to their questions.[10]

The good news is, we already speak the language, know how people relate to each other, Understand how people think and what they feel. You don't have to learn a new language per se.

Each of us have the ability to know your block, your community, your family, your neighbors….

Step 2: Examine the Culture Have your eyes and ears open to understand. Be a student of your culture. Look for ways the Bible can connect to the culture - not compromising on either side.

Here is one thing that helps: **Every culture is beautiful and broken**

Exercise: Let's discern the culture of the Block Neighborhood – how is it beautiful and broken?

In the same way, the Gospel message is relevant to every culture – it answers questions and uses language that every culture has.

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[8] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 20212), 119-20.

[9] Keller, *Center Church*, 121.

[10] Keller, *Center Church*, 122.

"Jesus arrives in no culture a stranger." Jesus and his work on the cross is relevant to every culture. This is part of what makes Christianity so beautiful. It spreads and finds its home in every culture. **This is what separates Christianity from other world religions**: Take out Mecca or Saudi Arabia; India; Eastern Asia like China and Thailand.

<u>**How to Speak into Culture**</u> – 5 minutes

Once we have stepped into our culture and examined it, we can begin speaking into it.

How: Affirm the culture's aspirations (Beauty) and confront where it differs from God's design (Broken) Not "you're wrong" but "I see why you are pursuing this, but it leads to disappointment/broken relationships/destruction (using examples from the context). Let me show you how faith in Christ leads to life."

Example: Talking with neighbors and say "Family is a beautiful thing. I believe that God created families because He knew we as people need support and care. We need families by design. They point to God's goodness. But unfortunately, our selfishness breaks God's plan and creates a lot of pain and heartache. Families are broken by selfishness. We needed an example of selfless love. – **People are agreeing. They value family and see the brokenness.**

> **This is much better than me going up to a group of guys on the street and saying** "You are a bunch of deadbeat men. You don't understand anything about being a real father. You are destroying your family…." Blasting without drilling

> I can continue, "God knew we needed an example of love. He gave us that example when he gave up His own son, Jesus, to fix our mess and make us whole. Jesus gave up his life to save us and show us a better way to be a family. By giving not just taking."- **This points to the Gospel and a beautiful way of understanding family.**

So, we enter the Culture, We examine the Culture, then we respectfully and with credibility speak the Gospel into it. But we speak as someone within the culture.

As missionaries in our home culture, we must strive to lower or remove as many barriers as possible to the gospel, knowing that the gospel itself is a barrier to belief. **Some will reject.**

Any questions or comments?

Practical Application – 5 minutes

You are the best person to contextualize the Gospel to your context.

Marlin, tell us about your experience growing up in the "context" of Decatur.

Your experience here is the context from which and to which you minister. You grew up on these streets, so you know the language, the culture, the people. It is intuitive and natural.

For those of us who live here or spend a significant amount of time here, our friendships, experiences, and presence here put us in a good position to contextualize the gospel.

We also contextualize the Gospel by Living it. This is called Incarnational ministry:

We live out our faith in a way other people can observe and learn from.

Then we can share the "why." - Any questions or comments?

Review and Application - 5 minutes Notepad

As a review, Contextualization is when we enter into the culture, understand it, and speak into it from a place of respect and credibility to show and share the Gospel message. We learn the questions our neighbors and friends are asking and provide answers in a way that points to the message of the gospel.

We drill down, find the middle of the boulder and strategically place the dynamite.

I like this illustration of using dynamite because we talked about dynamite last week: The dynamite is not **our power**. It's God's. **Acts 1:8** "You will receive power (dynamite) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." We speak the words (we place the dynamite), but the power of the message is what changes people. **Romans 1:16** "I am unashamed of the Gospel for it is the **power** of God for salvation."

We are simply obedient to get to know people, love them, and open our mouths.

Remember from last week: Obedience is success

Application

Think about how to live out your faith

- **Pay attention to your context. Be encouraged, you are at Home.**
- **Look for ways to communicate the Gospel by speaking the language of your context**
- **Let people see your faith**
- **Talk about "why"**

Let's take a quick break before we start the next Lesson (3).

Lesson 3: Biblical Values and Missional Lifestyle

Lesson 3 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the fundamental changes of values and goals that take place in someone's life when they commit to following Christ.

[Note: Lesson 3 comes directly after Lesson 2. No review needed]

Introduction: The bible tells us the **world was and is broken**, but Jesus came…

We choose to either believe in and follow Jesus to wholeness and new life or reject him. Choosing to believe in Jesus and follow him is the most important decision of our entire lives because it changes and aligns every part of our lives – **They are a Disciple of Jesus**.

But what does it actually look like?

Following Jesus – 10 minutes

The Bible gives us a picture in Acts 2 - Explain Context

Read Acts 2:37-41

We see a progression of attitudes and actions: **5 fingers**

Believe - Believe Jesus truly is who he said he is

Confess – "We and the world are broken (I have sinned) and need wholeness in Jesus."

Repent – from our old way of living in brokenness and our own path of life and follow Jesus

Be Baptized – by making a public commitment to leave the old life and begin a new life through immersion (explain every area of life).

Read Acts 2:42-47

Live the Life: Received the Word, Fellowship, Prayer, Compassion/Generosity, Worship

The Palm is what connects it all: Connection to God: Abiding – (What we are stressing every day): Connecting with God by getting into the Bible, Thinking about it, Talking to God, Listening, Being made whole.

*Important Note: Addressing suspicion This is not a gimmick. We're not trying to get you to do something that will benefit us (like a cult or works religion). This is a selfless invitation. Taste and see for yourself that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).

Perspective from Nate

– 15 minutes

So let's talk about the changes that take place in someone's life

They often begin inwardly, where only you and God can see them at first: Values, Thoughts, Attitudes, Feelings.

Think about a Tree: Healthy Trees grow deep, strong roots under the surface of the ground long before they begin growing good fruit.

The change associated with following Jesus begins internally, then begins to show outwardly in visible in actions and choices, and even our physical appearance – we look more joyful and alive.

Let's look at different areas of life where change begins to take place.

Spiritually: From believing anything to **One God**

We move from searching for everything and anything that will help us at different times to believing in God, the creator of all things, all the time – Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Relationally: From empty and searching to **Forgiven and Whole**

God created us for relationships "It is not good for man to be alone." However, sin has broken humanity, creating broken relationships and people feeling empty and searching for wholeness and health in relationships. In God, we have a perfect Father who fulfills us so we don't need to find complete fulfillment from other people. In addition, because we have been forgiven by God we can forgive others. ***If my cup is full, I don't need others to fill me up and I can forgive and pour into others because God is continually filling me.*** That doesn't mean relationships won't still be work. It means those relationships don't have to define us.

Financially: From unstable owner to **Content Steward**

Greed and discontentment are a cancer that eats away at people. They spring from selfishness and uncertainty about the future. If this life is all there is and the only enjoyment we have is our fleeting pleasures of the body then we get as much as we can knowing that we will inevitably lose it all one day. **But following Jesus gives us a different perspective:** We can store up eternal treasure that can never be stolen or destroyed (Matt 6:19-20). We can value the things of God rather than the pleasures of people. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Contentment – To be truly glad with our possessions and our situation.

Steward – To take care of and manage something that we do not own

*– **House on sand** Unstable Owner **vs. House on Rock** Content Steward*

Emotional: From alone and reactive to **Refuge and Strength**

Like relationships, we can either gain our emotional stability from the people and situations around us, or from God. The world tells us our value and purpose come from

what we have, what we accomplish, and how much attention we get. We feel alone as we react to the words and valuations of people around us. God tells us our value and purpose come from being his beloved Child who Jesus gave up his life for. God has lavished his love upon us and called us His children and an even greater life is ahead of us in eternity (1 John 3:1-2).

We acknowledge there are chemical imbalances at times and times when medication or therapy are helpful, but even in these situations we know a new perfect reality is coming.

Psalm. 46:1-3 – There will be difficult times, but our refuge and strength come from God.

Socially: From humanity to **Kingdom**

We either see the world through a lens of Humanity or through the lens of God's Kingdom:

Humanity: Temporary, imperfect, insignificant, selfish, No direction = No purpose

God's Kingdom (Reigns): Eternal, made perfect, joy, reflecting love, Purpose = Mission

<u>**Life of Submission**</u> – 10 minutes

Jesus is not just our savior, but also our Lord.

Some people push against submission. They want Jesus to save them, but not be in charge.

But the truth is, we were created to worship something.

Q – What are things people worship? Money/Possessions, Fame, Relationships, Teams, People

We worship things because on our own we are incomplete.

Jesus completes us and makes us whole. We were created for worshipping God and coming under his lordship, not out of bondage or guilt, but out of joy and fulfillment.

In **Romans 6:15-19** Paul explains we were once slaves to sin and selfishness, which leads to destruction. Now we are slaves to righteousness, which honors God and brings life – wholeness.

When we submit to God and worship him, we are filled by his glory and joy and it allows us to love other people who are imperfect and interact in situations that are imperfect because we don't need to completion in those relationships or those things because **we are filled by God.**

It all boils down to, We are filled by God.

This Week:

- **Connecting to God through Daily Bible Reading and Reflection (Abiding)**
- **Daily Thinking and Praying for someone else, Talk about Faith in conversation**
- **Read through the 2 verses on your card – let them get inside you and direct you**
- **Think and pray about ways you can contextualize the Gospel in the places God has put you.**
- **Think and pray about one way you can grow in your submission to God.**

Any questions or comments?

Closing Prayer - Marlin

Lesson 4: Covenantal Marriage and Biblical Sexuality

Lesson 4 Objective: Participants will hear and be able to articulate a clear understanding of Biblical marriage and sexuality that is orthodox and conservative while also compassionate toward people living in contrast to Biblical truth and trusting in God's ability to transform people.

5:20 – Welcome, Prayer and Check-in Cards with another person

5:30 Meal Served

During Meal

Review of Previous Weeks – BJ 5 minutes

The Gospel message is **The** good news that we have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.

What does a bucket symbolize? What does a pipe symbolize?

Clear commands and instructions **Matthew 28 and Acts 1**.

We are witnesses. This is God's mission. He invites us to join Him.

We simply talk about God and let Him do his transforming work in their lives.

We **abide** first. **He fills us so we can pour into other people.**

We obediently share and trust God to initiate change in people's lives.

We can then think about, pray for, and even look for opportunities to talk to people without fear.

Contextualize the Gospel: Step into Culture, Listening and Observing, Speaking truth with love.

Following Jesus means transformation in **every area of life**: *Submit*

As Disciples, We are on Mission from a Foundation of several pillars –BJ 20 minutes

1. We are Under the Authority of God and His Word:

As followers of Jesus, we hold ourselves and one another to the clear and unchanging standard found in the Bible.

2. Humility: We do not deserve God's love. This is why the Gospel message is so sweet. We live and invite others to come near to God knowing all the while that we do not deserve to be near God, but we get to be near Him because of what Jesus did **for us. We didn't earn it.**

3. Compassion: We desire all people to come near to God. Jesus did not leave anyone out in his commission "Go and make disciples of <u>all</u> nations (remember: All Peoples)" "…witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That covers everything and everyone on earth – no one is left out. Therefore, it is not our place to say "you're in, you're out. You cannot come to God."

There will be a judgement one day, but only the perfect, righteous, and holy God will make those judgements. We are not standing in anyone's way of coming to God.

These first 3 pillars create a clear line of distinction between those who say "I am a committed follower of Christ" and those who are do not. We hold ourselves to a higher standard than we do those outside committed faith in Christ. *If Nate says "Hey, I think I'm going to cheat on my wife." I would go off on him. But I'm not going to walk up the street and go off on the guys in front because they have never told me they are committed followers of Jesus.*

There is a clear line of distinction in how we hold one another to biblical living verses how we interact with those outside the faith.

This is why Paul makes this distinction in 1 Corinthians 5 "I wrote to you in my previous letter not to associate with immoral people – Not at all meaning the immoral people of this world. They are everywhere and you would need to leave the world to not be around them. What I meant was to not associate with anyone who claims to carry the name brother or sister in Christ, but is openly embracing immorality. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge (remember: in humility and compassion)? God judges those outside. (1 Corinthians 5:9-13 paraphrase).

However, in compassion, we desire for all people to come to God, repent, observe their own sins, and experience the rich forgiveness that we have experienced. We clearly see the sin in their lives, but do so not from a place of judgement, but a place of compassion. We only have to think for a moment about the sins we have committed and lives we once lived apart from Christ, and shudder. **This view does not make little of sin. It makes great of God's grace through Jesus.**

4. Trust in God's ability to Transform: We trust in God's ability to change people's lives in accordance to His will for them. It is not up to us to change people. We are not the Holy Spirit. God may use us as agents of His word and correction in someone's life <u>after</u> they have begun a journey of faith, but as we said before, it is not our job to stand at a gate we have built and say "You do not deserve to have a journey of faith with Jesus."

We invite people to come to God and trust Him to change them. This is difficult for some of us.

I will admit, there was a time early in my life when I wanted to create pre-requisites to faith. *If that door leads to a journey of faith with Jesus, I wanted people to fix some things before they could go through the door.*

But that is not what Jesus wants. Jesus says in Matthew 11, "Come to me, everyone who is tired and burdened. I will give you rest." The Pharisees wanted to make all these requirements and put heavy burdens of obedience on people from the start. But Jesus says, "Come to me first. Then as we walk together, I will teach you and we will carry this load of obedience together when I know you are ready. It will be light compared to the heavy weights of the world."

We can simply invite people to walk with Jesus and trust He will change them. **Our first step is simply to invite people to walk through the door.**

I think about my friend Nathan who started a friendship with a guy named ***Rick***. Rick was high the first time he heard the Gospel and did not really hear much, but heard enough to know he wanted to hear it again when he was not high ☺. Rick decided to begin a new life with Jesus. He had a lot of baggage that people could see, but they were just glad he was making this decision. Right before Rick's baptism he turned to Nathan and said "I already gave up drugs a couple weeks ago, but you know, I was thinking, I look at a lot of pornography, like 4 times a day. I do not think God wants me to do that anymore. Right? Does it say that anywhere in the Bible? I am going to quit!" Nathan said "That is a great decision" and baptized him.

Q - How have you seen this type of transformation play out in someone's life?

These 4 pillars: God's Authority, Our Humility, Compassion and Trust serve as the foundation for our mission to reach those who are not walking with Christ and our discussion. **We are grateful for God's love and the life of wholeness.**

We hold firmly to the authority of the Bible to show us God's perfect plan and submit to it.

We compassionately love and invite people who are living far from God to begin walking with Him and trust He will transform them just as He is transforming us.

Let's take a quick 5-minute break to clean to up from supper

We are going to discuss The Biblical Understanding of Covenantal Marriage and Sexuality.

The reason we are discussing these two specific subjects is because marriage is one of the best ways to display the Gospel message and at the same time it is becoming increasingly less common in our culture.

We are discussing Biblical sexuality because we all know people living in a diversity of situations, lifestyles and understandings of sexuality. It will be very helpful to understand God's best plan for human sexuality.

Let's begin by discussing the Biblical understanding of Marriage as a Covenant.

Covenant Marriage – 20 minutes

Read Genesis 2:23-25 – Jesus refers to this passage to explain marriage. God designed marriage.

Friendship – It is not good for man to be alone. Marriage is the most intimate context for relationship. It still takes effort and intentionality. My advice to married couples – Keep dating

Working Together – Life requires a lot of work. Children take A LOT of work. **Ecc 4:9-12**

Sexuality – "Became one flesh. They were naked and not ashamed." God intentionally created human bodies, man and woman, and created human sexuality.

God created sex and created it in the commitment of marriage.

Making Families – Not every couple's experience. "Be fruitful and multiply: Grow families. Family is beautiful: Nate – grand daughter born, new marriage, beautiful. Families are a refuge/safe place, a place to grow, a launchpad into the world.

Marriage is foundation of family and family is foundation of society.

Christlikeness – The perfect environment for imperfect people to become more like Christ. We are confronted by our imperfection so we can confess, repent, and grow. **Selfless Love.**

The key is to understand the word "Covenant" – a promise, a commitment, marked by sacrifice.

Not a "Contract" – an agreement between two parties of an exchange of goods or services for payment. *Cell phone Contract* vs. *A Friendship (with Patrick or Terri)*

Nate: Covenant Marriage described in the Bible. - Eph 5

Note: God's redemptive work in families: Our Sin and the sins of others breaks families, but God's grace heals and God offers wholeness to us and everyone.

The truth: No perfect marriages because there are no perfect people.

There is only one perfect marriage: Eph 5, Jesus's relationship with his "Bride".

The concept of covenant marriage reminds us of Jesus's for us. **Not perfect, but strive toward**

Biblical Sexuality – 30 minutes

One major aspect of marriage and many relationships is sexuality, so we are going to discuss it.

The Bible describes **Sexuality:** God created human beings, their bodily characteristics, and their desires. As designed by God, sex is between a husband and wife as an intimate and shared experience for just the two of them together, intended for pleasure that honors each spouse, resulting in physical and relational oneness, comfort, and the potential for creating new life.[11] Sex is something very special, created by God.

Verses on Sex in marriage: The Bible specifically instructs sex is created for marriage: Gen 2:18-25 creation of male and female bodies, Matt.19:4-7 Gen reference from Jesus

Instructs against sex outside of marriage: Ex. 20:14 and Lev. 20:10 Law given to Moses for God's people, Matt. 5:27-28 Even lust in one's heart is adultery, Hebrews 13:4 Keep the marriage bed pure.

And Homosexuality: The Bible also specifically instructs sex is created for marriage between a man and woman and prohibits homosexuality: Lev 18:22 Law given to Moses, Romans 1:26-27 Paul refers to homosexual acts as being clearly outside God's will for people and sinful. 1 Cor 6:9-10, 18-20, Paul notes several forms of sexual sin including homosexuality in the list 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul describes how people try to bend and change God's word to avoid guilt.

- ***I would be glad to talk with anyone one on one later to study.***
*Remember, God created people, sexuality, relationships, and families. As a perfect creator and loving Father, God knows and wants what is best for us.

God gives these instructions out of love: *If you give something to your children, you want them to understand it so they can best enjoy it and not get hurt* – ***Dominic's Skateboard***

Therefore, God clearly communicates through the Bible (God's love letter of instruction to us) that His intended design and purpose for sexual relationships is **Between a Man and Woman inside of marriage. Anything else** is unwise and dangerous (We'll come back to examples of the danger later). – **The Fence of protection Drawing**

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[11] Based on Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 193-94.

The whole situation is a result of the Brokenness we as individuals and we as humanity experience. Remember: Our world is broken and we are broken and incomplete. We live in the midst of a broken system, we are broken by the sins people commit against us, and we contribute to the brokenness by sinning against other people – **do not miss. WE are part of the problem.**

Sin twists or perverts good things that God has created: Relationships, resources, emotions, communication, even Food. ***Think of it like fire: Fire can be used for good….***

Sin takes something good and tries to twist it: to ruin it or make it destructive.

We would all probably agree that **nothing has been broken and twisted more than Sexuality:** Molestation, rape, affairs, pornography, degrading women, pedophilia.

God intended sex for love, commitment, enjoyment and creating new life. Sin twists it to result in division, anger, broken relationships, selfishness, predators, victimization, guilt, and further brokenness – many people who have been broken go on to break other people.

We have clearly seen what God desires and instructs.

What do we do when WE are outside God's instructions. We Sin - definition

The Answer: As we discussed, We are loved by God and invited to walk with Christ. **We confess our sin**, **We repent** and go a new direction that honors God. We are **submitting our lives to Jesus** as our Lord. It requires sacrifice and discipline, but we become more like Christ and grow in wholeness.

But an even bigger challenge is that there are LOTS of people who are outside God's instruction. What is our response to people who are <u>NOT FOLLOWERS</u> of Christ and are not living in obedience to the Bible?

It seems like some churches have gotten this wrong recently on 2 different sides: Churches either go after and attack people outside the church who are not living in accordance with the Bible, Or they go out of their way to affirm lifestyles that do not honor the bible in an effort to get some kind of social points.

Today, we are discussing how to hold to an approach that honors the Bible's instructions while also being compassionate toward people living outside the Bible's instructions and trusting in God's ability to transform them.

For Simplicity: We are only going to address sexual relationships outside of marriage and same-gender sexual relationships.

There is so much more we could discuss such as gender identity and transition, but we do not have time today to fully discuss it, and a partial discussion would not be helpful. – ***Surgery***

*What I will say though is this: Remember our discussion about the relationships that broke when sin entered the world: One another, creation, God and **Ourselves:*** We experience brokenness and separation even from ourselves, our identity, who we are at the core. We are so broken within that some people do not even know what gender they are - result of our imperfect world.

Again, I would be glad to talk with anyone one on one later to discuss anything more in depth. I am hoping to have several evenings later this fall to discuss these topics more in-depth.

In both situations, whether it is sex outside of marriage or homosexuality, people are living outside God's specific design and instructions for sex. However, if someone does not proclaim to be a follower of Christ our goal is not to fix their sin, Our goal is to connect them to Jesus.

Remember, We interact with humility, compassion, inviting people to experience God, and trusting that He will change them.

Regarding sexual relationships outside marriage, We understand that it is such a common practice that is modeled in our society so of course people are sleeping together. It would be odd to not do it. Think back to Rick: He had never had anyone tell him pornography was wrong and the people around him were doing it, so of course he did.

I think about my own story. I was at a birthday party when I was 11 or 12. We were playing tag out in the barn and one of the boys pulled out a magazine and said "Look at this" so we all looked at it. That started an interest that led to a habit that led to an addiction in my teen years.

Then a man at my church, knowing that like 88% of young men look at porn said to a group of us, "If you are looking at pornography you are living outside God's will for your life and if you let Him He will help you change. I know all the guys on the football team and basketball team and guys in your class look at it. But you can be different."

I started striving toward obedience. It was difficult at first. God changed me because I knew the truth and He brought people into my life to support the change.

It is the same with people in sexual relationships outside marriage. We love and invite them to follow Jesus. Then we support the change He will make in their lives.

Does anyone want to share how God has used people around you to support change in your life in any area of obedience or discipleship?

Homosexuality is addressed in the same manner: We hold firmly to the words of the Bible, but exhibit love and compassion for people who are not yet walking with Jesus and support for people who are walking with Jesus.

We cannot control how people will respond.

Some people might respond by saying "This desire and acting on this desire is not a problem because it honors God" – This view requires re-writing what the Bible says or finding a way to re-interpret what the Bible says.

Other people come to follow Jesus. In making Jesus lord they do not try to conform the Bible to their preference, but rather conforms their actions to the Bible. They say "Based on the Bible, acting on these homosexual desires do not honor God" like someone who recognizes their love of money or food is replacing their devotion to God, or someone who recognizes their desire to steal or lie or cheat or step on other people to succeed doesn't honor God - "I need to change my thinking and behavior to honor God."

Becket Cook's Testimony

Q – Have you ever heard a Testimony like this?

Saved from actions vs. Saved from Desires: God works differently in different people's lives. For some, God provides a way for the desire to sin to be removed completely. But for many, God provides strength and forgiveness along the way as we strive to be obedient in action and desire.

There is a clear distinction between embracing something and battling against. As long as we are in this broken world and until the day Christ makes everything perfect, we will battle against sin, and fall sometimes. But as Nate says, **"Its not whether you fall, because you will, but whether you get back up and keep pursuing Christ. He is our finish line and our motivation."**

I think about my friend Teri who has struggled for decades and continues to struggle

As Yarhouse and Zaporozhets explain, We must be careful to avoid building walls around the gospel by denying the diversity of ways in which God works in different people's lives. For people striving to be obedient, we can say this honors God.[12]

Invitation to talk later: We're Pushing a BIG Button. Invite a friend of mine to be a guest speaker sometime in the future.

Societal effects of living outside God's design for relationships -
http://www.familystructurestudies.com/outcomes/

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[12] Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets, *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 81.

*This is not to "Prove We are Right" or ammunition to say "See, you're wrong".

It is reason to show compassion and direction of ways we can help.

<u>**Review and Close**</u> – 20 minutes

The Christian Life is distinct because we do not live for ourselves, doing what is convenient or beneficial for us, but what brings God honor and glory. We are created to worship God, and it is when we surrender to God that we find the greatest fulfillment and joy: **Marlin, Lillian, Nate**

When we choose to follow Jesus, every part of our lives is influenced by the Gospel message of compassion, hope, and wholeness.

Covenant Marriage is a selfless commitment to love another person that reflects Jesus' love for us. He gave himself up for us – It reminds us of Our relationship with God

God's perfect design for sexuality is to be shared by a man and woman in the marriage relationship where they can trust one another and families can thrive.

Like so many other aspects of our world and our lives, sin has taken something good and pure and twisted it.

Q – So what do WE do?

- 4 Pillars we discussed earlier: God's authority, Our Humility, Compassion and Trust.

For people who are followers of Jesus: we remind them and encourage them toward obedience to God's word – out of respect for God, humility, love for the person – *Nate holding me acct.*

For people who are not followers of Jesus: We show and share Jesus in the way we live and the words we say, and invite people to follow Jesus for themselves. It is not on us to change people. God may likely use us as His agent in someone's life after they have begun a journey.

We have love for people living outside of God's will (we at times live outside of God's will and we repent) and we desire for all people to experience God's forgiveness, redemption, and transformation.

<u>Discussion and prayer about this and check-in</u>

What have you learned this evening?

What have you been challenged to think about differently?

How does this understanding of sexuality line up with our understanding of the Gospel?

What questions do you have?

How is Bible reading (Abiding with God) going?

How do you see God at work?

How is it going praying for someone in your life who is not walking with Jesus?

Review "Witness"

Has God opened any new doors for building a relationship or witnessing?

PRAYER TIME

Lesson 5: Biblical Life-on-Life Discipleship

Lesson 5 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the goals and process of life-on-life discipleship and will identify someone they can begin discipling.

5:20 - Welcome, Prayer, Check-in Cards with another person

5:30 - <u>Review/Discussion</u> – Led by Marlin – 10 minutes

Can anyone tell us what the Gospel message is: <u>The</u> good news that we have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.

Can anyone remind us of the difference between a "bucket" and a "pipeline"?

The Bible gives clear commands and instructions that followers of Christ are to share this good news with other people – **Remember, Matthew 28 and Acts 1**. We are witnesses of what God has done in our lives and the lives of others. This is God's mission. He invites us to join Him.

We simply talk about God and let Him do his transforming work in their lives.

What does our witness to others and inviting others to connect with God grows out of? **Our connection to God (abiding).**

We obediently share and trust God to initiate change in people's lives.

We can then think about, pray for, and even look for opportunities to talk to people without fear.

Can anyone explain the process of Contextualizing the Gospel? We take the message of Jesus to the places we live and work by stepping into our culture and observing it carefully, then speaking the Gospel and faith into it in a way people can understand.

How is the Christian Life distinct? It is distinct because we live not for ourselves, doing what is convenient or beneficial for ourselves, but what brings God honor and glory. We are created to worship God, and it is when we surrender to God that we find the greatest fulfillment and joy.

When we choose to follow Jesus, every part of our lives is influenced by the Gospel message of compassion, hope, and wholeness.

Marlin pray for meal and for the evening.

<u>During Meal Review</u> – **10 minutes**

BJ - Last week we discussed **Covenant Marriage**. Can anyone share what God's intention/design for marriage is? Selfless commitment to love another, made between a man and a woman, that reflects Jesus' love for us. He gave himself up for us – It reminds us of Our relationship with God. **There are no perfect marriages because there are no perfect people, but we strive to reflect God's perfect, selfless love for us: Not to make us happy, but Holy.**

We also discussed how we are to understand and interact with people who are living outside God's instructions for people: Sin has taken so many good and pure things that God created like sexuality and twisted it. God knows and wants what is best for us and gives us instructions for our own good.

We have love for people living outside of God's will (at times we live outside of God's will and repent) and we desire for all people to experience God's forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. Remember, the Bible is not on any one person's side. It teaches, rebukes, corrects, and disciplines all of us.

God has communicated His perfect standard for living which we strive for. For us, who are followers of Jesus, there is a big difference in how we interact with other followers of Jesus and how we interact with people who are not followers of Jesus.

You remember this drawing (Line with box).

How do we interact with people who are followers of Jesus who are living in sin (pursuing sin)?

How do we interact with people who are NOT followers of Jesus?

<u>**Defining Life on Life Discipleship**</u> – 5 minutes

Discipleship is helping someone else grow in their faith and obedience in Jesus.

Life-on-life discipleship is a specific approach to discipleship that happens in the context of personal relationships where daily life is observed and practical faith is discussed and modeled. It recognizes the specific needs of those being discipled and personalizes the approach.

The life-on-life approach is different than institutional or programmatic methods of discipleship that exist in many churches and are often driven by participation in classes, advancement in impersonal systems and consumption of written or video content.

Life-on-life discipleship in an urban context like ours is a very effective way of contextualizing the gospel to specific people and their life-settings because it takes place in the context of people's lives.

This is what Life-on-Life Discipleship Looks like:

Sharing Life Together in personal/practical ways – Modeling real life faith/biblical obedience

Encompasses every area of life: marriage, parenting, neighboring, serving, finances, friendship.

Observe the discipler's pattern of life: learn, discuss, ask questions, correction and practice alongside.

It also creates a context and momentum for continuing cycles of discipleship in the urban context, where participation in organized church programs are often ineffective.

Biblical Foundation for Life-on-Life Discipleship – Acts and 2 Timothy 2 – 10 minutes

The Apostle Paul was a man on a mission to make disciples of all peoples. Paul was taking the message of Jesus to completely new groups of people.

Throughout the story of the Early Church in Acts we see Paul's strategy was simple, but very powerful: Go to a city and Pray for God's transformation, Tell people about Jesus, Encourage and support the new followers of Jesus to grow in their faith and disciple other people and become a church, multiply leaders, move to the next city.

Life on Life discipleship was at a heart of this strategy. 2 Timothy 2:1-2 provides an example of a life-on-life discipling relationship that encourages the passing on of faith to future generations.

Read 2 Timothy 2:1-2. **Q – What do you notice in this part of the letter?**

Paul was following Jesus' example, who made disciples for the purpose of sending them to make disciples. – Luke 5:1-11 Q – What do you notice in this story?

Process of Discipling Another person – 10 minutes

Life-on-life discipleship includes an expectation that disciples will become disciplers – **bucket vs. pipeline** In fact, disciples are expected to immediately begin viewing relationships with those around them as a means for showing and sharing their faith in Christ.

Everyone should be in discipling relationships: Being Discipled, Peers, Discipling.

Conn and Ortiz note the credibility of urban ministry practitioners increases dramatically when those being discipled can examine their family life and daily walk, in addition to their preaching and teaching.[13]

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[13] Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 440.

The discipler builds a relationship, learns about the person, discerns the individual needs and contours of their faith journey, and matches up unique aspects of their own context and faith journey to best facilitate growth.

4 Roles of a person AFTER someone begins a journey of faith:

- **Encourage the person in their new life as a follower: Often a "desert" season**
- **Pray with them and pray for them (Modeling prayer as talking to Father God)**
- **Help them fall in love with Jesus by reading the bible together**
- **Help them discern their next step: Bible Study, Small group, Church, Serving, etc.**

This isn't the END of the Road; it is the beginning.

Life on Life Discipleship Creates Disciple Cycles

Disciples are made with the expectation they will disciple others. All Christians are called into ministry is discipling others **Matt 28 Make disciples**.

Life-on-life discipleship promotes not only the concept of every member ministry, but a personal responsibility for reaching and discipling others.

<u>**Application**</u> – 10 minutes

Life-on-life discipleship is a powerful force for spreading and deepening the presence of the gospel in urban neighborhoods. Out group – **Community Table** – can create a culture of Life-on-Life Discipleship by expecting that everyone who is a follower of Christ will help someone else in their journey of following – This encourages growth of both people. This experience being personal discipleship sets the stage for the disciple to become a discipler and continue to legacy of discipleship as the cycle continues.

Marlin describes experience of being recipient of life-on-life discipleship Past and Present.

BJ - Let's take a moment now to pray and consider WHO God is calling you to Disciple: Child, Neighbor, Friend, Co-worker.

It is important they know it is a discipling relationship (Mentoring) and the goal is to help them grow closer to Jesus.

Remember, we are asking God to provide opportunities for one person to hear about Christ and be invited into a journey of following him – Maybe God will use us, maybe not. But we are already in a great position to disciple them.

Who is someone you can disciple?

Let's pray and ask God to help us identify that person – Adlevia

Does anyone want to share who came to mind – Others.

5 minute break before lesson 6.

Lesson 6: The Local Church as the Body of Christ

Lesson 6 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the defining the basic characteristics of a local church's identity, function and expression as the body of Christ as well as their personal role and responsibility as a part of a local church. Participants will also hear and understand how a missional community participates either as an aspect of the local church or lays the foundation for a self-identifying expression of the local church.

[Note: Lesson 6 comes directly after Lesson 5. No review needed]

Defining the Essence of the Local Church – 10 minutes

Discussion – What is a church?

The Essence of a local Church: A local gathering of the people of God who have been saved through faith in Jesus and joined his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit to honor God. Remember the 5 fingers from Acts 2. ***Followers of Christ who gather with one another – Acts 4***

Universal Church – local church.

Identity is not derived from its meeting place or time. Payton, "What is rule #3 from Club 305, Respect the …." A church building is a place, a church service is an event at a certain time, a church is people who gather together as followers of Christ.

Relationships within a Local Church as the Body of Christ (One Another's) – 15 minutes

The "Body of Christ": **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27** – Followers of Jesus are not loners, but part of a greater body. Jesus is the head. We are the other parts; diversely equipped, working together, serving one another, needing one another, celebrating together.

Relationships: In relationship, we give and receive. As a community of individual followers of Jesus in fellowship with one another there are times when each of us gives and times when each of us receives. ***Note: Receiving is different than taking.** Taking is by force, in a destructive nature, or in payment of debt – you take something you deserve or want.

The bible says Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy – that is taking.

Jesus came to give life freely – and we receive life through him.

Diagram: Give and receive

- **Friendship and Encouragement**: The "One Another's"
- **Meeting needs and Prayer:** Physical, Financial, Emotional, Social needs
- **Fruit of the Bible**: This is different than teaching with authority. It is gaining valuable and encouraging fruit from reading and reflecting on the Bible and sharing

- **Perspective**: We bring our unique perspective man/woman, age, racial, life, and we gain perspective from others.
  - We are all enriched by the community of being connected to others.
  - All of this takes place under the authority of God, provided through His perfect word and the teaching of faithful and proven people under his word.

We have all been shown love freely by Jesus, therefore we give freely to one another. Each of us gives and receives. No one is here only to give or only to receive.

Everyone has a job and a responsibility within the Body: Local Church

This hasn't always been exhibited well: paid staff = paying customers

Delegation is key. Leadership is influence and responsibility. New Leaders must be developed.

Leadership development involves mistakes.

Ex: If someone offers to cut your grass for free, they're not going to do it as well as you the first couple times. You know your yard the best. But THEY ARE CUTTING YOUR GRASS!

*There are some roles of leadership such as handling and teaching the word, confronting others, making decisions that affect the whole body that are reserved for people who have proven their maturity in faith and leadership

– **Requirements in 1 Timothy:** Such a good man no one can rightly criticize him, a faithful to his wife if he has one, Self-controlled and wise, respected by others, a servant of others, not self-seeking, a good teacher, peaceful, not chasing after money or other worldly desires. He must be a good leader of himself and his own family or he will not be able to care for and lead God's church.

This is not to hold power as an "insider's club."

<u>**Function of a Local Church**</u> – 5 minutes

John Hammet describes the five universal ministries of the church as teaching, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism, and relates these ministries to the very nature of the church.[14]

Gregg Allison adds**,** churches "pursue purity and unity, exercise church discipline, and celebrate the ordinances of **baptism** and the **Lord's supper**. . . . These communities

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[14] John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 253, 246.

regularly gather to worship the triune God, proclaim his Word, engage non-Christians with the gospel, disciple their members, and care for people through prayer and giving.[15]

A local church is a body of believers who engage in these activities resulting from their identity.

Defining a Missional Community – 5 minutes

A group of people who exist in community together who are intentionally on mission to reach and disciple people who are in their context. As Jeff Vanderstelt suggests, think of **an outward-facing family** "of missionary servants who make disciples who make disciples."[16]

Community Table has been a great community for one another. We have done life together and grown together in our faith, but Jesus has given us a commission to reach other people with **The** Good News and invite them to begin a journey with Jesus can grow in their faith.

We, as a Missional Community, exist for our faith to grow and the faith of others to grow.

Question: Is a Missional Community a local church? – 10 minutes

Missional Communities like Community Table are part of the Universal Big-C Church.

But missional communities can differ in their identity and function:

- Some **fully identify themselves as local churches** and their members consider the missional community rather than a traditional church gathering their church home.
- Other missional communities **exist with a missional purpose, but do so as a conduit to existing local churches.** As people are reached and the process of discipleship begins through individuals and the missional community those relationships are used to help new disciples connect to local churches – note connection to one or more churches.

    This is the way Community Table began, but it can change.

Charles Brock argues that a gathering of believers is not a church until they have "self-identified" as a local expression as the body of Christ.[17] J.D. Payne adds this self-

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[15] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29-30.

[16] Jeff Vanderstelt, "What Is a Missional Community?," *Desiring God Blog*, August 10, 2011, http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/what-is-a-missional-community.

[17] Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 89.

identification process occurs as the group covenants together as a local church and assigns their own leadership.[18]

<u>Drawing</u>

Faith Community – Dots

Missional Community – Lines (reaching others)

Church/Missional Community identifying as a Church – Filling in the lines

The goal of this evening **is NOT** to move us toward self-identifying as a local church or to limit us to being a conduit to existing local churches.

The goal is to help us understand the essence of what a local church is: Followers of Christ gathering together to honor God and learn and grow together in faith as we experience the Holy Spirit and put our faith into action to represent and witness to the Gospel in the lives of other people.

When you think of Community Table what comes to your mind?

We will talk more about this later in the fall as we prayerfully consider what God how God is leading.

For Now:

- Continue to connect with God each day as the source of your life and mission.
- Continue to pray for a specific person to begin following Jesus.
- Show Christ to the people around you.
- Follow Jesus faithfully and trust in His ability to transform other people.
- Consider how you can engage in Life-on-Life discipleship with another person.

Prayer Requests and Group Share: Nate, pray us out.

Next Wed – Last 2 Lessons, **Oct 6** I would like to do a Review and Discussion (**Surveys after**) - What are you interested in doing after that?

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[18] J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 58.

Lesson 7: Addressing Poverty One Family at a Time

Lesson 7 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the conceptual aspects of poverty and basic approaches a Missional Community can take in practically addressing poverty in the lives of those in the community.

5:20 - Welcome, Prayer, Check-in Cards with another person

During Meal 5:30 -

Defining Poverty – 10 minutes

Discussion – Poverty is a world-wide issue, but when you think of "Poverty" in our neighborhoods what do you think of?

Some say the person is at fault, pointing to ……

Some say the system is broken, pointing to …..

It's complicated: Lecrae "I gave a $10 bill to the man on the corner. Had a sign up sayin' he was hungry. Yeah, the world kinda crazy and folks kinda foolish."

We can all agree the causes and effects are more than just financial – its more complex.

Discussion – How do you see this to be true?

Cycle of Poverty that Cause and Perpetuate: Housing, Family Structures, Education, Financial resources, Relational connections, Health, Decision-making all resulting in instability.

Conn and Ortiz note the word most connected to urban poverty is **powerlessness, stating the poor are rendered weak and helpless with no means of freeing themselves.[19]** Greenway adds, the manifestations of poverty are "symptoms of a whole network of problems that are social and economic, religious and political, familial and personal in nature."[20]

The biblical recognition of poverty as lacking what is needed is displayed in the word χρεία meaning "need" or "that which is lacking and particularly needed." The absence of *shalom.*

This understanding of poverty recognizes **material or financial poverty as only one component and even a symptom of a larger, more complex situation.** Material and spiritual poverty frequently go together. People experiencing poverty are often

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[19] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 326.

[20] Roger S. Greenway, "Confronting Urban Contexts with the Gospel," in *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*, ed. Roger Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 36.

exclusively consumed with meeting immediate physical needs such as food, housing, and safety, thus preventing attention to spiritual needs.

In addition, the disappointment, chaos and broken relationships largely associated with poverty in the urban context are likely to result in coping through substance abuse, violence, and further unhealthy relationships, thus deepening the trench of chaos and instability.

<u>How Missional Communities like Community Table can Address Poverty</u> – 20 minutes

We are going to focus on how we can address Poverty One Family or Individual at a time

Discussion – How do you think this approach can work well?

Calming the Chaos

Remember, **incarnational ministry is making faith visible and practical in the lives of others**, so when we address the challenges of poverty in someone's life with Christian compassion we are doing ministry.

However, it is essential to **prioritize evangelism as the central motivation and goal of their engagement.** Therefore, as participants in God's mission, missional house churches should pursue compassion for the poor through generosity and care as a means to effective evangelism.

- **Not a bait and switch**

Good for Goodness sake or Good as an expression of the Gospel – How do we do this?

Q – What are some ways you can think of "calming the chaos" that incorporate evangelism?

Providing temporary relief of immediate material needs, safety, dignity and hope for the future can create a platform for appealing to the need for spiritual reconciliation to God.

Shared Stability

By establishing consistent, life-giving friendships of biblical encouragement, members can come alongside neighbors to create greater stability. We can also provide empathy and the fruit of practical experience in the midst of systemic sin as the perpetuators of poverty.

Often, the greatest help is provided not in a grocery store giftcard, but in going grocery shopping together because it is a platform for friendship, teaching, encouragement, and exhibiting a potential life (faith, family, stability, health).

Adverse Childhood Experiences - Explain

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) exists as both a result of the current state of poverty and a perpetuator of poverty into future individuals and families. ACEs are exposures to childhood abuse such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse, and household dysfunctions during childhood such as exposures to substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, violent treatment of family members, neglect, parental incarceration, and criminal behavior in the household.

There is evidence that "the impact of major childhood adversities persists well into adulthood."[21] ACEs create deep and long-lasting impacts in every area of a child's life that continue into adulthood and sow the seeds of continuing poverty and dysfunction.

Bessel Van Der Kolk identifies that trauma is often associated with secrets. However, to deal with the trauma within, people cannot keep it a secret. Healing occurs when people can expose and discuss their trauma and revisit it safely in the context of a safe and supportive group.[22] Missional communities that are accessible to victims of trauma can provide supportive networks of nurturing relationships for victims of trauma to safely revisit and share the secrets of their experiences in a healthy manner and set new trajectories for themselves and their families.

Does anyone want to share about how their own Adverse Childhood Experience affected them and how a group like Community Table helped?

Obviously, a missional community does not take the place of professional clinical counseling in addressing psychological trauma, but it can provide initial contact and support through the healing process.

In Conclusion, Missional communities like Community Table provide safe and stable relationships and safe and stable environments for individuals and families to find hope and healing from the circumstances and traumas that deepen and continue the cycle of poverty.

Let's take a 5 minute break – Then we will do Lesson 8 and have a time of Review, Discussion, and prayer at the end.

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[21] Elizabeth A. Schilling, Robert H. Aseltine, and Susan Gore. "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Health in Young Adults: A Longitudinal Survey," *BMC Public Health* 7 (March 2007): 1.

[22] Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 125-26, 204.

Lesson 8: Racial Reconciliation Within the Body of Christ

Lesson 8 Objective: Participants will hear and understand the role of individual Christians and the local church in the process of racial reconciliation.

Introduction – 10 minutes

In the beginning: God is good and right, God created good and perfect things

Sin broke: Relationship to God, Relationship to creation, Relationship to each other, and even relationship to ourselves.

The World is broken and divided because of sin. The brokenness is present in every part of the world and our lives. Brokenness is engrained in who we are/ It doesn't just affect one aspect of our lives, but is embedded in every area. We our broken by the world and we contribute to the brokenness of the world and the brokenness of others.

Our societies, our relationships, and ourselves are broken.

Racism is the decision consciously or unconsciously to discriminate against someone based on race.

Systemic racism then is when racism is embedded in an entire society, giving advantage to one race and disadvantage to another in every area of society: Education, Healthcare, politics, etc.

Q - How have you witnessed or experienced racism?

Q - How have you witnessed or experience systemic racism?

History and Development of Critical Race Theory – 15 minutes

Q – Is anyone here familiar with the concept of Critical Race Theory and would be willing to explain their understanding of CRT?

As Tony Evans explains, imagine a **firecracker** on 4th of July: original solid object is shot up in the air - it explodes in light and sound and the solid object no longer exists. This is what has happened to Critical Race Theory: Its original definition and purpose has exploded in light and sound to mean so many things.

Original CRT: A Post social-rights social construct that demonstrates how the embedded foundation and filter through which race's attitudes, behaviors, policies and structures have been rooted throughout the fabric of American life and systems even after laws were changed.

Critical Race Theorists say, slavery is over, the civil rights struggle is technically over, **but injustice and racism is still embedded in the systems and societies we live in in America**. Unjust laws that were racist in nature filtered themselves in the culture and became a way of life, that benefitted White people and to the detriment of African Americans and other minorities.

Even though the laws changed, the system had already been infiltrated with the unjust fruit of the previous environment of all of society. Even today people struggle with racism, not as unjust laws, but an unjust environment.

Think of it as a cake: Racism was not just the top layer of frosting that could be easily cut off and removed. Racism is an ingredient "baked into" our society.

We have talked about how the world is broken and made imperfect by sin – not just some parts, but every fiber of every part show the evidence of sin and is imperfect.

Original CRT is concerned about racism in systems, not individuals who are or are not racist. The original people who identified CRT were observing something that needed to be observed and it is compliments our biblical understanding of how the world is broken by sin.

Then CRT exploded when several things were plugged into it:

The 1619 Project: The project "Aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery at the very center of the United State's national narrative."[23] 1619 is when the first indentured servants arrived in the "New World" and America was founded solely on the basis of slavery.

What are your thoughts?

This is difficult to determine – that thousands of different people covering thousands of miles in America all sought for freedom from England solely for the purpose of slavery: Big events, movements, and changes are usually complicated and take place for a variety of reasons Example: Last year Nate and Datrice bought a house on Chestnut Ave….

VIDEO

With the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd **Black Lives Matter grew:**

T. Evans explains, "BLM is an emphasis and an entity. It is a movement and an organization."

The BLM movement says "the lives of black people matter"

The BLM entity/organization says "the lives of black people matter" and promotes the dissolving of nuclear families and promotes LGTBQ+ privileges and identification.

Therefore, if people agree with the statement they are agreeing with the entity and if they disagree with the entity they are disagreeing with the statement.

Complicated – What do you think?

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[23] "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190817015721/https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.

All of this was plugged into CRT and the firecracker has blown up into so many different iterations, philosophies and followings. CRT is now taking on a whole new life of definition and even those under the CRT banner cannot fully agree with one another.

Christians and churches across racial lines are confused and divided.

Discussion: Does this all make sense?

What questions or comments do you have? - **WAIT**

The Church's Response – 30 minutes

Q – So how do WE respond (we are the Church)? Where do we stand?

Like so many issues right now in our culture, it is divided and complicated.

Our culture says "Pick a side and attack the other side."

Neither extreme seems right and standing in the middle does either.

Jesus often proposed a third way: Not this, or this, or the middle, but a completely different way.

Practicing the "One Anothers"

How do you see practicing the "One Anothers" as a way of promoting reconciliation?

So much division, fear, and anger originates in isolation and misunderstanding.

2 Sides: Shooting Rockets, Middle = you get rockets from both sides

May we have the humility and God-directed wisdom to enter honest and vulnerable relationships and dialogue for the sake of overcoming fear, anger, and division.

We can **ALL** gather, we can listen, and we can learn. **This is an ongoing process**: Ensuring that our heart is aligned with Christ is not a one-time item on a to-do list that we check off and move on from; it's an ongoing process. Regardless of our experience with racial reconciliation, may we all strive toward deeper and ongoing alignment with the heart of Christ.

It is important to remember that the greatest tool affecting change is the Bible. The message of truth in scripture unites all believers in gospel truth and creates common ground for working together.

Read Ephesians 2 – Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus, made up of Jews and Gentiles in the same church. There was years of years of slander, injustice, and racial division in their collective history. **Read Ephesians 2:11-18**

What do you hear in these verses?

"Uncircumcised" – name calling

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"But now in Christ Jesus" – You were once far away from God and separated

"one new man in him" – No longer two groups, brought together

Remember from last week, As the "body of Christ" we are one. While there is division outside, we have the most powerful reason to be unified and the greatest expression of unity. We have the most powerful reason to say "Black lives matter" and the best example of racial reconciliation.

Therefore, Tony Evans proposes **Kingdom Race Theology:** The reconciled, recognition, affirmation, and celebration of the divinely created ethnic differences through which God displays His glory as His people justly, righteously and responsibly function personally and corporately in unity under the lordship of Jesus Christ.[24]

This view seeks reconciliation, value, and unity of all races as a part of God's diverse, global, kingdom.

One important point: **God is not colorblind** – What do you think?

He intentionally created diversity as beauty. We should see and appreciate the diversity of colors and cultures – we come together in diversity as "One new people."

Q – With this understanding how should we interact with one another?

We interact with one another in the Biblical principle of Love – "Love one another"

1. **We Pay attention to the issues of one another's sensitivity.**
   There are certain words and actions that reflect the unjust treatment and experiences people of color have had to endure because of implicit and at times explicit racism.

   Marlin and Nate are my friends. There are certain words and phrases I could say to Marlin and Nate that would be offensive to their sensitivities that were created by unjust people and systems. – So I am sensitive to their sensitivity.

2. **Seek clarity, provide correction and receive correction in love**
   When someone does offend us based on our rightful sensitivities, we remember our deeper unity in Christ and our call to love one another and we give the opportunity to correct or to clarify – "Do you realize what you said hurt me?" "What did you mean when you said _____?" "May I share my perspective on this?"

   We can seek clarity and provide perspective, or if needed correction, with

   care.

   We can receive perspective and if needed, correction, with care.

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[24] Tony Evans, "Kingdom Race Theology #1," sermon delievered at Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, July 14, 2021.

*There are certainly situations where someone or a group of people are intentionally abusive. In other situations, people are neglectful to maintain an appropriate perspective. In still other situations, people are simply ignorant and unaware. The situation must be discerned.

Seeking clarity, giving clarity, providing correction, and receiving correction is all done out of LOVE in care for one another.

Caring for one another requires courage. But Gospel courage is not the showy bravado this shallow age desires and approves. In fact, Gospel courage is a call to be crucified, to give up one's rights and privileges in love for others and love of God.

3. **Do not forsake the gathering or disrespect Jesus' bride**

    As a society, we are so easily offended and divided by people's statements or any kind of disagreement. We cannot just **push away** from the table in offense. Remember, we freely give and receive perspective. **Arrows** We learn and we share.

    When we freely give and receive, we are functioning as the body of Christ, with Jesus as the head. **But when we push away we prevent others from learning and us from learning**.

As the writer of Hebrews encourages us, "Let us consider how we can help one another in love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as some have begun doing, but encouraging one another, as we see Jesus' returning coming.

When we divide and push away, we also running the risk of **disrespecting the bride of Christ.**

Remember from two weeks ago in Ephesians 5: The Church is not perfect. We (all) are sinful and selfish at times, but we as the Church are Jesus' beloved bride and gave himself to make us clean and righteous. We must be careful not to disrespect the one Jesus loves so dearly.

If we can love one another above the visceral divisions of our day we will be a light. If we can be in agreement and unity as a community of people following Christ we will have a powerful, profound and visible witness to the world around us.

Review/Discussion of Previous Weeks – Led by Nate – 10 minutes

How do you understand the Good News of the Gospel?: We have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.

How do you understand the commission Jesus gave to all disciples?

The Bible gives clear commands and instructions that followers of Christ are to share this good news with other people – **Remember, Matthew 28 and Acts 1**. We are witnesses of what God has done in our lives and the lives of others. **Be a "pipeline", Not a "bucket"**

Remember: We obediently share and trust God to initiate change in people's lives.

Remember also, we first connect to God as our source of life and mission (**Abiding**)

What is Life on Life Discipleship? It is helping someone else grow in their faith and obedience in Jesus through of personal relationships where daily life is observed and practical faith is discussed and modeled. It recognizes the specific needs of those being discipled and personalizes the approach.

What is the essence of a local church? Followers of Christ gathering together to honor God and learn and grow together in faith as we experience the Holy Spirit and put our faith into action to represent and witness to the Gospel in the lives of other people.

Can anyone describe a Missional Community? It is a group of people who exist in community together who are intentionally on mission to reach and disciple people who are in their context: **An outward-facing family** of missionary servants who make disciples who make disciples.

Review/Discussion of Tonight and Prayer – Led by BJ – 10 minutes

What do you think we can do individually to be representatives of God's kingdom as agents of his mission of racial reconciliation?

What do you think we can do as a group to display a diverse, unified body of Christ that draws other people in?

Acts 2:44-47 And all who believed were together and had all things in common.[45] And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as

any had need. **46** And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

In light of all of this, How can we pray specifically for God to use us around the table and this group for His will of being a missional community?

Let's do that now.

PRAY

APPENDIX 8

COMMUNITY DIAGRAM

The following diagram was used several times during the eight lessons presented at Community Table to illustrate the giving and receiving of care, perspective, friendship, assistance, and the fruit of biblical study. The diagram illustrates how members of Community Table bring aspects of their individual lives to share with the rest of the members in community together. This giving and receiving takes place in the context of fulfilling the "one another's" of the New Testament.

Individual Members

Friendship + Encouragement

Perspective

Group Gathering

Meeting Needs + Prayer
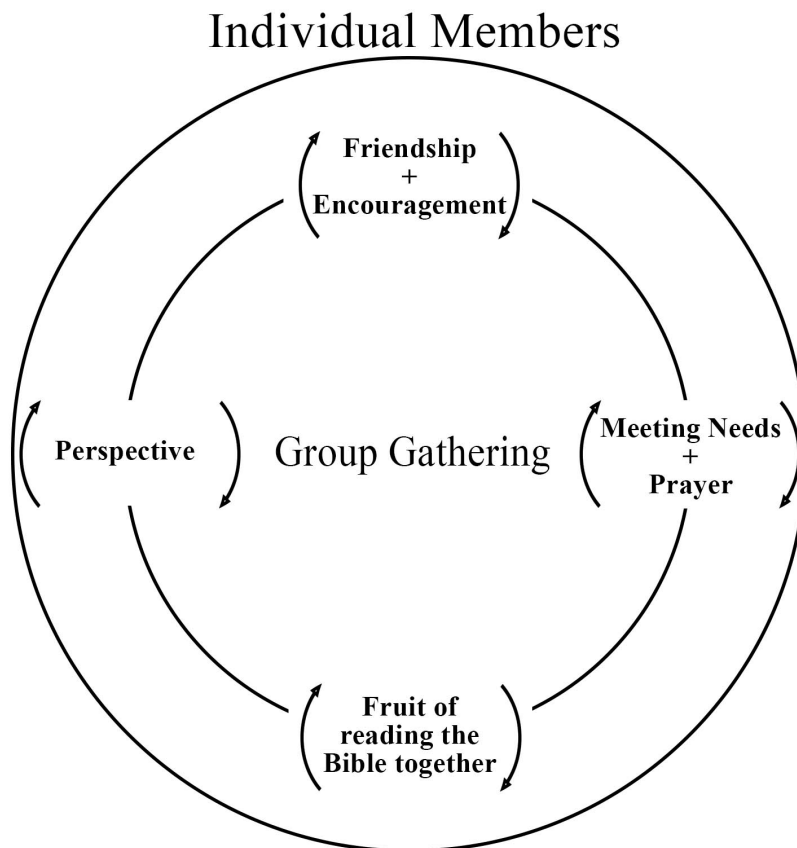
Fruit of reading the Bible together

Figure A1. Community diagram

APPENDIX 9

CURRICULUM REVIEW OUTLINE

The following outline was used during weeks 6 and 7 of the Community Table study to review and lead discussion of the key concepts of the Missional Curriculum. The discussion on October 13, 2021, focused specifically on review and discussion with the goal of developing the Ministry Plan.

Community Table Review – October 6, 2021

5:30   Welcome to new people

      Tonight we will eat together, review and discuss what we have talked about the last 5 weeks, and if time we will discuss our plans for this group moving forward.

Marlin - Pray for the evening and the meal

Serve MEAL

Check in: How is your week going? How is it going praying for and talking to people about faith?

For people who believe in and follow Jesus, The Gospel is the good news that changes our lives. What are the basic aspects of the Gospel that come to your mind?

The Gospel is **The** good news that we have been created by a perfect God, and even though we are broken and imperfect, living in a broken world, and deserving God's punishment for sin, we have been saved by Jesus Christ who fixed our relationship with God through his own death, restored us to wholeness through his new life, and invited us to follow him.

God did not intend for us to keep this good news to ourselves.

How would you explain the importance of missions?

Bucket vs. Pipeline

Do you remember the two passages we discussed that specifically commission followers of Jesus to share the message of Jesus with others and invite them to follow Jesus: **Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8**

Main idea: God is on a mission. God commands us to join Him. We are being obedient when we are witnesses of Christ and try to make disciples. We can talk about Jesus without fear. God is the one who changes people's lives. Think about your own life and how God has changed you – God can change others.

It begins with our connection to God first. Then we think about, pray for, and talk to people who are not following Jesus. Turn to one other person and take turns sharing with them who you are specifically praying for, then pray together for your people.

When we do show our faith or talk to people about our faith in Jesus we want to **"contextualize the gospel." Does anyone want to share what that means?**

When you think of what it means to be the Local Church – the essence of church – what do you think of?

Circles

The essence of the local church is Followers of Christ gathering together to honor God and learn and grow together in faith as we experience the Holy Spirit and put our faith into action to represent and witness to the Gospel in the lives of other people.

How does Community Table look like a church?

When someone begins a journey of faith with Jesus, how does their life begin to change?

spiritually, relationally, financially, emotionally, and socially

Now we are going to talk **about relationships**: How we can relate to each other, How Jesus relates to the Church, and how a husband and wife relate to each other.

How would you describe a covenant relationship?

How would you describe the biblical concept of marriage as a covenant?

We understand our world and ourselves are broken. Sin is when we do something our own way instead of God's perfect way. Sin has broken our relationship with God, creation, other people, and even ourselves.

We are the victims of the sins of others and we contribute to the problem of sin by hurting other people. **The good news is God still loves us and sent Jesus to save us from the eternal consequences of our sin, if we choose to follow him to freedom and life. But we still have to live for now in this sinful world.**

How can we understand God's instructions for us? Rules? *Fence*

How do we address sin in other people's lives?
Remember We are Under the Authority of God and His Word

Humility

Compassion

Trust in God's ability to Transform

How should we interact with people who are followers of Jesus who actively sin? -

How should we interact with people who are NOT followers of Jesus who actively sin?

How would you describe the goal of Life on Life Discipleship?

How would you describe the process of Life on Life Discipleship?

What is a Missional Community?

How do you see Community Table being a Missional Community?

How can we as individuals and together as a missional community address poverty?

How can we as individuals and together as a missional community pursue unity and promote racial reconciliation?

Pursuing Unity – Circles

Nate: Please pray for us as we show the world the unity of the Body of Christ.

Take 2nd survey: Instructions, this is to show your growth of understanding over the past 6 weeks: Example: "I understand the essence of the church" D = Disagree "I don't understand" SA = Strongly Agree "I really understand the essence of the church well.

If time:

Based on what we have learned over the past couple weeks, our current situations individually, and where God is leading, what do you sense God is calling us to do as a group?

Our mission as individuals is to be disciples of Jesus first, then disciple-makers of others: Sharing Jesus with people who are far from him, discipling people who are walking with him.

What is the mission of our group? What are we moving toward?

Community Table Discussion – October 13, 2021

5:30   Welcome and Prayer

Tonight we will eat together, discuss what is most important to us about Community Table and discuss our plans for this group moving forward.

Marlin - Pray for the evening and the meal

Serve MEAL

Check in:

How is your week going?

What have you learned/gained from your connection time with God this week?

Who have you evangelistically prayed for during the past week and how have you seen God at work in their life?

What promptings, opportunities, conversations, or events have been an open door for conversations about faith or even to explicitly share the gospel?

What fears or roadblocks have you encountered this week that have kept you from having conversations about faith?

How has your faith and/or obedience to God grown this week?

How can this community support you, encourage you, or keep you accountable to actively live out your faith?

What are the most important things you have learned the last couple weeks here at Community Table?

Based on what we have learned where do you see God leading, what do you sense God is calling us to do as a group?

Ask it this way: Our mission as individuals is to be disciples of Jesus first, then disciple-makers of others: Sharing Jesus with people who are far from him, discipling people who are walking with him.

What can we as a group do to best support one another in our journey of faith and our mission to make disciples? *Pipelines connected and connecting others*

What is our plan for ministry?

Format, Timing, Participants - Meal

Just this group? – invite others (new to faith?)

Every week – Time:

Every other week?

Once a Month gathering (Commit to be on mission other weeks)

Shared Bible Study

Meal, check-in/prayer

Zoom check-in?

Another day/time?

Format, Timing, Participants Notes:

APPENDIX 10

MINISTRY PLAN

A Ministry Plan For Community Table
Decatur, Illinois
October, 2021

Introduction:

      The core participants of Community Table are committed to grow together in faith in Jesus Christ and be on mission to reach and disciple other people through relationships. This ministry plan captures the biblical foundation, mission, identity, core values, and strategies for disciple-making and multiplication, including the necessary components and timeline for ministry and potential obstacles to continuing and growing the ministry.

Foundational Passages

Matthew 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Acts 1:7-8 [Jesus] said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. [8] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.[b] The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. [18] All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; [19] that is, in Christ God was reconciling[c] the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.[20] Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Romans 6:15-18 What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means![16] Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves,[a] you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? [17] But thanks be to God, that you

who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Acts 2:37-39 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" [38] And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Acts 2:42-47 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common. [45] And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

1 Corinthians 5:9-12 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— [10] not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.[11] But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. [12] For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?[13] God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

2 Timothy 1:13-14 Follow the pattern of the sound[d] words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. **14** By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

2 Timothy 2:1-2 You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, [2] and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men,[e] who will be able to teach others also.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.**13** For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves[a] or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. **14** For the body does not consist of one member but of many. **27** Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. [2] Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, [3] not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. [4] He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, [5] for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? [6] He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. [7] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so +he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Ephesians 4:1-7 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [4] There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. [7] But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Mission:

Community Table is a missional community which exists to support one another as disciples of Jesus Christ and disciple-makers through prayer, friendship, biblical study, and accountability, with the ultimate goal of making other disciples and welcoming them into the Body of Christ.

Identity:

As a missional community, Community Table is an autonomous gathering of followers of Christ who meet together for the sake of spiritual growth and mission. Community Table's autonomy is expressed in the self-governance of its members to determine its mission, values, and ministry strategy under the counsel of scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Community Table has the agency to address relevant issues and agilely contextualize ministry. Members of Community Table identify and appoint leaders, based on biblical characteristics, to oversee the spiritual health and ministry direction of the group using due process of selection and affirmation.

While Community Table is certainly part of the universal church of all believers in Christ, it is not currently a self-identifying expression of the body of Christ as a church plant. Rather, Community Table functions as a conduit to existing local churches. Community Table is most closely connected to First Christian Church (FCC), as an outgrowth of FCC's outreach in the Block Neighborhood. However, as Community Table grows and matures, there is potential for it to transition into a missional church plant in the future. This decision would require consensus by both the FCC leadership team and members of Community Table. At this point of transition, Community Table would self-identify as a church and become a missional church plant in its autonomy of ministry,

weekly gathering, leadership development, self-sustaining nature, and desire to plant future churches.

Core Values:

These eleven core values express the personality and foundations of Community Table and serve to guide and protect the direction of its ministry.

- **Life-on-Life Discipleship**: The intentional discipleship investment of one individual into another person through personal conversations, prayer, and exhibiting the praxis of Christian faith in daily life.
- **Prayer**: Dedicated time in each gathering to thank God, acknowledge need, express surrender to His will, and seek His provision for obedience.
- **Diversity**: Recognizing, welcoming, and celebrating the racial, cultural, generational, and social diversity of the Body of Christ, the Block Neighborhood and the larger community of Decatur by inviting and honoring diverse perspectives and supporting diversity among group leaders.
- **Relationships**: Practicing the "one anothers" of scripture used to describe and direct how members of the Body of Christ should interact.
- **Families**: Family members of all ages, including children and single adults are valued.
- **The Leading of the Holy Spirit**: Followers of Christ are aware and obedient to the leading of God's Spirit (Rom 8:9, Gal 5:16-18)
- **The Bible as Foundation**: The Bible is God's divinely inspired word as the ultimate authority for every area of life.
- **Accountability**: Holding one another, in love, to obedience and application of God's will.
- **The Block Neighborhood**: The neighborhood residents and area located north of Grand Avenue, between Main and Monroe streets in Decatur, Illinois.
- **Personal Invitations**: Invitations extended from one person to another through a relationship of trust and care, regardless of the response.
- **Multiplication**: Developing new disciples, new leaders, and new missional communities.

Leadership Development:

Leadership development is essential to the growth and replication of Community Table. Just as life-on-life discipleship fosters spiritual maturity, it is also a medium for leadership development. Participants learn leadership of themselves and their families, which is a conduit to leading in the group setting. The relational and collective nature of Community Table creates an environment for nascent leaders to both identify and test their leadership skills.

Community Table's ministry to its members and those it seeks to reach is built on the foundation of ministry involvement by all its members. The limited number of participants and intimate nature of the gatherings necessitate every person to share responsibilities for the group's existence, which facilitates leadership development. The flat structure of leadership and responsibility also allows leaders to grow and develop as Community Table grows. Since every member is involved in ministry, everyone has a capacity for some level of leadership tied to serving the group. The highest level of accountability in serving is group leadership.

As leaders grow in self-awareness, spiritual maturity, use of their giftings, affirmation of their calling, they are given increasing responsibilities and trust. The focus of the leadership development is holistic, unique to the person, and includes a strong presence of personal accountability through the life-on-life discipleship relationship. The leadership role resides in the person, not the position. When the other leaders of Community Table agree the individual is ready, and they have been affirmed by the group, they are set apart to lead or co-lead in a new capacity such as teaching, mentoring or providing leadership for a new missional community. A new group will not be launched until at least two leaders are in place to lead it.

<u>Strategy</u>:

The mission of supporting one another as disciples of Jesus Christ, making other disciples and welcoming them into the Body of Christ will be accomplished by the following four-part strategy:

A. **Discipling Relationships:** Each person at Community Table is intentionally being discipled by another person and discipling another person through one-on-one discipleship meetings. This strategy is accomplished through discipleship meetings that take place at least once a month and include the following check-points: 1. How are you growing in your faith? 2. Who are you thinking about, praying for, and looking for opportunities to engage who is not walking with Christ? 3. Who are you discipling? 4. How can I encourage you? 5. How can I pray for you?

B. **Personal Outreach and Evangelism:** Each person at Community Table is encouraged and held accountable to think about, pray for, and look for opportunities to engage someone who is not walking with Christ. This strategy is accomplished through weekly check-ins during group meeting time and a check-point discussion in one-on-one discipling meetings.

C. **Accessible Connection Opportunities:** Understanding that many residents of the Block Neighborhood are still very tentative and anxious about entering into another person's house, the members of Community Table intentionally create simple opportunities for people from the neighborhood and beyond to feel welcome and build relationships with someone from Community Table in an a shared and accessible neighborhood space. This strategy is accomplished through Open Yard, the Fall Celebration, Home Visits, and projects with neighbors.

D. **Regular Gatherings for Fellowship, Bible Study, and Prayer:** Recognizing the essentiality of frequent and consistent gatherings to build one another up in faith and send one another out in mission, the members of Community Table will meet together on a regular basis for prayer, bible study, discussion, and when possible, a meal. This strategy is accomplished by continuing Community Table gatherings on Wednesday evenings.

<u>Ministry Components</u>:

The ministry of Community Table will require five components for the group to continue meeting, making new disciples, develop leaders, engage the Block Neighborhood, and multiplication through replicating the ministry in other

neighborhoods and contexts. These six components will develop and adapt as the ministry grows and multiplies.

A. **People:** The Body of Christ is the people of God meeting together and worshipping Him. The core of Community Table is people. Therefore, the existing members of Community Table and those still to be reached and discipled are the focus of the ministry. All other components of the ministry, as well as auxiliary aspects such as financial resources, programming or governing documents are intended to serve the mission of growing and making disciples. If Community Table ever reaches a point of only

B. **Meeting Space:** The meeting space for ministry must appropriate accommodate the number of adults and accompanying children who attend. Community Table currently meets in the home of BJ and Mary Leonard in the Block Neighborhood, which is owned by First Christian Church. The space is limited to the spatial capacity of the house, garage, pavilion, and yard. At which time the number of adults and children is too large for the space, the group will determine either a new use of the space at the Leonards' home, another space to meet such as outdoors, another participant's home, or a public park, or launching an additional gathering of Community Table in another location. Two significant considerations are weather and the ability for residents of the Block Neighborhood to walk to the meeting space.

C. **Fellowship:** Relationships and practicing the "one another's" of the bible are foundational for members of the Body of Christ in a local gathering to grow independently and corporately in common as followers of Jesus. The ministry of Community Table must incorporate opportunities for members to gather, talk candidly about life, provide encouragement, pray together, and mourn and celebrate together accordingly. This fellowship also creates an intimate context for bible study and prayer. Whenever possible, Community Table fellowship will include the sharing of a meal to set a foundation for conversation, friendship and common experience. The goals of fellowship will drive decisions about meeting place.

D. **Prayer:** Community Table is a ministry of God's working. Therefore, every gathering and event of Community Table will accommodate times of prayer for welcoming the Holy Spirit, intercessory for the needs of members and praying for the unreached.

E. **Outreach Opportunities:** Community Table exists for its members to grow in their discipleship, for those members to make disciples, and for engaging the Block Neighborhood. Therefore, the members of Community Table will organize and execute events and activities specifically focused on meeting residents of the Block Neighborhood, building friendships, and creating a foundation for discipleship. Events may be fellowship-focused, such as a block party or may be service-focused such as helping a resident. The members of Community Table may also schedule times to visit neighbors or conduct prayer walks.

F. **Partnerships:** The members of Community Table recognize there are many churches, ministries, and individuals who honor God through biblical teaching and obedience, make disciples, and reach the city with the Gospel message, and some who do not. The Community Table group will engage in partnerships with individuals and groups for the sake of mission if the partnership is grounded in biblical principles and led by the Holy Spirit. Currently, the closest partnership is with First Christian Church in Decatur.

Timeline:

The timing of Community Table's ministry growth and multiplication will be determined by the processes of inviting new people to join the group and making new disciples as provided and led by God. Any decisions for expansion through changing meeting space or launching new groups will be discerned through prayer, fasting, consensus of the group leaders and affirmation by group members.

Leadership development will take place at the speed of discipling relationships and God's timing in forming and raising up new leaders. Every participant in Community Table will share responsibility in the tasks associated with carrying out the weekly gathering, fellowship, and outreach events. Those participants who exhibit visible faith and character reflecting 1 Timothy 3 and shows commitment to the ministry will be asked to join the other leaders in overseeing the group and discipling other members of the group. This request will be affirmed by the rest of the group.

Launching new meeting locations will take place in the event of three driving scenarios: 1. The group has identified a location in or near the Block Neighborhood it sense God is calling the group to begin a new meeting location and believes the original location will be sustainable as it sends new members for the new launch. 2. Several individuals or families from a particular location in or near the Block attend Community Table at the Leonards' home and feel called by God to launch a meeting location for the sake of making more disciples around the new location with the support of the other group members. 3. An established group in a meeting location has grown beyond the capacity of its location to continue reaching new people and desires to send members to launch a new location. A combination of two or all three driving scenarios are likely, as established groups grow, the group feels called to launch, and specific group members feel called to launch near their home. A new group will maintain close connections to existing groups as part of a network of Community Table groups.

Church planting is a potential result of Community Table. Currently, Community Table exists with a missional purpose, as a conduit to existing local churches. As people are reached and the process of discipleship begins through individuals and the missional community those relationships are used to help new disciples connect to local churches. However, if the members of one or more Community Table groups prayerfully consider the nature of the group and commit together to self-identify themselves as a local expression of the Body of Christ. At this point, Community Table would become an autonomous church plant as its members consider it their church home rather than an existing church in the Decatur community. This development would be affirmed by both the leadership of Community Table and the leadership of First Christian Church (FCC), which was instrumental in establishing ministry in the Block Neighborhood. FCC fully encourages the existence of Community Table and excitedly supports the potential for a church plant in the Block Neighborhood.

Potential Timeline for the development of Community Table in the next 2 years

Fall 2021: Members evangelize others, make disciples, and inviting new people to join the group

Spring and Summer 2022: Continue evangelism and discipleship and prayerfully consider the need, calling, location and leadership for launching a new group.

Fall 2022: Continue evangelism and discipleship as Community Table leadership assesses its current group or groups and prayerfully considers the potential and steps of launching new groups or even planting a church.

Spring 2023: Continue evangelism and discipleship as group members execute plans made to either launch new groups or plant a church.

Summer 2023: Continue evangelism and discipleship while growing and developing the existing groups and potential church in the Community Table network.

Potential Obstacles and Threats:

The potential obstacles to the growth, development, and multiplication of Community Table as a missional community are largely connected to the weakening or absence of the group's core values and/or ministry components. Missional communities comprised of deep relationships between people committed to making disciples can be severely compromised by division in the group, loss of mission, or movement away from a foundation of biblical faith and obedience.

Breaking of Relationships and Unity: The members of Community Table live in an environment ripe for division and anger. Racial, social, and political tensions fuel disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflict and threaten to divide the body of Christ. While the racial, social, geographic, and generational diversity of the Community Table group is one of its greatest strengths as a model of unity and deference, this diversity is also a liability for frustration and division along lines of potential divergence. Community Table suffered amidst the divisive climate of 2020, which resulted in the withdrawals of several of its members. A breaking of relationship and unity among members of Community Table would compromise the integrity of gatherings, the quality of the fellowship, and the ability to welcome new members into the group, as well as the loss of friendship among existing members. This obstacle can be prevented by open conversations, a spirit of empathy and unity, and group members pursuing the biblical characteristic of humility.

Loss of Mission: The members of Community Table are personally and corporately committed to the mission of making disciples, as a reflection of God and His kingdom. The group has covenanted together to pray for and engage unreached people, participate in life-on-life discipling relationships, and invest relationally in the Block Neighborhood. A loss of mission in these areas of missional commitment could easily take place if emphasis is taken off those outside the Community Table group and placed

solely on the preferences and care of those inside the group. While such a drift could be slow, it would be detrimental to the identity and fate of the group. A loss of mission would compromise the personal and corporate commitment to mission and discipling relationships that define Community Table at present, causing it to cease as a missional community. This obstacle can be prevented by maintaining and communicating a vision for personal evangelism and discipleship driven by a burden for the unreached.

Movement away from a Foundation of Biblical Faith and Obedience: Community Table was founded as a group dedicated to the study and application of the Bible, as the written word of God, and obedience to His congruent leading through the Holy Spirit. Urban ministry and discipling relationships are difficult without the tethering of biblical faith for persevering in mission. Recognizing God's word as the highest authority for life the active leading of the Holy Spirit, any move away from biblical study and obedience to the Bible would be detrimental to Community Table's identity and mission. Losing reliance on the Holy Spirit and accountability to biblical obedience would place ultimate authority and direction in the control of group members rather than God and undermine the mandate of biblical mission. This obstacle can be prevented by identifying the threats of selfishness and apathy and responding with a continued posture of faithfulness to biblical study, obedience and prayer.

If Community Table can maintain the unity of faith in fellowship while focused on the mission of making disciples s directed by biblical obedience it will thrive and multiply in its evangelistic reach and engagement of the Block Neighborhood. The challenges of collaborating schedules and resources, managing meeting spaces, and accomplishing effective outreach can be met and overcome if the group is unified in biblical fellowship and mission.

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<u>Assessment:</u>

       Monitoring the health and direction of Community Table will be accomplished through two regular assessments. The first assessment will be conducted internally three times a year in January, May, and September. The internal assessment will be a dedicated conversation focused on the health, vision, and mission of the group. The internal assessment will use the following questions as indicators of health and mission with an explanation for explanation: 1. Is Community Table still inspiring and equipping its members to make disciples? 2. Are the members of Community Table growing in their faith? Is the Community Table group a reflection of the Body of Christ in practicing and experiencing the "one anothers" of scripture? Is Community Table reaching the Block Neighborhood? Is Community Table still attentive and obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit? Is the teaching, discussion, and ministry of Community Table still biblically sound? Is the Community Table group in unity? Is Community Table a place of prayer, accountability, and encouragement?

       The second regular assessment will be conducted externally by a group of trusted ministry leaders called "advisors" who are familiar with the identity and mission of Community Table. This group will convene with the leaders of Community Table once a year in February to discuss the health of the group and provide external accountability. The leaders of Community Table will present the results of the January assessment and respond to additional questions from the team of advisors, based on their interests and concerns. At least one advisor will be a leader from First Christian Church and at least one will be from outside the Decatur area. The internal and external assessments will ensure Community Table remains faithful to its biblical foundation and calling of making disciples.

APPENDIX 11

BIBLE STUDY TEMPLATE

The following template was used at Community Table during the final two weeks of meeting to facilitate and guide the Bible study. The Bible study incorporated the values established by members of Community Table during previous weeks and incorporated aspect of the Discover Bible Study method.

Community Table – October 20, 2021

5:30 – Welcome, Prayer, Meal

Check in:

How is your week going?

What have you learned/gained from your connection time with God this week?

Who have you evangelistically prayed for during the past week and how have you seen God at work in their life?

What promptings, opportunities, conversations, or events have been an open door for conversations about faith or even to explicitly share the gospel?

What fears or roadblocks have you encountered this week that have kept you from having conversations about faith?

How has your faith and/or obedience to God grown this week?

Acts 1 Study:

At end: What is 1 thing you can put into practice from our study this evening?

How can we support you, encourage you, or keep you accountable to actively live out your faith in this way?

Prayer Requests:

Community Table – October 27, 2021

5:30 – Welcome, Prayer, Meal

Check in:

How is your week going?

What have you learned/gained from your connection time with God this week?

Who have you evangelistically prayed for during the past week and how have you seen God at work in their life?

What promptings, opportunities, conversations, or events have been an open door for conversations about faith or even to explicitly share the gospel?

What fears or roadblocks have you encountered this week that have kept you from having conversations about faith?

How has your faith and/or obedience to God grown this week?

Acts 1 Study continued (possibly Acts 2):

At end: What is 1 thing you can put into practice from our study this evening?

How can we support you, encourage you, or keep you accountable to actively live out your faith in this way?

Prayer Requests:

APPENDIX 12

T-TEST RESULTS

The following table displays the *t*-test results of the comparative analysis of the pre- and post-curriculum administrations of the Missional Understanding Survey.

6-point Scale		
T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	PRE TEST TOTAL	*POST TEST TOTAL*
Mean	41	55.875
Variance	52.28571429	17.55357143
Observations	8	8
Pearson Correlation	0.282929963	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	7	
t Stat	-5.795773124	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000333206	
t Critical one-tail	1.894578605	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000666412	
t Critical two-tail	2.364624252	

4-point Scale		
t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	PRE TEST TOTAL	*POST TEST TOTAL*
Mean	9	10.75
Variance	4.571428571	1.928571429
Observations	8	8
Pearson Correlation	0.529237747	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	7	
t Stat	-2.701457447	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.015287241	
t Critical one-tail	1.894578605	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.030574483	
t Critical two-tail	2.364624252	

COMPLETED MINISTRY PLAN
EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric was completed by the expert panel to evaluate the biblical

faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the missional curriculum.

Ministry Plan Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Mission					
The goals of the ministry plan to make disciples, reach the community and replicate missional communities are clearly stated.					
Rob					
David					
Gary					I give a 4 but qualify it by noting the fuzziness around group autonomy, connections to FCC, and missional community versus a church.
The need to multiply missional leaders is clearly stated in the ministry plan.					
Rob					This is most evident in the strategy.
David					The plan is clearly team-oriented.
Gary					
Biblical and Theological Accuracy					
The material presented in the ministry plan is faithful to the Bible.					
Rob					The extensive scriptural foundation presented is evidence of Biblical faithfulness.
David					
Gary					This plan is solid within the overall framework of Evangelical theology

The material presented in the ministry plan is theologically sound.				
Rob				
David				
Gary				
Organization				
The components of the ministry plan are well-organized and concise.				
Rob				
David				
Gary				Yes. I have personally attended and seen how group members have taken it in, discussed it, and applied it.
A timeline for implementing the ministry plan is clearly stated.				
Rob				
David				
Gary				It is clearly stated. Whether it can work out on that timeline will be seen in the coming years.
Sustainability				
The values for guiding the ministry plan are clearly stated and explained.				
Rob				Yes
David				
Gary				
Obstacles that may hinder implementing the ministry plan have been stated.				
Rob				
David				
Gary				These are, BJ notes, the social environment of community table that includes a diverse racial, economic, familial, and educational group.
Overall, I believe the plan, when executed will promote growth and multiplication of missional communities in Decatur.				
Rob				
David				From what BJ has reported, this plan is already in motion.
Gary				Yes, as already evidenced in the interactions among group members and their reports of their interactions with non-Christians.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE URBAN
CONTEXT OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS, IN COOPERATION
WITH FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS

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This project developed a missional community in the urban context of Decatur, Illinois, in cooperation with First Christian Church or Decatur, Illinois. Chapter 1 presents the history and ministry context of Decatur, Illinois, its urban neighborhoods, its area churches, and communicates the goals for the project. Decatur has experienced significant economic, educational, and social challenges in recent decades resulting in the decay of its urban neighborhoods and a growing segment of the community's population that is unreached by churches. Chapter 2 provides exegesis of four passages of scripture (Jer 29:4-11; Acts 1:3-1; 1 Thess 1:1-10; 2 Tim 2:1-2) to illustrate how God calls his people to represent and make him known to people in local settings and uses his people as a primary means of spiritual transformation and gospel mission. Chapter 3 presents the ways a missional community is the most effective as a means of engaging and reaching the urban context of Decatur, Illinois. Chapter 4 describes the project itself, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific missional curriculum. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on completion of the specific goals. Ultimately, this project sought to develop a group of people, in community, who are equipped to engage and disciple others in Decatur's urban context for the glory of God.

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