

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS: DEEPENING THE EXPERIENCE
WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER THROUGH
NEW MEMBER CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

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The focus of this ministry project was to offer new member classes that would deepen new members' relationship with God and with each other. Four classes incorporated Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements: creating sacred space, hospitality, holy listening, building community, and prayer, and Bible study. Using mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative research, the pre and post surveys, questionnaires and follow-up phone interviews provided the evidence that Membership Matters classes had a positive impact on participants' relationship with God and with each other, encouraging them to spend time relating to God and connecting with the church.

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INTRODUCTION

What happens when Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements of Holy Listening, Hospitality, creating Sacred Space, Prayer, and Community Building come in contact with people that are interested in joining a church? Membership Matters Classes happen! This document is the recorded history of the Action of Ministry model including: the assessment of need, the development, the application and evaluation of Membership Matters Classes offered to those considering joining Burnt Store Presbyterian Church in Punta Gorda, Florida.

Within this writing, one will find the reasons for new member classes and how the Membership Matters curriculum was created using elements from Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in combination with the theology and the expectations as found in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA. The next step was the facilitation of the Membership Matters curriculum and the participation of people that were interested in considering joining the church. Finally, the ministry project was evaluated by the participants and the researcher. The first two Membership Matters classes were held in October and November/December, 2006. They comprised the pilot program used to test the theory and application of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements to the new member classes.

The participants were given a pre-survey, post-survey and a follow-up survey to measure their experience of the Membership Matters classes. The categories included

how their relationship with God had been affected. Another category to be considered was their relationship with other people, in particular with their fellow students and those in the church congregation at large. The results showed whether being involved in a series of Membership Matters classes had a positive or negative impact on the participants' relationship with God and with each other.

Beginning with Chapter I: Ministry Focus, one will find a brief description of the faith and life experiences of the author and how that influenced her discernment in deciding what should be considered as an Action of Ministry Project. Blended with the autobiographical history of the author was a survey of the context of the church in which she serves. Here, the reader has the opportunity to become familiar with the geography, the demographics, the life and personality of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church in Punta Gorda, Florida. It is this combination of the author's experiences and the context within which she works that determines the Ministry Focus for the Action of Ministry.

Chapter II: The State of The Art in this Ministry Project and Review of Literature shows what is currently available to explore the importance of the elements of Blessings Based Spiritual Nurture such as Holy Listening, Hospitality, Creating Sacred Space, Prayer, Building Community and the practicing of Spiritual Disciplines. Another area of consideration was the theory, research and recommendations for new member classes in contemporary churches. Then with holding both sets of information in tandem, these were studied together see how could each set could be helpful in supporting the plans of the ministry project.

In Chapter III, the author establishes the theoretical foundation to support the Action of Ministry. Here one finds the historical, biblical, theological and theoretical basis for

applying Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements to new member classes. There is some overlapping of the four categories historical, biblical, theological and theoretical because of the high dependency on the information provided in the example of the Early Church. One will find while reading Chapter Three that the Early Church experience can be used to support the history of church member participation. The Early Church was also the main focus of the biblical record of new members and their spiritual practices. And the Early Church's activities were the bedrock for how new member theology was defined. Included too are citations that run the gamut of Church History and current research.

Chapter IV on Methodology gives a quick overview of the design of the model as it was used in the field experience. The hypothesis was given as a starting place for what will be tried and measured as the intervention was put in place. A description of the Ministry Project including the lesson plans for the series of four classes and examples of all the resources will provided so that the reader can have a sense of what and how the content was taught. And finally, there was a discussion of the available research methodologies to allow the reader an explanation and an appreciation for those research methods chosen for this Ministry Project.

Chapter V provides a description of what actually happened during the implementation of the Ministry Project. Included in the information is an explanation of how the data was collected and what the outcome was. This chapter sums up what were the results of the Membership Matters experience for the participants and for the church.

The final chapter, Chapter VI offers the author the opportunity to reflect and summarize her findings. Though there are many positive points about the Membership

Matters classes especially in relation to how people feel about God and their relationship with others within the classroom and the congregation. There are still some places that could use some attention and some greater consideration such as whom is still missing from the classes and how does one encourage those that are missing the Membership Matters classes to attend.

After assessing the need for new member classes at her local church, the associate pastor began to combine elements of Blessings Based Spiritual Nurture with the requirements of a new member class. The result was the development of the Membership Matters curriculum that included four lesson plans for four class meetings, each an hour long. They included an opportunity for the participants to share their faith journeys, to learn about the Creeds and Confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA, what is meant by spiritual gifts, how they can be used in ministry and if a person has one or more spiritual gifts. Finally, there is a review of what are the characteristics of being a church member and what are the expectations of church membership as mentioned in the Board of Order of the Presbyterian Church USA.

Beginning in August, 2005, a soon to be ordained associate pastor began work on discovering the context of her new church home and assessing the needs of the congregation. At the same time, the associate pastor was also learning about Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, an approach to ministry that emphasizes deepening one's relationship to God and to others. Many of the ways, Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture encourages the deepening of the relationship of a person with God is through appreciating that God loves human kind and wants to be close to people. God desires to have an intimate place in the hearts and minds of God's people. Blessing Based Spiritual

Nurture also encourages people to grow closer to each other through sharing their lives and experiences together. It is through these connections that people can support and care for each other. It is the recorded experience of this Action of Ministry Project of Membership Matters Classes using Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements that can be found on the following pages.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

As I reflect on what brought me to work on a Ministry Project using Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices in new members classes, I realize that much of it has to do with my own spiritual journey. Though none of us has cornered the market on how to help people be in touch with God and with others, all of us are responsible for using whatever experiences and teachings we have received to help us fashion ministries that will be relevant and helpful to others. These experiences start with the beginning of our lives. It is with humility and gratitude that I reflect on how God has been involved in my life and has been moving me to this particular place, time and service.

God spread the canvas on the frame and tightened the cloth until it was taut. This creation would be called Valerie Bell's spiritual journey and all the pieces were in place. The needles, the scissors, the rainbow of colored threads lay right beside God's knee as God began the project. There were no printed instructions, no picture of what the final product would look like upon completion. There was just God and me with choices and decisions, circumstances and events that would determine the texture, colors and design of this work of art or as God might put it, a work of heart.

It started out easy enough. I think God aimed the needle right into the dead center. The thread must have been strong, colored in the elementary hues of red, green, blue and yellow. As a child growing up in Conway, Arkansas, I thought Conway was the center of

the universe and that the First Presbyterian Church was the hub of all that happened in my life. The congregation was my faith family and here the habits of regular Sunday School and worship attendance were developed. Many of my childhood memories and friends were a part of Vacation Bible School, the contest to see who weighed enough to ring the church bell and Reverend John Shell leading a small pack of preteens through confirmation classes on Sunday evenings. The church provided the faith foundation from which I have never departed, sometimes drifted, but always being drawn back to what I was taught and witnessed in the lives of those folks.

Through my teenage years as my family was reorganized due to divorce and remarriages, the needle and threads ran in a zigzag pattern in colors of whatever seemed available, deep, dark tones with spots of yellow trying to cut through the stormy hues. I still continued to grow in my faith especially through the influence of my grandparents and attending summer camp. My grandparents on both sides of the family were my constant rock. They stayed put. Their routines were dependable and their love unconditional. Through their ordinary lives, they made me feel cherished and special. Popping popcorn, playing cards, going fishing, getting ready for church were all a part of life in the well worn, softly creaking homes in which each of my parents' parents lived.

The basic vocabulary of the faith and the Bible stories still rolled around in my head. I knew I could talk to God but I had not really connected the dots with how this applied to regular, ordinary life. But then I packed my suitcase, rolled up my sleeping bag and headed to camp.

Though it was a private Christian ranch camp, I think it was really an underground Pentecostal gathering and many of the saints were placed there just for lessons to be

learned. Throughout the years that I attended Brookhill Ranch Camp, I came to participate and experience an expression of the faith that I did not have in my local church. The counselors, cooks, ranch hands spoke much more openly about God, praying for God's movement in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Little did I know that this ranch camp experience was going to have to carry me for a great while as my life went through some crazy changes? From Conway, Arkansas to Athens, Georgia to Boonville, Missouri to Cape Coral, Florida to college, the security and sense of the familiar ebbed away. On occasion while at college, I would dare to stick my big toe into the worshipful waters of a local Presbyterian Church and I would immediately feel at home. The hymns, prayers and fellow worshippers brought me back to a moment when all was well with my soul. The pattern of the needlepoint was growing but in what direction and to what end was not clear.

Armed with a Social Studies teaching degree, I started my career introducing LaBelle, Florida middle school students to the geography and cultures of the world. Later, Bill and I married and as the children arrived, I began to realize that as a single person I had been pretty easy going and patient. However, being a full-time mother, took a whole other set of life skills and talents. There were days when I would be on my knees praying that all of us would survive. Because I had gone into semi-retirement from professional teaching, I had the "time" to volunteer as a Sunday School teacher and elder at Buckingham Presbyterian Church located between a cow pasture and a sod farm in beautiful downtown Buckingham, Florida.

That is where the call to Christian Education touched my heart deeply and I waited for God to provide a place to serve as a Director of Christian Education. During the wait, I

continued to mature spiritually. I learned more about the Bible, about God and how to apply Christian principles to my life, to the raising of our children and to our marriage. Now, the pattern had taken some definite shape and the colors were sometimes added simultaneously: the joys of children with birthdays and Christmases, the struggles of married life, the realization that you never grow out of being a child of divorce, even when you have your own kids.

Finally, the call came for me to serve as a Director of Christian Education. It was three years later than I thought it would come and it came on the same day that I received my pink slip in my teacher's mailbox at school. Due to being at the bottom of the food chain in seniority at the public school; I was to be reassigned to another school. Though I did not know it at the time, I had started a twelve year journey towards ordination as a pastor. It started as a private conversation with God that someday would go public. Through the following years, I continued to serve as a Director of Christian Education and attend seminary classes.

The destination had been determined but the question remained: how does one attend a Presbyterian Seminary when the closest one is five hundred miles away in Decatur, Georgia? And as a wife with two kids and a full-time job, I could not move. With little steps of faith, one goes forward. A class was offered in Winter Park, Florida every other weekend. The Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia offered two-week extended learning classes in the summer and later, they added a winter section. As I trudged through the back doors of a variety of learning institutions, I collected classes like a jeweler strings beads on a necklace. Periodically, I would complete the

requirements for another piece of jewelry- Master of Arts in Christian Education or the requirements to be a Certified Educator.

Now, the stitches are broad and long at times, the movements were bold and gaining ground. After one giant stitch, there would be a series of little tight stitches of study, reading books, writing papers and taking tests. Finally, the family and I were flung out to San Francisco where I would spend six weeks for each of two summers working on my Master of Divinity degree. God's hand had provided places to study, opportunities to study but to what end? My professional career that had enjoyed eight years of bliss was heading for some bumps and bruises like I had never known. I had only heard of these kinds of conditions from fellow Directors of Christian Education as they described their war stories. I did not know it could happen in my own backyard. I thought that professionally serving God came with an extra insurance policy that protected people like me from "people like them" especially in the church!

Wow, the river of tears that I have cried, as I have wept for the church, for the dashing of the promise of a future and for the facing the unknown. How could so much hard work and sacrifice by me and especially by my family come to this moment? Is this the expected experience of professional, full-time servants to the church?

I was closing in on the requirements for ordination; I thought I had a place where I could serve, only to learn that it was an empty promise. What had I been thinking? Had I missed God? Had God dropped the needle some five years back and I had not noticed that the motion I had felt- was really just the needle dangling and swinging back and forth? Was God even there?

And then I think the needle slipped off the thread and circumstances up righted the canvas and the frame. Everything was disjointed. Threads scattered. There was a tug-of-war as to whether this canvas even needed to be. My family life was strained, my professional life was without hope and there was no direction. I prayed, I cried, I would give up, only taking back the sliver of hope, again. Surely this was not the end and as it would happen the 'end of the end' did not come. For a long while, I stared into the "black hole of the abyss". My greatest fear was the possibility of experiencing deeper aches and sorrow than I had when my folks separated. Now, my greatest fear had caught up with me.

Had I only trusted in this God to try to ward off the inevitable? Was the dedication to my studies and the hours of work and sacrifice only pipe dreams of spiritual hocus pocus? There was no visible progress on the needlepoint. There were no stitches, no colors added, no activity.

But that was the point. For so long, I had taken little steps and had small successes. I had been paced through a series of learning events within my family, my professional work and my studies. But what did it all mean? Could I be obedient to God when it looked as though I was holding an empty bag? Had the thread of my life been frayed into a fuzzy line that would never collectively be able to slide through the eye of the needle again? Where was my hope? Did I even possess a desire to continue? Through a thorough check of my faith life, I could see that the needlepoint and frame had been wrecked. But in my heart of hearts, this path was the only one I knew to follow. The only one I knew for which to strive and to consider.

I popped in the cassette tape as I drove to visit my dad who had just gotten out of the hospital. It was a sermon on the zigzags of life. How God could give you a destination and yet it could take much, much longer than you ever expected to arrive? Hope. Take hold of the needle. Set the frame back up and make it steady. Untangle the threads and sort out the colors. When all has been taken away, what is there to frighten me? From where will my strength start again, and can it continue? My strength, my hope, my ability to stand and look at the needlepoint comes not from me but from God. God pulled me up from the floor. I now realize that there is very little that can scare me or leave me without breath. My hope and strength come from only one source and as long as I am tethered to God, it does not matter what the needle and thread are doing. It will be at God's timing, on God's agenda, with God's management of my life experiences that will complete the work of the heart.

By of November 1, 2005, I began serving as the associate pastor to Burnt Store Presbyterian Church in Punta Gorda, Florida. I oversee the Christian Education Ministry, Pastoral Care, Deacons and Evangelism. I am blessed because I did not have to move my family which would have been difficult due to my husband having a business in town and my parents needing to move back into the local area. God is good- all the time.

In the first six months that I had been at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, I had learned more about its loving congregation, the collegial relationships among the staff and how it allows me to be me. I realize that I am in a state of grace, being well received even after the allotted honeymoon period. I have been given permission to continue my Doctorate of Ministry degree which allows me to practice working with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and how that might apply to New Member classes.

Though I had considered that I might have worked with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices and staff meetings, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the consideration of the context within which Burnt Store Presbyterian Church functions, new member classes seemed to be the most immediate need. This was due to the anticipated growth of the church because of the changing demographics taking place in southwest Florida and in particular Charlotte County and in the City of Punta Gorda. As I studied the context of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, it became quite apparent that our church was in the midst of some great change involving the surrounding area. We needed to be ready. I sensed that Burnt Store Presbyterian Church needed to be prepared to answer the question, “What makes church relevant?” The first step to answering that question was to discover and learn about the audience, the geography, the demographics both present and those anticipated and then to fashion a church experience to suit the needs and desires of the said audience.

The study of the context of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church could start with the statistics of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church as found in the Ten Year Trends, a document from the Presbyterian Church USA that shows the membership, worship attendance and Christian Education enrollment from 1994-2004. In the Ten Year Trends document, there was support for the opinions of the committee that wrote the Church Information Form for Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and the concerns raised by the professional church staff. Both parties were concerned with the lack of spiritual maturity and biblical literacy of the church membership. They considered this lack of growth to be the leading cause of a less than robust commitment to stewardship and participation in mission activities: local and abroad. This is not an unusual assessment for a Presbyterian

Church. The challenge will be to strengthen the areas of personal spiritual growth of each individual within the congregation. This will be an important key for BSPC to be able to continue to meet their mission statement of being “a church reaching up and reaching out.”

Looking at BSPC through the lens of the ecology theme of studying a congregation means studying the history of the congregation in relation to the community, region/state, nation and world. This can be summed up in the chart of the historical timeline found in the appendix. The chart highlights what was happening in a particular decade on the world wide, national, state and local level. It helps to provide a perspective of how Punta Gorda, Florida is alike and different from other places in the world. See Table 1 on page X.

The Burnt Store congregation is one social institution among many, not only of other religious organizations but also various political, civic and special interests groups in Punta Gorda. Currently, BSPC is one of two Presbyterian churches within the area of Punta Gorda. It is one of the thirty-seven churches that make up Peace River Presbytery. In 1998, there were eleven churches for every night club. The Punta Gorda Church Directory shows thirty-seven churches within the city alone.¹

The church buildings are located at 11330 Burnt Store Road, Punta Gorda, Florida, 33955. It is not downtown but in an area that would be considered the ‘suburbs’.²

¹ ed., *Punta Gorda Church Directory* (Punta Gorda, FL: Punta Gorda Life Church Directory, 2005), Word Document http://www.puntagordalife.com/church_directory.htm. (Accessed October 4, 2005).

² Anon., *MapQuest for Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, Punta Gorda, FL:* (MapQuest, 2005), [htmlhttp://www.mapquest.com/maps.adp?searchtype](http://www.mapquest.com/maps.adp?searchtype) (accessed September 30, 2005).

It is quiet, sparsely settled area. The population strength comes from a residential community that contains the Burnt Store Marina. However, during the past five years, ever since Punta Gorda was featured in a 1996 Money Magazine article where Punta Gorda, Florida was number two of the Best Places to Live in America.³ And in a 1998 Money Magazine article where Charlotte County was voted the number one place to live in the South, there has been even greater interest in the area. Punta Gorda was highlighted in a Money Magazine newsletter: Retire with Money (February, 1998) as “America’s retirement capital” due to their low cost of living and a very low crime rate.⁴

The Long Range Planning Committee’s position paper submitted in June 2005, summarized a report on the anticipated development around the area surrounding the church. At a meeting held August 1, 2004, the committee heard a report on and discussed, the expected developments in South Charlotte County including the corridor of Burnt Store Road. Hurricane Charley delayed further Long Range Planning Committee meetings during the fall of 2004, and the Burnt Store Area plan has also been updated since the committee first received its report.

The following are some of the expected developments that are planned for the southern

³ Geneviene M. Fernandez and others. "Best Places To Live In America Our 10th Annual Survey We're Mad About Job-rich Madison, Wis., This Year's No. 1 Place. But Florida Shines too, For the Second Year," *Money Magazine*, July 1, 1996, 1996,, 2, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/moneymag_archive/1996/07/01/01/214151/index.htm. (accessed May 28, 2006).

⁴ "Retire With Money Newsletter," *Money Magazine*, February, 1998.

section of Charlotte County and will have an important influence on the church's long range planning:

- 1) fast tracking of the plan to four-lane Burnt Store Road and creating a new east/west access road extending Tuckers Grade to Burnt Store Road, 2) siting of commercial nodes within the corridor to eliminate the need for residents to travel long distances to Punta Gorda or Cape Coral to access general commercial services, 3) master-planning of utilities for greater efficiencies and enhancing water management systems to control flooding, 4) linking public ownership areas with a wildlife corridor for enhanced public enjoyment, 5) preparing for the "likely development scenarios" that would add 7100 dwelling units in the Burnt Store Road area.⁵

All of Southwest Florida is experiencing an explosion of growth in commerce, schools, public services and construction of family homes. It is important that BSPC anticipate the growth and prepare for it. As the position paper of the Long Range Planning Committee states, the growth is inevitable. The question is will BSPC be ahead of the demands?

From the Ten Year Trends, the growth of BSPC has been relatively steady. What the numbers do not show is the lack of children and youth (until recently). This is due primarily to Punta Gorda having been a retirement community. However, with the exploding increase of families moving into Charlotte County, BSPC is enjoying a big growth spurt. In the past summer, 2005, the church offered Vacation Bible School for the first time in fifteen years. They had fifty kids and a league of very willing and dedicated adult volunteers.

The demographic information for Punta Gorda and Charlotte County show the increase growth and changes in the population. From the Census of 2000 as reported in

⁵ Larry Sandles, *Long Range Planning Committee's Report*, (Punta Gorda, FL: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2004-2005), 3.

the wikipedia.org, The Free Encyclopedia, there are 14,344 people residing in the city of Punta Gorda. The racial makeup is 94.60% White, 3.17% African American, 0.17% Native American, 0.78% Asian, and 0.03% Pacific Islander. The household median income was \$48,916. Considering the total population, 10.9% of those under the age of 18 years and 3.0% of people 65 and older were living below poverty.⁶

These numbers reflect much of what was seen at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. They would consider themselves an average, a middle class population, primarily white with a majority of older members. They are looking to attract younger members especially families with children. The neighborhoods that are developing within walking distance of the church generally have house lower income families as residents. The church sees this as an opportunity for service and evangelism. Their sense as they pray is that God is calling BSPC to provide support and care to their neighbors. As noted in the Long Range Planning Committee's report, the committee is considering a change in facilities:

Facilities—remodeling of present facilities; building a fellowship hall/activities center; developing a children and/or an adult daycare program; building a life care center; providing more office space, a full nurse's clinic, a kitchen, storage space, and handicapped family restroom facilities.⁷

⁶ *Wikipedia*, 2005thed., s.v. "Demographics of Punta Gorda, Florida.", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punta_Gorda%2C_Florida/. (accessed September 30, 2005).

⁷ Larry Sandles, *Long Range Planning Committee's Report*, (Punta Gorda, FL: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2004-2005), 8.

It is in that spirit of building that the theme of resources: hard and soft will have great influence. The hard resources are the financial support, the building and grounds and the number of church members. The soft resources include reputation, spiritual energies, connections/influence in the community, the shared experience of hard times and the strength of faith and commitment.

In looking at the Ten Year Trends statistics, the official membership for BSPC in 2004 was 536.¹ Due to the seasonal residents, the church has an additional 500 plus people, who attend worship, activities and studies during the months of October through April. BSPC is in a growing and developing area and the Evangelism Ministry has as its goal to double the size of the membership within five years. This is not a “pie in the sky” goal when within a 10 mile radius; the area should accommodate 7,500 new households.²

The worship attendance has grown over the past ten years. The Church Information Form of 2005 states that the average attendance for worship was 527.³ There is steady growth and it is anticipated that with a new worship and the arts director and a new associate pastor, the church should be in a stronger position to provide more programs and activities to meet the needs of those joining the church.

¹ anon, *10-Year Trends for Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, ed* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church USA, Office of the General Assembly, 2005), Presbyterian Church USA, www.pcusa.org/ (accessed October 1, 2005).

² Larry Sandles, *Long Range Planning Committee's Report* (Punta Gorda, FL: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2004-2005) 8.

³ Charmaine Ponkratz, Chair, *Church Information Form* (Punta Gorda, FL: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2005) 3.

The bar graph of Christian Education shows a significant growth in the Christian Education enrollment in 1999, a dip in 2000- 2001 and then a rebound in 2002.⁴ The Church Information Form for 2005 states that the Christian Education enrollment was 80.⁵ Although, there are a number of classes offered through the “Mind Works” program, they may not be factored in as Christian Education enrollment due to the class being on subjects of a non-Christian Education nature. So Christian Education does have the potential for greater participation and impact in the coming years.

The total contributions and the contributions per person are only reported through 1999. In checking with the Smoke Signals (the BSPC newsletter) the Finance and Stewardship Ministry report states: A summary of Operating and Fund figures for January through August, 2005 was followed receipts were the actual \$436,170, the budgeted \$422,695, with the difference being \$13,475 to the positive. The disbursements were the actual \$411,126, the budgeted was \$462,244 and the difference was (-\$51,117). Therefore the net income was the actual at \$25,043, the budgeted at a negative \$39,549 and the difference was a positive \$64,592. The balance on the mortgage for the new wing and sanctuary of their building stands at \$215,840.⁶

The budget of BSPC reflects their anticipated amount of contributions, their budget of expected expenses and what the financial status was at that present moment. Reviewing

⁴ anon, *10-Year Trends for Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, ed* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church USA, Office of the General Assembly, 2004-200), Presbyterian Church USA, www.pcusa.org/ (accessed October 1, 2005).

⁵ Charmaine Ponkrat, Chair, *Church Information Form* (Punta Gorda, FL.: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2005) 3.

⁶ Larry Sandles, *Operating and Fund Report* (Punta Gorda, FL: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church Smoke Signals, 2005) 5.

the budget was a way to determine what the priorities of BSPC were. It can also show what the potential capabilities of BSPC to accomplish their mission goals.

Another hard resource is the physical plant of BSPC. The church is located on a twenty-six acre site. The present buildings and parking lot take about thirteen acres. The extra thirteen acres hold the potential of some exciting ministry developments such as a family life center, new fellowship hall, a school or an assisted living center. This is a rich resource because it invites BSPC to consider many avenues of ministry and service without the great burden of acquiring “very expensive and somewhat limited “real estate.

The church has been blessed in being located in a much wooded area. It lends itself to a feeling of retreat and peace when one goes to the church. The facility has wonderful classroom space and décor. The sanctuary, dedicated in 2001, continues that calm and soothing feeling with a décor of light wood, an airy, open worship center done in teals and pastels.

The soft resources of: reputation, spiritual energies, connections or influence in the community, shared experience of hard times and the strength of faith and commitment are harder to measure. From discussions with the pastor, staff and leaders of the church, there was a notion that the membership of BSPC is not operating at its full capacity. There was concern for the lack of commitment in volunteering and stewardship. Most would consider this a place for improvement.

What may have been a blessing in disguise was the impact of Hurricane Charley on the town of Punta Gorda and Charlotte County. As a soft resource, the shared experience of the hardship of the destruction of Hurricane Charley has galvanized the congregation. Many loss their homes or suffered some sort of damage to the structure. Those that could-

provided food, shelter, and support to those in need. The experience has been long lived because some were not back in their homes as of fall 2006. BSPC was able to provide a place of worship for the other Presbyterian Church in town, First Presbyterian Church of Punta Gorda, when their building was totally damaged. First Presbyterian has worshipped in the BSPC fellowship hall since August 2004 and was able to move to a new renovated facility by Easter 2006.

It seems that BSPC has done a good job of trying to be faithful to its call. There are many places where they would like to see further growth, a deeper maturity in the faith lives of their people but they are striving. Their pastor, staff and lay leadership continue to evolve as the church grows and adjusts to the changes in and around them. The pastor's style of a casual, collegial approach encourages participation and ownership of responsibility from the lay leaders. His evangelical, slightly conservative theology provides for God to be at the center of the leadership process.

The associate pastor position started in November 1, 2005 was to be one of support and to be in the secondary position of leadership within a collegial setting. The Associate Pastor would need to be very familiar with the Vision and the Mission statements of BSPC. It would be important to listen and become well acquainted with the people both within and without the church. Then as the committees and the Associate Pastor moved through the process of discerning what God is calling them to do, they would have a better sense of where to put their time and energy.

The next step was to take all they had learned and to discern what would be the best way to use the methods of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. Having been at BSPC for seven months by the end of May, 2006,

the Associate Pastor learned that one need the church had was for better assimilation of new members. It is important for a church to provide an opportunity for new members to get to know each other and the pastors. BSPC should guide new members to deepen their experience of God and others through a series of new member classes using an emphasis of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices and teachings.

During the process of consideration and discernment, the Associate Pastor, the Evangelism Ministry and the Christian Education Ministry sought to determine what needed to happen to encourage people to live the life of the Christian faith. Why have the mainline denomination declined in membership as other churches have grown in leaps and bounds? Here was the opportunity to pull the threads of those thoughts together to weave a statement. It would be a statement containing the results of the context of ministry work at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, combined with the Associate Pastor's experiences, interests and read of society as it is today. One thing that keeps coming back as the pivotal question was: "Is the church relevant today?"

The Associate Pastor grew up in a time and a culture when church was the center of people's lives. The church calendar was what determined the family calendar at home. One did not need to question the existence of God, why one went to church or if there was another way to worship?

Today the question is "why church, why the Christian faith?" Where is the relevancy of the Christian faith to people living today? Who can serve as a model or an example with authenticity and believability?

How do we in the mainline churches become relevant to children, youth, young adults and older adults in today's society? The sense is towards being real. The message or the

qualities for leadership are not any different today than years ago. God's call to us is no different than those in Biblical times, some of the guidelines that should act as the rudders in the lives of Christian leaders are not being taken as seriously as they should be. Christian leaders (not all, but sadly, too many) do not practice spiritual disciplines on a regular basis to keep grounded. Sometimes it is wondered what could be their motivation for being a faith leader; there seems to be a lack of humility or the practice of ministry from a servant's heart.

That is why it is important to apply the work of Learning and Developing the Theory, Practices and Power of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture to the context of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. When leaders maintain grounding in both the practice of spiritual disciplines and accountability, they are able to keep the focus on God and God's love. They aid people in sensing and being aware of God's deep desire to be in relationship with the people but on a personal level. Christian leaders need to go back to the basics. As a leader, the leader's service is to be about others and not about the leader. Leaders need to lead others and encourage them in deepening their relationship with God.

This is where the Christian faith gets very relevant. A Christian leader takes time to learn about the person, his or her struggles, loves, likes, dislikes, history and dreams. The leader helps the person to connect with God. The leader serves as a guide that moves along side the person and they travel together. Here the Christian leader is not the savior, God is. The encounter has genuinely touched the life of the person and hopefully, has helped in some way. Now, maybe the "seeker" will want to learn more or experience more in his or her relationship with God.

It is important to work towards an approach to ministry that will seek to make Christian faith more relevant to people living today. There needs to be a ministry model created that keeps God as the lover of all and helps encourage and guide people to discovering and experiencing that love for themselves. And by so doing, the people will want to respond to that love of God by choosing to live their lives the way God would want them to live their lives.

What will this look like within the context of ministry at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church? It would be a Ministry Project that would be a series of new member classes that would help people to deepen their experience and relationship with God and to deepen their experience and relationships with others. Through the opportunity of four one hour classes, where a group of new members would: share their faith journeys, learn about the local church and the Presbyterian denomination, have their spiritual gifts assessed and find a way to connect at BSPC. All the classes would have an emphasis of the BBSN practices; they would have time to intentionally focus on their relationships to God and to others. The Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices of: holy listening, creating sacred space, prayer, worship, blessings, Sabbath keeping and community building would play a vital role in presenting the curriculum in way that would model and inform people as to how to draw closer to God and to each other. It would provide a space where people could practice relating to God and to each other, maybe in ways they have never tried before or if they have, they would be given an opportunity to spend some time with God and others in an effort to strengthen their connection to both God and to one another.

CHAPTER TWO THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The ministry project involved creating four sessions of new member classes to strengthen people's relationship to God and to each other. It was a new addition to Burnt Store Presbyterian Church because there had not been any new member classes to date. Prior to the ministry project, people wishing to join the church only needed to come for an hour either on Saturday evening or on Sunday to complete some paperwork and to be asked the three questions for membership. This practice allowed for little introduction to the church or to each other. The new approach was to encourage a caring treatment of new members through new member classes based on the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices. Therefore Burnt Store Presbyterian Church would help new members have a more inviting, hospitable, supportive and informative experience involving their relationship to God and to others. The information and literature related to new member classes and to using the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices can be found in a variety of resources. The first place to discover how this combination of new member classes and the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices can be used is through an exploration of spiritual terms and their application to people's lives.

As one looks over page 267 of Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms by Donald K. McKim, it does not take much consideration to discover what is missing in most churches. A short glossary of "spiritual words" that do not seem to have a place of prominence or priority in most churches, words such as: Spiritual, Spiritual blindness,

Spiritual condition, Spiritual death, Spiritual development, Spiritual direction, Spiritual fellowship, Spiritual formation, Spiritual friend and Spiritual life.¹

It seems like a long laundry list of spiritual terms but if one goes back and reviews each term and then considers how often one hears that or those particular terms used in the church setting, one might start to get a handle on what is missing in most churches today. Graham Standish writes that churches are "teaching people about God instead of teaching people about having a relationship with God."²

Christians need to claim the Life of the Beloved as Henri J.M. Nouwen writes about spiritual living in a secular world.³ As Nouwen continues, he writes of how he hopes his friend (and later the reading audience) will be able to claim all there is in knowing and believing that we are truly loved by God. "All I want to say to you is, 'You are the Beloved', and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being- 'You are the Beloved.'"⁴

The experience of many churches today seems to be one of lacking a direction or a way to help people really develop a deeper relationship with God. Many of the "spiritual words" listed in the glossary at the beginning of this discussion are not a part of the working vocabulary of many of the clergy and church leaders. Much of the business and

¹ Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996) 267.

² N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) 34.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000) title.

⁴ *Ibid.*, front jacket.

the activities of church are void of any notion of sacred space or holy listening. It makes it hard to be on "God's agenda."⁵

The particular ministry focus coming out of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture peer group for the ministry project under consideration: is how do we help adults be aware of what is available to help them to grow in their faith and how do we provide opportunities for them to take advantage of what is available? Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture offers the underpinnings to help people realize that they are the "Beloved". Through the assumption that people are able to relate to God and God to them and that within a trusting relationship, one can be guided to deepening that relationship. From this point, it is only a matter of developing opportunities through classes, retreats, and 'one on one' discussions for people to be able to connect more intimately with God.

It is the mission of the church to remember the "Great Commission" and the "Great Commandment" and to help people to be encouraged and supported in their spiritual journey. Through Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices of creating sacred space, participating in worship, holy listening, blessings, Sabbath keeping and building community, one can grow spiritually and enjoy the experience that comes from a deeper relationship with God and with others. It is important that a church start at the beginning and develop a plan or a road map that would help those new to a particular church and maybe new to the faith to have an opportunity to participate and experience many of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture mainstays of practice.

The foundations for a solution to the problem of churches "teaching about God instead of teaching people about having a relationship with God"⁶ are found in the theoretical,

⁵ N.Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presences, and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) 62.

biblical, theological, and historical information relating to how people can connect to God. Throughout the research, there was an emphasis on looking for how the church could be relevant to people today and what have we learned from the past that could help in encouraging the spiritual formation and maturing of members of the church.

Interestingly enough, one does not have to look very far to learn what made church and faith relevant to people in the early church. The theoretical research proves that if people are to mature in their faith, they need to have the opportunity to practice a model of Christian faith based on the Blessing Base Spiritual Nurture mainstays and have it applied to the curriculum used in classes, retreats, one-on-one settings. In the case of this project proposal, the classroom event was four -one hour new member classes.

Much of the biblical information centered round the Book of the Acts and the Epistles that helped to instruct the new churches. It was important to use commentaries and biblical study helps to determine the full meaning of the writings of Luke and Paul that described the early church experience. Starting with translations of the Bible such as The NIV Study Bible New International Version, the Life Application Study Bible New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version, these were good places to commence the discovery of the practices of the early church in their gaining and disciplining new members.

Following up on the general information given in the Scripture, to appreciate the context and the historical perspective, it was important to use the resources of commentaries such as The Letter to the Hebrews by William Barclay⁷, A Commentary on

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia; Westminster, 1957) 219.

the Epistle to the Hebrews by Philip Hughes Edgcombe⁸ and The Epistles to the Romans by F. Godet⁹, these books offered clarification and illustrations to help the reader understand the message of the biblical passage better and more in depth.

Though considered books on systematic theology, Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding*¹⁰ and Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine*¹¹ both continued to reference the practices of the early church in making a case for the theological understanding that we presently have of church. Many times both authors had to return to the historical practices of the early Christians to be able show what is meant by the community of believers and what is expected from such a gathering. Migliore wrote about the importance of how human beings are created for life in community.¹² Shirley Guthrie noted that there is one Savior and Lord of the church and that the communities of people who are the body of Christ are united in faith, hope, love, worship and service.¹³

Another book considered more for its theological impact and yet, sheds light on the activities of the early church was John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

⁸ Philip Edgcombe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 106.

⁹ F. Godet, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883).

¹⁰ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

¹¹ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

¹² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 126.

¹³ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 358.

LCCXX. To Calvin the church should be the mother to the faith of the believer¹⁴.

Though the Institutes contain four large volumes and cover the grand scope of Christian faith especially from a Reformed Tradition perspective, throughout the writings, Calvin continues to draw his readers back to the importance of the church as a community of believers and as the source of learning about faith and its practice.

The Hospitality Commands by Alexander Strauch gives the biblical support to what the early church practiced in the care of those within the community and those that were on the outside.¹⁵ Strauch stresses how often in the Bible, the command of hospitality was not a suggestion but a necessary expectation of Christians to care for others with the same love and concern that God had for them.¹⁶ Hospitality was a very noticeable trait that those on the outside could witness when viewing the early church, they could cite it as a quantifiable difference between the Christians and other religions. This is a very helpful resource that traces the history and the importance of hospitality as practiced in the early church and why it is still of importance to the contemporary church today.

Other sources helpful in gleaning the deeper messages contained in Scripture are the Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary¹⁷ and the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms by Donald McKim. Both provide the historical background, explanation and scriptural references to the theological and biblical terms used in the scriptural text.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion LCCXX*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV: 1,1.

¹⁵ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ Herbert Lockyer, Sr. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986) 492.

McKim's book is a great resource for finding succinct descriptions and definitions for words used in scripture but also their application in the current religious environments.

The theological resources tracked closely with the Protestant theologians and the Presbyterian Church (USA) to support the importance of people being encouraged to experience God in addition to learning about God. As mentioned above in the information about the biblical resources, *Christian Doctrine* by Shirley Guthrie helps to provide the reason for there being a church, making the case that the church is in existence for those that are outside of the Christian faith. Continuing with Daniel Migliore's book *Faith Seeking Understanding*, it helps to encourage people to have faith in the institution of church even though it is flawed.

Because of the researcher's ties to the Presbyterian Church USA, it was important to use the resources that guide the PCUSA, so the PCUSA Constitution made up of the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order was sought. Here was vast documentation through the use of the creeds, the confessions and the polity of the PCUSA in setting the stage for why the church was called forth and what were the expectations of the church to its members and outside community. Also, in John Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion* LCC XX, he writes of the importance of the church as "The External Means or Aim by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein."¹⁸ Calvin's *Institutes* help give greater depth of understanding and meaning to concepts covered in the Book of Confession and the Book of Order of the PCUSA. A book that presents the Reformed Tradition's history and understanding of The Church with its

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* LCC XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV; 1, 1.

helpful summation of the important guideposts of the Reformed faith's theology of the church is *The Church: Guides to the Reformed Tradition* by Wallace M. Alston Jr.¹⁹

Though this ministry project had a strong attachment to Presbyterian USA theology, it respected the underpinnings provided by Martin Luther's idea of the "priesthood of all believers" as found in Helmut T. Lehmann's *Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry."*²⁰ This book echoed Luther's sense of the importance of all members of the church to be involved in the care of others. We are called to be the church to the world founded on love. C.S. Lewis stressed the importance of agape love in his book, *The Four Loves*.²¹

The self-sacrificing love of Christians is the essence of Christian life is emphasized in B.B. Warfield's *The Emotional Life of Our Lord, In The Person and Work of Christ*.²² Seeking to expound on how vital Christian love was to the community of faith, James Moffat wrote about love as found in *Love in the New Testament* which offers evidence of why no church could exist for very long without love.²³ *The Social Aspects of Early Christianity* by Abraham J. Malherbe²⁴ showed the importance of hospitality and love as

¹⁹ Wallace M. Alston, Jr., *The Church: Guides to Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984).

²⁰ Helmut T. Lehmann ed., *Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry", in Luther's Works, vol. 40* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 37.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1960) 114.

²² B.B. Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord, In The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950) 104.

²³ James Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1929) 244.

²⁴ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge, LS: State University Press, 1977) 67.

theological statements more than even the practical application of providing shelter and nourishment to believers.

The research of the historical aspects of the ministry project provided guidance as to who throughout the ages of church history were practicing methods to deepen church members' spiritual maturity. Though the Holy Scriptures give much of the historical information about the early church and the believers, books such as *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* which contain a number of writings from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose and Jerome offer more evidence to the importance of the early Christian practice of love and hospitality. *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*²⁵ provides the history of how Christianity started and then follows its development for the first three hundred years of existence. All these historical recordings help one to gain an understanding of why the practices of the early church were so important to the continuation of the Christian faith.

Keeping in the same vein of the church fathers and how the early church modeled the faith, much information can be noted in *The Fathers of the Church* especially Tertullian, *Apology 39.7*.²⁶ There is a collection of writings called the *Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve*.²⁷ It was discovered in 1873 but dated 1056. It offers instruction on being a moral Christian and could be used for those new to the Christian faith. It is helpful

²⁵ Adolf Harnack, trans. James Moffatt, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, 2 Volumes* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904) 1:222, 223.

²⁶ Joseph Deferrari ed., *Apology 39.7, in The Fathers of the Church* trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly and Edwin A. Quain (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1950) 99.

²⁷ J. Quasten ed. and J. C. Plumpe, 1 Clement 1.2, in *Ancient Christian Writers* trans. James A. Kleist (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961) 1:9.

information when trying to determine what might be important to present day churches when planning for their new member classes.

Finally, in reviewing the current practices and research of today, it seems to be coming back full circle to what was learned from the Book of the Acts and the Epistles. The practices of hospitality, holy listening, prayer, worship, blessings, building Christian community, creating sacred space and Sabbath keeping seem to be the very things that drew people from the outside into the Christian faith and it is also what helped sustain Christians in their faith journeys.

The encouragement for practicing the spiritual disciplines in a contemporary context can be found in books like *Practicing Our Faith*²⁸ by Dorothy Bass which is a collection of practices such as honoring the body, hospitality, keeping the Sabbath, healing and discernment to guide believers in how to live more authentic and deeper spiritual lives.

Adding to that practical application is Marva Dawn's book of *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*²⁹ which is a book that helps to remind us of the gift of Sabbath keeping especially that we need to cease, rest, embrace and feast. Then to see how this was practiced in the early church, another book by Marva Dawn entitled *Truly the Community: Romans 12*

²⁸ Dorothy Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. 1997) 72.

²⁹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans, 1989) 32.

and *How To Be The Church*³⁰ is in depths look at the how the early church behaved and lived using Romans Chapter 12 as the resource.

After gaining an understanding of what the early church was called to practice, it becomes a challenge for the contemporary church to maintain the same spiritual disciplines. *Becoming a Blessed Church* by Graham Standish helps to expand the ideas of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture to the church at large. It is useful in providing guidance and explanation for why the contemporary church is in the directionless condition in which it finds itself. Standish encourages churches and individuals to seek, discern and be on God's agenda³¹. Though taking it from a different angle, *The Purpose Driven Life*³² asks the question, why have people been put on the earth. It continues to use scripture to guide readers to the five purposes people have in their lives. The five purposes including: worship, fellowship, discipleship, mission, and evangelism. Here the focus is honed in such a fashion to help readers realize that their lives are to be lived for God and service to God or to be lived within the will of God.

Readers are reminded in *A Friendly Church Is Hard To Find*³³ that there are struggles for present day churches to be user friendly and welcoming. A resource that can be helpful in encouraging a church to become more user friendly and welcoming is the book

³⁰ Marva Dawn, *Truly The Community: Romans 12 and How To Be The Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

³¹ Graham Standish, *Becoming A Blessed Church: Forming A Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) 62.

³² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 137.

³³ Gene and Nancy Preston, "A Friendly Church Is Hard to Find" *Christian Century* (January 30, 1991) 102, 103.

The Hospitality Commands³⁴, it traces the history and importance of hospitality as practiced in the early church and why it is still of importance to the contemporary church today. It is vital that churches and their members realize that hospitality is not a minor detail in being Christian. In the book *Why Men Hate Going To Church*³⁵ the question is explored and a multifaceted answer is offered, basically that men do not feel welcome or appreciated in church. Though the reasons are more than the lack of hospitality, the book does provide some food for thought of how churches conduct themselves and what target group would find them appealing. It is a good litmus test to check out whether churches encourage men to use their gifts in serving the church and if not, how to go about making the church environment more male friendly.

Two other books that were helpful to learning about how to apply the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices to new member classes were *Membership Matters*, where the focus is on helping people feel a part of the community and to appreciate the importance of belonging in a dedicated sense to a group of people. The second book was *Selling Swimsuits in the Arctic*,³⁶ which used the story of a swimsuit salesman that was transferred to the Arctic and his struggles to earn a living. Basically, the message could be distilled down to anyone trying to sell anything, needs to believe in his or her product and that he or she truly believes it can make a positive difference in the customer's life. If

³⁴ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 7.

³⁵ David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going To Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Books, 2005).

³⁶ Adam Hamilton, *Selling Swimsuits in the Arctic: Seven Simple Keys To Growing Churches* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Books, 2005).

that is the case for Christian believers, then they should have no trouble in inviting and encouraging those outside of the faith to come on in, the water is fine.

All of the literature that was reviewed set the stage by providing the underpinnings of what and how one would apply the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices to the ministry project. The main focus was how to encourage people to see that a stronger relationship with God and others was important and relevant to life. As the stark, simple black billboard with white lettering read “Got God?”³⁷ The question was a take off from the highly popular milk advertisements that ask “Got Milk?” Well, to get milk, you can go to the grocery store, determine what kind, flavor and amount you want, make the purchase and take the milk home with you. But “getting God”, is not quiet as easy. You might be able to ‘get - religion’ but “getting God” seems to be somewhat more elusive. God is not a product that is able to be containerized. God is not containable. God is not sitting on a shelf waiting to be purchased.

Though the “Got God?” question is a little awkward in light of the “Got Milk?” inquiry, it is still a good question and prompts the reader to reflect on the status of God in his or her life. It also prompts one to think -how could I “get God?” As people seek God to fill that God shaped hole they have in their hearts or as Saint Augustine wrote “You have made us toward yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”³⁸ They may look to churches to help them connect with God. When they come to church, they are seeking a church that has “a congregational life that nurtures in people a vibrant, life-

³⁷ www.GodSpeaks.org, *GodSpeaks Devotional* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 2000), 178.

³⁸ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 197), 197.

changing faith- the kind that shapes a person's way of being, thinking, and acting"³⁹ a definition of a vibrant faith that can be found in the book, *The Teaching Church*. This vibrant faith can grow and deepen with the practice and power of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is an area of study that is helping many people to have a deeper experience and relationship with God. Because it is a newly identified area of study (though many of its practices are not new) the following information has been added to help readers have a better understanding to the scope of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture.

Many of the resources for BBSN come from the contemporary work of the mentors of the United Theological Seminary Doctoral Program of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Peer Group. As noted in Jackie Nowak's Theoretical Foundation paper,

"The term 'Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture' originated in Colorado Springs, Colorado in November, 2000, with the inception of First Steps Spiritual Nurture Center for Hurting Children and Teens. Founder Reverend Leanne Hadley, an elder in the United Methodist Church, chose the term as descriptive of ways of practicing spiritual nurture which stress the blessings of inner strength and God's presence in each person's life. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is a form of care used with children, teens and adults today in a variety of settings around the United States."⁴⁰

³⁹ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 19.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Nowak, "Theoretical Foundations for Learning and Developing the Theory, Practices and Power of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture" (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 2006, typewritten), 6.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture offers a packaged deal of a variety of practices that help one in his or her spiritual formation and in his or her spiritual growth. The emphasis is on the person developing and deepening his or her relationship with God. BBSN relies on practices similar to those mentioned in the description of Spiritual Formation used by the Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

"Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as Sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence."⁴¹

The focus of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is for all the practices and teaching to help people experience God and to grow closer in their relationship with God thus their lives become models of Christian love and living. The Vineyard Guild Prayer as mentioned in the book, "Becoming a Blessed Church" provides a helpful description of how one's life is to be lived when one is a Christian follower of God.

Holy God, Beloved Trinity, let me always be rooted in you so that I may live in you and you in me. Bless me so that your grace may flow through me, allowing me to bear your fruit to a hungry and helpless world. As I wander, prune me of all that inhibits your growth in me. Let me do nothing apart from you so that your joy may be complete in me. In Christ's name I pray. Amen⁴²

⁴¹ Office of Spiritual Formation Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Definition of Spiritual Formation," *Hungryhearts* (Spring 2004).

⁴² N. Graham Standish, *Presence Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose and Power*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), xiii.

The question that needs to be asked is what would help people deepen their understanding and relationship with God? What would impact their lives in such a way that it would encourage one's life to be the one as mentioned in the Teaching Church book's description of a vital Christian life? Using the assumptions as mentioned in Jackie Nowak's paper, in particular as they relate to adults, one would invite a seeker to be involved and to practice the mainstays related to Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. They include: Hospitality, Holy Listening, Blessings, Sabbath Keeping, Community, Worship and Prayer.

- Hospitality- is the gracious entertaining and care of others. Christian hospitality is a modeling of God's love to others. It sets the stage for the relationship of trust and love to be built between persons so that all that BBSN has to offer can have a chance to be received and accepted.
- * Holy Listening- this is the capacity of communicating well but in particular listening. Cari Jackson writes in the Gift to Listen, that the sacred role of listening is having the "capacity to bring another person's soul into life."⁴³
- * Blessings- are the announcements of God's blessings or goodness to us. A blessing can be a ritual done on a regular basis to remind one of God's love and devotion to each of us. Blessing can be understood to be the perspective from which one operates and applies the teachings and practices of the Christian faith. It is the acceptance of Bagpiper Bob's philosophy "You know, God never sets you up to fail."⁴⁴
- Sabbath Keeping- coming from the Fourth Commandment about keeping the Sabbath holy, we learn that there is a depth to this application for all our lives. Encouraged in Sabbath keeping is time for worshipping God, for rest, and for living at a pace that is dependent on God for security not upon our selves.
- Community- God's plan for God's children is that they are to live in relationship with each other. We are to care for one another, hold each other accountable,

⁴³ Cari Jackson, *The Gift to Listen: The Courage to Hear* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2003) x.

⁴⁴ N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) xi.

worship, pray, sing and celebrate together. There is a unique bond between followers of Jesus and it is important that we spend time together to be able to enjoy the 'joy' of being with one another. We are also called to be in relationship with those outside of the faith as a witness to the love of God for others.

- Worship- involves not only the intentional focus of praise, adoration, thanksgiving and prayer to God, it is also remembering to create a sacred space. It is setting aside time to devote to relating to God and "loving God back."⁴⁵
- Prayer- basically talking with God and listening to God. "It is the human approach to God and addressing God in praise and adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication and intercession. A consciousness of God's presence, love, direction and grace may be experienced."⁴⁶

Theoretical Foundations for Learning and Developing the Theory, Practices and Power of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture provide opportunities for people: children, youth and adults to develop and deepen their relationship with God. It is through the understanding that all people have a holiness within them that allows them to be able to relate to God. When one is encouraged to explore the real possibility of a relationship with God, one may then want to try some of the practices and teachings that help to guide a person in his or her meeting and relating to God. It is important to remember that Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture has many dimensions, methods and ways of offering opportunities of drawing closer to God and to each other.

⁴⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 216.

⁴⁶ Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996) 216.

CHAPTER THREE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Historical Foundation

The early church's mission was to help people to develop a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the experience of the Early Church that forms the historical foundation for the ministry project's focus of creating new member classes. Because much of the Early Church's history is recorded in Scripture, the Bible is an important place to start. Though the word church is only found in two places of the Four Gospels. The Book of Matthew has both of the listings:

Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. The Matthew 16 passage is when Jesus is replying to Simon Peter and he says

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18) And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

The word church is also found in Matthew 18:17 when Jesus teaches how to treat a believer who sins. He instructs them first to go to the believer and talk with him. If that does not help then take two or three witnesses and talk with him. If that does not work, “tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” The two church citations are helpful in understanding some

of the history and value of the church for its founding and its discipline but how does one know what the church was to be to the individual believer?

The church does not get under way until after Jesus' ascension in Acts 1:1-4. On the day of Pentecost as found in Acts 2, we see the establishment of the church. The rest of the Book of Acts is the story of the Early Church and its mission. The mission of the church was given by Jesus in Matthew 28:16-20, known as the Great Commission. Jesus gave the Great Commission, his last words to the disciples by saying:

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

So the church has a direction and instructions in which to follow. The early Christians met in the Temple and Jewish synagogues, as well as private homes of believers, Acts 5:42.¹ Their activities included devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer as mentioned in Acts 2:42. There were public worship services and at the services, missionary teachings and outreach in the name of Christ were offered to all within reach.² What was learned about the Early Church was that it was the hub for the growth and nurture of the believers.

As found in 2 Corinthians 5:20, according to the New Testament, Christians enter into the company of God's people by baptism, hearing the Word of God preached, receiving new life and strength as they broke bread together and were discipled in order to be sent

¹ Herbert Lockyer, Sr. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986) 232.

² *Ibid.*, 232.

back into the world as servants or “ambassadors” of Christ.³ Again, many of these activities would happen in the local congregations that could be found in Jerusalem, Antioch or Rome. For the first three centuries, the church had no buildings. People met in their homes or where they worked. Church buildings as they are known, today, did not come into being until the Middle Ages.

As Ignatius said in the second century, “Where Christ is there is the Church.” The true church exists wherever Jesus Christ is present in the world, wherever God calls people to be his Body, and wherever men and women respond in faith and obedience.⁴ This is a wonderful depiction to support the very nature of the church. The church has historically been called to support the mission of helping people develop a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. And as Rick Warren, pastor of Saddle Back Church in California says. ““The fellowship of the church is more important than any individual.”⁵

Hospitality and the Great Commandment provide a core of guidance for how people are led to experience God in a tangible way and therefore deepen their relationship with God and others. The author, personally experienced the importance of hospitality and the Great Commandment when on a Sunday morning worship service, she bounded down the steps during the greeting time to shake hands with an older gentleman of the

³ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 364.

⁴ Wallace M. Alston, Jr., *The Church: Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984) 54.

⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 150.

congregation. She extended her hand but he did not extend his. It took her a minute and then she realized that she had accidentally come across the very same man that did not shake her husband's hand a few Sundays prior. So considering that she was the associate pastor and therefore name recognition should not be a problem, she kept her hand extended. To which, he said that he did not shake hands in the winter time.

A rush of relief washed over her as she realized that she was going to be able to go home and tell her husband that the man was not being rude or unkind but that he had this weird hang up about shaking hands in the wintertime. But just as she was turning around to head back to the pulpit, from the corner of her eye, she saw the man shake a good friend's hand. Tempted as she was to chirp "oh, I guess it is spring" she did not.

What surprised her about the incident was how upset she got. All throughout the rest of the service, she simmered and came close to seething. She started to pray for the man and to ask God for forgiveness for how mad she felt. Here she was, right in the middle of a service and she was rehearsing things she would like to say to that man. As she tried to trace back her thoughts and feelings, she realized that had the man only dealt with her, it would not have been such a big deal. But because he had hurt her husband, she was near boiling.

As she processed her situation, the light started to glow of how damaging an experience like that could be to someone who was new to the church. It could be especially harmful to someone who was unsure of even being in church, much less having to interact with the other pew sitters in service. When the importance of hospitality and practicing the Great Commandment are stressed in the following pages, it is not lost to the author because she had experienced first hand the harsh sting of someone

else's rudeness and insensitivity. This was an effective object lesson for the writer to learn how hospitality and love are such mainstays for the Christian faith.

William Barclay writes "Christianity was, and still should be, the religion of the open door."⁶ William Barclay was a very learned and articulate man but it might be helpful to add that in addition to the open door, there should be a friendly and welcoming face behind it. Hospitality seems to be underrepresented on the church scene. Parishioners seem to talk a lot about it and think that it is worthwhile but most everyone groans when it comes to providing it.

Hospitality was a distinct characteristic of the early Christians and Christian communities. "Indeed, was there ever a visitor in your midst that did not approve your excellent and steadfast faith... or did not proclaim the magnificent character of your hospitality?"⁷ Hospitality offers Christians the opportunity to extend the love and consideration to others- anyone.

It provided a way for people to witness love in action. Tertullian, the third-century African writer and apologist comments that the pagans of his day had to acknowledge the extraordinary love of the Christians. The pagans had to admit "See ... how they love one another...and how ready they are to die for each other."⁸ It is true what the old adage

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 219.

⁷J.Quasten ed. and J.C. Plumpe, *1 Clement 1.2*, in *Ancient Christian Writers* trans. James A. Kleist (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961) 1:9.

⁸Joseph Deferrari ed., *Apology 39.7*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1950) 99.

says about being a walking and breathing sermon. Christians can communicate so much when they make the effort to help people feel accepted and valued. The church historian, Adolf Harnack wroteduring the early centuries of Christianity it was the Roman church more than any other which was distinguished by the generosity with which it practiced this virtue (hospitality)...A living interest in the collective church of Christ throbbed with peculiar vigor throughout the Roman church ... and the practice of hospitality was one of the manifestations.⁹

During the time of the Reformation, it was Martin Luther that championed the cause of hospitality with his open door policy at his house and the opportunities to sit at table for theological discussions and Bible lessons. “Martin Luther proved that the table is a splendid pulpit from which to teach God’s truths and disciple God’s people. Luther and his wife, Katie, became legendary for their open home and liberal hospitality.”¹⁰ In referring to Luther’s hospitality from a book entitled *Conversation with Luther*, it is noted “For the great house was always full to the brim.”¹¹

“For over 2,000 years Christians have regularly gathered in small groups for fellowship” writes Rick Warren of *The Purpose Driven Life*.¹² What was important in

⁹ Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 2 vols., trans James Moffatt (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 1:222,223.

¹⁰ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 19.

¹¹ Preserved Smith and Herbert Percival Gallinger, *Conversations with Luther: Table Talk*, (New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, Inc., 1979) p. xii.

¹² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 143.

the beginning years of the early church and what continued to be a powerful message being lived out in the lives of the Christians was their practice of hospitality and love. It is important to help people feel secure and to develop a level of trust so that they can start to experience God in a tangible way and therefore deepen their relationship with God and others.

When one finds oneself in a safe, hospitable environment one can concentrate on how faith involves all of one's being: our minds, spirits, bodies and our relationships with each other. From author C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, one can find the idea that the Christian way is different. It is both harder and easier. Christ says, "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked- the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."¹³

As can be seen from the quote in *Mere Christianity*, the 'total life' of a believer is expected in living out the authentic Christian faith. There is nothing in one's life that can escape from being considered part of a Christian's character or lifestyle. Dallas Willard wrote in *The Spirit of the Disciplines* that the contemporary church is weak on suggesting or requiring discipleship. And in so doing, the contemporary church is not helping people mature in their faith. It is Willard's contention that "When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being a disciple. Primarily it meant to go

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 167.

with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost."¹⁴ Willard's case in point comes from Mark 10:28 when Simon Peter says "Look, we've left everything and followed you."

Continuing with the cost of discipleship, Willard writes, "the disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his 'faith and practice', systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end."¹⁵ Again, one is reminded of what it takes to be a disciple of Christ's and to realize how that will impact and influence one's life. An interesting twist to the consideration to the cost of being a follower of Christ is the cost of "nondiscipleship". Though Dallas Willard is willing to acknowledge the main thrust of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, meaning that is important to be aware of what is required to live a life of true discipleship.

Willard wants to make readers aware of the even greater cost of not being a disciple of Christ. He writes "Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated through by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring."¹⁶ To Willard, the "cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 260.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

an instrument of liberation and power".¹⁷ Though following Christ can cost one his or her perceived freedom and choice, in the long run, to choose Christ is to gain.

There is a responsibility that belongs to the Christian believer; it is the choice to follow God. Marva Dawn sums it up "My responsibility in living is to be as faithful as I can to my own creation by loving my Creator and his will. That sets me free to enter into the adventure of a daily walk with him, of practicing his presence in all that I do and am becoming."¹⁸ So it is a continual process as one lives his or her life to become closer to the example set by Jesus Christ.

Christians have a responsibility, there is a choice between life and death as seen in Deuteronomy 30:19, " I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live."¹⁹ M. Shawn Copeland writes "we must choose a way of living that encompasses our whole lives so that we can be faithful and authentic to being followers of Jesus."²⁰ It is helpful for that life as a follower of Jesus to include daily personal prayer, examination of conscience, and participation in a faith-sharing group. To Copeland, using these practices can help believers to live lives that say yes to life and no to destruction.

When people give their all to the Christian faith, they start to put things in the proper perspective for a life of devoted to God. "The most important ordering takes place in our

¹⁷ Ibid., 263.

¹⁸ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989) 32.

¹⁹ Dorothy Bass, ed. *Practicing our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997) 72.

²⁰ Ibid., 72.

lives when we observe the Sabbath focus of placing God at the center and then prioritize everything else in proper relation to that focus. Keeping the Sabbath day constantly reminds us that Yahweh is to be pre-eminent in our lives."²¹

There are many choices in living one's life that can help or hinder. Just as the fore mentioned author M. Shawn Copeland encouraged practices that would help believers live positive, helpful lives. He reminds believers, "If we are to enhance and build up the capacities for a good, wholesome and holy life, we must learn to say yes to what affirms and renews wholeness and life."²² It is important for believers to realize that faith involves all of one's being: our minds, spirits, bodies and our relationships with each other. It is through that total commitment that one is able to fully enjoy the wholeness and holiness of the Christian life.

Biblical

It was the Early Church's study of Scripture, teachings, spiritual disciplines and practical application of the Christian faith to life that helped people to mature spiritually and to give their 'all' to God. The church was and is the community of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word *kyriakon* means something belonging to the Lord and the Greek word *ecclesia* means assembly.²³ In the New Testament, this could mean the assembly belonging to the Lord that was meeting in a home maybe in Jerusalem or

²¹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989) 141.

²² Dorothy Bass, ed. *Practicing our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997) 73.

²³ Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 49.

Antioch or Rome as found in First Corinthians 16:19 “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings, Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.” Also found in Colossians 4:15 “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.” Church could mean those meeting in a home or the collection of churches universally.

Church was the place where new believers in Jesus Christ would gather to praise and serve God. There was something very special about the relationships that the human beings shared with each other and with God. There was a transformational element in both. The community of believers shared some unique characteristics of mutuality, interdependence, forgiveness and friendship.²⁴ It is important that there be a community for support, fellowship, instruction, guidance and worship.

As seen in the Hebrew Scriptures, God has always sought a community of believers, as in Leviticus 26:12 “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” This can be compared to the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.” It is important for believers to be in community together. It was where they can learn about God and be strengthened in their faith.

God also calls the church to be a servant people as found in Exodus 8:1, 9:1 and 10:3. Serving through their worship as found in Exodus 10:3 it says “... Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” The same expectations of what the assembly should be

²⁴ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 189.

doing can be found in the New Testament. As one finds in 2 Corinthians 4:5 “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” it is in the church that believers will learn what it means to be a servant people and have the opportunity to practice caring for each other and for those in need.

The purpose of the church is that it should be the place where believers can not only grow in their relationships with others; it is also the place where they can strengthen their connection with God. If the church is the Body of Christ and Christ is the head as written in 1 Corinthians 12-31, then as believers deepen their understanding by practicing the faith, they become more tightly yoked to Christ. As they follow the Head of the church, they become more familiar and experienced in who is Christ and what is to be expected.

The community participates in one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism, and thus becomes “one body”. Added to the strength of being “one body” being connected to Christ and to each other, the church is also the Community of the Spirit as found in Acts 2:17 where there is a renewing experience of the Spirit of God.²⁵ Thus, the church has been the vehicle used to develop and strengthen the relationships a believer has with God and with others in the community of faith through the Holy Spirit.

There is one Savior and Lord of the church, that the community of people who are the body of Christ are united in faith, hope, love, worship and service.²⁶ In the New Testament, Ephesians 2:11-22 provides an overview of this community. Looking at specifically, Ephesians 2: 19-22

²⁵ Ibid.,190.

²⁶ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 358.

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, 20) built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21) In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22) and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

There are so many places in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament where the members of the church are challenged to grow in their faith and to serve as priests to each other. In Galatians 5:22-25, the churches are to present the fruit of the Spirit which means practicing a life that will bear love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is a list of characteristics of Christ as the Chief Priest which show what the believers are encouraged to imitate.

As the relationships between and among the believers grow and deepen, they will find that they not only experience a unique fellowship known as *koinonia* but they will also grow in their spiritual maturity. This growth is very helpful in the expectation that the church members are to be priests as seen in Exodus 19:6, all God’s people were called to be ‘priests’ (mediators who bring God to people and people to God).²⁷ When one has the responsibility to be a priest, one needs to be ready to share his or her story of faith with others. They should serve others through caring for and visiting the sick, helping the poor, feeding the hungry, finding shelter for the homeless, seeking justice and peace and supporting those in need.

The Greek word *diakonia* means service and sums up the idea behind the priesthood of all believers (which will be addressed more completely in the Theological Foundation

²⁷ Ibid., 365.

section.) The church's mission was to help people to develop a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. As one became involved with a church, one should be able to participate in worship, Bible study, fellowship, ministry and mission. Through those activities, a person could develop a deep relationship with God and with others. The church should be the mother to the faith of the believer, says John Calvin.²⁸ The church is the group of people that should nurture a believer's faith and the relationships both: between God and each another.

Hospitality and the Great Commandment provide the core of guidance for how people are led to experience God in a tangible way and therefore deepen their relationship with God and others. In the book of Hebrews, especially, as cited in Chapter 13:1 the author of Hebrews encourages his Christian readers to cultivate a deep, affectionate love for one another as brother and sisters. "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters." There is a strong emphasis on making sure that the church community intentionally put effort towards creating a loving and accepting spirit within their group looking to Christ as the cornerstone of their relationships. Biblical commentator Philip E. Hughes explains "Our brotherhood is first with him (Christ) and then and therefore with each other, for it is the brotherhood of the redeemed."²⁹ The actions of the Christians showed their care and love for each other: The Christians greeted one another with a holy kiss. The actions of Christian love can be found in Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14).

²⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion LCC XX* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV: one, 1.

²⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 106.

Justin Martyr (AD 150) writes that it was a regular part of the worship service in his time, for Christians to acknowledge each other with a holy kiss.³⁰ They would share their material possessions as Luke mentions in Acts 2: 44-45 “All believers were together and had everything in common. 45) Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” This was a sharing that occurred voluntarily and was used to help those that did not have enough for the basics of life. (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32, 11:29; Romans 12:13, 20; 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; Hebrews 13:16; James 2:15, 16; 1 John 3:17)

The early Christians met in homes so noted in Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). They ate together as found in Acts 2:46 “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” This breaking of bread was about eating ordinary meals not necessarily the practice of communion although they did participate regularly in that sacrament. In addition to the shared meal, there was a sense of a welcoming hospitality. It encouraged a “fellowship, an oneness and sharing that the helped the early church enjoy a mood of the believers which is one of the Fruit of the Spirit-Joy.³¹ This fellowship and joy are also mentioned in Acts 20:11; 1 Corinthians 11:2ff; Jude 12. In addition to the importance of hospitality or the gracious caring of others, there was the strong encouragement to love God and each other.

The Great Commandment as found in Matthew 22: 37-38 and Mark 12: 29-30 says: Jesus replied; “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

³⁰ New International Version Study Bible, 1731.

³¹ Ibid., 1649

Mark 12: 29-30 “the most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

There is great strength and challenge to the commandments given by Jesus. Because there was a high expectation not only in one’s devotion to God but there was also to be a love lived out in the relationships of others. “This new commandment to love one another with the same ardent, self-giving love as He loved, colors the whole New Testament. The Greek word group for love- *agape*, *agapo* and the adjective *agapetos* (*beloved*) appears approximately 320 times in the New Testament.”³²

The high level of expectation is continued in the writings of Paul from 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3” If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2) If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3) If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

In this hyperbole, Paul wants to make the strong case that without love, any actions that might be understood as generous and charitable are in vain, they are nothing.

The Greek word for love *agape* describes a love that transcends our English word love. *Agape* is the self-giving love seen supremely in God’s love for the world and is the mark of the Christian life.³³ The stress on the importance of this *Agape* love can be found later in the same chapter by Paul, 1 Corinthians 13: 13 “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love”

³² Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 13.

³³ Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 5.

In 1 Thessalonians 4: 9,10 Paul encourages those in Thessalonica to excel in loving each other. “Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more. And Paul writes to the Christians in Roman to “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” Romans 12:10.

Not only is *Agape* love stressed as a part of the Christian life but the practice of hospitality is also strongly encouraged. Hospitality is the welcoming and entertaining guests with generous kindness, being open-minded and receptive.³⁴ In 1 Peter 4: 8a, 9, Peter writes “Be hospitable to one another without complaint.” Another translation says “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”³⁵ For early Christians, hospitality was the practice of entertaining strangers graciously. It was a very important trait in Bible times. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as hospitality literally means “love of strangers.”³⁶ The author of 3 John 5-8 writes of Gaius’ hospitality to unknown, itinerant brethren was reported to the church and described as “your love”, Gaius' love for others. Gaius was a Christian in one of the churches of the province of Asia. John is writing to commend Gaius for his generous hospitality.

3 John 5) Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. 6) They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. 7) It was for the sake of the Name (God) that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.”

³⁴ Eileen Bailey, *The New International Webster’s Pocket Dictionary of the English Language* (USA: Trident Press International, 2000) 239.

³⁵ 1 Peter 4:8a, 9 NIV, Bible.

³⁶ Herbert Lockyer, Sr. *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986) 492.

Hospitality is always found within the context of brotherly love and is evidence of the Christian *Agape* practiced in providing for and welcoming graciously those that the early church knew and those that were strangers to them.

Faith involves all of one's being: our minds, spirits, bodies and our relationships with each other as Genesis 1:26-28 describes that humans were made in the image of God. It shows that God can relate to us but it also opens the way for us to be able to relate to God. Made in the image of God is "the created state of humans who were made in God's likeness and intended to enjoy the divine-human relationship."³⁷ As one moves toward a commitment to that relationship with God, it is helpful to know that it is going to require all of one's being. A relationship with God is going to involve one's mind, spirit, body and then working out one's relationship with others within and without the community of faith.

As found in the Shema: ("Hebrew for Hear!" It is a Jewish confession of faith, recited daily by the pious.)

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates."

³⁷Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 116.

There is nothing left in one's being that is left outside God's domain. As we find in

Joshua 22:5 But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.

To love the Lord and to serve him with all your heart was an understanding that both Moses and Joshua understood. It was that obedience to the laws of God that would require love and service from the heart. The service was not to be rendered out of a sense of duty but out of loving God. "In the ancient Near East, "love" was also a political term, indicating true hearted loyalty to one's king."³⁸ One is reminded in Matthew 22: 37-38 of the Greatest Commandment as Jesus replied to the expert of the law's question "what is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replied "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Here is the dovetailing of the commitment to God and the added commitment to love one's neighbors. Considered the Greatest Commandment, one finds the message of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 combined with the instruction in Leviticus, specifically, Leviticus 19:18 "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus replied to one of the teachers of law who had a question about which was the most important commandment?

In Mark 12: 29-30 "the most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and

³⁸ Kenneth Barker, *The NIV Study Bible New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985) 320.

with all your strength.’ The second is this ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’

Again it is important to remember that heart, soul and mind equal your whole being. Added to one’s commitment to God is the commitment of love to one’s neighbor. Jesus says that if we truly love God and our neighbor, we will naturally keep the commandments. “This is looking at God’s law positively. Rather than worrying about all we should *not do*, we should concentrate on all we *can* do to show our love for God and others.”³⁹

In Luke 10: 27, one reads of a similar question as it was posed in Matthew 22, here the expert in the law, asks the Teacher what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the expert what the Scriptures say. And the expert answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, Love your neighbor as yourself.” To which Jesus tells him that he has answered correctly and to do this and you will live. But the expert wants clarification on who is his neighbor. Then Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan. A story that illustrates that anyone should be considered one’s neighbor and that to be a good neighbor, one should have mercy or care for all others.

As has been seen elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus uses these words in reply to the question found in both Matthew 22:35-40 and Mark 12: 28-32. Jesus puts the two Scriptures of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 together. Whether it is a fourfold love (heart, soul, strength, and mind, as Matthew 22: 35-40 and in Mark 12:30) or three-

³⁹ *Life Application Study Bible New International Version* (Wheaton, IL and Grand Rapids, MI: Tyndale House Publishers and Zondervan, 1991) 1700.

fold (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:33), the significance is that total devotion of one's self is demanded.

John writes in 1 John 4:19-21 "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command; whoever loves God must also love his brother." Once again, one recognizes the Greatest Command was couched in knowing that God loves us and therefore we have a responsibility to love God and others. It is not a responsibility that can be shirked. To do so would be to stifle the spirituality maturity and growth of a believer. It would also limit the deepening of relationships between God and a believer and the relationships between the believers.

Theological Foundation

The theological foundation provides the stage to understand how the church would encourage a deeper relationship of a person to God and to others. The Early Church's mission was to help people to develop a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit however, Nietzsche wrote, "they (*the church*) would have to sing better songs to make me believe in their Redeemer; his disciples would have to look more redeemed!"⁴⁰ Sometimes the church gets a bad rap. There are situations that occur that make one wonder what God had in mind when God created the church. Charles C. Morrison says "the church is not a society of good people; it is a society of sinners. It is the only organization in human society that takes sinners into its membership just because they are sinners. It is the only organization that keeps

⁴⁰Nietzsch (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*), quoted by Hans Kung, in *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967) 150.

on saying week after week, year after year, age after age; “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done!”⁴¹ And Shirley Guthrie adds “the church is the only ‘club’ in the world that accepts as members only those who are not qualified to belong to it!”⁴²

So what did God have in mind, when God considered the plans for the church? When one reads the New Testament, one finds that the Greek word used for church means “called out.” The church is a community of people who are called out of the world to be God’s people. First, it is to receive God’s judging, forgiving, and renewing grace. Second, it is to be sent out again to be agents of God’s judgment, forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal in the world.⁴³

This can be seen in reading Second Helvetic Confession Chapter XVII 5.124

The church has always existed and it will always exist. But because God from the beginning would have men (humans) to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), it is altogether necessary that there always should have been, and should be now, and to the end of the world, a Church.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) 99.

⁴² Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 357.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁴⁴ The Presbyterian Church (USA), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of General Assembly, 2003) Second Helvetic Confession Chapter XVII 5.124.

Here is the mission of the church. And as the question is posed, *What is the Church?*

The answer coming from the Second Helvetic Confession continues by saying:

Second Helvetic Confession Chapter XVII 5.125 What is the Church?
The Church is an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; a communion, I say, of all saints, namely, of those who truly know and rightly worship and serve the true God in Christ the Savior, by the Word and Holy Spirit, and who by faith are partakers of all benefits which are freely offered through Christ. Citizens of one Commonwealth. They are all citizens of the one city, living under the same Lord, under the same laws, and in the same fellowship of all good things. For the apostle calls them “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19), calling the faithful on earth saints (1Corinthians 4:1), who are sanctified by the blood of the Son of God. The article of the Creed, “I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,” is to be understood wholly as concerning these saints.⁴⁵

Though the church may have a number of warts and problems, it is important to remember that the mission of the church is to nurture her members and to extend help to others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined the church as the community that exists for others. “The church,” he wrote, “must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating but helping and serving.”⁴⁶ Because again, one might ponder the mission of the church and then consider the practical evidence- only to question, if this was God’s best option?

Why did God create a world and then choose to use the church for God’s mission?

Daniel Migliore writes the end for which the world was created and redeemed is for the deep and lasting communion between God and creation, a commonwealth of justice, reconciliation, and freedom based on the grace of God. While flawed and always in need

⁴⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 204.

of reform and renewal, the church is nonetheless the real beginning of God's new and inclusive community of liberated creatures reconciled to God and to each other and called to God's service in the world.⁴⁷ John Calvin knew that the church was necessary for people to be and remain Christian. He called the church the mother of the faithful. The title of his fourth book in the series of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, he writes "The External Means or Aim by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein."⁴⁸ Calvin was expanding on the observation of the Third Century theologian Cyprian who wrote "you cannot have God for your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother."⁴⁹

Augustine said that he would not have believed except for the church. We need the church. Her mission is most important for people to mature in the faith. It is important that the mission that is uniquely that of the church continue to be carried out. For Luther, it was important that the church continue to provide the Word, "if the church is without the Word, it ceases to be the church."⁵⁰ For Calvin, the true measure of the church was "Whenever we see the

⁴⁷ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 186.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion LCC XX*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) p. IV: 1, 1.

⁴⁹ Stanley Lawrence Greenslade, ed. *Cyprian, "On the Unity of the Catholic Church," Early Latin Theology*, vol. 5 of Library of the Christian Classics (Philadelphia; Westminster Press, 1960) 127-128.

⁵⁰ Helmut T. Lehmann ed., *Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry," in Luther's Works, vol. 40* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 37.

Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁵¹

The church's mission is fulfilled through the relationships and activities of the people. It is important that the people come together and spend time together. Daniel Migliore writes “Human beings as created by God are essentially relational, social beings, and this essential sociality and co-humanity is unalterably concretized by our coexistence as men and women. We are created for life in community with others, to exist in relationships of mutual fidelity and mutual freedom in fellowship.”⁵² The idea that the people are the church and are important to the faith is echoed in Martin Luther's idea of the “priesthood of all believers.” Every Christian is called to be a priest to every other person. Both Lutheran and Reformed tradition support the “Communion Sanctorum” or the “Communion of the Saints” as mentioned in the Apostle's Creed. There should not be such a thing as a private, “Lone Ranger” Christian.

One is reminded of that the church is a collection of people or a community as we read

The Confession of 1967 (9.31) To be reconciled to God is to sent into the world as his reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate men from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.⁵³

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9.

⁵² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 126.

⁵³ The Presbyterian Church (USA), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of General Assembly, 2003) The Confession of 1967 (9.31).

Throughout the writings of confessions and creeds, the church has followed the mission outlined by God. In the Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
Everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
Sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
And binds us together with all believers
In one body of Christ, the Church.⁵⁴

Even as Liberation Theology challenges the status quo of the practices of contemporary churches, the call is still back to the mission that God intended. Liberation Theology calls the ecclesial life the “Christian base community.”

It is “made up of small groups of poor people in particular localities who gather to pray, interpret the Bible together, and relate their faith to their common, everyday problems, the Christian base communities understand themselves as experiments in a new way of being the church.”⁵⁵

So even with the problems and mistakes the church makes, it is the vehicle that God has created to help people to develop a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. As Theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us, “There is one Savior and Lord of the church that the community of people who are the body of Christ are united in faith, hope, love, worship and service. (Romans 12: 4-6; 1 Cor. 1:16-17; 12: 4-27, Eph. 2:11-22, 4:1-16)”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The Presbyterian Church (USA), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part I Book Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Presbyterian Church USA, 2003) The Brief Statement of Faith 10.4.

⁵⁵ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 197.

⁵⁶ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 358.

Hospitality and the Great Commandment provide a core of guidance for how people are led to experience God in a tangible way and therefore deepen their relationship with God and others. Throughout history what has struck people as unusual about the Christian church was the unique and abiding love exhibited by the people in their hospitality and care for those in and outside of the community. “The little pockets of early Christians survived because they cared exclusively for the love of the brethren and stooped their ears to the opinion of the Pagan society all around them” writes C.S. Lewis.⁵⁷ It is a tall order, a big expectation for ordinary people that happen to be Christians to be exceptionally loving and caring; however, it is God’s Great Command to Christians to make visible God’s love to others.

And it does not come without a cost, which is precisely why God calls Christians to the Great Commandment. Presbyterian theologian B.B. Warfield writes “Self-sacrificing love is thus made the essence of the Christian life.”⁵⁸ How do Christians encourage or invite others to be in relationship with God, if the environment and the Christians seem to be hostile or indifferent to the cares and needs of others? Who would be willing to become vulnerable and expose their 'soft under belly of vulnerability' to the attention of others, if the community seemed unsafe or unfriendly?

A church that is built without love can not stand. It misses the whole point of its existence. As with children, if a teacher does not provide a loving and warm setting, children will be preoccupied with their security concerns instead of continuing in their

⁵⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1960) 114.

⁵⁸ B.B. Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord, In The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950) 104.

learning and relating to each other. Bible translator, James Moffatt writes “no church has any prospect of stability or chance of existence in the sight of God if it neglects brotherly love.”⁵⁹ For the early Christians, the practice of hospitality was not just a practical consideration; it was also a theological one.

“The Christian practice of hospitality was not viewed simply as a means of overcoming a practical problem. Theological statements by different authors in the New Testament show that it was frequently viewed as the concrete expression of Christian love”⁶⁰ writes New Testament scholar, Abraham J. Malherbe. Hospitality and living the Great Commandment require our time, energy, effort, and concentration. It is by God’s design that through the fulfillment of these expectations people can witness God’s love in a concrete example instead of a philosophical concept that seems to float among the clouds and does not touch their lives in an effective way.

Faith involves all of one’s being: one’s mind, spirit, body, and one’s relationships with others. As was seen from the biblical foundational information, Christians are called by God to give of their hearts, souls and minds which equals their whole beings. To able to make a true commitment to God, Christians must be able to submit all of them selves, their total beings to God. As found in the Theological dictionary, the definition of faith is

⁵⁹ James Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (London: Hoddere and Stoughton, 1929) 244.

⁶⁰ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge, LS: State University Press, 1977) 67.

“trust,” “belief” in Christianity, it is belief, trust and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the means of salvation (Ephesians 2:80) or eternal life (John 6:40). Faith affects all dimensions of one’s existence; intellect, emotions and will.⁶¹

Humans are wired in such a way that they search for meaning in their lives; they try to fill the hole in their beings with all sorts of activities. However, it is through faith and a relationship with God that they can feel fulfilled in heart, mind and body. As noted earlier, Augustine writes in a familiar prayer “You have made us *toward* yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”⁶² Wolfhart Pannenberg calls this continual looking and constant seeking “world openness” or “openness to the future.” There is at work in all of creation an openness to the future. It is a “call forward” to new freedom.⁶³ As one considers being made in the image of God, one sees that one’s wiring is in fact tied to God. As discussed earlier, being made in the image of God offers people the ability to be able to relate to God. It is a part of one’s total being. The structural or substantive image of God is a view of the image of God in humanity is inherent in persons as qualities that define their nature.⁶⁴ Thus, it would be hard to get away from God; therefore, to be able to experience the fullness of God will require that one give all of one’s self to God.

⁶¹ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 100.

⁶² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 197.

⁶³ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970).

⁶⁴ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 138.

Emil Brunner wrote that people have a formal image of God and it designates the fact that humans are created in the image of God and retain that relationship even after the fall and human sinfulness.⁶⁵ Calvin wrote that humans had an innate knowledge of God and years later, Schleiermacher said that people have an “absolute dependence” on God.⁶⁶ With all that the theologians have to say about humans’ connection to God, it is hard to imagine people choosing to be in relationship with God and then try to limit their commitment to God. The very essence of faith requires humans to process it through the entirety of their beings and their lives.

What is our purpose in life? What is our reason for being? Or put another way “What is the chief end of man?” Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” The answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (the Presbyterian Church USA)⁶⁷ it is a part of the Presbyterian Church USA Confessions that the only reason or purpose humans have in life is to worship God and to delight in their relationship with God.

As continues in the Confession of 1967: 9.17

God has created man in a personal relation with himself that man may respond to the love of the Creator. He has created male and female and given them a life which proceeds from birth to death in a succession of generations and in a wide complex of social relations. He has endowed man with capacities to make the world serve his needs and to enjoy its good things. Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. Man is free to seek his life within the purpose of God; to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common

⁶⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁷The Presbyterian Church (USA), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of General Assembly, 2003) 7.001.

welfare, to work for justice and peace in society, and in other ways to use his creative powers for the fulfillment of human life.⁶⁸

The Confession of 1967 helps to paint the picture of how one's life is to be lived in relationship with God. It shows how one's life and all its aspects are to be centered in living within the purpose of God. Therefore, it shows an example of how faith does involve the total sum of our selves our hearts, souls and minds.

Practical Application

Therefore, it can be established that the ministry project of new member classes using the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices would be supported in its application based on the aforementioned historical, biblical and theological foundations.

The practical application of new member classes would encourage Christians to live and learn in community. Author Shirley Guthrie writes "There is no such thing as a purely individualistic relationship to Christ."⁶⁹ And it is true that Christian faith maturity must be worked out while in community. There needs to be people that are caring and supportive but that can also hold each other accountable. This is better explained by Claude Welch offered an expanded explanation when in writing *The Reality of the Church* says "There is no private Christianity, for to be in Christ is to be in church and to be in the church is to be in Christ, and any attempt to separate relation to Christ in faith

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Confession of 1967 9.17.

⁶⁹ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 354.

from membership in the church is a perversion of the New Testament understanding.”⁷⁰

Although the case has been made that the Christian faith is not to be practiced as a “Lone Ranger” faith, Rick Warren has a Point to Ponder: I am called to belong, not just believe.”⁷¹

In the second half of the Presbyterian Church USA Constitution, the Book of Order, there are three citations that underline the importance of the mission of the church and how it is to be processed through the workings of the Christian church.

Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)G-30000 The mission of the Church is given form by God’s activity in the world as told in the Bible and understood by faith. Continues with God’s activity, God’s covenant, God in Christ and God in the Holy Spirit.⁷²

Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)3.0200 The church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity. A. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.⁷³

It is important that one realizes that building relationships and getting to know people takes time. One needs to accept that fellowship takes commitment and being intentional about making people feel comfortable. “There are different levels of fellowship, and each is appropriate at different times. *Fellowship of sharing and the fellowship of studying*

⁷⁰ Claude Welch, *The Reality of the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958) 165.

⁷¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 137.

⁷² The Presbyterian Church, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2003) Book of Order G-3.000.

⁷³ The Presbyterian Church, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2003) Book of Order G-3.020.

God's Word together. A deeper level is the *fellowship of serving* as when we minister together on mission trips or mercy projects. And the deepest level, *the fellowship of suffering*, where we enter into each other's pain and grief and carry each other's burdens."⁷⁴

Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Christ's Faithful Evangelist G-3.0300 c 2 demonstrating by the love of its members for one another and by the quality of its common life the new reality in Christ; sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and service under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵

This citation is not unlike what is spelled out in *The Purpose Driven Life* when Rick Warren says "God's purposes for his church are identical to his five purposes for you. Worship helps you *focus on God*; fellowship helps you *face life's problems*, discipleship helps *fortify your faith*, ministry helps *find your talents*; evangelism helps *fulfill your mission*. There is nothing else on earth like the church!"⁷⁶ The true measure of whether a church is going in the right direction is to see how it measures up to the description by Graham Standish "The people of a blessed church experience *God* rather than merely experiencing church. They may talk about God and serve God, yet their overarching desire is actually to know and experience God in some personal and direct way" so writes

⁷⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 141.

⁷⁵ The Presbyterian Church, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2003) Book of Order G-3.0300c.

⁷⁶ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 137.

E. Stanley Ott.⁷⁷ The importance of a church's mission comes in seeing if it is being accomplished at that church. When people can report that they are experiencing God and that they are developing a deep, spiritual, loving, saving and healing relationship with God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit that is when the church will be able to say that they are on God's agenda.

It seems ironic that what would be most helpful to people considering the Christian faith and what spoke so powerfully in the early church and in later years, is not practiced as much now. The contemporary church does not seem to practice hospitality and love in a way that is enticing or inviting to those outside the faith. It is a funny thing that people do not practice hospitality and love because it is something that most everyone could do. People can smile. People can say hello. People can take a moment to allow someone to be heard. Bob Smith is a professor at Bethel College and witness to the Muslim people: "You know, 90 percent of evangelism is love."⁷⁸ The importance of hospitality and love go unnoticed too much of the time.

In a long but effective quote, Alexander Strauch writes "I don't think most Christians today understand how essential hospitality is to fanning the flames of love and strengthening the Christian family. ... through the ministry of hospitality, we share our most prized possessions. We share our family, home, finances, food, privacy and time. Indeed, we share our very lives. So hospitality is always costly. Through the ministry of hospitality, we provide friendship, acceptance, fellowship, refreshment, comfort, and love

⁷⁷ N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), x.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, X.

in one of the richest and deepest ways possible for humans to understand.”⁷⁹ It is true that to be hospitable will require a sacrifice but the investment is very worthwhile. And as Christians, they are called to be living sacrifices, so the cost of a meal or some time becomes “priceless.”

Having mentioned the author’s own story about the member of her congregation that would not even shake her hand (in the Historical Foundation) it is easy to realize that “A cold, unfriendly church contradicts the gospel message. Yet unfriendliness stands out as one of the most common criticisms people have of local churches.”⁸⁰ It is a puzzle as to how one can read the gospels and then choose to not put them into action.

Church members need to have more Bible lessons on hospitality and how to practice it. With the passing of home economics as a class in high school and college and people’s time in the kitchen being curtailed, this may be an “art” that has to be taught in a new way to a new time. “We need to rediscover the New Testament’s dynamic teaching on hospitality. We need to awaken Christians to their scriptural duty to practice hospitality. We need to show the rich blessings that await all who practice hospitality.”⁸¹

It is interesting to look at the *New American Standard Bible* interpretation of Romans 12:13, it shows “practicing hospitality” but when taking a closer look at the original Greek word for ‘practicing’ is *dioko*, which is better rendered “strive for” or “pursue”.⁸²

⁷⁹ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 17.

⁸⁰ Gene and Nancy Preston, “A Friendly Church Is Hard to Find,” *Christian Century* (January 30, 1991), 102, 103.

⁸¹ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers 2005) 7.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 34.

So it does take determination and effort to offer someone a warm welcome or an opportunity to share something about his or her life. Greek scholar and expositor, C. K. Barret even takes the idea of “effort in practicing hospitality” to a greater degree, by emphasizing the “force of the verb” thus interpreting the phrase “Practice hospitality with enthusiasm.”⁸³ To which Godet, the French expositor, shows what kind of determination we should have by translating it to say “Eager to show hospitality”⁸⁴

The connection between Christian love and hospitality is even more clearly emphasized in 1 Peter 4: 8-10 than in Romans 12: Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.⁸⁵ It always comes back to Christians taking their instructions from the Master model: Jesus Christ. If through a thorough study of Jesus’ life, one is not moved to be gracious to others, then one has missed the essence of the Good News and what Jesus was here to show through the living of his life.

In summary, Rick Warren writes “Love God with all your heart”; you were planned for God’s pleasure, so your purpose is to love God through *worship*.” “Love your neighbor as yourself”: You were shaped for serving, so your purpose is to show love for

⁸³ C.K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 240.

⁸⁴ F. Godet, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883) 436.

⁸⁵ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005) 36.

others through *ministry*.⁸⁶ This is not a new concept but like so many other things, the practice of hospitality and love take effort and concentration, along with one's time and resources. Christians must search themselves to see if they have done enough to make others feel welcome and comfortable. Hospitality and the Great Commandment do encourage people to experience God and others- in relationships that can be deeper and more meaningful.

Faith is all about trusting God with everything one is and has "*everything*: God's plan for your life involves *all* that happens to you- including your mistakes, your sins, and your hurts. It includes illness, debt, disasters, divorce, and death of loved ones, God can bring good out of the worst evil. He did on Calvary."⁸⁷ Part of the problem with appreciating that one needs to bring one's whole self into the relationship with God is that one may not know or trust that God is good. One needs to be in relationship with the Almighty Being that loves each person and one needs to truly believe it.

One of the ways of practicing giving one's whole self to God is to be in a small group where one can share and listen to others. Community requires commitment. In small groups, Christians will make a covenant that will include nine characteristics of biblical fellowship: they will share their true feelings (authenticity), encourage each other (mutuality), support each other (sympathy), forgive each other (mercy), speak the truth in love (honesty), admit their weaknesses (humility), respect their differences (courtesy),

⁸⁶ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 306.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

not gossip (confidentiality), and make group a priority (frequency)⁸⁸. Rick Warren continues with a statement that helps to under grid the emphasis on faith being more than a Sunday practice, “Community is built not on convenience but on the conviction that I need it for spiritual health. In closing, all that we are and all that we do has an impact on our faith maturity and growth. Everything that happens to you has spiritual significance.”⁸⁹

The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. believes that the Christian commitment requires a "cultural conversion", it is important for the church to have a commitment to the poor. "Thus they have place certain practices at the core of their common life, adopting them as disciplines required for membership: they covenant with God and each other to spend one hour a day in prayer, meditation, and devotional reading, to worship with their gathered community once a week; to participate in a mission group that is responsive to the claims of the poor; and to tithe their gross income as a basis for 'proportional' sharing."⁹⁰ This is an example of a church that gives their members advanced warning about the expectations of membership in the church and of a life as a committed Christian. Before one can become a member at the Church of the Savior, one must complete a two year study commitment.

⁸⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 151.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹⁰ Dorothy Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997) 57.

Both the commitment of the 'total' individual and his or her relationship with others will be a large factor in one's faith life. In *Truly the Community*, after citing Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters because of the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a sacrifice, living and holy and acceptable to God- which is your spiritual worship." Author Marva Dawn writes that "Paul's plea is for each of us to put our whole selves into our relationship with God and consequently, with each other. We can not be Christians, merely intellectually, rather, we must respond to God's love by loving him with our words and attitudes, our emotions and actions." ⁹¹

It is important that those considering a commitment to Christian faith and those involved in the Christian faith already, begin to realize that faith involves one's total being including one's mind, spirit, body, and one's relationships. When one is able to make the choice to be on God's agenda, one is then able to enjoy the life offered as mentioned in Deuteronomy 30:19, one can choose life. It will be a life of wholeness and holiness. And though the cost is great, it is not as great as that of choosing the other option- death (or put a little more mildly: "nondiscipleship" .)⁹²

⁹¹ Marva Dawn, *Truly The Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2000) 12.

⁹² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

CHAPTER FOUR METHODOLOGY

The hypothesis for the Ministry project was that employing the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices of: hospitality, holy listening, worship, creating sacred space and building Christian community while utilizing a newly developed Burnt Store Presbyterian New Member Curriculum “Membership Matters” would help new members to deepen their relationship to God and to each other. This would help the new members to strengthen their faith life and their church community life. It would also help Burnt Store Presbyterian Church to model and explain to the potential new members the expectations and benefits of Christian spiritual formation and community.

Prior to the Ministry Project there had been some attempts to conduct new member classes. When the Christian Education Ministry got its way, there were new member classes that included eight sessions that were required before participants could be received into membership. When the Evangelism Ministry was more influential, they were inclined to have no classes. Their theory was that nothing should be in the way between those that wanted to join the church and joining the church. With an appreciation of the chasm of philosophical differences between the Christian Education Ministry and the Ministry of Evangelism, the Associate Pastor conducted some delicate conversations of diplomacy with both Christian Education and Evangelism. The result was an idea of four class sessions for a new members’ class. Through an act of the Holy Spirit, an agreement to try the proposed Membership Matters class on an experimental

basis was accepted. Hence, the Ministry Project was allowed to progress at the beginning of October 2006.

The Ministry Project which was used as the intervention was a four session classroom experience for those that were interested in more information about the church or would like to join Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. The classes were held on four Sundays usually consecutive Sundays, in between the first and second worship services at 9:45-10:45 am in the Board Room of the church. The two Membership Matters experiences used for the Ministry Project were given in October 2006 and November/December 2006.

The Membership Matters curriculum was designed by using the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices and gleaning from a number of Presbyterian Church USA New Member resources. Each Sunday, the teacher would create a sacred space by having a table at the front of the room covered with a special table cloth, adding fresh flowers, a Bible and a lit candle. There was also fresh coffee and homemade banana bread being served in the back of the room for those that were so inclined.

The first class started with a cheery welcome to the participants, a prayer and an overview of what was to be expected during the next four classes. All the participants were given a registration form (see Appendix 1) and a pre-survey(see Appendix 2) to complete. Then they made name plates using 8x11 sheet of card stock which they folded in the middle horizontally and wrote their first name in big print on the back and front of the “tent”. This way folks across the room and those sitting beside them could read the names of their neighbors as they spoke. The first class was a time for the participants to

get to know the teacher and each other a little better. They were given a worksheet¹ (See Appendix page 3) to help guide them through the class activity.

The worksheet read that the students would be invited to answer questions about four topics and that that would help each class member participate in the sharing. The worksheet questions included questions about how student got his or her name, where he or she was born and how he or she came to southwest Florida. Then they were encouraged to use the three stepping stones drawn on the worksheet to help them consider three “landmark events” that had been important experiences in bringing him or her closer to God.

The teacher would go first and share the four items from the worksheet. Then the teacher would invite the others to share their information to the degree to which they were comfortable. Due to the limit of sixty minutes for class time, normally participants spoke for three to five minutes. At the end of the sharing, there was a closing prayer and homework was assigned. The class was encouraged to read the pamphlet entitled About Being Presbyterian... a guide to more effective church membership² to learn the basic details of being Presbyterian and to try to spend some time daily in prayer and reading their Bibles.

Reading the pamphlet, About Being Presbyterian... a guide to more effective church membership between the first and second class was to help the participants be ready for the second class that focused on what Presbyterians believe. As the students came in for

¹ David Ng, *Journeys of Faith: A Guide for Confirmation-Commissioning* (Louisville, KY. Presbyterian Publishing House, 1996) 10.

² *About Being Presbyterian...a guide to more effective church membership* (South Deerfield, MA, Channing L. Bete Co., 2001).

the second class, all the fore mentioned preparations of creating sacred space, providing food and beverage were in place. On the front table were the Bible, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA: including the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. Also there were worksheets G3³ and G4⁴ (see appendix pages five and six) that were taken from the Journeys of Faith: A Guide for Confirmation-Commissioning along with a teacher generated worksheet that served as an outline for what would be discussed in class.

This class time focused on the creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA. The students learned that there are three basic resource books that Presbyterians use as their guide to life and how we work together. They include the Bible, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order, the last two making up the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA. Using a classroom set of the Book of Confessions; the class looked at the table of contents and started to learn about the confessions and creeds. In particular, the students spent time studying the Confession of 1967, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Brief Statement of Faith. No homework was assigned. A closing prayer was given before dismissing the class.

In the third meeting, the participants were provided the same sacred space and hospitality of food and drink. The third lesson covered the idea of Christian community and the details of the local church, case in point, being Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. After the opening prayer, the teacher reads Romans Chapter 12. Then the students

³ David Ng, *Journeys of Faith: A Guide for Confirmation-Commissioning* (Louisville, KY. Presbyterian Publishing House, 1996) 138.

⁴ Ibid., 139.

respond to the questions found in their worksheet about being the body of Christ⁵ (see Appendix page seven). After that discussion, the class moved on to hear a brief history of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and an explanation of the Connecting Point. The Connecting Point was a sub-committee of the Evangelism Ministry that helps to connect members of the church with places of ministry within and with out Burnt Store Presbyterian Church where members might like to volunteer and serve.

The participants were asked to hold that thought as they view a video by Pastor Bill Hybels from Willow Creek Church⁶. Bill Hybels shared a story of a pastor who tries to fill all the ministry slots in his church by motivating his church members through strong preaching and guilt. The video helped to create the stage for explaining the biblical understanding of Spiritual Gifts and passion. The class then continues with a worksheet⁷(see Appendix page eight) which provides the students questions to help them explore what they might have a passion for in working for the Kingdom of God. There was some small group sharing and then some sharing of the results with the class as a whole.

At the end of the third class, a homework assignment was explained. The assignment included an one hundred and thirty-three question Spiritual gift inventory⁸ (see Appendix page nine) that would help each student discover his or her own spiritual gifts or areas in which he or she might have a passion to serve. Also the students were given

⁵ Ibid., 172.

⁶ Bruce Bugbee, Don Cousins, Bill Hybels, *Network The Right People...in the Right Places...For the Right Reasons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994) 30.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ Ibid., 131.

accompanying papers to help describe what each spiritual gift was and how it might be applied in the body of Christ. Included in their homework was the official form to be completed⁹ for joining Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and a Connecting Point form¹⁰ that offered information about the specific local church ministries where new members could serve. A closing prayer was given and the class was wished well as they took time from their busy schedules to complete the Spiritual Gifts Inventory.

On the fourth Sunday, the teacher reviews what the class has covered over the past three weeks. Then the class members are invited to share what they have learned about themselves from the Spiritual Gifts Inventory and how that might translate into existing ministries in the church or a need to develop a new ministry to accommodate the spiritual gifts and passion that has been discovered through the experience. After the group sharing, the teacher shares the Marks of Membership also known as Membership As Ministry¹¹ found in the Book of Order that describes the characteristics and practices of the members. (See Appendix page ten) Those interested in joining Burnt Store Presbyterian Church are asked the questions of membership and because two active elders are present at the fourth class, it is considered an official session meeting. The participants that desire to be members of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church were officially

⁹ *New Member Information*, (Punta Gorda, Florida: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2004).

¹⁰ *Connecting@BSPC*, (Punta Gorda, Florida: Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, 2006).

¹¹ Office of the General Assembly, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly 2005) G-5.0102-.0202.

received into membership. The class session is closed with prayer. The following Saturday or Sunday service, depending on the desire of the new members, they will be recognized and given their certificates of membership front of the attending congregation.

The Research Design was two-fold. There is a quantitative piece, using a pre-survey and a post-survey¹² that measures the faith maturity of the participants and a mailed out questionnaire. There was a qualitative piece which depends on the observations of the teacher during the class sessions, responses and remarks made to the teacher, the write-in portion of the mailed questionnaire and a follow-up phone interview with each participant completed at the five month mark of his or her membership.

The choice of a mixed method approach to the research came as a result of considering what exactly would be measured as the outcome of the intervention. The main focus was to determine how the intervention would affect a participant's relationship with God and his or her relationship with members of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. Seeking guidance from the book, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* by John W. Creswell¹³, it seemed appropriate to combine both methods to arrive at a fair and more balanced reading of the results of the ministry project. As mentioned in Creswell's book, "A mixed methods research problem may be one in which a need exists to both understand the relationship among variables in a situation and explore the topic in further depth."¹⁴

¹² Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 39.

¹³ John W. Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2003) 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

In this particular case, it would be important to determine a baseline for the faith maturity of the participants. Faith maturity was measured using a survey that consisted of thirty-eight questions that tested eight dimensions of faith maturity as defined from the Effective Christian Education Study and found in the book *The Teaching Church Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*.¹⁵ Faith maturity was described as first, a relationship with God and then as a relationship with our neighbors. The relationship with God would be “a life-transforming relationship to a loving God. Some ways which Christians express this part of faith include worshiping God, praying and studying their Bibles.”¹⁶ The second dimension of faith is the relationship we have with the people around us. The measurement is to find a “consistent devotion to serving others. Some ways Christians express this part of faith include helping people in need, becoming involved in social issues, and taking care of the environment.”¹⁷

Due to the short length of time, the four weeks of Membership Matters classes, it was determined the quantitative approach to research as the only approach might leave the measurement of results wanting. Though the Measuring Faith Maturity survey would be helpful, it might not be able to determine a change in the faith maturity of the participants due to the ministry project being only four Sunday sessions in length. The survey could be used to provide a base line for all participants as they come into the Membership Matters class and it could be used to check their faith maturity as they exit the class, however because faith development is a process, the intervention might only be the

¹⁵ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 39.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 38.

catalyst for the beginning of a change or a deepening of some already established expressions of faith.

The questions became how can one measure or establish the affect of the Membership Matters classes on the new members? The problem was, what if the Measuring Faith Maturity Survey could not register the slighter shifts in one's choices and behavior relating to his or her faith maturity after having taken the four weeks of the new members classes? It seemed that it would be important to add another layer of information gathering that would help inform the researcher as to what might have happened to a participant as he or she went through the Membership Matters experience.

It seemed that being able to have a conversation and ask some questions directly to each participant would be helpful in discovering what occurred as a result of attending the Membership Matters class. After consulting a number of sources as to the viability of personal interviews as a method of research, it was discovered that interviews can be helpful to the discovering of what changes may have happened while attending the classes. A case can be made for interviewing when one considers that the purpose of the interview is to have an "understanding of the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience." Irving Seidman's book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*¹⁸. The personal interviews provide an opportunity for the participant to respond in a personal way to the affect that the Membership Matters classes had on his or her faith maturity.

¹⁸ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2006) 9.

So the mixed method approach offered the opportunity for the quantitative measurement of a nationally recognized survey to be used to provide a base line for the beginning of the Membership Matters experience and it also provided an exit survey. The surveys were helpful for determining any changes in faith maturity that might have happen as a result of the four weeks of study. During the project, it was discovered that the pre-survey and the post-survey were not precise enough to help measure the effect of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements in the new member curriculum on the participants.

Therefore, a third measuring instrument was instituted. It was a mailed questionnaire that provided ten questions with answers on a sliding scale of one to five of how the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements used within the context of the Membership Matters class had affected the students' relationship to God and their relationship to each other. There was also a place for students to write in their own opinions of what they liked about the class and places they would suggest improvements. The questionnaire was mailed to each student and a self-addressed envelop was included for the return. The questionnaire provided both a quantitative approach and a qualitative approach to gathering data.

Another qualitative measurement was follow-up personal telephone interview, this approach allowed for a personal response by the participant to share what he or she experienced and an opportunity to have those changes communicated in such a way that they could be acknowledged and recorded. The changes may have been too subtle due to the short length of the class period that it would not show up on the Measuring Faith

Maturity survey but could be brought to light by a participant having a conversation with the researcher.

Therefore, the mixed method was determined to be the best approach for the measuring of results of the Membership Matters Ministry Project. The expected outcome would be two-fold, that the participants would grow in the vertical dimension of faith, that being their relationship with God. That would include that participants would find that they wanted to invest even more in personal Bible study, devotional time, be more regular in their worship attendance and following God's guidance in daily life. The second fold was that the participants would grow in their horizontal dimension of faith, that being their relationship with others. Here, it was hoped that participants would appreciate the value of being in a faith community and therefore want to be active in both church functions and opportunities of service inside or outside the church walls. Through exposure to the Membership Matters classes, it was hoped that all participants would know and sense the deep love of God for each one of them and that they would feel accepted and invited to participate in the life of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church.

CHAPTER FIVE FIELD EXPERIENCE

The Action of Ministry Project of Membership Matters classes was first launched October 8, 15, 22 and 29, 2006 and a second time starting November 26, December 3, 10, and 17, 2006. There had been advertisements in the Burnt Store Presbyterian Church newsletter, in the bulletin and on the rolling announcements on the screens in the sanctuary prior to services starting. Potential participants were encouraged to register for class by contacting the church office, signing up at the information center on Sundays or calling one of the pastors.

The first day of the first Membership Matters class the associate pastor arranged the room prior to the time of the class. A table cloth, fresh flowers, a candle and the Bible were placed on a table in the front of the room to create a sacred space. Fresh coffee and baked goods were available in the back of the room to provide for hospitality. The tables were formed in a U shape so that everyone would be able to see each other to help build community. Registration forms, pre-surveys, card stock, pens and markers were placed in groups on each of the five tables to help the participants know that they were expected and appreciated.

As the participants arrived, they were greeted at the door and invited to help themselves to the coffee and baked goods. Then they were directed to the tables and encouraged to find a place to sit. As they found their places, they started to complete their registrations forms and pre-surveys. Folding the card stock in half, they made name

plates with their names printed on front and back so their neighbors in front and beside them could read their names. As everyone got settled, the associate pastor welcomed the participants to the first Membership Matters class and opened with a word of prayer. Then she proceeded to introduce the idea of Membership Matters classes and reviewed what each lesson would cover.

The first worksheet was given to each participant. The associate pastor reviewed the worksheet with the class and said that the worksheet would serve as their agenda for the rest of the class time. The sheet gave directions for what would be covered in the class. The participants would be invited to talk a little about themselves. They were to share how they got their name, where they were born and how they got to Southwest Florida. Then they were to consider three spiritual stepping stones that they consider as significant moments in their faith journeys that influenced them to become who they were today.

The participants were invited to offer their stories at the level that they would be comfortable and to realize that no one was going to have to talk too long because the class only lasted sixty minutes. Out of the thirteen participants that would make up the class, twelve were in attendance on the first Sunday. The leader went first and answered the worksheet questions. Then the group was invited to participate. It was an easy transition from one person to the next. Because the questions moved from the least threatening to those that could be more intimate, the students could pick and choose how long they spent on a particular category.

The experience was amazing. Some folks stayed at the surface level in answering the introduction questions and describing their spiritual stepping stones. Many times those stories reflected where they had gone to church, how they had met their spouse and how

they had served in a church. For others, the stories went deeper. One gentleman told how he was Hindu and that he had always felt that God had been directing his life. He was coming to learn who God was and how he could get to know God better. For him, his stepping stones of faith included when his father sent him at age nineteen to the United States from India to attend college, then later getting married and getting a job. Recently, his wife had died. He was seeking closure. A friend had suggested that he start attending church with her. He had started coming and after a visit with the associate pastor and reading some theology books, he had decided it was time to learn more about the church.

Next a woman spoke up with a heavy German accent. Though it was hard to understand all that she had to say, the group stayed with her and gave her the encouragement that allowed her to feel comfortable. That led another lady to confess that though she was married, her husband would not be attending church with her. He was Episcopalian and was not comfortable with Burnt Store Presbyterian Church's more casual worship style. She added that she had tried being Episcopalian but had flunked. In her judgment, she did not make a very good Episcopalian. She was more comfortable being Presbyterian.

The class learned one participant was a single mom with a thirteen year old son. She was working on her teaching certificate and enjoys hand bells. An older couple was quiet but gave a brief history of themselves and how they had been invited to the church by some of their neighbors in their residential community. They were already members of a local church but thought that a change might be in order and so they wanted to come and learn more about Burnt Store Presbyterian Church.

At the end of the hour, the class had participated in its first assignment and they seemed to be pretty happy with themselves. Each had shared a little bit and at a level that they were comfortable. Some had found that they had things in common with others, maybe where they grew up or where they spend their summers. Others found that they shared similar experiences in growing up or in their work experiences. They became fast friends.

The associate pastor gave the students their homework for the next week. They were to read a little red booklet entitled *About Being Presbyterian...a guide to more effective church membership*.¹ The participants were told to review the red booklet because it would give them an overview of the basics of what Presbyterians believe and prepare them for their second class. In the second class, they would be looking at the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA especially the Book of Confessions. The class ended with a closing prayer and all were excused to attend the second worship service or go home. Some of the students stayed and chatted with their new found friends. The associate pastor had to leave to help assist in worship.

On Sunday, October 22, 2006 the second Membership Matters class met. A new participant was added to the group bringing the number to thirteen. She took the pre-survey prior to the class starting. However, her situation would become a consideration for the processing of the research data. Would a participant's data be valid if he or she did not participate equally to what the other members did? Later the associate pastor would find that some of the class members would have to be away for a lesson and so

¹ *About Being Presbyterian...a guide to more effective church membership* (South Deerfield, MA, Channing L. Bete Co., 2001).

their experience would be different from the participants that met for all four classes.

Because the ministry project reflected what was happening in the field and it was a real life experience, the participants' with an anomaly in regard to the data would be kept but processed with special attention.

As the second session got under way, the class opened with prayer and the students were invited to consider in what they believed. The worksheet started with the statement "I believe....." The students were expected to fill in the blank. Then they were asked if they believed strongly enough in their statement to put money on it. The hope was to set the stage for considering what people believe and to what degree. The lesson moved on to identifying the three books Presbyterians use to guide their lives. First was the Bible followed by the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA containing two books, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The rest of the lesson dealt with an overview of the Book of Confessions related to the table of contents, the Brief Statement of Faith, The Confession of 1967 and the causes for why each of the confessions was written.

Though this lesson would seem to be about as exciting as one on history (which for the general public might not find too thrilling), it was interesting to see how people were fascinated to learn that there was a Book of Confessions and that some of the affirmations of faith used in the worship services were direct quotes from writings found in the Book of Confessions. The class members worked in teams to answer some of the questions from the worksheet and then reported to the class as a whole. This exercise offered the students an opportunity to be stretched. Some had not been in school for years so they were a little out of their comfort zone by having to do school work and to work with

people with which they were not too familiar. Also some had not seen a Book of Confessions before so for them, they had to learn how the confessions were labeled and where to go to find answers to their questions.

Lesson Two on “What Presbyterians Believe?” seem to have had a positive impact on the classes. The associate pastor was asked by students in both the October class and the November/December class, if it was alright to take one of the Book of Confessions home. Also, some of the students wondered where they could get a copy for themselves. One student wanted to know if it came in large print. Many of the students just seemed to be impressed that what they have heard in the worship services throughout their lives could be found in the Book of Confessions. They had questions about each of the confessions and the associate pastor encouraged the students to borrow a copy of her study edition of the Book of Confessions so that they could read up on some of the history and explanations for why the confessions were written.

The third week was the opportunity to help the participants spend some time on themselves. The lesson started with a reading of Romans Chapter 12 especially highlighting how all Christians are the Body of Christ and that no one has a spiritual gift that is any better or any less than anyone else’s. No matter what the gift, all believers are called to share their gift(s) for the building up of the Body of Christ. An important consideration when talking to Presbyterians and to others that are not in the practice of discussing spiritual gifts is to help them feel comfortable with those terms.

So the associate pastor shares a seven minute video of Pastor Bill Hybels from Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois.² The video is a humorous story of a pastor that wants to fill all the volunteer jobs in his church by August. He succeeds in filling all the slots but not necessarily with people gifted in their assignments. It happens that a businessman who had volunteered to teach fourth grade Sunday School, was not very good at it and does not feel successful. The fourth grade students are not happy either. It is an illustration of how people who mean well but are put in the wrong place of service, do not have a fulfilling time and may not be motivated to try to serve again.

The video helps to set the stage for the associate pastor to lead into the questions printed in the worksheet asking the participants to consider what might be their passions. She asks that if money, time and failure were not a part of the equation, if the students could snap their fingers and be anything they wanted to be, what they would choose to be doing that moment. This is one of the associate pastor's favorite questions because it gives the students permission to think outside of the box. The students are given a few minutes to jot down some ideas off the top of their heads. Then they are invited to share their thoughts (to the degree that they are comfortable) with a couple of other members in the class. Then the students are invited to share what they have learned during their small group discussions.

Usually some folks are really excited about the opportunity to voice their thoughts about what really excites them or to what they would like to devote some time.

² Bruce Bugbee, Don Cousins, Bill Hybels, *Network The Right People...in the Right Places...For the Right Reasons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994) 30.

As people start to ponder what God might be calling them to do, they are given their homework assignment. Each student is given a one hundred and thirty-three question spiritual gifts inventory to help them discover what their spiritual gifts might be. They are also given a brief glossary describing each of the spiritual gifts. This tool is helpful to each student as he or she completes the spiritual gifts inventory. The glossary gives each student a short explanation of their spiritual gift so that while they are at home, they can determine what their spiritual gifts mean and how they might be used in the Body of Christ. Also, included in their homework are the [official forms \(see Appendix page eleven\) to be completed for joining the church and the “Connecting @ BSPC” form \(see Appendix page twelve\)](#) that is used to list all the ministries at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and what opportunities are available in which to serve.

The fourth lesson has been the most fun. Again, the class opens with prayer and the leader quickly reviews all that the lessons have covered. The students are asked if they have any questions about any of the lessons and in particular about their most recent homework. Then the associate pastor asks if someone would like to report to the class about his or her findings after taking the spiritual gifts inventory. Here is where the class has a good time and where one can measure the degree to which they have become friends and familiar with each other.

Each student is asked to share what he or she discovered about his or her spiritual gifts as a result of taking the spiritual gift inventory. Usually the associate pastor asks if the discovery seems to be a good fit for the student. Once the student has made his or her remarks, then the associate pastor asks the spouse (if one is present) if the spouse would agree with the results of the spiritual gifts inventory. This is where the real fun begins

because the group seems to wait with baited breath to see if the spouse would agree. In one class, where a student was single, the class felt so comfortable with one another, that a couple of the members ventured an opinion as to the appropriateness of the outcome of his spiritual gifts inventory. That experience caused for the whole class to reel with laughter. The student had learned that he had the spiritual gift of prophecy meaning the ability to tell the truth even when it is not popular. His fellow students were quick to cite examples of when he had challenged the teacher about the necessity of assigning homework and the explanations for some of the activities during the lessons. His fellow students gave him a good natured hard time which only showed that they had truly accepted him into the group- prophecy or no prophecy.

As the students reported, they seem to start to appreciate their own spiritual gifts and to applaud the giftedness of others. It was as though they started to understand that they were witnessing a microcosm within their class of how the whole church was to function. There was some momentum and energy created as the reports came in. People wanted to help each other find a place to serve. They wanted to explore how they could share responsibilities. It was on that note that the associate pastor would move the class from their light hearted conversation of possibilities and service to the expectations of church membership.

To sum up all that the students had done together, the associate pastor offers a review of the marks of membership also known as Membership As Ministry, G-5.0102-.0202 as found in the Book Order.³ It is her opinion that before anyone chooses to join in the

³ Office of the General Assembly, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly 2005) G-5.0102-.0202.

“game”; one should to know the rules and the expectations of the said “game”. With that in mind, the associate pastor reads the characteristics of membership as mentioned in the Book of Order Presbyterian Church USA. The list includes the expectation of regular Bible reading, study and prayer. There is mention of the giving of time, talent and tithe. Also the participants are challenged to serve at the local church level along with the possibility of serving at the presbytery, synod and General Assembly level. The students are instructed to review the list carefully and to consider the solemnity of their commitment of becoming members of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. They are also asked if they have any questions about the characteristics of membership.

Having completed the review of the characteristics of membership each student is individually asked the questions of membership and after affirmative answers in the presence of two active elders (who constitute the official session meeting for the receiving of the new members) the students are received into membership. This moment can be fairly emotional for some. The associate pastor takes the hand of each student as she asks the questions of membership and after the response, welcomes the new member into his or her new church family. It is a touching time as the class witnesses the “graduation” of each class mate as they collectively come together to join Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. They have participated in four weeks of classes together. They have shared something of them selves and have learned a little bit about each other. They enjoy a unique bond among their group and they should be able to acknowledge each other when they see each other at a worship service or church function.

The concluding details are to introduce each new member to the church congregation at the worship service of their choice the following Sunday. Their paperwork designating

their method of membership: affirmation of faith, letter of transfer, or affiliate member was then processed by the church office. Their “Connecting @BSPC” form was received by the Evangelism Ministry and the appropriate ministry chairs are informed of new members that have indicated an interest in serving within a particular ministry or service. Finally, name tags were ordered for all new members to wear when they are on the church campus so that they can be identified along with their other fellow church members.

The Characteristics of Membership has usually served as an opportunity to clarify the expectations of the church and make sure no one is standing in the lurch. One of the former Membership Matters students requested an appointment with the associate pastor. He wanted to confess that he was bothered by having agreed to join the church but that he knew in his heart he could not keep all the requirements of membership.

When the associate pastor inquired as to which characteristic had troubled the student, he said it was the one promising to read the Bible each day. The student shared that he found the Bible boring and that reading was not his strong suit anyway. The associate pastor pondered the comment and then suggested that the student try reading a small portion of Scripture each day. She gave him the little devotional booklet “Upper Room”⁴ and offered the student some time to see how a little bit of Scripture might work for him. He agreed to give it a try but he was not so sure it would work for him.

Other times students have mentioned that they have found their passion and they want to get started. One man knew that his passion was drama and that he was singly focused on helping communicate the love of Christ through plays, readings and skits. He had

⁴ Stephen D. Bryant, ed., *The Upper Room Daily Devotional Guide* (Nashville, TN., The Upper Room) January-February 2007.

been encouraged to attend Burnt Store Church because there was room for a drama coach and director. By February, 2007, he had helped direct and produce the play “Our Town”. So often being able to connect the people with their passion to the right place in ministry, it creates a synergism that cannot be contained and that enthusiasm spills over, it encourages others to join in and help.

Out of the twenty-five students that took the Membership Matters classes in October 2006 and November/December 2006, twenty-four have found places in which to volunteer and serve. Some of the jobs are entry level and not very demanding. Other jobs carry a great deal of responsibility. In either case, the students have felt a leading to join in a ministry and to serve. The experience has allowed for them to feel closer to God and to others as they serve.

The research data collected from the experience of the Membership Matters classes of October 2006 and November/December 2006 included the results of the pre-survey and the post-survey given at the beginning of the first class and at the end of the fourth class. The surveys ask for each student’s gender, age within a ten year span and how long the student has been involved in the church. Both the pre-survey and the post-survey were taken from the book, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*.⁵ The survey was used by the Search Institute in their research to discover the level of spiritual maturity of church members. It included a measurement of one’s vertical faith maturity meaning the relationship one has with God and a measurement of one’s horizontal faith maturity being the relationship one has with his or her neighbors.

⁵ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 39.

Each individual's pre-survey and post-survey responses were recorded. The data was tabulated to make comparisons between the individual's responses to the two surveys. This was to show any change or improvement in the spiritual maturity of the participant and to see if the experience of attending the Membership Matters class had an impact on the results. After the results were measured per each individual, the first group's results were tabulated and compared to the second group. Also there was a comparison of the men within a class with the women of the class and then a comparison of the first group of men to the second group of men and the same for the women of the first and second classes. Another comparison that was measured was the level of experience within a church and how it influenced the recording of the spiritual maturity of the individual students.

It was discovered that of the seventeen total students that took the Membership Matters class: Group A had eight students with four men and four women and Group B had nine students with four men and five women. In the age range of 20-30 years old there were no students, 31- 40 years there were no students, three students in the 41-50 years old, four students in the 51-60 years, five students in the 61-70 years, five in the 71-80 and no students in the 81-90 years old range. The gender and age ratio are very similar to the demographics at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. The time spent in a church experience ranged from two to eighty years with the average being fifty-one years.

The individual results of the pre and post surveys (see Appendix page thirteen) for Group A and Group B can be seen in the Tables page two, five students in Group A scored lower on the post-survey than the pre-survey providing a .12 loss of measurement

translating into a -2.34 percent change. Group B's combined scores resulted in a positive .56 gain or an 11.14 percent positive change in their scores. It is hard to determine the cause of the drop in the scores of Group A. It may have been some confusion as to the meaning of the questions or that as the students became more familiar with the terminology by the second survey they were able to answer in a more authentic manner which reflected less of an improvement or a deficit in their spiritual maturity both vertically and horizontally.

The average improvement of Group A and B combined was .24 or 4.70 percent. The hope is that the numerical improvement meant that there was an increase in the spiritual maturity of the majority of the students in each group. The comparison of men to women showed that the men of Group A gained .21 equaling 4.17 percent improvement and the men of Group B gained .85, an 18.64 percent improvement thus their combined average was .57 or 11.65 percent. (See Table Three) The women of Group A decreased to -.45 or -8.47 percent while the women of Group B moved to a positive .20 equaling 3.59 percent, the average for the two women's groups was .23 or -4.09 percent. (See Table Four)

The result of the comparison of men to women was unexpected because most findings show that women are usually more spiritually mature than men.⁶ However, on further reflection, maybe that was the case. The men of the two classes grew the most in spiritual maturity because they had the most room in which to improve. It is a small

⁶ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 39.

sampling so it would be hard to discover an accurate reading without testing more participants. (See Table Five)

Another check was done for how one's age might matter in determining an improvement in one's spiritual maturity. For those in the both Group A and Group B at sixty years and under the improvement was .04 or .72 percent. For those students that were sixty-one years or older the improvement was .75 or 7.14 percent. These results might indicate that older people are more spiritually mature but the number should show the change in the level of maturity. (See Table Six) So again on further reflection, it might be said that the students that were sixty-one years and older did make a change in their spiritual maturity to the positive. As the author considered the use of the pre-survey and the post-survey, it seemed that the instrument was not especially helpful in determining the changes in the students' vertical and horizontal spiritual maturity for such a short term intervention.

When the author identified the questions that caused the greatest deficit in the post-survey scores, it was discovered that many of the questions had to do with reducing poverty, being concerned with the country's poor, showing love, and helping to create international understanding and harmony. It seems that the questions were trying to measure the horizontal dimension of a person's spiritual maturity, the dimension involving one's relationships to others. In contrast, the questions that showed the greatest improvement or maintained a high standing were questions involving one's personal faith in knowing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died on the cross and rose again. The students responded that their faith shapes the way they think and act each and every day.

Looking within in the context of the Membership Matters classes, the author admitted that the classes are weighted more in the direction of “God talk” than “people serving opportunities”. This may be a necessary hazard for the scope and brevity of the four Membership Matters classes but it is something that the Adult Christian Education Ministry may want to address in additional class offerings.

Another form of data collection was **the questionnaire and a consent form (see Appendix page fourteen and fifteen)** that was mailed to each of the participants. Each participant was asked to consider “to what extent did the following practices move you closer to God and/or to others?” The practices mentioned are those used in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. They included: creating holy space, hospitality, sharing of our spiritual journeys- holy listening, studying what we believe (in this case, The Book of Confessions PCUSA), spiritual gifts-taking the spiritual gifts inventory, building community- as in joining Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading and study. There was also a place for students to respond in an essay form to the questions of “specific things that I liked about the Membership Matters class” and “improvement I would suggest for the Membership Matters class”.

The responses of the mailed survey from each individual were recorded. Then a comparison was made among those students in both classes. It was discovered that the responses to the questions reflecting the use of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements to the Membership Matters classes that impacted one’s relationship with God were in the 2.86 to 4.09 range resulting in a 74.75 percent average. The sliding scale used for the answers to the God relationship questions was one equaling no effect and five meaning the strongest effect. Therefore, the average response was 74.75 percent which fell

between the numbers three and four in the range of answers, so the participants found the use of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements somewhat helpful in affecting their relationship with God. (See Tables page seven)

The responses of how the elements in the New Member classes affected their relationship with the other students, the range was between 3.14 and 4.09 which averaged to be 74.04 percent. This measurement is very similar to the measurement reflecting the influence of the elements on the students' relationship with God. Here there was an effect that would fall between the number three answer and the number four. The results were slightly lower than those of the first God-related questions but not enough to merit serious consideration.

Though the questionnaire did provide data that was more closely related to the work of the intervention provided, it would take more participants and their data to show a fuller understanding of how the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements included in a new member class curriculum could impact the students' relationship with God and with others. It might be that in future studies, the instructor might identify and define the different Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements so that they would be brought to the attention of the students prior to the beginning of the intervention.

On the basis of the results of the data analysis, it can be said that the pre-survey and the post-survey comparisons were not finely enough tuned to be able to measure a significant change of spiritual maturity during the time between the surveys. With only four one hour classes as the experience, it would be hard to ascertain a shift in most of the participants' spiritual maturity. The mailed survey or questionnaire might have been a better instrument to use than the pre-survey and the post survey. It related more closely

to the intervention that was being used within the classes. The questionnaire might have identified more clearly to the students the practices of Blessings Based Spiritual Nurture that influenced a student's sense of closeness to God and his or her closeness to others.

Another concern for the associate pastor was the inconsistent attendance practiced by some of the students. Although the participants on a whole did a fine job of attending the four classes, a few of the students were not aware or could not change their plans and had to be away from class. No one missed more than one time but when there are only four classes, missing one class equals missing twenty-five percent of the lessons. This would make measuring the absent student's improvement in his or her faith maturity harder to identify. As has been mentioned earlier, even though the comparison will be slightly off, the inerrant student's data was processed with special attention.

Though quantitative data is easier to handle when it comes to processing the results of the numbers, it does not always allow for the intangible changes that happen when people come together in the Spirit of Christ. Many of the results came as students talked of their experiences. In one of the reports to the Evangelism Ministry under which the Membership Matters Classes sits, a former Membership Matters student and newly assigned member of Evangelism Ministry said it would not be hard to call the seven hundred "Friends of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church" to invite them to the Membership Matters class. She said there was something special that happens when people go through the experience of Membership Matters and they will not be the same. They will feel an inclusion to Burnt Store Presbyterian Church as they have never felt before. They will have a sense of call on their lives which they will be encouraged to honor when the time is right for them. Burnt Store Presbyterian Church will become their church not just

one in which they sit on a pew. To the former Membership Matters student that experience makes a world of difference in relating to the church and makes it easier to invite other folks to participate in something special.

That is why both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Though a strong effort was made to quantitatively measure the changes in the students' closeness to God and to others, sometimes that information comes to the forefront more easily by talking with people. In the give and take of conversation, people can relate personal stories and experiences.

That was why a follow up phone call was placed to each one of the participants. It offered an open opportunity to share whatever they might have wanted to say but found no place to voice it. The phone calls provided for "one on one" opportunities for participants to share with the associate pastor. It was time consuming to try to catch all the participants and the associate pastor did not experience one hundred percent success.

Many times the phone calls would shift from the topic at hand to concerns that the participants had in other areas of their lives or they had a number of subjects that they were interested in reviewing. The associate pastor heard about one participant's dyslexic daughter, that the seats in the class were uncomfortable, another said he would be away for two months in the summer, and one mentioned that he was taking guitar lessons at the church. Though personal phone calls did open the door to a variety of subjects, in a round about way, the associate pastor did get some feedback about the classes and how the students were connecting with the church.

When the participants stayed closer to the subject at hand, they informed the caller that they were making lots of connections, that they were enjoying getting to know many

people within the church and that they were involved in planning the ArtFest for the spring. The phone calls were good to offer participants' the time to share and visit with the associate pastor but it was not the most efficient means of gathering data.

It is the hope and prayer of the associate pastor that the Membership Matters classes will continue to have a positive impact on the lives of the participants and on Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. There are many things yet to be learned and many things that could be improved but as a Ministry Project that served as a pilot project to start a method for helping people be prepared to join the church, it was a good step forward.

CHAPTER SIX REFLECTION, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As one reflects on the field experience of the Action of Ministry project known as Membership Matters Classes at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church in Punta Gorda, Florida, one realizes that this experience was more involved than anyone anticipated. How could four classes targeted to help new members grow closer to God and to each other, make a difference in so many dimensions? In the early stages of the considering of the Membership Matters classes, there were turf issues between the Evangelism Ministry and the Christian Education Ministry. The Evangelism Ministry did not want there to be a requirement of attending any new member classes for membership. The Christian Education Ministry wanted attendance to be at least six classes before one could become a member.

The puzzling thing was that the associate pastor in her zeal to create an opportunity for potential members to experience the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, did not realize how big a quagmire, the Evangelism/Christian Education concern could represent. That was probably a good thing, because as things unfolded, each side seemed to be surprised by the development of the Membership Matters classes. Both were willing to concede their position (at least temporarily) to see if the pilot program of Membership Matters would make a difference. Would it matter?

With permission conditionally granted, the Membership Matters classes started 9:45am, Sunday, October 8, 15, 22 and 29, 2006. The classes were also offered on

November 26, December 3, 10 and 17, 2006. For each class, the associate pastor had made sure that the classroom had an area of sacred space by having a table with a table cloth, fresh flowers, a Bible and a candle on it in the front of the class. Also there were arrangements made to make people feel welcome. Fresh coffee and baked goods were served in the back of the room and the students were encouraged to partake of the goodies as they were getting settled. In an effort, that everyone would be able to become acquainted with the names of those in the class, name plates were made by each student and set in front of them so that the participants and the teacher could learn the names of each class member.

The first class provided an opportunity for each person to share how they got their name, where they were born, how they came to Southwest Florida and then three stepping stones of significant impact during their faith journey. No one needed to speak for a long time due to the sixty minute limit to class time and people could chose how much they would want to divulge. They were invited to share at whatever level they felt comfortable. This class seemed to break the ice for the participants and encouraged them to feel comfortable. Generally, they discover things they had in common with other members and found opportunities for conversation at the end of class.

The second class was an introduction and brief survey of what Presbyterians (USA) believes. The students had been assigned homework that encouraged them to read some of the basics of what Presbyterians USA believe and be prepared with any questions they might have as a result of reading a little booklet that was given to them at the end of the first class session. The question is asked, "What three books guide Presbyterians in living their lives of faith?" As the class collectively puts an answer together, they

respond that the three books that guide the faith lives of Presbyterians are the Bible, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA which consists of the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The teacher explains that the Book of Order is all about the polity of the PCUSA and is helpful in determining how the Church does its activities however, instead of taking time with the Book of Order; the class time will be spent delving into the Book of Confessions.

The Book of Confessions contains the creeds and confessions that help to guide and instruct a Presbyterian's faith life. The class was invited to study the table of contents and to recognize that some of the creeds are shared by many of the denominations and that many were very old. The class was also encouraged to take note of the dates of the confessions and see if they could determine why a particular creed or confession was written at a particular time. Then the students worked in small groups to seek answers to some questions that helped them get a small taste of what is contained in the Book of Confessions.

The interesting thing that seemed to happen with each class that participated in this introduction to the Book of Confessions was that they always wanted to know more. One question led to another, and soon they were digging deeper into the contents of the Book of Confessions. Often times, some of the students asked where they can obtain a copy of the Book of Confessions. This surprised the associate pastor because the students show a real interest in learning more. It makes the teacher wonder what other interest members would have in studying about Christian faith, if they would only allow themselves to be exposed to some of the information and stories.

At the third meeting, there was a dovetailing of spiritual information in particular on spiritual gifts, passion, how all of this relates to the Body of Christ, and the individual student's giftedness. For some class members, this was a time they started to squirm. They may not be familiar with the concept of spiritual gifts and that they themselves were gifted. Through the use of the reading and discussing of Romans 12 highlighting especially the piece about the Body of Christ and what Christians are called to do and be, a video of Pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church, Barrington, Illinois and a spiritual gifts inventory, the students were gently led through a process of discovering their spiritual gifts. Their homework assignment was to complete the spiritual gifts inventory and be ready to report on their findings at the next class. They were also given the official paperwork necessary to complete to be able to join the church on the fourth Sunday.

The last class was the most fun. By this time the students had become pretty comfortable with each other and they had developed some familiarity among their new acquaintances. After a quick review of all that they have learned throughout the past three weeks, they were invited to share what they learned about themselves as they completed the spiritual gifts inventory. Each participant reported at the level with which they were comfortable. As they shared, the teacher asks if what they were sharing seems to be a good fit for what they know about themselves. This is where the fun begins; for the most part the student found the inventory to be helpful. It provided a guide for what they might want to explore as a place of service in ministry.

Although all seemed to enjoy the feedback of the participant, if there was someone: a spouse, an adult child, parent or friend available, the teacher asked for the opinion of the

other person. “Do the spiritual gifts being mentioned by said student seem to be good fit for him or her?” Sometimes the other person would affirm the assessment; sometimes the whole class would offer an opinion. This was the time when you knew a class has jelled and that they had an understanding of their classmates and to their call of service in a ministry.

Towards the end of the fourth class, the teacher reviewed the Marks of Membership as mentioned in the Book of Order so that all the students would have an appreciation for what the expectations would be as a member of the Presbyterian Church USA. After the review, all those that wanted to join Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, were asked the questions of membership in the presence of two active elders, after answering in the affirmative, each student was welcomed into the family of faith at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. This could be a very moving time for some as it was a time of finding a church home and a time of celebration.

On the following weekend, the new members were presented to the congregation at the worship service of their choice. They were given their certificate of membership and their name tags. They were encouraged to wear their name tags at any church function to help the rest of the congregation to get to know them by name.

For the most part, the experience of the Membership Matters classes was very positive. It was a surprise to the associate pastor but the chemistry of each group seemed to be friendly and supportive. There was a sense of community with each class that gathered. Most everyone seemed to feel as though they knew at least a handful of people, a little better, that they knew something about being in a Presbyterian Church USA, and how they could be connected within Burnt Store Presbyterian Church.

There also some momentum that developed for an interest in continued studies by the students. This may be due in part to the relationships that developed during the class time and the positive experience that many of the students had in learning about the Church. For some of them, it had been a good while since they had been in “school”.

Some of the other things that the associate pastor had not expected were that this was a wonderful opportunity for the pastoral staff to get to know something about each of their new members. The associate pastor found herself trying to help the new members meet people that she thought would be a good match between two couples or individual members due to common interests or residential locations either locally or in their summer locations. Also, it gave the associate pastor a quick overview of which new members might enjoy serving in the different ministries of the church.

Out of the seventeen students in the first two Membership Matters sessions, only one student was not involved with a ministry after being in the classes. This particular student was unable to be involved due to some responsibilities at home. So one of the by products of the Membership Matters classes seems to be that the percentage of new member assimilation is pretty high and that it encourages new members to claim Burnt Store Presbyterian Church as their church in a relatively short time span.

Another observation was that both the Evangelism Ministry and the Christian Education Ministry seem to be pleased with the results of the Membership Matters classes. The associate pastor has noted that the Membership Matters classes have helped to provide a predictable way for people to join the church. The above average flow of people choosing to become new members is a result of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church being a good “product and experience” to begin with. The church basically sells itself to

people. The Membership Matters classes offer a guideline and an opportunity to come and learn about Burnt Store Presbyterian Church and see if it is a good fit for those interested.

The associate pastor has been stopped in the narthex or told over the phone about how special the class experience was for individual students. Some have commented that they have been Presbyterians all their lives and did not know much about the Book of Confessions. Others have said the same thing about spiritual gifts and how this was the first time a church helped them to learn something about themselves. For the teacher, the richness comes in the stories of faith and family that the students share. It was a very humbling and holy moment to hear about the lives the students have lived. It provided an opportunity for the pastoral staff to get to know their flock in a deeper way than if there was no classes or if the classes did not invite the students to share.

Another surprise for the associate pastor was that folks that were already members of the church (especially newer members) wanted to attend the classes. So they were included in the classes and it made for delightful conversation with those that were considering membership. Nothing closes a deal like a “prospective customer” hearing the positive testimony of a “pleased customer”. Also the new members were very helpful in anticipating and explaining the “ropes” of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church to the potential members.

One drawback to the plan was that both pastors are unable to be involved in the classes at the same time. Only one was able to be in the class at a time because the other pastor is either preaching or teaching another class. Because this was the project of the associate pastor, she has had the lion’s share of the responsibilities and the pleasure of

getting to know the new members personally. In an effort to help the pastor head of staff and the new members to feel as though they have had a time to get to know each other, “Just Desserts” has been developed. This is a quarterly homecoming for all the participants of the Membership Matters classes. Once every three months, invitations will go out to those that have attending the Membership Matters classes. They will be served dessert by the Evangelism Ministry. As they are eating, the pastor head of staff will respond to the very questions that the students answered during their first class: how did they get their name, where were they born, how did they get to Southwest Florida and three of their significant stepping stones in their faith journey. On completion of the questions, the pastoral staff will ask the participants how are they experiencing Burnt Store Presbyterian Church since joining and do they have any questions, theological or otherwise for the pastors?

The hope is that the “Just Desserts” will be an opportunity to close the loop between the pastor head of staff and the new members and that it will provide a check-in time for the staff to see how the new members are experiencing Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. By serving as a “homecoming” the new members may find this experience to be a fun one when they get to visit with folks with which they are already familiar. This is an anticipated event scheduled for April 29, 2007.

Part of the blessing of the Membership Matters classes has been the popularity of the classes. That also can be a hardship. The associate pastor has found it more difficult than anticipated to keep tabs on all the new members. She had thought that by spending four class periods with each group of new members, that she would be able to pick them out of a crowd and be able to identify them by name. Since the October, 2006 class,

Membership Matters class has run five times taking in fifty-eight new members. Sadly, the associate pastor needed to find a method in which to be able to identify the new members by sight. Because the Evangelism Ministry takes pictures of all the new members, the associate pastor has requested a copy of each picture. Her hope was to create flash cards to help her keep the names and faces of all the new members at the ready for instant recall. A copy of the flash cards should be given to the pastor head of staff so that he too, would be able to identify the new members.

Another unanticipated difficulty of running the Membership Matters classes on almost a monthly basis is that the associate pastor is not able to oversee the other Christian Education activities that are going on at the same time. Because this was an area of responsibility for her, it will be important to start to transfer some of the Membership Matters teaching needs to others. Now, that the classes have been developed, the associate pastor will be in a better position to train some lay persons to take over some of the classes. It would be important for a pastor to meet with the new members at the beginning and the ending class but the middle classes, two and three could be taught by many talented teaching gifted folks.

With the Membership Matters experience being so well received the question has arisen, what to do with all the present members who have not had the opportunity for learning about the Book of Confessions or taken the spiritual gifts inventory? How should they be involved in the same experience? The plans are to have a fall campaign to encourage all existing members to participate in a shortened version of Membership Matters. There will be advertisements in the monthly newsletter, in the bulletin and a

sermon on spiritual gifts. Then each worship attendee will be given a puzzle piece and asked how they are connected to the life of the church?

As they ponder the question, they will be invited to register for an afternoon or evening of dessert and exploration as they too can take the spiritual gifts inventory and discover their place of service in the ministry of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church. It is hoped that this will encourage those already members of the church to participate in part of the experience of the Membership Matters classes. Possibly in time, a majority of the whole church will be canvassed and a greater percentage of the membership will be actively involved in an area of ministry that is suited to their spiritual gifts and passion.

A couple of side notes the associate pastor did not expect but was pleasantly surprised, in a FaithWorks Class (an Adult Sunday School class) the pastor head of staff asked when was the last time anyone felt really excited or thrilled about an event in their lives. On that particular Sunday there was a couple waiting to be presented to the congregation for having become new members. The wife joyfully raised her hand and said that she was excited about being presented to the congregation. Although this couple had been affiliated with Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, they were now making it official and she was tickled to be a full fledged member.

On another Sunday morning as the associate pastor was whizzing from one side of the narthex to the other in an effort to get ready for the upcoming worship service, one of her former Membership Matters students, stopped her. The student said “Pastor, I just needed to let you know how much I enjoyed the Membership Matters classes. I have been Presbyterian all my life but I have never had the opportunity to spend some time in

the Book of Confessions or have my spiritual gifts identified. Thanks!” That meant a lot to the associate pastor especially since that student had had the class a month before.

Some of the places it would be helpful to spend a little more time and attention includes better record keeping. This was an area that fell through the cracks. The associate pastor did not plan on having to be the one responsible for keeping the minutes of the official session meeting that occurs during the fourth Sunday. There was some backtracking that had to take place to keep the church records of new members and affiliate members in check. Also, the associate pastor learned that it is hard to keep up with all the new members and be able to identify them on sight. It is important to ask for copies of the pictures that are taken during the fourth Sunday so that there are a group that is displayed in the narthex and a group of pictures for continual review for the pastor(s). It makes a very nice and welcoming impression for the associate pastor to recognize the new members and call them by name.

Though it was not a part of the ministry project per say, the Connecting @ BSPC sub-committee plays a big part in the assimilation of the new members. It has a steady presence but for the Membership Matters classes to be successful, the Connecting @ BSPC will need to be enhanced. It will be important for the sub-committee to have more participants, to be able to shepherd the new members through an entire year and to have a tickler system to double check that ministry chairs are involving the new members in their areas of ministry. Because the new members feel so affirmed for having different spiritual gifts and that all make up the Body of Christ, it is vital that the new members are placed in areas of service and really get to serve.

Another consideration that has become apparent as the Membership Matters classes continue is the need to channel the new members into the next level of FaithWorks classes (Christian Education classes) either on Sunday mornings opposite their worship service and or FaithWorks classes during the week days. The new members seem to be positive and intrigued by what they have learned during their Membership Matters classes. They should be invited and strongly encouraged to continue their studies especially in light of having been instructed that it is one of the fundamental marks of membership of which they have recently promised to uphold.

There is some concern that we may not be reaching all the people that would be willing to join. With the high percentage of participation of the new members in areas of ministry, there is thought that Membership Matters classes draw people that are willing to study and commit. Not all those sitting in the pews are willing to make move. They may be introverts and not comfortable to a class format. They may not be able to meet for four consecutive Sundays. This may be due to health reasons or because the spouse is not supportive or requires care during that time. There has not been enough time to study what people are missing from the Membership Matters classes and what would be some of the reasons.

On the heels of the consideration of what types of people maybe attracted to the Membership Matters classes and which ones are not being tapped is the concern about how to *attract* the visitors to the church. What should the pipeline be that will encourage visitors to seek out the Membership Matters classes? It will take some shifting of perspective and look at the classes from the visitors' point of view. The question is, of what value are the classes to the visitors? That leads to the consideration of is there

different types of visitors? Should the Evangelism Ministry determine a method of tracking the visitors to make sure they do not fall through the cracks if they have an interest in being more involved in the church? Not that each visitor fits one particular profile but should the Evangelism Ministry shepherd the visitors in a caring but none controlling way?

The pre-survey and the post-survey given to each participant as they started and completed the Membership Matters classes were not as helpful in measuring the effect of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements in the classes on the relationship of each student to God and to each other. The surveys were too long and unexpected by the students. Many of them did not complete the whole survey. Because the survey was to measure the change in the spiritual maturity of the participants both in their relationship with God and with others, it was not the most helpful document. For many people, it would take a number of weeks or months to be able to show a measurable difference in their faith maturity.

As the ministry project continued to develop, it was decided to add a third survey to help better determine the effects of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements on the participants of the new member classes. The third survey was mailed to the Membership Matters students provided for a more anonymous opportunity for response than the pre-survey or the post-survey. The questions were better crafted to measuring with more precision the effect of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements used during the new member classes had on the participants' relationship with God and their relationship with each other. In both categories of relationships, the average of the participants'

responses was 3.7 on a scale of one to five with one being no effect and five being the strongest effect (translating to a 74% out of a hundred).

On further reflection, this third measuring instrument was the most helpful at getting the participants' opinions of what the Membership Matters Classes were trying to accomplish. The ten questions using the sliding scale for the effect of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements on the participants' relationship with God and their relationship with others provided a quantitative measure to use to compare the elements and the two relationships. There was an opportunity for participants to write in answers for things that they liked about the Membership Matters classes and improvements they would suggest.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative measurements were helpful in ascertaining the opinions of the students and translating their opinions into information that would determine the level of success the classes provided. It was also beneficial in providing guidance for how to improve the classes to meet the needs of the students.

The phone interviews were hit or miss. It is difficult to try to catch people when it is convenient times for them to visit over the home. Also, upon further reflection for the associate pastor to be the one calling, it is hard to ascertain whether the students felt at liberty to tell their true thoughts and feelings. They may have chosen to share whatever they thought the associate pastor wanted to hear. If the study were to be done again, it would be suggested that the teacher of class not be the one designated to conduct the interviews. Interviews are a good idea because they allow for great latitude in what people might say and areas that interviewer has not imagined. There is a human quality

to the interview that allows for the interviewee to be affirmed for participating in the classes and as someone of value for his or her opinions.

Another item learned during the use of the surveys was that the pre-survey and the post-survey were too long for some of the students that attended the classes. For some of the students, they had not been in school in a long time; they felt as though the paper/pencil experiences were not suited to them. Some of the older students did not complete the pre-survey or the post-survey. In a future ministry project it would be helpful to fine tune the pre-survey and the post-survey to about fifty percent of the questions. Also, the questions should be better related to activities of the Membership Matters classes than the broad issue of personal faith maturity which might take longer than four weeks to produce a measurable result.

Also the subject matter of the Membership Matters classes lends itself to being heavy on information which can be uncomfortable for the non-scholastic types. It will be important when planning for future classes to make sure that the information dispensing is done in a way that would be *comfortable* for people who are accustomed to classroom work. The small group discussion time is used to help dilute the sense of overload from the lecture method used for short periods during the class time. However, for some students, this balance may not be well enough enhanced for their style of learning. It would be a worthy consideration for measurement and evaluation with classes in the future.

Currently, the Membership Matters classes are offered only on Sunday mornings at 9:45am which is in between the first worship service and the second worship service. At the time of the first two classes in October, 2006 and November/December, 2006 there

was a Saturday worship service at 5:00pm. If anyone who attended the Saturday worship service wanted to join the church, he or she would have to come back to church on Sunday to attend the Membership Matters classes. There was one couple that chose to attend Saturday worship and came again on Sundays for the Membership Matters classes.

At the time of the writing, Burnt Store Presbyterian Church has moved all three worship services to Sunday morning. The challenge will be to offer the Membership Matters classes at the 9:45-10:45am time for first and third worship service attendees and to offer the classes at 10:50-11:50am to those that attend the second worship service on Sundays. This creates a challenge for the pastoral staff because they need to be in the worship services and leading the Membership Matters classes too. The plan would be to train lay people to take responsibility for the administration and teaching of the classes.

Because the Membership Matters classes were being offered on almost a monthly basis, in addition to the administration and teaching of the classes by lay people, many of the other tasks need to be in the hands of lay people. The setting up of the “holy space”, the practice of hospitality including the welcoming, provision of coffee and baked goods needs to be in the hands of others. As the classes continue, official greeters have been recruited to welcome and assist the students before the pastor is able to start the lesson. What has been discovered is that the responsibility for Membership Matters classes requires the help of many volunteers and can not be accomplished by the solitary teacher.

Spin offs from the Membership Matters classes include the proposed “Just Desserts” experience which will be a quarterly opportunity for the participants of Membership Matters classes to come together. It will be an evening to enjoy each others’ fellowship,

eat scrumptious desserts, visit with the pastor head of staff and to describe what their experience has been so far as a member of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church.

Another spin off possibility is the development of FaithWorks classes at the 201 and 301 level. There was some enthusiastic interest in studying more about Presbyterians, spiritual disciplines, the Bible, mission opportunities and the like. As the Adult Christian Education sub-committee gets the time, they will start to explore the options for offering a variety of classes. A member of the Stewardship and Finance Ministry has sat in on the Membership Matters classes to determine what is being taught in relationship to stewardship and tithing and what more needs to be done in an effort to help the church members understand tithing as a spiritual discipline versus a fund raising technique. It seems that encouraging people to spend four weeks together learning about the Presbyterian Church USA, about their spiritual gifts and passions and about where they can connect at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church has only helped to lay the groundwork for future Christian Educational opportunities.

Another area for some focused attention is the “Friends of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church”. Friends are people that have attended the church for three times. They are placed on a list of people that receive the church newsletter, church-wide emails, generally are involved at some level with the church and a few would expect a visit from the pastoral staff if they were in the hospital. *Some* Friends contribute to the church. Some are more committed by their giving and volunteering than active members however, they are not members. The Evangelism Ministry appreciates the Friends attendance and participation in church activities but feel as though Friends are not

enjoying the full benefits of being active members. It is though Friends keep dating the church but never make the move to marriage or commitment.

The challenge is what to do with the seven hundred plus people that consider their selves Friends of the church? If active membership is advantageous to the life of the church and to the members, what would be the best way to encourage the Friends to consider active church membership and attend the Membership Matters classes? The whole Friends consideration has come to the forefront due to the emphasis on having the Membership Matters classes as a requirement for membership. It seems as though the church has almost as many people seeking the *services* of the church as there are members. This puts a great strain on the church staff to try to accommodate the needs of both the active members and the Friends.

There are plans in the Evangelism Ministry to have people call on the Friends and invite them to consider attending the Membership Matters classes. If this were to be successful, Membership Matters leaders will have their hands full but with a good problem to have. Burnt Store Presbyterian church needs to determine why being an member is important and then relay that message to all those that are not members but attend Burnt Store. Because the church is a seasonal church, swelling in numbers when the ‘snowbirds’ return between the months of October through April, it makes the push for active membership a little more *tedious*. The Evangelism Ministry has to be sensitive to those that attend Burnt Store Presbyterian Church only because it is near in their second home location.

With so much effort going into making the new members feel wanted and accepted. It has come to the attention of the associate pastor that it might be helpful to have the new

members shepherded for a year. For the Evangelism Ministry this might mean a quarterly check up call. This would be the opportunity to ask how the experience at Burnt Store Presbyterian Church is going, are they as involved in serving a ministry as they would like and do they have any questions regarding church life. These calls would be intentional in reviewing the subject matter they covered in the classes. Burnt Store has a strong and active Diaconate; each deacon is given the names of the new members that belong to their geographical area. The deacon is to call each of their flock once a month and see how they are doing in general. Between the quarterly calls of the Evangelism Ministry and the monthly calls by the deacons, new members should feel connected and cared for by the church family.

As the associate pastor reflects theologically on the whole ministry project, she is reminded yet again how the stuff of faith is not intricate or high brow, it is simple yet profound. During the process of the ministry project: the spiritual autobiography, the describing the context, identifying the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, backing those up historically, biblically, theologically and with current research, then developing a plan that would be of benefit to Burnt Store Presbyterian Church, the author realized that a slick program is not needed. What is needed by people seeking church membership is what was given in the Book of the Acts. People need to feel welcomed, invited to prayer, be able to break bread together, study the Bible and be prepared to serve in ministry.

For the author, being steeped in the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture only keeps one grounded in the faith. It is tempting when someone, a ministry or a church starts to experience some success to step away from the basics and start becoming fancy

and slick. Everyone getting too big or important to relate to the new members with the care and consideration that should be shown by Christians no matter what in what century they live. By practicing the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, one is grounded in the faith on a personal level and then by using the same guideposts to be applied to any class, project or gathering, the process is duplicated. No operation, no series of events escape the practice of prayer, discernment, hospitality, holy listening and the like.

The Early Church practices should be the practices of the contemporary church. The contemporary church should create holy or sacred space, should practice hospitality, holy listening, be yoked to prayer and Bible study, and work towards building a community of all believers no matter what their spiritual gifts might be. The essence of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture needs to be the common thread that guides all that an individual Christian or an entire church chooses to do and how it conducts itself. For the author, to continue to practice the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture helps to keep her on “God’s agenda” instead of her own. The practice helps the author to develop the skills and behavior to seek God and God’s ways instead of seeking success.

In this particular case of working with new members, some of them new to the Christian faith going through the paces of the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture make a good primer of what Christian life can include. It is a good way to model the faith for new comers. It is also a good reminder for those that have been believers for a long time especially if they have started a relationship at a new church. Sometimes the newness of the start, helps even long time believers to be reminded or to teach them that

the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements came be very useful in their personal lives as well as their activities within and with out the church.

For church professionals to be tethered to the primary aim of church work to be to help people develop a closer relationship to God and a closer relationship to others, then all that one does should be guided by that aim. By lifting up the message in Romans Chapter 12 that all believers have a place to serve within the Body of Christ and that every gift is important, church leaders are continually reminded that they are not to have to do everything by themselves. Through prayer and discernment on the part of the church membership, ministry and calls of service are determined. Then there is the clarion call for all members of the Body of Christ to pitch into the work required. This sets the stage for a church leader to remain humble because it is not on the backs of the church leader alone that the job is accomplished. The whole *practice* invites and involves the whole church body and that is where the strength of God is truly released into the world.

By being grounded to the degree of being steeped in the practice of the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual, Nurture a church could have its hold ethos *influenced* by them. It would be an interesting study to watch a church start with its new members, introducing them to each other and to the creeds and confessions of their church, then helping them discover their spiritual gifts and that there is a need for them to use or give their gifts to the building up of the Kingdom of God. Followed by a reminder of the marks of membership that show what is expected by being a faithful member. If that mindset, if that heart set were to permeate among the congregation, what could happen to

the congregation? Could a gradual honing of the activities of the church start to be fashioned in such a way to reflect even more closely what God has called churches to do?

This could be a place for further research. It would be interesting to follow the lives of the new members for the next five years and study what they do with their lives. See if they have chosen to use their spiritual gifts in places of ministry and service. See if they have tried to keep up with the expectations of the marks of membership.

It would be interesting to take the primary level of the Membership Matters classes and move to the next level of classes, the 201 and 301 designs. What would new members need to know or would like to study? If a church feels a strong responsibility to intentionally help believers grow in their faith through Christian Education classes, what would be the next series and the series after that? How would exposure to those classes enhance one's faith journey? What other opportunities should be offered in tandem with the classes? Should mission trips be encouraged, short stints of soup kitchen work, what other options should be made available to enhance one's spiritual growth? It would be interesting to do a follow-up study to people that attend the Membership Matters classes and also of future class offerings.

Another aspect that would be interesting to study is to apply the same Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements that were used in the Membership Matters classes to other classes and church meetings. Would the influence of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements be on the experience of other classes and church meetings? If a church was using the Membership Matters curriculum and then added the elements to the other aspects of church life, would there be a greater sense of authenticity, of strengthening the relationship between God and individuals and people to people? In time would it seem as

though the entire church body was functioning within a focused, strong vision as the Early Churches?

Finally, as it always seems with God, one does not know exactly where God will lead until one listens. As one seeks to listen to God, one needs to create a sacred space, offer hospitality to the Almighty, work toward building community and wait. God will answer and God will direct the next course of study.

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APPENDIX A
REGISTRATION FORM

APPENDIX B

PRE-SURVEY

APPENDIX C

WORKSHEET FAITH JOURNEYS

APPENDIX D

WORKSHEET OF PCUSA BELIEFS

APPENDIX E

WORKSHEET OF CONFESSIONS BY DATE

APPENDIX F

BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH WORKSHEET

APPENDIX G

BODY OF CHRIST WORKSHEET

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