

**BEING WITH:
MOVING FROM A PARADIGM OF MISSION AS “DOING FOR”
TO A PARADIGM OF “BEING WITH”**

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation begins by asking the question, How does one lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local? What follows is an exploration of that question.

I came to this project with the thesis that as I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations designed to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others, we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community.

My thesis begins with the preliminary assessment that my church and I were stuck in a paradigm of “doing for,” and the suspicion that this reflects a similar dynamic in many American congregations. “Doing for” is reflective of modernity, including the modern notion that we as humans can live life without God.

On the other hand, as Christians abide in Christ (John 15:4) through practices such as prayer and dwelling in the Word, we may both learn and experience what it means to “be with” Christ. Since God is a missional God who sent Christ into the world, and since Christ, in turn, sends disciples into the world, including their neighborhoods, “being with” Christ will enable Christians to both learn and experience what it means to “be with” neighbor.

To guide me in this project, I chose *Stepping Out*, a curriculum available for download from the Missional Network at JoiningGod.org. Over the course of sixteen sessions, *Stepping Out* presents practices of observation, curiosity, listening, reflection, and discernment in a posture of patient attention to one’s neighbor.

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INTRODUCTION AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

How does one lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local?

This project represents an exploration of that question. I came to this project with the thesis that as I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations designed to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others, we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community. As a result, and concurrently, I will learn about the practices and leadership critical to such a journey.

I chose *Stepping Out* as the guide for our journey. Offered through The Missional Network at JoiningGod.org,¹ *Stepping Out* is a four-module, sixteen-session curriculum presenting practices of observation, discernment, listening, curiosity, and reflection as opposed to practices of “anxious productivity,” to borrow a phrase from Walter Brueggemann.² *Stepping Out* invites believers to “regard the neighbor seriously” without objectifying the neighbor as a potential notch in one’s evangelistic belt. Rather, the posture of *Stepping Out* is one of patient attention to one’s neighbor. Materials included a leader’s guide, videos, and handouts. Experiments include dwelling in the Word, in which participants were to live with a specific scripture passage for a more extended period of time, encouraging them to be open, curious, and ready to hear from God.³ There are also reflection/action exercises, especially as they relate to one’s community, as well as prayers and simple liturgies. Participants were also encouraged to join a *Joining God* Facebook group.⁴ Additionally, because dwelling in the Word was an

¹ Roxburgh, Alan; Watts, Fiona; Jin, Jinna; and Walker, Sara Jane, *Stepping Out: Leaders’ Guide*, The Missional Network, 2019; downloaded from JoiningGod.org.

² Brueggemann, Walter, *Sabbath as Resistance*, Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2014, 28.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/jg.stepsingout/>.

important part of *Stepping Out*, I reflect on certain scripture passages as a part of my theological contemplation.

The seeds for my project were planted in September 2018 when I began meeting with a seven-member praxis team; I was the eighth member. Because missiology has been an important part of my doctoral studies, four of the eight members of my praxis team had previously joined me as adult leaders on youth mission trips.

My praxis team was helpful in that they led me to the thesis that a critical paradigm shift toward joining God in the local is to transition from a posture of “doing for” others to a posture of “being with” them. My thesis was developed over the summer and fall of 2019 and was subsequently tested with a research team which journeyed with me through our curriculum. *Stepping Out* was the key intervention upon which my research focused; it served as a primary source, giving structure to the experiments and practices which I used in this project. The validity of my thesis will be evaluated on the basis of baseline and follow-up focus groups and field notes along the way as well as my own ongoing critical reflection on the knowledge, skills, habits, and values I, as the leader, discovered to be critical to the group’s journey.

An important aspect of the *Stepping Out* curriculum is the posture of the leader which is clearly defined in the materials:

Pay attention to your role in this group. Congregations have deep patterns and defaults in needing to defer to you as the trained pastor in spiritual matters. It will be important for you to show with your actions that you are not concerned about people in the room “getting it right.” (1) Your primary function is that of a facilitator. Be genuine and yourself, but practice an openness to receive what the Spirit might be saying to you as a group. You don’t need to control the outcomes in this. (2) Take off your expert hat and any need you have for others to “get it.” (3) Be curious, open and receptive to what God may teach you in and through this experience. (4) Participate alongside others in your group. This means that you are doing the same work as they are in between gatherings.⁵

⁵ Ibid., 1.

In the following pages, I present the theological, missiological, and ecclesiological context in which I dwell. I also draw upon several books which discuss context, missiology, leadership, spiritual practices, and theology. Additionally, as a pastor who has served local congregations for forty years, I reexamine my own beliefs and how they have been formed and reformed in me as a Christian leader in light of this journey and this doctoral program.

My thesis begins with the preliminary assessment that my church and I were stuck in a paradigm of “doing for,” and the suspicion that this reflects a similar dynamic in many American congregations. Thus, I validate that assessment in Chapter 1, and do so on two levels. First, I begin by defining “we” within the larger Western social-cultural-historical narrative, especially as it relates to the rise and impact of modernity. From there, I narrow my definition of “we” by defining it within the context of my community, Orion, Illinois. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to Orion’s socio-economical and geographical context. Finally, I will define “we” within the history, context, and lived ecclesiology of the Orion United Methodist Church (Orion UMC), the church I served from 2006 to 2020.

Secondly, since my thesis assumes that we are stuck in a paradigm of “doing for,” I will validate that assumption by exploring what the paradigm of “doing for” has looked like historically and why it is a flawed modernistic paradigm. Again, this assumption will be addressed within the larger Western context as well as the specific context of Orion UMC, a church I served as pastor for fourteen years.

In Chapter 2, I address a further claim I am making in my thesis, that a paradigm of “being with” is preferable to a paradigm of “doing for,” particularly in a time when the mainline American church seems to be unraveling. I further argue that a paradigm shift toward “being with” is supported by an understanding of God’s nature, and God’s relationship to both Creation

and the Church. As I consider the ways our missional Triune God is “with” Creation, humanity, and the Church, it will become apparent that the biblical narrative further confirms this element of my thesis. I especially reflect on this as it relates to our understanding of the life of Christ, from his Incarnation to his Resurrection.

In Chapter 3, I describe the formation of my research team and how I tested my hypothesis by means of an experiment in group praxis. I invited a group of Christians to take the journey of practices and conversations as they were presented in the *Stepping Out* curriculum. The seeds for my experiment were first sown in a Bible study group which I led. However, it was not long before I saw the need to shift to a praxis team where we were able to test some practices together more effectively. However, the experiment itself did not begin until I recruited my research team out of my praxis team. Only then did I begin *to lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local*. My praxis team proved pivotal in helping me develop my thesis, that *as I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations designed to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the local church community to a paradigm of “being with” others, we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community*.

God, through the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ, moved into the neighborhood of human experience and chose to “be with” humanity. The task for Christian leaders, then, is to invite others to discover how we might join God in what God is already doing in our neighborhoods. Given the example of our Triune God, learning and practicing how to “be with” others beyond the church is a more effective posture for mission than is a posture of “doing for.” Furthermore, the posture of “being with” others beyond the church is better suited for a group of Christians to

join God in what God is already doing in our neighborhoods. Since *Stepping Out* is presented in four distinct modules, I likewise describe our research team's journey of discovery module-by-module in Chapter 3.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I present the learnings of my research team as well as my own learnings. I assess whether or not my research team became more aware of God's activity in their neighborhood and whether or not they were able to join with God in what God has already been doing in the neighborhood. If they were able to join with God, I describe what that looked like. Additionally, I assess the extent, if any, to which they shifted from a paradigm of "doing for" to one of "being with." Also in Chapter 4, I reflect on my own leadership skills and practices as they have been shaped by the *Stepping Out* project as well as scripture and other readings. Finally, I include proposals for future practice in churches with similarities to Orion UMC.

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT

The beliefs and attitudes of Orion—both the community and the church—have been formed in part by the circumstances of its geographical place as well as its place in history. As the result of Orion’s contextual formation, it has settled into a default paradigm of “doing for,” which is a paradigm shaped by Western modernity. This chapter addresses Orion’s geographical and historical context. However, the community’s modern context is typical of Western communities, just as the church’s modern context is typical of Euro-tribal churches. Mark Lau Branson and Alan Roxburgh have introduced the term *Euro-tribal churches*, which is shorthand for denominations and theological traditions which have been formed as Europe moved into the modern era. “And that meant that their organizational and leadership habits had been shaped by numerous cultural forces that were more powerful than their espoused theology.”⁶

A. Western and U.S. Context and History. Our Western context is rooted in two historical realities: First, we are enmeshed in the “modern experiment” and secondly, we are inheritors of the Protestant work ethic. As to the first, Alan Roxburgh writes that “we have accepted what might be called ‘modernity’s wager’—on some level, we think life can be lived without God, that if we or our churches are to be saved, it is up to us alone.”⁷ Modernity does not deny the existence of God; it does, however, deny that God is the primary agent in the world. In God’s place, modernity asserts humankind as the primary agent in the world.

Modernity, then, replaces God’s *power* with military might which supports the empire without glorifying God. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat write, “Empires are built on systemic

⁶ Branson, Mark Lau, and Roxburgh, Alan J., *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020, 2.

⁷ Roxburgh, Alan, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015, xiv.

centralizations of power and secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control.”⁸ Likewise, modernity replaces God’s *wisdom* with human reason and a form of education which has been cut off from loving spirituality. In his book, *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker Palmer describes the incredible increase in human knowledge which ultimately led to the production of the first atomic bomb in World War 2. However, it was a knowledge which led to “demonic ends.”⁹ Palmer’s depressing conclusion underscores the failure of modernity: learning does not automatically lead to a better world. It may even lead to destruction for thousands. Consequently, according to Roxburgh and Robinson, “too many of the children of modernity live without a narrative core that provides hope or direction.”¹⁰

In his book *Cosmopolis*, Stephen Toulmin describes the rise of modernity in the 17th century by exploring “the growing power of the laity, (which) allowed European nations to insist on their sovereign authority to manage their social and political lives.”¹¹ As that sense of national sovereignty grew, Western populations grew less reliant on the Church and, by extension, less reliant upon God and more inclined to live life without God.

As to the influence of the Protestant work ethic—especially as it is traced back to Puritanism—it is a rather ironic counterpart to modernity because Puritanism was deeply rooted in faith in God. In the 1620s, Pilgrims settled in Plymouth Colony and a decade later Puritans settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Both groups brought with them a “vision of what Christ’s true church should be, of how society should be ordered, and a biblical commonwealth constructed.”¹² Eventually the two groups merged into “the way Congregational” as opposed to

⁸ Walsh, Brian, and Keesmaat, Sylvia, *Colossians Remixed*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 31.

⁹ Palmer, Parker, *To Know as We Are Known*, San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1983, 1.

¹⁰ Roxburgh, Alan J. and Robinson, Martin, *Practices for the Refounding of God’s People*, New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018, 3

¹¹ Toulmin, Stephen, *Cosmopolis*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990, 15.

¹² Gaustad, Edwin S., *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982, 61.

“the way National.”¹³ Thus, the Puritans established in the New World a religious order that was self-governing as opposed to one which operated under an ecclesiastical hierarchy like that of the Roman Catholic Church. Ning Kang notes that the Puritans “formed their own church, chose their own priest, and eliminated the hierarchical system in church,” thereby liberating the church from Catholicism and creating a free organization of Christians in which salvation was “a personal spiritual pursuit.”¹⁴ The Protestant ethic, therefore, extolled religious individualism which carried over into other aspects of American culture. Kang further notes,

Many of the mainstream values in the U.S. such as individualism, egalitarianism, optimism, can find their origin in Puritanism of colonial periods. ...Nowadays, the value of individualism has permeated every corner of American society. It places great value on self-reliance, on privacy, and on mutual respect.¹⁵

America’s valuation of self-reliance and independence affirms Roxburgh’s argument that Western society has accepted modernity’s wager that life can be lived well without God. Not only have we empowered ourselves through military might, but we have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and have thereby become “wise like God.”¹⁶

Drawing upon Max Weber, Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that the modern approach to leadership, which he identifies with the manager’s “bureaucratic authority,” is “emotivist.”¹⁷ Emotivism is the belief that moral assertions are, in essence, statements of preference.¹⁸ The manager, as an exemplar of leadership in the modern mold, thus needs “to influence the motives of his subordinates” so they will produce in accordance with the manager’s own “prior

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kang, Ning, “Puritanism and Its Impact upon American Values,” *Review of European Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, December, 2009. Accessed June 26, 2019 at ccsenet.org/journal.html.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:17, 3:5. Unless indicated otherwise, all scripture references are from the New International Version, 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue*, Third Edition, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007, 26.

¹⁸ Sinnicks, Matthew, “Leadership After Virtue: MacIntyre’s Critique of Management,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2018. Vol. 147:735-746, located at <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10551-016-3381-6.pdf>.

conclusions.”¹⁹ Thus, the manager’s function is that of “controlling behavior and suppressing conflict in such a way as to reinforce” the manager’s own preferences.²⁰ In other words, the manager’s preferences are subjective, reflecting the manager’s own wants and needs; they are not necessarily objective goals which might be more obvious to the subordinates.

In 2017, I wrote a paper presenting my then-current understanding of leadership. In that paper, and in one which followed, I proposed six qualities of leadership: (1) a leader envisions; (2) a leader conveys that vision; (3) a leader leads; (4) a leader collaborates; (5) a leader is an example; (6) a leader discerns; and (7) a leader serves. With the possible exception of “a leader collaborates,” the qualities I named all reflected my reliance on human agency and formation according to MacIntyre’s portrait of the manager. MacIntyre further maintains that “The manager represents in his *character* the obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.”²¹ If I am reading MacIntyre correctly, then he is arguing that any leadership action taken by a manager is manipulative, whether he or she has intended for it to be so because the manager is in a position of authority, and unless those serving under her or him are willing to successfully challenge that authority, the manager’s position will become the preferred position. For purposes of this paper, MacIntyre presents a managerial system in which employees “do for” the manager consistent with the manager’s own preferences. It precludes managers and employees from collaboration; it prevents the mutuality and partnership of a “being with” paradigm.

If that is true in a secular managerial context, it can be even more so in the context of religion because a religious leader may be inclined to declare—or let it be assumed—that his or

¹⁹ MacIntyre, 27.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 30.

her preferred course of action is “the will of God” when the proposed action is simply the preference of that religious leader who may, whether knowingly or not, be using God as a manipulative tactic to get his or her way. When applied to the church, the pastor functions as the leader, and the pastor’s proposed action likely reflects his or her subjective wants and needs. For example, a pastor might propose that the congregation embark on a building program; that proposal may simply reflect the pastor’s desire to be like other, larger churches. It is, therefore, an emotivist proposal, especially given the fact that such a tactic has the added “benefit” of reducing the potential for conflict because now if anyone objects to the course of action proposed by the leader, they are not merely objecting to the leader, they are resisting God’s proxy.

B. Local Community Context: Place, History, Culture, and the Built

Environment. There are several features of the Western context reflected in Orion, Illinois of note, including its geographical location, key employers, and religious makeup.

Orion’s geographical setting reveals some of the forces which have influenced the community over the years. The town is located fourteen miles from downtown Moline, Illinois, which is one of the four municipalities of the “Quad Cities” straddling the Mississippi River. On the one hand, the Mississippi River is emblematic of environment and creation; however, it is also one of our nation’s most important trade arteries. Thus, the Mississippi symbolizes the tension which often exists between environment and commerce, and in our modern context, the latter trumps the former.

The Quad Cities boasts two significant employers. The international headquarters for John Deere & Co. is in Moline, just fifteen miles from Orion. To say that Deere & Co. holds a place of privilege in the socio-economic structure of the entire area is to state the obvious.

Similarly, John Deere employees and retirees are scattered throughout the area and contribute to the makeup of both Orion and Orion UMC.

The other employer of note is the Rock Island Arsenal, which is located on an island in the Mississippi River. It is home to a U.S. Army base, including manufacturing facilities and the Rock Island National Cemetery. The arsenal casts a long shadow over the region, a melding American patriotism with Christian faith. It also a large enough facility that it carries significant political clout in Washington, DC and that, in turn, gives some political clout to the Quad Cities. If modernity's wager was to propose that life can be lived without God, then there was a need to replace God—or facets of God's being—with something else. Modernity replaced the power of God with national military might, affirming that humanity can have power as long as humanity is armed. The arsenal not only embodies the nation's legacy as a military force; it is also a socioeconomic force in the Quad Cities and beyond. Moreover, the regional presence and political power of both John Deere and the Arsenal call to mind William Cavanaugh's cautionary word that "The interests of corporate and state elites have become so deeply intertwined that we cannot expect the state to protect us from corporate interests."²²

Orion itself has a population of 1,940;²³ the Quad Cities has a population of 383,681.²⁴ Thus, Orion is both a rural community that is shaped by agriculture as well as a bedroom community living in the orbit of a larger urban area. Its proximity to the Quad Cities also places Orion within a short twenty-minute drive to the kind of amenities and services which one might find in a small urban area, including health care, shopping, restaurants, entertainment, and the like. Conversely, few of those services are found in Orion itself. Proprietors, health care

²² Cavanaugh, William, *Migrations of the Holy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011, 3.

²³ Data USA, located at <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/orion-il#economy>. Accessed on April 23, 2019.

²⁴ World Population Review, located at <http://worldpopulationreview.com/regions/quad-cities-population/>. Accessed on July 11, 2019.

professionals and others are drawn to the more financially lucrative opportunities which are available to them in the Quad Cities. This has important implications for one's understanding of *parish*.

Orion Community School District No. 223 is the largest employer within the community. The school district encompasses several smaller communities, including Andover, Lynn Center, Osco, Sunny Hill, and portions of Coal Valley. The school district and the communities within it form the parish for Orion UMC. Just as the Mississippi River, Deere & Co., and the Rock Island Arsenal have all shaped our understanding of environment, commerce, privilege, and patriotism, so the school district embodies how we have been shaped by knowledge.

Statistics for religious affiliation for Orion are not available; however, they are available for Henry County of which Orion is a part. Those statistics reveal that Henry County's religious preferences are trending in the same direction as the rest of the nation²⁵ with an increasing percentage of the population opting to live life without God, or at least without the church. In 2000, there were 15,603 mainline Protestants in the county (32.4%); 9,802 Catholics (20.4%); and 4,617 Evangelical Protestants. However, the largest religious group in Henry County express "no religious preference." These "Nones" numbered 17,471 or 36.3% of the population. However, in just ten years, the Nones added 10,196 to their ranks for a total of 27,667 (54.8%). Mainline Protestants numbered 11,117 (22.0%); Catholics, 6,390 (12.7%) and Evangelical Protestants, 4,763 (9.1%).²⁶

The rise of Nones in Henry County in just ten years is significant and is also consistent with the rise of modernity and its corollary, "the myth of individualism" which has fragmented

²⁵ Drescher, Elizabeth, *Choosing Our Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 16ff.

²⁶ Data USA. These figures do not include non-Christian religions which comprise approximately 1.4% of the population.

the Western church.²⁷ “The myth of the individual” is a phrase drawn from *The New Parish* by Paul Sparkes, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen who continue, “It’s not to say that people are not unique or that they do not have their own agency. It’s simply to say that the individual is not autonomous.”²⁸ However, individual autonomy, or at least human autonomy apart from God, lies at the heart of modernity.

The statistics do not indicate that the Nones have ceased believing in God (although that may be happening), but they do indicate that the Nones are choosing individualism over belonging to a local church. Despite these trends, Erin,²⁹ one of my praxis team members, expressed her belief that “everybody in Orion goes to church.” Her observation seems to be based on her knowledge of her friends and acquaintances, because statistics do not support her claim. When it comes to church affiliation, Henry County, including Orion, reflects the trends of modernity in general and individualism in particular.

C. Congregational Culture and Practical Ecclesiology. Orion UMC is, first of all, a United Methodist Church, and as such, is rooted in the theology of its denomination, including the *Wesleyan quadrilateral*. Within Methodism, that term was coined in the later part of the 20th century as a way of identifying the means and methods routinely used by John Wesley to understand God’s will and ways. That quadrilateral includes scripture as the unique, authoritative source of truth, and the foundation of the four elements. The other three are reason, tradition, and experience.³⁰ An analysis of the Wesleyan quadrilateral reveals evidence of modernity embedded within it; an important clue is noticing the modern date in which the term was coined.

²⁷ Sparks, Paul; Soerens, Tim and Friesen, Dwight, *The New Parish*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23f.

²⁹ All names of local persons have been changed.

³⁰ Adams, Don, *The Top 10 Methodist Beliefs*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016, 14.

Specifically, the conceptualizations of reason and experience it reflects are rooted in the modern imagination. Moreover, if the quadrilateral was derived from the writings of John Wesley, then it would seem as though some modern imaginations were a part of Wesley's thinking. Wesley was, after all, raised in England in the 18th century where he was part of the Euro-tribal church. Reason, tradition, and experience may simply have been means by which Wesley and others came to understand God's will and ways within a given context. Nevertheless, Orion UMC has been shaped by the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

I was appointed pastor of Orion UMC in July 2006 and served there for fourteen years. Over the course of my ministry there, I noticed that the culture of the church shifted, reflecting the shifts occurring in Western society. Two such shifts which I have observed at Orion UMC are a more *laissez-faire* attitude toward gender issues, and a decline in worship attendance.

Additionally, the two historical streams of modernity and Puritanism have done much to shape Orion UMC into a congregation that is deeply rooted in a paradigm of mission as "doing for" others. It is a very capable congregation which, over the years, has had significant resources to "do for" others as well as itself. This is best seen in three areas: Orion UMC's participation in missions; its financial culture and practices; and its culture of property. These five areas are addressed below.

1. *Laissez-faire Attitude toward Gender Issues.* My first impressions of Orion UMC were that the church was quite conservative and evangelical in nature. There were moderate and even liberal members of the church; however, they did not have as strong of a voice as did the conservatives who held to a fairly literal reading of scripture and who held to traditional values with regard to gender and sexuality issues. Ironically, it was an open secret that

the last male to be appointed as pastor was a homosexual. He served Orion UMC for three years beginning in 1997. The congregation had a culture of affirming the pastor, so, consistent with the culture of the church, he was treated with great respect, albeit in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” atmosphere.

With the passage of time, most of our conservative members either died or moved away. Others softened their stance on gender issues to such an extent that today I would characterize the culture of the church as more open and accepting of alternate lifestyles than it had been in the past. Perhaps my own theology on the matter has shaped the theology of my congregation. I have emphasized that our communion table is open to all persons, stipulating in my invitation to the Lord’s Table that there was only one requirement for receiving of the bread and the cup, and that was that recipients must be a sinner. I did so suspecting that the few remaining conservatives in the congregation would, upon hearing this, continue to consider homosexual practices as sin. On the other hand, I suspected that a gay or lesbian person—or someone who was sympathetic to them—heard that invitation and felt welcome, all the while characterizing any disdain or hatred aimed at gays or lesbians as sin. Nonetheless, the softened attitudes of the congregation are reflective of modernity’s emphasis on individual choice and free expression.

On a larger scale, it is worth noting that the United Methodist Church is still struggling with gender and sexuality issues. In February 2019, a specially called General Conference was called which was supposed to address our gender issues once and for all. That did not happen. In keeping with the modern imagination, the majority of United Methodists in America and other Western countries tended toward a more open and affirming position, which was more in keeping with modern laws and emerging customs in those lands. However, that was not the case

for United Methodists in Africa, the Philippines and Russia, and their numbers were strong enough that a “traditional plan” was approved, reinforcing our denomination’s stand that

The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.³¹

Ironically, while our General Conference was imposing a uniform theology across our entire Connection, our cohort read Clemens Sedmak’s *Doing Local Theology*.³² I found no evidence of “doing local theology” in the proceedings of our General Conference. Clearly, the local theology of United Methodists in Liberia or Russia is going to differ from the local theology of a United Methodist Church in urban America.

Because of Covid-19, our denomination’s General Conference which was scheduled for May 2020 has been rescheduled for September 2022, and there is a growing likelihood that our denomination will split.

2. *Attendance and Worship.* As is the case in many Euro-tribal churches across the West, attendance at Orion UMC has been declining. The primary reason is the loss of conservative members due to death and relocation. Another reason is that members who have remained active in the church have not been as active as earlier generations were, as they are bombarded with alternative activities such as their children’s Sunday sports programs. This would be consistent with the modernity’s wager, for if we as humans think life can be lived without God, then we certainly have no need of church, either. Orion’s decline in attendance also reflects the “great unraveling” of which Alan Roxburgh writes.³³ As one might expect, this

³¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, Nashville, TN, United Methodist Publishing House, 2016, ¶304.3.

³² Sedmak, Clemens, *Doing Local Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

³³ Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 6.

unraveling not only impacted our attendance; it also impacted church finances. This created no small amount of anxiety in the congregation.

One loss in particular has contributed to that anxiety. In October 2017, long-time member Norma died. Her financial support of the church accounted for roughly seven percent of the church's annual General Fund expenses, and since she did not include the church in her estate planning, when she died, her financial support disappeared.

3. *Missions.* Orion UMC has long considered itself to be a mission-minded church. This came into focus a couple of years before I was appointed pastor. There were two women in our congregation, Bernadette and Marlene, who traveled to Africa University in Zimbabwe. The university had been the focus of much denominational attention, especially in our Conference.

In Africa, Bernadette and Marlene became acquainted with two students, Ezekiel and Micah, both from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The two women decided to help underwrite the cost of their education at Africa University as they were pursuing their bachelor's degree. Later, Ezekiel and Micah followed a call into the ministry and enrolled at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary (GETS) in Evanston, Illinois, and Bernadette and Marlene continued their financial support of the two students. Both men were quite enthusiastic about serving God and it was not long before the pastor who preceded me in Orion became enthralled with their story and the two became frequent visitors to the church.

Cultural practices soon came into play. Micah's family in the Congo found a bride for him in preparation for what was to be an arranged marriage. However, none of the parties who were involved could afford the airfare, so my predecessor launched a fundraising campaign within the congregation dubbed, "Bring the Bride." It was an exercise in "doing for": sizable

funds were raised, and the bride-to-be was flown to America where the couple met and were united in marriage.

Beneath all of the support for the African students, however, was the assumption in our congregation that after the two students had earned their master's degree, they would return to the Congo because that is what the two had communicated to their benefactors as well as the rest of the congregation. After all, it seemed like the Democratic Republic of the Congo was the "real mission field" and that was where they should apply their gifts and graces in ministry. Instead, in 2008 (two years after I was appointed to Orion), the pair graduated from GETS, applied for and received an appointment to churches in the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Bernadette and Marlene were thrilled, as was Marlene's husband Jack. After all, they had established a relationship with the two and as the years passed, they would be able to visit and share in family milestones such as the births and baptisms of their babies. Indeed, Ezekiel and Micah had become family to the Bernadette, Marlene, and Jack. And years later, after a marriage had been arranged for Ezekiel, he and his wife named their first son Jack to honor one of his benefactors.

On the other hand, the rest of the congregation did not share that same excitement. In fact, many of them felt as though they had been duped by the two Congolese students because they did not return to Africa after graduation.

This long episode highlights several theologies. First, if we take the intent of the two students at face value, that they originally intended to return to the homeland after receiving their education, then we see in their call the unpredictability of the Spirit's leading. They fully intended to return to the Congo when they completed their studies, but the Spirit had other plans in mind for them. I can identify with that: I entered the ministry in 1980 as an Assemblies of God

pastor and I believed I would always be one. However, the Spirit had other plans, so in 1993, the Spirit led me into the United Methodist Church.

Second, the experience of the African students demonstrated the “flatness” of the global mission field. The old paradigm was that the West sent missionaries to Third World nations, thereby “doing for” them. That in itself is reflective of modernity because with its origins in Europe, the modern imagination has always privileged the culture and religion of the West over other cultures and their religions, even if the religion in question was Christianity. However, as Ezekiel’s and Micah’s experience would indicate, there is a new paradigm emerging in which the missionaries go from everywhere to everywhere; the West is just as much of a mission field as any Third World nation might be. Indeed, Western nations may be more of a mission field than, say, the Congo. Additionally, pastors and other church leaders may be so steeped in modernity and Western culture that they may be unaware of the need that exists right in their own community. Pastors and church leaders may need the Spirit’s infusion of the gifts and graces which might come from places like the Congo. Orion UMC witnessed firsthand that reversal of mission paradigms, much to the chagrin of many.

Third, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, this episode revealed our congregation’s posture of “doing for,” especially when it came to the “Bring the Bride” campaign. The congregation was happy to “do for” Micah and his wife, but their expectations were attached to their support. Namely, they expected the couple to eventually return home to the Congo, as our congregation believed that was where the “real need” existed.

Undergirding this sentiment is the further assumption that “we” Westerners do not need missional help the way “they” in Africa need it. Moreover, we do not need it from two students from the Congo. While no one ever voiced that sentiment so blatantly to me, it seemed to be part

of the culture of our congregation. It certainly revealed our modern American value for independence.

At about the same time, I detected a backlash in our congregation with regard to our investment in Africa; it happened to coincide with our Bishop's then-emphasis on Liberia. As one might guess, when the Bishop introduces a new emphasis, it usually includes opportunities for giving in a special offering. However, I found that whenever I mentioned Africa, I created a mild division in our congregation. On the one hand were those who felt duped by the Congolese students: they wanted to redirect more of our missions giving to local endeavors such as the Orion Area Food Pantry. At the very least, they asked that we at least direct more of our missions money to ministries closer to home.

On the other hand, those who continued in their support of Micah and Ezekiel—financial and otherwise—felt that the need was so great in Africa that we should invest more heavily in it. One member of our missions team even suggested cashing out our endowments and sending the money to Liberia. It should be noted, however, that both sides in the debate regarded money as a weapon to be wielded, and both sides were willing to exert their power by the way they spent money.

The church did not cash out its endowments; if it had, it still would have represented a “doing for” approach. Indeed, Bernadette and Marlene's support of the two students began as a “doing for” approach, but as time passed, it increasingly evolved into a “being with” approach.

Robert Schreiter, in his forward to *Doing Local Theology* contends, “theology is simply a mindfulness of God, an attentiveness to the action of God in creation.”³⁴ Thus, one chooses to do theology just as one chooses to be mindful of God's action. Bernadette and Marlene chose to be

³⁴ Sedmak, vii.

attentive to the action of God in Africa. Ezekiel and Micah chose to be attentive to the action of God in Iowa, much to the consternation of those who wished to be attentive to the action of God locally, at least by “doing for” if not by “being with.” Each of the three parties—Bernadette and Marlene; Ezekiel and Micah; and those who wanted to direct funds to local ministries—believed they understood the action of God and were acting accordingly. However, it appears more likely that each party was acting according to their own context and their own individual beliefs.

At about that time, Lynne, who would eventually serve on my praxis team, suggested a more balanced plan for giving to missions. As a result, our missions committee created a “Mission of the Month” program, selecting a different mission emphasis or agency for each month. Some missions of the month were focused locally, others globally. Some months featured United Methodist concerns; others were ecumenical. The plan has been well-received by the congregation, although it admittedly represented an approach to mission of “doing for” because it only distributed money to ministries.

In their book, *The Art of Neighboring*, Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon expound on Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” noting,

Today as we read the parable, we go straight for loving the neighbor on the side of the road. Thus, we make a metaphor of the neighbors—a metaphor that doesn’t include the person who lives next door to us. If we don’t take Jesus’ command literally, then we turn the Great Commandment into nothing more than a metaphor. We have a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, and our communities are changed—but only metaphorically, of course. In other words, nothing changes.³⁵

Sending money to a mission agency is certainly a blessing to that agency. However, sending money becomes the metaphor of which Pathak and Runyon spoke. It did not afford the church or the givers the opportunity of joining with the agencies they were supporting. That is

³⁵Pathak, Jay and Runyon, Dave, *The Art of Neighboring*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012, 35f.

not to say that joining with those agencies is impossible; Bernadette and Marlene demonstrated that it can be done.

4. *Financial Culture and Practices.* Orion UMC has always considered itself to be a generous congregation. Its support of the pastor has always included a financial package that has been a bit higher than our Conference's average for a church of its size. Moreover, the church has always been generous in its support of missions, disaster relief, and benevolences. The latter is especially indicative of a church rooted in a culture of "doing for" rather than "being with." Giving money is, after all, a way of "doing for" without having to "be with."

In 2006, Orion UMC became the recipient of a sizeable endowment which reinforced its ability to give large sums of money to benevolences and ministries beyond the local church. Proceeds from the endowment enabled the church to carry on with its financial commitments for several years. However, as more members pass away, proceeds from endowments have not been able to keep up with the loss of income resulting from those deaths. That has further contributed to a sense of instability and the congregation has been forced to "tighten its belt." That is something which is not comfortable for the congregation.

5. *Culture of Property.* Despite the unraveling which I have described, Orion UMC's endowment was able to position the church to expand in ways which previously the congregation had only dreamed of doing. In 2012 and 2013, Orion UMC purchased two adjacent properties—one each year—and the properties were eventually transformed into an activity center and parking lot. The total project was completed without incurring any debt at a cost of \$503,000. This included the purchase of the property, the demolition of a house, the renovation of a large metal building, and the completion of a parking lot. Distributions from the church's endowment funds covered \$218,000 of the total cost; had it not been for the endowment, it is

doubtful the church would have been able to complete the project debt-free. Once it was renovated, the metal building was named the Methodist Activity Center, or simply “the MAC.”

My praxis team discussed the church’s culture of “doing for” in the context of the MAC, for it created a cultural shift for the congregation by making them more mindful of the community. Orion has limited public gathering spaces and the renovation of the MAC created a space that comfortably holds 200. Prior to the pandemic, several church activities were held there, but even more significantly, the MAC was open to a number of community organizations as well as private parties. That does not mean the congregation fully embraced its new role as host to the community because “outside groups” forget to turn off lights, scratch doors, break hula hoops, and let helium balloons soar into the rafters. The use of the phrase “outside groups” is intentional because it conveys an “us and them” mindset which is counterproductive to a paradigm of “being with.”

Carol served as the architect for the five-year project. She is a member of the church; she also served on my praxis team, so she was present when the team observed that our church had many reasons for taking on the renovation project, though not all of them were noble. For example, some of our church members feared that someone else might acquire the property and turn it into something they would not want next door to the church. However, there was also a desire to stay relevant in the community by creating a safe space for sports, games, meals, and other public gatherings. In other words, my praxis team saw the MAC in missional terms. They believed—as I believed—that the MAC would help us to reach out to our community, although it is something we did *for* the community, rather than *with* the community.

After renovation was complete, the board of trustees and the administrative council adopted a set of policies and a fee schedule which determined *how* the members of the

community might utilize the MAC as well as other church facilities. This generated a lengthy discussion in my praxis team because we feared that our policies might hinder our witness to our community because of the rather high fees which were set. My praxis team felt that the MAC had been renovated as an outreach tool rather than as a source of income.

The MAC was not the only way in which Orion UMC's culture of property was connected to its financial culture. For years, church trustees and administrative council members knew that they would soon have to replace a fifty-year-old boiler. Motivated by the fear that it might completely fail in the dead of winter, in 2018, the church council accepted a bid to replace it with a new boiler system. This affirmed a theology of constantly maintaining and upgrading its facilities. However, there was more to this than just replacing a boiler. Not only did that action underscore an theology of care for church facilities, it also revealed a theology of fiscal conservatism. During a lengthy discussion in one church council meeting, one board member declared, "We are a church. We're supposed to operate by faith. I think we should go ahead and replace the boiler this year and trust God that when it comes time to pay the final bill, the money will be there." The council ultimately agreed, but only after they had calculated from whence the money would come. Once they were satisfied that they could pay for the project, they proceeded with it "by faith," underscoring a local theology of *trust God, but always keep an eye on your bank balances and never, ever get into debt.*

Several of our leaders ascribed to the belief that the church was a business, which is an image drawn from Wall Street rather than the scriptures. Business models are concerned with money and profit, and people may be expendable for the sake of the "bottom line." A church which does not follow a business model will privilege people—including the poor—above money, and profits will be earned in heaven, not on earth. The "church is a business" model is a

belief that is rooted in our Western, modern culture, and I challenged that belief, contending that nowhere does the Bible maintain that the church is a business. Without question, churches must follow certain good business practices, but the Bible presents the church as a living organism³⁶ rather than as a corporate organization. The church's relationship to the state is that of a business; but its relationship to God is that of a people – God's own. Perhaps the best parallel is with marriage: as far as the State of Illinois is concerned, marriage is a contract. But as far as God is concerned, marriage is a covenant.

The church is far more than an organization; it is a living organism and Christ is its head. He is a part of us, and we are a part of him. As parts of that spiritual organism, we are connected to one another, not with bones and sinew, but through the blood of Jesus Christ. And we maintain that connection and partake of his blood in Holy Communion. I want our church to have good business practices, but I also want to free it from being locked in a Western, modernistic imagination of church as a business.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23.

CHAPTER 2: THEOLOGIES

People, whether in communities or in churches, are formed in part by their geographical and historical contexts, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter. Additionally, people, whether in communities or churches, are also formed by theologies. Some theologies are derived from the scriptures and an understanding of God's nature. Other theologies are handed down as traditions or are derived from the teachings of others. Regardless of the means, theologies, especially in these modern times, are born out of personal preferences and beliefs, especially in the church. As noted earlier, that was the case with Bernadette and Marlene, Ezekiel and Micah, and Orion UMC parishioners who wanted to direct mission funds to local ministries. Context and personal preference determined their practice of theology. It is also true when the paradigm of "doing for" is compared to the paradigm of "being with," as the former is reflective of modernity. As will be demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, the paradigm of "being with" is more closely aligned with God's nature and actions.

A. Missional Theology and Ecclesiology. Early in my career and for many years afterwards, all I thought I really needed to know about the mission of the church was the Great Commission, especially as it is found in Matthew 28:19-20. However, as society changes, as Christendom continues to unravel, and as the church is increasingly marginalized in society, I am finding that what I really need to know about mission is the nature of the Triune God's relationship to creation. This is seen in the opening words of Genesis, where the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, implying a caring watchfulness over the earth, even though at this point the earth is described as "formless and empty."³⁷ Then God speaks and order is brought to the chaos as the earth is made habitable for humankind. One might argue that in the first account of

³⁷ Genesis 1:1-2.

creation, Genesis 1:1-2:3, God is “doing for” humankind by speaking order into the chaos of the earth. That is certainly God’s prerogative. However, in the process of seemingly “doing for” humanity by speaking order into chaos, God created space for God to “be with” humanity.

God’s prerogative to “be with” humanity is clearer in the second account of creation, Genesis 2:4-25. God does not simply stand aside and speak the world into existence. Rather, God opts to “be with” humankind: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a human being.”³⁸ Later, God is found once again with the human being as they tour the garden together. Later still, God chooses to be with humankind by creating the woman out of the man. In the process, God was also with the woman, creating a beautiful symbiotic relationship between man and woman: first, woman comes out of man; henceforth, man will come out of woman.

In Job 38-41, God reveals to Job that not only is God with humans, but God is also with creation itself, by marking the dimensions of the earth’s foundation, walking in the recesses of the deep, loosening Orion’s belt and watching the doe as she bears her fawn.³⁹

The ultimate example of God “being with” humanity is the Incarnation, in which the Son of God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”⁴⁰ Christopher James notes that the Incarnation is the “paradigmatic expression of the *missio Dei*” whereby God became one of us, lived among us, and moved into our neighborhood, “taking a self-emptying posture of radical solidarity” among us.⁴¹ In other words, *mission* originates with God because God sent Christ into the world. Consequently, James rightly concludes that—

³⁸ Genesis 2:7.

³⁹ Job 38:4, 16, 31; 39:1.

⁴⁰ John 1:14.

⁴¹ James, Christopher B., *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 143-144.

—God—not the church—is the primary agent of mission. The recognition that mission emerges from the nature of the Godhead leads to the further implication that the mission belongs to and is enacted by God. The mission is not ours but God’s.⁴²

Specifically, Christ made his dwelling in the Roman province of Israel, among ordinary people such as Simon, Andrew, James and John: “He pointed twelve that they might *be with* him...”⁴³ Jesus ate with common folk such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The familiar story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:39-42 is a story of both “being with” and “doing for.” At first blush, it would appear as though Mary is “being with” Jesus while Martha is “doing for” Jesus because Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said” (vs. 39). However, a better understanding of the story is that Jesus is the one who was “being with” and he was “being with” both Mary and Martha as well as the others in the home who were present that day. Yet only Mary responds to Jesus’ invitation for her to be with him. Martha, on the other hand, “was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” (vs. 40). In other words, Martha was caught up with “doing for” to the point that she missed Christ’s invitation to “be with” him. Consequently, Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen “what is better.” Believers who strive to be like Christ would do well to strive to “be with” Jesus.

Lest we be too hard on Martha, we see something of a reversal of roles in John 11 following the death of Lazarus. There, Jesus comes to awaken Lazarus and, in effect, to “be with” both Lazarus and his sisters. Note that it is Martha who chooses that “better place” with Jesus in which she hears him declare, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 141.

⁴³ Mark 3:14; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ John 11:25.

Martha, in turn, professes her belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Meanwhile, Mary is home, although she is not “doing for.” Rather, she appears to be consumed by her grief.

After Christ was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead, he gave the Great Commission which not only reveals the trinitarian nature of God, but also informs the missional leader. In Matthew’s version, Christ’s followers are to baptize using the trinitarian formula: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In John’s version of the Great Commission, the Risen Christ passes through the locked doors of the place where the disciples had gathered. Standing among them, he says, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”⁴⁵

Thus, mission begins with God the Father, for, as Roxburgh observes, “God is a missionary God...God is a sending God. This is most clearly seen in the Incarnation, when God sent God’s son for the life of the world.”⁴⁶ Roxburgh then references *The Missional Church in Perspective* where authors Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile introduce the notion of *participation*:

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ means that God is not only the one who sends, but God is the one who, first and foremost, participates in the world. God’s sending can only be understood when paired with God’s participation in God’s own mission.⁴⁷

Thus, God through Christ took up residence in the neighborhood of humanity by becoming flesh. In overcoming the power of the grave, Christ did for humanity what humanity could not do for itself: human effort cannot conquer sin or death. Only Christ could accomplish that; Christ came to “do for.” I suppose Jesus could have appeared on the earth at, say, age thirty-three with no prior history on earth. He could have been crucified and been raised from the dead and opened the way of salvation while bypassing the Virgin Mary and Bethlehem’s manger. But

⁴⁵ John 21:21.

⁴⁶ Roxburgh, Alan, *Joining God*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, quoting Van Gelder, Craig and Zscheile, Dwight, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011, 106-111.

Christ did not do that. Instead, his “doing for” arose from his “being with.” Moreover, his “being with” included his suffering and death whereby Christ suffered and died just as we suffer and die.

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile maintain that the “Incarnation is God’s ultimate missional participation in human life.”⁴⁸ In other words, the purpose of God was not just to *save* humanity; the purpose of God was to *be with* humanity, and for that to happen, the Incarnation was a necessity. There could be no shortcuts to Calvary. Thus, Jesus began life on earth in much the same way as all humans begin life. He came to live as we live, and die as we die, but only to be raised from the grave in a “spiritual body.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, Christ’s act of “doing for” humanity by redeeming those who would be saved opened the way for Christ to “be with” the saved in eternal life.

And that brings us back to John 21. After Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” he then breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Thus, mission begins with the Incarnation of Jesus, sent by the Father to “be with” humanity in their struggles with sin and death. Mission continues as the Risen Christ sends the Holy Spirit upon his missional partners, equipping them to “be with” their communities in their various daily struggles as they embody the love of God.

Christopher James adds that if God is the primary agent of a mission, “then the church can anticipate that God is at work in every context in which it might find itself.”⁵⁰ What James is describing is what Leslie Newbigin identifies as “the prevenient work of the Spirit.”⁵¹ James further observes that this was an important shift in international mission thinking. Rather than

⁴⁸ Van Gelder and Zscheile, 114.

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:46.

⁵⁰ James, 143.

⁵¹ Weston, Paul, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Reader*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006, 84. C.f. 81.

viewing non-Western countries as “spiritual wastelands” inhabited by heathens “they came to recognize that in all the lands to which they had been sent, God had already been at work...”⁵²

For the missional leader, the question then becomes, How does the biblical narrative of the Triune God’s dealings with humanity lead us to understand what it means to be God’s missional people? The answer appears to be in understanding what it means to “be with” others as God has been with us—the people of God—and is now with and present to all of creation, including our neighbors. God is not one isolated person. Rather, God is Three who are also One. In other words, the Trinity is communal. The Father is wholly and completely with the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly and completely with the Father and the Spirit; and the Spirit is wholly and completely with the Father and the Son. There have been some characterizations of the God of the Old Testament as being judgmental or harsh when compared to some characterizations of Jesus in the New Testament which portray Christ as being more gentle and more loving. But God—and the love of God—are the same in both covenants.

If Trinitarian love involves “being with,” it is natural that the extension of Trinitarian love toward the world would take shape as God’s “being with” us in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. But the love which drove Christ to take up residency in human flesh is the same love which drove the Father to send his Son. And it is the same love which is now manifest in the Holy Spirit who has been sent to “be with” us.

The Old Testament story is one of God coming to “be with” humanity. Christ was with God at creation. God was with Adam and Eve in Eden. God was with Noah and his family prior to, during, and after the Flood. God was with Abram, making covenant with the patriarch “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”⁵³ Thus we see the beginning of one of the

⁵² James, 143.

⁵³ Genesis 17:7.

recurring themes of the Old Testament, “So you will be my people, and I will be your God,”⁵⁴ implying that God would be with God’s people forever. Indeed, the Revelator employs that theme in Revelation 21:3:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and God will dwell with them. They will be God’s people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”⁵⁵

God was with Moses and Joshua. God, in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, was with the Hebrews in Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. God—or perhaps Jesus—was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace and with Daniel in the lions’ den. And Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.”⁵⁶ Isaiah well captures the love of God by declaring, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”⁵⁷ Affirming that God is love is more than affirming a theological tenet; it is also affirming that God is with us. According to Orthodox Theologian John Zizioulas, that is the essence of *communion*. Quoting Zizioulas, Graham Hill notes that,

The phrase “God is love” means that God is constituted by these personal relationships. God is communion: love is fundamental to his being, not an addition to it...If we took away the communion of the Trinity to make God a unit, God would not be communion and therefore would not be love.⁵⁸

God is a community of love. Because God is love, God’s love has spilled out to create the universe and all that is therein. But God did not stop there. God sent Jesus to be with us and this “with us” Savior sends us, saying—

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

⁵⁴ Jeremiah 30:22.

⁵⁵ Revelation 21:3.

⁵⁶ Isaiah 7:14.

⁵⁷ Isaiah 31:3.

⁵⁸ Hill, Graham, *Salt, Light, and a City*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR, 2017, 267.

everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.⁵⁹

Thus, to be missional is to “be with” others, just as God through Jesus and the Spirit is with us. “Being with” is not something that happens in a moment; rather, it happens in community, just as God is a Triune community of love. In John 13:34f, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another as the key to their witness to the world. In doing so, God’s missional partners “live as a contrast people and thus...draw the surrounding nations into covenant with God.”⁶⁰ According to Michael Goheen, living as a contrast community is dwelling in the “organic mode” of mission, which is distinct from the “sending mode” of mission.⁶¹ The latter suggests a top-down or a “doing for” mission whereas the former suggests a “being with” mission. In our Western society, entering into that organic mode is no easy task as our culture is steeped in individualism and independence. It does not come by simply attending a church or a Bible study. True spiritual formation rather than mere programming is required. Inagrace Dietterich writes,

Missional communities are called to represent the compassion, justice, and peace of the reign of God. The distinctive characteristic of such communities is that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains them. Their identity (who they are), their character (how they are), their motivation (why they are), and their vocation (what they do) are theological, and thus missional. That is, they are not formed solely by human intentions and efforts, individual or collective, but instead by God’s empowering presence.⁶²

Secondly, the Trinity is missional; the “sending mode” referred to by Goheen begins with God, for mission originates with God rather than with any human agency. If the church is to participate in mission, it must participate in a mission which God has initiated and sustains.

⁵⁹ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁶⁰ Goheen, Michael, *A Light to the Nations*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011, 122.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 149.

⁶² Guder, Darrell, editor, *Missional Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, 142.

Guder notes that “Barth reminded his hearers that the concept ‘mission’ was used in the ancient church to describe the interrelations of the Trinity as a process of sending: the Father sending the Son, the Father and the Son sending the Spirit.”⁶³

To be missional, then, is to not only be in an organic mode as a contrast community of love for one another, but it is also to be in the “sent” mode, thereby becoming God’s missional partners. The Father sent the Son; together they sent the Spirit. Those whom God loves, God sends and the divine community joins with God in God’s own mission. As we yield ourselves to God, we come to understand that we are foreigners and aliens in a foreign land. This is a radical idea in Western culture where Christianity has been so intertwined with the culture that for many, the two have become one. In other words, Newbigin observes that in their presentation of the gospel, Western missionaries have often confused culturally conditioned perceptions with the substance of the gospel, and thus wrongfully claimed divine authority for the relativities of one culture.⁶⁴ In the process, non-Western cultures are disrespected.

Thirdly, the Trinity is creational. In the beginning, God created all that is. Indeed, the creation should be understood as the fruit of God’s love—the creation of creatures and persons and a place in which they could be with God. Being missional, then, means embracing God’s creation and extending loving care for it. Paul wrote, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”⁶⁵ In the Old Testament, the prophet Jonah was sent by God to warn the wicked city of Nineveh of impending judgment. In response, the people of Nineveh repented. Jonah certainly cannot be accused of extending loving care to Nineveh; nonetheless, because of his warning, not only were a hundred and twenty

⁶³ Guder, Darrell, *Called to Witness*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015, 8.

⁶⁴ Weston, 107.

⁶⁵ Romans 8:22.

thousand people spared, but “also many animals.”⁶⁶ Thus, as God’s mission embraces more and more people, creation also shares in God’s mercy. Dwight Zscheile writes,

The Trinity is the key to engaging theologically with creation and culture. In deep trinitarian collaboration, God creates the world and all that is in it, calls a people (Israel) to show forth God’s vision for human community, enters fully into human culture in the incarnation to redeem humanity and actively moves to renew, inspire, rebuke, reconcile, and bring creation to its fulfillment. The world is by no means godforsaken, but rather charged with God's presence and movement and redeemed at the greatest cost: the cross.⁶⁷

If a person or a people are to be missional, then they are going to care for creation. But they are also going to be fruitful, just as God’s creation is fruitful. Throughout scripture, Christ’s missional partners are called to be fruitful. This is evident in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23 where the sower scattered seed indiscriminately and without judgment, yet knowing that a portion of the seed would bear abundant fruit. But how are God’s missional partners to be fruitful? Drawing on John 15, the key to fruitfulness is to abide in Christ. Jesus declares,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love... My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.⁶⁸

We cannot push the fruit out of our branches; we can only abide in Christ and let the fruit develop naturally and organically in our lives. Furthermore, when we abide in Christ, we abide in love, thus loving people into the kingdom of God. Those people, then, become the “fruit” of our loving concern. That is no more intended to objectify converts as fruit than John 4:35 was intended to objectify Samaritan converts as the “harvest.” Moreover, the scriptures speak of a variety of ways in which a missional person might be fruitful. In Galatians 5:22, fruitfulness is

⁶⁶ Jonah 4:11.

⁶⁷ Van Gelder and Zscheile, 136.

⁶⁸ John 15:1-2, 4, 9.

found in one's attitude and character; in Hebrews 13:15, fruitfulness is found in our speech; and in Matthew 25:14-30, fruitfulness may be found in making wise investments.

B. Theology of Leadership Among the People of God. Despite circumstances in which God “did for” humanity, God’s ultimate purpose was to “be with” humanity, whether in the Garden of Eden, the Incarnational and salvific work of Christ, or in our eternal home. In this section, the paradigms of “doing for” and “being with” will continue to be compared; however, they will now be compared in light of my leadership practices over the course of my ministry, and further in light of my learnings as I’ve journeyed through *Stepping Out* with my research team. As will be demonstrated in this section, the paradigm of “being with” is preferable and more effective than the paradigm of “doing for.”

When I was appointed to Orion UMC in 2006, I brought with me certain leadership theologies and practices which had been long embedded in me. I am the son of a businessman. Together, my father and uncle owned a meat market in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and for many years I worked there on Saturdays. My father modeled an ethic of working hard; he often worked seven days a week. My father was responsible for every aspect of the business: if something went wrong, it was up to him or my uncle to fix it. His leadership practices reflected the practices of modernity’s wage and were imprinted on me from an early age, and I brought that imagination of leadership with me when I was appointed pastor of Orion UMC. Perhaps the best example of that imagination came in 2017 when it was apparent to me as well as our church council that attendance was declining as older parishioners died and a few younger parishioners moved away. With the loss of members, the church also lost income. Clearly, Orion UMC was unraveling.

I turned to Clayton Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma*⁶⁹ where the author suggested trying little experiments which had a minimal outlay of capital and in which the risk of failure was present, but only minimally so. I decided to launch a Thursday evening worship service to try to fix the problem. Prayer was an important factor for me as I discerned whether or not to take such a step; however, what most influenced me was the fact that a colleague in a nearby community had already launched a midweek service, and to great success. That suggested that when I went to God in prayer, I had likely already made up my mind as to the course of action I should take. After all, I had a plan for stopping the unraveling.

I recognize that am a deeply committed United Methodist pastor; nonetheless, my basic framework for leading the people of God had been formed by a paradigm which had come from the business world;⁷⁰ it was a paradigm of “doing for” and God was merely sought to apply a divine “rubber stamp” approval. Certainly seeking God's approval is useful. Unfortunately, though, as Mark Lau Branson and Alan Roxburgh point out in their book *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions*, “God has become little more than a useful resource for all the making, planning, and projecting of futures that shape much in current modes of Christian leadership.”⁷¹

Like my colleague's experience, midweek worship succeeded at Orion UMC. However, I had assumed it would attract those who regularly worshipped on Sundays, but who might have missed a service. Instead, most of the people who began worshipping on Thursdays were those who had not been active in our church previously; nor had they been active in any church. Thus, our Thursday worship experiment created a new community of believers who shared in worship and fellowship together. We averaged twenty-two in attendance and generated a new income

⁶⁹ Christensen, Clayton, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, New York: Harper, 1997.

⁷⁰ Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions*, 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

stream which helped offset the losses incurred through the deaths of those who regularly contributed to the church. By launching a midweek service, I was applying a “fix” to an unraveling organization in the hopes of restoring it to some form of health which would be easily measured by counting the nickels and the noses, and eventually adding those numbers to both my weekly and yearly reports.

Branson and Roxburgh note one of the characteristics of modern Western churches is their “technical rationality” which includes the development of “professionals trained in the best methods of the social sciences to manage and control the systems and organizations for which they were trained to lead” which is the world in which nearly all Christians leaders have been “professionalized.”⁷² I certainly fit that description. As midweek services developed over the months, I became more adept at employing the best practices which would enhance our worship experiences. For example, the church’s pipe organ had been digitalized a few years earlier and that meant I was able to have our organist pre-record hymns on Sunday morning for playback on Thursday night. This helped keep costs down, as one of my goals was to produce a service that was cost-neutral for the church: I did not want the church to have to pay an organist to play on Thursday night.

Launching a Thursday evening worship service was not inherently the wrong thing to do, except that I had operated from a modern paradigm of “doing for.” Had I not operated from such a paradigm, I might have still arrived at a midweek service, or perhaps some other form of a midweek gathering of neighbors. However, if I were to function from a paradigm centered on God’s agency, then I would have to divest myself of my “doing for” imagination. I would have to divest oneself of the modern notion that leadership—even in the church—can be exercised

⁷² Ibid., 3.

without God. Instead, leadership—especially in the church—must begin with the conviction that God is the primary agent active in the world today.⁷³ If God is the primary agent active in the world today, then it behooves the Christian leader to join God in what God is doing. Contrast that to the imagination of prayerfully asking God to rubber stamp what the Christian leader is doing: that puts the leader in the position of being the primary agent and God is simply put in the position of joining the human agent in whatever he or she is doing, which is a modern imagination.

Christian leadership divested of the modern imagination, then, begins with paying attention to God. Branson and Roxburgh use the metaphor of “waking up” to God’s agency in the world.⁷⁴ Waking up begins with “observing and describing how assumptions currently shape us.”⁷⁵ In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul warns against being shaped by “the patterns of this world.”⁷⁶ Modernity is one of the patterns of this world. Eugene Peterson phrases Paul’s warning this way: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”⁷⁷ That describes a practice of waking up and attending to God as the primary agent in the world, for waking up begins with recognizing that the Spirit of God is already at work ahead of us “in the local.”⁷⁸

One of the most important waking practices is paying attention to, or dwelling in, the Word of God, thereby allowing the Spirit to challenge and shape the Christian leader through the Word. This forms the basis for practices of discernment as Christian leaders—note the plural—

⁷³ Ibid., 11, 40.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁶ Romans 12:2.

⁷⁷ Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*: Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002.

⁷⁸ Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions*, 10.

engage in practices of “continually moving between acting and reflecting within a posture of listening to God.”⁷⁹ This is done in community; the Christian leader ought not work alone in this action/reflection process.

For discernment to be engaged, all of our actions—all of our experiences among friends and neighbors, in church and work, at home and in civic life—get brought into conversations with reflective practices (including worship, prayer, silence, daily office, dwelling the Word, etc.) concerning our actions and experiences. This interactive work becomes a continuous spiral: actions, then reflections, then more actions, and additional reflections...as a means of *doing local theology*.⁸⁰

According to Branson and Roxburgh, in an age in which the church is unraveling, Christian leaders are called to dwell in the local with God’s people, discerning God’s agency in their neighborhoods and communities and participating with God in them.⁸¹ In doing so, Christian leaders keep in mind the basic practices which are connected to God and neighbor. They include hospitality, witness, love expressed in deeds, and attention to orphans, foreigners, and the poor.⁸²

The “continuous spiral” of actions and reflections, coupled with dwelling in the Word, are central to the conversations, experiments, liturgies, and prayers utilized by the *Stepping Out* curriculum.

Branson and Roxburgh’s “reflective practices” combined with their “basic practices which are connected to God and neighbor” are important because all those practices connect with the means of grace, and the means of grace are important disciplines within Methodism. The means of grace include practices of piety as well as practices of mercy. The means of grace are also practiced individually as well as in community. Works of piety which may be practiced

⁷⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁸¹ Ibid., 192.

⁸² Ibid., 31n.

individually include reading, meditating, and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others. Works of mercy which may be practiced individually include visiting the sick and the imprisoned, feeding the hungry, and giving to the needs of others. Works of piety which may be practiced in community include sharing in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (or accountability to one another), and Bible study. Works of mercy which may be practiced communally include addressing the needs of the poor, seeking justice, and ending oppression and discrimination.⁸³

If we identify the means of grace with the practices identified above by Branson and Roxburgh, then we identify the means of grace as practices which enable believers to “join God in the local.” If that is true, then why is the Western church unraveling? Branson and Roxburgh would respond that the means of grace have been practiced with a modern imagination and without awakening to the primary agency of God. For the means of grace are not a strategy for fixing a broken church; they are simply a way of joining God in the local. Or, as Jesus said, the means of grace are practices by which we “abide” in Christ.⁸⁴

What Branson and Roxburgh add to the means of grace—which traditional Methodist theology does not—is the need for reflection and discernment, both individually, but more importantly, in community.

Christians leadership, then, is leading a group of believers on a journey of practices, reflections, and discernments which will enable the leader together with the group to abide in Christ. Since God, through the Spirit, is already at work in the local ahead of any human agency, any leader or group that abides in Christ will thereby join God in the local.

⁸³ Maddox, Randy, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, Nashville, TN, 1994, 192ff.

⁸⁴ John 15:4, King James Version.

Earlier in this section, I described why I decided to launch a midweek worship service. This was an important leadership initiative on my part and it eventually prompted an important discussion with my research team. Thus, I will come back to midweek worship in Chapter 4 in the context of describing what I have learned about leadership through conversations with my research team as well as through personal reflections following those conversations.

C. Local/Contextual Theology. Chapter 1 addressed how people, communities, and churches—including Orion UMC—have been shaped by their *context*, especially in light of modernity. That modern context has led to a default paradigm of relating to the wider community by “doing for.” That default paradigm is not unique to Orion UMC; it may be found in countless Western Euro-tribal churches because all such churches have been formed by modernity. In this chapter, section A contrasted the modern human paradigm of “doing for” with God’s ultimate purpose of “being with” humanity in God’s Creation. Section B addressed the leadership implications of God’s ultimate purposes. In this section, I press the argument a bit further by addressing what it means for a Christian leader to “be with” a particular community or group by entering into a particular context.

Context is of critical importance. In Chapter 1, section C.1, I described United Methodism’s ongoing struggle with gender and sexuality issues. One of the reasons for our struggle is that the UMC is a global denomination trying to impose a global theology on vastly different cultures and contexts. A local theologian is going to have a very different ministry with a homosexual person in, say, Chicago, Illinois than he or she would have in one of the four United Methodist conferences in Russia because homosexuality is illegal in that nation. That is not to say the local theologian has the task of enforcing or even supporting the state in a context

where homosexuality is outlawed; rather, the local theologian must find a vastly different way of joining God with a homosexual person in Russia than he or she would in Chicago.

Moreover, context is not simply about *place*; context is also about *time*, as I observed during my fourteen years as pastor of Orion UMC where attitudes toward gender issues changed over time. People die. Some people move away. Some people discover that a loved one has come out as a gay or lesbian, and with the discovery, attitudes change.

Gender issues are not the only factors which inform context. Other contextual issues include, but are not limited to, racism, sexism, poverty, employment, education, and gentrification. In their book, *Churches, Culture and Leadership*, Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez draw from Craig Van Gelder who emphasizes the importance of a church's context:

Just as congregations are always contextual, their ministries are also always contextual: The Spirit leads congregations within particular contexts. Ministry can take place only in relationship to a particular context, and, as ministry takes place, congregations develop specific practices for that context. This means that all forms of ministry are going to bear the patterns and shape of the culture in which a congregation is ministering.⁸⁵

Van Gelder is speaking of the congregation; however, the same applies to the missional leader. In order to do local theology, then it is imperative for that leader to learn the local culture and minister within it, rather than import one's own culture into a given situation. Doing local theology is beautifully demonstrated by Vincent Donovan in his book, *Christianity Rediscovered*.⁸⁶ A Catholic priest and missionary who went to Tanzania in 1956, Donovan sought to minister to the Masai. When he arrived in that country, he found that the Catholic church had already been operating there for many years under a strategy of "doing for" which included the institutional education of children, medical care, and agricultural development.

⁸⁵ Branson, Mark Lau and Martinez, Juan, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011, 66.

⁸⁶ Donovan, Vincent, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978.

Unfortunately, Donovan noticed that the efforts of the church did not result in the growth of the church; few, if any Masai, were loyal to the church once their education was complete and they reached adulthood. Donovan believed that there was a more effective way of reaching the Masai. He proposed that he “just go and talk with them about God and the Christian message.”⁸⁷ In his method of “being with” the Masai, Donovan divided the territory into manageable sections so he could spend time in one community, dwelling with the Masai, before moving on to the next group. In the process, he did more than just learn their culture: he developed an appreciation for it. He adapted the message of the Gospel to their culture. Talking about God became Donovan’s sole focus.⁸⁸ However, conversations were not one-sided because Donovan took time to get to know the Masai as well as many of the subtleties of their culture. For example, he discovered that even though the Masai were herders, they held a low opinion of farming. In contrast, one of the foci of the institutional “doing for” Catholic church was on farming. He learned to appreciate the culture of the Masai and defined the Christian God as the “High God,”⁸⁹ a term familiar to the Masai. It would have been easy for him to condescend on the Masai, but Donovan gave no hint of condescension in his book. Instead, he saw the Masai as people of worth. Likewise, Clemens Sedmak emphasized the importance of doing theology with a respect for people, knowing that they matter.⁹⁰

Donovan established a practice of dwelling with one Masai community for about a year before inviting them into faith in Christ. He discovered that in their culture, an entire community was converted together and was baptized at the same time.⁹¹ His success was rooted partly in his

⁸⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁰ Sedmak, 33.

⁹¹ Donovan, 67, 70.

willingness to work outside of the institutional structure of the Catholic Church and going out to dwell among the people. Yet in doing so, he remained loyal to the Catholic Church.

One of the interesting aspects of Donovan's experience is that initially he planned to simply go and talk with the Masai about God and the Christian message.⁹² However, whatever talking he did was predicated on *listening* to the Masai. In other words, Donovan planned to talk, but instead had to listen. Talk came later.

Clemans Sedmak continues the conversation in *Doing Local Theology* by maintaining that doing theology with people implies being with them in their local situation and getting to know the details of their lives.⁹³ He adds that everyone—believer and nonbeliever alike—does theology by asking “fundamental questions” about God.⁹⁴ Often such questions are rooted in our own woundedness. Sedmak writes, “We do theology as wounded people, sometimes because of our wounds.”⁹⁵ That does not mean that Christians are to enter into such situations with the goal of healing those who have been spiritually or emotionally wounded. Such a tact suggests a paradigm of “doing for” the wounded. Moreover, healing is God’s work, not ours.

God wants to heal our wounds without making them magically disappear. The wounds are still there, like the wounds of the risen Lord. But they might become origins of growth and springs of new life... We do theology because we hope that wounds may be the source of strength, that the cross may be the source of new life. That is why we need to be aware of our needs, and we need to see the wounds of our people.⁹⁶

If Donovan does local theology by entering into the culture, Sedmak does local theology by entering into the woundedness of the other. In both cases our theological task is simply to “be with” others and listen to them. We do so by being sensitive the Spirit who may nudge us to say

⁹² Ibid., 13, 18.

⁹³ Sedmak, 3

⁹⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

or do something which might provide further comfort and support. However, we ought not feel compelled to offer theological answers because doing theology does not mean that we have all of the answers. After all, providing all the answers is reflective of the paradigm of “doing for.” On the other hand, by functioning within the paradigm of “being with,” we are better able to discern what we might say or do in any given situation. Moreover, if we do theology “out of the experience of the cross,”⁹⁷ we open the way for the Spirit to bring hope and healing to the wounded. The crucifixion of Christ is the way in which Christ chose to “be with us” in pain and death. And ultimately, the crucifixion leads us to our hope because Christ rose from the dead and opened the way to eternal life for us. Elsewhere Sedmak writes, “Doing theology entails cultivating the art of hope.”⁹⁸

Sedmak maintains that the main source of Christian tradition is the Bible. “In order to see the relevance of the Bible for present-day contexts we need to reappropriate biblical texts. In order to do that we need basic knowledge of the Bible and sensitivity toward the concrete concerns of a given biblical text.”⁹⁹

D. Theology of Formation and Practices. I am offering “being with” as a paradigm. That is to say, “being with” is a model or a pattern for Christian leaders to follow. However, leaders live into that pattern through their *practices*. This section addresses the importance of sacred practices in general as a means for entering into a paradigm of “being with.” Going back to the research question which shaped my thesis, without practices, the Christian leader cannot lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local . Therefore, an understanding of practices, and how they form the believer, is of critical

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 56.

importance if a Christian group is to be guided from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others.

Roxburgh argues that spiritual practices are critical for a Christian group to shift to a new narrative because formative practices “are shared actions that, when taken together, weave a way of life amongst a people....They are routinized actions shaping our lives in a certain direction.”¹⁰⁰ In his book, *Faithful Presence*, David Fitch devotes one chapter each to the spiritual practices of Eucharist, Reconciliation, Proclamation of the Gospel, Being with the “Least of These,” Being with Children, of Kingdom Prayer and the Fivefold Gifting of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.¹⁰¹ However, these practices are rooted in the faithful presence of God. Fitch’s premise is that:

Faithful presence names the reality that God is present in the world and that he uses a people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real amid the world’s struggles and pain. When the church is this faithful presence—¹⁰²

in other words, when the church is *being with* God—

God’s kingdom becomes visible, and the world is invited to join with God. Faithful presence is not only essential for our lives as Christians, it’s how God has chosen to change the world.¹⁰³

Faithful presence, then, does not only refer to God’s faithful presence in the world; it also refers to our faithful presence in the world as “Christ’s ambassadors.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Fitch maintains that God “uses a people faithful to his presence.” But how might we become that people who are faithfully present in their world? The answer lies in Christian practices. For example, the Holy Spirit’s presence is welcomed to the Eucharist table, “Making possible the living and real

¹⁰⁰ Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Fitch, David, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016, 153.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

presence of Christ at the meal” so that “the table shapes us to know and discern God’s presence among us and in the neighborhood.”¹⁰⁵ Fitch observes that “we’ve lost the capacity to be present in our society,” adding “Nonetheless, our world starves for presence.” He finds that “The world longs for Eucharist.”¹⁰⁶ It is the primary way in which Christ joins with us and it is how we might join with one another and with neighbor. Eucharist does not save us, but it does shape us. Thus, regularly observing the practice of communion shapes us to be present in our neighborhoods just as Christ is present with us in the breaking of bread and sharing of cup.

I do not interpret Fitch to mean that his list of holy practices is exhaustive. There are other holy practices for those who would be faithfully present in their local neighborhoods. In his forward to Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon’s book, *The Art of Neighboring*, Randy Frazee refers to *neighboring* as a practice.¹⁰⁷ To connect Frazee, Pathak and Runyon with Fitch, neighboring is simply how those authors understand and apply *faithful presence*. Likewise, there are other holy practices which shape us for mission and for being a faithful presence as Christ’s ambassadors among our neighbors.

Both Roxburgh and Fitch focused more on following sacred practices than on having right beliefs. In her book, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren offers that

Some Christians seem to think that we push back against the age primarily by believing correctly—by getting the right ideas in our heads or having a biblical worldview. While doctrinal orthodoxy is crucial in the Christian life, for the most part we are not primarily motivated by our conscious thoughts... We move in patterns that we have set over time, day by day. These habits and practices shape our loves, our desires, and ultimately who we are and what we worship.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Fitch, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Fitch, 47f.

¹⁰⁷ Pathak and Runyon, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Warren, Tish Harrison, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016, 29, 30.

Granted, anyone who has ever read the epistles of Paul knows that the church has always strived for right beliefs; however, one of my takeaways from Alan Kreider's *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* is that the early church grew because of its practices; it was not until the conversion of Constantine, the subsequent Council of Nicaea and the influence of Augustine that the church began to emphasize right beliefs over sacred practices. Kreider, like Roxburgh, Fitch, and Warren, calls Christians back to sacred practices.

The same is also true of Walter Brueggemann who calls the church back to the practice of observing Sabbath, a many-faceted practice which includes resisting the “liturgy of consumerism;” care for the land; resistance to all forms of violence; respect for neighbor; and countering the anxiety of a productionist social order.¹⁰⁹ Sabbath-keeping, then, is a way of forming oneself into a peculiar identity that is distinct from the larger society. The implication is clear: we all practice practices. But which practices will we practice? Which practices will form us? Similarly, Warren proposes that we have all been imprinted with something. Have we been imprinted by our smart phones or are we being imprinted “to pay attention to God and to those around me”?¹¹⁰

E. Theology of Featured Practices. In the previous section I presented the importance of sacred practices when moving from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” others. In this section, I address how specific practices facilitate the move to the paradigm of “being with.” An important word in that last sentence is the word *how*. Just as “being with” humanity involved more than lip service from God, so “being with” for Christian leaders requires more than lip service. Intentional practices are the means by which a Christian leader may “be with” others. However, just as loving one’s neighbors as oneself is predicated on

¹⁰⁹ Brueggemann, 13,15,16,22,28.

¹¹⁰ Warren, 36.

loving God,¹¹¹ so “being with” neighbors is predicated on “being with” God. In this section, I describe how five specific practices help us to “be with” both God and neighbor. As leaders learn how to be with God and neighbor, they will be better able to discover that God is already at work in the neighborhood and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in the community.

1. *Parish.* When I was appointed pastor of Orion UMC, it was understood that my parish reached beyond the church and was to include the entire Orion School District, which is described in Chapter 1, section B. That understanding led me to become involved in my community in a variety of ways and through a variety of organizations without necessarily cooperating with other churches for the good of the community. I was being formed by an understanding of *parish* as a clearly defined geographic area wherein lived my “target consumers.” It also an understanding of *parish* as a noun only. It was also an understanding of *parish* which Alan Roxburgh has described as “dead” because nowadays “people drive out of their neighborhood to a church of their choosing... Most, however, simply stay home on Sunday morning.”¹¹²

That idea of parish may be dead, but there is emerging a new understanding of parish that is still rooted in geography, but places a higher value on personal relationships. In this new understanding, parish is not just a noun; it is also a verb. It is an understanding that challenges individualism and independence. In contrast, the emerging parish is a connected, relational parish. In their book, *The New Parish*, Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight Friesen describe that emerging practice of parish in which various “faith communities begin connecting together,

¹¹¹ Matthew 22:37-40.

¹¹² Roxburgh, Alan J., *Missional Map-Making*, San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2010, xii.

in and for their neighborhood (and) learn to depend on God for strength to love, forgive, and show grace like never before.”¹¹³

We’ve also been inspired by the way these groups reach outward in love and care toward the neighborhood at large. The gospel becomes so much more tangible and compelling when the local church is actually a part of the community, connected to the struggles of the people and even the land itself.¹¹⁴

To practice parish, then, one does not simply occupy or travel to a particular geographic location. Rather, to practice parish one must practice being in relationship with others within the church, with believers from other churches, and with neighbors who may not be part of any church at all. This is important because, “Our community is not separate from church life; but instead, our community and church life are integrated.”¹¹⁵ Practicing parish even includes one’s relationship with the environment (land) within the geographic area. *Parish* is a unique word that recalls a geography large enough to live life together, yet is small enough to be known as a character with it.¹¹⁶ In other words, practicing parish is about practicing “being with.”

One of the key characters in this emerging parish is the pastor or the Christian leader, just as the pastor was a key character in a traditional understanding of parish. However, in order to truly “be with” others, in this understanding of parish, pastors commit themselves to remain in the parish for an extended period of time. In *The Wisdom of Stability*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove describes this as the practice of stability, which describes our engagement with and endurance in a specific place. He writes that

Life in the house of God is life with other people who are every bit as broken and messed up as we are. We learn to dwell with God by learning the practices of hospitality, listening, forgiveness, and reconciliation—the daily tasks of life with other people. Stability in Christ is always stability in community.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, 22.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁵ *Stepping Out*, Module 1, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability*, Brewster, MA, 2010, 18.

Roxburgh and Robinson add that key to “being with” a community is actually living within that community. People—including pastors—in a given congregation may drive many miles into the parish from other neighborhoods “without any sense of the communities they either drive out of or into to meet with one another.”¹¹⁸

In contrast, practicing parish “reconnect(s) us to the everyday rhythms of our neighborhood and community.”¹¹⁹ Like Wilson-Hartgrove, Roxburgh and Robinson describe the practice of stability as a “decision to embrace the vocation of remaining in one place and choosing not to move about from place to place. It is rooted in a long Christian tradition. This practice calls us to a radical counter-narrative to the ways of modern life...”¹²⁰

It is also rooted in scripture. After the Babylonian deportation of the Hebrews following the fall of Jerusalem, false prophets declared that their exile would be short. However, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Hebrews in captivity and instructed them to settle in their new land; their stay there would not be short. They should instead practice parish and “be with” their new neighbors in their new communities:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”¹²¹

Practicing parish and the practice of stability will be further discussed in Chapter 4, section D.4 under the fifth quality of leadership: a leader stays.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 151.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Jeremiah 29:4-7.

2. *Sabbath*. I tend to be somewhat of a workaholic, which is reflective of modernity and its production-focused paradigm of “doing for.” In contrast, Brueggemann points out that God’s corrective to that paradigm of production and workaholicism was the remembrance of Sabbath without a legalistic interpretation which leads to the likes of “blue laws”:

It is unfortunate that in U.S. society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath.¹²²

Traditionally for many people, keeping Sabbath has been simply a matter of refraining from labor. However, Brueggemann maintains that Sabbath is not merely about taking a day off. Rather, Sabbath is about resisting the culture of Pharaoh which was a culture of constant anxious production and endless acquisition.¹²³ To place that premise in today’s modern context, observing Sabbath is a call to remember God and God’s works as we retreat from a rat race economy with its coercive goals and drive to acquire in competition with neighbor. Brueggemann argues that properly observing Sabbath leads one toward a “covenantal enterprise for the sake of the whole community.”¹²⁴ Sabbath, then, in Brueggemann’s view is not about merely taking a day off from work every week; rather, Sabbath is a way of living which impacts the entire week because when one observes Sabbath, he or she becomes more attentive to God and to neighbor, treating them as equals rather than as competitors or commodities. In other words, keeping Sabbath is a way of “being with” God as well as “being with” neighbor. Brueggemann adds,

How does one regard the neighbor seriously when one has imbibed the profound anxiety of the Egyptian system? If one is a slave, one has anxiety about the brick

¹²² Brueggemann, 20.

¹²³ Ibid., 2ff.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 39.

quotas. If one is a Pharaoh, one is anxious about the food monopoly. In fact, Pharaoh and slave colluded in a common enterprise that made neighborliness impossible.¹²⁵

3. *Prayer.* While there are many aspects of prayer which might be explored, I am going to focus on two. In *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, Alan Roxburgh describes how he was challenged to “a regular practice of saying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.”¹²⁶ He describes how praying the Lord’s Prayer as a daily ritual imprinted his life, to borrow a phrase from Tish Harrison Warren. “Practices like this shape us communally into the ways of God,” Roxburgh concludes.¹²⁷

In examining her own daily “imprints,” Warren realized that her daily practices were “malforming” her, making her less human, less able to give and receive love throughout her day. Thus, she began to change her daily rituals to form a new repetitive and contemplative habit which pointed her toward a different way of dwelling in her world.¹²⁸ Thus, a daily practice of prayer forms us to be more human, more likely to give and receive love throughout the day and more likely to “be with” others.

Secondly, prayer is often understood as asking God for things, which, from the standpoint of our Western culture, can be a rather consumerist way of approaching God. Prayer practices which are focused on getting things from God—such as health or especially various expressions of wealth—are prayer practices which have been shaped by the modern desire for accumulating things. Prayer practices which are shaped by the paradigm of “being with” are practices which are focused on the other, whether God or neighbor. Such prayer includes listening to others, especially one’s neighbors, as well as listening to the Spirit of God.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 26f.

¹²⁶ Roxburgh, 49.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Warren, 31.

4. *Hospitality*. In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl explores the practice of hospitality in the history of the church. After describing the common notion that hospitality is “entertaining family and friends,” she writes, “For the most part, the term ‘hospitality’ has lost its moral dimension and, in the process, most Christians have lost touch with the amazingly rich and complex tradition of hospitality.” Pohl goes on to argue that hospitality has been taken over by the “hospitality industry”¹²⁹ and various institutions, ranging from hospitals, hospices, and government agencies, and away from the church. Today, the personal face-to-face aspect of hospitality has become a rarity.

Scott Hagley writes, “For the Christian, hospitality provides an image of the gospel. We are simultaneously the guest and the host of the Triune God. So also, we relate to one another in a fluid interchange between guest and host.”¹³⁰ This is well illustrated by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon in *The Art of Neighboring*. The two present *neighboring* as virtually synonymous with *hospitality*. However, as Pohl notes, hospitality can be misunderstood as simply entertaining family and friends. True hospitality is far more multidimensional than that. In their discussion of “for” and “with,” Pathak and Runyon describe George and Kate who live in a middle-class subdivision where their neighbor, Heather, is a single mom. They describe how George and Kate helped Heather by doing things for her such as mowing the lawn or shoveling the driveway. One day they were spreading some mulch in their yard when they came up a bag short. Heather happened to stop by as they were getting ready to the store to buy more when Heather said, “Hey, I have an extra bag of mulch.” George and Kate’s first reaction was to say no; they did not want to take a bag of mulch from a single mom. But Heather was persistent, so they accepted.

¹²⁹ Pohl, Christine, *Making Room*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999, 4.

¹³⁰ Hagley, Scott, *Eat What Is Set Before You*, Skyforest, CA, 2019, 29.

Later, when the two discussed it, they realized how important it was for Heather to care for them. The authors conclude, that when “giving is one-sided, it robs the ‘needy’ one of dignity, because it makes him or her dependent. But when giving is two-sided, everyone feels a sense of worth.”¹³¹ True hospitality is not just about giving or hosting or, for purposes of this paper, “doing for.” True hospitality is also about “greeting” so we might graciously receive from others. Greeting, then, is an important way in which we might “be with” neighbors.

5. *Conversation*. It may be erroneous to characterize conversation as a practice that is separated from our other featured practices, for conversation is an important part of parish, Sabbath, prayer and hospitality. *Parish* describes the place for conversation. *Sabbath* provides the space for conversation. *Prayer* describes our Partner in conversation, and *hospitality* describes the purpose for conversation. However, Peter Block reminds us that “We are avoiding conversations that are just talk. Certain conversations are satisfying and true, yet they have no power and entail no accountability.”¹³² Such conversations include telling the history of how we got where we are; giving explanations and opinions; blaming and complaining; making reports and giving descriptions; and seeking quick actions.¹³³ Instead, Block advocates that conversations which produce more than talk are conversations that are invitational; offer statements of future possibilities; invite dissent without complaint; which move the gifts of those on the margins into the center; and which call for accountability and ownership.¹³⁴ Such conversations are never to be one-sided; rather, it is imperative for leaders to listen to their conversation partners.

¹³¹ Pathak and Runyon, pg. 120f.

¹³² Block, Peter, *Community*, Oakland, CA: Betrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018, 115.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 116ff.

In their book, *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky write about Lee Kuan Yew, prime minister of Singapore who spent three years learning Mandarin, the local dialect. This gave him the ability to listen to and speak with the people in their own language, which helped him succeed in the next election. “If Lee could take years to learn the languages of his constituents, then surely we can take time simply to listen before we intervene.”¹³⁵

Each of these five practices are intended to help followers of Christ break free from the imaginations and the habits of modernity and its penchant for “doing for.” Instead, the practices of parish, Sabbath, prayer, hospitality, and conversation are intended to guide believers into patterns and habits of “being with” others beyond the church as well as with God.

In the next chapter, I describe how these practices, as presented through the *Stepping Out* curriculum, helped my research team to begin to move from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with.”

¹³⁵ Heifetz, Ronald and Linsky, Marty, *Leadership on the Line*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017, 64.

CHAPTER 3:

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE AND NARRATIVE OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

I began by asking, *How does one lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local?* That question gave rise to my thesis that as I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations designed to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others, we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community.

Thus far, it has become clear that the Western Euro-tribal church as typified by Orion UMC has been shaped by its modern context which includes the paradigm of “doing for.” In contrast, God’s purpose as revealed in scripture, Creation, and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is one of “being with” humanity. In order to move from the patterns and imaginations of modernity, Christians have been given certain practices. This chapter examines how one group of Christians experienced those practices as they were presented in *Stepping Out* and how they began to move into the patterns and imaginations of “being with” others beyond the church.

A. Narration of Work. The groundwork for my research project was laid in 2018 with the formation of a praxis team. However, the praxis team should be confused with my research team, for only the members of the research team participated in a formal human subjects research project and participated in the *Stepping Out* project. Nonetheless, both groups engaged in various spiritual practices, though with different results.

After an introduction to my praxis team, I describe how I tested my hypothesis with my research team. As we began our sixteen-week journey together, we engaged in conversations and

practices which helped us to “be with” neighbors so that we might be better able to join God in what God was already doing in the neighborhood.

1. *Praxis Team.* In the summer of 2018, I formed my praxis team. I was still in the process of refining my research question; ultimately, that question would not be addressed to my praxis team, but to my research group. Nonetheless, it was clear that my research question would ultimately be a missiological question about learning to join God in what God was already doing in the community. Thus, I invited five adults who had accompanied me on YouthWorks mission trips over the previous eight years to form the core of my praxis team, and they agreed. To round out the team, I invited their spouses to also join.

We began meeting in September 2018. Because I had intended to eventually use a curriculum, we began studying together Alan Roxburgh’s *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*. We spent considerable time discussing “The Great Unraveling,” especially as it related to the Western mainline church, the United Methodist Church, and our local congregation. The deaths of some key members as well as the renovation of the MAC were fresh on our minds, so those two topics shaped some of our early conversations. In fact, as previously noted, Carol not only served on my praxis team, but she also served as the architect for the MAC; eventually she served on my research team as well.

Guided by the curriculum, we discussed “The Great Unraveling,” especially as it was being experienced in our congregation. The curriculum later guided us into a discussion about our community and what our church’s role might be within it. Looking back, however, we were addressing our the church’s role in the community from a paradigm of “doing for” others.

We noticed that our community—our *parish*—was changing as more and more businesses closed and as community members relied more and more on driving to the Quad

Cities for services and supplies. We also noticed that the school, rather than the churches, had become the centerpiece of our community.

Our practices included eating meals together; sharing and listening to one another's stories; prayer; liturgy, and prayer walks. We discussed participating in a common devotional practice such as a daily observance of *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*.¹³⁶

Some agreed but others had already committed to other daily devotional practices and preferred to remain with them.

Our YouthWorks experiences shaped many of our conversations, and in July 2019, four members of my praxis team joined me on a week-long YouthWorks mission trip to Denver, Colorado. This trip provided us with many opportunities for missiological action/reflection as we explored what it meant to form into a Christian community that is learning how to “be with” others versus one that is “doing for” others. Of particular interest was a “Listening and Learning” exercise called “Beads Needs” which offered this “Big Idea”:

To serve a community well, you must take time to listen to what they need and learn their story...It's easy to assume we know what others need and make a plan to meet those needs. Too often, however, we forget the important step of listening and, instead, assume we know best. When entering a community on a mission trip, we need to be extra careful to value the community by taking time to listen.¹³⁷

Listening to neighbors can be an important first step in “being with” those neighbors, provided that listening is not simply part of a strategic plan to “do for” neighbor more effectively. The best way to “value the community” is by “being with” the community.

¹³⁶ Claiborne, Shane; Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan; and Okoro, Enuma, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010.

¹³⁷ Handout: YouthWorks Activity Facilitation Guide: Listening & Learning, 2016.

2. *Research Team.* In May, 2019, my research question and my thesis was refined into its final form as presented at the beginning of this chapter. Throughout that summer and fall, I laid the groundwork for a more formal research project to address my research question, and that winter, I formed my research team. Since my praxis team had already participated together in a journey of practices and conversations centered around Roxburgh's *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, I recruited from among this group first in February 2020. I was aware that several members my praxis team were already involved in the community through various teaching, coaching, and work experiences. Since they were already in relationship with a number of people from the neighborhood, I hoped they might be willing to listen to their neighbors as they shared their stories with the members of my research team. Additionally, several of them had journeyed with me on various YouthWorks mission trips over the past several years, so they were acquainted with the concept of joining God in the local, although those localities were in distant communities. Would they be able to join God in the local when the local was in their own neighborhood?

B. Leadership Challenge and Practices. Historically, Orion UMC has been a strong church numerically with a solid financial history; moreover, its members viewed themselves as having a strong commitment to giving to missions. Also, the completion of the MAC provided additional ways in which it might serve its community. However, that very statement shows that the congregation is functioning with a mentality centered in playing host and “doing for” our neighbors. That has been true of our attitude toward our mission endeavors beyond our local community; it is also true of our neighbors within the Orion School District. Our “doing for” imagination may have worked in years past, but given the unraveling of both church and society, it seems inadequate.

I began to recognize that our productionist/benefactor imagination is the product of modernity. As I continued honing my research question, I contemplated how engaging in spiritual practices might help us counter that imagination so that we might better join God in the local. Such practices might include dwelling in the Word, observing, attentive listening to others, engaging in mutual hospitality, and discerning what the Spirit might be up to.

I began leading my research team “on a journey of learning to join God in the local” on March 2, 2020. It was the first of sixteen sessions; our final session was held on June 16, 2020.

C. Experiment and Rationale. My thesis rests on confidence in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, and the belief that God is already at work in the neighborhood ahead of us. That understanding of the *missio Dei* also informs *Stepping Out*. For example, one experiment in the curriculum invited participants to go to a place in the neighborhood where people gathered and focus on being with someone, providing “a smile, a listening ear, or simply a shared experience”¹³⁸ and then sharing with the group what they heard or experienced.

The purpose of people coming back with experiences to share is to wonder together about how God is being revealed to us in the places where people gather. Many people are not used to looking at their everyday lives in this way or they might think that they don’t have enough knowledge or expertise to have any authority to actually name God at work in what they are seeing.¹³⁹

Stepping Out was engaged in the hopes that it would help to attune our participants to view our neighbors not as “immoral heathens,” but as people in and among whom the prevenient work of the Spirit is also discernible. In contrast, when Christians view neighbors as immoral heathens, they may be more inclined to do something for them, or worse, *to* them. As noted in the curriculum, “We are so deeply conditioned as the church to look for ways to help others that

¹³⁸ *Stepping Out: Leader's Guide*, Module 1, 29.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

sometimes it can be very hard to put that instinct aside.”¹⁴⁰ Instead, the exercises and experiments of *Stepping Out* were designed to help us shift to a posture of “being with” neighbor.

D. Narrative of the Experiment. My experiment began with a baseline focus group and then continued as my research team journeyed together through the *Stepping Out* curriculum with its exercises and experiments. Exercises were conducted during team sessions while experiments were conducted between sessions. After sixteen weekly sessions, I conducted a final focus group and then analyzed the data I had collected.

The sixteen sessions were divided into four modules, and I address each module separately from the others.

1. Composition of the Research Team. All of the members of my praxis team were invited to be part of my research team. Announcements were also made to the entire congregation of Orion UMC so that others would have the opportunity to join. In addition, letters of invitation were delivered to some members whom I felt would provide valuable input to the experiment. Of the seven praxis team members, five accepted the invitation and two declined. The five were joined by two others for an initial total of seven research team members. As was the case with my praxis team, I became the eighth participant.

Makeup of the research team included five females and three males, including myself. All were between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five. Occupational backgrounds of the lay members include engineer, pharmacist, school teacher, architect, electrician, and bank teller. Two research team members are retired, although one continues working as a substitute teacher.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Another team member is hired by the school as a soccer coach, and yet another volunteers as a baseball coach.

2. *Focus Groups.* Before launching into the *Stepping Out* curriculum, I conducted a focus group with my research team exploring five questions:

- Thus far, what has helped you understand the difference between a paradigm of “doing for” others versus a paradigm of “being with” others beyond the local church?

- What do you think someone needs to know in order to move from a service paradigm of “doing for” neighbors beyond the church to a friendship paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

- What attitudes and values might you need to move from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

- What habits and practices might you need in order to transition from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

- What key skills might you need in order to help others move from “doing for” to “being with”?

At the end of the final *Stepping Out* session, I conducted another focus group in which those same questions were posed to the research team. Thus, I was able to compare and contrast their responses in order to gauge their learnings. I explore those learnings in the next chapter on *Findings*.

3. *Stepping Out Module 1: Becoming a People of Relationship Rather than Outcomes.* A priority on outcomes is a product of modernity, whereas relationships are more closely tied to the work of the Spirit. Thus, the purpose of this module is to lead participants away from the productionist values of modernity toward the priorities of the Spirit.

In our first session, we reflected “upon all the ways (our) church is connected in the community.”¹⁴¹ Featured activities in Module 1 included looking for places where people gathered in our community;¹⁴² being attentive to what was happening in those places;¹⁴³ spending time with a partner in those places;¹⁴⁴ and reflecting and sharing on what we observed in those places.

In one experiment, the research team looked at a four-square grid and then considered how they were involved in our community by “being with; being for; working with; (and/or) working for.”¹⁴⁵ The curriculum further defined the four categories. “Being with” happens when we are not focused on solving a problem, but enjoy people for their own sake. “Being for” happens when we focus on having the right ideas or attitudes. “Working with” happens when we do things with someone to make their life better, whereas “working for” happens when we do things to make someone else’s life better, using our resources.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the activity was designed to help learners differentiate between “doing for” and “being with.” The intent of the experiments was that once that differentiation was made, it would be easier for all of us to see the value of and enter into the latter. Part of my contribution to this discussion was to place my various community involvements into the four categories and explain why I placed them where I did.

With its focus on relationships, this module included the practices of dwelling in the Word; participating in prayer and liturgies; listening exercises with one another; observing and listening in the neighborhood; looking for places in our community where people gather;¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Module 1, 7.

¹⁴² Ibid., 14.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 23, 32.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ *Stepping Out: Leaders' Guide.*, 14.

being attentive to what is happening in those places;¹⁴⁸ spending time with a partner in those places;¹⁴⁹ reflecting and sharing on what has been observed in those places, and having a conversation without an agenda.

Before further exploring our experiences in Module 1, it will be helpful to place that first module within the context of two crises, one global, and the other local.

a. Two Crises. The first crisis our research team faced came just three weeks into our experiment. Our second gathering was held on Monday, March 9, 2020, at a time when there was a growing anxiety in our nation about the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus. Consequently, the following Sunday afternoon, March 15, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker issued an executive order closing all restaurants and bars beginning at 9 pm, Monday, March 16 due to the spread of the coronavirus. Drive-through and carryout services by restaurants were allowed to continue. Then on Friday, March 20, Governor Pritzker issued a second executive order requiring residents to “shelter at home,” except for those deemed to be “essential workers.”

Illinois Area Bishop Frank Beard followed suit by ordering the discontinuation of all in-person church meetings. My research team was able to meet for our third session on Monday, March 16, but I cancelled our March 23 session, assuming that after a two-week quarantine, we might return to normal gatherings. Unfortunately, it was not long before it became clear that this would be no short-term quarantine, so my research team agreed to meet via Zoom beginning on Monday, March 30. That evening, as we practiced dwelling in the Word, we came to verse 11 (“Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off...”), to which Deborah observed, “With what we’re going through now with this coronavirus, they say you should take off your shoes before you go inside your door because of what might be on the soles of your

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 23, 32.

feet.” I doubt that’s what Jesus had in mind in his instructions to the Seventy; nonetheless, Deborah’s observation underscores how the pandemic suddenly overshadowed every aspect of life, including how we encountered scripture. As for me, I found great irony in the fact that I was leading a group in “stepping out” into their neighborhood at the very time when our governor and our bishop were calling for Illinois residents to shelter in place in their homes and avoid public contact. Fortunately, the members of my research team found new ways to “step out” safely and complete their exercises. Unfortunately, though, once the coronavirus pandemic forced the shutdown of restaurants, church activities, and worship, one team member dropped out of the research project.

Our second crisis began on Thursday, March 26 when I received the call from Bishop Beard and learned that I was being appointed to Aledo UMC, effective July 1. The change in pastoral leadership was announced on Sunday, March 29 during Orion UMC’s Facebook Live worship service. Orion UMC’s new pastor was announced the following week. My new appointment made it expedient for me to complete this research project by the end of June 2020.

b. Dwelling in the Word. Supplementing the five practices described in the previous chapter, *Stepping Out* invited participants to engage in another sacred practice: dwelling in the Word. Each of the five lessons in this module began with that practice, and the biblical text suggested by the curriculum for each lesson was Luke 10:1-12, the story of Jesus sending out the Seventy. Five of the seven participants comprising my research team had previously served on my praxis team, and over the course of the year we met together, we studied Alan Roxburgh’s *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*. That book also advocated dwelling in the Word, and invited readers to dwell in Luke 10:1-12 on multiple occasions, which we had done the previous year. When our research team embarked on *Stepping*

Out, and learned that nearly every lesson invited us to dwell in the same passage, there were a few chuckles and an eye-roll or two. But afterwards, the team commenced dwelling in the Word with enthusiasm and found new insights in the passage throughout the duration of the experiment. Some of those insights will be presented over the course of this chapter so as to demonstrate their learnings over the course of the project.

In verse 1, team members were curious about the Seventy: From whence had they come? How had they become followers of Christ? We looked at the context and discovered that in the previous chapter, Jesus fed a multitude with nothing more than a few loaves and some fish. We speculated that the Seventy may have been a part of the crowd for that miraculous feeding, and I appreciated the fact that they expressed such an interest in the context for Jesus' commission.

I noticed how Verse 4 ("Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road") stirred a vigorous discussion every week throughout the entire research project. However, I noticed that in the earlier weeks of the project, the verse prompted several personal stories of trips to places like California, Galveston, and Milwaukee. But as we continued to dwell in the Word over the ensuing weeks, research team members were more concerned with the actual meaning of Jesus' words, rather than their own experiences. Gary said he compared verse 4 to having a conversation without having a purpose for the conversation. He said that was contrary to the way he typically conducted himself. "If I'm going to spend time talking to somebody, it's going to be about some project that we're working on or something that I have to do."

Karen countered, "I think it would be harder to have the conversation with somebody that's not already your friend. I could sit with a friend and have a conversation without having a purpose and just talk about whatever comes up."

We then talked about conversations one might have with a stranger, with Karen citing her experiences on airplane flights. “Normally they’re usually very brief conversations,” she observed, “because usually the headphones get put in their ears or they put their nose in a book, so it shuts off the opportunity for conversation.” We recognized that cell phones, books, and magazines can be used as social cues to prevent interaction with others, not only on airplanes, but also in coffee shops, on park benches, and elsewhere. We also admitted that sometimes we are the ones utilizing those social cues. In contrast, we recognized the need for identifying commonalities with the strangers we meet. Such commonalities may include taking a trip to a common destination or receiving service from a waitperson. The importance of noticing what a stranger may be wearing may also indicate a commonality. For example, a conversation may be opened if a stranger is wearing a shirt with the name of a sports team or vacation destination.

c. Exercises. One of the characteristics of modernity is that it objectifies and commodifies virtually all things, including relationships, based on productivity. That is because modernity is outcome-driven. Whereas in a fuller theological vision relationships are an end unto themselves, as part of the very nature of God’s created and intended world. Thus, exercises in the first module focused on prioritizing relationships, rather than outcomes. The module began with liturgy, with the intent that team members would “leave behind their tasks, worries and activities” of their day by participating in relational liturgy of prayer.¹⁵⁰

The exercises suggested by the curriculum were to be conducted during our *Stepping Out* sessions, and they were often designed to build on one another from one session to the next. For example, the first week the research team was asked to reflect on the various ways in which Orion UMC was connected to the community. Some of the ways which were identified by the

¹⁵⁰ *Stepping Out: Leaders' Guide*, Module 1, 7.

team included Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the Orion Area Food Pantry, YouthWorks, Senior Citizens, Halloween Hustle, team dinners for high school sports teams, Main Street Orion, TLC Preschool, Vacation Bible School, and community-wide Lenten services.

In the second week, each of those programs and ministries were listed on a single Post-it note. We then plotted those notes on a four-part grid:

- *Being With*, when we are not focused on solving a problem but enjoy people for their own sake.

- *Working With*, when we do things with someone to make their life better.

- *Being For*, when we focus on having the right ideas or attitudes.

- *Working For*, when we do things to make someone else's life better.¹⁵¹

Just as some of the team members saw some fluidity between “doing for” and “being with,” so they also saw several of the programs and ministries as being rather fluid, fitting into more than one category. By *fluid*, I mean that research team members understood the characteristics of each model as flowing easily back and forth between the two paradigms. This understanding arose because research team members had not yet sorted out the distinctions between the paradigm of “doing for” and that of “being with.” Because they sensed fluidity between some of the categories posed by the curriculum, team members placed Post-it notes on the line between two or more grid boxes.

It should also be noted that the four categories cited above do not necessarily line up with the two categories of my thesis of moving from a paradigm of “doing for” to one of “being with.” Moreover, I questioned the extent to which Orion UMC was actually operating within either a paradigm of “doing for” or of “being with” because in many cases, all the church was

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 12.

doing was providing meeting space for those programs and ministries. While providing space, placing an event on a church calendar, and making sure the meeting space is clean before and after the event may be a form of hospitality, it is also a form of “doing for.” It also seemed like a rather hands-off, non-interactive connection to the community which seemed to be typical for a “doing for” paradigm. Certainly, the church’s generosity in opening its doors to outside groups enhances its standing in the community as an open, welcoming congregation; nonetheless, the practice does little by way of listening to the stories of those who attend those outsider activities. The exception, though, would be those outsider activities which include one or more persons who are from the church. For example, a Boy Scout meeting might involve three dozen boys and their adult leaders, and most of them are from outside the church. However, five or six of them are members of Orion UMC and actively participate in the life of the church and engage in faithful spiritual practices.

We revisited the grid in our third gathering, which also happened to be our last gathering before the shutdown of church and society due to Covid-19. Rather than looking at each quadrant of the grid from the standpoint of the church and its connections to the community, the team looked at the four quadrants of the grid from the standpoint of what they had done or observed in the community. Thus, “being with” was understood as simply enjoying people for their own sake and might include going to the local restaurant with friends to share a meal together. “Working with” was expressed as doing things with someone to make their life better, such as going to the local coffee shop in order to tutor a student. “Being for” was expressed as having the right ideas and attitudes about something. Here, several team members noted that just prior to the meeting, they had gone to a local restaurant for a taco dinner fundraiser in support of the Fine Arts

program at Orion High School. Both tutoring and attending the taco fundraiser were cited by team members in the "working for" grid.

d. **Experiments.** Other assigned activities gave us the opportunity to engage in conversation practices in the neighborhood outside of our regular meeting time. Our first such experiment called for team members to spend some time looking for places in the community where people gather and notice who was there, what they were doing, and what triggered their curiosity. Some of those gathering places included the local coffee shop, restaurants, bars, the library, school, the parks, the post office, the grocery store, the gym, and the churches. People gathered in various places in order to pick up their mail, or shop, or eat, or support their children and grandchildren, or simply to visit with friends. Team members wondered what some of the people may have been talking about, and whether or not gathering in such places at specific times with specific people was happenstance or habitual.

Carol observed that people gathered at a local gym in order to work out, but an equally important part of the gathering involved socializing in the parking lot when the work out was over.

Before the shutdown, our experiments went well. However, once Illinois businesses were shut down by Governor Pritzker and Conference churches were closed by Bishop Beard, our research team was unable to observe neighbors at places like the local coffee shop. Fortunately, the weather was warming up by early April, and after sheltering in their homes for over two weeks, team members noticed a higher number of people going for walks in their neighborhoods, and many of them were eager to strike up a conversation with a friend, provided it was done from a safe distance. Likewise, I discovered that people and their stories will come to you. By simply working in my front yard, I was in a position to visit with dog walkers who happened by.

One such party was Roger, his wife Charlotte, and their dog Cody, who walked past my home frequently, often multiple times per day. The first time I noticed them walking by, I said hello as they passed. The second time, I stopped them and asked about their dog, since it appeared to be a similar breed as mine. Roger and Charlotte confirmed my suspicion, and we had a nice conversation about dogs which lasted for many minutes. The third time Roger and Charlotte walked by with Cody, he seemed eager to talk. So they stopped and we had a longer conversation. He inquired further about my dog, as well as the pool in my yard. I, in turn, was able to ask him about his story, which he was happy to share.

I had a similar experience with Jim, who also walked past our home regularly, although without a dog. Jim was a member of my church and attended regularly, so I had known him for years. However, I never really heard his story until we talked in my driveway in the middle of a pandemic. In fact, we spoke several times over the coming weeks and in one sidewalk discussion, he told me how much our Thursday evening worship services meant to him. “You really kind of saved me,” he said. “I was a goner.” I took that to mean that he had doubts about his salvation prior to his involvement in our Thursday evening services.

Team members began to wonder if we as a society had taken our social context for granted. Deborah observed, “How many of us have not really talked to our neighbor, but now we have the opportunity of doing so when we pass by them on the street.”

Chris agreed, saying she felt that “everybody seems to be more in sync” with one another. She described taking a walk early in the pandemic and meeting a college age girl in her neighborhood. Even though they did not know one another, they had a pleasant, caring conversation about school and coping with the shutdown.

Not all neighbors were willing to stop and talk. Team members noticed that some neighbors seemed to be deeply suspicious of strangers, possibly out of a fear that they might be carriers of the coronavirus without realizing it or displaying any symptoms. Nonetheless, early in the pandemic, Carol, who also worked as a soccer coach, found great value in video conversations with her players. “One of my locations was a video call with my soccer players. We were going to do a plank challenge, but it was just a way to touch base with them,” she said, explaining that *planks* were an exercise similar to push-ups. “My goal was to see if they were playing soccer and were staying in shape, but instead it became just a social time. The girls were laughing with each other and telling stories and I let the conversations go. We never did get to the intent of the call, which was the plank challenge.”

In her role in education, Carol added, “I set up a video call for all of my kids in grades one, two, three, and four so we could work on a math project together. At least that was the intent. But what I noticed with all of them is that the intent became secondary. It was more important just to visit and see their friends online and see how online school was going. I got to see everybody’s pets and I got to see all kinds of stuffed animals and siblings who kept popping in. It was purpose versus presence. The purpose was the math project, and that’s the reason we set up the call. But it became clear that we needed to just be present with one another, even if it was only by way of video chat.”

Deborah noted that she regularly checked in with one of our church members who lives in a nursing home. However, once the shutdown began, it was impossible to visit with her, so she had to call instead, severely limiting her ability to “be with” someone who was both lonely and frightened in quarantine.

Carol observed, “Even though we can’t be with people right now, we’re figuring out different ways to be with people. We’re not filling that need completely, but we are helping to fill that need, even if it’s just in our own homes. We’ve had more family dinners in the past three weeks than we did all last year.”

“It is a need, it’s not just a want,” Erin clarified. “As human beings we do need to be with other human beings.”

e. Eucharist. On Sunday, April 5, two of my research team members assisted me with the spiritual practice of observing Eucharist. Because of the statewide shutdown, I was unable to conduct a traditional communion service; instead, I opted for a drive-through communion event for both church and community members, and there were several persons from outside the church who came to the drive-through service . The practice became an important topic of discussion the following day when our research team met via video conference. As we discussed how God might be at work in the neighborhood, Carol said, “I saw God at work in our drive-through communion. I was surprised at the numbers. When I first saw the sign for drive-through communion, I thought, ‘Oh, that’s interesting.’ But then I thought that it’s Holy Week and I want to have communion, so I put the drive-through part out of my mind because it’s still communion. Then when I saw everybody line up in the parking lot, I could tell that they were really happy to have that connection. It seemed like it was a very important thing to do.”

4. *Stepping Out Module 2: Listening Without Agenda*. Module 2 was conducted entirely by means of Zoom virtual meetings. Featured practices included listening exercises, including “listening conversations” within one’s neighborhood,¹⁵² listening to know

¹⁵² Ibid., Module 2, 13.

one's story,¹⁵³ and learning to listen without agenda.¹⁵⁴ Such practices were designed to help us to recognize that the Spirit of God was already been at work in the community ahead of us. The curriculum was written with the hope that as a result of Module 2, participants would become curious about what God was doing in the community and how our congregation could get involved in our neighborhoods.

The module was comprised of four lessons, each including dwelling in the Word, along with exercises and experiments. I found that Module 2 connected well with the first part of my thesis as its listening exercises and experiments helped guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with.”

a. Dwelling in the Word. Once again, the curriculum invited us to dwell in Luke 10:1-12. In one session, our imagination stopped at verse 9, “Heal the sick.” Gary said, “So if he was telling me, ‘You and sixty-nine others are going out into the town, and oh, by the way, cure the sick,’ then my first question would be, ‘Because I can? Up until then I didn’t know I could cure people.’”

We noticed that curing the sick was expected of all Seventy, rather than one who might be identified as a physician or a “faith healer” with the “gift of healing.” That prompted a vigorous discussion, with Carol observing that as a soccer coach, she frequently engaged in a ministry of healing. However, she was quick to point out that the healing which she typically administered was comfort-related. “I’m taping people’s feet, or doing whatever,” she explained. “I’m not healing them, but I am helping them.”

The team then wondered if the healing which the Seventy were to administer might simply have been a matter of providing comfort and care to the people. In other words, my

¹⁵³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 30.

research team did not necessarily see their works of healings as miraculous or supernatural events. I found that to be a rather insightful comment because of its modern implications. It can be rather intimidating for modern Western believers to be expected to administer healings in a miraculous fashion. However, it is less intimidating for modern Christians to provide comfort.

We wondered whether curing the sick was “doing for” the sick or if it was “being with” the sick, and they sensed that it was both. Again, I found that to be indicative of the way my research team saw “doing for” and “being with” as rather fluid paradigms. Upon further consideration, when Christ’s command to “heal the sick” is read through the lens of modernity, then it may be read as a command to “do for” the sick by healing them. Thus, there is an outcome-based expectation placed on the Seventy, and, by extension, modern believers. However, if the command is read through the lens of “being with,” then the Seventy—and again by extension, modern believers—are called to comfort the sick by being a healing presence with them, laying hands on them, and praying with them, which, in turn, opens the way for the Spirit to intervene and heal. Either way, it is clear that Jesus gave specific instructions to the Seventy because they had specific tasks assigned to them; they were not simply to go and hang out with new friends.

Deborah wondered if Jesus was directing the Seventy to heal not just physical illnesses, but mental and spiritual illnesses as well. In another session, her imagination stopped at the thought of “carrying no purse” (vs. 4) and “eating what is set before you” (vs. 8). “Not taking anything allows us—I was going to say, ‘forces us’—it allows us to rely on God for food and stuff,” she offered. “Yes, we’re supposed to do our part, but it also allows us to see God at work. Whereas if we took food and stuff, then we might say, ‘Yup, I was prepared.’” I considered Deborah’s observation in my reflections after the session, and while it was true that the Seventy

were to rely upon God for their needs for food and shelter, it was also clear that Jesus intended them to rely on the hospitality of strangers who likely did not realize that the kingdom of God had come near to them. Christ's intention for the Seventy gave them equal standing with the townspeople because it made both groups givers as well as receivers. The Seventy received food and lodging from the townspeople while they manifested the hope of the kingdom of God. Conversely, Christ's command gave the townspeople equal standing with the Seventy because as they gave food and lodging to the Seventy, they also received the hope of the kingdom of God from the Seventy. In the process, the dignity of the townspeople was protected, making it easier for them to receive that hope. Thus, the Seventy, who were physically hungry and thirsty, were directed to find food and drink from strangers who were spiritually hungry and thirsty. Moreover, it made the Seventy find physical shelter from strangers who had physical shelter to offer, but who needed spiritual shelter. These exchanges would help the Seventy to discover that the Spirit was already at work in "every town and place" ahead of them.

b. Exercises. The various listening exercises featured in Module 2 were intended to help participants recognize that the Spirit of God has already been at work in the community ahead of them. Additionally, it was hoped that participants would become curious about what God was doing in the community and how congregations can get involved in their neighborhood.

In the second lesson of Module 2, we explored four ways in which we listen. They were presented in a grid, reminiscent of an exercise in Module 1. The four ways include:

- Listening to know someone's story.
- Listening in order to provide help or support.
- Listening to defend or protect your point of view.

- Listening to gain information.

Owing to the technology of screen sharing, we were able to describe various conversations we had with others and plot them into one of the four quadrants. Several members of the research team expressed relief that, thanks to their learnings from the curriculum, they felt as though they were freed from the notion that they had to offer advice to those who shared their story with them. For example, Chris described her conversation with a friend who had recently lost her husband. She said she did not have any advice to offer, but she felt as though it was important for her to listen to her friend as she shared her story of loss. Likewise, I described a conversation I had had with a parishioner. As the parishioner shared his concern, my mind began to consider the advice I might offer to fix the situation. At first, it was hard to focus on everything he said because I was in a “fix-it” mode. But soon I made a conscious decision to listen without being distracted by my need to give advice.

As we had discovered in a similar exercise in Module 1, my research team members found that some of the conversations fit into more than one quadrant. For example, Deborah described her listening conversation with a friend from church. She explained how it started out as a conversation to know her friend’s story, but eventually evolved into a conversation to provide support and prayer. That prompted a lively discussion about whether or not praying with someone was a form of fixing a problem. In the end, we decided that it depended on what we offered in prayer.

c. Experiments. Among the experiments in this module, team members engaged in “at least one interaction in your neighborhood or community in which you listened to someone without agenda.”¹⁵⁵ Once again, the members of my team sought creative

¹⁵⁵Ibid., Module 2, 2.

ways to engage in their listening conversations in their neighbors, despite the restrictions imposed upon them by the pandemic. Some of the conversations were conducted over the phone or by way of video chat; others were in person. Regardless of the means, they all discovered that despite being in quarantine, they were all able to engage in a number of conversations, whether with students and athletes in their charge, or with family members, or with co-workers, or with friends and neighbors. However, their mindfulness of the curriculum prompted them to engage in those conversations with a higher level of intentionality than they might have done otherwise. In some cases, team members shifted into a higher level of intentionality after the conversation began.

d. Reflections. At the end of the second module, I asked my research team how “listening without agenda” connected with moving from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with.”

“If my normal agenda is looking and listening for what their problems are that I have to solve, then that’s all I hear,” Gary responded. “But if my agenda is that I have no agenda, then I set aside looking for that problem to solve.” I found it both ironic and telling that even when Gary said he had no agenda, he used agenda language anyway. That seems to reveal just how steeped we are in modernity. Nonetheless, I sensed in his response a shift from his own need to solve problems to his willingness to listen to others without feeling the need to fix something. On the other hand, Erin responded without any hint of agenda. “You can just enjoy their personality and their humanness,” she offered. “You can just enjoy being with a person without needing anything at all.”

5. *Stepping Out Module 3: Attending to the Stories of People in the Neighborhood*. As we launched into Module 3, we continued meeting by way of Zoom. While

meeting virtually was awkward at times, we made the most of the format. Carol said, “With as much as we’ve been quarantined, this has been something I’ve looked forward to. It’s been life-giving. It’s something I’ve planned for. It’s a blessing to see people and be part of a group when that’s not really been possible right now.”

Activities and practices in this module build on the practices and activities of the previous two modules and were intended to help participants “learn about what God is already doing in the lives of people in our neighborhoods.”¹⁵⁶ The curriculum described it this way:

It’s a bit like learning to ride a unicycle. You may already know how to ride a bicycle and there are some transferable skills but learning how to ride a unicycle is a completely different experience. Congregations have been participants in their neighborhoods for years, offering space and people resources to walk with those who are grieving, running soup kitchens, coordinating food drives, etc., all for the sake of faithfully being a part of bringing God’s kingdom near. Congregations have had lots of practice doing these sorts of things and have learned some skills along the way. These kinds of activities are as familiar as riding a bicycle... Attending is about being present and asking God what it is that you should be paying particular attention to.¹⁵⁷

Just as I found that Module 2 connected well with the first part of my thesis by helping to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with,” so I found that Module 3 connected with the second part of my thesis where we began to discover that God was already at work in our neighborhoods. To that end, the curriculum provided us with a drawing of a city neighborhood under the heading, “Where the Church Is.”¹⁵⁸ The team noticed that while there was not a church *building* in the picture, arrows and the word *here* pointed to a number of individuals in the picture, thereby affirming that the Spirit was already present in the neighborhood by way of the people who comprise the church. The team imagined what the figures in the drawing might be doing in response to the Spirit’s nudging.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., Module 3, 1.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ My research team revisited this drawing in Module 4.1; it is included in Appendix B.

“We don’t stop being the church just because we’ve left the building,” Deborah suggested. “The church is inside of us, therefore, where we go, the church goes.”

a. Exercises. Listening to the stories of people in the neighborhood became the means for discovering that God was already at work in our neighborhoods. I found that the exercises in this module connected well with our experiences of dwelling in the Word. In Luke 10:1-12, the Seventy were to receive food and shelter from the townspeople they met; similarly, our research team was to receive stories from people in the neighborhoods as a gift, for attending to the stories of others “puts you in the position of receiving from another.”¹⁵⁹

I also found that this had a reassuring effect on my research team, for they had been concerned that at some point they might be called upon to share their beliefs with their neighbors in an evangelistic outreach. However, the curriculum was clear that team members were not to listen in order to respond, or to convince someone to do something, or even to share their ideas or beliefs. “You are simply being with them and wondering about what God might be revealing through their story.”¹⁶⁰

The curriculum in Module 3 included three short videos. The first was a news clip about a story out of Alabama where three young African American men went into a restaurant and noticed an elderly white woman eating alone. One of the young men said he “hates seeing people eating alone,” so he encouraged the other two to join him as he went over and sat down with the woman. The four then dined and conversed together, disregarding their racial and generational differences. While recognizing that the three men offered conversation without any agenda—except the agenda of having a pleasant meal with the woman—they also observed that the

¹⁵⁹ *Stepping Out*, Module 3.1, 8.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

elderly woman had to be willing to be vulnerable in order to enter into a conversation with the men. Vulnerability will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

The team utilized intentional listening practices. For example, in one exercise, team members described something they were looking forward to; then another team member would practice retelling the event as closely as possible. Afterwards, members described how they felt having someone listen to them. “I felt safe because I knew you weren’t going to judge me,” Deborah reflected. “I felt like I was being supported.”

b. Experiments. Team members were asked to build upon the listening skills they had practiced in our research team meetings by developing a “posture of anticipation” as they moved about in their respective neighborhoods, listening to their neighbor’s stories.¹⁶¹ Because of the pandemic, my research team found they had to be more intentional in attending to the stories of others. For some, the front porch became an important place to sit down with a friend or neighbor while practicing socially distancing and utilizing their listening skills. For others, it meant intentionally being ready to listen to an unexpected conversation which might come up at work or while walking their dog. In short, it meant making the most of natural connections.

We discussed the importance of simple, everyday conversations, especially as they occurred during a pandemic. “You may not think that your conversation with someone was that big of a deal, but you might’ve been the only ‘Jesus’ they talked to that day,” Gary offered. It is worth noting that the reverse may also be true.

In her “posture of anticipation” experiment, Karen discovered that sometimes a rather simple conversation can lead to a much deeper one. She opened a conversation with a new

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

coworker, a young woman, because she simply wanted to get to know her better. “So I asked her if she and her husband had talked about starting a family,” Karen explained. “She said she had, but she was worried that she might not be a good mom. That surprised me because I thought she would be a wonderful mom.” Karen went on to describe how her new coworker opened up about the troubled past of her family of origin and the impact it has had on her as an adult. “I know I was supposed to just listen,” Karen continued. “But I couldn’t help but tell her that she should forgive herself because I’m sure that God had already forgiven her for that childhood situation.”

As Karen told her story, Erin said that her imagination stopped as her coworker described her childhood. Erin suggested that Karen’s encouragement to her coworker to forgive herself was in keeping with Christ’s directive in Luke 10 to pronounce peace and heal the sick.

“It’s been to really good to realize that you don’t have to always give advice.” Karen observed. “People want to be heard; that doesn’t always mean they want an answer from you.”

c. Dwelling in the Word. By the end of Module 3, we had spent a total of seven hours dwelling in Luke 10:1-16. Erin said, “the thing that occurs to me is that even though we’ve been in the same passage every week, every time we read it we get new meanings from it. The Bible is so rich in information, no matter how many times we read it.”

Early in my research, the paradigm of “being with” captured my imagination, as evidenced by the title of this thesis. Since that paradigm captured my imagination, it caught on with my research team as well. Carol imagined the Seventy as a part of the kingdom of God which had “come near to you,” adding, “So that means the Kingdom of God has come near to you.” She then connected that imagination to the paradigm of “being with,” saying, “the kingdom of God has come to ‘be with’ you.”

Nearly every week my research team was troubled by the closing verses of our “dwelling” passage in Luke 10:

“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.”¹⁶²

They found Jesus’ words difficult to reconcile with their understanding of mission and what it means to join God in the neighborhood. They were troubled because if one house failed to accept any of the Seventy, that the entire community would suffer Sodom’s fate. They were also troubled because it seemed like the Seventy were given permission by Jesus to quit if they were rejected. In my reflections following our research team meeting, that concern raised several questions. First, how long were the Seventy sent out? They seem to have been engaging in a short-term mission. The Seventy were apparently to report back to Jesus in seemingly just a few days. That may not have given them sufficient time to succeed. Their experience contrasted the later mission journeys of Paul, who went into a community and dwelt there long enough to establish a faith community. Paul succeeded because he dwelt within a community for an extended period of time, practicing what Wilson-Hartgrove calls *stability*.

Secondly, did my research team’s resistance to quitting reflect a Western productionist value that one should never quit? Whether they were expressing that value or not, it is certain that my research team read the text from their own Western mindset. Moreover, the one who was the most troubled by the prospect of quitting is also a high school soccer coach who is not inclined to quit.

Thirdly, how likely were the Seventy to fail, given the parameters of their mission? Their task was rather simple: pronounce peace; heal the sick; accept hospitality; and proclaim, “The

¹⁶² Luke 10:10-12, New Revised Standard Version, National Council of Churches, 1989.RSV.

kingdom of God has come near to you.” In other words, they were not sent out to put forth a theological position, or even to make disciples. They were sent out as gifts to the communities, and to receive the gift of hospitality from the communities. With such a simple mission, it appears as though Jesus was setting them up for success, as evidenced in verse 17 when they returned with a joyful report of success: “Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!” That suggests that today we may be failing in our mission because we complicate it. Better to stick to the simple mission and message of Jesus, which is, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But how? Could it be that it had come near because of the Incarnation of Christ? Or could the kingdom have come near because the Seventy had come near and were, in effect, incarnating Christ to them? Or could it be that God was already at work in those various communities and neighborhoods and the Seventy were simply joining God in those places, helping neighbors discover the presence of God in their midst? Indeed, the story’s context raises the possibility that some of the people in those towns may have been in the crowd when Jesus fed the five thousand as noted in the previous chapter. If they had not been a part of that miraculous feeding, they certainly would have heard about it. Either way, it would have been a most practical way in which God through Christ had already been at work among them. No wonder Jesus said the harvest was plentiful!

6. *Stepping Out Module 4: Discerning What the Spirit Might be Saying to Us.* Module 4 is the shortest module, only two sessions long. Nonetheless, by the time our research team was ready to delve into the module, it was not yet available for download from the JoiningGod.org website. Accordingly, I extended my learning experiences in this experiment by developing my own Module 4; both sessions are included in Appendix B. Moreover, I had served as a Pentecostal pastor for thirteen years, so I was keenly aware that one’s ecclesiological

context is of critical importance in a discussion of spiritual discernment. Therefore, in developing my two lessons for Module 4, I limited my source materials to books, articles, and videos which were connected to The Missional Network of which *Stepping Out* is a part. Thus, my primary sources became the *Journal of Missional Practice*; Alan Roxburgh's *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*; Scott Hagley's *Eat What Is Set Before You*; and a YouTube video of a conversation between Alan Roxburgh and Mark Lau Branson entitled, "*Discerning the Movement of the Spirit.*"¹⁶³ Not only are Roxburgh and Branson closely connected to The Missional Network, but at four minutes and forty-four seconds, the video was consistent in length with other videos which had already been included in the *Stepping Out* curriculum.

Earlier I noted that Module 2 connected well with the first part of my thesis in which learners were guided from a paradigm of "doing for" to a paradigm of "being with." Module 3 connected with the second part of my thesis where we discovered that God is already present and active in our neighborhoods. Module 4, then, helped us to better join God in what God is doing in the neighborhood.

It should be noted that by the time our research team began Module 4, the state of the pandemic was such that residents in our region of Illinois were allowed to gather in small groups, provided that certain safety protocols were followed. Thus, we felt that it was safe enough for us to gather in person at the church for our final two sessions.

a. Dwelling in the Word. Throughout the first fourteen lessons of *Stepping Out*, my research team dwelt in Luke 10:1-12. However, the video conversation between Roxburgh and Branson opened with a discussion of Jesus' table fellowship. Thus, for

¹⁶³Roxburgh, Alan and Branson, Mark Lau, "*Discerning the Movement of the Spirit,*" a *Joining God Webinar* (video) located at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0oOv5ebzVk>. Accessed June 1, 2020.

the final two lessons, I decided to have my team dwell in Luke 24:13-35, the story of Jesus meeting two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The culmination of the story occurs around a table at which Jesus breaks bread with the two. Since we had not dwelt in this passage before, we were able to dwell in it without importing thoughts and impressions from previous weeks.

The imagination of the research team stopped at the phrase, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him,”¹⁶⁴ to which Deborah asked, “What keeps me from recognizing him?” The question was a rhetorical one; nonetheless, I found it to be a timely question as we were about to launch into a discussion of discernment. There is also a connection to my thesis, for as a group of Christians are guided from a paradigm of “doing for” to one of “being with” others beyond the church community, they will discover that God is already at work in their neighborhood and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in their community. Conversely, if said Christians are not listening to neighbors or are not attending to their stories, then their eyes may be kept from recognizing that God is already at work in their neighborhood. Consequently, they will be unable to join God in what God is already doing in their community.

Since much of our learning revolved around listening to and attending to the stories of neighbors, the women on my research team noticed that the women who went to Jesus’ tomb on that first Easter morning were not considered particularly reliable by the male disciples. In fact, their story was not considered credible until it had been verified by men.¹⁶⁵ The ladies on my team expressed how frustrating it must have been for the women to tell their story and not have anyone listen to them. Again, I found that to be an insightful observation, given that much of the material we had already covered addressed the importance of listening to others and attending to their stories.

¹⁶⁴ Luke 24:16.

¹⁶⁵ Luke 24:24.

The team saw a connection between both of the passages in which we had dwelt: in Luke 10, Jesus instructed the Seventy to “eat what is set before you.” In Luke 24, Jesus practices the same, as Cleopas and his companion offer hospitality to him, and he accepts. Carol noted that if the two had not offered hospitality to Jesus, or if he had refused their hospitality, they likely would never have recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread.

b. Discernment. Each of the previous three modules in *Stepping Out* builds up to Module 4, which is about discernment. Activities in previous modules focused on “becoming a people of relationship rather than outcomes;” “listening without agenda;” and “attending to the stories of people in the neighborhood.” Those themes and practices connected with the early part of my thesis, that *as I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations designed to guide us from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others, we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods*. Module 4 connected with the next phrase in my thesis: *we will be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community* because by listening to and attending to the stories which come out of our community, we establish relationships and create an atmosphere of mutual trust. We are not judging. We have “been with” them. We are seeing neighbors as people of equal worth. We are not commodifying neighbors as “mere converts” to be listed on a year-end report.

Once we establish mutual trust with our neighbors, we will be in a position to recognize that the Spirit has already been at work in their lives. We will see that the Spirit does not operate exclusively in the lives of Christians. That means that one key to discernment is learning to appreciate and recognize the prevenient grace of God, that God has already sent the Spirit into

the neighborhood ahead of us. Our task, then, is simply to join the Triune God in the neighborhood. As we listen to our neighbors, we listen for what the Spirit is saying to us.

c. Exercises and Experiments. I named the first session in Module 4, “Discerning What the Spirit Might Be Saying to Us” because that is the title given to the module at JoiningGod.org. However, I named the second session, “Becoming Alert to the Surprises of the Spirit” because it connected with Scott Hagley’s discussion of Peter’s surprise when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the house of Cornelius in Acts 10:44-45.¹⁶⁶ The Spirit, it seems clear, always reserves the right to act in a way which may not fit into our theology or our plans. Such was the case with Peter. Likewise, as church leaders discern the Spirit’s direction, they must do so in a posture of humble expectation.

Exercises in this module included watching a video and revisiting the diagram, “Where the Church Is.” In the video conversation between Roxburgh and Branson, Roxburgh contrasts the metaphor of *pew* with that of *table*, saying that he finds many pastors isolated in an imagination of the church as a gathering place, whereas “table is in the home and in the community.”¹⁶⁷ In response, Branson suggested that pastors “need to spend twenty percent of their time in their communities...but without their collars, (with) no official status, simply being a neighbor among neighbors.”¹⁶⁸

That comment caught the attention of Karen, a pharmacist, who said, “When you tell pastors they need to spend percent of their time out in the community without their collar, I relate that to what we call in my profession the ‘white coat syndrome.’ Somebody comes into the store and I take their blood pressure and it’s sky-high, and they don’t know why. They’ll say they’ve

¹⁶⁶ Hagley, 119f.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

taken their medicine, so I say to them, ‘Why don’t you sit here for five minutes and I’ll take it again.’ Then I take off my white coat, and I just talk to them. Then I’ll take their blood pressure again and it’s come down in just five minutes because they didn’t see me as an authority figure in my white coat. I just talked with them about their kids or their grandkids or whatever they’re doing that day. And it works miracles. So for ministers out in the community, if the community doesn’t see you as that authority figure, they will open up to you, and be more receptive to you, and tell you what’s on their mind. I think that seeing someone in their professional element is scary to people.” It should be noted that as a pharmacist, Karen removed her white coat in order to advance her agenda: she needed to take someone’s blood pressure. In contrast, when a pastor dwells in the neighborhood, she or he does not need to advance an agenda; the pastor is simply “being with” neighbors who may or may not open up.

In another exercise, we revisited “Where the Church Is,” which was a diagram of a neighborhood used in the previous module. In Module 3, we imagined how the church might be present in the neighborhood through the persons who were depicted in it. However, in this module, we looked at the same sketch and imagined what the various figures might be feeling. The team saw this as an exercise in “listening underneath,” which was a phrase borrowed from Mark Lau Branson in the video we had just watched. “Listening underneath” goes beyond the words and stories told and gets to the feelings expressed by the storyteller. By imagining what sketched figures might be feeling, the team was better prepared to be attend to what neighbors might be feeling.

In the experiment, team members were asked to pray and reflect on the stories they had heard over the course of the past several weeks and discern where God may have been at work in their neighborhood. Karen recalled a couple of conversations she had had which she viewed

differently as a result of this course. “Before this, I wouldn’t have seen it as a ‘God moment.’ But now, reflecting back, I think it probably was.” She described her conversation with a nurse who had tried to redirect some personal protective equipment to an area of greater need. Karen concluded, “She never convinced them to do it, but I still think that was God working in her to try to do that.” In other words, Karen was learning to see God at work in situations where she might not have attributed the actions to God in the past. Similarly, she described a how her husband had recently had a surgical procedure and then accepted some help from their neighbors in mowing their lawn. “Whether they realize it was God moving them to help or not, I think it was,” she observed.

Discerning what the Spirit might be saying to us may prompt church leaders to make a decision. However, discernment means that such a decision ought not be made out of a paradigm of “doing for.” Rather, when such decisions are made, they are rooted in a paradigm of “being with” both neighbor and the Spirit who is already at work in the neighborhood ahead of us. As Carol observed. “You’re hearing what people are saying and the decision isn’t so much a decision as it is a way to respond to what people are saying.”

CHAPTER 4: PROPOSALS AND FINDINGS

In this chapter, I first explore five key learnings of my research team to see whether or not a journey of practices and conversations actually guided us from a paradigm of “doing for” to one of “being with” others so we might discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community. I then describe the “roadmap” I used for my human research project. That journey began with an initial focus group; continued with a sixteen-week journey through *Stepping Out*, and concluded with a final focus group. I then explore my own learnings through this project and then conclude with practical and theological reflections and proposals for future praxis.

A. Participant Learning. In gauging what my research team had learned over the course of my research project, I observed the following:

1. *Distinguishing Paradigms.* In my initial focus group, team members saw the paradigms of “doing for” and “being with” as fluid strategies rather than as distinct or default paradigms. As fluid strategies, one could move easily and quickly from “doing for” to “being with” and back again, often within minutes. Furthermore, one could function simultaneously in each of those two “strategies” with two different persons or groups of people. As the research project progressed, team members began to grasp the distinctions between “doing for” and “being with” and they understood them as being less fluid.

2. *From Strategy to Paradigm.* By the end of the research project, team members began to see “doing for” as a Western default, though they did not necessarily see it as their default. On the other hand, team members began to see “being with” as more than a strategy. Instead, they began to see a paradigm of “being with” as a lifestyle of being fully present with others in the various situations of life.

3. *Dwelling in the Word.* The practice of dwelling in the Word gave the research team a significantly deeper appreciation for the scriptures. This was especially evidenced by the surprise most team members expressed in having their “imagination stopped” by various words and phrases we read in the dwelling passage of Luke 10:1-12. They expressed that surprise even after reading the same passage every week for fourteen weeks. Team members also began to see this method of reading the scriptures as a way by which the Spirit might even speak to them.

4. *The Nudging of the Spirit.* As part of the practice of dwelling in the Word, the curriculum asked, “How do you think the Spirit of God might be nudging you?” For the research team, this raised the possibility that the Spirit might indeed be “nudging” them to “join God in what God is already doing in our community,” as proposed in my thesis. Team members described when they felt those nudges: Gary was nudged to reach out to a neighbor. Carol was nudged to “be with” some students and soccer players. Karen was nudged to “be with” a coworker. Chris was nudged to “be with” both a neighbor and a relative. For the most part, team members felt as though they were partnering with God to “be with” a neighbor in each unique situation. Nonetheless, I did not sense that they believed they were somehow incarnating God (or God’s love) to neighbor, although Deborah expressed the feeling that she felt as though God was “being with” her neighbor through her.

5. *Joining God in the Neighborhood.* Although team members felt as though they were being used of God to be with neighbor, they were reluctant to say that they were “joining God in what God is already doing in the community.” Perhaps that phrase suggested that God was engaged in some overarching program to meet some divine purpose in the community, and the members of my research team had not yet found that program. After all, if

we are to join God in what God is already doing in our community, then it is logical to ask, What *is* God doing in our community? However, one of the advantages of joining God in what God may be doing in our community during a pandemic is that there is less programming taking place. However, the neighbors are still in the neighborhood which means that if we are going to join God in the local, then we are more likely going to be doing so with individuals and families, rather than through programs and organizations. Our Western productionist mindset might be to look for God's project or God's program. That, of course, often leads back to whatever *our* project or *our* program might be. However, what God might actually be doing in our community is simply "being with" our community and its neighbors. And if we are to "join God in what God is already doing in our community," then what we must do is simply "be with" our community and be open to the nudges of the Spirit, should there be any further or more effective way of "being with" neighbor.

B. Roadmap for the Research Project. Answers provided to questions posed during the initial focus group gave me a baseline for evaluation as the same questions were posed again at the end of the sixteen-week research project. However, participant learning occurred throughout the journey through *Stepping Out*; learnings gleaned from both the focus groups and *Stepping Out* follow.

1. *Initial Focus Group.* In order to measure any learnings which might have been gained by my research team, this section presents some of the assumptions and ideas of my research team prior to beginning our journey through *Stepping Out*. Some quotes from team members are included, along with my observations.

I launched my human research project on Monday, March 2, 2020, during which time my research team met together as a focus group. I led the group into a discussion around five

questions: (1) Thus far, what has helped you to understand the difference between a paradigm of “doing for” others versus a paradigm of “being with” others beyond the church?” (2) What do you think someone needs to know in order to move from a service paradigm of “doing for” neighbors beyond the church to a friendship paradigm of “being with” neighbor? (3) What attitudes and values might you need to move from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor? (4) What habits and practices might you need in order to transition from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor? (5) What key skills might you need in order to help others move from “doing for” to “being with”?

In responding to the first question, it became immediately clear that the research team grasped the conceptual difference between the paradigms of “doing for” and “being with.” Team members recognized that “being with” is more personal and interactive, and therefore is more relational. They affirmed that “being with” requires a greater personal commitment on the part of the leader. Gary added that “doing for” might not even involve conversation with another, whereas conversation may be unavoidable when “being with.” Deborah added that, ““Doing for” the other person doesn’t really mean you even have to be there with them.”

One of the research team members saw the two paradigms as being fluid. Drawing from his experience as a leader on our YouthWorks mission trips, Paul noted that there were times when he was “doing for” one party (such as a homeowner whose house he was helping to paint) while at the same time he was “being with” the youths on the mission trip. Despite the fluidity of Paul’s answer, it resonated with several other members of the team, since five of us had served as adult leaders on YouthWorks mission trips. I observed that the so-called fluid nature of the two paradigms indicated that the team saw each paradigm as a strategy to be utilized, depending on the situation. However, it seems clear that modernity is so pervasive in Western thinking and

conduct that it has virtually become the air that we breathe, and the paradigm of “doing for” is a part of modernity’s productionist values. In that atmosphere, “being with,” becomes another way of producing a desired end result if the building of relationships is absent. In contrast, “being with,” as presented in *Stepping Out’s* Module 2, focuses on “becoming a people of relationship rather than outcomes.”

In response to the second question, research team members felt that this required a greater commitment of one’s time and attention, rather than simply giving of one’s money.

As an example, Gary explained that his neighbor seemingly struggles to keep up with his yard work. In response, Gary often mows his yard. “Easy to do, right? But I did not spend any time going (over) and talking with him when his dad died,” Gary continued.

Deborah identified “being with” as a place of personal vulnerability whereas “doing for” is a place where one is able to maintain control. Erin added that “being with” may come with emotional attachments.

When asked in the third question about which attitudes and values might be needed, the team responded by suggesting an open mind, a humble spirit and the ability to empathize. Erin added that the focus had to be on the other, rather than on oneself.

As to the fourth question, team members noted the importance of listening, not realizing that would be the primary focus of Module 2, “listening without agenda.” The team also identified the need for surrendering control, and for being willing to come out of one’s comfort zone.

Paul hinted at table fellowship by noting that when he comes home from work, he typically grabs a snack. However, in reflecting on this question, he offered that he might “be more apt to eat on the front porch and see your neighbors going by and wave and talk.”

The final question dealt with the skills needed in order to move to a paradigm of “being with,” and Paul was the first to speak. “Somebody has to be leader,” he opined. “Somebody has to be the first to...take charge of the situation.” Coming in the initial focus group as it did, it was not surprising that someone would offer an answer reflecting the modern Western imagination. His answer also reminded me of my own seven qualities of leadership which were first presented in Chapter 1, section A.

Deborah suggested leading by example was a key skill one might need. Erin took a more invitational approach, offering, “Sometimes it’s just inviting someone. I got involved a few weeks ago with feeding people at King’s Harvest, and it was just that a friend of mine asked me if I would be interested in doing it, and I never thought about doing that before, you know, so sure. I did.”

Other team members pointed to the importance of storytelling, again not realizing that it would be a key focus of Module 3. In moving from one paradigm to the other, Gary noted that “in order to get others to (join you), you’re going to have to explain, you’ll have to tell some people what you’ve done. You’re going to have to talk about what you’ve accomplished and be ready to share that.” Gary’s comment, however, focused on the stories told by the missional leaders, rather than the stories told by others beyond the local church. That perspective was shared by Erin, drawing on her experiences as a youth missions leader. “That’s one thing that (our youth have) done wonderfully with the mission trips,” she explained. “They’ve come back and told everybody how wonderful it was.”

Deborah said she felt it was important for leaders to step aside and let others take over, work, and show their strengths, “even though we think that we might be able to do it better than

they do.” Karen agreed, adding that leaders need to actively involve others, even giving them space to make mistakes.

I have drawn a couple of observations from our initial focus group. First, I observed that the participants did not see themselves as functioning within a paradigm of “doing for.” On the other hand, I also observed that the participants did not see themselves as functioning in a paradigm of “being with” either. In fact, the participants seemed to view the two paradigms rather fluidly. In other words, one might easily move from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with,” and then back again, sometimes within minutes. Moreover, they viewed the two paradigms as being so fluid that one could be operating out of both paradigms simultaneously. Nonetheless, and in spite of my previous observation, my focus group quickly grasped the conceptual distinction between “doing for” and “being with.”

2. *Final Focus Group.* At the end of Module 4, I again asked my research team the focus questions which I had first posed to them at the beginning of the project. This was done in order to compare responses with those given in the initial focus group as a means of measuring any learnings which they might have experienced over the course of our sixteen lessons together. Their assumptions and learning from both focus groups are summarized in Table 2 later in this section.

In response to the first question (Thus far, what has helped you to understand the difference between a paradigm of “doing for” others versus a paradigm of “being with” others beyond the church?), Deborah offered, “We make them the priority as opposed to the action.”

Erin added, “If you’re ‘doing for’ someone, they don’t necessarily need to be involved. But if you’re ‘being with’ someone, you’re on an equal footing with them.”

“If you’re going to help somebody like your neighbor, you’re doing that for them, to help them,” Carol reflected. “But now I see that it’s not just to physically help them; it’s also an opportunity to ‘be with’ them.” Both Deborah and Carol seemed to see the paradigms of “doing for” and “being with” as less fluid than the team understood them in the initial focus group. In other words, they were able draw distinctions between the two, something with which the group had difficulty in the first session. This was indicative of a better understanding of the characteristics of both paradigms.

Drawing on her experience with YouthWorks, Carol added, “I experienced that on one of our mission trips. We were painting the inside of a house, and one of the leaders said to me that it was important to paint the house, but it was also important for us to visit with the family *in* the house. So every ten minutes or so, I peeled off one or two of the kids from painting and told them to just go and play with the kids who lived there. After awhile, the staff person came by and said, ‘What? You’re not done?’ So I reminded him that he had told us to ‘be with’ the family. I see that more now: ‘doing for’ is only part of it. ‘Doing for’ is the segue way into ‘being with’ others.”

Table 1: Assumptions and Knowledge Gained	
Table 2 compares the assumptions of my research team at the beginning of <i>Stepping Out</i> (left column) with the knowledge gained at the end of <i>Stepping Out</i> (right column).	
Assumptions of the Initial Focus Group	Knowledge Gained as evidenced by the Final Focus Group
Team intellectually grasped the difference between the paradigms of “doing for” and “being with.”	Team members were able to identify the unique qualities of a paradigm of “being with.”
Team identified “being with” as more personal, interactive, and relational.	“Being with” prioritizes the other.

Table 1: Assumptions and Knowledge Gained

Table 2 compares the assumptions of my research team at the beginning of *Stepping Out* (left column) with the knowledge gained at the end of *Stepping Out* (right column).

Assumptions of the Initial Focus Group	Knowledge Gained as evidenced by the Final Focus Group
In practical terms, team members saw the paradigms as being fluid with little distinction between them. A person could even be functioning within both paradigms simultaneously.	“Being with” puts the disciple on equal footing with the other.
Team identified “being with” as requiring a greater personal commitment, which may be a deterrent.	“Being with” identifies what the other needs, rather than what the leader wants to give.
“Being with” renders one vulnerable. However, this was understood in broad, generic terms.	“Being with” renders one vulnerable. However, this was now understood in more specific, practical terms.
Both paradigms require someone to step up into traditional leadership roles.	“Being with” is rooted in prayer as a two-way practice of listening to God as well as talking to God.
It is important for leaders to share their stories.	It is important for leaders to listen to the stories of others in the neighborhood.
Team members did not see themselves as functioning from a default paradigm of either “doing for” or “being with.”	Leaders may represent God to others by “being with” them.
	“Being with” requires well-developed listening skills; there are different kinds of listening skills.

Carol and I agreed that this represented a shift for YouthWorks since our first mission trip with them in 2011; we felt as though they were likewise making the shift from a paradigm of “doing for” to one of “being with.” Carol added, “I love to serve; it’s in my heart. But then I step

back and I ask myself, ‘Am I serving for me? Or am I serving for others?’” Somewhat ironically, I observed that Carol’s self-awareness was helping her to become more aware of others.

Gary clarified, “Help is defined by the recipient. You may think you’re helping me, but what I really need is X, not Y. You may think I need my fence painted, but what I really would like is for you to sit down with me and talk with me.” Both Gary and Carol had grasped a fundamental shift between the two paradigms, that “doing for” is more likely to be leader-centered, whereas “being with” is focused on others, especially others beyond the local church.

As to the second question (What do you think someone needs to know in order to move from a service paradigm of “doing for” neighbors beyond the church to a friendship paradigm of “being with” neighbor?), Karen firmly stated, “It’s not all about you. You may have a notion that you have an expertise in something and that you can go and take care of these problems for someone. But maybe what they need isn’t for you to take care of the problem and prove that you can do it. Their need is just for you to listen to them and accept them.”

Erin offered that a person’s emotional needs might be more important than their physical needs. However, those emotional needs might only be revealed after one takes the time to listen to and attend to their story. Her observation indicated the shift away from the stories told by the leader and the shift to the stories told by the others.

When asked the third question asked about attitudes and values one might need in order to move to a paradigm of “being with” others, and team members raised the importance of being vulnerable, open-minded, and compassionate. Deborah observed that “it’s important to go into a situation with the attitude that I’m going to learn something from this person.” Carol added that, “We should have an attitude that everybody has something that they can teach you. You can learn from anyone.”

When asked, “What habits and practices might you need in order to transition from a paradigm of ‘doing for’ to a paradigm of ‘being with’ neighbor?” Carol mentioned the importance of prayer, not necessarily as a skill, but as a habit and a practice that is critical in moving to a paradigm of “being with.” Carol did not elaborate, but prayer is one way for humans to “be with” God. But prayer also involves listening to God, so it is one way for God to “be with” humans. My thesis states that as we moved to a paradigm of “being with” others, “we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community.” It does not seem possible to join with God apart from prayer.

The research team also recognized that developing and maintaining good listening practices are critical if one is to ultimately join God in the neighborhood.

With regard to the final question (What key skills might you need in order to help others move from “doing for” to “being with”?), the team identified listening as the most important skill one might need. However, the team also learned that there are different ways of listening and that not all ways of listening come alongside a person to more fully understand her or his story.

3. *Further Observations.* My thesis begins with the idea of leading “a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations.” Earlier in this paper, conversation was identified as a featured practice, and conversations were a critical part of our journey together, as our curriculum presented different types which we practiced with each other. Team members then conducted those practices with others in their neighborhoods. When asked what aspects of *Stepping Out* had the greatest impact on her, Carol offered, “The skills we’re learning on how to listen and attend to the stories of others, I feel that’s going to be a life-giving thing. I feel that it’s going to give me better tools to listen to other people and be a witness to the

kingdom of God.” She added that she had developed better listening skills and was trying to be less distracted when she was in conversations with others, including members of her family. “I’m trying to remember to put down the phone and make eye contact and just be in the moment. I’m being nudged to be better at listening.” Carol’s comment called to mind one of the phrases we heard during Module 4 of *Stepping Out*. In the video, Mark Lau Branson noted that church leaders often ask, “What are the needs of this community and how do we solve them?” Instead, he challenged church leaders to “listen underneath” to discover the emotions, the fears, the anxieties, the loves, the passions and the desires of the community, adding, “That is a whole different type of listening.”¹⁶⁹ My research team was captivated by Branson’s phrase, “listening underneath,” and understood it in terms of practicing a more focused listening and drawing out the emotions and stories of the subject.

Conversation was also conducted as part of our dwelling in the Word, for not only did team members share their insights with each other, but they also practiced listening for the “still small voice” of the Spirit to speak to them through the Word. Team members also learned that listening to the “still small voice” of the Spirit is an important prayer practice.

C. Learnings about Leadership in a Paradigm Shift. My human research project provided me with a number of learnings about leading God’s people in a paradigm shift from one of “doing for” to one of “being with.” In this section, I list those learnings which were gleaned through my project.

1. *Identifying the Shift.* An important part of my thesis includes leading a group of Christians from a paradigm of “doing for” others to a paradigm of “being with” others.

¹⁶⁹ “Discerning the Movement of the Spirit” (video).

As previously noted, that language captured my imagination, and as I led my research team, it captured their imagination as well. Since most of the members of my research team had joined me on several YouthWorks mission trips, some of our reflections involved looking back at our participation in those trips and identifying how that ministry was making the shift from “doing for” to “being with.” Our first YouthWorks trip was in 2011, and at the time, it appeared that we were functioning from a paradigm of “doing for” neighbors in our destination communities. For example, we painted churches and buildings and may not have engaged with neighbors at all. But in more recent trips, we noticed that teachings and activities were designed to help us engage with neighbors in our destination communities. Certainly it is difficult if not impossible to truly “be with” neighbor in a week-long youth mission trip, but over the course of several years, many of my research team saw the shift modeled for them by YouthWorks. On occasion, several of us even practiced functioning within a paradigm of “being with” while on our mission trip, although we did not realize it at the time, and the shift was only temporary. It was only in retrospect when we discussed YouthWorks’ shift in paradigms in our *Stepping Out* conversations that we were able to identify that it had been happening. Nonetheless, it is important for a leadership team to recognize the characteristics of each paradigm because if that team is going to make the shift from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with,” that team or that group has to be able to identify the characteristics of each. In my case, I had noticed the change YouthWorks seemed to be making, but I was not able to identify the paradigms until I began my research project. Additionally, as several of us were able to identify the apparent shift in another organization, it helped us to better grasp the shift proposed by *Stepping Out*. Finally, being able to identify the paradigms made it easier for us to see the need in our own church. Even so, seeing the need is not the same as making the shift, although seeing the need is an important first step.

In the focus interviews I conducted at the beginning and end of the project, I asked, “What key skills might you need in order to help others move from ‘doing for’ to ‘being with’?” One of those key leadership skills is to be able to identify each paradigm and when a person or a group of persons is operating in either of those paradigms.

2. *Patient Listening. Stepping Out’s* emphasis on listening has caused me to reexamine my practice of listening, and although I have always considered myself to be a good listener, I came to realize that there were certain situations where that was not the case. One such situation involved Cheryl, an older woman who has had numerous health issues over the fourteen years I have known her. Moreover, she has never failed to update me with the result of every doctor’s visit she had had and every new prescription she had taken. I found that her updates were quite tedious, and in the middle of her updates, I frequently found myself looking for a way to wrap up the conversation. However, I found that as a result of my participation in the *Stepping Out* curriculum that I became more patient in listening to Cheryl. I realized that her health ailments were an important part of her story and she simply wanted to be heard. As I became more intentional in listening to her, I learned that her husband grew quite impatient with hearing about her woes, so it was important to her that she had a safe place to go with her stories. Additionally, the more I attended to her stories, the more I appreciated what a thoughtful and caring person she really was.

3. *Discovering Neighbors.* Embarking on the *Stepping Out* curriculum during a pandemic helped me to be more mindful of *neighbor* and *neighborhood* and how I might engage with neighbors. For example, the curriculum directed participants to “take some time to look for places in the community where people gather.”¹⁷⁰ Prior to the pandemic, people

¹⁷⁰ *Stepping Out*, Module 1, 4.

gathered at the schools or in the coffee shops or in the taverns. But once the pandemic shut down the state, those kinds of gatherings ceased. In response, my research team and I began searching for new ways to understand both *gather* and *community*. As to the first, we learned we could create our own neighborhood gatherings as my team and I noticed that neighbors who had been sheltering in place because of the pandemic nonetheless ventured outside to rake their lawns or walk their dogs or simply stretch their legs. When they did venture out, they seemed eager to converse with a neighbor. Two such neighbors were Roger and Charlotte, whom I mentioned in Chapter 3. I noticed they walked their dog Cody past our home regularly, so I often found a reason to be outside late in the afternoon. Their dog is the same breed as mine, so it was easy to strike up a conversation with them. As they shared their stories with me, I learned that they were Lutheran, so I was not going to convert them to Methodism. However, that gave me the freedom to listen to them as a neighbor, rather than as a prospective pastor. I could “be with” Roger and Charlotte as a neighbor, without any pressure to “be with” them as pastor. I may be a church leader, but sometimes I am just a neighbor and neighborhood gatherings may occur simply and spontaneously. When they do occur, I may hear someone’s gift of a story. I learned that if people are given the opportunity to share their story with you, that they are eager to do so, especially in a pandemic when social opportunities are so limited and when most faces are hidden behind masks.

4. *Leading Versus Doing.* In the earlier section, “Theology of Leadership Among the People of God,” I described my leadership practices which are likely rooted in the example modeled for me by my father: *Work hard and do whatever needs to be done*. Prior to beginning our study of the *Stepping Out*, my presupposition was that the overall operative paradigm at Orion UMC was one of “doing for” others, rather than one of “being with” others,

including neighbors. *They* were “doing for.” *They* were not “being with.” However, as I began to live into the *Stepping Out* curriculum, I came to the realization that *I* operate from a paradigm of “doing for.” In other words, even though there are many ways in which I am “with” my congregation and my community, I came to the realization that far too often I operate from a paradigm of “doing for” the church, thus limiting my opportunities for “being with” the church. That realization came to me early in our journey through *Stepping Out*, and it freed me from feeling as though I had to be the resident expert and allowed me to adopt the position of co-learner with my research team. I was the only one with a Leader’s Guide so I still led the team by guiding the discussion according to the curriculum, but I nonetheless had freed myself to learn with them, rather than adopting a posture of teaching them.

5. *Leading without Controlling.* Bible studies and small groups have been a part of ministry for years. Usually, I pick the curriculum and lead the discussion; I can be rather controlling. However, early in my research project, I realized that *Stepping Out* was not like the Bible studies or small group discussion starters I had used in the past. Since I was embarking in new experience, I adopted a posture of co-learner with my research team and let the curriculum itself be the leader. I was still the one who passed out the sticky notes and set up the white board, but as much as possible, I surrendered control and submitted to the exercises and experiments of *Stepping Out*.

D. Practical and Theological Reflection on the Experiment in the Context of the Research Question. Four contextual considerations inform this section. I begin with a brief return to the context of the Western Church before moving into the context of scripture, specifically the teachings and example of Christ. From there, I examine an experiment undertaken at the Orion UMC, how that experiment was addressed by my research team, and

what it might say about my thesis. I follow that up by revisiting my understanding of leadership, and finally, I address the risk of “being with.”

1. *The Unraveling of the Western Church.* My self-realization that I operate from a paradigm of “doing for” prompts me to wonder if one of the reasons behind the unraveling of the Western church is that so many churches are pastor-centered, especially those churches with fewer than 150 in worship. It seems that in order to validate their own ministries, often times pastors are expected to in charge of everything that goes on within the church, and, in the process, end up “doing for” the church, rather than “being with” the members of the congregation while giving lay members enough space to either fail or succeed. This paradigm of “doing for” fits neatly within our Western narrative of work and productivity. The Western imagination is that I must be “doing for” productivity and growth because I am responsible for whatever growth might occur in any given situation. However, it would appear that God simply calls us to “be with” God. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God declares in Hosea 14:8, “Your fruitfulness comes from me.” In other words, our fruitfulness is not a by-product of anxious labor; rather, it is a by-product of “being with” Christ. Likewise, Jesus said,

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”¹⁷¹

In his book, *A Spirituality of the Road*, David Bosch notes that Christian leaders and missionaries often refer to themselves as “channels or instruments” used of God to communicate God’s message to people. “Our understanding of such a channel usually is that of a clean water pipe which does nothing but allow an unrestricted flow of water.” Bosch contrasts the metaphor of *channel* with Jesus’ metaphor of *branch*. “A channel remains unaffected by what flows

¹⁷¹ John 15:4-5.

through it, but a branch has, first of all, to absorb the nutritive power which comes to it from the root and trunk.”¹⁷² In other words, “being with” begins with being with Jesus, and rather than being caught up in the Western imagination of disconnected productivity, we are called to simply abide in Christ and then follow the nudges of the Spirit. When we abide in Christ, we will bear fruit, not through our own efforts, but because we are connected to a “system” which provides us with nutritive power.

Moreover, the paradigm of “being with” creates an environment for pastors and laity to share ministry together. Then, together, pastors and laity may venture out into the neighborhood as the Spirit nudges them. Indeed, one of the questions asked repeatedly throughout *Stepping Out* is, “How do you think the Spirit of God might be nudging you?” That question is asked of all *Stepping Out* participants, not just pastors. However, in a pastor-centered church, regardless of size, one might be led to believe that the Spirit only nudges the pastor, and, of course, all such nudges are related to the programming or expansion of the church. Moreover, if and when the Spirit nudges the pastor, those nudges trump any Spirit-nudges to the laity. On the other hand, in a paradigm of “being with,” pastor and lay person join together to discern the leadings of the Holy Spirit.

2. “*Doing*” and “*Being*” with Jesus. At first blush, it appears in the Gospels as though Jesus operated from a paradigm of “doing for”: he healed the sick, he gave sight to the blind, he caused the lame to walk, he raised the dead, and so much more. His ultimate act of “doing for” was his crucifixion which opened the way for humanity to experience the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of relationship with God. Upon further consideration, however, all of Jesus’ acts of “doing for” were predicated on his ultimate act of “being with,”

¹⁷² Bosch, David, *A Spirituality of the Road*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 41.

namely, his Incarnation in which Christ came into the neighborhood of humanity so that ultimately humanity could be with Christ in eternity.

In an episode of the NBC drama *The West Wing*, Vice President Bob Russell asks Communications Director Toby Ziegler, “You know what they call a leader with no followers? Just a guy taking a walk.”¹⁷³ That statement implies is a paradigm of leadership in which a true leader must be out in front of a group of followers. However, that is a paradigm of *separation* between leader and followers, for in order to be out in front of the followers, the leader must separate himself or herself from the pack. Being out in front of the pack may be necessary for a drum major leading a marching band, but it is contrary to the example of Jesus Christ. He taught them as he walked with them; if he were out in front of them, they would not have been able to hear his teachings as he walked along. John 14:31b (“Come now; let us leave”) suggests that Jesus’ discourse about the true vine, which follows in John 15, was given as Jesus walked with his disciples on the way to (presumably) Gethsemane. Indeed, they may have walked past a vineyard on the way to Gethsemane.

Jesus led by “being with” his disciples. Mark 3:14 states that “He appointed twelve that they might *be with* him” (emphasis added). Jesus led his disciples by example, as is evident from Luke 10 when he directed them to “cure the sick.” How could he make such a request of them? Because he had been with them and they had watched him as he cured the sick.

3. *Qualities of Leadership.* In Chapter 1, section A, I listed seven qualities of leadership, most of which were rooted in the imagination of modernity. Therefore, after joining in “Leadership in a Changing Context” with all it entails, and after leading a group of Christians

¹⁷³ *The West Wing*, Season 5, Episode 8, "Shutdown." NBC, 2003. Per Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_West_Wing_episodes#Season_5_\(2003%E2%80%9304\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_West_Wing_episodes#Season_5_(2003%E2%80%9304))), this episode originally aired November 19, 2003. Bob Russell was played by Gary Cole and Toby Ziegler was played by Richard Schiff.

through *Stepping Out* in a human research project, I am offering a revised list of leadership qualities on the following table. The left column presents seven the qualities of leadership as I understood leadership at the beginning of my doctoral studies. The right column presents seven qualities of leadership plus one quality of discipleship as I have come to understand leadership as a result of my doctoral studies, especially my journey through *Stepping Out*. Each of those qualities are further examined in the bullet points which follow the table.

Table 2: Shifting Understandings of the Qualities of Leadership	
Qualities of Leadership 2017 from Chapter 1, section A, pg. 4.	Qualities of Leadership 2021
1. A leader envisions.	1. A leader is a friend.
2. A leader conveys that vision.	2. A leader convenes people to form discerning, interpretive groups.
3. A leader leads.	3. A leader sees people rather than projects or programs.
4. A leader collaborates.	4. A leader creates space for discernment.
5. A leader is an example.	5. A leader facilitates.
6. A leader discerns.	6. A leader stays.
7. A leader serves.	7. A leader practices “being with” others, including those beyond the church community.
	8. A <i>disciple</i> abides in Christ through practices such as prayer and dwelling in the Word.

- *A leader is a friend.* This may not apply in all situations—the military comes to mind—but this paper is about leadership “among a group of Christians” and when a leader shifts to a paradigm of “being with,” then it is only logical that the leader has shifted to being a friend to the

one the leader is “being with.” That is the kind of leadership described by Christopher Heuertz and Christine Pohl in *Friendships at the Margins*. They begin by asking, “How would our lives and our ministries be different if our understandings of love emphasized friendships?”¹⁷⁴ They respond to their question by describing the results of a leader “being with” others:

Within friendship we learn truths about the other person we couldn’t know any other way except through a context of trust and fidelity. Within friendship we learn about ourselves as we see our love and action through the eyes of another who loves and trusts us. And relationships forged among friends can open into deeper understandings of God’s love and concerns.¹⁷⁵

Heuertz and Pohl note that, “Once our eyes are opened to the importance of friendship,” Christian leaders can become more sensitive to neighbors, whether on a college campus, a seminary, or in one’s neighborhood, and ministry “can be reframed when we recognize that friendship and love belong at the heart of every Christian ministry and act of reconciliation.” Reconciliation, Heuertz and Pohl add, “requires friendship wherever we find ourselves.”¹⁷⁶ This quality of leadership stands in direct opposition to Western modernity and its productionist values which are seen in a paradigm of “doing for.” Again, Heuertz and Pohl observe:

Learning to see the so-called other as a friend increases our sensitivity to the reductionism, commodification and manipulation that plague some versions of mission and ministry... When we shrink our interest in people to the possibilities of where their souls may spend eternity, it is easy to miss how God might already be working in and through a particular person.¹⁷⁷

• *A leader convenes people to form discerning, interpretive groups.* This characteristic was at the heart of the *Stepping Out* project. My role was not to be the boss or even the expert. However, someone needed to start the conversation. Consequently, as the leader, my role was to convene a research team, begin the conversation, and guide the group into practices which would

¹⁷⁴ Heuertz, Christopher and Pohl, Christine, *Friendships at the Margins*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010, 10.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 30f.

pique their curiosity about what God might be up to in the neighborhood. The bullet points which follow are predicated on this characteristic of leadership.

- *A leader sees people rather than projects or programs.* That was one of the experiences of my research team in *Stepping Out* during a pandemic: With the shutdown of so many programs, we had no choice but to become alert to the people in our neighborhoods. That message became particularly clear the two weeks we studied and discussed the diagram, “Where the Church Is,” which invited us to see individuals within a community as part of the church—or as part of what God is already doing in the community—even though the people were not pictured in a church. In the experiments which followed, we were better able to see neighbors as persons of worth in whom the Spirit of God was already working. In the absence of programs, we were freed from the need to promote a particular agenda.

Promoting a program—including church—can lead to the creation of a modern business mindset. According to Heuertz and Pohl:

Because a business mindset is so prevalent in our society, the work of mission is sometimes recast in very economic terms. Missional language like ‘target audience’ and a focus on results-driven measurements echo a sales approach that sees people first as potential consumers—in this case, consumers of the product we’re offering, a particular version of Christianity. Such approaches open us to the temptation toward manipulation, and manipulation should never be mistaken for evangelism.¹⁷⁸

When leaders see people as people and not as prospective participants in a program such as the church, then leaders preserve the dignity of their neighbors and validate their story.

Implied in each of the two preceding points, *a leader listens*. It is hard to imagine a leader—or anyone—being a friend without listening, and it is hard to imagine a leader seeing people without listening to those people. It should be noted, however, that listening is not simply

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 31.

a quality of leaders; it is also a skill which must be developed by leaders. To that end, many of the exercises featured in *Stepping Out* such as “Listening Without Agenda” and “Attending to the Stories of People in the Neighborhood” were designed to help participants develop the skill of listening.

- *A leader creates space for discernment.* As the leader develops his or her listening skills, the leader is better equipped to engage in the practice of discernment. However, this is done differently than it might have been done in a paradigm of “doing for,” for in that paradigm, the leader takes all of initiative and the so-called discerned action may not be the best fit for the needs and the stories of those who may be affected by said action. This is one of the lessons not only of *Stepping Out*, but also of *Beads Needs*, which was cited in Chapter 3, section A.2. In a paradigm of “being with,” a leader discerns in an atmosphere of mutuality. If discernment is to take place in the church, then the congregation—or at least its leadership—participates in that process of discernment. Likewise, if discernment is to take place in the neighborhood, then neighbors participate in that process. This follows the biblical pattern established at the Council of Jerusalem, where James states in his letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us...*”¹⁷⁹ Christian leaders do not engage in discernment alone; rather, they facilitate discernment within community.

- *A leader facilitates.* It is the nature of leadership for leaders to have certain responsibilities; there are simply certain things which need to be done. However, for those leaders who are shifting to a paradigm of “being with,” this is an area where such leaders may fall back into a paradigm of “doing for,” and simply decide, “I’ll just do it myself.” However, true Christian leaders are facilitators. The *Stepping Out Leader’s Guide* offered a checklist for

¹⁷⁹ Acts 15:28. Emphasis added.

leaders which clarified that as leader, I was to function as the group facilitator which meant that I was to have the Leader's Guide, handouts and any other needed resources for our work together. I was also to move the team along through each of our gatherings, and participate alongside of them, doing all of the same work as them. This also freed me from having to be "the one in the room with all the answers."¹⁸⁰

Leader as facilitator is where some of the qualities of leadership which I wrote about in my 2017 paper fit in, but with a key difference: leaders *facilitate* vision, discernment, and service. In other words, leaders create an atmosphere of mutual collaboration where anyone in the group feels comfortable offering a vision, a sense of discernment or a service.

- *A leader stays.* If leaders are to become friends and "be with" neighbors, then leaders would do well to realize that friends do not come and go quickly. Friends stay. As noted earlier in Chapter 2, section E.1, Wilson-Hartgrove calls this practice *stability*. Heuertz and Pohl wrote from the standpoint of overseas ministry; nonetheless, their observations apply to the practice of stability:

"We're finally realizing the significance of long-term commitment and readiness to sacrifice that stands behind the career missionary model... We've also increasingly learned that the vulnerable women and children among whom we serve cannot afford another painful goodbye in the sad series of losses that characterizes their lives. We've discovered that our commitment to community building requires fidelity over time."¹⁸¹

There are certainly other qualities of leadership; however, these are the qualities which I gleaned through *Stepping Out* and the readings which informed it.

- *A leader practices "being with" others, including those beyond the church community.*

Church leaders often say that the church has a mission. However, this quality of leadership

¹⁸⁰ *Stepping Out*, Module 1, 3.

¹⁸¹ Heuertz and Pohl, 27f.

recognizes that the mission of the church is first and foremost God’s mission. Moreover, God’s mission can be summarized in just two words: “Being with,” for behind the Creation, the Incarnation, the Passion of Christ, the Resurrection, and eternal life is God’s ultimate purpose of “being with” humankind on earth as well as in heaven. Consequently, for a Christian leader to participate in God’s mission, then it will be necessary for that leader to practice “being with” others, including those beyond the church community, reflective of God being with us. Before his Ascension, Jesus invited his followers to participate in God’s mission. He then added, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”¹⁸²

- A disciple *abides in Christ through practices such as prayer and dwelling in the Word.*

This characteristic is for all followers of Christ, including leaders. This characteristic also recognizes that my human research project was centered around *Stepping Out*, and the title of that curriculum is a metaphor describing Christian leaders emerging from their churches to engage with their neighbors with curiosity and with the full expectation that once they stepped out of the confines of their churches, they would discover that God was already at work in their neighborhoods—perhaps even more there than in their churches—and that all the Christian leaders had to do was discern how they might join God in the local in whatever God might be up to. *Stepping Out* may present a new metaphor, but it is not a new idea. There is another older metaphor which has been right in front of us since the founding of the church. It is a metaphor of “being with” and it was given to the church by Christ himself in John 15:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful ... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

¹⁸² Matthew 28:18-20.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing ...

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.¹⁸³

There are two key images in that passage. The first is the image of *remaining in Christ*, which is the language of “being with” Christ. The second is the image of *bearing fruit*, which speaks to the Western narrative of productivity. When separated from the first image, bearing fruit is interpreted as an image of modern productiveness. Jesus wants us to be fruitful; however, he does not tell us what that fruit will look like. Instead, Christ invites us to dwell in him and let the fruitfulness take care of itself. Or perhaps more accurately, Christ will take care of the fruitfulness. In contrast, the modern imagination is to focus on the fruit (or converts, or profits, or results) as though life can be lived without God.¹⁸⁴ Thanks to the modern imagination, we came to believe that we could be fruitful without abiding in Christ—and without abiding with neighbor. Our fruitfulness then became an exercise in “doing for,” and all it brought about was unraveling.

The purpose behind *Stepping Out* is, first of all, to connect a group of Christians to Christ. We accomplished that through a series of practices which included, but was not limited to, dwelling in the Word and prayer. Secondly, as we participated in those practices with one another and then entered into conversations with others in our neighborhood, we discovered that

¹⁸³ John 15:1-2, 4-5, 9-15.

¹⁸⁴ Roxburgh, *Joining God*, xiv.

God was already at work in our neighborhoods and that we were better able to join God in what God was already doing in our community. In other words, we began to be fruitful. However, we entered into our neighborhoods ready to “listen without agenda,” which is to say, we entered into our neighborhoods without any preconceived ideas as to what our fruitfulness might look like. The fruitfulness was determined by the Vine, which is to say, Christ, who was already at work ahead of us. Our task was simply to dwell with Christ, with one another, and with neighbor. The results of our dwelling with Christ were left up to him.

When we abide in Christ, we love Christ. And when we love Christ, we love neighbor. The commandment to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” cannot be separated from the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁸⁵ Likewise, *Stepping Out* invites us to first dwell with Christ and then dwell with neighbor. Using another example from horticulture, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove expands on this idea, describing it as the practice of *stability*:

The practice of stability, then, is an exercise in putting down roots. A good tree bears good fruit, we know, and the fruit of the Spirit begins with love. But we are product-oriented people, eager to skip over the process and enjoy the apple without attending to the soil and sun and roots that help it grow. All of us would love to be more loving, but we spend precious little time establishing roots of love... If I really want to learn to love my neighbor, I have to pay attention to the details of life in this place. Stability's wisdom calls me to learn the ways and means of grafting onto this place.¹⁸⁶

First, notice how Wilson-Hartgrove contrasts “doing for” to “being with.” The former is connected to modernity as evidenced by his observation that “we are product-oriented people.” Modernity is tied to productivity and progress, among many other things. But Christianity is about being planted. At the risk of mixing metaphors, we are first planted in the Vine because we

¹⁸⁵ Matthew 22:37, 39.

¹⁸⁶ Wilson-Hartgrove, 84.

love Christ; we learn to “be with” Christ, just as Christ through the Spirit is always with us. Then we are planted in our neighborhoods to “be with” neighbor because we love our neighbor. Moreover, we are planted in our neighborhoods because Christ loves our neighbor and wants to love our neighbor through us. In so doing, we are able to join God in what God is already doing in our community

4. *The Risk of “Being With.”* In my former denomination, the Assemblies of God, pastors often spoke of keeping the congregation at “arm’s length” meaning that pastors were not to get too close to their parishioners. A 2017 Southern Baptist blog identified five reasons why pastors keep parishioners at arm’s length, with the primary reason being a fear of putting their reputation at risk. Blogger Mark Dance writes:

I talk to pastors almost every day who are carrying burdens alone because they are afraid to share them with their members. Most are not so much afraid of getting fired as they are being pitied. Men thrive on respect, and so we hold on to it too long sometimes.¹⁸⁷

Dance cites other reasons why pastors keep parishioners at arm’s length, most notably that they confuse friendship with favoritism, and prefer serving to being served. Consequently, pastors retreat into some form of isolation rather than risk getting too close to parishioners.¹⁸⁸ Incidentally, pastors who prefer serving over being served is indicative of pastors who are operating from a paradigm of “doing for.”

In an article in *Christianity Today*, Cole Hartin asks, “Why do people keep pastors at arm’s length?”¹⁸⁹ However, even a cursory reading of the article makes it clear that it is not

¹⁸⁷ Dance, Mark, “5 Reasons Pastors Keep Parishioners at Arm’s Length,” August 16, 2017, Facts and Trends, August 16, 2017. Located at <https://factsandtrends.net/2017/08/16/5-reasons-pastors-keep-members-arms-length/>. Accessed October 12, 2020.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Hartin, Cole, “Why Do People Keep Pastors at Arm’s Length?” *Christianity Today*, October, 2019. Located at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2019/october-web-exclusives/why-do-people-keep-pastors-at-arms-length.html>. Accessed October 12, 2020.

people who keep pastors at arm's length; it is the pastors. They may do so by the clothes they wear, including clerical collars or all-black ensembles. More significantly though is the nature of the pastoral calling. Hartin writes that, "To be a pastor is to be set apart, holy, 'other'—or so it seems. Whether or not this is in fact the case, it is how we are popularly perceived, and it shapes the way we are treated."¹⁹⁰ But who sets the pastor apart? Hartin writes that God sets pastors apart to be holy and therefore dedicated to God. However, that does not mean God intends for pastors to be separated from people. Apparently, Hartin found it difficult to make that distinction:

In one of our previous churches, my wife and I started to get close to a couple. We had lots in common, and our kids were about the same age. Yet when deep marital issues between them started to surface, the couple asked me to do some marital counseling, which I did happily. But as they aired their dirty laundry in my office, I realized the kind of friendship my wife and I had hoped for wasn't going to work out. My role had changed from friend to priest. In situations like that, I often find myself wondering, *Are you interested in being my friend or are you interested in what I can do for you as a pastor?* I can be happy with either answer, but I want to be clear about what I'm getting into.¹⁹¹

Clearly, Hartin was torn between two paradigms: the paradigm of "doing for" and the paradigm of "being with." It would appear that Hartin enjoyed a "being with" relationship with the couple in question until the couple developed marital issues. Then Hartin seemed forced into a paradigm of doing for." Left unstated in the article was the question of how Hartin's wife and children were impacted by this shift of paradigms. While it is beyond the purview of this paper to present the particulars of marital counseling in a paradigm of "being with," it seems reasonable to assume that the other couple needed the pastor and his wife to "be with" them during a difficult time in their marriage, perhaps even more than they needed their pastor to "do for" them.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

In contrast, the lines between pastor and friend should become fuzzy because one should not have to choose between being a pastor and being a friend. A person can be both, at least until that person is no longer the pastor; then that person is simply a friend.

Why would pastors want to engage in practices of keeping themselves at arm's length from their congregation? One reason may be found in Shane Stanford book, *The Eight Blessings*: “Jesus encourages us to love with real openness and honesty, but such love also brings great vulnerability.”¹⁹² One cannot easily love and simultaneously maintain distance. True love involves intimacy, and intimacy means vulnerability. Unfortunately, some pastors may be more concerned with protecting their reputation or their privacy than with getting close to their parishioners. The paradigm of “being with” is a paradigm of vulnerability, as my research team pointed out on several occasions. Unfortunately for some pastors, “being with” and becoming vulnerable is a risk they are not willing to take: they do not want anyone to know their faults and frailties. However, being vulnerable is part of being real and it seems logical that God would want Christian leaders to be real. Moreover, when Christ walked among us, he was not only real; he became vulnerable, even becoming vulnerable to death. Certainly Christ was set apart from his followers—Christ became God-in-the-flesh. Nonetheless, he called his followers *friends* rather than servants.¹⁹³ Jesus is still willing to be our friend.

I began my previous section with *a leader is a friend*. A friend is someone who loves you. A friend is someone who will “be with” you. And a friend is someone you can trust because a friend is real with you. As Stanford noted, that is what it means to be open and honest; that is what it means to be vulnerable. Parishioners and neighbors alike need that kind of church leader.

¹⁹² Stanford, Shane, *The Eight Blessings: Rediscovering the Beatitudes*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007, 43.

¹⁹³ John 15:14.

I wrote this paper after completing *Stepping Out* with my research team and after moving from Orion to Aledo. As I reviewed my notes and materials from my human research project, I heard my friends share their stories, and I missed them. I had practiced stability with them for fourteen years, and I had grown to love them. That may have been the most vital reason for any success I might have had in Orion. If pastors are to lead like Jesus, then they must be willing to love like Jesus. We cannot simply move from pastorate to pastorate without investing our love as well as our time in each congregation.

During Module 2, as my research team spent time dwelling in the Word, I asked them, What does Luke 10:1-2 say about leadership? Noting that in verse 4, Jesus said the Seventy were to “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals,” Carol observed that that made them vulnerable. Thus, she offered that one of the characteristics of Christ-like leadership is to make oneself vulnerable. Friends are vulnerable among friends.

E. Proposals for Future Praxis. As a typical American church, Orion UMC reflects its own modern context. It is also unraveling. Churches like Orion UMC would benefit by engaging in some specific practices. First, I recommend that the church anticipate the loss of an exemplary figure. In his book, *Eat What Is Set Before You*, Scott Hagley explores at length Midtown Baptist Church and two of its “exemplary figures,” Sara and Keith, who did much to connect neighborhood youths and adults to the church. Hagley adds that the West End neighborhood knows the church because so many neighbors know Keith and Sara.

However, the reliance upon exemplary figures for connecting to the neighborhood carries some risks. First, it presents a pragmatic risk. What happens when Sara or Keith move on or if the church runs out of money to fund these fulltime positions?¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Hagley, 140.

Exemplary leaders are not forever. They experience burn-out. They get sick. They die. They move to other communities and other churches. They retire. Deborah, one of the members of my research team had also been an exemplary figure in Orion UMC. However, two months after we completed *Stepping Out*, her husband retired and they subsequently moved to another state.

In my case, I received a new pastoral appointment, which, as previously noted, was one of two crises Orion UMC faced in March 2020. The first was the shutdown of the church due to the pandemic. The second was my announcement that I had received a new appointment, effective July 1. My wife and I may have qualified as exemplary leaders, not only in the church, but also in the community. We had lived in Orion a long time; we had many friends in the church and in the community; and we did a lot. For fourteen years, I was involved in several community organizations and ecumenical endeavors. I also championed opening the doors of the church and the MAC to the community. Additionally, my wife was heavily invested in the community as the executive director for Main Street Orion. Nonetheless, it was inevitable that the day would come when we would no longer be exemplary figures in Orion. Fortunately, the polity of the United Methodist Church mitigates the loss of an exemplary figure when that figure is the pastor, because a bishop quickly appoints a new pastor to the church. That was the case in Orion because one week after I announced my new appointment, Bishop Beard appointed Rev. Ann Champion to Orion UMC, effective July 1. She is in position to become an exemplary figure in the church.

Hagley goes on further define exemplary figures as “heroic missionaries” who, even when they are present in the congregation as we were, tend to buffer the rest of the congregation

from the people and concerns of its immediate context because they are “*singular* points of connection to the neighborhood.”¹⁹⁵

In the best case, these individuals invite the whole church to participate in boundary-breaking behavior. But such an arrangement can also cultivate distance and passivity: *they go on our behalf*.¹⁹⁶

That describes many churches, Orion UMC among them. Many church leaders were happy that my wife and I were involved in the community; however, much of my community involvement was done through organizations. In retrospect, that probably precluded me from a more personal way of “being with” neighbors beyond the church. I now realize I was operating from a default paradigm of “doing for.” Had I been more aware of what it means to be leading from a paradigm of “doing for” rather than a paradigm of “being with,” I would have been more intentional in inviting other members of my congregation to join me in “stepping out” into the community. That, in turn, would have created several benefits. First, it would have enabled us to discover that God was already at work in our community. Second, it would have positioned us to join God in the local. Third, it would have facilitated other persons becoming exemplary figures. Fourth, it would have enabled the church to become more attentive to its community apart from simply making its facilities available to the community. After all, opening its facilities to outside groups is not the same as being attentive to the community. The MAC can be a most helpful tool in helping the church become more attentive to its community, much as Midtown’s gymnasium was an important tool in connecting it with the West End neighborhood. However, both the MAC and Midtown’s gym are just buildings. Neighbors might connect to a church through a building, but buildings do not automatically connect churches with neighborhoods. The real objective is to—

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 141.

—go out into God’s world and build partnerships and relationships beyond the church, (that we might) open ourselves to suffer the presence of others, to be shaped, challenged, and gifted by those beyond the boundaries of the church.¹⁹⁷

A proposal for any church, including Orion UMC, is to *give their pastors the freedom to do less* in the church that they might have more time and energy to “be with” neighbors in the community. In reviewing my ministry at Orion UMC, I now realize that I was so caught up in “doing for” the congregation that I little time and energy left for “being with” neighbors. This reveals a default to the productionist values of modernity by the church as well as by me. The modern mindset is that the only way to be productive is to be working, and having a cup of coffee with a stranger does not seem like work to the modern mind. Moreover, when I did take time to “be with” community, it was often through participating in organizations such as Lions Club or the Orion Fall Festival. Such involvement often led me to “doing for” the organization or community, but it was not conducive to “being with” neighbor.

In order for churches like Orion UMC to open themselves to the presence and gifts of others, as Hagley suggests, churches must learn to “eat what is set before them.” In other words, they must attend to the stories of their neighbors and their communities. Likewise, they will need to receive whatever gifts the neighborhood has to offer. In doing so, they cannot choose what the neighborhood has to offer. The neighborhood is what it is; it is not controlled by the church. *Control*, after all, seems to be characteristic of a paradigm of “doing for.”

Given the fact that Deborah moved away, Orion UMC should “*cultivate everyday missionaries*” rather than relying on “heroic missionaries”¹⁹⁸ such as a paid youth pastor or a dynamic senior pastor. This will require a church leader (such as the pastor) to lead a group on a journey of conversations and practices through which they might be able to join God in the local.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 79.

This will also require a larger body of people from the congregation who are convinced of the need to shift into a paradigm of “being with,” rather than expecting a single heroic missionary to “do for” them and the community. Moreover, an atmosphere of “being with” is an atmosphere conducive to the cultivation of everyday missionaries.

Finally, most of my research team remains in Orion UMC and have access to *Stepping Out*. Even though I am no longer its pastor, those team members can help lead the church in the curriculum and the various steps which will help it to become more attentive to its community.

F. Personal Praxis Following the Research Project. In response to Scott Hagley’s cautionary word, I am striving to free myself from the urge to become a “heroic missionary” as I begin my pastorate in Aledo and as I move from a paradigm of “doing for” to one of “being with.” At the least, I am striving to be one of several “heroic missionaries.” Thus, my staff and I have developed our Wednesday evening Community Connections as an opportunity for lay persons to share their stories and sermons with the congregation in person and via Facebook Live.

I have also been able to apply the lessons learned from both my research project by hosting “Coffee with the Pastor” weekday mornings at the church. Because of safety concerns due to the Covid-19 pandemic, participants had to register in advance. Nonetheless, the practice gave me the opportunity to sit down with anywhere from one to nine persons at a time and hear their stories. It was a wonderful listening opportunity, although as a new pastor, many wanted to hear my story as well, so it became a time for mutual sharing and listening. In general, I find that I am more attentive to hearing people’s stories regardless of the situation. Coffee with the Pastor is also becoming a springboard for stepping outside the church and into the community. I am also blessed that my new congregation gives me enough flexibility of time and support of laity

that not all my time is invested in the church; I am finding that I have the freedom to dwell in the community and not just in the congregation.

G. Final Conclusions. In this final section, I offer my conclusions about the project, especially as I show how my project proves my thesis. However, I am going to present those conclusions in the context of a conversation I had with my research team.

In Chapter 2, section B, I described how I was inspired by Clayton Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma* to launch midweek worship in response to the unraveling I saw at Orion UMC. It is not only one of my proudest achievements at the church; it was also among my most fruitful endeavors while serving there. However, when I suggested to my research team that it was perhaps the best example of my "doing for" the church, I generated a lively discussion with my research team.

One of the benchmarks in the unraveling of the church occurred in October 2017 when Norma died. Norma had been one of the most generous contributors to the church, donating roughly seven percent of the annual church budget. There were other deaths plus a few congregants who moved out of state, so both our attendance and our income dropped, triggering much anxiety for both the finance team and the administrative council. However, neither group offered a strategy for addressing the unraveling, so in May, 2018, I launched the midweek worship service as a two-month experiment. If it succeeded, it would continue.

At first, I did not want to obligate anyone else to participate in the service; nor did I want to obligate church funds to the endeavor. I kept the format simple with a thirty-minute service. I did all the preaching and prayers and utilized pre-recorded music to accompany the congregational singing. And it turned out to be a successful experiment, as it brought in twenty new worshippers every week plus an additional \$10,000 the first year into the church coffers.

However, as I reevaluated that experiment in light of *Stepping Out*, I saw the midweek service as a clear example of me “doing for” the church. When I shared that observation with my research team, Deborah observed, “It may have started out as you ‘doing for’ the church, but clearly it’s evolved into a case of you ‘being with’ that group of people who come to worship on Thursday nights.” I suspect that Deborah was simply being nice to me. Of course, I could argue that she was right; after all, her observation coincided with my experience with the midweek worship service: I had launched it assuming that regular worshippers who missed a Sunday service would come on Thursdays, but that did not happen. Instead, almost all of our Thursday night regular worshippers were persons who had not been involved in the church before. They formed a new community of believers in a setting that was much more casual than a traditional Sunday morning worship experience. And we occasionally shared simple meals together or participated in simple outreach activities, such as serving meals to the poor. Deborah said midweek worship gave me a new opportunity to “be with” a new community of believers, since they had little, if any, involvement with the church before and I had not been with them at all. Deborah may have been right that the midweek service provided limited “being with” opportunities; however, I felt the scale was clearly tipped toward the paradigm of “doing for.”

More likely, Deborah’s comment revealed just how deeply the language of “doing for” and “being with” had become embedded in the imagination of my research team. They were important concepts in the curriculum, and they were critical concepts within my thesis. However, “doing for” and “being with” were not the end of my thesis. Rather, the shift from one paradigm to the other was intended to help my research team and me to first “discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods” and second, to “be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community.” Deborah’s question indicated that my research team was in the process

of learning what it means to “be with” others. However, it was a “being with” that was located in the church, rather than in the community. I wanted to know if our learnings had extended to the next part of my thesis: Had we discovered that God was already at work in our neighborhoods? And had we joined God in what God was already doing in our community?

Unfortunately, those questions assume that God exists, that God is knowable, that God is active in our neighborhoods, and that God is joinable. However, those contentions cannot be proven in a human research project such as mine; those contentions are matters of faith and cannot be verified by collecting and analyzing data. Fortunately, the members of my research team are all believers and they all accept the premises that God exists and that God is knowable, active, and joinable. If those premises are accepted, then I am able to draw the following conclusions from my human research project:

- A sixteen-weeks’ journey through a curriculum is not long enough for a complete shift from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with.” By incomplete, I mean that modernity’s paradigm of “doing for” is so deeply embedded in our Western culture that it would take months if not years of practicing “being with” before one would be able to say that the shift had been made. Indeed, the paradigm of “doing for” has been embedded in me since I was a child, as first noted in my discussion of my father in Chapter 2, section B.

Earlier I described the two paradigms as being rather “fluid.” In fact, that idea came up in the initial focus group where the conversation about the so-called fluid nature between “doing for” and “being with” indicated that there was little distinction between the two paradigms. On the other hand, as we journeyed further into *Stepping Out*, I noticed that the two paradigms still seemed rather fluid to my team. However, fluidity had come to mean that one could move from one paradigm to the other rather easily. Thus, the distinctions between the two paradigms had

become clearer, and there was a willingness to move into the paradigm of “being with,” but team members still wanted the option of drifting back into the paradigm of “doing for.” This demonstrated that the ways of modernity are deeply embedded in us, but it also demonstrated that one could intentionally shift to the paradigm of “being with.” I see that as progress.

- With that in mind, I further conclude that a sixteen-weeks’ journey through a curriculum was long enough for my research team and me to recognize the differences between the two paradigms and, in particular, to appreciate the value in “being with” those beyond the church community. Furthermore, a sixteen-weeks’ journey was long enough for us to *begin* to shift into a paradigm of “being with” others beyond the church. I noticed how excited my team members were when they reported how well their various listening exercises had worked out and how eager their neighbors had been to have someone listen to them without agenda.

- Because the curriculum directed participants to engage in the practices of prayer and dwelling in the Word, team members were better able to know God and to discern God’s activity in their lives and in the neighborhood.

- Team members were just beginning to see themselves as persons incarnating God’s love and care to neighbor by offering to them a willingness to listen. Moreover, team members were able to receive the stories of neighbors as a gift.

- Team members began to see their willingness to listen to neighbor as a metaphor for prayer in which a believer not only speaks to God, but also listens to God speaking through the Spirit.

- Team members did not see evidence that God was “already at work” in our neighborhoods through projects or programs; rather, they saw that God was working in the lives of individuals or small groups of individuals. Perhaps that is because the pandemic had shut

down so many programs. On the other hand, it may simply be that God prefers to work through individuals who have been created in the image of the divine, rather than through projects and programs which are a human construct.

Finally, at the beginning of this paper I asked, How does one lead a Christian group on a journey of learning to join God in the local? I found that as I led a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations, we were indeed guided from a paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to a paradigm of “being with” others. Those conversations were held both within my research team and in our neighborhoods, and they included various listening practices as well as attending to the stories of others. Our practices included, but were not limited to, prayer, dwelling in the Word, and learning to discern what the Spirit of God might be saying to us. Since my research team and I are all Christian believers, we began to discover that God was already at work in our neighborhoods, even in the midst of a pandemic. We were not able to join God in what God was already doing in the programs and projects of our neighborhood; however, we were able to join God in what God was already doing in the lives of individual neighbors.

As for me, I found that as I led a group of Christians through a journey of practices and conversations, that the journey was beginning to guide us from a default Western paradigm of “doing for” others beyond the church community to an ancient paradigm of “being with” others. In making that shift, I noticed that my practices gave me a better sense of abiding in Christ. I also noticed that I was developing a posture of leadership which was focused on the other rather than on projects or programming. While projects and programs have their place, I found that the posture of “being with” was a more effective posture for joining God in the local, for I found that God is more interested in the individual than in the program.

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APPENDIX A:

SCHEDULE AND QUESTIONS FOR SELF-INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

1. **Schedule.** In order to gauge the learnings of both the research team and its leader over the course of the project, four interviews were conducted. The first was a self-interview in which I was interviewed by another Doctor of Ministry student at the Hancock House in Dubuque, Iowa on Tuesday, May 28, 2019.

I conducted the second interview on Monday, March 2, 2020 with a focus group comprised of six members of my research team. This interview was held just prior to our first session in Module 1 of *Stepping Out*. The purpose of each of the first two interviews was to establish a baseline before the research project began.

I conducted the third interview at the conclusion of the research project on Monday, June 16, 2020 with five members of my research team. Despite the pandemic, the guidelines established by our Bishop allowed us to conduct this exit interview in person at Orion UMC, provided we practiced the proper protocols such as social distancing.

My exit interview was conducted by a member of my praxis team in Aledo on Sunday, September 13.

2. **Interview Questions.** Each of the four interviews included five questions:

- a. Thus far, what has helped you understand the difference between a paradigm of “doing for” others versus a paradigm of “being with” others beyond the church?
- b. What do you think someone needs to know in order to move from a service paradigm of “doing for” neighbors beyond the church to a friendship paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

c. What attitudes and values might you need to move from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

d. What habits and practices might you need in order to transition from a paradigm of “doing for” to a paradigm of “being with” neighbor?

e. What key skills might you need in order to help others move from “doing for” to “being with”?

APPENDIX B: *STEPPING OUT*

MODULES 4.1 AND 4.2

On the following pages are two handouts developed by this author to complete the experiment with his research team.

4.1 Discerning What the Spirit Might Be Saying to Us¹⁹⁹

Agenda

1. *Dwelling in the Word*
2. *Discerning the Movement of the Spirit*
3. *Revisiting Where the Church Is*
4. *The Basics of Discernment*
5. *Activity 4.1*
6. *Liturgy*

Dwelling in the Word

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹ He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the

¹⁹⁹ Adapted by David R. Schultz

scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Dwelling Questions

1. Where is your imagination stopped?

2. Are there words, phrases, or ideas which grasp you?

3. How do you think the Spirit of God might be nudging you?

*Discerning the Movement of the Spirit*²⁰⁰

Each module in *Stepping Out* introduces us to a new practice, and the practice introduced in Module 4 is **discernment**. A congregation’s vocation is to discern the ways the Spirit is continually inviting it to join with God in their neighborhoods. In Module 1, you practiced “becoming a people of relationship rather than outcomes.” In Module 2, you practiced “listening without agenda,” and in Module 3 you practiced “attending to the stories of people in the neighborhood.” If you take on those practices, you will have plenty of experiences around which to discern.

Discernment is a big word that can be either scary or cliché for congregations. It’s truly about bringing God back into the center of our conversations and actions. This is the practice by which

²⁰⁰ This section has been adapted from Alan J. Roxburgh’s *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 74.

a congregation develops the capacity to name concrete ways they might join with God in their neighborhoods. Discernment is different from analyzing a neighborhood and then deciding how to meet some related need. Such research and response is not wrong, nor is helping others an improper form of Christian action. Discernment is simply a different way of seeing and being with your neighborhood.

First, discernment assumes God is already active in the neighborhood. Second, it assumes that listening with our own ears and seeing with our own eyes gives us clues to where God is at work. Third, discernment depends on a willingness to be surprised about the places and among the people where the Spirit might be at work. Fourth, it involves being present without a predetermined strategy for assessment.

Discernment is the way we practice the conviction that the Spirit is already out ahead of us. If this is true, then our common work includes discovering how to listen for what the Spirit is saying to us. Discernment asks the question, “Where might we be seeing God in our neighborhood, and how might we join with God there?”

Facilitate Reflection

1. Watch together the conversation between Alan Roxburgh and Mark Lau Branson:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0oOv5ebzVk>
2. After you have watched the video, go around the group and invite each person to share their responses to these questions:

Reflection Questions

1. Where did your imagination stop?
2. What captures your attention?
3. How do you suppose the metaphor of “table” connects with the practice of discernment?
4. What do you suppose Mark Lau Branson means by “listening underneath?”
5. How might “listening underneath” connect with “becoming a people of relationship rather than outcomes?”
6. How might “listening underneath” connect with “listening without agenda?”
7. How might “listening underneath” connect with “attending to the stories of people in the neighborhood?”

*The Basics of Discernment*²⁰¹

As you shift from listening to discernment, begin by asking questions like these:

1. Based on the listening we are doing, where might the Spirit be inviting us to join with God in our neighborhoods?

2. Are there some concrete steps we can take to test out this sense of the Spirit's invitation?

Initially, these questions may feel disorienting. The usual response is to look at what's happening in a neighborhood and to respond with a project or program. But we want to cultivate a new practice: learning to "see" what God might be doing in the midst of the many good things that are happening. As followers of the way of Jesus, we're learning how to develop the eyes that can see where God is ahead of us in our neighborhoods.

There isn't a formula for discernment. It happens in moments and activities such as:

- Listening to one another's stories
- Praying together
- Dwelling in the Word
- Sharing in silence or worship.

All these help a congregation to tentatively propose where we might be sensing the tug of the Spirit in the midst of our listening engagements in the neighborhood.

Discernment, by its very nature, is going to be tentative. It is framed with these kinds of questions:

- "I have an inkling that..."
- "I wonder if this might be a place where the Spirit is nudging me to...?"
- "I've seen these new folks in the neighborhood and would really like to..."
- "For along time I've had this sense that I should..."

In each of these illustrations there is neither certainty nor guaranteed steps but, rather, this nudging and tentative sense that there are places where we might want to experiment in testing if this is where the Spirit is calling us. Such testing and practicing where God might be calling us comes out of a conviction that God is up to something in the ordinary, concrete, everydayness of our lives. Without this core practice of a Christian community, we have nothing to bring with us into our communities.

²⁰¹ This entire section is drawn from Alan Roxburgh's *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 76f.

Activity 4.1²⁰²

Before your group meets for Module 4.2, please complete the following activity.

1. Take 15-30 minutes in a quiet space where you can pray and write to complete this activity.
2. Pray: *Lord God, I know that you love me and that you have called me to be a part of your people. I desire to listen and hear the ways you want to shape me now. As I listen in my neighborhood, confirm in me the next steps I might take. As I explore the options before me, help me to listen to you through others in my group, and to pay attention to what is in the depth of my own heart. In these ways may I hear your call to a way of life that allows me to love you and those who are in my neighborhood. Amen.*

3. Where have I seen God in my life or neighborhood this week?

4. From your neighborhood listening, what are the places, things, moments, or connections which have drawn your attention and imagination?

5. Do any stories, images, or conversations connect with your responses to the previous question? Do those connections help to explain why they caught your attention?

6. Jot down a little of why these particular things caught your attention so you might share them with the group in your next gathering.

²⁰² This section is adapted from Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 78-79.

*After a few moments of silence, take turns reading the following prayer. All may pray in unison the portions in **bold print**. Together let us proclaim:*

We believe and trust in God the Father Almighty.

We believe and trust in Jesus Christ His Son.

We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit.

We believe and trust in the Three in One.

Take a few moments to prayerfully lift up the names of people and places in your neighborhoods which have been on your mind and heart today.

Lord, we know that you are good. Your steadfast love endures, and your faithfulness to all generations. You continue to show us your goodness right here in this place. We see the signs of your life and coming kingdom, in the places we live, work, and worship. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

You call us to another way of being in the world, to your way of loving, living, and being with neighbors. In the places we live, work, rest, and play, May we be attentive and open to your life among us. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the work, chores, rest, and play ahead of us this week, may we trust your faithfulness and presence among us. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the ordinary exchanges with the neighbors around us, may we tune our hearts, minds, and ears to your voice at work. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the stories we receive from people in our everyday lives, may we listen with the expectation that you are present. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

Together let us offer the prayer Jesus taught us:

[The Lord's Prayer]

We believe and trust in God the Father Almighty. Creator God you are faithful and continue to shape us, form us and call forth life from among us. **We believe and trust this day.**

We believe and trust in Jesus Christ His Son. Lord Jesus Christ you came and dwelt among us, inviting us to join you in the making-of-all-things new. **We believe and trust this day.**

We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit. Spirit of God you fill the whole earth, even our neighborhoods, creating new life and renewing our hope. **We believe and trust this day.**

We believe and trust in the Three in One. Triune God, your kingdom comes, often disorienting, but filled with wonder, justice, grace, and mercy. **We believe and trust this day.**

²⁰³ Adapted from Module 3.4.

4.2 Becoming Alert to the Surprises of the Spirit²⁰⁵

Agenda

1. *Dwelling in the Word*
2. *Sharing Experiences*
3. *The Gift of Surprise*
4. *The Spirit of God in the Neighborhood*
5. *Capacities of Discernment*
6. *Questions for Discernment*
7. *Liturgy*

Dwelling in the Word

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹ He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Were not our

²⁰⁵ Adapted for *Stepping Out* by David R. Schultz, June, 2020.

hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Dwelling Questions

1. Where is your imagination stopped?

2. Are there words, phrases, or ideas which grasp you?

3. How do you think the Spirit of God might be nudging you?

Sharing Experiences

In our last activity, you were asked to reflect on some important questions. Take some time to share your reflections with the other members of your group. You’ll be sharing around these questions:

- Where have I seen God in my life or neighborhood recently?
- As you listened to one another, where did you sense God to be in the story?
- How do you think the Spirit may be nudging you?

The Gift of Surprise

Have you ever been involved in a surprise birthday party? If so, were you the one who was surprised or were you one of the ones giving the surprise? How did you experience that birthday party?



With which of the following scenarios would you best identify?

Scenario 1

You have one of those milestone birthdays coming up in just a couple of days—you know, one of those birthdays which ends in a zero. But is it really that big of an occasion? Or is it just another day on the calendar? You’ve pushed it out of your mind when a friend casually suggests meeting for a drink early that evening. Your friend offers to pick you up and you accept. A couple hours later, your friend arrives, you hop into the car, and you ride to your destination. You notice that the bar and grille seems eerily quiet, but you enter anyway. As you do, dozens of persons pop out of the side rooms shouting, “Happy Birthday!” Paper noise makers sound and someone brings out a brightly lit birthday cake. And you are so overcome with joy that you don’t know what to say.

Scenario 2

You have one of those milestone birthdays coming up in just a couple of days—you know, one of those birthdays which ends in a zero. But is it really that big of an occasion? Or is it just another day on the calendar? You’ve pushed it out of your mind when a friend casually suggests meeting for a drink early that evening. Your friend offers to pick you up and you accept. A couple hours later, your friend arrives, you hop into the car, and you ride to your destination. You notice that the bar and grille seems eerily quiet, but you enter anyway. As you do, dozens of persons pop out of the side rooms shouting, “Happy Birthday!” Paper noise makers sound and someone brings out a brightly lit birthday cake. But you are upset because this isn’t what you had planned for the evening. Nor were you properly dressed for the occasion.

It is imperative to recognize the central role of the Holy Spirit in the neighborhood. However, this may seem to be such an obvious truth that it does not change how we approach the neighborhood. That is why the practice of discernment is so critical. Why? Because the Spirit has been at work in the neighborhood long before we arrived there. In his classic book, “The Go-Between God,” John V. Taylor quotes Luke Timothy Johnson who writes,

“The narrative of Acts suggests that a community truly led by the Spirit will be led in new and surprising directions.” A careful reading of Acts, reveals a church continually surprised by the Spirit. Much which we now take for granted was a surprise to the church at the time. Why should it be different for us? The church takes shape by following the missionary Spirit.”

Just as being the recipient of a surprise birthday party can delight one and upset another, so it is with the Spirit. If we launch out into our neighborhoods with a specific agenda or plan, we may find that we are out of step with the Spirit who is already at work in our neighborhood with a completely different objective. If that is the case, then are we going to be thrilled with what the Spirit is unexpectedly doing in the neighborhood? Will we be delighted that the Spirit is inviting us to join in with what the Spirit is doing? Or are we going to react as though we are smarter than the Spirit, or that we know the neighborhood better than the Spirit does? Then are we going to be upset because what the Spirit is doing is not in line with our strategy?

How much better it is to practice discernment and cultivate an environment in which we join with God in the neighborhood! ²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ This section, including the passage from John Taylor’ “The Go-Between God,” is adapted from Bishop Graham Cray, “On Not Knowing the End at the Beginning,” *Journal of Missional Practice*, no. 2 (Spring, 2013), <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/on-not-knowing-the-end-at-the-beginning/> (accessed June 4, 2020).

²⁰⁷ Marcos Canales and Josh Smith, “Leading and Discerning in a Fragmented Context,” *Journal of Missional Practice*, no. 11, (Winter, 2019), <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/?s=leading+and+discerning+in+a+fragmented+context>. (Accessed June 11, 2020).

In his book, *Eat What Is Set Before You*, Scott Hagley offers four capacities for discernment. First, discernment creates the capacity for perceiving God’s presence and activity in one’s life, enabling us to “articulate experiences in a narrative of faith.” Peter models this in Acts 10 and 11. In Acts 10, the Spirit calls Peter to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. There, Peter tells the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” and Peter “was astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:44-45). However, in the next chapter, Peter is called before a church council in Jerusalem to explain his actions. There, Peter narrates his experience at the house of Cornelius as a narrative of faith and of the Spirit’s surprising work in the world. Clearly, the Spirit was out ahead of Peter at the house of Cornelius. As Peter explains his actions, his story revealed something about God.

Second, discernment requires from us and creates in us the capacity to listen to the narratives of faith given by others. In Acts 11, the church council listened to and discerned Peter’s narrative. This is not to say that all testimonies must be affirmed immediately, but it does encourage in us a posture that is open to the narratives of faith offered by others. We cannot discern if we do not listen.

Third, such listening is done with an ear for what God might be saying to the church through the story. In Acts 11, Peter explained his actions to the council in Jerusalem. The council, in turn, listened for what Peter’s story might express regarding the word and leading of God, and they concluded that the Spirit is given not only to the Jews, but also to Gentiles.

Fourth, such storytelling and listening leads to a decision. In Acts 11:16, Peter concluded by remembering that Jesus had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Peter then concluded, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to argue with God?” Such decision-making leads to an articulated risk regarding what the community believes God is saying or doing in their midst. However, in Acts 11, the council’s concerns were silenced, and they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (vs. 18). Such decisions are done in humility, with the expectation of future testing, weighing, listening, and discerning.

In short, we attempt to make sense of what we see and hear by making statements regarding what we think God is up to, what we think God might be asking us to do, or where he might be calling us to go. These statements are risky, but they are made in the context of community and meant to be tested and weighed by God’s people. These kinds of risky statements might begin with:

- I think God said...
- I think God invites us to...
- I think God is doing...
- I think God is calling us to...

²⁰⁸ This section is adapted from Scott Hagley, *Eat What Is Set Before You*, 119-120, 127.

- I think the Spirit will surprise us with...

Questions for Discernment ²⁰⁹

Fred Liggins is a pastor working in the Southern United States. He writes that discernment is a communal process. When a significant event occurs in his church or community, the practice of their church leadership is to ask two questions. First they ask: What could God be saying to us in this? For Fred, a community is necessary because although the Spirit is in each one, an individual may be deflected by ego or bias.

The second question follows the first: What do we need to do about it? In Fred’s process, this second question would be shared with a broader group, perhaps the whole church, in a time of prayer and fasting. For Fred, this type of submission to shared decision making has been a protection from deception by ego and the temptations of power.

Here are some questions you might ask as you continue to engage in the practice of discernment:

1. What are the surprising ways I have found in which the Spirit has been working in the neighborhood?

2. What is important for my community and how might I join in?

3. How might I (and by extension, the church) become more relevant in the neighborhood?

²⁰⁹ This section and the questions which follow are drawn from Joseph Omoragbon, Fred Liggin, and Martin Robinson, “Two Pastors Talking: ‘So How Do You Hear God?’” *Journal of Missional Practice*, Winter, 2019; <https://journalofmissionalpractice.com/two-pastors/> (Accessed June 11, 2020).

4. What simple experiments might I try in the neighborhood to see if I am truly joining with God in what the Spirit is already doing in the neighborhood?

5. In what practices might I engage to remain continually alert to the surprises of the Spirit?

Liturgy ²¹⁰

*After a few moments of silence, take turns reading the following prayer. All may pray in unison the portions in **bold** print. Together let us proclaim:*

We believe and trust in God the Father Almighty.

We believe and trust in Jesus Christ His Son.

We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit.

We believe and trust in the Three in One.

Take a few moments to prayerfully lift up the names of people and places in your neighborhoods which have been on your mind and heart today.

Lord, we know that you are good. Your steadfast love endures, and your faithfulness to all generations. You continue to show us your goodness right here in this place. We see the signs of your life and coming kingdom, in the places we live, work, and worship. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

You call us to another way of being in the world, to your way of loving, living, and being with neighbors. In the places we live, work, rest, and play, May we be attentive and open to your life among us. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the work, chores, rest, and play ahead of us this week, may we trust your faithfulness and presence among us. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the ordinary exchanges with the neighbors around us, may we tune our hearts, minds, and ears to your voice at work. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

In the stories we receive from people in our everyday lives, may we listen with the expectation that you are present. **Lord, awaken us to your presence.**

Together let us offer the prayer Jesus taught us:

²¹⁰ Adapted from Module 3.4.

