CREATING A HEALTHY AND COMPELLING GROUP

LEADER CULTURE AT THE AUSTIN STONE

COMMUNITY CHURCH IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

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A Project

Presented to

the Faculty of

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Doctor of Ministry

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by

Marshall Raymond Perry

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APPROVAL SHEET

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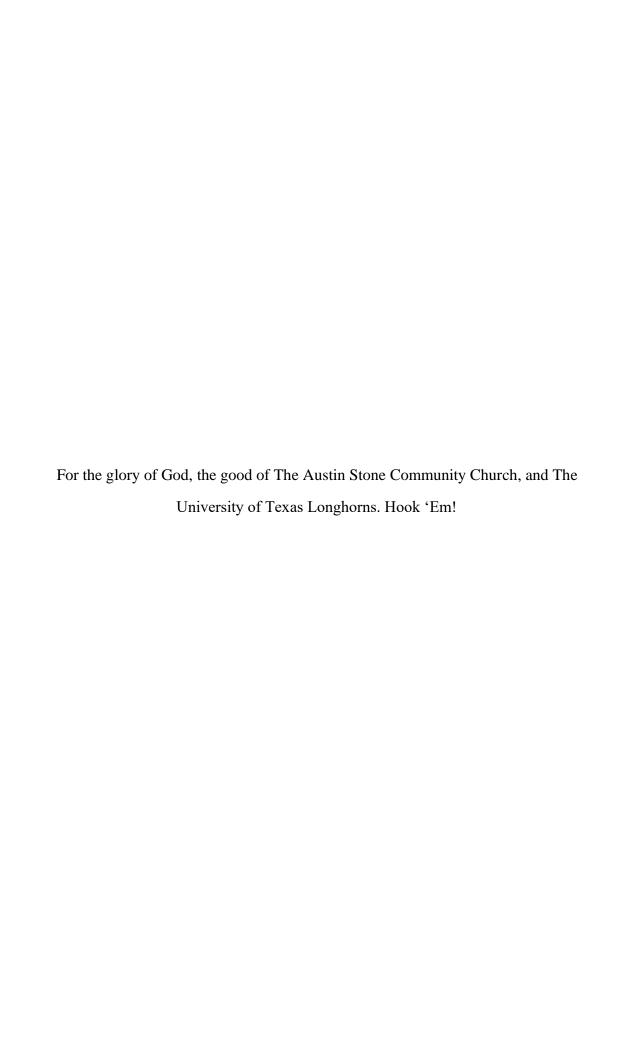Second Reader: Matthew D. Haste

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For the glory of God, the good of The Austin Stone Community Church, and The University of Texas Longhorns. Hook 'Em!

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PREFACE

Thank you, Jenny, my sweet wife, for your support and love throughout this process. I am honored to be your husband and I thank God for you, our marriage, our daughter, and the home we have built together. I love you.

Thank you group leaders for being the inspiration for this project. Your ministry is indispensable to our church. I pray this serves you well.

Thank you Matt, Brandon, Zach, and Andres for your friendship and interest in my work. You have each helped me press on in unique ways.

Thank you Walt, Tyler, Scott, and Todd for investing in me throughout my ministry. I am the leader I am now because of the unique ways each of you has led me.

Thank you Dr. Gregg Allison for your instruction and supervision these last three years. You have been the single greatest influence on my ecclesiological convictions, and I thank you greatly for taking the time to invest in my project and me.

Finally, thank you partners of The Austin Stone Community Church for being my brothers and sisters. This is the church where I was saved and the only church I have ever known. I hope and pray this work is used to build us up into the fullness of Christ as one united body of believers.

<div align="right">Marshall Perry</div>

Austin, Texas

May 2023

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

First John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."[1] Committed fellowship with Christians in the church is not a product of faith but an evidence of faith. Therefore, one core value of The Austin Stone Community Church is to be committed to covenant community. This conviction is expressed in a wide variety of groups of Christians in community with one another. These groups are led by an indispensable part of the body of Christ: group leaders. Group leaders are responsible for leading these communities of believers toward faithful pursuit of The Austin Stone Community Church's mission to love God, love the church, love the city, and love the nations. To help endure this mission, group leaders need meaningful investment and support. Currently, the majority of group leaders are not receiving the level of investment and support needed to empower their enduring leadership. For this reason, The Austin Stone Community Church seeks to create a healthy and compelling leadership culture for the good of the church, fruitful mission, and the glory of God.

Context

The Austin Stone Community Church (TAS) is located in Austin, Texas, and currently has six unique congregations across the city: Downtown, St. John, South, West, North, and Northwest. Although each congregation has its own pastor, executive pastor, staff, elders, deacons, and members (called "partners"), they are not autonomous churches. Instead, TAS is one church existing in six congregations that share a common identity,

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

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mission, theology, vision, budget, and preaching calendar. One product of these shared commonalities is the ministry called "Groups at TAS," which was the focus of this project.

Groups at TAS is responsible for how biblical community is expressed at TAS and similarly reflects the organizational structure of the church. Each congregation has its own respective groups ministry with designated staff who are responsible to lead, equip, and care for all the groups that exist within the congregation. All groups at TAS, regardless of congregation, share a common identity and common values that reflect what it means to be in biblical community. Therefore, it is the job of each congregation's groups ministry staff to ensure that its groups are pursuing the shared values of family, discipleship, and mission in ways that are realistic and appropriate considering its respective context.[2]

For example, a group of college students at the Downtown congregation shares the same values of family, discipleship, and mission as a group made up of families with young children at the West congregation. Even though both groups pursue the same values, how each group expresses those values should look different considering the differences in life stages and demographics. Currently, this ministry strategy has clear strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths

The first obvious strength in the groups ministry of TAS is its vision. Having all groups at TAS be centered on the shared values of family, discipleship, and mission, the ministry is empowered in two ways. First, the shared values allow for a wide variety of types of groups to exist considering the significant differences between each congregation's context. Regardless of which congregation a group is in, the shared values

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[2] See "Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations" for explanations of the values of family, discipleship, and mission.

of family, discipleship, and mission allow group leaders to lead the community in ways that are realistic and pursuable considering the life stages of the people within the group. Second, the shared values empower the leadership of the group leaders. Although trained and equipped by the congregation's staff, the group leaders have the greatest level of influence in the life of the group. By emphasizing values over specific practices, group leaders are empowered to lead according to their spiritual gifts, passions, and knowledge of circumstances in the lives of the people in the group. And when unexpected disruptions happen, like a season of suffering, or a pandemic, group leaders can simply adjust their rhythms to pursue family, discipleship, and mission in light of the new circumstances.

The second clear strength within groups at TAS is the equipping that group leaders receive from the staff. Equipping the people of TAS with the necessary resources to serve in a leadership role has been a long-standing strength in the church. For group leaders, the on-boarding and training process is very effective. Potential leaders are thoroughly vetted through applications and conversations. Once approved for leadership they receive detailed training on the vision for groups, values of groups, and responsibilities of group leaders. However, helping these leaders endure and effectively lead in the long-term is a challenge.

Weaknesses

Although the equipping that group leaders receive from TAS is a strength of the ministry, the on-going support for group leaders is a first and obvious weakness. Currently, the main support structure is group coaches, lay people who have prior experience with leading a group. Their responsibility is to regularly meet with their assigned group leaders to provide care, prayer, and practical advice. Although in theory the concept is sound, in reality the coaching structure is unsustainable and ineffective for two reasons.

First, given the size of TAS an unrealistic amount of coaches is needed to provide this level of support for group leaders. As lay leaders, most group coaches can

handle one or two groups to coach on a monthly basis. With over 350 groups at TAS, the number of coaches needed to ensure each group has a coach is unsustainable. As a result, many group leaders do not have any coaching support. Since that is the primary means of support, the lack of it in its entirety leaves those group leaders under-supported, which impacts their trust in the ministry. Second, effective coaching relationships are those in which there is established trust between the coach and leader. Trust requires time to develop between people with no prior relationship. TAS is an extremely transient context where coaches and leaders come and go at great speed. It is often the case that after months of establishing a relationship between a coach and a group leader, one or the other will transition out. This leaves the other person resistant to a new coaching relationship since they have to start over with a new person after months of progress with the previous person.

The problem then, is that the lack of on-going support for the leaders prevents them from enduring and maturing in leadership. Although they are initially well-equipped to perform the function of group leadership, no clear support or investment helps them endure as faithful and fruitful leaders. Certainly other environments in TAS can indirectly help them endure in group leadership, such as corporate worship or equipping classes, but the existing system of support within the groups ministry is functionally not accomplishing its purpose.

A second weakness in the groups ministry is its inability to recruit new group leaders. With a large number of individuals wanting to join a group and very few willing to lead a group, TAS has created a leadership bottleneck that needs to be addressed. It is often the case that new groups will launch without a formal leader in an ungrounded hope that one rises to the surface. It appears that the overwhelming number of people in the church simply have little to no desire to lead a group.

There are three potential causes for this bottleneck. First, there could be an overwhelming amount of consumerism in the body, resulting in little desire to lead.

Second, it is possible that the people of TAS do not view themselves as able to faithfully and effectively lead. In this case, either they have too low a view of themselves, too high of a view of group leadership, or both. Third, there is a possible narrative that TAS does not value groups or care for its leaders.

These two weaknesses prevent the ministry from growing at a healthy rate. Existing group leaders struggle to endure in leadership, and new groups struggle to form because of a lack of new potential leaders. In fact, the two weaknesses are closely correlated. If existing leaders have a negative leadership experience, then the group members do not have a compelling example for why they would consider leading a group. This is one reason why it has been a great challenge to recruit new leaders from within existing groups. These weaknesses are clear signs of unhealth within the groups ministry at TAS.

Rationale

In light of the weaknesses described, it is clear that group leaders lack the investment and support needed to endure in group leadership. As a result, the groups ministry at TAS does not have a healthy or compelling leadership culture. Without this meaningful investment and support, the weaknesses will remain, and the current culture will persist. Therefore, this project is necessary for the following theological and practical reasons.

The first theological reason why this project is necessary is because the leadership of TAS is biblically commanded to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph 4:12). This command assumes that the kind of equipping that group leaders need should directly align with the work of ministry they are called to pursue. Group leaders are responsible to create rhythms that pursue the TAS values of family, discipleship, and the mission to love God, the church, the city, and the nations. This vision encompasses the entire mission of TAS. In addition to that responsibility, group leaders are also entrusted with real authority to care for and lead the individuals within the group.

Therefore, the responsibilities of group leadership, combined with the spiritual weight it carries, requires a robust amount of on-going support and equipping. Otherwise, group leaders will continue to burn out at their current rate.

The second theological reason why this project is necessary is because equipping alone does not produce spiritual fruit. Jesus makes this clear that those who "abide in [him]" will bear much fruit (John 15:5). If TAS does the best job possible at equipping group leaders for the work of ministry but the group leaders are not abiding in Christ, then their leadership will produce nothing. On-going support and investment in group leaders is not less than equipping but must be more than that. TAS must provide the kind of on-going support and investment that equips them while they help cultivate a deep and abiding love in Christ.

In addition to these theological reasons for this project, there is also a practical reason. Practically, healthy and effective groups need time to form; they need to endure. Committed relationships do not form overnight, and the people within groups need significant time for genuine love to be established—the kind of love that shows the world what disciples of Jesus look like (John 13:35). Given the high turnover culture that exists in Austin and the difficult nature of group leadership, a robust support system for group leaders is essential to keep them from burning out before the life-giving aspects of biblical community is created. It is important to recognize that group leaders are lay people, unpaid leaders who sacrifice time, energy, and their own resources to lead God's people. Correcting the lack of on-going support is not a form of compensation for lay leaders; rather, it is the right way to show honor and truly equip these saints for the work of ministry.

As a result of these theological and practical reasons, this project focused on providing group leaders with meaningful investment and support in five ways: equipping,

relationships, faith-nurturing, celebration, and blessing.[3] First, group leaders need effective equipping in order to have the necessary skills and information to do the work of group ministry well. Robust teaching on the vision, direction, and values for all groups at TAS is essential for group leaders to faithfully lead their group members.

Second, group leaders need relationships with other group leaders and their congregation's elders, deacons, and staff. Peer relationships are a crucial aspect of creating a healthy leadership culture. Without this leadership community, group leaders will feel isolated, even if there are hundreds of leaders just like them. Creating consistent environments where group leaders can see and interact with each other promotes solidarity and momentum.

Third, group leaders need faith-nurturing experiences that focus solely on supporting their trust in God. Since they sacrifice time, energy, and resources for the sake of the faith of their group members, they need to have meaningful experiences that cultivate deeper love and faith in God. As mentioned, helping group leaders abide in Christ is an essential aspect to their fruitfulness as leaders.

Fourth, TAS needs to celebrate group leaders corporately to create an inspiring narrative for group leadership. Leading a group is something TAS wants all Spirit-filled partners to aspire to pursue. By celebrating God's faithfulness through these groups, the whole body of Christ rejoices (1 Cor 12:26). Sharing a wide variety of stories that display God's grace within groups connects the leaders and members of other groups to the bigger picture of God's redemptive work in TAS. At the same time, it inspires the average partner of TAS to consider what God might do through them if they were to lead a group.

Fifth, group leaders need to receive tangible blessing from TAS in order to communicate the on-going meaningfulness and importance of the role they play in the

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[3] See "Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations" for definitions of the values of relationships, equipping, faith nurturing, celebration, and blessing.

body. This would include meals, retreats, journals, books, and other beneficial resources that make leadership enjoyable and the weight of ministry lighter.

If TAS does not provide group leaders with meaningful on-going support and investment in these five ways, then group leaders will continue to struggle in their ability to endure in leadership while the need for new leaders will continue to create a problematic bottle-neck at TAS. These problems have two negative impacts to the ministry: they hurt existing groups and prevent new groups from forming. For this to change, TAS needs to create a healthy and compelling leadership culture that helps existing group leaders joyfully endure while also providing the average partner of TAS with a compelling reason to aspire to group leadership. Creating a robust system of on-going support and investment was the main focus in accomplishing a healthy and compelling leadership culture at TAS.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture at the Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas.

Goals

To create a healthy and compelling leadership culture at TAS, group leaders need on-going support and investment in five ways: relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, celebration, and blessing. Meeting these needs will create a healthy and compelling group leader culture at TAS because existing leaders will endure in leadership at the same time partners of TAS aspire to group leadership. To accomplish this, this project pursued the following five goals:

1. Develop a curriculum that provides new group leaders with the necessary skills and information to lead their groups effectively.

2. Assess new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS.

3. Increase new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS.

4. Create an annual conference for group leaders who will gather for intentional investment and support through relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration.

5. Create a plan for on-going investment and support of group leaders to help them endure in group leadership throughout the year.

The following research methodology was created to measure the successful completion of these five goals.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depends upon the completion of these five goals. The first goal was to develop curriculum that provides new group leaders with the necessary skills and information to lead their groups effectively. This goal was measured by creating three training resources. First, a "Group Leader Fundamentals" resource trained group leaders with the vision, values, responsibilities, and expectations of group leaders. Second, a "Group Leader Practicals" resource provided them with helpful theological and pastoral frameworks for group leadership. And third, a six-session "Group Launch Guide" oriented all group members around the TAS values of family, discipleship, and mission. The goal was measured a success by a central elder of TAS who approved the finalized version of each resource with a rubric that evaluated the resources for theological, cultural, and strategic alignment with TAS.[4] This goal was considered successfully met when each resource was approved by the central elder.

The second goal was to assess new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS. The goal was measured a success by administering a Group Leader Survey to group leaders before being trained on the curriculum created in goal 1. The purpose of the pre-survey was to assess group leaders' knowledge of the ministry prior to onboarding and training.[5] This goal was considered successfully met when

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[4] 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 this ministry project.

[5] See appendix 2.

at least twenty group leaders were assessed.

The third goal was to increase new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS. The goal was measured a success by administering a Group Leader Survey to group leaders before and after reading the curriculum created in goal 1. This survey measured the change in their knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS.[6] This goal was considered successfully met when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-survey in goal 2 and post-survey scores. A *t*-test involves the comparison of the averages of the pre-survey and post-survey scores.[7]

The fourth goal was to create an annual group leader conference in which all group leaders of TAS are gathered for intentional investment and support through relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. This goal was measured a success by administering a post-conference survey to evaluate the conference's impact on the participants' desire to endure in their leadership.[8] This goal was considered successfully met when more than 80 percent of the survey responses indicated that group leaders' desire and energy to continue leading was the same, or greater, than before the conference.

The fifth goal was to create a plan for the on-going investment and support of groups leaders to help them endure in group leadership. This goal was measured by creating an annual calendar with planned events, classes, and experiences that focus on five specific elements: relationships, equipping, faith nurturing, celebration, and blessing. This goal was considered successfully met when the total number of groups at TAS was the same, or greater, than the total number at the beginning of project implementation.

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[6] See appendix 2.

[7] Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 191.

[8] See appendix 3.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

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

Culture. The term *culture* is being used to describe the beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that are explicitly and implicitly taught, learned, and shared between the leadership of TAS and its group leaders.[9]

Groups at TAS. A group at TAS can be defined as "consistent and intentional Christian friendships that seek to love God, the church, the city, and the nations together."[10] *Groups at TAS*, then, is the umbrella-term that encapsulates every type of group that fits this definition, including missional communities (MCs), college MCs, student discipleship communities, men's groups, women's groups, newly-married groups, recovery groups, adult Bible fellowship groups, For the Nations groups, workplace fellowship groups, and new parent groups. Even though there are distinctions between the types of groups that exist, they all share the same vision, direction, and values.

Group leader. A *group leader* is required to be a partner of TAS and is affirmed for group leadership through an application, interview, and onboarding process.

Central Groups Director. The *Central Groups Director* is a full-time staff position at TAS. The main responsibility of the *Central Groups Director* is to ensure that each congregation is leading its groups in accordance with the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS.

Central elder. The *central elders* of TAS are responsible for the leadership, direction, and oversight of the entire church. All strategic initiatives, including changes to ministry strategies, that impact the direction of TAS are decided by the *central elders*.

Partner. A *partner* is TAS's term for a covenant member of the church.

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[9] Edgar H. Schein, and Peter A. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2016), 2.

[10] The Austin Stone Community Church, "Groups," accessed July 13, 2021, https://austinstone.org/groups/.

Family. *Family* is the first of three core values of groups at TAS. The value of *family* can be defined as "love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ."[11] As a core value, all groups at TAS should have a consistent rhythm that empowers the members of the group to pursue the value of *family* together.[12]

Discipleship. *Discipleship* is the second of three core values of groups at TAS. The value of *discipleship* can be defined as "know, delight, and obey God together."[13] As a core value, all groups at TAS should have a consistent rhythm that empowers the members of the group to pursue the value of *discipleship* together.[14]

Mission. *Mission* is the third and final core value of groups at TAS. The value of *mission* can be defined as "seek the kingdom of God together."[15] As a core value, all groups at TAS should have a consistent rhythm that empowers the members of the group to purse the value of *mission* together.[16]

Relationship. *Relationship* is the first of five values for how TAS meaningfully supports and invests in group leaders. The value of *relationship* can be defined as connecting group leaders with each other and TAS leadership. As a value of group leader investment and support, the staff of TAS should have consistent rhythms that provide group leaders with *relationships.*

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[11] The Austin Stone Community Church, "Groups."

[12] TAS's value of family builds upon the work and research done by Todd Engstrom. See Todd R. Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model for Integrated Discipleship in an American Context" (DEdMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

[13] The Austin Stone Community Church, "Groups."

[14] TAS's value of discipleship builds upon the work and research done by Todd Engstrom. See Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model."

[15] The Austin Stone Community Church, "Groups."

[16] TAS's value of mission builds upon the work and research done by Todd Engstrom. See Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model."

Equipping. Equipping is the second of five values for how TAS meaningfully supports and invests in group leaders. The value of *equipping* can be defined as training group leaders to become more fruitful while staying faithful in leadership. As a value of group leader investment and support, the staff of TAS should have consistent rhythms that provide group leaders with *equipping.*

Faith-nurturing. Faith-nurturing is the third of five values for how TAS meaningfully supports and invests in group leaders. The value of *faith-nurturing* can be defined as helping group leaders sit at the feet of Jesus. As a value of group leader investment and support, the staff of TAS should have consistent rhythms that provide group leaders with *faith-nurturing* experiences.

Blessing. Blessing is the fourth of five values for how TAS meaningfully supports and invests in group leaders. The value of *blessing* can be defined as making leadership enjoyable and the weight of ministry lighter. As a value of group leader investment and support, the staff of TAS should have consistent rhythms that provide group leaders with this kind of *blessing.*

Celebration. Celebration is the fifth of five values for how TAS meaningfully supports and invests in group leaders. The value of *celebration* can be defined as celebrating God's power in group leaders corporately. As a value of group leader investment and support, the staff of TAS should have consistent rhythms where group leaders experience this kind of celebration.

Two limitations applied to this project. First, this project was limited to the established leader on-boarding process of TAS. To mitigate this limitation, this project sought to create a healthy and compelling leadership culture within the parameters of this on-boarding process. Second, one aspect of this project focused on the development of resources and on-boarding of new group leaders. Therefore, this project was limited to the sample size of new leaders who applied for group leadership and were on-boarded during the implementation period of this project.

Conclusion

       The church has received a mission from God to make disciples—both new disciples and more mature disciples. Group leaders of TAS are entrusted with this mission and the leadership of TAS must help them be faithful and fruitful in the mission. Since group leaders are lay people who sacrifice much for the building up of TAS, in order to help group leaders endure in leadership, consistent investment and support is needed in five areas: relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. The following chapters will show how these five areas of investment and support contribute to a healthy and compelling leadership culture. Chapter 2 will focus on the relevant biblical and theological passages, and chapter 3 will focus on the relevant theoretical and practical concepts related to this project.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CREATING A HEALTHY AND
COMPELLING GROUP LEADER CULTURE

The New Testament reveals that effective investment and support of group leaders requires five values: relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. This chapter will examine each value through a broad biblical and theological survey of passages from Paul's epistles.[1]

**Biblical Investment and Support of Group
Leaders and the Value of Relationships**

For group leaders at TAS to joyfully endure in their leadership, they need relationships with other group leaders as well as the leadership of TAS. These peer relationships provide group leaders with solidarity and momentum in ministry while the relationships with the leadership of TAS provide direction, support, and affirmation. A theological survey of Paul's relationships with his co-laborers during his missionary journeys, as well as his introductory and concluding remarks to individuals in his epistles, reveals the essential role these relationships had on his effective ministry as an apostle.

Relationships in Pauline Epistles

Paul's ministry relationships are clearly present in his writings as he makes specific references to the community of Christians in his ministry.[2] He always served and led with his Christian friends at his side. Furthermore, his authority as an apostle did not

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[1] Given that this chapter contains five sections with a prescribed length, some discussion around the passages is intentionally brief in order to provide a thorough survey.

[2] First Timothy is the only Pauline epistle in which Paul makes no reference to being present with a Christian in either the introduction or conclusion of the letter. However, the fact Paul is writing to an individual (Timothy) proves a close relationship exists.

exempt him from needing other Christians in his ministry. As this section will show, there are times in his ministry when he receives dire help from his friends. Lastly, the content of Paul's letters reveals that healthy doctrine and healthy relationships are both essential to a thriving church. Michael Gorman notes that many theologians today are people whose writing is detached from the daily lives of the people they lead and serve. They are, in essence, Christian generalists. This was not the case for Paul. He was a Christian specialist because his relationships were foundational to his successful ministry. Paul was a community builder as much as a theologian.[3]

Craig Blomberg describes the community that Paul built as a group of Christians who meant more to him than simply being peers. The people he describes in his letters were his partners, brothers, sisters, fellow soldiers, children in the faith, coworkers, and companions. Paul used these labels not to simply make a theological statement about their identity but to express what they truly meant to him. The shared experiences between Paul and his co-laborers created a community of people that knew, loved, and served one another. As Blomberg concludes, "there is no doubt that much of Paul's ministry success can be attributed to the trusting relationships within his community."[4] The following examples of Paul's relationships described in the introductions and conclusions of his epistles prove this to be true.

Relationships in Pauline Introductions

In the introduction of seven of Paul's epistles, Paul attributes authorship to himself *and* another person.[5] The book of 1 Corinthians, for example, opens with "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, *and* our brother Sosthenes" (1:1).

[3] Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord; A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 131.

[4] Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 92.

[5] See the introductions of 1 Cor; 2 Cor; Phil; Col; 1 Thess; 2 Thess; and Phlm.

This clear statement of co-authorship indicates that the subsequent content of the letter was crafted (to some degree) in partnership between the two men. It is unknown whether Sosthenes was a contributor to the letter's construction or if Paul is simply giving proper attribution to Sosthenes through their conversations about Corinth. Regardless of the degree of Sosthenes's involvement, his impact is certain—he *helped* Paul craft this letter of loving rebuke.

According to Darrell Bock, the Sosthenes that Paul attributes co-authorship to in 1 Corinthians 1:1 is the same Corinthian synagogue official Luke describes in Acts 18:17. This is most likely the case because "nowhere else in Acts do we have Luke concerned about strictly Jew-Gentile relations, which suggests that Sosthenes is a believer."[6] Thus, Luke's intentional description of Sosthenes signifies that when he wrote the book of Acts he must have been aware that the described event in Acts 18:17 did not involve a synagogue official in general. Instead, it was a specific person—Sosthenes, the now Corinthian church leader that Paul partnered with to serve and lead the church through his ministry and letters.

Gorman offers that "if Sosthenes is the (now believing) Corinthian synagogue official mentioned in Acts 18:17, his co-authorship would perhaps strengthen Paul's hearing in a city where his credibility had been diminished."[7] As a synagogue official, Sosthenes would have been a public figure known by many people. Paul's close association with this highly networked friend would certainly strengthen, or reestablish, his credibility to a church to which he was no longer in close proximity. This example clearly demonstrates that relationships with other church leaders help navigate complex theological and pastoral situations in a church questioning a leader's role or authority.

An even more powerful example of relationships in Paul's ministry is seen in

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[6] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 582.

[7] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 239.

the introduction of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Both letters start with attribution to "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy" (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1) Interestingly, these are the only two Pauline epistles in which Paul did not elaborate on his or his co-authors' names like he does in other letters. For example, in the opening lines of Ephesians, Galatians, and Colossians, Paul reminds the church of his apostleship. However, to the Thessalonians, he does not. Michael Martin argues that the most likely reason why Paul did not have to remind the Thessalonians of his apostolic status was because the relationship with the church was so healthy.[8] So healthy in fact that the church of Thessalonica had become their "crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 2:19).

The fact that both letters are largely affirming the Thessalonians' conduct is good evidence that Paul had no need to defend himself in the introduction. Furthermore, the reason why Paul did not have to elaborate on Silvanus and Timothy was because the three of them equally ministered to the church together. All three men were equally known to the church because of their faithful conduct toward them (1 Thess 2:7-9). Their ministry conduct alone served as a sufficient resume of their authority. As a result, the two epistles are attributed to all three men equally, without title elaborations, because they led, served, and wrote to the church together as a community.

According to Gordon Fee, the predominant use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians is distinct from the other Pauline epistles. This suggests that there is a legitimate co-authorship between Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus. It is not until 1 Thessalonians 2:18 that Paul says for the first time "I, Paul"; making a personal statement on his own behalf and not the other two men.[9] Therefore, the need for the individualization of this statement proves how much his

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[8] Michael D. Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 33 (Nashville: B & H, 1995), 45.

[9] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), chap. 1, sec. "Introductory Matters," eBook.

ministry to the Thessalonians was done in direct relationship with Timothy and Silvanus; both in the actual ministry accomplished as well as the construction of the letters.

The clear co-authorship between these three men is significant because it reveals that much of Paul's ministry success was not always driven by his authority as an apostle. Often, the power for his ministry came from the unified community with whom he served and led. In the case of Thessalonica, the opening words of the letters reveal that Paul's ministry to the church was not actually his ministry—it was *their* ministry. Similarly, today, church leaders need healthy relationships with other leaders to see powerful ministry accomplished. One effective way church leaders can establish these relationships is by connecting leaders in the church to each other. This was Paul's strategy in the conclusions of many of his epistles, which the following section explains.

Relationships in Pauline Conclusions

Whereas the introductions to Paul's letters reveal the people he was present with at the time of the letter's construction, his conclusions reveal the people who helped him in the past. The specific acknowledgements made to individuals show that Paul's relational network went beyond a select few. He was a man who served and was served by many brothers and sisters throughout his missionary journeys. As such, he wanted the churches to know how much these individuals helped him *so that* he could establish relationships between them for their mutual benefit.

The most compelling example of this is found in Paul's conclusion in Romans 16. Verses 1-16 alone acknowledge thirty or more individuals, households, or groups of people that Paul wants the church to greet or commend. Many of these people had a significant impact on Paul's ministry, and he wants the church in Rome to be aware of the meaningful relationships he had with them. For example, Prisca and Aquila are two individuals who Paul says risked their own lives for his sake (vv. 3-4). Another example is Rufus's mother, who Paul says was a mother to him as well (v. 13). Having a spiritual parent, as well as people who willingly sacrificed their own lives for the sake of his

ministry, empowered Paul to endure.

Paul includes these brief descriptions of his relationships in Romans 16:1-16 because he wants to make sure the church in Rome is connected with these individuals. His command to greet them is not a greeting on his own behalf. He wants the church to greet them. Paul is not trying to send personal regards to his friends; as if he is trying to tell them hello. Instead, he wants *the church* to greet his friends and welcome them into their community. This is evidenced by the fact that his commands are in the second person plural form and not the first person singular.[10] He is saying *you all* greet these people.

Susan Mathew succinctly states that "the greetings should not be interpreted as if the author is directly sending greetings to the one named; instead, the church is summoned to greet the person(s) named . . . [because] such greetings cement relationships among church members."[11] In other words, the greetings establish a healthy bond within the church body. Paul's desire to establish relationships between his friends and the church in Rome is precisely the reason why he gives descriptions of who the individuals are and how he knows them. Paul deliberately includes the descriptions of his friends, while commanding the church to greet them, because he wants the church to know the value they had on his ministry *so that* they could do the same to the church in Rome.

Thomas Schreiner argues that by "commending these people, Paul allies himself with them and encourages the Romans to value them."[12] Since Paul values them, the church in Rome should value them too. Through this example it is clear that Paul exercised his leadership over the church in Rome by not only instructing them with sound doctrine, but also by instructing the establishment of healthy relationships between them.

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[10] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 744.

[11] Susan Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of Romans 16:1-6: A Study of Mutuality and Women's Ministry in the Letter to the Romans* (London: Bloombury T & T Clark, 2013), 93.

[12] Schreiner, *Romans*, 745.

Summary

The passages examined in this section clearly present that Paul's relationships significantly contributed to his ministry success. Furthermore, many other Pauline passages emphasize the value of relationships as well. For example, Paul commends and expresses his affection for Titus, "his partner and fellow worker" (2 Cor 8:23); Timothy, who Paul says is "[his] beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (1 Cor 4:17; cf. 1 Tim 1:2; cf. 2 Tim 1:2; cf. Phil 2:22); Mark, who "is very useful to [Paul] for ministry" (2 Tim 4:11); Tychicus and Onesimus, Paul's fellow servants and beloved brothers in the faith (Col 4:7-9); and finally Epaphroditus, Paul's "fellow soldier . . . and minister to [his] need" (Phil 2:25). Collectively, these passages prove that relationships in ministry are essential to an enduring ministry.

Group leaders of TAS do not continue leading when healthy relationships with other leaders is absent. At some point in time, every group leader enters a season when leadership is difficult, and they need help. Having established relationships with other group leaders ensures that they are not isolated and provides opportunities to receive guidance during these seasons. Thankfully, there are hundreds of group leaders at TAS to connect with and lead together. However, TAS must not assume these relationships are established without intentional effort; clear rhythms and strategies within the TAS are necessary. Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture, TAS must invest and support group leaders by establishing healthy peer relationships.

Biblical Investment and Support of Group Leaders and the Value of Equipping

The second value of investment and support needed to create healthy and compelling group leaders is equipping. Ephesians 4:11-12 makes it clear that church leaders are tasked to equip the church members for the work of ministry. The purpose of equipping is to help the church members "work properly" so that the church "builds itself up in love" (Eph 4:16). Since group leaders are church members, the logic here is simple— if they are not equipped for their work of ministry, then they cannot work properly and

the church will not grow. The question then is not *should* group leaders be equipped, but *how* group leaders should be equipped. By using Paul's equipping strategy to the Ephesian elders as a model in Acts 20:17-38, the following section will explain that effective equipping requires training in doctrine, character, and pastoral skills.

Effective Equipping and Doctrine

Acts 20:17-38 is a powerful example of what robust equipping looks like. In his final address to the Ephesian elders before leaving for Jerusalem, Paul summarizes the three years he spent leading and training them. Paul gives them this final reminder because he believes his ministry to them has been fulfilled and that they are now fully equipped to lead themselves. In Acts 20:24, Paul tells them that what he values most in life is completing the ministry God gave him. In other words, he would not leave them until he felt his ministry had been fulfilled. The fact that he immediately tells them that they will never see him again and declares that he is innocent of whatever happens to them after his departure indicates that Paul believed he had fulfilled his ministry toward them (Acts 20:25-26).

Blomberg notes that "the brunt of Paul's address is his insistence that he has completed his job faithfully among the Ephesians."[13] But what would have indicated to Paul that he had fulfilled his ministry toward them? Furthermore, what would have given him such a clear conscience to be innocent of whatever might befall them? Blomberg contests that Paul's ministry was complete because he preached "the whole counsel of God's Word."[14] They were fully equipped to lead because of their robust doctrinal training. The scope of this doctrinal training contains two aspects: the gospel message and biblical theology.

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[13] Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 66.

[14] Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 66.

The gospel message was the first thing Paul wanted these leaders to understand and believe. In the beginning of his address to the Ephesian elders he reminds them "how [he] did not shrink from . . . teaching [them] in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20-21). Simply put, he taught them to repent and believe in the gospel. The primacy of the gospel message is a consistent pattern throughout Paul's ministry. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 he says that the only thing he wants the Corinthian church to know was Jesus Christ and him crucified. In Galatians 1:6-7, Paul's stark rebuke to the Galatian church is centered entirely upon their abandonment of the one true gospel message. Finally, the most compelling example of the primacy of the gospel message is seen in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Paul tells them, "Now I remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you" (vv. 1-2). The efficacy of the gospel message covers the full span of the Christian's life. They received it in the past, stand in it in the present, and persevere by it in the future. This is why Paul says in verse 3 that the gospel message is of "first importance."

Leon Morris rightly acknowledges that the gospel being of first importance is so stressed in Paul's letters because he "did not originate the message. He simply passed on what he had received."[15] The value of the gospel message was objective for Paul; something more than his own subjective opinion. He rightly saw that the gospel is objectively valuable because "it is the power of God for salvation to those who believe" (Rom 1:16). The gospel connects him to every Christian that went before him as well as every Christian who will come after him. As Jude 3 says, the gospel message contains "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." Morris echoes Paul's sentiment:

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[15] Leon L. Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 198.

"Without this message [there is] no essential Christian position."[16] Thus, for Paul, the gospel message must be faithfully passed down to Christians throughout each generation (2 Tim 2:2). Following in the legacy of Christians for nearly two thousand years, equipping the church today with the gospel message must continue to be of first importance.

However, even though equipping church leaders with the gospel message is of first importance, it is not of sole importance. As Paul continues his address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27, he uses the same expression to similarly remind them how he also "did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole counsel of God." Robust biblical doctrine was also essential to the full scope of equipping these leaders. For Paul, belief in the gospel message makes a person a servant of Christ Jesus. But, "being trained in the words of the faith and of good doctrine" makes a Christian "a good servant of Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 4:6). The life-long process of learning, understanding, and teaching biblical doctrine is paramount to growing in one's belief in the gospel message itself. As Paul says, Christians are to "persist in this [discipline], for by doing so [they] will save both [themselves] and [their] hearers" (1 Tim 4:16). Therefore, church leaders today must equip the church in sound biblical doctrine in perpetuity.

Effective Equipping and Character

As church leaders equip the church with sound biblical doctrine they must also equip them to pursue godly character. Sound biblical doctrine always accords with godliness (1 Tim 6:3). Notice the striking contrast in conduct between two types of persons: the person who has "an unhealthy craving for controversy . . . which produces, envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth" (1 Tim 6:4-5), and the "man of God [who] flees these things [and] pursues righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness,

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[16] Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 198.

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gentleness" (1 Tim 6:11). What separates the character of these two types of persons is those who "agree with the sound words of [the] Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness," and those who do not (1 Tim 6:3).

From this passage, Hayne Griffin and Thomas Lea argue that the godly character that reflects sound doctrine "insures Timothy's effectiveness in his ministry"—both to God and to other people.[17] Character that reflects biblical doctrine pleases God and is a sign of a person's genuine spiritual health to other people in the church. In other words, godly character is worship to God and compelling to other believers. However, it must not be assumed that a person knows how to pursue godliness or what it looks like. Rarely does a person stumble into godliness; it must be cultivated and practiced (1 Tim 4:7) Therefore, church leaders should equip people to pursue godly character by modeling it for them in their own lives.

Modeling was Paul's method of equipping church leaders with godly character. He modeled the godly character that aligns with sound doctrine to the Ephesian elders during his three-year stay. He tells them, "You yourselves know *how I lived among* you the whole time from the first day I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility" (Acts 20:18-19a). Paul was daily present with the people; teaching and modeling what it looked like to serve the Lord with humility. His life was on display to the whole church. The Ephesian elders watched his conduct when his circumstances were good as well as when he faced suffering and persecution (Acts 20:19b). As a result, they saw what godliness looked like.

Furthermore, Paul was not entitled or greedy. He proved this by working a job to provide for himself *and* other people (Acts 20:33-34). He chose to do this so that he could model in every way what godliness looks like. He told them, "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all

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[17] Hayne P. Griffin and Thomas D. Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 148.

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things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:34-35). By reflecting the character of the gospel message, that which is of first importance, Paul modeled what it looks like to obey the commandment of greatest importance—to love God and love others (Matt 22:37-39). I. Howard Marshall concisely concludes, "Paul simply sought to be an example for them to follow—someone who helps those in need because it was the clear teaching of Jesus."[18]

Paul's strategy for equipping church leaders to pursue godly character was the essence of discipleship; he modeled it, and they imitated him. The example shown in Acts 20:17-38 presents a narrative that illuminates the numerous instances when Paul commands or commends the church's imitation of himself (1 Cor 4:16; 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7; Phil 3:17; Phil 4:9). Christian leadership for Paul was about transformation; not just an exchange of information. His proximity with the people of the church empowered him to teach and model godliness. Church leaders today must likewise be in proximity with the people of the church. Not only to invest in the church members' lives, but to allow church members to see godliness on display in the leader's life. Those who are biblically qualified and called to church leadership set the example for what everyone in the church ought to imitate. Nothing can replace a faithful example of godly character for leaders in the church to follow. Today, the overwhelming supply of digital Christian content available threatens the average Christian's ability to see and follow embodied godliness. The Christian life cannot exist on a screen or podcast. Therefore, church leaders must equip the church to pursue godly character by modeling it in their own lives.

[18] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 264.

Effective Equipping and Pastoral Skills

Equipping church leaders with the pastoral skills needed to respond to situations is the final aspect of effective equipping seen in Paul's final address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-38. Pastoral training was one of the most common principles displayed through Paul's servant leadership.[19] It is nearly impossible to overlook how often his epistles give specific instruction to situations that a church is facing. This is why Paul reminds the elders that part of his leadership included teaching them "anything that was profitable" (Acts 20:20). Bock argues that this phrase reveals Paul's desire for them to be prepared for the trials they will face after he is gone. Thus, during his three-year stay, he taught anything that would edify and be beneficial to them.[20] This broadens the scope of Paul's equipping strategy and brings insight into the final charges he gives to the elders in verses 28-31.

First, he tells them that they need to "pay careful attention to" themselves and everyone in the church (Acts 20:28). What a wonderful reminder he offers them: they need to watch their own lives. As overseers with the responsibility to "care for the church of God," he wants them to know that they must also oversee their own selves in order to effectively do that. The concept of self-evaluation is a consistent pastoral discipline that Paul commands of church leaders throughout his letters and is evident to the Ephesian elders as well (1 Tim 4:16; Eph 5:15-17; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:1).

He continues his helpful pastoral training by telling the elders where the threats will come from and what they will look like. He tells them people will try to destroy the church from *inside* and *outside* the church (Acts 20:29-30). He wants them to know that some of the greatest dangers in the church are not the things outside, but inside the church. Thus, they need to know where to look for threats. Second, he offers another profitable lesson by telling the elders what the threats will look like: "Men speaking twisted things,

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[19] Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 67.

[20] Bock, *Acts*, 627.

to draw away the disciples" (Acts 20:30). He wants them to be pastors that know specifically what to look for. Finally, after giving these instructions, he commands them in verse 31 to "be alert." Since his pastoral instruction was specific and not generic, the elders are effectively equipped to faithfully respond to the threats the church will face.

This is exactly the kind of pastoral skills with which church leaders need to be equipped today.[21] Church leaders need to train group leaders proactively and reactively in the pastoral skills needed in their specific contexts; proactively by teaching church members how to navigate common pastoral situations and reactively by offering them direction and guidance as new or unexpected situations arise. This type of pastoral training requires regular environments and opportunities for new leaders to be effectively on-boarded, as well as clear communication channels for them to solicit on-going help throughout their leadership. The following examples show how Paul effectively demonstrated this type of proactive and reactive pastoral equipping.

First Timothy 5:1-6:2 is a phenomenal example of proactive equipping of pastoral skills. He writes to Timothy, a young man who may be insecure in his leadership considering his age and lack of experience. After telling Timothy to not let other people look down on him because of his age (1 Tim 4:12), Paul offers clear and detailed instruction for how to lead and relate to different groups of people. First, he tells Timothy how to relate to older and younger men and women (5:1-2). Then, he gives instruction on how to address and navigate situations with widows, based on their age and circumstances (5:3-16). Next, he continues on to explain how Timothy should respond when an elder is persisting in sin (5:17-20). Finally, Paul instructs Timothy on relational dynamics in the workplace when a boss and employee are both believers (6:1-2). The impact this letter had on Timothy must have been powerful. Feelings of relief, confidence,

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[21] The term "pastoral" is being used as an adjective to describe the ministry skills involving the care and leadership of group members. "Pastoral" is not meant to refer to the office of pastor. As such, "pastoral skills" is training needed for both male and female group leaders even though at TAS the office of pastor is reserved for qualified and called men.

clarity, and direction were offered to Timothy because of Paul's proactive training. Church leaders today can similarly benefit from this kind of proactive equipping strategy.

An example of Paul reactively equipping the church is clearly seen in the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says, "it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you." This statement indicates that Paul had been told about the situation and is now responding to how they should navigate it. But Paul does not stop at simply addressing this specific situation; he seizes an opportunity to instruct them even more and help broaden the principle. At the end of the chapter, he makes sure that the current issue of sexual sin relates to other potential sin patterns in the church; greed, idolatry, and drunkenness (5:11). Today, those who are responsible for equipping church leaders with pastoral skills need to help leaders respond to specific situations while helping them see how the principle applies to other potential situations in the future.

The situation Paul is addressing is one that the Corinthians may not have realized they were mishandling at the time. Someone had to report the sexual immorality to him. This was not a situation that they self-disclosed to him because two chapters later he transitions the letter by saying, "now concerning the matters about which you wrote" (7:1). This reveals that the church had sent him a letter with questions on how to navigate situations regarding marriage, singleness, divorce, remarriage, and food sacrificed to idols, and now he is responding (7:1-8:13). Reactive equipping like this is needed in the church today and church leaders must be available to respond to the questions and situations that church members have.

Summary

The close examination of Acts 20:17-38, along with the explained passages in Paul's epistles, make a convincing argument that effective equipping of group leaders requires training in doctrine, character, and pastoral skills. To do this, TAS must have a clear understanding of which three areas group leaders are needing the most help with at any given time. This means that group leaders must be adequately onboarded when they

first become leaders while existing leaders receive consistent and intentional proactive and reactive equipping opportunities throughout the year. By doing so, group leaders will be equipped for their unique work of ministry at TAS, and the church will build itself up in love. Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture, TAS must invest and support group leaders with effective equipping.

Biblical Investment and Support of Group Leaders and the Value of Faith- Nurturing

The third value of investment and support needed to create healthy and compelling group leaders is faith-nurturing. Establishing strong relationships between group leaders at TAS and effectively equipping them will produce nothing if they do not love God. Abiding in the love of God is essential for healthy group leaders and for effective ministry (John 15:5-9). It is easy for a group leader to become so consumed with leading other people that they lose sight of their greater portion. Jesus in Luke 10:38-42 makes this clear in his conversation with Martha when she makes the mistake of prioritizing service over worship. Therefore, TAS must create consistent moments with the sole purpose of helping group leaders sit at the feet of Jesus Christ and worship the Triune God. These moments nurture their faith by focusing attention on God while reminding them of their primary identity as his children. The following section will explain the value of faith-nurturing presented in the New Testament.

Healthy and Compelling Leaders Love God

The previous section thoroughly examined Paul's equipping strategy to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-38. One aspect of his strategy included his admonishment to look out for false teachers who would try to destroy the church. One might wonder what happened to the Ephesian church after Paul left and whether or not the elders were able to protect the people from the threats. Fortunately, Jesus provides insight to what happened to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-8. In this passage Jesus offers a

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specific encouragement and rebuke to the church in Ephesus that serves as a necessary reminder for Christian leaders today—the love for God must always be present in healthy and compelling ministries.

Jesus's message to the church reveals that the elders were in fact well-equipped by Paul because they had "tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" (Rev 2:2). Jesus's commendation of how they "faithfully endured" these threats shows that Paul's ministry had a lasting impact on the Ephesian church. However, Jesus then transitions the tone of his message when he rebukes them for abandoning their love of God. The Ephesian church did not love God like they did in their early days as a church (Rev 2:4). Jesus holds their abandoned love against them despite the fact that their ministry was effective as a result of Paul's equipping.

In response to their abandoned love, Jesus calls the church to "remember therefore the works [they] did at first" (Rev 2:5). Frank Macchia and John Thomas point out two aspects of Jesus's call for them to remember. First, Jesus wants them to remember their works at first because currently they are unaware that their love for God has faded over time. They did not know how far their hearts had drifted from God even though their ministry had flourished. He wants them to remember the beginning so that they can see how far their hearts have drifted. Second, Jesus wants them to remember their works at first because he wants them to see the essential relationship between the works of ministry and love for God.[22] Regardless of how fruitful a church's ministries are, what makes a ministry healthy and compelling is its love for God.

The absence of love in the Ephesian church is what differentiates its works in the present from the past. Jesus wants effective ministry to be rooted in love for God. The desire for love-centered ministry is precisely why Jesus' call for repentance has two

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[22] Frank D. Macchia and John Christopher Thomas, *Revelation*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), chap. 2, sec. "To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus," eBook.

aspects: repent of their abandonment of love *and* return to the works they did at first.[23] Their successful ministry back then had love, but their "successful" ministry now does not. Therefore, they must repent. If they do not, the consequences are dire. Jesus himself will remove their lampstand, signifying the termination of the church altogether. Without love a church ceases to be a church entirely. Moreover, without love groups at TAS cannot be healthy and compelling.

Leon Morris writes, "A church can continue only for so long on a loveless course."[24] The ease in which church leaders can unknowingly begin to walk down that loveless course is exactly why healthy and compelling group leaders need their faith to be consistently nurtured. Paul was aware of this problem and regularly wrote about the importance of love and faith in his epistles. The following section thoroughly examines 1 Thessalonians to further support the importance of nurturing the faith of church leaders.

Faith-Nurturing in 1 Thessalonians

First Thessalonians is a textbook example of the power of faith-nurturing. In contrast to the Ephesian church, whose works had become absent of faith and love, Paul opens his letter by acknowledging the Thessalonians for their "work of faith and *labor of love* and steadfastness of hope in [the] Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3).[25] This is a clear statement of the church's present health. Their faith was strong and their ministry was powerful. So powerful in fact that the entire first chapter can be summarized as Paul's commendation of them for becoming an example of faith not only for churches in the surrounding region, but apparently all of Christendom (1:8). Their faith is what caused the narrative to

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[23] Macchia and Thomas, *Revelation*, chap. 2, sec. "To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus."

[24] Leon L. Morris, *Revelation*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 65.

[25] Even though most of the discourse in 1 Thess is from the perspective of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy through the first person pronoun "we," for the sake of brevity I am referring to Paul as a representative of the three.

spread about the church, not their works. Amazingly, a further examination of chapter 2 reveals that the faith-nurturing conduct of Paul toward the Thessalonians empowered their strong ministry.

What did Paul's leadership of the Thessalonians look like? He nurtured their faith. Paul reminds the church how he was "gentle among [them], like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (2:7). Interestingly, the word Paul uses for "mother" is actually the Greek noun τροφός (*trophos)* which means "a nurse." This noun stems from the verb τρεφω (*trephō)* which means "to feed" or "to nourish." In this sense, Paul is communicating what he did to them, not who he was to them. This is the reason why the English translations render this verse as "nursing mother."[26] This word is intentionally used to point out that their faith was nurtured in a specific way. Whereas mothers take care of their children through a variety of activities such as feeding, bathing, playing, protecting, and teaching, Paul focused on one activity: nurturing their faith with spiritual milk.

This spiritual milk was the gospel of God (1 Thess 2:8; cf. Heb 5:12). The rich nutrients of the gospel message are what made the Thessalonians' faith strong. As 1 Peter 2:2 says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation." This is precisely what the Thessalonians had experienced—through Paul's faith-nurturing conduct they had grown up into healthy adults by the pure spiritual milk of the gospel. For Paul, being part of this process was not a burden for him. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The responsibility to nurture their faith became Paul's delight to daily share the gospel message *and* his own life with them.[27] He nurtured their faith, they

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[26] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 146.

[27] Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), chap. 1, sec. "What Paul Was Like Among the Thessalonians," eBook.

grew, and he continued feeding them. Their spiritual growth, combined with the dear relationships he had established, led to another aspect of being their spiritual parent.

As the church matured in faith, Paul began to act as a spiritual father to the Thessalonians (2:11). He commands and shows them how to live in a worthy manner of the gospel (2:12). At the same time though, Paul never ceased to continue feeding them the faith-nurturing message of the gospel. He reminds the church how he "worked night and day . . . while [he] proclaimed to [them] the gospel of God" (2:9). As the church began to move on to more mature matters of the faith, Paul ensured they never graduated from the basic principles of the gospel that made their faith consistently strong. He did this because the gospel was of first importance, and he feared any threat that could weaken a church's faith in it (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Paul's fear is clearly displayed in chapter 3 when because of persecution he is forced to flee Thessalonica (vv. 1-5; Acts 17:1-10). He was afraid that after his departure their faith would be jeopardized (3:5). In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5, Paul uses weighty language to express how deeply concerned he is about the status of their faith. Twice in his letter Paul explains that his fears for them were so strong that he sent Timothy back to them "because [he] could bear it no longer" (3:1, 5). Out of concern for their faith he sent Timothy to do two things: "learn about [their] faith" (3:5) and "establish and exhort [them] in [their] faith" (3:2).

Paul's concerns about their faith significant because in these verses he never expresses concerns about their circumstances. He is not concerned about the real afflictions they are currently facing; the same afflictions that forced him to flee. In fact, he even reminds them that "when we were with you, *we kept telling you* beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know" (3:4). Instead, he is concerned about their *faith*. Paul wants to know how their faith has been impacted by their circumstances. This serves as a sobering reminder for church leaders of TAS today—what concerns TAS about its partners? Certainly, TAS should become concerned

if group leaders display weakness or immaturity, or their participation fades, or they are suffering, or they stop responding, or their behaviors begin to reflect poorly on TAS's reputation. But what about the quality of their faith? Like Paul, TAS must have a genuine concern for group leaders' faith.

Motivated by his concern for their faith, Paul sends Timothy to check on the Thessalonian church. Thankfully, Paul received Timothy's report containing "the good news of [their faith and love]" (3:6). In response to hearing this news, Paul expresses his relief and prays that he can return to them to continue nurturing their faith (3:7; 3:10). Hearing that their faith is strong was simply not enough for Paul. He longed to return to them so that he could continue nurturing any part of their faith that was lacking with the gospel.

Andy Johnson makes the powerful point that, for Paul, writing an authoritative letter is not a sufficient means to nurture their faith. He could have continued his letter with some faith-nurturing content, but he does not. Faith-nurturing must be done in person because "there is simply no substitute for face-to-face, physical interaction for effective modeling, encouragement, and exhortation whose ultimate goal is transformation."[28] Paul believed that the regular pursuit of nurturing the church's faith through the gospel was transformative. This belief drove Paul's prioritization of faith-nurturing as a continued rhythm to invest and support the Thessalonians and must not be overlooked by TAS today.

Summary

TAS should create a healthy and compelling group leader culture like Paul did in Thessalonica. As the Thessalonians matured, Paul never graduated from the faith-nurturing power of the gospel message. Today, church leaders of TAS must do the same. As group leaders in TAS mature, it is essential for their faith to be regularly nurtured by

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[28] Andy Johnson, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2016), chap. 2, sec. "2:17-20 An Explanation of Absence," eBook.

the beauty of the gospel. The faith-nurturing moments that TAS provides for group leaders should not focus on equipping, ministry impact, church growth, or leadership development; other environments can be devoted to those. Instead, faith-nurturing moments need to lead group leaders to the feet of Jesus and be reminded of the gospel that compels them to love God and the people in their communities. Otherwise, they may end up like the church in Ephesus by abandoning their love altogether. Even if TAS had the most competent and high capacity group leaders imaginable, "without love [they are] nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture, TAS must invest and support group leaders by nurturing their faith.

Biblical Investment and Support of Group Leaders and the Value of Blessing

The fourth value of investment and support needed to create healthy and compelling group leaders is blessing. The Lord Jesus Christ said that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Blessing group leaders of TAS with tangible support makes their leadership enjoyable and the weight of ministry lighter. This value creates a healthy and compelling group leader culture because it empowers them to joyfully endure in their leadership as they are supported by TAS. The following sections support the value of blessing by presenting instances in which Paul personally benefitted from blessing, and commanded churches to support others through blessing.

Receiving Blessing While Not Asking for It

Although there are many passages in which Paul commands churches to support individual people or entire churches, in general he sought to support his own ministry. One notable example of this is seen in 1 Corinthians 9:8-18. Here, Paul makes the point that it is permissible for people to receive material support for their spiritual labor (v. 11). Paul certainly qualified for this kind of material support. However, even though he was entitled to receive material blessing for his ministry, he tells them, "I have made no use of

[this] right, nor am I writing [this letter] to secure any such provision" (v. 15). He did not exercise this right because he wanted to "present the gospel free of charge" (v. 18) "rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (v. 12).

Gorman explains that Paul intentionally decided at the beginning of his ministry to not be a financial burden on any community he labored among; even though he had every right to accept this support. The reason why, Gorman argues, is because Paul saw himself as a kind of miniature version of Christ:

> Refusing to exercise [his] right and working with his hands, were apparently absolutely essential to his self-understanding as an apostle. It was a concrete way of being an imitator of Christ: possessing a right, associated with a certain privileged status, that would be advantageous to oneself; yet freely choosing not to use the right; but rather lowering oneself to the status of a slave for the benefit of others.[29]

Just as Christ had all the privileges of being God but willingly chose not to use them by taking the form of a humble servant (Phil 2:6-7), Paul chose to not be compensated for his labor even though he had that privilege as an apostle (1 Cor 9:15; 2 Cor 11:7). However, the difference between Jesus and Paul must be noted. Being fully God, Jesus never truly needed support from other people even though he received from others in his humanity.[30] Paul though, being entirely human, truly needed support on occasion even though he never expressed his desire for it as an apostle of Jesus Christ. There were times in Paul's ministry when it was necessary for him to receive support. These moments of need make a compelling case for why the value of blessing is essential to help a person endure in ministry.

One powerful example is in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. When Paul famously declares, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13) he is explicitly referring to being content in all circumstances (4:11-12). Perhaps in an attempt to minimize his present struggles, or to flex his spiritual muscles to them, he leads up to

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[29] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 68-69.

[30] See Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane in Matt 26:37-38 and with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:6-7.

verse 13 by saying, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound. I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (4:11-12). Even though Paul is able to be content, his contentment does not change the reality of his needs. He has learned to be content despite his needs.

Furthermore, because Paul has to appeal to God's strength to be content is a good sign that at times he has been brought very low and his needs were very real. This was certainly the case for Paul while writing this letter to the Philippians. He was in the midst of a multi-year imprisonment. Circumstantially, things were not going well, and he needed help. Thankfully, the Philippian church sought to bless him in his time of need. In an almost comical fashion, he sets aside his "I can do all things" machismo and tells them, "Yet it was very kind of you to share my trouble" (4:14) "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent" (4:18).

Clearly, Paul needed help in prison, but he did not ask for it. After he received their blessing, Paul acknowledges the outcome that he believes it will produce in his ministry. In Philippians 4:17 Paul expresses, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit." In essence, Paul is saying that even though he was not seeking their help, their generosity blessed him in a way that will produce real fruit for the kingdom of God. Commenting on this verse, Ralph Martin writes, "What the Philippians gave as their gift was like an investment which would repay rich dividends in the service of the kingdom."[31] Blessing produces fruit because it empowers future ministry and removes obstacles that would otherwise prevent a future harvest. This is what Paul is communicating to them, and it is what the Holy Spirit is communicating to church leaders today.

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[31] Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 186.

Needing Blessing and Asking for It

Whereas the previous section presented how people in ministry sometimes find themselves in need and receive unsolicited blessing, this section explains the times when people in ministry ask for help in their time of need. Paul does this at the end of 2 Timothy. In his last letter before martyrdom, he writes to his dear friend and child in the faith, Timothy (1:2). Even though the majority of the letter contains important pastoral instruction to Timothy, Donald Guthrie argues that Paul's personal requests in 2 Timothy 4:9-13 serve as the climax of the epistle.[32] While writing the letter under house-arrest at the end of his life, Paul makes his final requests which present a clear picture of his desires and needs.

Paul makes two unique requests for support. First, he asks Timothy in verse 11 to "get Mark and bring him with you." For what purpose? Perhaps to say goodbye to a friend he served with throughout his ministry (Acts 15:37; Col 4:10). No, Paul asks for Mark because "he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim 4:11).[33] This request reveals something amazing about Paul: even at the very end of his life Paul does not retire as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One would imagine that Paul would spend his last days preparing to be present with the Lord. Especially since he just told Timothy a few sentences earlier that "the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (4:6-7). Instead, he asks for the support of another laborer so that his ministry can continue until his very last breath.

The second request Paul makes is for Timothy to bring Paul's cloak, some books, "and above all the parchments" (4:13). With his immanent death upon him, these tangible items were of great value to Paul. Either he wants them because they would provide comfort to him during his final months or because the books and parchments in

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[32] Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

[33] Interestingly Paul's request at the end of his life is a relationship with a brother in the body of Christ. Once again highlighting the value of relationships displayed in Paul's ministry.

particular would help him continue his ministry. Regardless of why he made this request, clearly these items would bless him in his time of need. This serves as a reminder today that even small, tangible, and on the surface meaningless requests can bless a person and help them joyfully endure in their leadership. Perhaps this is why throughout his letters Paul commands churches to support individuals with "*whatever* [they] need" (Rom 16:2).

Blessing as a Command

The argument for blessing as an essential value of investing and supporting a group leader can be made simply because it is a biblical command. In Romans 12:13, Paul says "contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." From this clear and pointed command are two aspects that make an even more compelling case for the value of blessing. First, it is important to understand the context that surrounds the verse. In Romans 12:3-8, Paul provides a brief discourse concerning the nature of the church being comprised of one body with many members, followed by a list of spiritual gifts. This is immediately followed by a thorough list of succinct commands that mark the genuine Christian's life in Romans 12:9-16; including verse 13. However, right before Paul lists these commands he provides one pivotal transition statement, "let love be genuine" (Rom 12:9a).

Interestingly, Paul does not use a verb in the original Greek for this transition. Douglas Moo comments that by leaving out an imperative, a very literal translation of this verse could be "the love sincere,"[34] and then argues that "these words seem to be the heading for the rest of the passage. It is as if Paul gives a definition: 'Love that is sincere will be.'"[35] With Romans 12:9a serving as a heading, all of the following commands qualify what genuine love is. Therefore, "contributing to the needs of the saints" (v.13) is

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[34] Douglas J. Moo uses the NIV translation, which renders "sincere" in Rom 12:13.

[35] Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 337.

not a unique command Paul makes to the church in Rome in regard to a specific situation. Rather, it is a command of blessing to be obeyed by all Christians, in all churches, across all time because it is a command of love; just like the Greatest Commandment (Matt 22:34-40).

The prescriptive command to bless Christians in the church by contributing to their needs is further evidenced by the structure of Paul's discourse in Romans 12:3-16. Here is the flow of Paul's logic: the nature of the body (vv. 4-5), the endowment of spiritual gifts (vv. 6-8), then a call to love (vv. 9-16). This is the same instruction he offers the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 12:27, he tells them, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Then, in 1 Corinthians 12:28-31, Paul lists spiritual gifts given to the body. Finally, in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Paul explains to the Corinthians what love is and what it looks like. Given Paul's consistent instruction across churches, Schreiner correctly explains that Paul's command in Romans 12:13 was not a specific project for the church in Rome to participate in; it was an on-going command and practical mark of any genuine Christian community.[36] The same must be true of genuine Christian communities in TAS today.

Furthermore, at the time Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome he was keenly aware of their ministry context. He knew exactly the kind of needs those saints had that he was calling the church to contribute toward. Specifically, they needed hospitality. The second half of the verse, "and seek to show hospitality" (Rom 12:13b), is not independent of its antecedent, "contribute to the needs of the saints" (Rom 12:13a). The conjunction "and" makes this clear. However, Paul is not saying that being hospitable is the only application to contributing to their needs. In fact, typically passages in the New Testament that address this kind of generosity are in reference to financial assistance,

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[36] Schreiner, *Romans*, 632.

which certainly would apply to the church in Rome anytime that need arises.[37] Paul simply adds the call to hospitality because he is aware of specific people in the church with that need.

The first section of this chapter explained the value of relationships by examining Paul's lengthy greeting at the end of his letter to the church in Rome. Its contents are once again relevant to the value of blessing here. Paul's greetings to those individuals proves he knew they were in Rome (Rom 16:1-16). Paul knows which of his friends are in Rome and what their needs are. Most of those people were not native to Rome because he came to know them personally throughout his missionary journeys. Now that they are in Rome, they need a place to live, and hospitality is how the church ought to respond.

Schreiner aptly concludes his commentary on Romans 12:13 by stating that Paul desired for the church to take initiative in hospitality "because [these] believers who traveled would typically lack the financial wherewithal to pay their own lodging, and thus their ministry or visit would depend on [it]."[38] These leaders being blessed by the church with hospitality helped them endure in their ministry because the weight of this need was lifted. This is the second aspect for why Romans 12:13 presents a compelling case for the value of blessing; group leaders will endure in their ministry when TAS meets the needs that make their leadership enjoyable and the weight of ministry lighter.

Summary

The example of blessing that Paul received from the Philippians, the list of needs he writes to Timothy, and a thorough explanation of Romans 12:13 make a compelling argument for how the value of blessing helps a leader endure in ministry. However, many other Pauline passages are worth noting that support how much the value

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[37] Schreiner, *Romans*, 632.

[38] Schreiner, *Romans*, 633.

of blessing was an integral part of Paul's ministry. Examples include Paul's financial blessing to the church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-26); his command for the Corinthians to set aside money for other churches each week (1 Cor 16:1-2; cf. 2 Cor 9:12-15); and his general command for wealthy people "to be generous and ready to share" (1 Tim 6:18).

The value of blessing removes restraints and allows for continued effective ministry. Therefore, it is essential that TAS has clear structures in place in order to know what group leaders' needs are, and the resources to meet their needs. When these needs are identified and met through blessing, the ministry endures because leadership is enjoyable, and the weight of ministry is lighter. Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture, TAS must invest and support group leaders with blessing.

Biblical Investment and Support of Group Leaders and the Value of Celebration

The fifth and final value of investment and support needed to create healthy and compelling group leaders is celebration. Group leaders' ministry to the church is essential. They are responsible for the discipleship and spiritual formation of individual members of the community as well as the collective pursuit of the community's mission to reach the lost. And yet, the week in, week out hustle of leading others in one's living room can very easily go unseen by the rest of the church body. In one sense this must be the case. Apart from the handful of people in that community, no one else in the church literally sees the ministry these leaders do. This is not problematic. However, it is problematic when a group leader *feels* unseen by the rest of the church body.

The feeling of being unseen occurs when their ministry is not acknowledged or appreciated by the church. Ironically, silence in the church is often the loudest voice. The lack of recognition communicates that the church does not value the leader or the ministry. If the pattern persists, then eventually leaders step down and the community dissolves. Conversely, celebrating group leaders corporately communicates the honor and value that their ministry contributes to the entire church. In this case, existing leaders

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endure in their leadership while members aspire to group leadership and new communities are created.

This section presents a compelling case for the value of celebration in two ways. First, Paul's metaphor of the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 shows how celebration benefits the entire church. Second, Paul's acknowledgements of the household of Stephanas in 1 Corinthians 16:15-18 show how celebration helps people joyfully endure in their ministry to the church.

Honoring Group Leaders
Benefits the Church

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, Paul uses the analogy of a human body, comprised of body parts, to make his ultimate point that the Corinthians "are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (v. 27). The analogy is broken up into three sections of thought to communicate the various ways Christians are to relate to one another as well as the whole church. First Corinthians 12:12-14 serve as the introduction of the analogy to make the point that the church is created by the unilateral work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that as individual members of the body, they had no active role in its creation. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (v. 13). Each person was a passive recipient of the Spirit's work.

The oneness within the church that the Spirit created leads to the first set of points of Paul's analogy in verses 15-20. By personifying individual parts of the human body in verses 15-16, Paul is communicating that each person is equally a part of the body *regardless* of what part they are. The value comes entirely from the fact that each person is a part of the whole. This has nothing to do with function, role, or gift. This reality presents an important reminder as it pertains to the value of celebration—the church must not communicate that group leaders are more important or valuable to the church than other roles.

Paul then extends his analogy in verses 17-19 to explain the second error the

church makes when it overemphasizes one part of the church. When the church is built around one type of body part, there is no body at all. Paul makes this point plain when he rhetorically says, "If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (v. 19). Thus, the church must not emphasize one part of the church more than the rest. Paul's reasoning is because "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (v. 18). This truth presents the second important reminder of the value of celebration—the church must not celebrate group leaders as a way to recruit people from other roles in the church.

Now that Paul has communicated how each member of the church should relate to the whole body, he then transitions in verses 21-27 to explain how each member should relate to other members. In these verses his analogy describes the different body parts talking to each other based on whether they *need* each other. His point is clear: the people of the church need each other. In fact, they need each other more than they realize. Mark Taylor precisely articulates Paul's emphasis: "In stark contrast to the attitude that one body part has no need of the other, what only appears to be weaker is actually all the more essential. Furthermore, the body parts we deem less honorable we treat with greater honor and the unpresentable parts we treat with modesty."[39]

This beautiful reality presents the biblical basis for celebrating group leaders. Group leaders should be celebrated by the entire church because it is the honor they deserve. As Paul commands in Romans 13:7, pay "honor to whom honor is due." Their ministry is honorable. However, the private form of their living-room ministry receives less honor than other public forms of ministry, like preaching and teaching. Celebrating group leaders, then, is the church elevating this indispensable part of the body to the place it is supposed be—equal with the rest of the body. To use a financial illustration, celebration of group leaders is when the church cashes in on the honor they have accrued over time to balance the accounts with the other parts of the body that are honored

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[39] Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 28 (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 164.

regularly.

It is a special moment in which the church gives "greater honor to the part that lacked it [so] that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Cor 12:24-25). The outcome of celebrating church leaders is unity, not partiality or favoritism. This unity is realized in the church when "one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26). The corporate rejoicing that occurs is because, as Taylor concludes, "a profound solidarity exists between the members of the body."[40] When the entire body rejoices because group leaders are honored for their ministry, they joyfully continue in their leadership, and this cycle repeats. The impact that celebration has on the entire church now illuminates the instances in which Paul celebrates individuals in his epistles.

Acknowledge Such People

Since it has been explained how celebration benefits the entire church, it is clear why Paul acknowledges individuals in his letters. The conclusion of 1 Corinthians is an excellent example showing how Paul put his own instructions in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 into practice. In 1 Corinthians 16:15-18, Paul publicly honors the household of Stephanas, "the first converts in Achaia," because they "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (v. 15). Before the significance of their ministry is explained, their track record as the first converts in the region requires expansion.

In the opening chapter of the letter, Paul mentions that he baptized Stephanas when he first came to the region (1:16). This fact, in combination with the additional information made about them being the first converts in the region, presents an important insight regarding their prominence within the church. They were the longest tenured Christians in the entire region. Therefore, their leadership status within the church would be likely.

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[40] Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 164.

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However, Leon Morris argues that verse 15, which describes that Stephanas and his household had devoted themselves to the service of the saints, is an indication that "they did not assume a place of leadership or prominence, but one of lowly service."[41] Their devotion to the service of the saints was a lifestyle they had freely chosen and busied themselves with. As such, he concludes, "Stephanas and his family have taken as their particular responsibility, their piece of Christian service, the task of the service of the saints."[42]

This appears to be the correct interpretation considering Paul's discourse about the nature of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Here Paul makes the point that some parts of the body receive more, or less, honor than others. The outward facing parts naturally receive more recognition than those who are devoted to the lowly service of the saints. In light of this tendency, Paul says, "The parts of the body that we think are less honorable, we bestow the greater honor" (12:23). Bestowing greater honor to the parts of the church that regularly lack recognition elevates them to equal status with the rest of the church. This is precisely what Paul does when he celebrates the household of Stephanas in the letter's conclusion. Paul is not celebrating them for their leadership positions. Instead, they were *servant-leaders* and Paul is honoring them accordingly.

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 16:17, "I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence." Notice Paul's use of the present tense, "I rejoice," and not the past tense, "I rejoiced." The three men are with Paul at the time he is writing the letter. Schreiner postulates that Paul's present rejoicing is most likely because they were the ones who delivered the Corinthians' letter containing the questions Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:1-8:1-13.[43]

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[41] Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 233.

[42] Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 233.

[43] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 334.

This is another indication that the three men were not in leadership positions within the Corinthian church. In this context, church leaders would rarely have been given the task to leave the flock they are in charge of to deliver letters. Therefore, the household of Stephanas must have simply been devoted servants to the saints.

Once these devoted servants arrived with the letter, Paul writes that their ministry of presence "made up for your [the Corinthian church's] absence" (16:17). Had Paul not mentioned this simple statement, their impact on him would have gone completely unrecognized by the church. The same is true today when countless honorable acts occur every day that go unrecognized *unless* someone acknowledges them. Thankfully, Paul does so here. He then continues to acknowledge their impact when he says that they "refreshed my spirit as well as yours" (16:18). Here, Paul's main point in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 comes full circle—"when one member is honored, all rejoice together" (12:25). Since Paul is rejoicing because of how they refreshed his spirit, the entire church must rejoice as well. To do this, Paul celebrates their ministry in his letter and then commands the whole church to "give recognition to such people" (16:18). What a beautiful example of how celebration benefits the entire church.

Even though the entire church benefits from their celebration, the impact of Paul's corporate celebration on them personally must also be noted. Paul's positive experience of their ministry and their role in the church as servants of the saints compels Paul's command "be subject to such as these" (16:16). On the surface, this language seems to present evidence for the status of their leadership and authority within the church.[44] However, for the same reasons already mentioned, this is likely not the case. Instead, as Blomberg states, the command to submit "most likely means to place oneself voluntarily under the authority of someone else." In other words, "put yourself at the service of such people" is a more appropriate interpretation since these men had no authoritative

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[44] Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 333.

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leadership in the church.[45]

By corporately recognizing them and embracing their role within the church as servants of the saints, the impact to the Corinthians is two-fold. First, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus would joyfully continue fulfilling their roles now that their ministry was recognized and celebrated. Second, as they continue in their ministry, "there may be no division in the body, [and] the members have the same care for one another" (12:25). The value of celebration helps individual people joyfully continue in their ministry *and* church unity is fostered through the mutual care for one another.

Summary

Church leaders must pay attention to the fact that roles in the church are often unrecognized not because they are stagnant or weak, but because they are functioning properly. Those in the church whom the Holy Spirit has empowered with the gifts of service, helping, and sometimes leadership (when it takes place in one's home on a weeknight) can be the healthiest parts of the body and be entirely unseen. Although they are unseen, they are working properly, and the church can build itself up in love (Eph 4:16). Gregg Allison writes, "Paradoxically, when [these gifts] are functioning well, the church rarely notices the great blessing that the Spirit has brought through those who serve."[46] Conversely, the more visible gifts like teaching, prophecy, generosity, wisdom, and knowledge may receive credit for the growth of the church even though they may be unhealthy.

Group leaders carry significant weight in the church, and it often is unrecognized. Not that the rest of the body is unaware of the ministry, but they may be unaware of its impact. Although the answer to this would be conjecture, it is a fascinating

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[45] Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 165.

[46] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers; The Doctrine of the Church,* Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 418-19.

thought experiment to consider how many church discipline cases never make it to the elders because repentance happens within community? Similarly, how many marriages are restored? And how many lonely singles are welcomed into community? And how many marginalized people are served? Group leaders produce these kinds of fruit in their living rooms every week, and the rest of the church body is often unaware. Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture, TAS must invest and support group leaders by celebrating them.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the biblical and theological foundation for creating a healthy and compelling group leader culture at TAS. Through a broad and thorough examination of Pauline epistles, it is clear that five values are essential for investing and supporting group leaders: relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. Each value should be consistently and intentionally pursued by TAS for existing group leaders to joyfully endure in their leadership and for partners to aspire to group leadership. The next chapter will explain additional theoretical and practical issues related to the project.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED
TO CREATING A HEALTHY AND COMPELLING
GROUP LEADER CULTURE

TAS can control how it invests and supports group leaders, but it cannot control how the group leaders choose to lead. Group leaders' decisions, behaviors, and habits have a significant impact on how healthy and compelling they become; even if TAS is faithfully investing and supporting them. Put simply, healthy and compelling group leaders must also be effective group leaders. One key aspect of effective group leadership is understanding and responding to the broader cultural context in which the community exists.

The cultural context of TAS is marked by the rampant ideologies of individualism and consumerism. Together, these two ideologies are the greatest obstacles group leaders face as they lead their groups, and they must be addressed in order to accomplish the purpose of this project. This chapter will first explain the theoretical concepts of individualism and consumerism. Then, it will describe the negative impacts individualism and consumerism have on groups at TAS. Finally, this chapter will offer two essential practices that all healthy and compelling group leaders must pursue to joyfully endure in their leadership: effective communication habits and a resolved pursuit of a mission.

Individualism and Consumerism in the Western World

In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self,* author Carl Trueman seeks to answer the powerful question, "How and why has the statement 'I am a woman trapped

inside a man's body' come to be regarded as a coherent statement in society today?"[1] Prior to the past fifty to sixty years, this statement would not only have been incoherent but also inconceivable by society. However, today, not only is that statement coherent, but overwhelmingly supported and beyond deniability by the majority of Western culture. For Trueman, this is problematic because "that statement carries with it a world of metaphysical assumptions. It touches on the connection between the mind and the body, given the priority it grants to inner conviction over biological reality."[2] In other words— psychology determines biology. Not in a way that restructures a person's biological nature, but in a way that detaches human personhood from biological nature.

For Christians, transgenderism is problematic because it defies God's design and desire for humans to be gendered-embodied biological beings—male with a male body or female with a female body. However, the prioritization of inner conviction over natural reality at the core of transgenderism is also at the core of Christian individualism. Given the same priority, Christian individualism grants to inner experience over theological reality; it separates the Christian's identity from their natural connection with their spiritual body—the body of Christ (the church). Christian individualism defies God's design and desire for local churches by making a Christian's essential commitment and service to a local church body nonessential. Even though the concept of a Christian's optional participation in a local church would also have been inconceivable prior to the past fifty or sixty years, the behaviors stemming from Christian individualism are overwhelmingly accepted in churches like TAS today.

However, like Trueman's concern with transgenderism, the issue for local churches is not whether Christian individualism is *accepted*. Rather, the concern revolves around *how* and *why* Christian individualism has become accepted. The answer is the result

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[1] Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 20.

[2] Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 20.

of a fundamental shift in the Western world's thinking about what defines the nature of human selfhood.[3] Furthermore, since this shift in defining human personhood is the dominant school of thought today, it explains the pervasive behaviors threatening Western churches like TAS.

Western Culture's Individualism

Today in Western culture, a person's identity is self-determined. It is a repackaged version of René Descartes's *cogito ergo sum.* For Descartes, human *existence* is self-determined. The simple fact that he was a thinking being proved his very existence. However, the dominating school of thought for Western civilians today is that human *identity* is self-determined. Something Descartes's Gen Z descendent might say today, "I am what I think." Logically, then, an affirming culture is required in societies in which the identity of each individual is self-determined. Affirming cultures become the necessary product of self-determined individuals because each person's identity is as valid as their neighbor's. Therefore, any challenge or objection to another person's identity is always personally offensive, not because it is false, but because their identity is *only* personal—literally. Under this worldview, affirming positions have nothing to gain and non-affirming positions have everything to lose.

The normalization of transgenderism today is not necessarily rooted in the shared belief in another's identity, but the shared source of their own authentic individualism—the self-defining authority of individual identity. The majority of Western civilians affirm the claim of their neighbor, or coworker, or sibling—"I am a woman trapped inside of a man's body"—not because it is a coherent statement, but because it is consistent with the postmodern worldview of the Western world. Normalization and affirmation must become a cultural expectation of any individual's identification of *authentic self* (including their lifestyle and behaviors).

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[3] Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 20.

The unfortunate reality for Christianity today, however, is that the same is true for Christian individualism in the local church. In this case, many Christians in the local church have a spiritual identity that says, "I am an individual Christian trapped inside of Christ's body." Even though the statement is theologically incoherent, this *authentic* identity is normalized and accepted by other Christians in the church.

Christian individualism is the notion that a Christian's identity is *primarily* their individual relationship with God. A person's union with Christ does not extend to others in which Christ is also in union. Theologically, a person may say their Christian identity is connected to other believers as the body of Christ, but ultimately their individual *experience* authenticates the genuineness of his *personal* Christian identity. Therefore, if a decision or experience *feels* like it is good for his faith, it is good for his faith. This form of Christian identity is extremely dangerous for two reasons. First, it reduces Christian identity to personal experience instead of faith. Second, it defies God's design and desire for the church of Jesus Christ—men and women joined together by the work of the Holy Spirit as individual members of one body of Christ. However, instead of viewing themselves as individual members *of the body of Christ*, they view themselves as *individual members* of the body of Christ.

In March of 2022, The Barna Group released a study of US adults who professed to be active Christians. The focus of the study was the privatization of the Christian faith in America. In other words, how deep does individualism go in American Christians? The study's conclusion showed that 56 percent of Christians say their spiritual life is *entirely* private.[4] An important distinction must be noted. The study defines *private* not as a Christian who practices their faith in isolation from other people. Instead, it means that practicing their faith is always a private experience, even if it occurs in the context of a Christian community. The study concludes, "A private approach to spirituality is

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[4] Barna Group, "56% of Christians Feel Their Spiritual Life Is Entirely Private," March 16, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/discipleship-friendship/.

pervasive, even among Christians who are in discipleship community. Forty-six percent *still say* they consider their spiritual lives to be private."[5] If these statistics are approximate representations of US Christians today, then nearly half of the most engaged people in American churches today are functionally holograms. They have the appearance of being part of the body while their participation is immaterial and private.

What led to this extreme Christian individualism? The same thing that led to the sexual revolution and transgender movement in America today: a shift in Western thinking about the nature of humanity. Trueman calls this shift the creation of the *psychological man*—the notion "that psychological categories and an inward focus are the hallmarks for being a modern person."[6] The psychological man is the philosophical and epistemological offspring of the Enlightenment, which separates human nature from a divine creator, leaving behind only the natural and rational person. Once there is no divine authority defining human personhood, the thinking human is the determiner of one's existence.

As eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau said, "I am resolved in an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself."[7] Thinking like Rousseau's powerfully reflects a radical shift in human history from something (or someone) outside of humanity that defined an individual's identity, to identity being defined within oneself. Naturally, as this self-deterministic thinking embeds itself deeper into the inner experiences of oneself through the centuries, it leads to what twentieth-century philosopher Charles Taylor identifies as the dominant school of Western thinking today—*expressive individualism*:

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[5] Barna Group, "56% of Christians."

[6] Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 31.

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. Patrick Coleman, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 5.

The understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.[8]

Taylor's expressive individualism takes the Enlightenment school of thought one step further. Not only does the idea of the supernatural not have determining authority over human nature, but *nothing* outside of a person has determining authority. Societies, policies, governments, family systems, and family origins have no voice in a person's identity—it is completely self-determined by giving expression to one's own feelings and desires. The shift to expressive individualism is the foundation for why the statement "I am a woman trapped inside a man's body" is culturally affirmed; nothing outside of that statement can say otherwise.

The jettison of all outside institutions and authorities in determining the human identity marks another radical shift in human history. Culture no longer has authority in defining human nature. Even though the philosophers of the Enlightenment removed divine authority over human nature, the statement "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" would still have been preposterous. The reason is because people still held to natural authority. Science, society, and government entities would have delivered a resounding rejection of that statement.

According to twentieth-century sociologist Philip Rieff, culture has historically influenced society's understanding of human identity: "Culture is another name for a design of motives directing the self-outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied."[9] In other words, all humans have historically derived their identities, and embraced it as their true self, from their community. Why then is this not the case today in the twenty-first century? Because expressive individualism has

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[8] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 475.

[9] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, NC: ISI, 2006), 3.

silenced the role and authority of culture (with its explicit and implicit standards and rules), and nothing can challenge a person's self-determined nature.

Expressive individualism has flipped the entire fabric of human living. Today, institutions and culture do not shape individuals to become something else; they validate individuals just as they are. Trueman's commentary on this change is jarring:

> In the worlds of political, religious, and economic [humanity], commitment was outwardly directed to those communal beliefs, practices, and institutions that were bigger than the individual and in which the individual, to the degree that he or she conformed to or cooperated with them, found meaning. The ancient Athenian was committed to the assembly, the medieval Christian to his church, and the twentieth century factory worker to his trade union and working man's club. All of them found their purpose and well-being by being committed to something outside themselves. In the world of [expressive individualism], however, the commitment is first and foremost to the self and is inwardly directed. Thus, the order is reversed. Outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and his sense of inner well-being.[10]

The self-serving engagement of institutions that expressive individualism produces is precisely the reason consumerism plagues Western civilians. A person's felt need for an experience-driven authentication of their self-determined identity is a craving that never ends. He or she will consume everything an institution has to offer and then move on to the next one. All the while their inner self justifies the consumeristic behavior because it is authenticating their *true* identity.

Tragically, this is also true of individuals in the local church. For many, the church should serve them so that their personal faith matures, instead of them serving the church so that it matures into the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). The moment they think about or ask what a church will offer them, they have bowed to the idolatry of expressive individualism. Jesus, the church, community, classes, events, and programs exist to authenticate their faith. In other words, they are the center of the church and the person they claim to worship is a faux-Jesus made in the image of their own self-determined identity. However, the real Jesus of the Christian faith only lives outside of his experience

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[10] Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 33.

and is the only true self-determined person.

The concepts of "church shopping/hopping," and an individual's long-term pattern of no meaningful engagement or service, reveals the idolatry of the self-determined Christian. They have no intention or desire to be shaped and formed by the church, even though they would never articulate that fact. Instead, their deepest desire is to remain completely unchanged for the entirety of their engagement with the church. To let a sermon change their convictions, or a community group leader challenge their commitments, would be a rejection of their self-determined identity. Therefore, they participate as long as the sermons, songs, and programs satisfy what they have already determined to be *authentic* faith for themselves. When the church calls for a person's changed behaviors, makes a change to a person's favorite program, or speaks too much (or too little) about a specific topic, they move on to the next church. Sadly, as they leave the church, in their mind they reason, "this is the church's fault" or "this church is not a good fit for me anymore."

According to this perspective, local churches exist to *entertain* an individual's faith instead of maturing it. A Christian is more than happy to give time and money in exchange for an entertaining experience. The church that a person feels is the better experience wins their loyalty. Christian individualism makes a person's relationship with a local church entirely contractual. The irony of a contractual relationship with a local church is that it prevents a Christian from experiencing the maturing faith that church shopping/hopping seeks after. They say they are leaving one church for another because it will grow their faith, but, they are leaving because the new church is simply more entertaining for their faith.

For a Christian to grow in faith, change is necessary as a member of the body of Christ. The trajectory of the church is always centered on change because it is growing and building itself up in love (Eph 4:16). As the church matures, so should a Christian's faith. However, Christian individualism rejects change and craves status quo. Notice the

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juxtaposition this creates in the church: maturity feels like regression, positive change feels oppressive, and a call to new forms of obedience feels threatening. Thus, instead of maturing with the church, Christian individualism drives Christians to leave for another church in order to "mature" in their private faith.

Christian individualism, then, makes local churches to be functionally no different than Amazon, Walmart, or a digital streaming service; it is simply a spiritual marketplace for spiritual consumers to consume on local churches, like TAS. To create healthy and compelling group leaders, TAS must identify and address the threats of individualism and consumerism within its own communities.

Individualism and Consumerism at TAS

This project argues for the connection between transgenderism and the individualism and consumerism expressed in groups at TAS to show the powerful deception of expressive consumerism. The greatest threats that TAS group leaders face are not the pastoral and theological situations related to transgenderism, nor are their greatest threats false doctrines, relational conflicts, or personal burnout. Rarely is there a specific moment that is visceral enough to cause group leaders to transition out of leadership. Group leaders' greatest threats are "the philosophies of empty deceit according to human tradition" (Col 2:8).

One aspect of the "philosophies of empty deceit" that Paul refers to in Colossians 2:8 are "primarily at work within the idea systems of our culture."[11] According to Alan Andrews, these idea systems are the threats embedded in widely accepted Christian patterns of thinking and behaviors.[12] They are spiritual wolves dressed in culture's sheep clothing. Andrews concludes that these "idea systems are commonly

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[11] Alan Andrews, *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 48.

[12] Andrews, *The Kingdom Life,* 48.

held assumptions about reality. They are patterns of thinking and interpretation, historically developed and socially shared."[13]

These behaviors have observable patterns within American Evangelicalism, are historically developed as a predominant Western worldview over the last three to four centuries, and are shared socially between the men and women of TAS. Therefore, the greatest threats to group leaders are the normalized behaviors of individualism and consumerism within groups at TAS. These normalized behaviors within TAS groups are further examined in the following sections.[14]

Compartmentalization of Groups at TAS

In *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey describes the individualism of the Western culture as the division of truth into compartmentalized spheres of life: secular versus sacred, fact versus value, and public versus private. These divisions are a significant reason why many Christians today have sincere faith, and yet, pursue their faith inconsistently. According to Pearcey, "the fatal weakness in [many Christians'] faith is that [they] have accepted Christian doctrines strictly as individual items of belief . . . but lack any sense of how Christianity functions as a unified, overarching system of truth that applies to [all of life]."[15]

The compartmentalization of a Christian's spiritual life from the rest of his life can be first seen in the health of relationships within TAS groups. One commonly occurring anecdote of this is when someone at TAS distinguishes their friends and community. Those two categories of relationships are rarely the same group of people. It

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[13] Andrews, *The Kingdom Life*, 48.

[14] The data presented in these sections comes from the results of an existing bi-annual survey of all group leaders of TAS established years before this project. The data represents groups at TAS as of May 2022.

[15] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 32.

is often the case that people in a community become genuine friends, but rarely are they ever referred to as friends. Once a formal group at TAS is created, a relational divide is established between a group member's "friends" and "community". Pearcey says this is the fruit of Christian individualism—a Christian's privatization and compartmentalization of spiritual life from the rest of life.[16] In groups at TAS, compartmentalization exists between religious relationships (community) and social relationships (friends), creating competition between the two categories of relationships.

Tony Reinke explains, "Because human attention has always been lured from the weight of eternal things and hooked by the shiny bait of expiring things, the church has never enjoyed exclusivity in the market of human attention."[17] Competition for the Christian's attention between the world and the church has always existed. Since the default state of the flesh is to look away from things that promote Christian flourishing (i.e., Christian community), the competition is fierce. Therefore, prioritization of Christian community over competing spectacles of the world is essential. Otherwise, an underprioritized Christian community will eventually become collateral damage to the attention given to everything else. Moreover, when a person's Christian community becomes compartmentalized from the rest of his life, prioritization becomes nearly impossible. The negative impacts of compartmentalization are clearly seen in the following normalized behaviors within groups at TAS.

One of the first actions of a newly formed TAS group is the implementation of a communication platform (e.g., Slack, GroupMe). The purpose is to create a place in which members of the community can communicate with each other. On the surface, this is not problematic. However, the reality that a separate platform for the community is used proves that compartmentalization has occurred. Rarely are these platforms used to

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[16] Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 33.

[17] Tony Reinke, *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 39.

communicate with friends and family. Group text messaging and phone calls are sufficient for those relationships, yet the Christian community requires a separate platform, smartphone app, and username. Thus, communication with community occurs apart from the rest of a group member's life. As a result, messages are missed and responses are delayed. Overtime, this repeated pattern of poor communication hinders the health of relationships within groups at TAS.

Since messages from group leaders or members exist on a separate platform, messages are often unseen or not responded to. Unresponsiveness can make the sender feel unheard or unloved (depending on the message's content). When a member sends a message asking if anyone wants to have lunch together, they will receive almost no response. Even worse, when someone sends a vulnerable message asking for help or prayer in a time of need, unresponsiveness can be interpreted as rejection. For group leaders, the lack of consistent communication and responsiveness turns the communication platform into a functional announcement page for meeting logistics only.

The second example of the compartmentalization of a person's religious and social relationships is the separate environments created to meet with different groups. It is often the case that a person will create two separate events, with two separate groups of people, for the same occasion. Take a group member's birthday for example—there will be one party with community group members and another with friends and family. In the event that there is an environment in which both categories of relationships are present, the labels still remain. If asked, "who was at the party?" the likely response is "some people from my community and some friends."

A reasonable objection to this would be that the labels are not evidence of individualism but purely a label to distinguish a segment of whole. However, data from the survey reveals this is not the case: only 52 percent of groups at TAS said they would describe the relationships between group members as "genuine friends," and 32 percent said they are "still getting to know each other." This data, and the specific anecdotes in

the following section, reveal that many individual group members are living out the individualism that Pearcey presents.

Individual Participation within
Groups at TAS

One expectation for group leaders is to establish and pursue consistent community rhythms that reflect the vision and values of *family*, *discipleship*, and *mission* at TAS.[18] These values are not defined by group leaders (or the community members) because no group is its own autonomous community. All groups fall under the leadership and direction of TAS because they are a part of the same body of Christ. Ideally there should be no resistance from group members to pursue the vision and values of TAS. However, in reality, group leaders experience much resistance because of the individualism and consumerism within themselves and the groups' members.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that all forms of person's self-serving expectations for a community are only a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He says that the person "who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."[19] Expressive individualism requires each person in the community to have their own expectations for how the community should serve their own faith. Participation only occurs when their desire for the community's direction and values aligns with TAS's. When the expectations of TAS competes with their own desires for the community, they will opt out of the community entirely.

At TAS, the two most commonly expressed desires for community are geographic proximity to the group's meeting location and a shared season of life among

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[18] See Definitions and Limitation/Delimitations for how family, discipleship, and mission are defined at TAS.

[19] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 27.

group members. Although these desires are fair and valid, expressive individualism makes them essential expectations for a person to engage in a group at TAS. A group member may know that TAS's value of *family* is "love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ," yet their heart believes the value of *family* is "be loved by the brothers and sisters in Christ who are like me and live near me." The following anecdotes highlight the common yet unrealistic expectations of many individuals within TAS groups.

The first anecdote is from a newlywed couple attempting to connect to a group for the first time. The couple was connected to a group of young married couples at TAS after expressing their desire to be with other Christians in their life stage. In response to a follow up message asking how the first meeting went, the husband replied, "We had a blast last night with everyone! We really enjoyed the discussion and the community. Would it be possible for us to check out another group that is closer to us? Not necessarily ruling their group out, but would love to take a look at something closer before making a final decision."[20] After being connected to another community closer to their new home, TAS followed-up again, to which the husband replied, "Because of the drive we did not go back to the [first group] and the [second group] wasn't a good fit for us."

The next anecdote is from a married couple who after spending multiple years in the same group expressed the desire to be a part of a new group. TAS emailed the couple after being informed by their group leader that the couple had left the group to start a new group themselves. The following message is the couple's response to TAS's email. What makes this exchange notable is that after a season of feeling disconnected, their natural conclusion is that it is an issue with TAS:

> The group we started was with our friends that we connect with regularly and we wanted to start a community with them. But in the end, since they live up north the distance seemed to be an issue with scheduling. We are currently not in a group and we don't feel like [the old group] would be the best fit for us right now. They are wonderful people and while we did get a lot out of being part of the group, there were hardly any women or married couples. We also felt like we were pouring in

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[20] Personal correspondence used with permission from the sender.

constantly and hardly anyone would reciprocate. Lastly, we are considering leaving TAS because it has been so difficult to find community and a place we feel connected to. At this point, we do not know where God wants us but we know we do not want to give up on the church. The last thing we want is to be disconnected from the body of Christ but we acknowledge it may not be at TAS.[21]

Both examples reveal the profound negative impact that expressive individualism has on groups and individuals at TAS. The first example shows how expressive individualism does not allow a person to sacrifice to experience Christian community. For the newlyweds that had a positive experience with the group with which they were first connected, a weekly twenty-minute drive was a sacrifice they were unwilling to make. However, when the commute was no longer an obstacle with the second group with which they were connected, they were still unwilling to sacrifice their desires for a specific type of community. The refusal to sacrifice for community prevents them from experiencing any community. The irony, however, is that sacrifice is essential for every Christian community. Christian community is cultivated among Christians who love one another—and love is always sacrificial.

The second example reveals not only the same irony of expressive individualism but also its powerful deceit. Expressive individualism turns a person's past allies into present enemies. In the couple's response back to TAS, expressive individualism blinds them to their own self-indicting statements. They fail to realize that they feel disconnected from community precisely because they chose to leave the group that they themselves called "wonderful people." In addition, they fail to realize how their consideration to leave TAS is at the same time clearly where God does not want them—isolation is never God's desire for his people. Even more, in the name of seeking God's will for them and acknowledging that being disconnected from the local church is truly "the last thing" they want, they are considering leaving the TAS. Expressive individualism convinced them that the current season of feeling disconnected is TAS's and the group's fault—when in reality it was their choice to make.

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[21] Personal correspondence used with permission from the sender.

Once expressive individualism turns good desires (like proximity to meeting location and similar life-stages) into expectations for the entire community, it is only a matter of time before a person leaves the community entirely. If this becomes the case for multiple group members, then eventually the entire community fails. The unfortunate reality is that group leaders experience the greatest impact from non-committal behaviors of the members. At TAS, 34 percent of all group leaders indicated that commitment from group members was the greatest obstacle they experienced as a leader. Lack of commitment causes the leader to carry the additional weight of trying to lead members that have no intention to be moved. This extra weight is only added to the existing responsibility to lead those who are participating. Eventually, group leaders spend too much time and energy trying to lead people who have no intention to participate that they experience burnout.

Discipleship and Mission within Groups at TAS

Another impact of expressive individualism can be seen in a group's pursuit of the values of *discipleship* and *mission.* TAS believes that sin confession and repentance are essential components to the pursuit of discipleship in a group. Therefore, group leaders are expected to create regular rhythms for members to pursue this together. Typically, this looks like the formation of accountability groups in which two to three group members of the same gender meet on a regular basis. Unfortunately, expressive individualism has significantly prevented the pursuit of group confession and repentance.

Specifically, 25 percent of group leaders and 40 percent of group members do not consistently confess and repent of sin. Furthermore, only 21 percent of groups have *every* group member actively involved in an accountability group. This means that 79 percent of all TAS groups have some segment of group members not confessing and repenting of sin. The reason is because expressive individualism is fundamentally opposed to the purposes and outcomes of biblical confession and repentance of sin. At the core of

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a person's confession of sin is the admission to God (in the presence of other group members) that they are guilty of their actions, wrong in their desires, and flawed in their nature. Furthermore, at the core of a person's repentance of sin is their willing rejection of their former desires, thoughts, and actions while committing themselves to the new nature they have received in Christ.

Confession and repentance of sin reinforces that a Christian's identity is *always* determined by someone other than his inner-self—Jesus Christ. When a group member makes a regular practice of rejecting expressive individualism through confession and repentance, they not only reinforce the notion that their *personal* identity is defined by Jesus Christ, but also that Jesus Christ has authority to define *every person's* identity. Their worldview says, "Jesus Christ is Lord!" This statement is true of their own life and objectively true of every human life. Therefore, they do have agency to make statements about another person's identity, which is something that expressive individualism does not allow.

Naturally, then, the pursuit of *mission* becomes a reality for disciples who confess and repent of sin. A statistically significant correlation between the pursuit of *discipleship* and *mission* within groups at TAS proves this to be true. As mentioned, 40 percent of group members do not actively confess and repent of sin. By correlation, 43 percent of group leaders indicated that they did *not* have a clear and expressed mission as a group. Furthermore, 42 percent of group leaders stated that "pursuing mission" was the greatest obstacle for the community.

TAS's value of mission within groups "to seek the kingdom of God together" is made abundantly clear to leaders when they are initially trained. Typically, this is pursued by demonstrating and declaring the gospel—evangelism to make new disciples, and mercy and justice for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Therefore, a group's lack of pursuing mission is not a result of the leader's lack of understanding. All group leaders understand that mission is an essential value of all groups at TAS.

Gregg Allison correctly concludes that mission is an essential characteristic of a true church's nature.[22] If a church does not have mission as part of its ecclesiological DNA, then it is not a church. By extension, all groups at TAS *must* pursue mission to qualify as an authentic Christian community. The value of mission is part of the group's identity, not an aspirational value. The problem with groups that are not pursuing mission is that "mission is commonly relegated to the domain and responsibility of [individual] Christians"[23] and is no longer something that belongs to the entire community. Allison concludes, "This entrenched trend must be reversed and an emphasis on the missional identity of the [community] helps in this regard."[24]

If all group leaders understand that the value of mission is part of their group's identity, then why then do 40 percent of groups have no clear and expressed mission?—Because expressive individualism makes mission optional and non-essential to each person individually and the community collectively. Expressive individualism functions like a virus that threatens the essential values of groups. A group's lack of mission is a symptom of a community that is sick with expressive individualism. If it is not addressed, then eventually a community becomes so insular that the "mission" becomes entirely focused on the people already in the group. It is no surprise then that 89 percent of groups have not multiplied in the past two years.[25] If the non-missional trend within 40 percent of groups at TAS is not reversed, then group leaders will be unable to endure in their leadership.

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[22] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 140.

[23] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 147.

[24] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 147.

[25] *Multiplying* is when an existing TAS group creates a new community within itself as a result of fruitful mission. Similar to the concept of a church planting a new church by sending existing members.

Summary

Concerning this project's purpose to create healthy and compelling group leaders at TAS, the main theoretical issue is expressive individualism. Expressive individualism is the pervasive worldview that allows every individual the power to determine his own identity. Nothing and no one outside of himself is allowed to define his human experience. As a result, according to Andrew Root, outside organizations and institutions can only be affirming servants of a person's human experience. Now "the enemy [is] that which threatens the self because it doesn't line up with [a person's] project of identity shaping and personal meaning making."[26] Expressive individualism in the life of a Christian means the local church and Christian community do not (and cannot) exist to change a person; instead, they exist to entertain and serve a person's faith right where it is.

Therefore, the issues that threaten the health of groups at TAS (and its leaders) do not come from the outside but from within the individual members. Unrealistic expectations, noncommittal behaviors, poor communication, and the absence of mission are the consistent patterns of group members that threaten the entire community. While TAS meaningfully invests and supports its groups leaders with the values described in chapter 2, group leaders themselves must address the individualism and consumerism within their own communities. This is accomplished by creating positive change in the group members' lives. However, change must first be catalyzed in group members' lives before it is personally chosen on their own.[27] Group leaders can achieve this by modeling

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[26] Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 5.

[27] J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2021), 5-6.

two essential practices: effective communication habits and a resolved pursuit of mission.[28]

Group Leaders' Practical Responses to
Individualism and Consumerism

Paul David Tripp writes, "If any leader in any leadership community is going to become spiritually mature so that he can experience the fruitfulness of ministry longevity, he must be blessed by a gospel community."[29] A healthy Christian community is essential for a leader to endure. At TAS, the first goal of a group leader is to create committed group members. To do this, group leaders must know how to properly respond to the individualism and consumerism threatening each group member's commitment. However, TAS leadership must not assume that group leaders know how to create commitment within the group—group leaders must be trained. The following section is an example of the ways in which TAS must invest and support group leaders through *equipping*.[30] To create healthy and compelling group leaders, TAS must equip leaders with effective responses to individualism and consumerism.

Effective Communication
Empowers Participation

In *When the Church Was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman focuses on recapturing the authentic vision of Christian community that expressive individualism is destroying today. He wisely states that church leaders "need to exercise a degree of cultural sophistication" in order to help a person embrace the very different vision of biblical

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[28] Although TAS will help group leaders combat consumerism and individualism in more ways, given the prescribed length of this chapter, these two are being emphasized.

[29] Paul David Tripp, *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 199.

[30] The value of equipping is one of the essential values presented in chap. 2. Equipping is defined "equipping group leaders to become fruitful while staying faithful".

Christian community.[31] In other words, effective group leaders of TAS must understand the context in which they are trying to lead people ruled by expressive individualism.

At TAS, even though group leaders lead a Christian community, they must be aware that the community is mostly a collection of individuals. These individuals have a very low commitment to a corporate identity with TAS and the group. The context in which group leaders serve is marked by radical individualism that "has profoundly compromised the solidarity of our relational commitments to one another."[32] Even though the group is a community, initially many members are only committed to themselves, and since only two hours of a week are set aside for the group's meeting, participation is motivated much more by convenience than commitment.

If no part of Christian identity is bound to the community, then no form of community communication will empower participation. A message sent to the group is irrelevant to an individual who does not identify with the group. It is no surprise, then, that communication sent to the community about meetings, prayer, needs, or service opportunities often times generates almost no response or participation from the individual members. Therefore, group leaders must do the hard work of effectively communicating to individual members. Effective communication is a powerful way to love a group member—it makes them feel seen, known, accepted, and wanted. Receiving love from another person creates safety and trust, which produces loyalty. Christians are most committed to Jesus Christ because they are most loved by him. The same can be true for an individual's commitment to a community.

The need for effective communication is especially true when an uncommitted member is present during the group's meeting. There is no replacement for embodied relationships between people. True Christian community only exists in space and time with

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[31] Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 7.

[32] Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 6.

gathered people. There is no better occasion for a group leader to lead a member toward continued participation than being together in person. But how should a healthy and compelling group leader lead those who choose to not show up? And how should a healthy and compelling group leader lead those who are scattered across Austin throughout the week? The answer to both questions is effective communication. When group members are scattered throughout the week, the battle for gathered community happens on a smartphone.

The smartphone will never be a complete replacement for God's design for embodied relationships between human beings. Flourishing relationships cannot exist on a screen. The same is true for a Christian community. However, Tony Reinke argues, "Every technological innovation is a new theological invitation for renewed biblical contemplation by God's people."[33] Therefore, group leaders should use a smartphone's capabilities for disembodied communication in ways that lead to group members' embodied participation and commitment to the group. To communicate effectively, group leaders must overcome two obstacles.

First, a group leader's communication must compete for the member's attention. When a group is gathered in person, a conversation has one speaker and one or more listeners. On a smartphone, though, every group leader's message is one of many conversations in which a group member is actively participating. Each of those digital conversations contains messages inviting a group member to increased involvement, participation, and engagement to everything other than their Christian community. In light of this competition, a group leader's communication needs to capture the member's attention. This requires the leader to make sure the message breaks the compartmentalization of the group member's religious life from the rest of life.

The previous section explained how one piece of evidence that this

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[33] Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 37.

compartmentalization exists in groups at TAS is the use of a separate smartphone app as a communication channel. The communication channel is a vacuum that does not permeate group members' lives unless they choose to access it. To get group members' attention, leaders need to communicate on channels that the members cannot compartmentalize. Instead of using an app, group leaders should send a text message or make a phone call.

The second communication obstacle of a smartphone that group leaders must overcome is its convenience. Even though a smartphone allows group leaders to conveniently communicate to the entire group at once, this convenience can dramatically reduce the impact of a message's effectiveness because a smartphone ineffectively fosters relationships between people—especially those ruled by expressive individualism. As mentioned, expressive individualism is opposed to a community identity. An individual feels no responsibility to things communicated to an entire group—especially a group that is not serving or entertaining their faith. In these instances, group leaders communicate to individuals who have no group identity. Logically, then, a group message can only fall on many deaf ears. Group leaders who are struggling with member commitment must understand that a message to the entire group is simultaneously a message to *no one*.

Communication to individual members requires group leaders to use their smartphones effectively. The effective use of a smartphone is what Andy Crouch calls putting technology in its proper place: "Technology is in its proper place when it helps us bond with the *real* people we have been given to love. It is out of its proper place when we end up bonding at a distance."[34] In other words, group leaders need to communicate to group members at a distance (digitally) in ways that draw them into the community (physically). This is accomplished by sending messages to individual group members. Individual messages are effective because personal messages demand personal responses.

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[34] Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 20.

One might consider the difference between these two messages: one to an entire group and one to a specific group member. In the first case, when a group leader sends a message to the entire group asking if someone is willing to host the following week's meeting, often there is almost no response. The reason is that each member either assumes someone else will respond or disregards it entirely. A message to a group is a message to no one. In the second case, when a group leader sends a message to a specific person asking the same thing (with the member's name in the message), it demands a response. The group member will either say yes or no, or ignore the message. Even when a message is not responded to, the group leader can personally follow-up and ask again.

The goal of effective communication is not only to receive a response, but to see increased participation in the life of the group. Messages need to cultivate a deeper relationship with the group leader while also encouraging a group member's active participation. In this way, effective communication becomes a discipleship tool for the group leader. A group leader should use three different aspects of effective messages to maximize the power of this discipleship tool: personal invitations, empathic responses, and specific acknowledgments. Each type of message is used to accomplish different goals that can increase a group member's participation.

Personal Invitations

Personal invitations make a group member feel pursued and desired by the group leader. Intentionally pursuing individual group members is a crucial tactic for healthy and compelling group leaders today. According to a 2021 study by the Barna Group, "31 percent of all Americans experience some form of loneliness every day."[35] For those that experience loneliness at least once a week, "45 percent said the feeling

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[35] Barna Group, "31% of U.S. Adults Report Feeling Lonely at Least Some of Each Day," December 8, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/mettes-lonely-americans/.

ranges anywhere from intense to unbearable."[36] Even if expressive individualism blinds a group member from seeing the value of the group, every human is created for relationships with other people and their soul longs for this connection. Helping isolated and potentially lonely group members feel personally invited by the group leader is the first step toward long-term participation in the group.

A powerful example of personal invitation is seen in John 1:43-51 when Philip invites the skeptical and lonely Nathanael to "Come and see" Jesus for himself (v. 46). This invitation eventually leads Nathanael to a personal encounter with Jesus and, in response, his skepticism becomes the confident confession, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (v. 49). As a result of Philip's invitation, Nathanael is now a committed disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of a community.

One could consider the difference in power of the following two messages. Most group leaders will send an inviting message to the entire group saying, "Hey everyone! Really looking forward to seeing you tonight. Remember to bring your Bible and a journal. See you at seven o'clock!" This message means nothing to a group member who was already resolved to not attend. Compare that message to the following message intentionally sent to an individual group member. "Hey Sarah! We missed you last week. The ice-breaker game wasn't the same without you! I am really looking forward to getting to know you more tonight. Would you be able to come a few minutes early tonight to help me plan tonight's intro discussion?" This is a more effective message because it recognizes Sarah's absence, expresses the group leader's desire for a relationship with Sarah, and invites her into meaningful involvement with the group.

Healthy and compelling group leaders send personal invitations to group members for them to experience Christian community for themselves. Group leaders know the power of experiencing more of Jesus Christ and want their group members to

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[36] Barna Group, "31% of U.S. Adults Report Feeling Lonely."

experience Him as well. Therefore, like Philip and Nathaniel, group leaders personally invite uncommitted group members to come and see.

Empathetic Responses

According to Tim Chester, "we build one another up through the words we say. We need to be intentional with our words."[37] His point is precisely what the apostle Paul urges: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such that is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29). Applied today, the talk that comes out of our mouths is also talk that comes from our smartphones. Therefore, the messages group leaders send should seek to build up the group. Empathetic responses achieve this because the words in the message "fit the occasion" for the group member. Fitting the occasion means the message makes a group member feel seen and heard by the group leader.

Empathetic responses are marked by appropriate vulnerability; that is, the response matches the level of vulnerability of the group member's message. Empathy seeks to meet a person where they are. It is essential that group leaders understand that every message sent by a group member contains revelation. Every picture, meme, GIF, question, request, prayer, thought, or comment reveals something about who the person sending the message is. Each message is an opportunity for the group leader to know and see the group member more clearly. The group leader's goal is to make a group member feel rightly understood. The messages from group leaders should not be overly dramatic or trivial. Nor should the messages leave room for ambiguity or misinterpretation. Instead, empathetic responses are clearly and thoughtfully *worded* messages.

"Worded" is emphasized because, sadly, the convenience of the smartphone has taken words and reduced them to symbols through emojis. Words were created by God

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[37] Tim Chester, *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 155.

and given to humanity to love him and other people. In essence, then, words are always relational. Emojis however, are created by humanity and are only informational and impersonal. Emojis simply communicate in an entertaining way that information was received. In addition, emojis are only interpretative—they never communicate an explicit message.

For example, a message asking for a headcount so the host can cook enough food for anyone wanting dinner might receive a dozen different emojis. For one person the "heart" emoji means that he loves the host's cooking but will not be in attendance. For another person, the "thumbs-up" emoji means she will be in attendance and wants dinner. For still another person, the "praise hands" emoji has nothing to do with the food; it simply means he is excited to be with the group later. At best this is confusing and warrants additional follow-up, and at worst it is misinterpreted and leads to wasted time and money for the host.

In instances like this, the cost of using emojis is relatively low. However, the costs are greater when a group member sends a vulnerable message. Remember, every message reveals something about the sender. The group member who consistently asks the group if anyone wants to hangout on the weekend might be extremely lonely and needing friends. The group member who asks for prayer before every job interview might be anxious about paying bills. The group member who sends a verse they read that morning might have spent time in the Word for the first time in weeks. And the group member who sends a message apologizing for missing the last three weeks in a row because of her job might be feeling overwhelmed at work and guilty for missing another week.

Group leaders that do not capitalize on opportunities to build up the group with an empathetic response fail to recognize that on the other end of each message is a real person, with a real story. These messages are not announcements to acknowledge but relationships in which to engage. Even though emojis are entertaining, they cannot love a person. By using well-worded and empathetic responses, group leaders can instill a

community identity between group members. While this new identity is being established, the group leader must then maintain momentum by sending messages with specific acknowledgements.

Specific Acknowledgments

If empathetic responses make group members feel seen and heard, offering specific acknowledgments makes them feel valued. It cannot be overstated how important it is for group leaders to specifically acknowledge the ways group members (especially uncommitted members) positively impact the group. Tripp says these acknowledgments: "Capture the hearts of [the group members] with the gospel and guard their hearts from discouragement and feelings of inability."[38] In a context surrounded by radical individualism, healthy and compelling group leaders capture the hearts of the group members. This task holds an individual to the community from which expressive individualism attempts to pull them away. For it is significantly harder for individuals to leave a group once they know how they positively contribute toward its growth and health.

Almost every group at TAS begins with a group member who remains silent during Bible study, prayer time, and/or sermon discussion. When they eventually speak for the first time and offer a short answer to a discussion question, group leaders must not miss this opportunity. Group leaders must recognize the courage it took to speak, regardless of the quality of their answer. The first response is to offer a simple acknowledgement thanking them for their input. Group leaders must also recognize that for the rest of the evening, or possibly even the following day, they will dwell on their answer, wondering if it was worth sharing or not. This is when a message with specific acknowledgment has great power. A day or two later, a healthy and compelling group leader will send a message explaining the specific impact of their answer. A message that calms their mind and captures their heart is, "Hey! I want to let you know that I keep thinking about your answer

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[38] Tripp, *Lead*, 67.

from last night. I am reminded that the Lord is my shepherd at work just as much as he is at home. My outlook on the projects I'm working on has been different today because of that. Thank you for sharing!"

Offering specific acknowledgments like this is necessary because it protects the group leader from flattery or being ingenuine. Moreover, it has multiple positive impacts to the group. First, it reinforces positive behaviors and contributions from group members. Second, it overcomes feelings of insecurity or inadequacy. And third, it unlocks the potential for greater impact from group members. Consider the potential with the group member in the previous example. If she genuinely served the community after weeks of mustering up the courage to speak, how much more once she feels confident and valued as a group member?

There is no minimum level of impact necessary to warrant a specific acknowledgment. Consistent attendance, radical generosity, welcoming hospitality, joyful presence, and sacrificial service all deserve acknowledgement from group leaders. Furthermore, healthy and compelling group leaders offer specific acknowledgments to all group members—not just those on the margins. In fact, overlooking the positive contributions of the most faithful and consistent group members eventually has a reverse effect. According to Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, "Groups often devalue someone by ignoring them, by rendering [their contributions] invisible—a form of marginalization."[39] Therefore, offering specific acknowledgments is one of the most important skills in a healthy and compelling group leader.[40]

Summary of Effective Communication

Healthy and compelling group leaders effectively communicate to group

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[39] Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2017), 52.

[40] Mac Lake, *Leading Others: Developing the Character and Competency to Lead Others* (Cody, WY: 100 Movements, 2020), 129.

members throughout the week. They recognize that participation with the group is one of many commitments competing for each group member's attention. Therefore, effective communication is a skill group leaders must utilize when the group is scattered throughout the week just as much as when the group is gathered once a week. By overcoming the smartphone's obstacles, group leaders can empower individual participation through personal invitations, empathetic responses, and specific acknowledgments.

Personal invitations recognizes that each group member has a primary autonomous identity and encourages each person's participation with the group. Empathetic responses wins the group members' hearts by making them feel uniquely seen, heard, and loved by the group. And specific acknowledgments maintains and grows group members' contributions by recognizing their individual positive impacts to the group. Collectively, these three types of messages build up the entire group by empowering participation from individual group members. When consistent participation from individual group members slowly occurs over time, eventually a community identity is established. From here, the group leader is able to lead the entire community on mission *together*. But first, group leaders must be resolved in their own pursuit of mission.

Resolved Pursuit of Mission

As mentioned previously, one of the greatest weaknesses across all groups at TAS is the pursuit of mission. Nearly half of all groups have no clear, defined, and expressed mission. And even the groups that do are faced with the greatest obstacle of getting group members to pursue the mission. There are several reasons for this trend. First, expressive individualism hinders Christian mission entirely. Expressive individualism does not allow anyone or anything outside of an individual to define a person's identity or experiences. Thus, mission is directly at odds with expressive individualism since mission seeks to objectively change a person or place as an outside agent.

Second, group leaders who focus too much time, energy, and effort trying to

lead uncommitted group members have no margin to pursue mission. As group leaders use effective communication habits to empower group members' participation, they must also realize that unanimity is not necessary to pursue mission. If group leaders believe that complete buy-in from every group member is necessary, then rarely will mission become a real pursuit in the group. Even Jesus Christ had disciples who were uncommitted (John 6:60-66), but it did not stop his mission to demonstrate and declare of the kingdom of God. Instead, he was fully resolved on his mission regardless of whether the disciples would follow. Therefore, healthy and compelling group leaders must similarly be resolved to pursue mission while they call group members to follow them. The following sections explain how group leaders can accomplish this task by identifying the mission and creating an appetite for mission.

Identify the Mission

Jesus Christ began his ministry with a resolved mission—to establish the kingdom of God. In the Gospel of Mark, immediately after Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). This occurs immediately before Jesus calls the first disciples (Mark 1:16-20). Clearly, Jesus was personally committed to his mission before his disciples began to follow him. Even after Jesus formed a new community of disciples it was still his mission in which they were called to participate.

The Gospel of Matthew presents the moments immediately after Jesus called the first disciples to follow him: "And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of and healing every disease and affliction among the people" (4:23). This verse makes no mention of Jesus's newly formed community of disciples. *He* went throughout all Galilee, and they followed him. Jesus Christ had a resolved pursuit of his mission.

Healthy and compelling TAS group leaders must also have a resolved mission

to pursue. However, a mission pursued is first a mission identified. Broadly speaking, all group leaders have the same mission as TAS: to love God, love the church, love the city, and love the nations. Since group leaders are partners of the church, they all know this mission. The challenge then for group leaders is identifying *their* pursuit of TAS's mission as a group.

It is impossible for group leaders to pursue the entire mission of TAS. Healthy and compelling group leaders must embrace their limitations and accept that it is for all TAS's partners to collectively accomplish the church's mission. Thus, the first step for group leaders is to narrow the scope of TAS's mission. They should pick *one* aspect of the mission to love the church, the city, or the nations for a defined season.[41] Narrowing the scope of a group leader's mission has a clear upside and downside.

The upside of empowering group leaders to narrow the scope of their mission is that it broadens their understanding of mission. In *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace speaks to a common blind spot seen in many group leaders: "Among many religious conservatives the concept of mission and ministry to the world is narrowly restricted to verbal preaching of the gospel. Many seem to feel that *Evangelical* is a noun derived from evangelism."[42] Since TAS is an evangelical church, many group leaders at TAS think evangelism is *the* way to pursue the mission to love God, the church, the city, and the nations. Certainly evangelism is an essential way partners pursue TAS's mission, but it is not the *only* way. Historically, healthy and compelling group leaders have pursued TAS's mission by engaging in foster care or adoption, financially supporting a goer,[43] serving in the kids or student ministry, helping people out of homelessness, serving at low-

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[41] The aspect of TAS's mission to *love God* was intentionally left out because to faithfully love the church, city, or nations, a love for God is the assumed foundation for the rest of the mission.

[42] Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 356.

[43] *Goer* is a long-term missionary sent from TAS to an unreached people group.

income pregnancy centers to fight against abortion, or teaching English to international refugees. Evangelism can (and should) occur in contexts like these as a group focuses on one specific aspect of TAS's mission.

The downside of empowering leaders to narrow the scope of their mission is that many group leaders struggle to identify which aspect of TAS's mission (love God, the church, the city, and the nations) to pursue. Given how broad the mission is, the opportunities are endless; there is always an abundance of missional opportunities and avenues offered for a group to pursue together. However, the abundance creates a "paralysis by analysis" mentality in many group leaders. Like a missional endless buffet, group leaders either do not know where to begin, or they see multiple opportunities they want to pursue but cannot fit them all on their metaphorical plate. In either case, narrowing the scope of the mission becomes a difficult task for many group leaders.

The starting place for group leaders is to consider for which aspect of TAS's mission are they most zealous. The Spirit wants them to lead with zeal (Rom 12:8). Group leaders that have an existing passion for pursuing the kingdom of God should lead out of that passion while calling group members to follow them. Group leaders with a specific zeal must trust that the Spirit wants to make their passion become their group members' passion as well. However, zeal is not a prerequisite for group leadership. Nor should it be expected that every group leader has a zeal for a specific pursuit of TAS's mission.

When group leaders lack a specific passion for mission, the starting place for them is prayer and fasting.[44] The Holy Spirit, sent from the Father and the Son together, has the unique temporal mission of outpouring in the lives of believers (group leaders) for

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[44] I am not saying that group leaders that do have directional zeal for mission do not need prayer and fasting. My point is that prayer and fasting is for the Spirit to give group leader's missional direction when it is absent.

their mission to make disciples.[45] The Spirit's job is to help Christians identify and pursue mission.

As for the role of group members in identifying the group's mission, while it is permissible for group leaders to allow members' input, doing so effectively is essential. Group leaders must remember that they are the leaders of the group. They have been vetted, trained, and affirmed by the TAS leadership to lead the community. If the input from group members causes the pursuit of mission to stop, become unrealistic, or unsustainable, then in reality the group is being led by the members.

Being thoughtful toward the interests, passions, gifts, and resources of group members is important, but it is the group leaders' responsibility to set the direction for the group and lead them toward it. This does not mean that group leaders always and only set the direction for mission independent of the group members. Groups at TAS are not led by dictatorships or democracies. Instead, they are led by Spirit-filled group leaders who are called to thoughtfully set a direction for mission in a way that considers their own interests and the interests of the group members (Phil 2:4). Once the mission is identified, group leaders must be resolved to pursue it regardless of the group members' initial buy-in. This ensures that the value of mission does not stagnate. Moreover, as group leaders pursue the mission, their focus turns toward creating an appetite for mission within the group members.

Creating an Appetite for Mission

The Scriptures make no indication as to what degree Jesus's disciples were originally committed to his mission. Perhaps some of the disciples were more committed to Jesus himself than to his mission. Others may have been more committed to the dream of one day becoming "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). However, the Scriptures are clear that

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[45] Gregg R. Allison, *Primer on the Trinity*. This is an unpublished handout given to DMin students in January 2022 by Allison during the DMin program's historical theology in the local church seminar.

before they ever engaged in Jesus's mission it was his mission before it was theirs. The disciples first watched Jesus pursue his mission (Matt 4:23-9:38). This lengthy section of Scripture focuses entirely on the teachings and healings of Jesus. The only references to the disciples are their interactions with Jesus while he is on mission. Eventually, Jesus invited and instructed them on the mission (Matt 10:1-40). Finally, Jesus sent them on the mission while he continued pursuing it himself (Matt 11:1).

An appetite for mission grows in group members when group leaders invite them to participate in the mission they are already resolved to pursue. However, for the reasons mentioned, expressive individualism does not tolerate any mission that is not serving the individual. Therefore, knowledge of the mission alone will not compel a group member to pursue it. As Psalm 34:8 says, "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!" Personal experience of God leads someone to know that the Lord is in fact good. Similarly with mission, group members need to experience mission for themselves to know its objective value.

At the same time, group leaders must have realistic expectations for creating an appetite for mission. First, group leaders should have an expectation for themselves to continue pursuing the mission regardless of the group members' participation. Second, group leaders should not expect equal participation from all group members; there will always be group members who do not pursue the mission. Thus, group leaders should consistently invite all group members toward mission but focus on creating an appetite in those who are responsive. Third, group leaders should expect the mission to change.

Changing the mission is a result of several reasons: God may reveal a new opportunity that the group leader believes will allow them to more effectively be on mission. Or, circumstances change in group leaders' or members' lives (e.g., a unique season of suffering, growing family, career change, etc.) that justify a change in mission. Expecting change to the mission is why healthy and compelling group leaders establish a clear direction for mission for a defined amount of time. This allows group leaders to

thoughtfully consider whether the current direction should or should not change.

Summary to Resolved Pursuit of Mission

Healthy and compelling group leaders have a resolved pursuit of mission. Like Paul, they "strive to have a clear conscience before God and man" (Acts 24:16). Therefore, their pursuit of mission is not dependent upon anyone other than themselves. Thus, the starting place for the entire group's mission ought to stem from group leaders' already established mission. This reflects the mission Jesus led and instilled in his community of disciples. In turn, group leaders' first task is to identify their own mission. Through prayer, fasting, and a zeal to see the kingdom of God established, the group leaders' mission becomes clear, defined, and expressed in their life. From this point, group leaders create an appetite for mission by inviting group members into small steps of increasing participation in the mission. Finally, as the group pursues the mission together, group leaders need to have realistic expectations for group members and the mission in order to joyfully endure as a group leader.

Conclusion

The greatest threats to creating healthy and compelling group leaders at TAS are the theoretical concepts of individualism and consumerism. The negative impacts of individualism and consumerism in groups must be recognized and addressed by group leaders for them to joyfully endure in their leadership. This chapter thoroughly explained the pervasive problem of individualism and consumerism by arguing how their negative impacts on groups share the same source as transgenderism—expressive individualism. Expressive individualism fundamentally shifted the way humans derive their identity. Historically human identity was shaped by authorities outside an individual. By contrast, expressive individualism is the notion that human identity today is only self-determined.

One of the greatest consequences of expressive individualism is the shift in the role that outside agents formerly had in a person's life. Culture, religion, family systems,

government, education systems, etc., were identity *shaping* agents. Expressive individualism has turned these into identity *serving* agents—they exist to affirm an individual's already determined self. This is the source of the individualism and consumerism within groups at TAS. For many, Christian community, an essential biblical value, no longer is a means in which people mature as disciples of Jesus. Instead, the community entertains a Christian's present faith. This is the precise cause of the uncommitted behavior from group members and the lack of mission that marks many groups at TAS. If these issues are not addressed, existing group leaders will not joyfully endure in their leadership.

Therefore, the two essential skills that group leaders must practice are effective communication habits and a resolved pursuit of mission. Effective communication habits combat individualism by empowering participation from group members, which over time instills a community identity. Moreover, group leaders that have a resolved pursuit of mission combat consumerism by giving group members a mission to participate in that is already pursued and modeled by those leaders. In conclusion, to comprehensively create healthy and compelling group leaders, TAS must meaningfully invest and support group leaders (chapter 2) while group leaders combat individualism and consumerism through effective communication and a resolved pursuit of mission.

CHAPTER 4

PREPARATION, IMPLEMENTATION, AND CONTENT
OVERVIEW OF CREATING HEALTHY AND
COMPELLING GROUP LEADERS

This chapter describes how this project was applied to TAS to create healthy

and compelling group leaders. First, this chapter will explain the preparation of the project.

Before the five values of investment and support presented in chapter 2 were implemented,

thorough preparation was essential. The necessary resources, budget, manpower,

scheduling, and consideration of other ministries had to be thoughtfully considered in the

preparation of the project. This chapter will then explain the project's implementation,

specifically the concrete ways the five biblical values of investment and support were

applied to the ministry of groups at TAS. Finally, this chapter will present a content

overview of the two key artifacts of this project: the "Group Leader Fundamentals"

resource and the Group Leader Renew Conference.

Project Preparation

The size and scope of TAS (as one church with six congregations) means that

changing a ministry is a complicated task. Given the complexity of creating a healthy and

compelling group leader culture across the entire church, the preparation phase of the

project proved to be a pivotal component to the project's success. The following sections

explain the three areas of focus related to the project's preparation: training, resource

assessment, and creating a plan.

Training

Each congregation has full-time staff position dedicated to leading the Groups

ministry of their congregation. These staff persons were responsible for implementing

this project within their respective congregations. Therefore, training the staff was a necessary task in project preparation. Without training, the congregations would be misaligned in the timing, scale, vision, and direction of implementing the project. The first aspect of training was in regard to the fundamentals of the ministry.

Group Leader Fundamentals (Fundamentals) was a resource created in pursuit of this project's purpose to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture. Fundamentals explains the vision, values, direction, rhythms, and expectations of all group leaders of TAS.[1] Thus, the resource functions as the charter document for a group leader—it contains everything a group leader must know and pursue in their leadership. All TAS group leaders are required to be trained with this resource before they begin leading a group. And the person responsible for training group leaders is the Groups ministry staff person at each congregation.

Before Fundamentals was implemented into the ministry, robust training of TAS staff was essential, for if the staff persons responsible for training group leaders did not thoroughly understand Fundamentals, then this project would certainly fail. As the Central Groups Director, I trained all six staff persons by teaching through each section of Fundamentals, followed by an assessment of their knowledge over a three-month period. This training aligned the Groups ministry of all six congregations, which prepared the project to be effectively implemented across the whole church.

The second aspect of training was in regard to the five biblical values of investment and support of a group leader presented in chapter 2 (i.e., relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration). These five values served as the foundation of the entire project. Similar to Fundamentals, if all of the values are not shared and understood across all six congregations, then the project would fail. Therefore, it was essential for each staff person to fully understand and be committed to all five

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[1] See "Content Overview" in this chap. for the complete content of "Group Leader Fundamentals."

values. If the staff were aligned in their knowledge of the values, but misaligned in their convictions, then the project's implementation would be jeopardized.

As the Central Groups Director, I established a shared conviction for all five values by leading the staff through a day-long workshop. During this workshop, I facilitated an inductive Bible study and discussion of the passages presented for each value in chapter 2. The workshop produced a shared zeal for implementing these values across TAS. However, before implementation could occur, an accurate assessment of each congregation's resources was necessary.

Resource Assessment

For this project to succeed, the implementation of the five values of investment and support had to be realistic. An ideal plan for investing and supporting group leaders would be worthless if each TAS congregation did not have the resources to implement and sustain the plan. In fact, to overpromise and underdeliver on group leaders' investment and support would be counterproductive to the project—it would hinder group leaders' ability to joyfully endure in their leadership and break their trust with TAS's leadership. Thankfully, an accurate assessment of each congregation's resources empowered the preparation of a realistic plan to implement across TAS.

People were the first resource considered for creating a realistic plan to implement the five values of group leader investment and support. The size and scope of the project required more than a single staff person at each congregation. Additional lay leaders became a necessary resource to make a realistic, sustainable plan. Thus, TAS equipped the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12) by ordaining a new class of deacons that were trained to specifically serve in the Groups ministry of TAS.

Even though these deacons served in a lay capacity, being in an ordained office meant they could be held to a higher degree of accountability. Their office and authority in TAS increased the confidence that the promises made to group leaders for their investment and support would be pursued. Once the deacons were ordained, I trained them on the

Fundamentals resource and the workshop of the five values of investment and support in the same way I did for TAS staff. At this point, every person responsible for implementing and executing a plan for creating healthy and compelling group leaders was trained. After the training phase, two additional and necessary resources were assessed: environments and budget.

Creating healthy and compelling group leaders happens in time and space. Therefore, environments were a crucial factor in preparation of this project. Small-sized, mid-sized, and large-sized events and opportunities would be necessary environments to implement all five values across TAS. TAS owns four church buildings in central, north, northwest, and west Austin. Each building can be accessed by all staff of TAS, regardless of their affiliated congregation (i.e., the South congregation groups staff person can use the Northwest congregation's building). Thus, space for mid-sized and large-sized gatherings were accounted for. Even though these buildings could be used for small-sized events in large spaces, smaller spaces would create a more hospitable place for connection between group leaders. Thankfully, the addition of the deacons solved this problem because their homes could also be used for small- and mid-sized gatherings. Furthermore, their homes created more geographic opportunities to strategically gather group leaders that lived near each other. Therefore, TAS now has more realistic opportunities for events and gatherings at its disposal. However, with more opportunities comes additional expenses. The final resource that required consideration was the budget.

TAS operates on a budget that is approved by the partners on an annual basis. First, the elders and staff responsible for budget allocation and oversight create the proposed budget. The proposal includes the allocated budget for each congregation and their respective ministries' operations. This budget is sent to the partners and voted on for approval. Once the budget is approved, it is finalized and all requests for additional finances during the year require review and approval from a committee of elders. Preparation of this project began after the approved fiscal year's budget. As a result, all

six Groups ministry staff were allocated a budget that did not include the scope of this project's investment and support of group leaders.

Consequently, at this point in the project's preparation, it was determined that more money was needed to implement a plan to create healthy and compelling group leaders. I created and submitted a request for additional funds on behalf of all six congregations to move forward with implementing a plan to accomplish the project's purpose. The request was granted, therefore TAS staff and deacons responsible for implementing the project entered the final phase of preparation—creating the plan for group leaders' investment and support.

Creating the Plan

The plan to create healthy and compelling group leaders at TAS focused on two factors. First, the creation of an annual calendar of events, trainings, and other opportunities that centered on one or more of the five values of biblical investment and support presented in chapter 2. All the events needed to be properly scheduled so that group leaders always had an upcoming moment that they anticipated and desired throughout the year. This meant that the events needed to be scheduled close enough together so that group leaders were consistently engaged, even if a they are unable to attend one. At the same time, the events needed to be scheduled far enough apart so that group leaders prioritize the next one, even if they attended the previous event. The plan sought to give group leaders the most meaningful level of investment and support without being a burden.

The second factor considered for the plan was assurance that the events centered on each of the five values in a variety of environments. Offering small-sized, mid-sized, and large-sized environments throughout the year communicated to group leaders the thoughtfulness and intentionality behind each event. This project argues that the values of biblical investment and support presented in the New Testament are universal and can be applied in any size environment. TAS's application of the values do not have to default to large-scale environments simply because it is a mega-church. Large-sized environments

are often effective for breadth of investment while small-sized environments are often effective for depth of investment. Therefore, the project's plan sought to create small-sized, mid-sized, and large-sized environments to maximize each value's impact on creating healthy and compelling group leaders.

As these factors were considered, creating the plan required the acceptance of various limitations, the first of which were the limitations to the environments and the budget. The second limitation was the deacons' bandwidth. As lay leaders, their time and energy toward the implementation and execution of the plan was essential to a realistic plan. Thus, the plan was created with the input and affirmation of the deacons so that they could be fairly held accountable to the plan's implementation.

The final consideration was the plan's conflict with other ministries. As a large and complex organization and church, TAS constantly has upcoming events and programs from any number of congregations and ministries. Thus, previously scheduled events and programs from other ministries were considered to maximize group leaders' potential participation in the plan for their investment and support. Once this was accomplished, preparation of the project was complete.

Project Implementation

The project's implementation consisted of two parts—announcement and execution. To achieve the project's purpose of creating a healthy and compelling group leader culture, the announcement of the changes to group leaders' investment and support was vital. The culture of TAS would not change if segments of group leaders were left unaware. Thus, I announced the plan in fifteen meetings over a three-week period. The large number of meetings ensured that all group leaders received the news about the shift in the ministry. Fifteen meetings accommodated to group leaders' schedules and created more intimate environments for the important announcement. Each of the meetings had the same three objectives.

The first objective was to acknowledge, appreciate, and celebrate the group leaders' for their significant and essential role within TAS. Group leaders were celebrated for the often-times unseen, yet essential, ways they contribute to the overall health of TAS. Since group leaders' ministry is so important, they need meaningful investment and support. This objective created a clear transition to announce and introduce the changes in TAS's investment and support of group leaders.

The second objective was to deploy the three resources created to accomplish the project's first goal—Group Leader Fundamentals, Group Leader Practicals ("Practicals"), and Group Launch Guide ("Launch Guide"). The deployment of these resources oriented all group leaders around a united vision, direction, and strategy for the ministry. The content of these resources was given to TAS's graphic designers to create three visually stunning printed resources. The resources were distributed and explained during the meetings.

The third objective was to announce the plan for their on-going investment and support throughout the year. Included in the announcement was the introduction of the newly ordained deacons of the ministry. Announcing the plan established a shared excitement among group leaders for the project's implementation. The announcement of the plan alone helped group leaders joyfully endure in their leadership because it provided something to look forward to.

Once the plan was announced, the second part of the project's implementation began: execution. The following section presents the project's implementation by explaining how the five values of biblical investment and support of a group leader were applied in TAS.

Relationships

The value of relationships was implemented by establishing relationships between group leaders and TAS in two ways. First, relationships were established between group leaders and their peers at their congregation. Second, relationships were

established between group leaders and the TAS leadership (i.e., staff, deacons, elders). This was primarily accomplished through quarterly prayer messages and deacon-led dinners with group leaders.

The newly ordained deacons were the primary vehicle for establishing relationships with group leaders. After the deacons were introduced to group leaders, each was assigned fifteen to twenty group leaders to personally e-mail. In the message, the deacons introduced themselves, expressed thankfulness for the group leader's ministry, and asked for specific ways to pray for them. In addition to the e-mails, each quarter the deacons personally invited their assigned group leaders to a group dinner. The dinners were paid for by TAS as a way to bless the group leaders and contained no formal training. The goal of these dinners was simply to establish relationships through fellowship between ten to fifteen group leaders at a time.

The deacons received a new list of group leaders each quarter and were assigned with the same two tasks. Thus, by the end of the year every group leader was intentionally prayed for and invited to dinner by four unique deacons. As relationships between the deacons and group leaders were established, group leaders began to initiate with them. Deacons would be invited to coffee and meals to discuss situations in their group. Strategically, the deacons used these invitations as opportunities to continue forming peer relationships between other group leaders by asking if other group leaders could be invited to collaborate together. These follow-up meetings, in addition to the prayer messages and deacon dinners, established relationships between group leaders, making a mega-church feel smaller.

Equipping

The value of equipping was implemented by training group leaders to become more fruitful in their leadership while staying faithful in their discipleship. Group leaders were equipped through resources, opportunities, and training. The Fundamentals, Practicals, and Launch Guide were the primary resources used to train the group leaders.

In Fundamentals, group leaders were equipped with the vision, values, and strategy needed to effectively lead.

Practicals was created to provide group leaders with guidance in specific situations. The resource consisted of a one- to two-page response to the twenty most common situations and scenarios that group leaders of TAS experience. Each scenario was titled in the form of a question that leaders often ask for guidance in. For example— "How do I respond to conflict between group members?" and "How do I establish regular rhythms of confession and repentance in my group?" The one- to two-page response offers relevant biblical truths, general wisdom, and practical skills to apply to the situation.

The Launch Guide was a six-week study created for group leaders to establish agreed upon rhythms to pursue as a community. The resource effectively equips group leaders to teach the ministry's values of family, discipleship, and mission. With each of those values, facilitated questions guide the entire community to tangibly pursue them together. The primary audience for the Launch Guide was new group leaders. However, even the most tenured group leaders found it to be a helpful resource when the group needed to reset its vision and direction.

In regard to equipping group leaders through opportunities, the main tactic was the creation of a semester "menu." The menu was a digital newsletter sent at the beginning of each semester highlighting all the opportunities group leaders could leverage for their group. It included dates for classes and events, sign-up information for missional opportunities, and links to published resources and curriculum. The menu was effective because it helped group leaders quickly identify opportunities in which the group could participate together throughout the semester.

Finally, group leaders were equipped through various training environments. A class called "Leading Others" spent six weeks teaching group leaders a different aspect of effective leadership. One of the weeks focused on the effective communication habits presented in chapter 3. Another training environment was a seminar exclusively for group

leaders on gospel fluency. An outside speaker was brought in to remind group leaders of the good news of the gospel (to nurture their own faith) and its power for their leadership in the group. The last training environment was four felt-need breakout sessions during the Group Leader Renew Conference.[2] The focus of these sessions was to provide training for group leaders in an area that they desired for their personal discipleship and leadership.

Faith-Nurturing

The value of faith-nurturing was implemented by creating moments throughout the year to help grow group leaders' faith sit at the feet of Jesus. These moments existed to cultivate a deeper love for God in ways that have nothing to do with their leadership in TAS. The Group Leader Renew Conference contained a large emphasis on the value of faith-nurturing. The word "renew" was chosen for the conference because of TAS's desire to help group leaders renew their love and worship of the triune God. Since the following section, "Content Overview," includes a detailed description of the conference, the specific ways the value of faith-nurturing were implemented are explained in that section.[3]

Blessing

The value of blessing was implemented into TAS by making leadership enjoyable and the weight of ministry lighter for group leaders. This primarily consisted of removing obstacles that would prevent group leaders from receiving investment and support. All events and gatherings were intentionally scheduled on evenings that did not conflict with the group leaders' weekly meeting. The locations of events and gatherings were chosen based on the closest deacon's home or TAS church building for the group leaders' convenience. All events and gatherings that occurred during a mealtime were

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[2] See p. 116.

[3] See p. 114.

paid for by TAS. In addition, childcare was offered and paid for by TAS for the entirety of the two-day Group Leader Renew Conference so that all group leaders with children could attend. Finally, group leaders were given small gifts at the end of each semester to bless them for their leadership.

Celebration

The value of celebration was implemented into TAS by creating moments for the entire church to specifically celebrate group leaders. The most powerful moment occurred in response to a preached sermon on the importance of Christian community. After the preacher made his final point regarding the responsibility of all Christians to intentionally pursue community, he asked anyone in the congregation who currently leads a group to stand up. He then acknowledged the significant role group leaders have and asked the entire congregation to audibly honor the group leaders and thank God with cheerfulness for their ministry. Another moment of celebration occurred during the Group Leader Renew Conference when group leaders were celebrated by the elders of TAS—which the following section will explain in detail.

Implementation Summary

The implementation of the project centered on creating consistent events and gatherings (in various sizes) that provided group leaders with one or more of the biblical values of investment and support. The aim was to ensure that, at any point in the year, group leaders had an upcoming event, moment, or experience to anticipate in order to help them joyfully endure in their leadership. Given the prescribed length of this chapter, only the key events for each value were explained. The Group Leader Renew Conference was created to be an annual event in which all TAS group leaders receive all five values in the most impactful way possible. The following section explains the events of the conference in more detail.

<center>**Content Overview**</center>

The implementation of the project required a significant amount of content creation. However, this section only focuses on the two resources that directly relate to the specific goals of the project—Group Leader Fundamentals (Fundamentals) and Group Leader Renew Conference (Renew). An overview of Fundamentals is explained first because of its foundational role for group leaders.[4] It is followed by a detailed overview of Renew.

<center>**Group Leader Fundamentals**</center>

Groups at TAS exist because of our faith in Jesus Christ. First John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Fellowship with Christians is not a product of faith, but an evidence of faith. A person walking in the light is actively in Christian fellowship. This is one reason why a core conviction of TAS is to be committed to covenant community. This conviction is expressed in a wide variety of groups of Christians in community with one another. Groups at TAS matter because faithfulness to Jesus matters.

Fundamentals provides group leaders with the common vision, values, and direction for all TAS groups so that together the church may walk in the light as one united body of believers.

A Vision and Theology for Groups

TAS's mission—to love God, love the church, love the city, and love the nations—encapsulates the entire scope of our identity.[5] It is precisely through this

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[4] Given the prescribed length of this chap., the overview of "Group Leader Fundamentals" only presents a consolidated version of the resource.

[5] All uses of first-person plural pronouns (i.e., "we," "us," "our") in this section are referring to the partners of TAS because this overview is presenting the content as it is presented to group leaders.

mission to love God, the church, the city, and the nations that TAS fully exists for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ.

Groups are a natural outworking of the kind of church TAS wants to be and the mission TAS wants to pursue, and faithfulness to Jesus requires fellowship with other believers (1 John 1:7). This means that TAS's identity and mission must be expressed through various communities of believers in fellowship with one another. TAS Groups are defined as people engaged in consistent and intentional Christian friendships who seek to love God, the church, the city, and the nations together.

TAS is one large church with multiple congregations. As a large church, we must have a place where the body of Christ is cared for and pastored, where the "one anothers" of Scripture are lived out, and where the church can exercise oversight and authority consistent with the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus Himself created groups within a larger body of people in order to provide more effective care and oversight of the individuals within in the groups:

> Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. (Mark 6:39-42)

Practically, groups at TAS create the structure in which the elders, deacons, and staff can effectively provide the oversight, care, and leadership needed for the larger body. In addition, groups create proximity to other individuals who can care for one another, support one another, and practically meet the needs that arise.

Definition and Values of Groups of TAS

A group at TAS is defined as people engaged in consistent and intentional Christian friendships who seek to love God, the church, the city, and the nations together. While distinctions exist across congregations and ministries of TAS, all groups share the same vision and values. Since the contexts of groups vary, the strategies guiding groups are broad and relevant enough to empower all groups to thrive in their particular contexts.

Group leaders are responsible for implementing rhythms and practices that appropriately reflect the values of the ministry. The New Testament presents three clear values that drive any faithful and fruitful Christian community: family, discipleship, and mission. Although the practical strategies for groups can be fluid across ministries, all groups at TAS build their practices on these three biblical values.

The value of family is to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Much like a healthy family, members of a group seek to love one another well. Members of healthy groups know far more than just facts about one another—they know one another's motivations, fears, dreams, challenges, and celebrations. Healthy groups know how to share life together, laugh together, mourn together, rejoice together, and suffer together (1 Thess 2:8; Rom 12:15; Gal 6:2; Col 3:13). Faith in Christ brought believers of TAS into a relationship with God and into a relationship with one another. At one time the partners of TAS were strangers, but now we are the family of God—brothers and sisters in Christ (Eph 2:19). As brothers and sisters, we come together to form clearly defined groups of committed believers who relate to one another like family (Gal 6:10; Eph 5:1-2).

The value of discipleship is to know, delight in, and obey God together. God is a person, and he wants us to know Him. Discipleship means that groups are centered on God's Word as they grow in their knowledge of who God is (John 10:27; Matt 11:27). The purpose of humanity is to worship and delight in God (Isa 43:7). A growing knowledge of God produces a growing love and delight in who he is and what he has done (Phil 1:8-9). Furthermore, love for God is expressed by faith-driven obedience to Jesus (John 14:15). The Christian life should be marked by a progressive pattern of obedience to God's Word, evidenced by repentance of sin and faith in Christ (Acts 20:21; 1 John 3:1-10). Finally, discipleship is always meant to be pursued in a community. As such, healthy groups create consistent space for group members to encourage obedience, confess sin, and build up one another's faith (Heb 3:13; Jas 5:16; Rom 1:12).

The value of mission is to seek the kingdom of God together. The first message of Jesus's ministry was about the kingdom of God—the new kingdom of which Jesus Himself would forever be king (Mark 1:15). As his people, Jesus commands us to seek the kingdom of God here on earth (Matt 6:33). In general, we seek the kingdom of God in two ways: by making disciples through evangelism and discipleship, and by reflecting the kingdom's nature through mercy, justice, and righteousness in the church, city, and nations.

Therefore, groups pursue the biblical value of mission by advancing the kingdom of God through loving God, the church, the city, or the nations for a defined season. No one group can realistically pursue the entire mission of TAS, but when each group emphasizes an area in which to seek the kingdom of God, then collectively, the entire church pursues the full mission of God as one, united body of believers.

Each group at TAS, regardless of type, congregation, or ministry, is centered around these three biblical values—family, discipleship, and mission. Because these values may be expressed in many different ways, it is important for the congregation or ministry staff to help you consider the strategies, practices, and rhythms that are most appropriate and effective for your group's context.[6]

Establish Rhythms to Pursue Family,
Discipleship, and Mission

One of the main responsibilities of any group leader at TAS is to ensure that their group is pursuing rhythms that appropriately reflect the values of family, discipleship, and mission. TAS is one church consisting of multiple congregations and various ministries. While each congregation and ministry is united by a common identity, mission, and values, there are differences between demographics and life stages. Various types of groups exist within the church to provide the necessary structure and opportunities for consistent and intentional Christian friendships for those who seek to love God, the church,

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[6] All uses of second-person pronouns are referring to the intended reader of the resource, group leaders of TAS since this overview is presenting the content as it is presented to group leaders.

the city, and the nations together.

However, the differences between congregations and ministries make it challenging to set universal practices for all TAS groups. Therefore, groups are centered around shared values instead of shared practices. For example, how a group made up of families with young children at the North Congregation pursues the value of family should look different from how a group in the college ministry pursues the value of family, because the circumstances and life stages of the people within each group are different. Even though how these two groups pursue the values of family, discipleship, and mission will look different, what is common between them is that each group is pursuing those values.

Centering groups around shared values rather than shared practices empowers group leaders to lead in power of the Holy Spirit and the unique spiritual gifts he has given to each leader. Romans 12:6-8 says,

> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Whether a group leader has the spiritual gift of leadership or is simply a leader with spiritual gifts, we desire for all leaders to lead with passion and zeal. Shared values enable group leaders to dream, plan, and establish rhythms with excitement, regardless of the differences in demographics and life stages across congregations and ministries. This does not mean that group leaders have full autonomy over their groups. It is the responsibility of the elders, deacons, and staff to ensure that each group's rhythms are an appropriate reflection of the values of family, discipleship, and mission. As such, group leaders are expected to lead in accordance with the oversight, training, and leadership of their respective elders, deacons, and congregation or ministry staff (see later section on "Group Leader Expectations").

The outcome of the partnership between group leaders and their congregation

or ministry elders, deacons, and staff is the beautiful picture Paul speaks of in Ephesians:

> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (4:11-16)

When group leaders across all congregations and ministries are equipped by the elders, deacons, and staff, and they lead in the power of the Holy Spirit with their spiritual gifts, then each part of the body is working properly and TAS matures, grows, and builds itself up in love.

As you establish your group's rhythms, consider setting timeframes and desired goals for each rhythm. A helpful question to answer for each rhythm is, "How long should we pursue this rhythm, and what do we want to see God produce from it?" Having timeframes and desired goals accomplishes three things. First, it provides a clear sense of direction for where the group is headed for a specific amount of time. Second, it provides opportunities to celebrate together when you see tangible fruit. Third, it provides a clear point in time to assess if any of your rhythms or goals need adjustments.

It is important to remember that although goals are helpful, success is defined by faithfulness. Be sure to celebrate moments of the group's (and individuals') faithfulness while you work toward desired goals together.

Assess and Adjust Rhythms as Needed

An important responsibility of group leaders is to periodically assess the rhythms of their group to determine whether adjustments should be made. Because all TAS groups are centered on shared values, group leaders are able to adjust rhythms if circumstances within the group change. For example, if a group adds new members, a group member enters a unique season of suffering, or a pandemic occurs, the group can

simply adjust its rhythms to more effectively pursue family, discipleship, and mission in light of the new circumstances.

The ability to adjust the group's rhythms also protects group leaders from discouragement if a particular rhythm is not resonating with the group. If one of the rhythms is not working, this is not an indictment on the leader; it is simply an opportunity to adjust the rhythm(s). Pursuing shared values allows for countless, creative ways for a group to pursue family, discipleship, and mission.

In addition to adjusting rhythms when there is an issue, it is important for group leaders to set timeframes and desired goals for rhythms so that there is a defined point in time for the group leader to review and assess whether that rhythm is effectively pursuing the value of family, discipleship, or mission. If things are going well, then the leader can set a new timeframe and goals and continue with that rhythm. If not, then the group leader should change the rhythm, cast the vision to the group, and set a new timeframe and goals.

Lastly, there will be times when the elders, deacons, and congregation or ministry staff will assess groups through group plans and impact reports. This kind of assessment helps leaders understand the overall health of all groups and informs them of needs in the areas of oversight, care, or equipping.

Care and Oversight of Group Members

Group leaders are also tasked with the care and oversight of the individuals in their group. The most frequent image used to describe the role of a leader in the Bible is that of a shepherd. In addition, God refers to his people as his sheep, his flock.

In the Old Testament, God assigns the elders of Israel to be the shepherds of the people. However, they consistently fail to care for the people in the way God desires. In response, God makes a beautiful promise to send shepherds who would truly care for his people: "I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord" (Jer 23:4). Elders, deacons, congregation and ministry staff, and group leaders are one answer to this promise.

In the New Testament, the word "shepherd" is even used as a verb—an action. Shepherding is a role and a responsibility: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:2-3). Even though this text is referring explicitly to the role of elders in the church, group leaders are entrusted with real authority to lead the people in their group. And with that authority comes the responsibility to likewise shepherd the flock of God. To effectively care for the people in their groups, group leaders should know, feed, lead, and protect the flock.

Know the Sheep

Good shepherds know their sheep like Jesus knows his (John 10:27). For group leaders, the first aspect to being a good shepherd is to know their sheep—the members of the group.[7] This involves knowing about them and knowing them personally in a growing relationship. Here are some things to think through for the individuals you lead:

Know their past. Everyone has a story, so get to know your group members' testimonies. We all have our own unique experiences and circumstances that help shape who we are, how we think, and how we live. In fact, one of the most powerful ways to connect with one another is by sharing stories.

Know their present. Get to know your group members' hopes, fears, and needs. The things we hope for and the things that we fear provide windows into our heads and hearts related to what we value and believe about God.

Be present. There is no substitute for being present with your group—your sheep—and we cannot disregard the importance of simple togetherness. A good shepherd must practice the discipline of being present in body and mind with their people. Never is

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[7] This section is a continuation of an existing TAS framework in created by TAS's pastor, Todd Engstrom. See Todd R. Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model for Integrated Discipleship in an American Context" (DEdMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

this truer than in seasons of suffering. During these times, being physically present is usually more important than having the right words to say. A good shepherd celebrates with those who celebrate and mourns with those who mourn.

Feed the Sheep

Feeding the sheep is one way group leaders demonstrate their love for Jesus.[8] Jesus makes a connection between love for Him and responsibility to care for his people:

> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17).

Just like sheep need physical food, God's sheep need spiritual food. Group leaders must teach and remind the people in the group of the good news of Jesus so that they grow in maturity. One mark of a mature believer is the ability to self-feed, which is when a person's ability to grow in knowledge and love for Christ is not fully contingent on someone else leading them in devotion to and study of Scripture. This idea of self-feeding is an early step of sanctification that must be taught and demonstrated to group members to equip them for future seasons of life. A person will continue to grow in maturity as they submit their lives to Scripture. Group leaders can help by not only teaching group members Scripture, but also helping them learn from Scripture on their own. Jesus desires to have obedient disciples, not just consumers of teaching.

Groups should read the Word of God together and discuss the Word as a regular rhythm of the group. Encourage your group to talk together about not only what God is speaking in his Word, but also how to obey and enjoy what He commands. Additionally, encourage group members with supplemental resources like books, sermons, articles, etc.

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[8] This section is a continuation of an existing framework by TAS's pastor, Todd Engstrom. See Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model for Integrated Discipleship."

Be creative, bearing in mind the specific ways the group members are wired, and regularly ask about what people have been learning. A good leader will make sure the group is feeding on good food.

Lead the Sheep

The beginning of this section focused on the responsibility of the group leader to implement rhythms that reflect the values of family, discipleship, and mission. While the implementation and assessment of the group rhythms is the main way a group leader leads, it is important to understand how the group leader's personal life and faithful pursuit of following Jesus is another aspect of leadership.

Shepherds lead, and the sheep follow.[9] Group leaders should lead not only by implementing the group's rhythms, but also by setting a personal example of what it looks like to follow Jesus. This is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 11:1: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." In other words, group leaders should live their lives in a way that honors God and could be replicated by the others in the group. This responsibility carries with it the necessity of a pure and holy life which should be emulated by the flock.

Protect the Sheep

Threats to the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of the group members are real and present.[10] The Bible is not silent in regard to these threats and even speaks directly to the role of the shepherd to protect the flock:

> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that

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[9] This section is a continuation of an existing framework by TAS's pastor, Todd Engstrom. See Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model for Integrated Discipleship."

[10] This section is a continuation of an existing framework by TAS's pastor, Todd Engstrom. See Engstrom, "Missional Community as a Model for Integrated Discipleship."

for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:28-31).

We have a real enemy who—like a wolf—desires to devour God's sheep and draw them away from the faith. Notice how this passage refers to wolves who "will come in among you" and will arise "from among your own selves." This means that the attacks on God's people can come from outside of the group, and sadly, even from someone who is a part of the group. Group leaders have a responsibility to recognize such dangers and protect the flock. They must speak out against that which is misleading. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, thus, we too must be willing to sacrifice our own rights for the sake of the good of others. This means we must be willing to train ourselves to distinguish good from evil.

Practically, group leaders are the first line of defense in protecting the sheep, which requires compassion, tremendous courage, and a strong connection with church leadership. Although group leaders are entrusted with real authority to lead, the ultimate responsibility falls on the elders of the church. In the event that a group leader perceives a real threat within the group, leadership—an elder, deacon, or congregation or ministry staff member—should be contacted.

Group Leader Expectations

Group leaders are entrusted with real authority to lead the people within their group. At the same time, elders are responsible for the oversight of the entire church, including all groups at TAS. The following expectations are in place to provide group leaders with clear boundaries for where their leadership should and should not be expressed.

The expectations of group leaders are not meant to restrict their leadership. Instead, they are meant to empower leadership. These expectations are necessary for the church because they keep the oversight of groups under the authority of the elders while at the same time they protect group leaders from having to lead in ways in which they are not expected or called. To use the metaphor of shepherding, the following expectations are

like fence posts that surround the responsibilities of group leaders. When group leaders stay within the boundaries of the expectations, there is freedom to lead and use their spiritual gifts knowing that they fall under the authority of their shepherds: the elders, deacons, and congregation or ministry staff.

Lead under the Authority of the Elders
of The Austin Stone

Just as the character qualification to be "dignified" serves as the overarching quality that encapsulates all the other group leader qualifications, leading under the authority of the elders of TAS is the overarching expectation that encapsulates group leader expectations.

The office of elder is a weighty role. As the leaders in charge of oversight, vision, and direction for the entire church, their decisions can have a significant impact, positively or negatively. This authority entrusted to the elders by God is why they will be judged with greater strictness (Jas 3:1). Since groups at TAS—and those who lead groups—fall under the oversight of the elders, it is the elders who will be held accountable by God for how the people within them are led. Group leaders should understand the weight of their role as leaders in the church and the amount of trust the elders genuinely have in them.

In light of this trust given to group leaders, the Bible speaks to how group leaders should relate to the elders, deacons, and staff: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17). First Thessalonians says, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thess 5:12-13).

There is a beautiful relationship between the elders, deacons, and staff with the group leaders of TAS. As those responsible for the oversight of the entire church, the

elders, deacons, and staff entrust group leaders to lead the people in their groups. In response, group leaders should lead under the authority of the elders, deacons, and staff of TAS.

Partner with The Austin Stone

Partners are the men and women who have formally committed to TAS as covenant members of the church. Partners represent and embody the theology and convictions of TAS. Therefore, to lead, all group leaders must be partners of the church. It is expected that group leaders who are not partners become one within six months of leading a group.

**Teach in Accordance with the
Affirmation of Faith**

As an extension of partnership, which requires that partners agree and affirm the Affirmation of Faith of TAS, group leaders are expected to not teach anything contrary to it.

**Participate and Communicate with
Elders, Deacons, and Staff**

Each group is part of a larger network of other groups of the same type. Since the elders, deacons, and congregation and ministry staff are responsible for the training, equipping, and care of all groups, group leaders are expected to attend and participate in relevant group trainings, gatherings, assessments, and events. In addition, to maintain health and clarity with the group's congregation or ministry, proactive and reactive communication is expected of group leaders toward the elders, deacons, and staff.

Elder Involvement

Group leaders are also expected to involve the elders, deacons, and congregation or ministry staff if specific situations arise within the group. These are situations that

contain a high degree of complexity and sensitivity. The elders are particularly called, qualified, and gifted to handle these types of situations.

Generally, group leaders are encouraged to ask their congregation or ministry leadership when there may be doubt about how to navigate a situation within the group. Err on the side of over-sharing versus under-sharing.

Summary

The purpose of Fundamentals is to help group leaders robustly understand the common vision, values, and direction for all groups at TAS so that the church walks in the light as one united body of believers. This resource is meant to empower the leadership of group leaders, not replace it. Where there are any questions about specific applications or practices of this resource, one should reach out to the group's congregation or ministry elders, deacons, and staff. They are honored and eager to help implement the information found here into the life of the group. In addition, the Group Leader Practicals resource contains a helpful FAQ.

Group leaders are an important and indispensable part of TAS. Their leadership, experiences, spiritual gifts, and passions enable TAS to be a people in pursuit of the mission to love God, the church, the city, and the nations, every day of the week.

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Group Leader Renew Conference

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The five values of biblical investment and support presented in chapter 2 can be applied in any ministry context. A rural church plant and a metropolitan mega-church can both invest and support their lay leaders through relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. The intentions behind the Group Leader Renew Conference ("Renew") were to create an environment in which all TAS group leaders could receive all five values in a meaningful way together. Given the number of group leaders, a conference-style event was the strategic way to accomplish the task. The following section presents the powerful ways group leaders experienced all five values of

biblical investment and support through Renew.

Pre-Conference Overview

Since the goal of Renew was to provide all group leaders of TAS with an experience centered on all five values of investment and support, one essential task was to remove obstacles that would prevent their attendance. One of the greatest obstacles within TAS is childcare. To ensure that all group leaders parenting children could participate, childcare was provided and paid for by TAS for both days of the conference. This required a significant churchwide collaboration between all six congregations to coordinate volunteers, safety protocols, and curriculum necessary to bless group leaders in this way. The time, energy, and expenses were a worthy cost since it dramatically impacted the overall registration numbers of Renew.

Friday Overview

The first day of Renew was from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Early that morning, an e-mailed letter from TAS's preaching pastor was sent to all registrants. The purpose of the letter was to remind group leaders of how much they are loved by God and by the TAS elders. Group leaders are loved not for what they do (lead a group) but for who they are—God's children and saints of TAS. The letter undoubtedly prepared the hearts of many group leaders for Renew later that evening.

Upon arrival, group leaders checked in and received a name tag, journal, pens, and monogrammed water bottle with the conference logo. Snacks and drinks were offered in the foyer of the building and as the group leaders entered the auditorium, they were invited to sit anywhere they wanted. As they settled into their seats, music played and on the screen was a rolling slideshow containing prayers for the group leaders written by TAS's staff.

The conference began with a welcome and introduction by me, the Central Groups Director, followed by two worship songs. Then, one of TAS's most respected and

loved pastors and preachers, Halim Suh, addressed the group leaders. This particular pastor is known by the TAS partners for his theological precision and pointed exposition. However, in this situation he shared a personal and intimate testimony describing the power and role his community leaders have had on his life when he was a new believer, a new husband, a new father, and all the moments up to the present as a pastor in his mid-forties.

Following Suh was TAS's director of counseling and soul care, Andrew Dealey. Instead of teaching the group leaders, Dealey spent thirty minutes reminding them of their identity as image-bearers redeemed by Christ by reading Scripture over them. Using only God's Word, he reminded them of who they were created to be, of their brokenness, of their redemption, and of their future restoration. Then, time and space were given to the group leaders to bring themselves into God's presence and rest in the truth of the gospel. Two final worship songs concluded this section of Renew.

After worship, group leaders broke for dinner. They sat at tables with six to eight others for intentional conversation and reflection.[11] As they ate, lay elders of all six congregations walked by every single table and expressed their thankfulness for the group leaders—a moment group leaders had never experienced before. Then, group leaders were invited back into the auditorium for a closing moment of celebration all together.

TAS's North Congregation pastor, Will Bostian, powerfully celebrated various segments of group leaders based on the length of their tenure in leadership.[12] This pattern was repeated for each additional year of leadership until it concluded with four group members who had been leading at TAS for the *entirety* of TAS's existence. An eruption of celebration and tears of thankfulness covered these saints in the honor that was due to

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[11] Multiple food options were offered as a way to bless the group leaders.

[12] For example, he asked the group leaders that had led for less than one year to stand up. While standing, he celebrated them for what their leadership uniquely represents in the life of TAS. Once finished, all TAS staff, elders, and fellow group leaders collectively celebrated them with cheers, claps, and shouts.

them.

The moment of celebration concluded Friday's session of Renew. As the group leaders dismissed, the atmosphere was contagious. Their shared experience of all five values (in just a few hours) already had a profound impact on each group member present, which created an appetite for the following day's session of continued investment and support.

Saturday Overview

Saturday's session was from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. With eager anticipation of the day's events, group leaders showed up early and on-time (typically a rare occurrence for TAS). The day began with a welcome and overview of the day, including a moment for group leaders to sign-up for one of the four breakout sessions offered. The breakouts were designed around the value of equipping with the specific focus of providing group leaders with the necessary skills to address challenges most often experienced in leadership. Once they signed-up, the morning consisted of an extended time of worship.

Five worship songs led to a teaching session from the Downtown Congregation pastor, Tyler David. David, who is typically known for his strong and catalytic personality, spoke to the group leaders with a tender posture and calm tone. Using the life of David, as well as honest reflections of his own trials, he urged group leaders to look to Jesus for strength in the difficulties of leading others. The message flowed seamlessly to a moment in which group leaders were led to look to Jesus for strength in the upcoming year. As music played, group leaders were given a blank page and envelope to write a prayer for themselves and their community, specifically praying for the ways they need the Lord's help in the upcoming year, and how they want to see God's power displayed in the community one year later.[13]

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[13] Once finished, group leaders sealed their letters and turned them in to TAS leadership who will mail it to them the week leading up to the following year's Renew.

After the prayer letters, group leaders went to their respective breakouts.[14] The majority of breakout teachers were respected female leaders of TAS. Diversity of voices and gender was an important emphasis in order to execute the best version of Renew as possible. Female leadership in the breakouts was a perfect avenue toward this end.

Following the breakouts was an outside lunch with all the group leaders. They were encouraged to sit with other leaders that they did not know in order to continue cultivating relationships across TAS. In addition, breakout teachers remained in their designated rooms during lunch for any group leaders that wanted to eat lunch and ask questions about the session. Roughly an even number of group leaders split between lunch outside and with the breakout teachers. Once lunch finished, all group leaders returned to the auditorium for the final session of Renew.

The conclusion of Renew was arguably the most impactful moment of the weekend. Instead of being ushered out of the conference by a compelling hurrah from a TAS preacher, the moment was led by the group leaders themselves. After sharing a brief exhortation from 1 Corinthians 12:24-26, I facilitated two activities that allowed for group leaders to celebrate and care for each other.

In the first activity, group leaders were given a moment to personally reflect on a prompt: "For group leaders that came into this weekend (fill in the blank), my hope for you is that you leave here (fill in the blank)." Then, any group leader that felt led by the Spirit to share was given a microphone to stand up share to the entire room. Group leaders were instructed to respond once a person shared. If a group leader said anything that they personally resonated with, or if they too were hoping for the same thing for the other leaders, they were to shout out "Amen!" The microphone was passed around the room and leader after leader was responded to with a thunderous "Amen!"

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[14] The breakout sessions were: "Creating an honest and vulnerable community," "Leading a community of families and singles," "Discerning spiritual gifts in community," and "Growing in faith during life's busy seasons."

The second activity was an opportunity for group leaders to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). The question was simply asked, "Is anyone here rejoicing in something that we can all rejoice in together?" Group leaders raised their hands as the microphones were passed their way. They each briefly shared what they were rejoicing in and in response the room erupted in celebration. Then, they were asked, "Is anyone here mourning something that we can all mourn together?" There was no hesitation from leaders to raise their hand. Leaders shared about dying relatives, infertility, cancer diagnoses, betrayal, and loss. In response, all of the group leaders close in proximity to the person sharing laid their hands on them, as all the others extended a hand in their direction, and one person took the microphone and prayed for their brother or sister.

Summary

Renew concluded with group leaders mourning and praying for each other. Over three hundred group leaders left on Saturday having experienced a taste of what this project sought to accomplish—healthy and compelling group leaders that joyfully endure in their leadership. Renew's impact did not come from the size or scope of the environment. Conferences do not change people—the Holy Spirit through the Word of God does. Renew simply embodied in a meaningful way the biblical values of investment and support that this project argues for, and the Holy Spirit was faithful.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

This chapter presented a detailed explanation of the project's implementation to show how TAS created a healthy and compelling group leader culture. The training on the Fundamentals resource effectively onboarded new group leaders while the annual plan of events supported them throughout the year. The annual plan concluded with Renew, which provided a unique opportunity for all group leaders to be celebrated together. Renew was an atypical experience, yet the impact was deep and abiding—which the data

proves. The week after Renew, group leaders were asked in a feedback survey, "Did this experience make you want to continue in your leadership this year?" The results were astounding and are thoroughly examined in the concluding chapter of the project.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This final chapter provides the overall evaluation and reflection of the project. First, this chapter examines whether the project fulfilled its intended purpose through a concise and detailed evaluation of the project's goals. Then, a reflection of the project's strengths and weaknesses further substantiates the scope of the project's success. Finally, this chapter concludes with specific theological and personal reflections of the project.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of the project was to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture at the Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas. A healthy and compelling group leader culture consisted of two primary markers: existing leaders joyfully enduring in leadership and potential new leaders aspiring to leadership. To create this culture, the project presented and implemented five biblical values for investment and support of group leaders: relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration.

The reasoning behind the five values of investment and support of group leaders as the means to fulfill the project's purpose was simple. As existing group leaders were consistently and intentionally invested in by TAS in meaningful ways, the costs of serving (time, energy, resources, environments, etc.) would make leadership worth it. Thus, the reasons for continuing in leadership would be just as compelling (or more) as the relief group leaders would experience if they transitioned out of leadership.

Meanwhile, as partners of TAS become aware of the unique level of investment and support group leaders receive, it would create an enticing reason for partners to aspire to group leadership. If this rationale were true, then sustained growth in the quantity of

groups at TAS would be the overall outcome of a healthy and compelling group leader culture.

Upon completion of the project, it was definitively determined that the rationale was true, and the project powerfully and successfully fulfilled its purpose—a healthy and compelling group leader culture was created at TAS. Existing group leaders continued to endure in their leadership and new groups were created by aspiring new group leaders. The following evaluation of the project's goals proves the project fulfilled its purpose.

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Evaluation of the Project's Goals

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The project sought to fulfill its purpose by accomplishing five goals. Successful accomplishment of each goal was required to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture at TAS. Each goal had a specific measurement to determine its success. Since the project's purpose was fulfilled, the goals were accomplished as well. The following sections explains the success of each goal.

Evaluation of Goal 1

Goal 1 was to develop a curriculum that provides new group leaders with the necessary skills and information to lead their groups effectively. This information included the essential vision, values, rhythms, expectations, and tips for group leadership. The curriculum consisted of three resources: Group Leader Fundamentals, Group Leader Practicals, and Group Launch Guide. The goal was relevant to the project's purpose because a healthy and compelling group leader culture cannot exist with misalignment between leaders or the leadership of TAS.

Successful completion of goal 1 was measured through an evaluation form of all three resources by a central elder of TAS.[1] Since the central elders are responsible for the oversight and operation of the entire church, approval was necessary to deploy the

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[1] See appendix 1.

resources. Each resource was evaluated in four categories; (1) theology, to ensure the content of the resources correctly interpreted and applied Scripture and aligned with TAS's statement of faith; (2) strategy, to ensure the content aligns with the scope of the ministry's vision and fits the organizational structure of TAS; (3) pedagogy, to ensure the content has a clear purpose and way to accomplish the purpose; and (4) style, to ensure that the content matches the voice and style of all official documents of TAS. All three resources were approved and goal 1 was successful.

Evaluation of Goal 2

Goal 2 was to assess new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS. The goal was pursued by administering a Group Leader Survey to group leaders before being trained on the curriculum created in goal 1.[2] Assessing group leaders' knowledge of the ministry prior to onboarding and training established a baseline measurement to be compared against the results found in goal 3. This comparison determined whether group leaders' knowledge of the ministry increased after being trained with the curriculum created in goal 1. Thus, goal 2 was relevant to the project because it ensured that new group leaders were effectively onboarded to the ministry. The benchmark for success was a minimum of twenty group leaders surveyed during the training process. During the project's implementation, the knowledge of twenty-five group leaders was assessed and goal 2 was successful.

Evaluation of Goal 3

Goal 3 was to increase new group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of groups at TAS by training them on the resources developed in goal 1—with a primary focus on Group Leader Fundamentals. After being trained, group leaders' knowledge was measured to ensure that they were effectively on-boarded to the

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[2] See appendix 2.

ministry.[3] An increase in group leaders' knowledge of the ministry would reveal the effectiveness of the curriculum created in goal 1. Thus, the goal was relevant to the project's purpose because a healthy and compelling group leader culture could not exist without a unified understanding of the ministry between all group leaders of TAS.

Successful completion of goal 3 was evaluated by comparing the results of the Group Leader Survey that was administered before training group leaders, with the results of the same survey after training them with the curriculum created in goal 1.[4] First, group leaders were sent the survey before any of the on-boarding process began. Then, group leaders were given the Group Leader Fundamentals resource to read, followed by an in-person training by a staff person. Then, the group leader filled out the same survey again. The comparison of survey responses measured the change in their knowledge.

This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey scores. The survey consisted of thirteen questions to assess a group leader's knowledge of the ministry's vision, values, definitions, rhythms, and expectations. The results from the t-test revealed a positive statistically significant difference in every question. The average response to all thirteen questions increased as a result of the on-boarding process. Furthermore, the survey revealed no outliers—every group leader surveyed increased in their knowledge of the ministry. Therefore, goal 3 was successful.

Evaluation of Goal 4

Goal 4 was to create an annual conference for group leaders who will gather for intentional investment and support through relationships, equipping, faith-nurturing, blessing, and celebration. The conference's purpose was to provide group leaders with all

[3] See appendix 2.

[4] See appendix 2.

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five values of biblical investment and support in the most impactful way possible. The focus here was to help existing group leaders joyfully endure in their leadership. The conference focused on providing group leaders with each value in the most meaningful way possible. By being invested in a powerful way, group leaders would feel renewed after a long year pouring themselves out for the men and women of their group.

Successful completion of goal 4 was evaluated by a feedback form sent to all the group leaders that attended the conference. The metric for success was for at least 80 percent of group leaders to express a renewed desire to continue leading for another year on a conference feedback survey.[5] When asked, "Did you leave the conference with a renewed desire to continue in group leadership?," the results were astounding—98 percent responded "yes," 2 percent responded, "I'm not sure," and none responded "no."

Clearly, there was a strong relationship between the biblical values of investment and support and their impact on existing group leaders. The impact of the Group Leader Renew Conference proved the project's arguments for the biblical values of investment and their ability to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture. In conclusion, goal 4 was successful.

Evaluation of Goal 5

Goal 5 was to create a plan for on-going investment and support of group leaders to help them endure in group leadership throughout the year. The plan consisted of an entire year of events (with each event focusing on one or more values). These events provided group leaders with consistent investment and support throughout the year and also created anticipation for upcoming events—which would help them in their leadership along the way. Furthermore, the consistency in which group leaders receive investment and support created a compelling narrative that motivated average partners of TAS to aspire to group leadership. Thus, goal 5 was relevant to the project's purpose by

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[5] See appendix 3.

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helping existing leaders endure in leadership while partners of TAS aspired to become new group leaders.

Successful completion of goal 5 was evaluated by a comparison between the total number of groups at TAS between the project's beginning and end. For goal 5 to succeed, more groups needed to exist at TAS by the end of the project. The rationale for this metric was because the number of groups at TAS prior to the project was in decline. From 2020 to 2021, the number of groups at TAS dropped from 356 to 321; a drop of 35. Thus, the desired scope of the project's impact on TAS after the first year was to simply stop the decline. However, the following results prove that the project had a much greater impact on TAS than anticipated.

Immediately prior to the project's implementation in August 2021, 321 groups existed at TAS. After one year of the project's implementation, in August of 2022, 356 groups existed at TAS[6]; a growth of 35 groups in one year. Evidently, the project did not stop the decline—it reversed it! The exact same number of groups that dissolved between 2020 to 2021 was created between 2021 to 2022. Evidently, TAS's investment and support of group leaders throughout the year had a powerful impact on creating a healthy and compelling group leader culture. In conclusion, goal 5 was successful.

Summary of Goals

Each goal of the project focused on a necessary aspect of creating a healthy and compelling group leader culture at TAS. By the end of the project, all five goals were successfully accomplished. Therefore, the project fulfilled its purpose, and a healthy and compelling group leader culture was created at TAS. The following sections explain the major strengths and weaknesses that contributed to the project's success.

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[6] TAS's fiscal and ministry calendar operates from August 1 to July 31. The total number of groups was recorded prior to project implementation in August of 2021 and again after one full year after implementation in August of 2022.

Strengths of the Project

Although the project had many strengths, given the prescribed length of the chapter, this section will focus on one: contextualization. As mentioned in the "Context" section of chapter 1, TAS is a complex church consisting of six congregations across Austin, Texas. Each congregation varies in its demographics and life stages of the average partner. There was no effective way to implement a project for the entire church's benefit that did not consider this reality. Therefore, to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture across the entire church, adaptability across varying contexts was necessary.

The need for contextualization was precisely the reason this project argued for specific biblical values instead of specific practices. If the project had prescribed all six congregations with rigid ways to invest and support group leaders, it would not have positively impacted the entire church. Only some of the congregations would have benefited. By contrast, a value-driven project empowered the investment and support of group leaders in ways that were realistic yet contextually appropriate for each congregation.

Furthermore, a value-driven project also increased the effective innovation and collaboration between the groups' staff person at each congregation. For example, it was often the case that after one congregation successfully invested and supported its group leaders in a specific way, other congregations would follow the exact plan, or make slight adjustments, and execute the event at their congregation. The same was true for events or opportunities that were not successful. Instead of wasting time, energy, and effort toward low-impact events for group leaders, other congregations often planned new and original ways to lead its group leaders with one of the values. This cycle of collaboration, adaptation, and innovation repeated throughout the year.

Lastly, the strength of a value-centered project benefitted ministries outside of groups at TAS. In reality, the values of biblical investment and support that the project argued for are values that apply to all people of the church, not just group leaders. Thus,

throughout the course of the project other ministries of TAS learned and applied the values to invest and support their respective volunteers and lay leaders. Leaders in the kids ministry, students ministry, college ministry, and the Sunday hospitality team were positively impacted by the project. In the end, the project's purpose to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture resulted in the creation of a healthy and compelling *lay leader* culture.

Weaknesses of the Project

Although the contextualization of the project was undoubtedly its greatest strength, it also exposed its greatest weakness: oversight. The value-centered project that empowered much of the innovative ways TAS invested and supported group leaders also significantly broadened the scope of the ministry's oversight. Instead of executing a few of the same events at each congregation, many events were executed. Each one on a different scale, in different ways, and at different congregation throughout the year. Thankfully, this weakness was not felt by the group leaders of TAS. Instead, the greatest impact came to the workload of the Central Groups Director and groups staff responsible for the project's implementation across the entire church.

Another weakness that contextualization revealed was the difficulty of maintaining alignment and direction between congregations and ministries of TAS. This was especially true during the planning phase of the Group Leader Renew Conference. Six congregations coming together to create a shared experience for all group leaders of TAS required a significant amount of coordination.

Creating commitment and alignment between stakeholders at each congregation to execute the conference was a large feat. A churchwide event on this scale required involvement from the kids ministry staff, worship staff, congregation pastors, and lay elders from all six congregations. At many different times throughout the six months of planning, responsibilities were passed on to another person. Each time this happened, the new person received less necessary information, leading to more work closer to the event.

Thankfully, the group leaders did not experience the impact of the weakness and the conference still had a massive positive impact of their continued leadership. However, the weakness does pose a threat to the sustainability of the conference in subsequent years.

What I Would Do Differently

Although the project fulfilled its purpose, in retrospect there are some changes to the project that would have maximized its efficiency and impact. The first change is in regard to the planning phase of the Renew conference. Even though six months was enough time to plan and execute a powerful experience for group leaders, it was a hectic and complicated process for the TAS staff. An additional six months (one year total) of planning would have positively impacted TAS's budget and strategic planning for the following fiscal year.

Regarding the TAS's budget, an entire year of planning would have given Renew consideration when the elders were proposing the following year's financial budget. This would have prevented the need to request a budgetary change in the middle of the year, which halted all planning until it was approved. Thus, extending invitations to all stakeholders would have happened much sooner, reducing the many moments of last minute changes and scheduling conflicts.

In regard to TAS's strategic planning, an entire year of planning would have allowed the relevant ministries involved in the conference to more effectively synchronize. Since the strategic goals of each ministry of TAS are set by the time the fiscal year begins on August 1, the conference was not considered by any ministry since it originated in October—two months into the fiscal year. Even though the conference was a definite success, it came at the cost to other ministries as they devoted time and energy to the unanticipated conference. An additional six months of planning would have aligned the relevant ministries of TAS around shared strategic goals for the conference.

The second change to this project is the timing in which the groups staff of TAS were trained on the five values of biblical investment and support. Even though the all-

day workshop effectively trained the staff, it contained a lot of information to learn and process. Furthermore, planning the events and opportunities to implement in goal 5 immediately followed the workshop. By spending one week of training for each value, the staff would have had a more robust understanding of the values and perhaps incorporated them in their congregation in more thoughtful, efficient, and effective ways.

Theological Reflections

Upon completion of the project, the main theological reflection relates to the authority and profitability of God's Word. Put simply, the authority and profitability of God's Word are why the project was successful. Thus, the main lessons learned from the project was that God's Word has the authority to transform God's church throughout history. Second Timothy 3:16-17 says, "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Throughout the project, these verses increasingly became more and more alive within groups at TAS.

When Paul says "All Scripture" in verse 16, he means *all*. Every single word was inspired by the Holy Spirit for the instruction of God's people. Therefore, no part of Scripture should be overlooked or undervalued—not even the introduction and conclusions to Paul's epistles. It is not as if only the portions of discourse in Paul's letters are the only parts of Scripture that are authoritative. Since Paul's greetings and acknowledgments of specific people are equally inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are also authoritative for the church today.

The church must pay attention to God's revelation in the parts of Scripture that are seemingly irrelevant. This project proved this to be true in chapter 2 when the biblical value of relationships was presented. Had the authority of Paul's greetings to specific people been overlooked, then the project would have missed the value of relationships to create a healthy and compelling group leader culture. Thus, consider the scope of the authority of God's Word throughout time—Paul's closing remarks to people in Rome

(Rom 16:1-16) had authority for how a church in Austin, Texas established relationships between its group leaders nearly two thousand years later. This kind of impact on the church is why 2 Timothy 3:16 also describes Scripture to be profitable.

The project centered around a thorough exposition and application of Scripture. This means that the project was successful because God's Word is also profitable. Throughout the project, each aspect of 2 Timothy 3:17 was experienced: "teaching" by training the staff of TAS; "reproof" for revealing TAS's previous failure to support group leaders; "correction" of the ministry's limited understanding of what it means to equip the saints for the work of ministry; and "training for righteousness" by faithfully applying God's Word to the ministry. Collectively, TAS profited from God's Word by creating a healthy and compelling group leader culture—a culture consisting of men and women who are now more equipped for every good work as a group leader. As a result of the project's success, it is abundantly clear that God's Word has the authority to transform the church throughout history.

Personal Reflections

The main lesson learned from this project relates to chapter 3 of the project. In chapter 3, the impact that expressive individualism has on the health of groups at TAS was thoroughly explained. In expressive individualism, a person's identity is self-determined— all authorities, relationships, organizations, and environments *outside* a person only serve to affirm a person's identity. Meaning, they do not change a person. Thus, expressive individualism is the root cause for the individualism and consumerism threatening groups at TAS today. People only engage in a group to the extent that it serves, entertains, and satisfies the present state of their faith.

Writing chapter 3 was a humbling experience. Even though this project allowed for a thorough diagnosis of expressive individualism's problem on groups at TAS, its symptoms were also exposed in myself. I learned that I am not above my own criticisms of groups at TAS. Chapter 3 served as a mirror to reflect my own motivations,

commitments, and actions toward my community. I am guilty of committing the same problematic behaviors seen in groups at TAS.

Upon reflection, I observed changes in my level of commitment to my community based on the extent to which I agree with what the community's direction at the time. When I agree, I am a present and active participant. And when I do not agree, I conveniently justify my reasons for being a passive member of the group. This behavior is exactly what expressive individualism produces in the church—a self-serving pursuit of church participation.

In light of this personal reflection, I learned that my leadership over groups at TAS does not excuse my own sin as a follower of Jesus Christ and partner of TAS. This project reminded me that I am a sinner in need of a savior. Thanks be to God for his son Jesus Christ, my savior. I more firmly believe that Jesus Christ is the answer to the problems seen in groups at TAS as well as the sin in my own life.

By God's grace I am now a different person from when the project began. When I look back on my heart's motivation at the beginning of this project, frustration was more present than I realized at the time. Now, after being humbled by the research of this project, my heart feels compassion toward the problems of TAS. I rejoice in my change of heart—it is a reminder that even though expressive individualism remains inside me, my heart is ruled by the Holy Spirit of God. He has conformed me into the image of Jesus Christ through this project, and he will continue to long after it.

Conclusion

In light of this chapter's evaluation and reflection, the project successfully fulfilled its purpose. This chapter served as proof by presenting all four goals as successfully completed. First, a new vision and strategy for groups at TAS was accomplished through the creation of new curriculum. Second, new group leaders increased in knowledge of the ministry's vision and strategy through the effective onboarding process. Third, existing group leaders continued to endure in their leadership

through the Group Leader Renew Conference. Finally, the decline of groups at TAS was reversed after an effective year of investing and supporting group leaders with meaningful events and experiences. In fact, the ministry increased by thirty-five groups at the time of the project's completion. In conclusion, a healthy and compelling group leader culture was created at The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas.

APPENDIX 1

GROUP LEADER CURRICULUM
EVALUATION FORM

This evaluation form was used by the central elder to review, evaluate, and approve of the following curriculum: Group Leader Fundamentals, Group Leader Practicals, and Group Launch Guide.

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Group Leader Curriculum Evaluation Form					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Theology					
The content is sound in its interpretation and application of Scripture.					
The content is written in accordance with the affirmation of faith of TAS.					
Strategy					
The content pursues the defined strategy of Groups at TAS.					
The scope of the content fits within the parameters of the organizational structure of TAS.					
Pedagogy					
The content contains a clear and defined purpose.					
The content is clearly written in a way to accomplish its defined purpose.					
Style					
The content is written in accordance with TAS's style guide.					
The content is written in accordance with TAS's voice for official documents.					

Upon incorporation of the revisions stated in the comments section of this form, this resource is approved for Groups at TAS. Signed X_____

APPENDIX 2

GROUP LEADER SURVEY

This survey was used to assess each group leaders' knowledge of the vision, direction, and values of Groups at TAS as well as the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of a group leader. This survey was administered before and after a new group leader receives the group leader curriculum and the results compared for evaluation of the curriculum's effectiveness.

GROUP LEADER SURVEY

Date: _____

Name: _____

1. How many years have you been attending The Austin Stone? _____

2. Have you ever been in a group at The Austin Stone?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. Have you ever been a group leader at The Austin Stone?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. Are you a partner at The Austin Stone?
   c. Yes
   d. No

5. Have you ever attended a group leader training at The Austin Stone?
   c. Yes
   d. No

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer based on your current knowledge of the question using the following scale:
        1 = 0 %
        2 = 25 %
        3 = 50 %
        4 = 75 %
        5 = 100 %

	1	2	3	4	5
6. I know the definition of a group at The Austin Stone.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I know the group value definition of Family.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I know the group value definition of Discipleship.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I know the group value definition of Mission.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I know what it means to establish rhythms in my group.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I know what it means to assess the rhythms of my group.	1	2	3	4	5

12. I know what it means to "know the sheep."	1	2	3	4	5
13. I know what it means to "feed the sheep."	1	2	3	4	5
14. I know what it means to "lead the sheep."	1	2	3	4	5
15. I know what it means to "protect the sheep."	1	2	3	4	5
16. I know what the expectations of group leaders are.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I know what the biblical principles for group leadership are.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I know the reasons why a group leader would be removed from leadership.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX 3

GROUP LEADER RENEW CONFERENCE SURVEY

The group leader renew conference survey was sent to every group leader who attended the conference. The purpose of the survey was to assess the impact the conference had on group leaders' desire to continue leading. The survey was administered one week after the conference and the results were evaluated for the conference's effectiveness.

GROUP LEADER RENEW CONFERENCE SURVEY

Date: _____

Name _____

1. Which congregation are you a part of? _____

2. What day(s) did you attend the conference?
    a. Friday Only
    b. Saturday Only
    c. Both

3. What breakout session did you attend?
    a. How do I lead a community of singles and families?
    b. How do I grow in my faith when life is so busy?
    c. How do I use my spiritual gifts if I don't know what they are?
    d. How do I lead my community to be more honest, vulnerable, and committed?

4. Did you leave the conference feeling renewed in your desire to continue leading your community?
    a. Yes!
    b. I'm not sure.
    c. No.

5. Based on your experience, how important would you say it is for group leaders to attend next year?
    a. Essential: Leaders should do everything they can to prioritize this.
    b. Beneficial: Leaders should attend if they are able to.
    c. Helpful: It is helpful but not necessary.
    d. Optional: Leaders can take it or leave it.
    e. Unhelpful: Leader are better off not attending.

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer based on how meaningful your experience of the conference was using the following scale:

      1 = Least
      5 = Most

6. Friday Worship & Teaching   1   2   3   4   5

7. Friday Celebration   1   2   3   4   5

8. Saturday Breakout Session   1   2   3   4   5

9. Saturday Teaching & Story Sharing   1   2   3   4   5

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ABSTRACT

CREATING A HEALTHY AND COMPELLING GROUP
LEADER CULTURE AT THE AUSTIN STONE
COMMUNITY CHURCH IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
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The purpose of this project is to create a healthy and compelling leadership culture at The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas. Chapter 1 explains the context and goals for this project regarding the need to provide effective biblical investment and support of group leaders. Chapter 2 presents the biblical foundation for the project through a theological survey of Paul's ministry conduct. Chapter 3 presents the necessary cultural and theological factors in order for church leaders to endure in leadership. Chapter 4 describes the nature of the project by explaining its preparation, implementation, and content overview. Chapter 5 evaluates the project's effectiveness based on the completion of the project's goals. Ultimately, this project seeks to serve the leaders who faithfully serve The Austin Stone for the good of the church and the glory of God.

VITA

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