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Band of Hope

The church is diminishing. This reality has been researched extensively, as the topic is meaningful to many. The phenomenon has lived in such a sustained season, that different species of non-engagement in terms of organized church affiliation have evolved. Whereas different categories of disaffiliation could lead to re-directive efforts of the organized church, it seems rather to be a situation that is inevitable to many. Is it? This is the main question of the paper. Is this issue just a matter of time? Is it just a season of contraction in the life cycle of an organization? There was unarguably a time when the church seemed irresistible. It grew in the first three centuries in a way that still has scholars, social scientists, and historians baffled. Was there something special about that season of time? Did it grow simply because of the evolutionary mechanism of beginnings? Or, was there a reality of the church present then that made it an entity that drew people in, rather than repel as it seems to be doing today? Later seasons of growth such as the Protestant Reformation and Great Awakenings add texture to this question. The Anglican revival of the eighteenth century, known as Methodism, will be the season most focussed on in answering the above question. As David Hempton notes, “the rise of Methodism was the most important Protestant religious development since the Reformation, yet it remains remarkably undersearched.”¹

In the rest of this chapter, the importance of the question will be established by showing the detrimental social effects of a diminishing church. The general varying reasons the church is repelling will be reflected upon for the sake of informing the

¹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 2.

church of redirective steps, if possible. I will also introduce the substantive concept of the paper.

Decline is not inevitable. It is quite possible the church can learn to draw more than repel. It has before. It can again. John Wesley's classes and bands of the Methodist revival show that in the midst of a stagnant church climate, redirective steps can be taken to create a draw and allure of genuine interest and demand. By researching the strengths of the environment John Wesley created in his bands and classes as attested to by those who experienced them, looking for contemporary successful examples of similar environments, and cross pollinating the two ideas so as to inform today's church, this paper seeks to provide hopeful possibilities. A question that drives this first chapter is about the way in which the church motivates. Chapter two will establish the method, impact and characteristics of the classes and bands as revealed in the popular opinion. Chapters three, four and five will explore the modern examples of similar environments that can inform the church. The concluding chapters will reflect on a brief critique and how these redirective efforts might be applied.

The problem addressed in this paper is that of a diminishing church. There are many different reasons and types of disengagement that will be addressed. Naming the issue of why a shrinking church is damaging establishes the importance of the topic. Naming the reasons can be quite emotional to those involved on the inside. However, there are many secular articles citing non-religious studies that name the issue in sober terms. John Stonestreet in "How the Declining Church Harms Society" points out that the "do not do's" of the church have long been cited to produce the health benefit of

longer lives.² It turns out that less smoking, drinking, regular drug use, and sexual promiscuity is actually better for you. However, the “do’s” of the church are where the real impact on individuals and society happens. Stonestreet cites Stanford anthropologist T.M. Luhrman who researched evangelicals by attending a typical Bible study. Luhrman was amazed when through the course of the study, at the end of each session the group would discuss the dental needs of one in the congregation. The cost for the procedure was considered by the group. Eventually they agreed to raise the \$1500 needed. The care that Luhrmann witnessed was overwhelming.³ For those familiar with church life there is little shock in this story. But, to a sober intellect looking for an evangelical characterization often described in extreme conservative language, it was enlightening. How often this type of community building care takes place is hard to measure. But as the church diminishes, so does this type of care.

Sociologist Robert Putnam writes that the impact of church involvement on the contribution of children and young teens is also impactful. These students are 40-50% more likely to continue their education beyond high school. The reasons for this are many. Putnam argues that studies show children whose families attend church typically have higher grades, and are thus learning more. Children who attend church typically have a dramatically lower rate of dropping out of high school because they are performing better and are thus happier with the experience. Children of church going families typically have better relationships with their families, as well as with other adults, and so talk more frequently about what their dreams in life are. Children of church going families are typically more involved in sports and extra-curricular activities

² John Stonestreet, “How Declining Church Attendance Harms Society,” *Bangor (Main) Daily News*, December 28, 2017.

³ Ibid.

as they understand the importance of both as it relates to their personal development, as well as their contribution to society. For these reasons and more, Putnam argues that church going children are more successful at continuing their education and thus have a better start on life than those who do not. As the church diminishes, so does this pattern.⁴

The above points are mainly the personal cost of a diminishing church. There is also a cost to society that is hard to measure. What happens when you remove all the community building care, and healthy future driven kids? A couple from Georgetown University argues that the positive impact of churchgoing individuals on the business world alone is around \$1.2 trillion annually.⁵ Moreover, Charles Murray writes that the religiously disengaged are growing more rapidly within the un-educated demographic, causing more costs to society. Weekly church attendance of those who went to college remains steady because many of them understand the above connection. Church attendance drops a third by those with a high school education or less. This has the effect of thinning the margin of help needed in times of emergency or error. As the population seeking emergency assistance from an already overwhelmed government grows, so does the cost on society.

Hank Mooore's work on the history of volunteerism is also revealing as to the importance of Christian engagement. The amount of innovative volunteerism inspired by Christianity that has emerged in the United States alone is impressive and would indeed be missed were it absent. Clara Barton attributes her heart for volunteerism to

⁴ Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2015), 75.

⁵ Brian J. Grim and Melissa E. Grim, "The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 12 (2016).

her devotion to Jesus. She began the American Red Cross during the Civil War because of that devotion. The Red Cross not only started the profession of medical nursing, but now extends to helping families, flood victims, and victims of fires and other disasters. George Williams founded the YMCA in response to his love of Jesus to provide healthy activities for young men in crisis.⁶ The Young Men's Christian Association now extends sports activities, and fitness programs to millions. Most of those who work at the YMCA are volunteers. The list of incredibly impactful volunteer organizations inspired by church going people is a book unto itself. The list includes The Salvation Army, The Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Boy Scouts and many more.⁷ As the church diminishes, so does the existing and future innovative volunteerism mentioned above.

The diminishment of a church going people will create a loss that is both dramatically individual and societal in scope. That there is a problem is not the difficult reality to assess. Secular thinkers and writers agree that the impact of a diminishing church going people is an undesired result. The measurement of the diminishing church is even easier to assess. Every year over four thousand churches close their doors. Every year, nearly one thousand church start ups occur. The math is clear. More and more people report that they are un-affiliated with a church. From 1990 to 2000, the total membership of all Protestant churches in the United States has declined by nearly five million people. This decrease happened at a time when the total US population saw an increase of around 24 million people. The decrease in church

⁶ Hank Moore. *Non-Profit Legends for Humanity and Good Citizenship: Comprehensive Reference on Community Service, Volunteerism, Nonprofits and Leadership*. (New York: Morgan James Publishing. 2017)

⁷ Ibid.

affiliation is dramatic. Even if church affiliation stayed the same in number, with a growing total population, the effect is still a shrinking church. This suggests that the church is not touching the new generations. At the same time its current membership is slowly dying off and leaving. And of the people that say they attend church, more than half of them attend only one Sunday per month. One study shows that many others who say they attend, don't attend at all. Close to 80% of people in the US find something better to do on Sunday than go to church.⁸

That people are attending church less is a reality that is highly documented. That people not attending church is an undesired issue creating other undesired issues is also documented. Much research has been done on other important topics germane to the issue of a declining church including the different types of non-engagement, as well as the different reasons associated. These reasons are important to explore, if a redirective effort is to be attempted.

The non-engaged are unchurched or de-churched. The unchurched have never had a church affiliation. The de-churched have, and subsequently do no longer. These types of church non-engagement break up into their own subcategories. Of the unchurched, there are of course those who've never heard the name of Jesus. These could be called unreached. This category used to be the main target for modern missionaries. However, of the unchurched there is also a category of people that has been reached but are simply uninterested. One solution of the unreached is access. Access to proximity, culture and language will increase the chances of gospel spread, and thus a sustained church. But many of the unchurched are proving to be due to lack

⁸ Thom and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), 42.

of interest, not access. Many uninterested have sufficient access, but insufficient interest. The “church” has access to many unchurched and has been unable to transfer the faith. Researcher David Kinnaman on this topic names the complexity of change over the past few decades as adding to reasons why proximity to access has not helped. The fluidity of change over the past fifty years has created a diversity of “markets, media, advertising, technology, politics, sexuality.”⁹ The church’s ability to gain access by speaking these languages has been less than successful. Boomers and Busters are finding it difficult to speak into the changes in values, attitudes and aspirations that have taken shape over the past few decades. Employing Jesus’ fisher of men metaphor, for the “uninterested” fish, the church has access to where they are schooling. Casting a bait that they find utterly unappealing is the issue. They are not biting.

Of the de-churched brand of the non-engaged there is an even broader breakdown of species. These are people that have been a part of the church at one time or another. Their lack of interest is not because they aren’t biting what the church is casting. No, their lack of interest is because of their personal experience as a part of the church. They have experienced what they think the church is. Based on their experience, the de-churched have concluded that they are un-interested in being a part of a church anymore. Kinnaman has classified several of these dechurched species as “nomads, prodigals, and exiles.”¹⁰

Nomads are wanderers. Their increased detachment from the church is often due to searching. The Sunday School faith of their younger years does not answer their

⁹ Kinnamen, David. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church And Rethinking Faith*. Baker Books. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2011. Pg. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

adult questions and so they search. They may continue to describe themselves as Christian, but they believe that personal involvement is optional. Nomads are not angry or hostile towards faith, they just view the importance of it as fading. Nomads may find stimulation in the spiritual side of life, but it's through a variety of activities and experiences.¹¹

Prodigals do not just wander. They leave their faith entirely. They do not claim to be Christian. When asked about religious affiliation, they claim “none.” They feel resentment towards Christianity. That resentment is often aimed at their parents. They feel as if they have broken out of the constraints that created such regret for them. No more regrets. They are passionate and resolute about de-churching. They may journey to another form of faith, but most often the journey is to no faith.¹² Nomads are four times as common as prodigals, but prodigals often become evangelistic in the journey away from faith. Prodigals are also focused on by others seeking to reform them because they no longer classify under the “Christian” column of species.

Exiles are not inclined to separate from the church, but they are skeptical of the institution. Exiles embrace tradition but have a strong distaste for shallow expressions of the faith they love. They hold firm to their identity as a follower of Jesus, but they find the institutional church to be increasingly difficult to remain a part of.¹³ Some exiles are not so intentional. Their slow development of disengagement is similar to, as one writer put it, “Sneaky fat.”¹⁴ They feel a sense of shame about their distancing from the life of a faith community. If they had their way, no one would notice. When questioned they

¹¹ Kinnaman *You Lost Me* 65.

¹² Ibid., 69.

¹³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go*, 16.

may even act as if they had not noticed. Publicly they act as if little has changed. Privately they are glad to be distancing from some part of the church they find distasteful. The exiles make up a large portion of the people in a church membership role. But these rolls are deceiving as they far exceed the average Sunday attendance. A thousand member church with an average Sunday morning attendance of one hundred is likely made up of a number of exiles. If asked they may even say “Oh yeah, I go to that church.” But, by “go to that church” they may mean on Easter and Christmas. Or, they may just mean people in their family go and their name is on the membership role. Nevertheless, they do not really “go.”¹⁵

Understanding the unchurched and de-churched is important if the church is going to aim a corrective strategy of increasing the chances of sustainability and growth. Understanding where they are is important when thinking of possibilities of rehabilitation. Prevention is a different question. To work on a strategy of prevention it seems that understanding the reasons the unchurched and de-churched got where they are is the priority. Their reasons for distancing from the church vary greatly. There are entire books written on why members are leaving. There are entire books filled with interviews of people for the purpose of hearing why they left. Rather than parsing out all the reasons documented on this topic, I'll name some of the most common reasons.

The number one reason suggested by research that people leave church is that they feel judged. “Eighty seven percent of Americans label Christians as judgemental.”¹⁶ Ninety-one percent of Americans say Christians are anti-homosexual,

¹⁵ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go*, 49.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

which causes many more to lump Christians into the judgemental category.¹⁷ Many young people are already insecure about things such as clothes, choice of friends, looks, lifestyle, and behavior. Having their personal disappointments confirmed by external judgement is a layer of hurt that is unwanted to the point of departure. A noted irony to many leaving is that Jesus taught on the destructive force of judgement, and how it should be wielded with the utmost care.¹⁸ He teaches that poorly applied judgement can have a dramatically negative affect, and that one should pay way more attention to the judgement of one's own life. "Why look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own."¹⁹ Many of the de-churched and unchurched sense that Christians demonize just about everything outside the church. Many believe that the church's underlying message about non-Christians, be they religious or atheists, is that they are categorically evil.²⁰ It is also assumed by many that Christians are afraid of pop culture within the mediums of movies and music. So, if someone enjoys going to the movies with an atheist friend, and then they hear from their church that both are categorically evil, it stands to reason their feelings of being judged will push them away.

Another major reason people cite that they leave or are just uninterested is the experience of hypocrisy inside the church. Eighty five percent of folks surveyed make this claim.²¹ On one hand no one can live up to the standards of Jesus. Moreover, Jesus taught that he came for the sinners. Seeing sinners in a church is as appropriate as seeing the sick in a hospital. People do not go to the hospital because they are

¹⁷ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters*. (Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Books 2007), 27.

¹⁸ Matthew 7:1-6; Luke 6:41,42.

¹⁹ Matthew 7:3.

²⁰ Kinnamen, David. *You Lost Me*, 99.

²¹ Kinnaman, David. *Unchristian*, 27.

healthy. However, whether the hypocrite label is fair or not is beside the point. People say they stay away because of impossible standards that the leaders don't even live up to.²² Again, Jesus himself taught about hypocrisy.²³ He seems to have a heavy disdain for it. He too leveraged the label of hypocrite specifically on the religious leaders of his day. He Taught because of their hypocrisy that they were "shutting the Kingdom of Heaven in men's faces."²⁴ It is not hard to imagine Jesus thinking that the church is where people should find the least amount of judgement and hypocrisy compared to anywhere else.

Another major reason many people cite as contributing to their disinterest in the church is that its teachings seem irrelevant. Research suggests people are still very interested in the spiritual need to believe that life is meaningful and has purpose. They still want to feel as if their faith is growing. They still sense the need for deeper relationships and community. They still want practical help for developing their faith.²⁵ Most people believe in God. Most people even believe that developing their faith life is important. They simply are not finding those opportunities for themselves inside the gathering of the church. In interviews of real individuals who have left the church, many claim the church promises much, but is quite elusive in delivering.²⁶ If an abundant life comes from being "born again", then why not teach more about an abundant life? Being born again is a message that is heard repetitively. What the above are saying is they would rather hear how to Follow Jesus in an ongoing way, instead of a one time experience. If it's a one time experience, and they have heard of it, possibly even

²² Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go*, 26.

²³ Matthew 23:13; Mark 12:38-39; Luke 20:45-46.

²⁴ Matthew 23:13.

²⁵ George Gallup Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay. *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 20th Century Churches*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2002), 12-14.

²⁶ William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving the Church*.

experienced it, why would they need to hear the same thing over and over?²⁷ The repetitive doctrinal talking points miss the real time spiritual needs of people. It is likely that if the church continues to focus on repetitive doctrinal stances, rather than topics such as meaningful purpose and faith that develops, it will continue to experience an exit of the people looking for relevance.

Many others claim that the message of the church is anti-intellectual. The people making this claim do not want to feel as if they must check their brains at the door to listen to a message. They want to know that God is interested in the life of their mind. Sadly, many young people claim that the lessons they've heard are shallow in nature, lacking the depth of their questions. Questioning itself seems to be out of bounds. When faith is often taught as something that has no room for doubt, this can be problematic for young people. Since doubt is such a large topic in the lives of young folks, for the churches that have little room for it, they are essentially saying they have little room for those with it.²⁸ People want the room to question why there is such suffering and evil in the world. People want the room to question whether or not their faith is an accident of geography. People want the room to question why and what they should believe about the Bible. Questioning why Christianity seems so exclusive should not be a problem.²⁹ If the church can not be savvy enough to have answers to these questions, and not self-confident enough to allow such questions, then it is likely those who have similar questions will continue to leave.

Many people are also repelled by what seems to be an anti-science posture of the church. One person who left faith specifically because of this said, "To be honest , I

²⁷ William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving the Church*.

²⁸ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

think that learning about science was the straw that broke the camel's back. I knew from church that I couldn't believe in both science and God, so that was it. I didn't believe in God anymore."³⁰ Churches that are not anti-science still rarely speak about it. Even when the teaching of a church is not anti-science, the lack of teaching speaks volumes. One strong statistic shows that over 50% of teens in a typical youth group will go into a science driven career. This could include health related careers, or in engineering or technology fields. But the percentage of youth pastors that address the issue of science is 1%.³¹ While one of the most important components of an individual's life is being shaped by scientific perspectives, the church is silent. The effect for many is sensing that the church cares little in regard to that part of their life. Science will continue to grow in shaping the lives of churchgoers. If the church continues to remain silent, or just seem ambivalent, it should be no surprise that the people to whom science is important will continue to exit.

To all of the varying species of the uninterested, they are essentially responding to what they sense to be a posture that the church has taken toward them. One writer suggests that because of the way the individual local church postures itself relationally towards people, many continue to decide to be disinterested. A police station, a seminary, a museum, a theatre, a political action committee and even a mortuary, have all been used to describe how some people feel relationally to a church.³² So, for instance, a little girl comes home from vacation bible school and the parents ask, "hey darling, what did you learn at vacation bible school?" If the little girl answers "when you go to the restroom, stay in line." then the church she went to is posturing as a police

³⁰ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 131.

³¹ Ibid., 140.

³² Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go*, 40.

station. Learn the rules to stay in line or you'll get in trouble. If she says "I learned that when you're in the sanctuary do not touch the stained glass windows because they have been there for a hundred years", then the church is posturing like a museum.

Writer Leonard Sweet takes on this theme and uses an entire book to show how the posturing of a well run coffee shop has more in common with the gospel proclaimed by Jesus than many local churches. People stand long periods of time in line at Starbucks for the chance to pay handsomely for a cup of coffee, because Starbucks has paid attention to what drives people. Because of the experience, the participation and the connection people drink in at a Starbucks, they are more than willing to stay, and are highly likely to return.³³ The experience is multi sensory. The sights and smells tap into a vibe and style that draw people in. The guest at Starbucks has had their expectations exceeded in regard to what they thought they would be experiencing. One of the key features of waiting for a cup of Starbucks coffee is the calling of your name. When purchasing the drink, the barista asks for your name. Your name is then called when it is time to receive your personalized beverage. They know a simple fact, most people like knowing that their name is known by another. The planners of Starbucks have so anticipated the likes and wants of their guests, that they are in no danger of a diminishing consumer base. Are there ways the church can learn from a coffee shop in regard to how it postures itself for its guests? How many people come and go from a Sunday morning experience without ever knowing whether or not someone in that particular church even knows their name.

³³ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks; Living with a Grande Passion*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbook Press, 2007).

The aesthetics of a place of business is an easy way to anticipate the likes and dislikes of a consumer. David Murrow writes a good deal on why the church is losing men specifically. One of the many things he notes is the importance of the small detail of aesthetics when it comes to the interest of men. He makes anecdotal evidence of comparing how many men one typically sees at the makeup section in a department store, with how many men one typically sees at a Buffalo Wild Wings. He then makes an obvious distinction between the aesthetics of the two environments. His point is that the aesthetics of Buffalo Wild Wings is one of the reasons for its success with men. He then points out that most churches look more like the cosmetic section of a department store than they do Buffalo Wild Wings. Though the point is anecdotal, he points out that the churches that take the time to look more like the latter, see a significant increase in the percentage of men in attendance.³⁴

Naming the above is a matter of researching the work done on the topic of a diminishing church. “Does it have to be this way?” is another question that takes a bit more consideration. All agree that there was a moment in time when the church grew. A common word in the Gospel of Mark is “crowd.” Jesus the person, as recorded in the gospels, certainly drew a crowd. His followers, as recorded in the book of Acts, did the same. For the first three centuries the church boomed in crowd-growing. It drew people in, in a way and rate that historians and social scientists to this day have a difficult time describing. Social scientist Rodney Stark wrote a whole book to try and explain the rise of Christianity. He concedes that the growth rate was so magnificent, that creating a social science model to explain it in terms other than miraculous is an endeavor that takes an entire book. Even then, he concedes his model is merely

³⁴ David Murrow. *Why Men Hate Going to Church*.

plausible.³⁵ The point should be stressed here. The hard to explain rate of growth was accompanied by a hard to explain world acceptance. The Jesus movement was marginal at best in its beginnings. It was a sect of Judaism at most. The growth rate of this sect would contribute to its becoming the dominant religious force in the Western world. The dominance would be accomplished in a span of three centuries. In three centuries Christianity would trump Greco-Roman paganism as the dominant world religion. Many writers agree that in regard to the growth and appeal of first-, second-, and third-century Christianity, “We still really don’t understand how this came to be.”³⁶ The above acknowledgements of the staggering growth of the early Christian church are not made by evangelical Christian sympathizers. These are secular thinkers and writers.

Christian writers certainly agree. Andy Stanley wrote a book on how the draw of the church at one time was not just compelling, it was just about irresistible. He asks the growth question in the following way.

How did a religious cult birthed in the armpit of the Roman empire, whose leader had been rejected by his own people and crucified as a wannabe king by Rome, survive in the face of overwhelming resistance? How is it that this same upstart religion would eventually be embraced by the very empire that sought to extinguish it?³⁷

Stanley would later point to a remarkable transfer of power that took place in a span of a few centuries. This unprecedented transfer of power is embodied in an iconic familiar symbol. This symbol is arguably the most recognized symbol in the world, the cross. The cross at one time symbolized the power of the Roman Empire. It was the tool the

³⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

³⁶ Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 19.

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

Romans used to remind noncompliant individuals of the power they wield over life and death. The early church's claim that Jesus rose from the dead after being crucified on that very cross would eventually transform the iconic meaning of the cross as a symbol. Rather than symbolizing the power wielded by the Roman Empire through the threat of death, it would become a symbol of the power of God through the gift of life in Jesus.

The extraordinary growth of the early church establishes that it is indeed possible for the church to grow. The growth and attractiveness of the church was at one time miraculous and irresistible to many. It is no exaggeration to say that it quite literally changed the world. Still, the above issue remains. There is now a time when the church is not growing. Moreover, it is diminishing at a pace that is making many take notice. Rather than drawing people in, it is pushing people away. Is the issue just a difference in time? Is it just a season wherein the sap of the life of the church is wintering in the soil? The fruit of the tree is indeed falling, but only because of the season. Perhaps a church Spring is on its way, and just as a matter of all living organisms having life cycles, growth will blossom in time of season. Or, is there something distinct about the church's seasons of growth that can inform today's church?

This paper will argue that there are differences of distinction that enabled the church to flourish, and that may still be leveraged. In the early 1700's, after a long season of Resistance to the Pope, and King Henry VIII separating from the church of Rome and claiming the Church of England under the monarchy, there resulted in what Richard Heitzenrater calls a "conscious fear of explicit religiosity."³⁸ In the Church of England a general tenor of spiritual lethargy and moral laxity was becoming common.³⁹

³⁸ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

The result was diminished church attendance inside the lofty Anglican cathedrals, and increased lewd and lascivious societal norms. The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was created for this very reason.⁴⁰ In the midst of this season of church decline in England, Methodism sprang up. One writer writes that Methodism had a competitive advantage over other populist movements because of the discipline created in regard to sobriety.⁴¹ Moreover, the enthusiasm and buy-in that those involved seemed to have was incomparable to other movements of the day.⁴² What drew these people into this society-changing, enthusiasm-developing movement? Michael Henderson argues that it was the success of the class meetings and bands within the societies started by John Wesley that drew people deeper into a growing and sustainable relationship with the church.⁴³ As Kevin Watson puts it, “These structures created community at a time when previous social forms were being disrupted or lost.”⁴⁴

Something about the bands and classes of the Methodist societies drew people in. While the Church of England was in a season of repelling, the Methodists were exciting. The next chapter will argue that it was Wesley’s genuine desire to create and resource environments that encouraged and measured real spiritual growth, that the popular masses of England found relevant and engaging. Wesley’s desire to help people look for growth in areas such as joy, and his assistance in helping that growth to happen, pulled people into the society, rather than pushing them away. Rather than

⁴⁰ Hempton, *Methodism*, 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*. (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books 1997), 110, 111.

⁴⁴ Kevin M Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley’s thought and Popular Methodist Practice*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

simply repeating doctrinal beliefs, Wesley was helping people with what they truly wanted. He was tapping into what James K. Smith calls the “telos we desire.”

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith makes a large portion of his book the importance of how we are motivated. He writes “our ultimate love moves and motivates us because we are lured by this picture of human flourishing. Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a telos we desire.”⁴⁵ Being pushed to do something is in the category of obligation. Being pulled by what one desires is more of a want. Smith makes the point that different forms of motivation have differing effects. In this observation is a smaller, yet more profound point. Being pulled is better than being pushed. Wesley seems to have found a way to move and motivate people that his contemporary Anglican church home had not.

In chapters three, four and five I will examine the current success of specific modern institutions that embrace a similar environment to what Wesley’s Methodists embraced. The encouragement and measurement of real and lasting growth is something that some modern groups do well. These will be looked at to see how the environment Wesley created is executed in the atmosphere of today. The hope is to inform the church of ways to recreate the pull-type motivation tapped into by Wesley. The CrossFit community has a way that measures and promotes the growth of its members that is well known and beloved by many. College fraternities and sororities have a way of creating legacy and sustainable memberships that is lifelong in most cases. Alcoholics Anonymous has a way of enabling its members to overcome great weaknesses. These motivating institutions seem to move people rather well. What do

⁴⁵ Smith, James K.A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2009. Pp. 54.

these institutions have to say to a church that has lost its way in regard to engaging and motivating its people unto change like it once did? How might the church tap into the inner strength and desires of the individual for good?

Chip and Dan Heath, in a book about how to create change when change is hard, make an anecdotal representation of the difference between push and pull motivation. They invite the reader to imagine an elephant with a rider.⁴⁶ The rider has reigns and a small whip. In theory, the rider is motivating the elephant to go. The rider represents a push motivation. The rider has some success, but it only goes so far. However, the moment the elephant sees something it wants, there is little the rider can do to stop it. The want of the elephant represents a pull type of motivation. A brick wall likely could not stop the elephant being pulled by want of something. The groups mentioned above are tapping into the elephant-like want of the person. Wesley once did this.

There are many ways to motivate in the life of the church. Episcopal leaders can make large written statements on trying issues. Regional leaders can send out directives to local pastors. Denominational agencies can create well-crafted PR slogans like “Open Hearts, Open Doors, Open Minds.” The one single tool the church is most known for in regard to influencing and shaping the world is preaching. To be sure, preaching has taken on a cultural colloquialism that suggests the general public is not fond of the current use of motivation within preaching. “Don’t preach to me,” suggests preaching is seen by many as undesired. The person saying that may have experienced preaching that uses the motivation of push rather than pull.

⁴⁶ Chip and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 9.

Perhaps it is time to re-think the way the church postures itself. Are there fresh ways of presenting ancient paths that can be opportunities just waiting to happen for the church, and a world that needs the church? Into this question the concluding chapter will seek to apply the ideals built upon by chapters three through six. Is there some sort of common content or motivational angle leveraged by Wesley's classes and bands, along with today's modern expressions that can contribute to a season of the church's ability to draw people in? How might the environments spoken of in chapters three through six inform church leaders today in regard to changing the pattern of being repelling, to that of one that is desired? Or, can the bands and classes of Wesley's societies, and the message and motivations leveraged then, lead today's church to offer less religious obligation, and more spiritual passion? Was there something about the Methodist society's messaging and motivation that prevented it from taking on the disengaging characteristics of anti-intellectual, irrelevant, anti-science, no room for doubt, judgemental, hypocritical, and doctrinally repetitive? More to the point, is there a way the environment of engagement within the society's bands and classes could inform today's lay leaders?

Can the church become irresistible again? Can it link up to people's desire to get closer to God, to develop their faith, to find a life that is abundant, to grow in deeper relationships, and to embrace a life full of meaning? Is reversing the trend of repelling rather than drawing even possible? Can the church pull people in with spiritual passion, rather than push people away with religious obligation? These are the questions that fuel this paper. By researching the strengths of the environment John Wesley created in his bands and classes, looking for contemporary examples of successfully creating

that environment, and cross pollinating the two ideas in application for today's church, this paper seeks to answer those questions.

Chapter 2

Impact, Method, Needs

The impact and method of Wesley's classes and bands will be discussed in this chapter. These two points provide the context for the major thrust of this chapter which is the popular opinion of the classes and bands. The popular opinion will answer the question that closed the previous chapter. What made Methodism so compelling? What about Methodism tapped into the spiritual passion of the people of the time?

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the impact of John Wesley's class meetings and bands. In the eighteenth century the Anglican Church was anything but growing. Filled with priests who were being paid by the state, the Church of England was stagnant. Priests often lived in London, enjoying the conveniences of a larger city, and commuting to make Sunday Mass. Pastoring the flock was not a priority. Heitzenrater describes it succinctly: "The general tenor of spiritual lethargy and moral laxity that resulted in many parts of the country is typified by the licentious style of life at the royal court and signaled by King Charles II's own long line of mistresses."⁴⁷ Spiritual growth of the masses not being a focus, the soaring cathedrals of the Anglican church, if they were filled, had mostly the upper-class of society. The local coal miner of Gwennap Pit likely did not feel comfortable, or even welcome, in the state sponsored church on Sunday. So, at a time when England's mainline Protestant church was not

⁴⁷ Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 45.

seeing growth, and perhaps even declining, Methodism was growing. The growth of Methodist societies in the eighteenth century was staggering. The expansion of the Methodists in the 1700s shows that growth is indeed possible, even in a climate of decline.

John Wesley reached out to the neglected masses. His journal reveals Wesley preaching in Bristol to over 47,000 souls in one month. That is about 3000 for every preaching engagement. Wesley was very intentional about the spiritual development of these souls and so organized those interested into smaller support groups of classes and bands. In 1760 there were 20,000 individuals in classes. By 1790 that number more than doubled to over 53,000. So out of England and Wales' total population of 8,216,096, approximately 6.5% were a part of the Methodist society in a class or band.⁴⁸ He would travel by horseback to keep up with these little societies. Riding over 250,000 miles in his lifetime just to look after his efforts, he would average 8000 miles per year. That is more than the average nineteen year old puts on a car today. Horses actually died while being ridden by Wesley. His attention and care was sought after, and he gave it.⁴⁹

More than one writer believes it was actually the growth of Methodism that enabled England to buttress itself against the bloody revolution in France. The “Halevy thesis” basically argues that “the evangelical religion, and especially that of Methodism, prevented England from the sort of revolutionary upheavals which were prevalent on the continent of Europe in the late eighteenth century.”⁵⁰ So, rather than Voltaire and a

⁴⁸ David Lowes Watson. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: It's Origins and Significance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 131.

⁴⁹ Wesley, John. *The Journal of John Wesley*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press).

⁵⁰ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. 138.

cobblestone street blood-stained by the guillotine, England had class meetings full of middle class individuals finding a place of strength and community. The Industrial Revolution was waking up in England, folks were flooding into larger towns looking for work. The conditions were sparse, leading many to the vices of comfort found on the street. Tough conditions were similar to that of France. But the Methodists and their small groups that looked out for each other provided many with a place of hope and community. As Kevin Watson asserts “in the vast work of social organization which is one of the dominant characteristics of nineteenth-century England, it would be difficult to overestimate the part played by the Wesleyan revival.”⁵¹ Whether the Methodist movement saved England from a bloody revolution or not, there is no arguing that nothing near the storming of the Bastille took place.⁵²

One cannot grant the success of the Methodists solely on John Wesley’s field preaching. As innovative and risky as his willingness to go outside the walls of the church was, it was likely something else that contributed even more. George Whitfield himself, most noted field preacher of the time, believed Wesley’s impact had more to do with the care he took to organize the masses into classes and bands. He attributed Wesley’s success, and the lack of his own, to Wesley’s creation, organization and maintenance of the class meeting.

My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand.⁵³

⁵¹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*. 9.

⁵² English and French responses to the Industrial Revolution have been compared by historians. Voltaire and Wesley have been compared as representing their corresponding nation’s personality. Methodism causing England to avoid a bloody revolution was argued in Elie Halevy’s *The Birth of Methodism in England*.

⁵³ Holland M. McTyeire, . *History of Methodism*. (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1904.) 204.

Whitfield was admitting to the unsustainable nature of his work as his neglect of creating classes himself. Arguably the most successful field preacher of Wesley's day, attributed Wesley's lasting success to his efforts of organizing class meetings. Moreover Whitfield would claim that Wesley's overall impact was greater than his precisely because of the classes and bands. Wesley had similar beliefs.

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without the joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murder. How much preaching has there been...but no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of the once awakened are now faster asleep Than ever.⁵⁴

Writers have argued for the importance of the innovation of Wesley's class meeting system, and those who have say much more research and understanding is to be done. Wesley himself says that the class meeting and the bands are "the very sinews" that hold together the society.⁵⁵ He believed that the class meeting was the chief means of grace that lead to personal holiness. However, this paper does not seek to argue the importance of the class meeting from the point of those who organized them. Rather, this paper seeks to hear from those who experienced them as consumers. Tapping into the popular perspective of the bands and class meetings will lend a new voice to their importance. From an academic perspective, "The popular Methodist experience has not received sustained and careful scholarly attention to the degree that the study of John Wesley has as an object of intellectual history."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 45.

⁵⁵ Thomas Jackson, *The Works of John Wesley*. vol 11 (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1958), 433.

⁵⁶ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 12.

So, what drew the common person into the experiment of the class meeting, and what kept him or her there? There are sources of primary material that have not been published en masse. These are letters written by class and band members, often to John or Charles Wesley, that make mention of their experiences. To the question of what draws people into a passionate search for spiritual growth, these voices have never been heard. These resources and others will be sifted through to find out what drew spiritual passion out of these people at a time when other religious approaches were having less success. Before diving into these valuable perspectives, a look at the method, or, intended structure, of the class meetings and bands will give needed context.

The class meeting is largely the result of two main forces in John Wesley's life. Wesley's Anglican background along with his experience of the Moravians would be the forces that most informed the class meeting. If the class meeting were a "means of grace", then his Anglican background, with its focus on doing works of piety, would be the means. The intentional human discipline aimed at a structure of rules that pursued holiness would be the pious Anglican contribution.⁵⁷ The grace part would come from Wesley's time spent with the Moravians. The Moravians believed that justification was something a believer could experience. They believed that holiness was incomplete without an individual's spirit being witnessed to by the Holy Spirit of God that they were indeed God's child. So a direct experience of God's justifying grace, and the witness of the Holy Spirit would be the grace side of the means of grace.⁵⁸ The "rules of band societies" displays the conflation well. Rules suggest pious discipline. However, the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 78.

rules contained questions pertaining to direct experience such as “Have you the witness of God’s Spirit that you are a child of God?”⁵⁹

Wesley himself saw his small groups as recapturing the life of simple New Testament Christianity. In a letter to Victor Perronet he would write “Upon reflection, I could not but observe, this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity”⁶⁰ He saw what he was doing as an ongoing effort of the Church of Christ. Nothing new to the church, but recaptured and perhaps new for his time. He would go on to say in the same letter that in the early church, those drawn to the message of Jesus would often join into smaller gatherings that they might “instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them and for them according to their inward necessities.”⁶¹ He believed he was simply re-using a discipline that blessed the first followers of Jesus.

Wesley’s intent of the classes and bands was aimed at personal holiness. Many have said of Wesley that his main aim was to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.”⁶² Wesley believed that what connected this great body of work were the classes and bands. He understood holiness spreading throughout the land to be folks working on their own personal holiness. In regard to personal holiness, the chief means of working on it was through the structure of the small group. This is why he often said that there is no personal holiness without social holiness. By social holiness he meant working on holiness together with a smaller group of trusted individuals. “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁶³ Christian formation towards holiness was done in community. For Wesley, there was no such

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13

⁶² Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 7, 95, 96.

⁶³ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 2.

thing as solitary holiness. Caring for one another and bearing one another's burdens could only be done around one another. As he developed his distinct approach to Christian communal formation, the two distinct gatherings that emerged were the class meeting and the band meeting.

Both gatherings were animated by conversations that had to do with the state of one's soul. Where else would one have group conversations on that particular topic? Not just "how are you doing?", but "how are you doing, really?" The topic was moving the soul toward holiness. The tactic was being deliberate about having candor in the questions, and having transparency in the answers. Questions would be asked such as "where have you failed temptations?" and "are you OK with us telling you of your shortcoming?" As Watson observes, "The openness that was engendered by the meetings led to a more endearing affection between the members, and they felt free to be honest with each other."⁶⁴ After such questioning the folks in the group were to be as honest as possible in the answering. "They met weekly to give an account of their personal spiritual growth, according to the rules and following the procedures carefully crafted by Wesley."⁶⁵ The difference in the two was one of intensity. One's concern over one's own personal holiness would grow in class meeting, but becoming a part of a band would inspire even more growth.

In class meeting the group was typically around twelve, and the individuals would be asked questions by one specific leader. In band the group would be more intimate in size, typically between four and six, and the participants would ask questions of each

⁶⁴ Watson, *The Early methodist class meeting*, 94.

⁶⁵ Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 11.

other. While the questions in both would be similar, the level of spiritual maturity would be expected to be different. Wesley said of class meeting..

The particular design of the classes is to know who to continue as members of the society; to inspect their outward walking; to inquire into their inward state; to learn what are their trials; and how they fall by or conquer them; to instruct the ignorant in the principles of religion; if need be, to repeat, to explain, or enforce, what has been said in public preaching.⁶⁶

In class and band there would be varying degrees of checking on the development of one's soul toward personal holiness. Possible conversations would include the following topics: are you believing deeper? Are you loving stronger? Are you avoiding temptation? Are you enjoying the life of God? Are backsliding, and if so, what is the cause? Do you aim to be more deeply devoted to God? Do you take up the cross daily? Do you oppose extreme self-love? Are you working on humility? Are you willing to drink the cup of Christ? How are you working on improving your talents? In the article cited above, Wesley would go on to say "I earnestly exhort all leaders of classes and bands, seriously to consider the preceding observations, and put them in execution with all the understanding and courage that God has given them."⁶⁷ One could not be a part of the society without being in good standing with a class or band. Tickets would be granted on a quarterly basis to show whether one was or was not developing one's personal holiness within the structure of the class or band.

Spiritual growth was the intent of both groups. Maturity, intensity and theological development would be what mainly set the groups apart. For instance, a "desire to flee the wrath to come" would be the heart posture required for entrance into class meeting, whereas an experience of conversion and the desire for full assurance was required for

⁶⁶ Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 108. The quotation is from a *Zion's Herald* article printed in Boston on November 30, 1985. It was designated as a reprint from the *Arminian Magazine*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

entrance into a band.⁶⁸ Variations in intensity could be seen in the questions one would be exposed to. In class one might be asked, “what temptations have you been defeated by this week?” Whereas in band one might be asked, “Do you desire to be told of your faults as seen by others in the class?” The candor and transparency was assumed to be stronger in band. In regard to theological development, in class one was in pursuit of being convinced themselves that they were indeed a child of God. In band one was to become aware of the possibility of Christian perfection and to learn the theological disciplines of being in pursuit of it.

It is debated which was more important. Many writers focus on the primacy of the class meeting mainly because more Methodists attended class meeting, and because it was a requirement for membership in the society. However, to Wesley, the band meeting was far more important in regard to his chief aim. Wesley wanted to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land, which he believed was done through personal holiness. To Wesley, the chief means of grace that lead to personal holiness was in band. To one of his preachers he would write “You would do well likewise to exhort all the believers that are in earnest or would be in earnest to meet in band.”⁶⁹

Methodism grew so large that it inevitably transitioned from a society to a church. Because of this, Wesley started focussing more of his time and attention on the larger conferencing for the sake of church discipline. He would become aware that this affected society discipline. As the larger conferencing grew, band meetings became less attended to. Less attention however produced negative results. In the same

⁶⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 95-96.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

letter mentioned above Wesley would subsequently write “But the bands in every place need continual instruction; for they are continually flying to pieces.”⁷⁰

The thoughts above are the thoughts and intended structures and desired outcomes of those who helped create and organize the classes and bands. Now we turn our attention to those who participated in the classes and bands. What was their experience? What about the classes and bands proved to be impactful in regard to creating the desire to pursue personal holiness. At a time when the Anglican church was less than successful at drawing in the common person, or pushing back on the street vices of the day, what was it about the classes and bands that differed? Why did John Wesley, a learned and sober intellect of his day, believe the classes and bands as the most effective means of grace for leading the average person in the divine task of personal holiness? Why do some historians believe Wesley’s efforts to be that which enabled England to avoid a bloody revolution? Why did George Whitfield believe Wesley’s efforts to be the reason Wesley’s work has a longer life? What do the people who were in Wesley’s classes and bands have to say about these questions? And can their voice, which has yet to be heard in regard to these particular questions, inform the church of today about how it might redirect its own efforts? Can their voice assist today’s religious leaders on how to draw spiritual passion out of people once again rather than push them away with religious obligation?

The context of the class and band says much about the impact and method of both. However it says little about the needs and wants of the very people that made them up. The rest of this chapter will explore the popular opinion of why individuals desired to be a part of a class or band. What was their opinion on the matter? The

⁷⁰ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 46.

primary source of the information is from a collection of letters to Charles Wesley known as the Early Methodist Volume. This treasure trove of information is held in John Rylands University Library in Manchester. In the same Methodist Archive there is a collection of correspondence called the “Fletcher-Tooth Collection”, which are the writings of one Mary Bosenquet Fletcher.⁷¹ Many of the letters have yet to be transcribed into text document format. Most are scanned and digitally uploaded as an image. This makes them quite accessible, but very difficult to read. Only a handful of writers have resourced these valuable pieces of history. Phyllis Mack and D. Bruce Hindmarsh have reflected on some of these to shed light on how ordinary people of the day understood their religious experience.⁷² Though these works are keen to the common conversion narrative, they do not focus on the class meeting and band of Methodism.⁷³ Kevin Watson has used these primary resources to speak directly about bands and classes of Methodism. He reflects on how the Anglican and Moravian theological influences created the unique means of grace in the Methodist class and band.⁷⁴ Watson has read the vast majority of these letters and his published work includes many of the letters that mention the band or class meeting. Watson also has found popular opinions of band and class meeting in letters published originally in the Arminian Magazine. The quotations below come directly from Watson’s work.

The following interpretations and classifications of the quotations are of this writer. In regard to the wants or desires of the individuals that were drawn into class or band, there seems to be three main categories. The following read of these individuals

⁷¹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 12, 13.

⁷² Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷³ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ Watson *Pursuing Social Holiness*.

will be grouped into those who seem more drawn to a community, those who are interested in being set free of some sort of darkness, and those who are interested in growing to new heights in some spiritual way. Out of the eighteen people quoted, four seemed most interested in community (Thomas Olivers, Alexander Mather, Elizabeth Ritchie, and Hiram Lovegrove), six seemed most interested in overcoming darkness (John Oliver, Elizabeth Taylor, Thomas Cooper, Elizabeth Halfpenny, Mr. G.C., and Elizabeth Johnson), and eight were drawn to growing spiritually (Elizabeth Sais, Sara Barber, Elizabeth Downe, Mary Thomas, Lawrence Coughlan, Miss A.B. William Barber, and Margaret Austin).

Thomas Olivers mentions in a letter that he sensed a call to preach. The band was mentioned in his letter as the place that enabled him to share the idea with other trusted faith holders. He would say “this I communicated to the young men that met in band with me. They proposed a day of solemn fasting on the occasion.”⁷⁵ He would go on to communicate the band assisting him in creating a trial whereby he and others could discern if he in fact did receive a call to preach. What is understood in the letter that Olivers does not say outright is that what drew him to the band was having a group that shared his level of faith, to the extent that he could trust sharing such an intimate detail about his life. He also valued the willingness and ability of the group to discuss a path forward that enabled Olivers to discern if the call he was sensing was truly of God or of his own musings.

Alexander Mather wrote to George Marsden, Marsden seeming to be a senior member of a band, to help new members “meet in band with one who will prove a

⁷⁵ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 122.

nursing father or mother to them.”⁷⁶ He suggests that this will increase the chances of the newcomer being established in the group. Moreover, he writes that if they are mentored in the way by one who is a “friend of holiness”, then their path in the same direction becomes more feasible. Mather seems to be pleased with the possibility of newcomers. He’s also interested in their being connected well into the band. Moreover, the very motive of the letter shows he is interested in coaching Marsden on how both may be done.

Elizabeth Ritchie wrote excitedly about her experience in band. “I have found one or two who really enjoyed the pure love of God, and several who are athirst for purity of heart.”⁷⁷ What seems to have drawn Ritchie in was finding those who shared her level of love for God, as well as her desire for a heart of integrity. Finding others who were pursuing similar spiritual interests is what drew the passion out of her.

The sister of one Hiram Lovegrove had a similar experience to Elizabeth Ritchie’s. He writes of his sister that “she particularly loved and delighted in her band-meeting; and in this she was particularly favoured, being blest with a suitable and pious companion, one after her own heart, who earnestly panted after the mind of Christ.”⁷⁸ Lovegrove’s sister was also drawn into band by finding a spiritual journey-partner who shared her level of interest in growing into the mind of Christ.

Elizabeth Taylor left personal writings that speak of her interest in band. She describes a conversation she had with another in band where the other inquires as to the state of her mind. Her answer that she describes is of a change in her mind over her perspective of dying. “I have now such views of the heavenly world, that dying

⁷⁶ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 164.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 170.

seems no more to me, than passing out of one room into another.”⁷⁹ Taylor seemed to delight in the reality that her view on death was changing into something that was not to be feared. She would go on to say that her view of death began to inspire her to intreat others she knew to pursue meeting with the band themselves. Her interest in what she received was so welcomed, she wanted to share with others the same.

Elizabeth Halfpenny wrote to Charles Wesley about a “a certain time in my band, I received an extraordinary measure of the love of God...”⁸⁰ She speaks of this love of God as that which enables her to “thirst more for Christ, and more and more for His love.”⁸¹ Thirsting for Christ is something Halfpenny wanted. Getting there through her experience of band was exciting enough to put in letter. The same can be said of her experience of the love of God. Personally experiencing God’s love for her was a want that animated her letter. The love of God and desire to thirst more for Jesus is what drew her into the band. She would go on to share about the common letter theme of God’s power, and how because of it she would “...enjoy a closer union with God.”⁸² On top of her desire to want God more, having a closer union with God was important. Later she would disclose how all the above enabled her to overcome “...whatever temptation would beset me...”⁸³ Overcoming temptation may not have been what drew her into band, but it was certainly something she felt gratitude for, enough to write about it.

Thomas Cooper writes to Charles Wesley of his band that he found it a means or pathway to many desired things. He found a “faith to be held” when he “went to prayer”

⁷⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁸¹ Ibid., 87.

⁸² Ibid., 87.

⁸³ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 87.

that enabled him to pray until he felt forgiven of his sins.⁸⁴ It's hard to know which of the aforementioned he desired most. Whether it was a certain level of faith, or the feeling of being forgiven, it was the band that was the environment where she had the experiences. He would go on to say that in his knew faith-filled praying, she also found “power over the unclean spirit.”⁸⁵ The power he found over the unclean spirit would also help him find a “sweet calm” in his “soul.”⁸⁶

John Oliver wrote in a letter to John Wesley of his experience in band of men “uniting together in “love as brethren.”⁸⁷ This unity of men is what Oliver communicated as of interest. In this unity he would witness men confessing the faults of things such as pride and anger. Oliver had never witnessed this sort of confession, nor had he engaged in it. Eventually able to confess his own faults, he would speak of his participating in the group sympathising and praying for each other. He would go on to say it was the totality of those experiences that enabled him to sense his heart purified “from all sin.”⁸⁸

Elizabeth Johnson wrote a letter to Sarah Ryan that describes several areas of spiritual growth. She mentions the “removal of prejudices” and the “increasing of union.”⁸⁹ She spoke also of eyes being opened. These areas of spiritual growth happened when her Wednesday night band and the men’s band met together. The spiritual growth of removing societal prejudices, growing unity, and spiritual seeing are what engaged the interest of Johnson enough for her to put them in a letter.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 124

⁸⁹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 131.

Mr. G. C. speaks of a desire to overcome the evil in his heart. In this want of Mr. G.C's he writes of finding assistance in the bands and class. "Indeed I find great help in the means, particularly my band and class; for which I cannot sufficiently bless God."⁹⁰ Finding help to overcome the darkness in his heart is what drew Mr. G. C. He found so much help in this endeavor of his that he believed he would never be able to sufficiently thank God. Mr. G.C. was also comfortable in naming the bands and classes as a means of grace.

In a letter to Charles Wesley, Elizabeth Sais recalls being questioned by Charles himself, while attending her band meeting. The question had to do with whether or not Elizabeth was dealing with selfish pride. She recalls in the letter how troubled she was by the question, to the point of sustained "melancholy."⁹¹ She would go on to say that the encounter, though painful, would lead to something she seemed grateful for.

"After this the Lord was pleased to uncover my heart more and more, and so all evil tempers did beset me sore, but the Lord gave me strength as my day was, I have gone through close trials, which always worked together for my good."⁹²

Elizabeth, though surprised initially by the question, eventually seems glad to have had her heart uncovered. Self awareness was an aspect of spiritual growth that was welcomed by her. The probing question continued to reveal truths about Elizabeth that were edifying. Her heart was uncovered "more and more." She attributed the enlightening self awareness to the work of the Lord. A painful conversation that likely would not have taken elsewhere, led Elizabeth to spiritual growth that she was giving thanks for.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

⁹² Ibid., 126.

Margaret Austin writes in a letter that going to the sacrament of communion had convicted her deeply of her need to find mercy. This created in her the strong desire to get connected with a band meeting, which she did. She writes, “I went to ye Rvd Mr. John Wesley and he admitted me, and hearing the others tell of the state of their souls was of much strength to me, to speak of the state of mind.”⁹³ Being troubled internally on the state of her soul, Margaret found strength by hearing others speak of the state of their souls. Perhaps it was hearing that others struggled with similar issues. Perhaps it was something about their story that enabled her to understand her own a bit clearer. Either way, it was a need of Margaret’s that she did not find addressed at the sacrament of communion, or anywhere else.

Sarah Barber writes in a letter that she struggled greatly with feelings of unworthiness in regard to personally receiving justification from Jesus. The letter reveals that she believes deeply that Jesus does indeed justify. Only, it was hard for her to receive the truth that the justification offered by Jesus was hers to have as well. She would write that after one day in band meeting things changed for her. “Then I hoped and found comfort and indeed the band was of great service to me for I never went away without some comforts.”⁹⁴ In her experience it was in band that she began to personally sense the comfort of being justified. She would speak of a Sister Robinson in her band that would confirm her comfort by saying “I told sister Robinson and She glorified God and said I was justified.”⁹⁵ In band, Sarah would sense her spirit being witnessed to by the Spirit of God that indeed she was a child of God.

⁹³ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 1.

⁹⁴ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 32.

Elizabeth Downe's would speak of an occurrence in band where after praying she believed she encountered the very power of God. She would write to Charles Wesley "I felt the power of God in such a manner as I cannot express. I was filled with joy, love, wonder and amazement that the Lord should reveal Himself."⁹⁶ When praying in her band Elizabeth would encounter the power of God in a way that she never had before. She would go on to express that she did not know the words just yet to even articulate what it was she was experiencing. Although she did somehow know that it was the power of God.

Mary Thomas says much in one letter about her experience in band. She speaks of a visit from John Wesley and her affection toward her band. She connects the two to the experience of a sort of graduation. "I then went upon tryal into bands and there I found great love to my band when Mr. John Wesley came last to Bristol. I was taken in to the public bands. I have not now such joy as I had."⁹⁷ Mary graduated from class meeting to band. That, however, is a trial. Once matriculating through a certain season of trial band, she graduated into public band. This advancement process drew her in deeper by creating joy in her, and by increasing the love she had for the relationship of the band itself. John's presence may have been the catalyst for her inner joy. It seems at face value that, though she was appreciative of John's presence, his presence in the band was mostly about attending to the business of graduating folks from trial band to public. Knowing her presence in the band was more of a permanent thing is what brought feelings to Mary Thomas that were worth writing about.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 128.

William Barber also wrote a letter where he mentions being admitted into a band. His letter was more focused on about speaking about Thomas Cooper's impact on his band. But in the midst of his speaking of Cooper he mentions being "put upon the trial band."⁹⁸ Graduating from a trial band was important to Barber. Having the structure that facilitated movement from one level of band to another was something that pulled in Barber's interest.

Lawrence Coughlan wrote a letter to John Wesley mentioning an "Old Mr. Pritchard" who spoke in his band. Lawrence was captivated by Mr. Pritchards desire for a clean heart. He mentions Mr. Pritchard sharing that he believed for a long time that he was unable to have such an experience. Mr. Prichard shared that after hearing a particular sermon, he sensed his heart cleansed. This was shared with fondness to the group. Lawrence goes on to say that three others in the group shared similar experiences. For Lawrence Coughlan, hearing of the growth of others is what captivated him. Hearing first hand hearing of others sharing the experience of Jesus personally cleansing the souls of those exposed to his Word, captivated Coughlan's interest.

Miss A.B. wrote to John Wesley about something she had never experienced before in band meeting. She wrote, "Glory be to God! He did fulfil His promise, by pouring out his Spirit upon us. Within these last four days, five have received a clear sense of God's pardoning love."⁹⁹ The writer went on to speak of the sustained experience, and how those who received the experience are now sensing God's call on their life more clearly than before. A.B. seemed quite glad to be a participant in

⁹⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 20.

⁹⁹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 158.

witnessing such an encounter, and seemed quite glad that it happened. For A.B. it seems that getting to witness the spiritual progress of others was the draw that ignited her spiritual passion.

Wesley's classes and bands drew people in through community, the desire to overcome darkness, and a want to grow measurably in some spiritual way. The desire for strength through community is attested to by the people of the time. Alexander Mather was interested in the mentoring of newcomers and the coaching of leaders to that end. Elizabeth Ritchie was attracted to connecting with others that shared her love of God. Hiram Lovegrove was compelled by enjoying witnessing others find spiritual journey partners. Thomas Oliver was compelled by a group wisdom from a trusted circle of friends that enabled him to discern a very personal sense of calling on his life.

The classes and bands tapped into the wants of people by assisting them in overcoming darkness. This is attested to by the people of the time. Elizabeth Taylor enjoyed her perspectives changing to the extent that she no longer feared death. John Oliver experienced a unity within men, where he witnessed the vulnerable confession of faults. His participation in this experience enabled him to sense himself purified from sin in a way not experienced before. Elizabeth Halfpenny found a union with God in a band that gave her the strength she needed to overcome strong unwanted temptations. Thomas Cooper found a faith filled prayer in band that seemed to have power over unclean spirits. This reality calmed his soul. Mr. G.C. sensed an endless thanksgiving for the classes and bands being a means of grace that enabled him to overcome the darkness of his heart. Elizabeth Johnson experienced a growing unity which diminished social prejudices within the group.

The Methodist class and band system tapped into the needs of people by providing them the atmosphere to grow spiritually. This is attested to by the people of the time. Elizabeth Sais' self awareness resulting from band was a source of healing and learning. Margaret Austin found in band that sharing the struggles of life was actually a source of strength. Sara Barber found affirmation from others in band, enabling her to receive a long desired sense of justification from Jesus. Elizabeth Downe's engagement with corporate prayer led her to sense God's power in a way that was unknown to her. Mary Thomas was drawn in by the experience of graduating from one level of band to another which brought her a strong sense of joy and a lasting sense of permanence. William Barber found meaning and belonging in graduating from being in trial band to the more permanent public band. This experience helped him see spiritually in a way unknown to him before. Lawrence Coughlan was inspired to witness the growth of others. Miss A.B. was glad to witness others receiving pardoning love.

These are the reasons, given by the very participants of the classes and bands, that made the church irresistible under Wesley. These were the reasons people desired to journey on longer and deeper with Wesley's class and band. They wanted to get closer to God, to develop their faith, to find a life that is abundant, to grow in deeper relationships, and to embrace a life full of meaning. These are the reasons why the trend of the church repelling people was turned into compelling people instead. These are the reasons the church was actually pulling people in with spiritual passion, rather than pushing people away with religious obligation.

Can it be done again? Are there modern institutions that are practicing what was so compelling in Wesley's day? If so, can the church be re-informed of these life giving ideas in today's time? To these questions we turn.

Ch. 3

CrossFit

The methodist class and band system tapped into the needs of people by providing them the atmosphere to grow spiritually. This is attested to by the people of the time. Elizabeth Sais' resulting self awareness from band was a source of healing and learning. Margaret Austin found in band that sharing the struggles of life was actually a source of strength. Sara Barber found affirmation from others in band, enabling her to receive a long desired sense of justification from Jesus. Elizabeth Downe's engagement with corporate prayer led her to sense God's power in a way that was unknown to her. Mary Thomas was drawn in by experience graduating from one level of band to another which brought her a strong sense of joy and a lasting sense of permanence. William Barber found meaning and belonging in graduating from being in trial band to the more permanent public band. This experience helped her see spiritually in a way unknown to her before. Lawrence Coughlin was inspired to witness the growth of others. Miss A.B. was glad to witness others receiving pardoning love.

If there are modern institutions that are practicing what was so compelling in Wesley's day, perhaps the church can be re-informed of these life giving ideas in today's time. In this chapter I will explore the current success of a specific modern institution that embraces a similar environment that Wesley's Methodists embraced.

The encouragement and measurement of real and lasting growth is something that some modern groups do well. This will be looked at to see how the environment Wesley created is executed in the atmosphere of today. The hope is to inform the church of ways to recreate the pull type motivation tapped into by Wesley. The Crossfit culture has a way of exciting its members to do life-changing activities that are grueling to watch, yet those participating want to do them and do even more. What does this modern institution have to say to a church that has lost its way in regard to engaging and motivating its people unto change like it once did? How might the church tap into the inner strength and desires of the individual for good?

Why would anyone pay \$130 per month at a crossfit gym as compared to \$30 per month at a typical gym? Many people are being passionately drawn in to the CrossFit gym because of the proven results of development as it relates to fitness. Hailey Hughes speaks of the draw for her. “My story may not be anything special but I think you could easily make some similarities and/or references to your own life because we all go through seasons of low valleys where we’re burdened with a lack of motivation and feel uninspired.”¹⁰⁰ Hailey Hughes is one of many who has been drawn into CrossFit because of the development of her inspiration and motivation. Her passion for life has been ignited.

The magic sauce of CrossFit is the science of tracking fitness. For starters, fitness is a term that is specifically taught before beginning the measurement phase. Fitness is the breadth and depth of one’s ability to perform in one of ten ways. The ten ways are cardio, respiratory, endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed,

¹⁰⁰ Hailey Hughes, “Why You Should Try Crossfit (A Dietician’s Testimony),” October 22, 2018, RDRx Nutrition, <https://rdrxnutrition.com/why-you-should-try-crossfit-my-testimony/>

coordination, agility, balance, and accuracy.¹⁰¹ Through skills, drills and physical tasks one's ability to physically adapt in these ways produces a measurably higher level of fitness. Another way to say it is that through a “constantly varied high intensity functional movement” one’s power increases. Power is defined as force times distance divided by time.

Lord Kelvin is quoted to have said “If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it. Once your ego is checked in at the door and your understanding of fitness is in place, the measurements begin. Before one begins measuring one’s capabilities as listed above, one’s personal body measurements are tracked. Any gain is a gain. Now everything gets measured. Common measurable workouts to increase your fitness include burpees, kettlebell, deadlift, pushup, pullup, handstand pushup, squat, rope climb, shoulder press, snatch, clean and jerk, and lunge. These are just the inhouse exercises. Often the workout is taken outside to run, flip tires over, you name it, if it improves functional fitness, it's done and measured.

This writer personally interviewed an owner of a CrossFit establishment to ask him about his experience. When I asked him about the reputation of development, Vincent Jackson grinned and told me a story of a woman who came in just the other day because she was drawn to that very possibility. For her, the desire was to develop physically toward a smaller percentage of body fat. She is already on her way. In his shop, you name your goal right when you sit down with him. Soon after Vincent develops a step by step plan to feasibly guide you towards your goal. He also gives you an anticipated date of achievement. You then inherit a team of folks who are already a

¹⁰¹ The Crossfit Marine, “The Purpose of CrossFit: Part 2,” originally published in the CrossFit Journal, May 15, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5Wqj2WrCIU&t=11s>

part of the Crossfit community.¹⁰² They become your tribe to train you and encourage you on your way to achieving your developmental goal. As you achieve milestones along the way, the team will display your name somewhere and celebrate with you.

Vincent was animated when he spoke of “the tracker.” “There is an app that each participant puts on their phone that enables them to track each day’s progress.”¹⁰³ While Vincent does not manage the input of the information for each individual, he is able to monitor. So, from his desk he’ll periodically pull up someone’s progress and check in to see if they are charting on a tolerable trajectory toward their stated goal. “If they are tracking well I let them carry on. If they are not tracking well, I’ll meet with them and suggest redirective behavior.”¹⁰⁴

Pedro Lem Santos thinks that the real secret to the success of CrossFit in enabling others to develop their fitness is the culture of CrossFit.¹⁰⁵ Everyone helps everyone. For starters when you have just onboarded to a new CrossFit facility everyone knows the new guy will need help. The culture is to reach out and encourage. Because of this, when someone is no longer the new guy, and a new person shows up, the longtimer remembers the help they were given and gladly returns it.

Another part of the culture of crossfit is that you learn to prioritize your pace yourself. First of all, you are not competing with anyone as you train but yourself. And because you are tracking your own progress, you are the one that sets your pace.

Fun is a part of the culture as well. The CrossFit Games are a part of the experience. The culture of work and play together seems to add to the task of personal

¹⁰² Vincent Jackson, interview by author. Pascagoula, Mississippi, February 22, 2021.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Pedro Lem Santos, “OutSystems and CrossFit: The Power of Culture,” outsystems, January 4, 2019, <https://www.outsystems.com/blog/posts/crossfit-power-of-culture/>

development. The CrossFit Games is an event that connects all those within the crossfit community into a global game. This element of fun in the CrossFit culture has certainly had the effect of drawing people in. In 2011 the number of folks registered for the CrossFit Games was just over 20,000. By 2019 that number had grown to over 500,000. The games have not just added to the overall growth of CrossFit. The growth of CrossFit means more stories of lives transformed through development. The testimonies are just about endless. Amit G says “Not only will you get in the best shape of your life, but you’ll do so in a warm, friendly, supportive atmosphere.”¹⁰⁶ Jared M. says “challenging my body in a different way every day has got me in the best shape of my life.”¹⁰⁷ Annisa D. says “I’m now lasting until evening without any naps or fatigue in the afternoon. I’m more focused too, which is crazy because I’m usually all over the place.”¹⁰⁸ Alex H says “There’s no stopping now. I’m just gonna keep getting better, stronger and faster. So if you wanna make some changes then come through. You will meet some of the nicest and most helpful people around you.”¹⁰⁹ Jennifer F says “New members get a warm welcome and lots of encouragement from everyone. I have made so many friends here, which, for me, would never have happened at any other kind of gym.”¹¹⁰

Many of the testimonials speak to much more than just the focus on development. Community is being built. The personal training received through the coaches as well as the personal encouragement from the cheers of your peers increases the feeling of community. Overcoming weaknesses also takes place as one's

¹⁰⁶ Amit G., “Testimonials,” accessed January 10, 2021, Crossfitinsanity.Com/testimonials.

¹⁰⁷ Jared M., “Testimonials,” accessed January 10, 2021, Crossfitinsanity.Com/testimonials.

¹⁰⁸ Annisa D., “Testimonials,” accessed January 10, 2021, Crossfitinsanity.Com/testimonials.

¹⁰⁹ Alex H., “Testimonials,” accessed January 10, 2021, Crossfitinsanity.Com/testimonials.

¹¹⁰ Jennifer F., “Testimonials,” accessed January 10, 2021, Crossfitinsanity.Com/testimonials.

vision and work for one's goals become more important to them than the immediate temptations that once held one back.

Local CrossFit establishments can compete in their overall score. This means the individual strengths of members are leveraged. Everyone gets a piece of the fun in the overall score. Maybe one is not great at toes to bar, but their snatches are better than average. Their score now helps the group.

Having a process specifically designed for development is a tactic that could inform the church. I think a look into Scripture may even reveal the idea to be something Jesus leveraged. CrossFit's naming areas of graduation and having a way to measure that is also an area that could inform the church. Celebrating the wins of development and creating the culture that embraces the process is also a way that the church could learn from the CrossFit world.

My understanding of the process of Jesus making disciples includes the naming of areas of graduation, having metrics for measuring those levels, and shaping ministry so as to create movement within the named areas. All three ideas are taken out of Jesus's playbook. The book of Acts shows a church with a strong sense of what it takes to make disciples. The gospels, however, show Jesus starting from scratch. As the reader makes her way from one to the other she notices a graduation of naming.

When the original twelve first showed interest in Jesus they were simply named "followers."¹¹¹ As they progressed from just hanging out with Jesus, to deciding that they wanted to become intentional about learning from Jesus, they began to be called "disciples."¹¹² It is no coincidence that the word disciple specifically means learner. This

¹¹¹ Matthew 4:18-20.

¹¹² Matthew 16:20.

graduation is seen in the gospels. However, in the book of Acts, when the disciples are now leading and growing the church as ones' sent on a mission by Jesus, who is no longer physically with them, they take on a new title. They are called "apostles."¹¹³ Apostle specifically means one who is sent on a mission, or on behalf of another. A church need not take on these specific designators. But naming areas of graduation is important. Every school names the progress of students. If the church is going to be about the progress of growth within the lives of the members, then naming is vital. A church could use whatever words it chooses. It could use community, curious, crowd, congregation, and core, with core being the highest level, and community the entry level. Just start the process of celebrating where people are in their discipleship development. If you do not know where someone is in their faith development, then as in CrossFit, it will be difficult to name what their next step of development is.

Having some metric system whereby one may measure movement from one named place of discipleship to another is vital to a process. The way to assess growth is through measurement. Jesus frequently made clear his interest in his followers having a faith that grew. In essence, for Jesus, faith was a metric for measuring his followers' discipleship. "Ye of little faith" was often heard by his followers with the purpose of communicating Jesus' desire for them to have more. Metrics specific enough to measure discipleship are prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. How often one is praying, or in devotional Scripture reading, is measurable. How often one's presence is in worship or small group is measurable. How much one gives financially is measurable. How many ways one serves is measurable. How often one witnesses of the good that results from their discipleship, is measurable. In these ways

¹¹³ Acts 13:2.

one can assess where someone lands in their level of discipleship, and set smart goals for growth.

The trickiest task of discipleship for Jesus was creating movement of growth within the named areas of graduation. He was often portrayed by the gospel writers as frustrated, even amazed, at the level of faith of those around him. He wanted to see movement, or growth. Subsequently, he often arranged opportunities for such. By calling Peter out of the boat, urging the disciples to feed five thousand people, or sending them out as ministers with no money, Jesus facilitated opportunities for the disciples to grow their faith. A process of discipleship in a church must include the same. It is tricky because movement within the different areas of graduation take unique approaches. Creating a ministry that increases the chances of someone in the “community” becoming “curious” about the church is a unique task. Creating a ministry aimed at moving someone already a part of the “congregation” to becoming “core” is a unique task as well. The two will look very different. Just as kindergarten and high school differ in their respective unique approach, so too does the approach of encouraging differing levels of spiritual growth.

If CrossFit and the church are compatible in regard to the effort of assisting members in the category of development, how might a church take on some of the practices of CrossFit in a way that is faith based? Could a similar culture such as taking measurements, goal setting, coaching, spiritual exercises, tracking, strength development, and fun be a regimen that churches and their small groups could learn from? Determining whether each of these categories could be applicable is a matter of imagination.

Measurements could be spiritually taken easily in regard to the fruit of the spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”¹¹⁴ Individuals could easily be asked to circle a number between 1 and 10 in regard to how they are doing in each of the categories. For instance “In regard to your level of joy over the past month, one being the lowest and 10 being the highest, how are you doing really?” The same question could be asked of all categories. The person could sign and date, and the document could be kept in their development file for future comparisons. Obviously the data would be limited to the opinion of the one answering the question. Perhaps later with the consent of the person, other individuals such as spouses, close friends, or small group members could be asked the same question about the individual to render a fuller form of data.

Spiritual exercises could easily be connected to membership vows. If someone is a member of a United Methodist Church, they commit to being active in regard to the prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.¹¹⁵ The following ideas are general and could be made as specific as the individual wants. The point is to show that goals can be set in regard to spiritual exercises. The individual could easily answer multiple choice questions corresponding to each commitment topic. In regard to prayers, “How often this month will you get alone with God in prayer?” Circle either, A. 1-3 times a week., B. 4-5 times a week., or C. 6-7 times a week. In regard to presence, “How often will you surround yourself with our community in worship? Circle either, A. once a month B. twice a month, or C. three to four times a month. In regard to gifts, “the total

¹¹⁴ Galatians 5:22.

¹¹⁵ *The United Methodist Hymnal : Book of United Methodist Worship*. (Nashville TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

amount of financial gifts I pledge for 2022 is _____.” In regard to service, “I pledge to serve the following ways in 2022,_____, _____, _____.” A pamphlet for avenues of service could accompany the questionnaire. In regard to witness, “In 2022 I will share the good resulting from my relationship with God and His church with...” A. 1-5 people, B. 5-25 people, or C. 25-100 people.

Goal setting could then be established on an area of spiritual fruit the individual would like to see more of, or of a spiritual practice. A goal of more joy or more prayer time would be feasible to set. A mentor could then assist the individual in creating a path to meeting that goal.

Tracking of one’s goal could be done within church software. Realm software enables a church to create accessible files on all individuals that offer their information. A mentor could easily chart how an individual is doing on a digital platform. Realm also comes with a phone app which could be utilized by the one wanting development. As they spend time in prayer, or come to worship, or give to the church, or serve in some capacity, or witness, they can chart everytime in the Realm app.

Strength development could be done by identifying which practice the individual excels in. Do they perform naturally better in prayers, presence, gifts, service or witness? Based on their strengths, the mentor knows more about where to steer them for higher performance. Moreover, If a strength is identified, the individual could begin the steps of becoming a mentor for someone else in that particular area. Either way, identifying and celebrating individuals strengths is very feasible in regard to development.

Games could be done by small groups and individuals competing by score in regard to points assigned to any category of prayers, presence, gifts, service, or witness. For five years a category could be assigned to the year, and points could be added to see who places. The overall goal of course is the spiritual development of the people that makeup the church. As the games inspire people to higher scores, spiritual development increases. Everybody wins.

It must be said that CrossFit was strong in the other areas that Wesley's small group were appealing to people. Community building and overcoming weaknesses were a draw to Wesley's bands and classes. Community is something noted in this chapter that develops at CrossFit. Newcomers are made to feel welcome. Their accomplishments are celebrated. They participated in teamwork which often leads to a deeper sense of community. Folks in CrossFit typically work out with the same people on a regular basis, which often leads to relationship building. The community building aspect of CrossFit surely contributes to its appeal. It just wasn't the focus of this particular chapter because of how impactful CrossFit is on progress in personal development.

CrossFit is also an atmosphere that enables individuals to overcome certain weaknesses. Insofar as Wesley's classes and bands enabled individuals to overcome weaknesses, Crossfit could also inform there. Anytime someone grows in strength in a particular muscle group, they are also overcoming the weakness that was once present in that particular area. Anytime someone grows in their ability to perform a gymnastic movement such as a pull up, they are overcoming the weakness of not being able to do

a pull up. Again, because CrossFit performed so well in personal development, that was made the focus of this particular chapter.

The ways of measuring, tracking and coaching individuals toward physical health and development has attracted many. All the strategic tactics leveraged by the CrossFit community will not cut and paste into a church environment. However, surely some can. Assessing and measuring where someone is can certainly be done. Setting goals for where someone would like to go can certainly be done. Journeying with them on the path from A to B can certainly be done. Jesus measured up some fishermen as followers, gave them the goal of disciples, and coached them through the process. If the church is to follow the example of Jesus surely there is something to be gained from observing the CrossFit community.

CrossFit informs the church that there is a genuine want in many, perhaps most, individuals for developmental growth. There seems to be enough want for even spiritual growth as to tap into passionate motivation. This is not just an obligation form of motivation. People do not pay to feel obligated, and people are paying top dollar to develop. This want of growth can inform the church in regard to assisting people in growing in their life of faith. The church, or churches, that focus on simply believing or not believing will miss this opportunity. Research certainly shows people want to grow spiritually. Spiritual growth can be difficult and so the church has a need that can be supplied. Were spiritual growth easy, the world would likely be an easier place to live. Spiritual growth can be difficult and so assistance is welcomed. The disciples of Jesus certainly found that reaching new levels of spiritual growth did not just happen. It took

intentionality and help. But, they also found that their new found levels of spiritual maturity was quite worth it.

CrossFit can also inform the church in regard to the important steps involved in assisting individuals in their growth. Just as naming categories of fitness is important to beginning fitness development, naming categories of spiritual maturity for individuals can be a resource the church offers. Joy, peace, kindness, hope, love, and patience are just a few markers of spiritual maturity. Individuals can decide for themselves which of these categories they want to grow in. If a list of growth opportunities is as thought out as CrossFit's list, it would likely be a service wanted by many.

After naming the category or categories of desired growth, a growth track can then be developed. The church can be informed by CrossFit in developing pathways or growth tracks for individuals as related to their stated goals. Just as CrossFit creates pathways of fitness through various combinations of physical tasks, the church can offer various combinations of spiritual tasks. These are not to be seen as earning salvation, such as works righteousness. Rather, they are living out of the call to follow Jesus. In following Jesus there is a faith that most certainly grows.

The church can be informed by CrossFit to meet people where they are in regard to their faith development needs. One size track most certainly does not fit all. There are as many ways to grow in following Jesus as there are people. Peter's path to growth in Jesus looked very different to Paul's. But, both needed some form of mentoring or assistance. In this way CrossFit also informs the church to provide some form of coaching for those who desire spiritual growth. Naming a desired area of growth, discerning a path to reach said goal, and sticking to it will take some form of

coaching. A coach or mentor could assist an individual in creating a growth file based on the above information. Once developing the growth track, the coach could have feasible dates attached to the goals and have the individual actually sign their own goal sheet. This may sound excessive, but it has certainly been successful in the sphere of personal development.

For those who want the above growth track but are not keen on working with a spiritual coach, then the tracking application used by CrossFit could be an option. The tracking application enables an individual to do all of the above on their own within the convenience of a phone application. This way the individual decides their own pace. This path would have less accountability but more privacy for those who want it.

CrossFit can inform the church in the task of making development fun. For starters, the church could become far more intentional in the way it celebrates personal development. “Before and after” pictures are used in the fitness development community to congratulate those who are making gains, but also to inspire those who want similar gains. If someone in the church has a 2 out of 10 in the score of joy, and increases to a score of 7 within a six month period, that needs to be celebrated. For starters, that which gets rewarded is likely to be repeated. It will increase the chances of the individual’s continued success. Equally important are the lives that could be touched in sharing the story. If there are individuals in the church sitting on low levels of joy, the story may be the very thing that inspires them to believe that they too can be surprised by joy.

It can also be made fun by whole classes celebrating spiritual growth gains. Adding individual gains to other individual gains within a class or small group can give a

total gains score to an entire class. The class or small group can celebrate their total growth together. As this culture of growth develops, classes may choose to compete simply for the excitement of spiritual growth. Classes can also put their total scores in subcategories. A class may not have had best overall gains, but maybe they scored highest in the activity of prayer, or the experienced levels of joy. These are gains worth celebrating. Moreover, a newcomer in a church who is looking for those particular areas of growth will know better what small group will match their particular growth needs.

CrossFit's culture of everyone assisting each other, especially newcomers, with their development is an idea that can certainly inform the church. There are many different "one another" opportunities in Scripture. "Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."¹¹⁶ This is not a new idea in the life of the church, but certainly something the called gathering can do more of. Identifying opportunities for growth in the life of each other, and encouraging each other to that end, is part of the culture of CrossFit. How many more people might the church be drawing in if they knew they would be met with a culture of development opportunity encouragement.

Chapter one of this paper referred to many de-churched individuals who have left the church because they experienced their particular church context as irrelevant. They may have wanted to follow Jesus in an ongoing way, but their church did not seem to have the support that would help them. They may have been attending a church that stressed the idea that someone either believed, or they didn't. The above practical approach to spiritual growth can inform the church by providing these types of

¹¹⁶ 1 Thess 5:11

de-churched a reason to think that their deep want of spiritual growth may in fact be met in the context of a church.

Ch. 4

Alcoholics Anonymous

One of the draws to Wesley's classes and bands communicated by the opinions of those who participated was the overcoming of weaknesses, or dark strongholds. This could mean overcoming negative issues such as fear of death, or social prejudice, or lack of unity with others. Some spoke in more general yet darker terms such as being "purified from sin", being relieved of "unwanted temptations", being set free from "unclean spirits", and being released from "darkness of heart. It's hard to know exactly what these individuals meant. It is likely that many such statements were connected to the vices that were found on the streets. As mentioned above, England was facing the same hardships of France at the time of Wesley's small groups and so many homes were negatively affected by alcohol, gambling and prostitution. Regardless of the specific unwanted darkness that was being overcome, the point is that the people were quite drawn to the possibility of overcoming it.

This is attested to by the people of the time. Elizabeth Taylor overcame her fear of death. John Oliver experienced the overcoming of disunity. His participation in this experience purified from sin in a way he had not experienced before. Elizabeth Halfpenny overcomes strong unwanted temptations. Thomas Cooper found power over

unclean spirits. This reality calmed his soul. Mr. G.C. overcame the darkness of his heart. Elizabeth Johnson experienced diminished social prejudices within the group. Can the church re-capture such testimonies?

This chapter will explore a modern expression of a small group environment that is known for and successful at enabling individuals to overcome a life stealing darkness. It will seek to establish what exactly enables this small group to be effective in that way. It will also explore both scientific research, and testimonies of individuals who contribute to the popular opinion. The testimonies will show what real people express that drew them in. It will also explore the ways in which the church today might be informed by this modern expression, so as to once again reclaim its draw on the lives of people in need of such service help.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is an intentional small group fellowship of people overcoming the dark stronghold of alcohol.¹¹⁷ There are many addictions or strongholds that could have been the background of this contemporary example. Alcohol was chosen for several reasons. For starters, it is the world's favorite drug.¹¹⁸ It is consumed more than others likely because it is legal in most places and easily acquired. It has also proven to be the world's most lethal drug in terms of premature mortality, disease and long term disability. It is therefore the most treated addiction. Of the treatment approaches, AA is the most common place people receive treatment.

Interestingly enough, AA has its beginnings at the same University that gave John Wesley's small group ministry its start. At Oxford University Frank Buchman

¹¹⁷ John F. Kelly, Keith Humphreys, and Marcia Ferri, "Alcoholics Anonymous and Other 12-Step Programs for Alcohol Use Disorder," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2020, no. 3. art. no. CD012880. Accessed 08 March 2021, <http://DOI.org/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

began the Oxford Group. “AA got it’s ideas of self examination, acknowledgements of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups...”¹¹⁹ Sam Shoemaker had been heavily influenced by Frank Buchman and the Oxford group. Shoemaker would become the senior minister of Calvary Church in New York. In 1928 Shoemaker would formally start an Oxford Group in the U.S. Much of what this Oxford Group did by way of absolute surrender and life changing prayer and faith in small group would eventually be adopted by AA.

The fact that A.A. is the most popular treatment program does not necessarily mean it works. Dr. Keith Humphreys, professor of psychiatry at Stanford University, and Dr. John Kelly, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, both conducted a rigorous study on AA to critique whether it was more spiritual than scientific. They found strong evidence that the strategies of AA are indeed effective in helping overcome alcohol addiction. Looking for clinical outcomes and cost savings they researched 36 rigorous reports on 25 different studies, which included 150 different scientists, 67 different institutions and more than 10,000 different subjects. They concluded that AA participants are 20-60% more likely to end up abstinent than people who do not participate. They felt that if you could increase another treatment's success rate such as cancer by 20-60% it would be welcomed and well worth the time and effort. The success rate makes A.A. appealing.

AA was compared with four other treatment approaches and outperformed them all. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), outpatient treatment, mindfulness and education all scored lower. Outperforming in abstinence, partial drinking and the

¹¹⁹ Anonymous. “The Oxford Group Connection” *Silkworth.net*. Accessed 5 October 2021, <https://silkworth.net/alcoholics-anonymous/the-oxford-group-connection/>.

consequences of both means that those in AA had fewer health problems, fewer missed days of work, fewer DUIs, fewer relational problems, and lower emergency room costs. In regard to getting sober, staying sober, drinking less and suffering fewer consequences, AA works.¹²⁰

That AA works is one thing. How it works is another. The connection to the thesis of this paper is how it works. The approach of AA is unique among all the other approaches mentioned in a major way. The most clinical way to say it is that AA employs psycho-social factors that, though they work differently on different people, seem to help most increase their chances of overcoming this stronghold. For starters there is a strong shifting of one's social network. As members begin to commit to the program they eventually drop the heavy drinkers out of their network and begin spending more time with those who are abstaining or are at least in recovery. Because of this, there is less temptation. Fewer people are pulling out bottles around the critical person, and more people are supportive in their path toward recovery. The longer the relationships in the small group form, the more healthy role modeling takes place. Role modeling helps people develop coping skills necessary to stay sober, and also helps a person think differently about themselves. Another psycho-social factor is one's level of hope. Rather than seeing people's lives get inevitably worse, a person can see the positive long term results of sober living.

Another big key to the success of the program is the use of the sponsorship entry way. Onboarding a new member into an AA small group happens through being mentored by an experienced member. Mentorship is a big part of the success of the program for those being onboarded but also for the mentor. For those onboarding,

¹²⁰ Kelly, Humphreys, and Ferri, "Alcoholics Anonymous and Other 12-Step Programs."

having a big brother or sister helps prevent feelings of being an outsider. For the Mentor, seeing closely the fresh effects of alcohol helps keep a vigilant appraisal of the effects of the addiction they do not want to return to.¹²¹

The strategies observed above are what research scientists say are the reasons why A.A. can be considered a good choice in regard to alcohol treatment. A scientific perspective on the draw of A.A. is one perspective. But what do people say? How do the people who experience A.A. feel about their encounter? Both perspectives are vital for a more complete understanding of what draws individuals in the experience. The following paragraphs are interpretations of actual quotations taken from individuals who communicated uniquely of their experience. The names of most are kept anonymous. One quotation is named as it was made public.

For one Jewish young adult, already drinking too much in high school, fear of what would result from college consumption was looming. Just as this person was faced with continuing their education, and the culture that was present in the college environment, another community offered itself. “While many of my college classmates were experimenting with alcohol for the first time, I was off at meetings and AA get-togethers, becoming active in service work, and developing relationships...”¹²² With an acknowledged powerlessness to the attraction to alcohol, this young person knew of the weakness they would face in peer pressure as it relates to a common college vice. A deep appreciation for having an alternative community can be heard in the quotation. Developing community with others that share the same goal of surrendering to a greater

¹²¹ Kelly, Humphreys, and Ferri, “Alcoholics Anonymous and Other 12-Step Programs.”

¹²² Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 288.

power, rather than succumbing to the temptation of vice was a desired strength that drew this person in.

A married woman began to believe a dark lie within her own self talk in regard to the usefulness of her life. “I never thought I could be useful to anyone except my husband and my children and perhaps a few friends. But AA has shown me that I can help other alcoholics.”¹²³ For her, the abuse of alcohol had warped her hopefulness about her life adding value to others. Step 12 of AA is about the individual in the group carrying whatever good they have found in the group to someone they have identified may benefit from that good. Now, rather than just being a help to her family, she can bring the good she has received from the group to others she suspects are struggling with alcoholism. Sensing her life adding value to others was a draw that she became passionate about.

One housewife drank at home while taking care of two children. She admits that alcohol had taken her over and that her kitchen, bedroom, and laundry room had become her bar. All the places that had once given her meaning were being clouded by stashed bottles. “I have been able to interpret that failure and that shame as seeds of victory. It was through feeling defeat, failure and the inability to cope with life that I was able to surrender.”¹²⁴ Finding a power greater than herself to surrender to was her draw to AA. Until then she was faced with surrendering to the life taking master of alcohol.

The well known actor, Brad Pitt, was drawn to a small group of AA after realizing himself that he wanted help. His observation has more to do with the conversational freedom he found in the candor of the group. “You had all these men sitting around

¹²³ Ibid., 294.

¹²⁴ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 295.

being open and honest in a way I have never heard. It was this safe space where there was little judgment and therefore little judgement of yourself. It was actually really freeing just to expose the ugly sides of yourself. There's great value in that."¹²⁵ The transparency of the group was unlike any other group conversations he had been privy to. For Pitt, the darkness he needed to be released from was the inability to discuss his "ugliness" as it relates to alcohol with his everyday community. Having a place to make a fearless and moral inventory of his life was the life-giving draw that kept him participating in the group.

A physician who remained functional enough to work, realized that the growing grab of alcohol would soon affect even his ability to work. As a physician, this person very much saw life as a miracle and so believed in a higher power. At the same time, the ability to be dependent on any other power than himself was difficult. The tension of his powerlessness over alcohol led him to try AA. "So after taking the first half of the First Step, and very gingerly admitting myself to Alcoholics Anonymous, something happened."¹²⁶ Having a group of people in fellowship over their admitted powerlessness over alcohol enabled him to take the first step. What "happened" in that first step was the hope of finding a power that could diminish, and ultimately remove, the life-diminishing grip of alcohol. This hope is what drew this particular man.

A teenage girl took her first drink at a fraternity party and remembers feeling OK in her own skin like never before. This feeling soon turned into an appetite for alcohol that she could not control. All she could see in her future was drinking herself to death.

¹²⁵ Brad Pitt, "On Alcoholics Anonymous, Staying Sober". Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?e=dVwyGgfCaig&t=30s>.

¹²⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 305.

“One summer with people who enjoyed life sober was all it took for me to want sobriety more than I wanted to drink.”¹²⁷ What this girl needed was a good reason to turn her will and life over to the higher power she believed in. She found that reason in the lives lived by those enjoying the fellowship of joint victory over alcoholism.

Another young lady finds her own will power not enough to cease the life taking pattern of her drinking. She was surprised at what she found at her first AA meeting. “As I spoke I looked around the room. More importantly I looked at the faces of the people in the room and I saw it. I saw the understanding , the empathy, the love. Today I still believe I saw my Higher Power in those faces...”¹²⁸ What this young lady seems to have needed was to know that there were others that not only understood her struggle, but that cared for her overcoming it. What drew her in was the caring listening of those who experience a similar struggle.

A successful banker with a beautiful family decided at the threat of his wife’s leaving, that it was time for a change. After personally experiencing worry, anxiety and hopelessness he knew he had to do it. He got to the place where he didn’t want to live but was afraid to die. He gave AA a shot. “I certainly didn’t visualize a group of people talking about their drinking problems, making light of their personal tragedies, and at the same time enjoying themselves.”¹²⁹ Being honest about the hold and negative effects of the alcoholic lifestyle seems to be the space this banker needed. Making a fearless and moral inventory of the failures caused by alcoholism was a needed step in the journey of finding a new day. This joint interior search is what drew this fellow.

¹²⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 315.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 326.

¹²⁹ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 356.

A high functioning individual with dreams of winning a Nobel prize could not seem to fill the void caused by self loathing. Alcohol became the substance that filled such gaps. Blackouts eventually lead to vacant blocks of memory, which eventually lead to memory loss. The pattern was unsustainable. She eventually found an AA group and was struck by their interest in having her. "People gave me their phone numbers and urged me to call, to pick up the telephone instead of a drink. They were warm and friendly. They said keep coming back."¹³⁰ The group's intentional approach of letting her know that she was more than just welcome, that they actually wanted her there, was a draw that kept her coming.

One lady had a difficult time sharing her interior life with others. She drank to enable herself to open up. Eventually her life was shutting down due to over consumption. She found in AA an atmosphere that helped her open up without alcohol. "There was laughter in those rooms and sometimes tears, but always love, and when I was able to let it in, that love helped me heal."¹³¹ The candor and trust built into the conversations of the group enabled this person to trust the power that the group trusted, enough to invite that power to help her heal. Finding the space to humbly invite God into the interior of her life is what drew this lady in.

A high functioning gay attorney eventually drinks to the point of nightly blackouts. He resisted AA at first because it was very hard for him to receive a personal God who intervened in one's personal life. His resistance was based on his younger understanding of a condemning God. "Although for many years I did not come to an acceptance of a God who intervened personally and directly in the lives of individuals, I

¹³⁰ Ibid., 344.

¹³¹ Ibid., 344.

was able to accept the idea of a force that moved in the rooms and animated AA members with a sense of unconditional love.”¹³² What drew this person in was experiencing the character of the God he had resisted for so long in the loving atmosphere of the group.

A legally blind woman found herself eventually dependent on alcohol. She would drink heavily and call people she knew for entertainment. During these calls she would say things she would eventually regret. Friendships were lost, and the shame of her past misgivings became too heavy to bear. “The people of AA showed me how my past could and would become an asset. I got a sponsor and started working the steps.”¹³³ Learning that her past could be used for good, and that the group would help her with that task was her draw.

The reasons named by real people as to what drew them into the small group atmosphere of AA are many. The feeling of being wanted there was a factor. Welcome signs and open doors were not enough. The active seeking and inviting of new members was employed. The intentional ongoing recruitment that takes place is strategically embodied in a sponsor. When new people came, an active onboarding process was employed. Their presence was immediately given meaning. Confidence that the group was fully aware of the struggle the individual was in, and offered the grace to accept them anyway, was attractive.

Once becoming a part of the group the tangible witnessing of lives that were now sober and yet enjoying life was a reason to hope. Seeing lives with enjoyed meaning enabled the new member to believe they could embody a life with meaning again as

¹³² Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1989), 367.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 379.

well. This hope filled new perspective helped the new member to begin re-thinking their imagined future which had been influenced in a sustained way by lives of abuse, anxiety, loss, embarrassment and often death.

Once inside the community of folks who understood and cared, the atmosphere of honest sharing was transformative. The safe space provided for candor in regard to one's weaknesses and pain was revealed as freeing. This freedom resulted in an honest interior search that was not found elsewhere. In the interior searching individuals found the space in their life that they really needed to invite a power other than themselves to transform. Individuals witness to meeting life's Power, many say God, in this unique space.

Once having the unique experience witnessed to in the above, individuals become animated at the possibility of sharing the experience with other people. The thought of helping others have a similar experience is a real draw to people. This possibility allows individuals to experience their lives increasing with meaning by adding value to other's lives. It also helps in the healing process by reminding individuals of how far they have come in their journey. It also reminds them of the many reasons they have for not returning to such a life taking activity.

Alcoholics Anonymous could have easily been a source that informs the church about developing community. The onboarding that takes place in AA is exemplary. The welcoming atmosphere is a dynamic that most individuals I read about warmly mentioned. The topics discussed in the meetings are so personal that often bonds are formed that exceed even family bonds. And the relationships typically often go far

beyond a year. Community development is certainly something that AA is strong with; it just out performs in the topic of enabling others to overcome weaknesses.

Alcoholics Anonymous also performs remarkably well in the topic of personal development. Becoming a part of a community in a healthy way is something many alcoholics have trouble with. In the mentoring process the newcomers learn not only coping skills but they learn life management skills from others within the group. Having sustained community and life management skills quite often leads to employment opportunities which can certainly be classified as personal development. One's relationship with a higher power is certainly a place of development and often witnessed to by those in AA.

Personal development just was not the focus of this chapter. Because AA performed so well in the topic of enabling others to overcome their weakness, its example was used to inform the church in that way. Wesley's classes and bands drew individuals in by helping them overcome certain weaknesses. Perhaps the church can learn from AA which draws people in to this day because of success in this regard. Can the church become appealing by finding the practices that lead to the type of honest interior searching that inspires powerful personal transformations?

AA informs the church that there is a psycho-social effect in small groups that if leveraged can be quite transformative in regard to enabling others to overcome weaknesses. This includes the shifting of relational networks, mentoring, transparency in sharing, and many other ideas that can benefit small groups.

The church can be informed by just being aware that small group is more than just a teaching opportunity. The relationships that form can be a part of the healing. As

a struggling soul finds new relationships with those that are already overcoming weaknesses of their own, they inevitably shift their existing network of relationships. This has the result of relationally shifting away from those not so concerned with overcoming weaknesses. So, as individuals in existing small groups witness one who seems to be struggling, they may be more inclined to engage with the individual in and beyond the group.

The church can also be informed by the big brother and sister mentorship. For those small groups interested in actively onboarding new comers, adopting a new brother or sister has the effect of keeping the individual from feeling like an outsider. The more someone feels like an outsider the less likely they are to develop a new network of relationships. Small groups that will intentionally share the responsibility of mentoring newcomers will find a new level drawing people in.

AA's psycho-social effect of adding hope to an individual's life can inform the church. The power of hope is leveraged in three main ways. When a newcomer joins, fresh with the marks of alcohol, the existing members are reminded of just how far they've come and thus how far they can fall if they return. It makes them hopeful about the path that they are currently on. Moreover, it reminds them of how valuable the group is to the new person. Also, as the new person takes the hope filled new steps of overcoming their addiction, they eventually offer the opportunity to others. The church can be informed in regard to how small groups view newcomers who are scarred by their struggle. If the church actually wants to help them overcome their weakness, a judgemental view is to be avoided. Rather than viewing the person as an evil sinning enemy of God, see them as a hope filled possibility. That individual can remind the

group of its value, and just might overcome the struggle because of their involvement with the group. They might even take the story of their healing into the world and bring others in to find the same hope. But those beautiful possibilities are radically decreased if they find a heightened sense of judgement.

The psycho social effect of experiencing others' transparency in regard to struggle enables the one struggling to become transparent themselves. This can totally inform the church. The more transparent people become, the more they are enabled to face their failures. These healing moments are triggered by the transparency of others. Small groups within churches are informed by being aware of the value of being transparent with their own struggles. The more existing small groups are able to name the ways in which they've struggled, even failed, the more they increase the chances of others doing the same. If a group is truly wanting people to invite God into the deepest places of their heart, then model the behavior.

Another way AA can inform the church is in the way it enables people to face their failures. As people face their failures it enables them to invite the care of God and others into that failure. As care of God and others is administered to places of struggle, healing often happens. "Therefore, confess your faults to one another."¹³⁴ The willingness to share about similar areas of weakness communicates to newcomers a level of understanding. When individuals feel understood it opens a willingness to be cared for. If the church really wants to care for people in their struggle, then being willing to share personal areas of struggle is an opportunity. This level of confession would also push back on the hypocrisy that many say is the reason they do not come to church in the first place. Hypocrisy as taught by Jesus is not someone with sin. It is

¹³⁴ James 5:16

someone who has sin, but pretends as if they do not. Perhaps the church would produce fewer de-churched individuals if it became more willing to share the common human experience of struggling with personal weakness.

Chapter 5

Community

The desire for strength through community is attested to by the people of John Wesley's classes and bands. The want of community drew individuals into the Methodist small groups. Alexander Mather was interested in the mentoring of newcomers and the coaching of leaders to that end. Elizabeth Ritchie was attracted to connecting with others that shared her love of God. Hiram Lovegrove was intrigued by enjoying witnessing others find spiritual journey partners. Thomas Oliver was compelled by a group wisdom from a trusted circle of friends that enabled him to discern a very personal sense of calling on his life.

There are institutions today that are quite intentional in regard to developing community between unfamiliar individuals. Sororities and fraternities are institutions that strategically employ tactics to make brothers and sisters out of complete strangers. They provide this service for individuals who have been recently tossed into an extremely new and difficult environment.

Plenty of movies have been made highlighting the phenomenon of fraternity life in college. Monsters University is the most recent, showcasing the origins of the lifetime

bond in between two monsters. *Revenge of the Nerds* made in the early 80's showed how any variation of social standing can create community out of fraternity. Perhaps the most popular is *Animal House* made in the 70's. This movie showcased many of the abuses that fraternities are most known for. This paper seeks to look into the ways in which fraternity and sorority life develops community, so as to inform the church.

Fraternities began as honor societies in 1776 at the College of William and Mary to support the academic success of the college student.¹³⁵ In 1835 the focus became more attuned to social development. These foci were before the college experience began to become common in American culture. In the late 1800's the number of Americans enrolled in college was around 65,000. Starting in 1880 that number began to climb. By 1890 that number had grown to 150,000. By 1910 enrollment soared to approximately 350,000. By 1920 that number climbed to around 600,000.¹³⁶

The very practical issue facing the administrative faculty of colleges was ordering the life of the students. Fraternities became a tool to maintain order at a time in the life of a young person where they were transitioning into adult life. In short, discipline was enabled to be distributed. Deans could pass along orders to the Greek leaders. Greek leaders could pass along orders to upperclassmen. And upperclassmen could pass along orders to underclassmen.¹³⁷

The ability of the fraternal life to benefit the life of the student has driven the growth of fraternity and sorority life. All but three United States presidents were Greek in college. The first female astronaut was a part of a sorority. Eighty five percent of all

¹³⁵ Phil Edwards, "Why Colleges tolerate Fraternities," *Overrated*, Vox, accessed February 10, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVh7HP_wisw&t=26s.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Fortune 500 CEOs were Greek in college. Fraternities and sororities have a higher graduation rate than students who go without them. There are plenty of appealing aspects of Greek life, but the community building is what will be examined. Today there are approximately one million college students in a fraternity or sorority. There are nine million active alumni.

I personally interviewed the president of a Sigma Chi fraternity chapter at the University of Mississippi. A president is a student who has been elected to lead the business of the fraternity for a year. I asked him to reflect on the aspects of Sigma Chi life that are intentional towards and effective in the fostering of community. His answer was mostly divided into the main categories of the process used to assimilate a new person into the fraternity. The categories he mentioned were recruitment, bidding, and pledging.¹³⁸

In the recruitment process, a team of brothers within the fraternity would identify a slate of individuals that they think would be a good match for the Sigma Chi community. Once identified, the group would then begin to pursue these individuals. The pursuit starts with matching the individual of interest with an “active.” The active is an existing member who the group thinks would get along well with the person of interest. The active would then invite the person of interest to some sort of social outing where they could get to know the person of interest, and inform the individual about the fraternity and that the fraternity is interested in them. This has the positive effect of informing the individual before they even begin studying at the school that there is a community of brothers from which an invitation to be a part has been extended.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Clayton Moses Kirby, Interview by the author. January, 20, 2021.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

After the steps of recruitment have been offered, the process of bidding begins. Bidding is mainly about making sure the one being recruited can meet the standards of the fraternity. The community of the fraternity has core values that have been communicated to the one being recruited. The “Jordan Standard” is a list of standard expectations the fraternity demands of its brothers.¹⁴⁰ The core of the standard is “a man of good character...a student of fair ability...with ambitious purposes...a congenial disposition...possessing good morals...having a high sense of honor and a good sense of personal responsibility.”¹⁴¹ What is expected from the recruit having been communicated, it is now time for the brothers of the fraternity to see if they think the one being recruited can live up to their way of community. Once the brothers of the fraternity decide the recruit would bid well, it is time for the recruit to prove the ability to fulfil membership in the fraternity by pledging.

The start of the recruits’ task is to communicate to the brothers that they will be a real addition to the community, the recruit pledges to learn the names of all existing 180 brothers. If there are 70 recruits, that means the community of brothers is a group of 250 young men that all know each other's names. The recruit pledges to learn and live by the Sigma Chi doctrines. They pledge to learn about the founding fathers of the fraternity and the creeds created by them. Finally, they pledge to gather daily in the fraternal home and pledge allegiance to the community’s core values of “friendship, justice and learning.”¹⁴² While pledging, the recruit will be picked by a fraternity member to “big brother” them. This step is to mentor the recruit through the transition of pledge

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ “The Jordan Standard,” Sigma Chi, Florida International University, accessed February 1, 2021, sigmachifu.com/jordan-standard.

¹⁴² Kirby, Interview by the author. January, 20, 2021.

into member. The President being interviewed communicated fondly about the bond between him and his little brother.

After becoming a member it immediately becomes obvious to the new members that they too will one day run the same community building process as has just been executed on them. They will be expected to prepare for that day themselves. A House atmosphere is also to be adhered to.¹⁴³

Diana Turk writes of women's fraternities between the years of 1870 and 1920. The reality that she called them women's fraternities was a sign of the times. Fraternity meaning brotherhood, these women were pushing into a male dominated institution. It would be some years before the sisterhood would confidently claim the name sorority. "Isolated and denigrated by those who doubted their intellect scholastic abilities, the founders of Kappa Alpha Theta recognized that if they bonded together and provided mutual support this might quell the hostility surrounding coeducation..."¹⁴⁴

The common fraternity practices of pledging to higher standards, holding each other accountable, and representing something larger than self were all practiced by the women's fraternities. One unique practice noted by Turk in regard to the Theta sisters of the Alpha chapter is the practice of offering a safe place to fail. Any sister who had an essay to deliver orally would be invited to give the oral essay in front of the sisters first. They were often received by the sisters with harsh critique. In this way the sister delivering the essay would learn to receive redirection from a trusted group before receiving the same in public life. Also, the essay would always be better when delivered

¹⁴³ Kirby, Interview by the author. January, 20, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Diana B. Turk, *Bound by a Mighty Vow: Sister hood and Women's Fraternities, 1870-1920*. (New York Press. New York NY. 2004.)

publicly. The safe place to fail for the sisters proved to be a space that added value to their work and future disposition.¹⁴⁵

Steffanie Kochie, a sorority alum and director of communications for her sorority, recently shared similar practices and benefits on a promotional video. “Your social skills are above the average college student, simply because you are practicing them so much more while working in your chapter.”¹⁴⁶ Kochie points to these benefits coming through the practice of working with teams in one’s community to accomplish tasks together such as planning events, fund raising, and goal setting. She says it is within these practices involving teamwork that one learns to respect the leader of a task, work with many different personalities, and eventually learn to take a turn in leading. In all of these roles one is able to fail in a safe zone because your sisters are there to catch you. As the community develops in this laboratory of teamwork the individual sisters are learning lifelong tools such as dealing with difficult situations and difficult people.¹⁴⁷

The benefit of the community of the sorority was that it gave strength to the individual. A group of females found the strength to break through a time honored cultural norm of male only fraternities. Individual women found the strength to graduate college, serve as valedictorian, serve as salutatorian, serve as student newspaper editor, and class officer, and be inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society.¹⁴⁸ These achievements which drew on the strength of community likely would not have occurred without sorority support. This phenomena is what drew these women into the strength giving community of sorority life.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Stephanie Kochie. “Benefits of Greek life for the Real World and Employment,” Delta Phi Epsilon Sorority, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeN83pcc1Xc&t=23s>

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Turk, *Bound by a Mighty Vow*,.

Lawrence C. Ross writes of similar profound outcomes from the community life of African American fraternities and sororities. Ross's historical account of the Divine Nine reveals his understanding of the significant impact of the original nine African American fraternities and sororities.¹⁴⁹ He attributes many of the civil rights accomplishments, inner city mentoring programs, and overall leadership development of African Americans to the community-building efforts of fraternities and sororities. African American leaders such as Hank Aaron, Toni Braxton, George Washington Carver, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Michael Jordan, Martin Luther King, and Colin Powell were all referenced in the book as agreeing with the need for the strength of intentional community building.¹⁵⁰

The desire for strength found in community was a draw to the individuals that became a part of the Methodist classes and bands. These individuals communicated positive outcomes such as group discernment, being coached, learning to coach, connecting with others, and developing journey partners. The modern institutions of sororities and fraternities may be able to inform modern church-oriented small groups on how to become a draw to community once again.

Greek life receives individuals from all walks of life and bonds them into brothers and sisters. Together these different individuals from different walks of life find many types of success as they intentionally become a community. Through recruiting, specific pathways of invitation are extended to individuals of interest. Through bidding, the higher standards that the recruit is invited into are clearly communicated. Through pledging, a period of proving the recruit's interest and ability to learn and live up to the

¹⁴⁹ Lawrence C. Ross *The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities, illustrated ed.* (New York: Dafina Publishers, 2001).

¹⁵⁰ Ross, *The Divine Nine*,.

community's standards is shown. Once a part of the community the member is continually strengthened by participating in the business of the community. Through the ongoing work of recruitment and event planning, the member learns to accomplish tasks in teams. This effort enables the member to learn respect for other leaders, work with different types of people, and assume leadership for themselves one day.

The achievements of intentional community building such as the efforts of fraternities and sororities have been attested to by many highly influential leaders. These achievements are reminiscent of the achievement accomplished by the small groups of John Wesley's day. Perhaps the church can re-capture the attractive characteristic of being a group that is intentional about how it creates community once again.

Fraternities and sororities inform the church of drawing individuals into community by showing that onboarding new people into community does not just happen. It takes strategically creating pathways. Recruiting is an active foundation of a pathway initiated by the community. Matching existing community members with individuals of interest, and planning social interaction between the two communicates much to the individual about the community in question. It tells the person that before ever stepping foot in a community function, the community is already interested in their presence. Rather than sending the pastor after every new prospect that visits, leaders could try to identify a member who would have more success in relating with the person of interest at a church function.

The church could also be informed by being more intentional with clearly presenting community standards. Fraternities and sororities have better success with

brothers and sisters who clearly understand what is expected of them. It is also helpful to understand what can be expected by the newcomer from the community. If a church community expects a certain level of physical presence in a small group from a newcomer, clearly explaining that will have the effect of more newcomers entering the life of a small group.

The community building of fraternities and sororities works because eventually everyone takes a turn in being a part of a team that facilitates community building. The church could be informed there as well. Once an individual has benefited from being a part of the church community, it is time to work on a team that makes the community possible. Community development can even take place on the team. The newcomer learns to work with different people and eventually takes their turn leading. As a big brother or sister checks up on the newcomer throughout the process of engaging small groups and teams, questions can be answered, concerns can be addressed and success can be celebrated.

All the benefits of the church being informed by community building could begin a fresh tapping into the passions of people again. Being coached, learning to coach, group discernment, connecting with others and developing journey partners could be the strength that many are looking for. It would certainly provide some with a way to follow Jesus in an ongoing way. The church as an intentional community building endeavor could push back on the image of the church as irrelevant held by many dechurched. As stated in chapter one, many of the people leaving the church do so because of repeatedly hearing irrelevant doctrinal talking points. Teaching and modeling how to build and sustain healthy community is viewed by many as more than

relevant. It is something worth paying for. Sorority and fraternity life informs the church that communicating to outsiders the community's interest in them is a far more inviting posture than simply trying to convince the outsider that they should be interested in the community.

Ch. 6

Modern Small Group Success

The draw of John Wesley's eighteenth century classes and bands showed that the church does not necessarily have to be in a season of decline. As the established Anglican church of England was declining, Wesley's methodists were flourishing. The small group allure of community, and spiritual development is alive still today as seen in the activity and growth of crossfit, alcoholics anonymous and fraternity and sorority life. Can this need still be met by the efforts of organized Christian congregations? Can churches still offer a supply to the demand that seems to still be present? If so, are there churches that are meeting that demand with a supply? Are there still churches growing through a focus on small groups even during this sustained season of overall church decline? If there are, surely there is much to be learned from them. This chapter seeks to address these questions. One social scientist has researched the recent effects of the small group movement on the American church. His writings will show a picture of the present day impact of small group ministry in the American church. A church that is local to this writer will be looked at to highlight a local example.

Three larger multi campus churches in different regions of the US will be looked at with the same question. How might these churches inform today's church?

Robert Wuthnow, professor of social science and director of the study of American religion at Princeton University has written a book researching just how small groups are shaping American Religion. Of his many insightful questions, one of interest was whether participation within small groups in America is increasing or decreasing. He starts his answer by stating that most leaders within the small group movement that he interviewed believe that participation is rising. After sampling one thousand Americans his findings support the claim. Around 16% of those interviewed have recently started a group, whereas only 5% have recently dropped out.¹⁵¹ New membership in small groups seems to be substantial while attrition rate is minimal. In short, more people are joining than are leaving. Moreover, 24% who said they were currently uninvolved, said that they planned to join a group at somepoint. 53% of those who planned to join planned to do so within a year.¹⁵²

Wuthnow's sampling of Americans is published. The implications for this paper's main question, mainly the overall life of the church, are profound. More people are leaving church life in general, than are joining. The opposite is true for small groups. More people are joining small groups than are leaving. Because of this reality, many of the churches that are concerned with a sustainable and vibrant church presence are focussing their efforts on small group ministry. So, why then is the church at large diminishing? If the small group movement is indeed growing, and the church is engaging in this ministry, it stands to reason the church would grow as well.

¹⁵¹ Robert Wuthnow, *I Come Away Stronger; How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 372

¹⁵² Ibid., 371.

For many of the churches that are focussing their efforts on small groups, the outcome is growth. The demand is greater than the supply, and these churches are riding the investment. But sadly, not all churches are interested in the demand for groups that presently seem to be unmet by the supply. And of the churches that are interested, they lack the focus and alignment of resources to that end. Wuthnow's research goes on to show that the more conservative a church is, the more likely it is to embrace successful small groups, the more liberal, the less likely. His research would show this in individual group form, as well as across denominational lines. Within individual small groups, 41% claimed to be conservative, 39% middle of the road, 16% liberal.¹⁵³ A comparison of Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and Catholics, which happen to be the three largest christian groups in the US, will in-form the above question.

Wuthnow compared the % of individuals who claimed to be in a small group of a particular denomination, with the % of individuals who claimed to be in the same denomination but not in a small group. So for the more conservative Southern Baptist denomination, 11% of Americans claim to be apart but not in a small group, whereas 15% of Americans claim to be in a Southern Baptist sponsored small group.¹⁵⁴ So, there are actually more people who claim to be a part of a Southern Baptist small group, than claim to be actually Southern Baptist. So Southern Baptists are either focussed more on small groups or are just doing them better. Either way, the surplus of individuals in small groups increases the chances of growth in the respective Southern baptist churches.

¹⁵³ Robert Wuthnow, *I Come Away Stronger; How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 374

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 375.

For a less conservative church like Methodism, the ominous reality of the opposite is true. 10% of Americans claim to Be United Methodist, whereas only 7% of Americans claim to be a part of a United Methodist small group.¹⁵⁵ There are far fewer individuals who claim to be in a United Methodist small group, than there are actual United Methodists. United Methodists are either less interested or not as focussed in dispatching resources to that end. Either way, The deficit of small groups increases the chances of further church decline.

The Catholic church is similar to the United Methodists in this regard. 30% of Americans claim to be a part of the Catholic church.¹⁵⁶ However, only 21% of Americans claim to be a part of a catholic sponsored small group. To answer the above question, even though the small group movement is growing, the church at large is not because two out of the three largest Christian groups are not as interested or just not as focused on this particular ministry.

Wuthnow asserts that the impact on the churches focussed on leveraging the ministry of small groups is positive. For starters, the individuals who are interested in a small group will be far less likely to leave a church if the church is already involved in small group ministry. 61% of those polled say they have taken a much more active part in the programs sponsored by the church to which the small group is connected.¹⁵⁷ This includes an increased amount of money given, an increase in attending worship services, participation in special fellowship oriented activities, and even serving on program committees. “The extent to which group members are drawn into their

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 375.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 376.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *I Come Away Stronger; How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 374

congregations is also evident in friendship patterns. Five group members out of six say that at least one of their closest friends attends their congregation.¹⁵⁸

In this sustained season of decline in the life of the American church, there are churches that continue to be full of life and growing due to their focus on small group ministry. A look at one local church and three of the more well known growing churches reveals that they have known of the potential of small groups for some time and are leaning in. Northpoint in Atlanta, Saddleback in California and Willowcreek in Illinois have all leveraged small groups as their main ministry. For these three churches sustainability during overall decline has not been an issue. On the contrary, as the church overall has declined, these churches have continued to grow. The rest of this chapter will look at what they are doing in common and what each is doing that is unique from the other.

The theology for each of the three churches is similar. In books put out by each, they share the belief that mankind was created by a God who is triune, or communal, in essence. Being created by a God Who is communal in essence, it makes sense that mankind would be drawn to and even in need of authentic community. Moreover, Jesus literally prayed that His followers would be one as He and the Father were One. To grow in regard to following Jesus, individuals need a group just like the disciples had a group. To become one as the trinity, to grow into the likeness of Jesus, to develop spiritually individuals need small groups. They all also agree on intentionally creating best practices for and pathways to small groups. The way in which these churches do so are unique and informative.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 375

Timothy Boharic of Crosspointe Church in Ocean Springs Mississippi began sharing with me that learning from a church already doing small group ministry well is key. Crosspointe, a more conservative church with baptist leanings, sent a team to a training conference put on by non-denominational Church of the Highlands in Birmingham Alabama. Crosspointe did not necessarily need their training to be from another baptist church. Their priority was to learn from a church that was succeeding in small group. Their take away from the conference that eventually was implemented was to provide two main types of connect groups, operate on a semester system, and suggest curriculum to leaders.¹⁵⁹

Crosspointe's connect groups are split into "life" and "grow" categories.¹⁶⁰ Life is an entry level group that is oriented in an evangelistic effort. Far less requirements and far more choices of activity broadens the scope of interest to these groups. For instance, one mom started a Coffee and Play group for moms that want to meet once a month with their child to enjoy coffee with other moms and playdates for their kids. The only real requirement is that the leader have some form of prayer before the gathering is over. The grow groups are more discipleship oriented. A small group curriculum is used for which the leader is expected to facilitate. The facilitator has an eye to community development and spiritual growth of those involved. Once a year each grow group is expected to do some form of outreach together, such as give gift cards to teachers or raise money for a local ministry.

Operating on semesters of fall and Spring enables the systematic approach to providing groups with breaks as well as providing training for leaders during the summer

¹⁵⁹ Timothy Boharic. Interview by Author. May 21, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

months. The fall and Spring semesters last from between 15-20 weeks. So a personal commitment to a group will never last longer than that.¹⁶¹ Moreover groups are encouraged to do more than one study during that time frame. Every time a new study begins it is an opportunity for a new invite. Studies usually last from 4-12 weeks. So theoretically, a group could do 4 different 5 week studies in one semester if they so choose. This flexibility means if someone has to miss a few weeks of a study they can always jump back in on another.

During the summer, leaders are trained in best practices. These include keeping the atmosphere conversational, and knowing what conversations to steer away from such as politics. The main training is on curriculum choice. Materials are suggested and leaders are given the time to choose what combinations of studies will work for their semester.

Saddleback Church in Saddleback California has focused on small groups with a full time staff person since 1998. Since then they have grown to over 3500 small groups. Saddleback loves “seeing big church become small through true community developed through group.”¹⁶² Like the smaller local church mentioned above Saddleback leverages small group by creating spiritual development through community. Resourcing small group leaders is a priority. They train leaders, offer different curriculum paths, offer small group guidelines, and even provide coaches for their small group leaders.

Two very unique ways Saddleback works for the success of small groups is through their HOST system and spiritual assessment. Host is the word they use for a

¹⁶¹ Timothy Boharic. Interview by Author. May 21, 2021.

¹⁶² Steve Gladen. *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities*. (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI., 2013)

small group leader but is also an acronym for the responsibilities.¹⁶³ The term HOST was used to lower the bar and increase participation. HOST is also an acronym. Saddleback believes if an individual has a *Heart* for people, is willing to *Open* their place to their group, can *Serve* a snack, and *Turn* on a video then he or she can lead a small group. Asking people to be a small group leader seemed to limit interest. But when they began asking for hosts the interest took off. When the transition to asking for hosts was made, the issue became resourcing the hosts to fill and lead the groups. They created a website that hosts could go to for any questions. You can still see it at www.smallgroups.net/hosttraining.¹⁶⁴ The link provided answers to simple questions such as “How do I invite someone to my group?”, or scripts for inviting friends and neighbors to small group. Other ideas like setting up a gathering room, when to offer snacks, and what to do about name tags could be found there as well. Saddleback found that providing simple questions to simple answers enabled many to overcome certain fears. One saddleback leader writes “We tried to think ahead of time of any questions the HOSTs might have and then gave answers to them in writing so they could read them in the comfort of their home.”¹⁶⁵

The initial study offered by the host through video and discussion was preplanned. The host is not responsible for choosing this. If the host was uncomfortable leading the study portion, a facilitator would be provided. The group would then decide together if they wanted to continue after the initial study. The better the host did in recruiting friends and neighbors, the more likely the group would

¹⁶³ Steve Gladen. *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities*. (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI., 2013), 75.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 214.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 215.

continue. If the group decided to continue on to another study, a syllabus of recommended next studies would be offered for the group to simply choose from. The study facilitator could stay with the group, or the host would be given a coach to help guide the host in becoming the facilitator. Once the group moved to another study, the spiritual assessment tool would be introduced.

Another unique aspect of Saddleback small groups is the Spiritual Assessment and Spiritual Health plan component.¹⁶⁶ Once a group decides to continue to meet together, the facilitator introduces this. Individuals are encouraged to spiritually assess themselves by answering questions aimed at charting where an individual is in regard to the areas of worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and evangelism. The answers tally in numerical form to enable the individual to see if they are in a crawl, walk, or run stage of development in each category. If an individual finds that they are in the crawl stage of evangelism and they want to develop into the walk stage, a spiritual health plan is then created. The spiritual health plan is a tool created by Saddleback to enable the individual to grow from any of the crawl, walk or run stages, and in any of the above listed metrics. Much depends on what area the individual wants to work on. The individual is encouraged to share their plan with a spiritual partner for at least a year. The tool is designed to give intentional pathways for growth, inspire short term spiritual goal setting, and create healthy growth embracing small groups. Saddleback embraces growing individuals in areas that are scripturally founded. “It is not about the numbers because you can have 100 percent of your people connected in small groups, but if

¹⁶⁶ Steve Gladen. *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities*. (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI., 2013), 128

those groups are not spiritually healthy, you do not have a healthy small group ministry.”¹⁶⁷

Northpoint Church in Atlanta Georgia is another example of a church that continued to grow through the meeting the demand of small groups in a season of overall church decline. Began in the early 90s by Andy Stanley, son of Baptist pastor Charles Stanley, today Northpoint is a multi campus church with well over twenty thousand members actively engaged in a small group. Northpoint Church believes small group to be not just a ministry, but *the* ministry. Like the above churches they believe that spiritual growth happens best in community. They also believe that a church increases their chances of growing their small groups by intentionally creating pathways and best practices. Northpoint has uniquely created the pathway of what they call “Grouplink” to their small groups, and the “closed door” principle as a best practice.¹⁶⁸

“For a step to be effective, it needs to be easy, obvious, and strategic.”¹⁶⁹ For this reason Northpoint created Grouplink. The leadership of Northpoint was having difficulty leading worship guests to try out a small group. The intent was to make the pathway a bit more obvious and doable. Grouplink is a two hour event Hosted by Northpoint where the small group ministry of Northpoint is showcased. People are given the opportunity to connect with others in the same geographic area and stage of life to start a community group. It is similar to speed dating but for small groups. The event is decorated to suit the mood, generous hors d’oeuvres and music help break the ice. A

¹⁶⁷ Steve Gladen. *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities*. (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI., 2013), 146.

¹⁶⁸ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits. *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture*. (Random House: New York., 2004) 125.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 124

host welcomes all and reminds the room of the intent of the evening. Group leaders are introduced by name, location and day they can meet. If a guest has not already formed a group with others at the event, they can join with a leader whose meeting time and location best suits their needs. A video promoting Grouplink can be seen at Grouplink.org to this day. Ninety percent of those who attend a grouplink event end up in a small group. The year the book “Creating Community” was published by Northpoint the grouplink strategy was on target to connect over three thousand people into small groups in that year alone. Northpoint’s Grouplink strategy has made the pathway to small groups easier and more obvious to their worship guests and has therefore contributed to their growth.

A unique best practice created by Northpoint is the “closed door” idea they recommend to their community groups. Closed door sounds counterintuitive to a welcoming community, but it seems to work well. Northpoint believes that “people care for people they know well.”¹⁷⁰ They believe authentic community is created by belonging, accountability and care. These community building characteristics come over time in a predictable environment. That predictability, they believe, only happens if the group does not change for a particular season. If a community group is formed, the recommended parameters are 8-12 adults, meeting 3-4 times per month, for a season of 18-24 months. For the 18-24 months the group is closed to additions for the sake of predictability. They believe this environment fosters the best type of spiritual growth as the group knows if members are struggling. They further believe that groups that have

¹⁷⁰ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits. *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture*. (Random House: New York., 2004). 106.

history together knows each other's tendencies enough to keep each other moving in the right direction.¹⁷¹

'Like every living thing, every group has a life cycle. A legitimate concern of closed groups "is that they become stagnant and inwardly focused over time."¹⁷²

Therefore as a part of the closed door policy, Northpoint recommends groups stay closed for only a season. After the agreed upon period of 18-24 months is up, the group is open for movement of folks coming and going. Northpoint believes this keeps the group fresh and focussed.

Willow Creek church in South Barrington Illinois is another church that has sustained life and growth during decades of overall church decline. Starting in 1975 in a rented theatre, by 2001 Willow Creek grew to over 20,000 members with over 2000 individuals in small groups. Willow Creek's unique contribution to the small group movement is creating strategic guides for building and resourcing a small group ministry. The foci of their material is structuring the small group program, leading life changing small groups, and coaching life changing small group leaders. These works have since been published and are full of practical information. A Willow Creek Association was eventually created to provide training for those interested.

Building a Life Changing Small Group Ministry emphasizes the need to be intentional about providing the appropriate structure. Choosing what sort of small group model works for a particular context is one of many important topics discussed in the training. Cell models, G-12 models, house church models, purpose driven models, adult Bible fellowship models and common cause models are all good options, but do

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 108.

¹⁷² Andy Stanley and Bill Willits. *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture*. (Random House: New York., 2004). 108.

not work everywhere.¹⁷³ Choosing is important. How many small groups can one ministry point person be over? What number of small groups requires extra staffing. Willow Creek's Russ Robinson worked with over 200 staff persons to care for 2700 small groups. That is a little over 1 staff person for every 12 small groups. What to look for in a small group leader and tips for developing small group leaders is the largest chapter in the book. The material is extensive and shows just how involved and in depth the endeavor can be for those churches willing to take the work seriously.

The main focus of the Willow Creek training material seems to be resourcing leaders of small groups to effectively lead the group time.. *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* is a Willow Creek inspired resource manual that equips small group leaders with listening skills, ways to know the members better, and ways to facilitate productive conversations. Favorite phrases of active listeners such as "let me see if I understand what you are saying..." are taught.¹⁷⁴ Active listening increases clearer communication which in turn increases the sense of knowing and being known within the group. Willow Creek believes that this trust building strategy leads to more intimate community and spiritual growth. The manual also instructs small group leaders on ways to learn their members better. Tactics such as becoming aware of the unique love languages and personality types of members are taught will grow trust, deepen relationships, and bring the deeper parts of people to the surface. Another way to foster growth and relational depth is through dynamic discussions.¹⁷⁵ Leaders are taught to facilitate dynamic discussions through asking all sorts of good questions. Guiding questions, summarizing

¹⁷³ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. *Building A Life Changing Small Group Ministry*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids., 2012). 229.

¹⁷⁴ Bill Donahue. *Leading Life Changing Small Groups*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids Michigan., 2012). 48.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 122.

questions, application questions and launching questions are all taught to open up a conversation to more dynamic levels. Questions that get people thinking and talking are a premium. “What do you think was going through Peter’s mind at this time?” would get a group talking better than, “Do you agree with Peter’s response?” One is a yes or no conversation stopper. The other excites the mind to imagine the text and to share what Peter might have been experiencing.

Willow Creek also resources their small group leaders with coaches. Coaches provide for ongoing growth through training. Coaches are also given their own training material. *Coaching Life Changing Small Group Leaders*¹⁷⁶ is a practical guide developed by Willow Creek for those who want to lead small group leaders. Coaches learn how to lead small group leaders in building authentic relationships, resolve conflict in a healthy manner, extend care and compassion, reach out to seekers and identify and develop future small group leaders.

Wuthnow’s sampling of individuals in church sponsored small groups suggests that while the church at large is indeed in decline, the small group movement continues to be in demand. The demand can still be met by churches and there are plenty that are doing it with growing results. There are churches that have supplied the demand by making small groups their primary ministry focus. These churches grow even during the seasons of overall church decline. The genuine needs of community and spiritual growth are still felt as in Wesley’s day. For churches that are aligning their resources to that end, community is being developed and spiritual growth is being supplied. These churches have made their stories and strategies available. For the churches that want

¹⁷⁶ Bill Donahue and Greg Bowman. *Coaching Life Changing Small Group Leaders: A Practical Guide for Those Who Lead and Shepherd Small Group Leaders*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids Michigan., 2006).

to learn this time honored path of supplying small group ministry to the present demand, the resources are available. If a local church is willing to become more focused on small groups, are willing to align resources to that end, and remain persistent while applying the pressure of change, the chances of growth are likely increased. Building a life changing small group ministry, leading life changing small groups, coaching small group leaders, recruiting hosts, building easy to follow pathways to the small groups and creating best practices are all resources that are available to the churches that want to learn.

Research on churches that are successfully leveraging small groups reinforces the idea that decline does not seem to be inevitable. The research informs churches and denominations that chances of growth are increased when mission focus shifts to aligning resources to support small groups. For churches that do not know where to begin, sending a team of interested individuals to a church succeeding in small group is a good place to start. Churches that succeed in small groups have intentionally made pathways to small groups clearer. At these churches guests do not need to ask how to find a small group, or what a particular small group is like. Leadership at these churches serve the guest by actively informing and inviting. Open doors are not enough at these churches. These churches walk guests to and through these doors.

Churches are informed on succeeding in enlisting leadership for small groups. Soften the ask by resourcing those asked to serve by providing whatever resource is needed to reduce the perceived stress. If an individual is willing to host a small group but not lead discussion, provide them with someone who can. Churches are informed to find and offer the resources to assist facilitators. Facilitator resources can include

understanding good discussion questions, becoming a good listener, and learning the unique personalities of those in the group. Once a church grows over a certain number of small groups, appropriate staffing becomes important.

Dissertation Critique

_____This chapter seeks to reflect on and acknowledge several valid critiques of the claim of the thesis. The critiques are made on the basis of informing the church. The overarching thesis is that the popular opinion of Wesley's classes and bands can be informative to a church that is in decline in regard to drawing spiritual passion out of individuals once again. The underlying assumptions of the thesis that deserve a critique are as follows: the popular opinion of Wesley's classes and bands is relevant; the popular opinion can be helpful; and the popular opinion will reveal specific ways that the current church can be positively informed. These will be explored first, followed by critiques on chapters 3,4,5 and 6.

Is the popular opinion of Wesley's classes and bands relevant? In regard to historical and intellectual inquiry, the question is a good one. John Wesley as a historical figure has been researched from many different angles. His theology, such as his views on sanctification, have been researched from many different intellectual angles. If one believes that unexplored topics in regard to the historic and intellectual life of John Wesley are worth researching, then this topic is indeed worth the time and effort. The popular opinion of Wesley's classes and bands is one that has been sparsely researched. Moreover, when researched, the topic is usually explored in regard to theological ideas. For instance, the book most cited in this particular paper looks at the popular opinion of bands and classes primarily to understand the theological influence of the Anglican and Moravian churches upon them.¹⁷⁷ This paper,

¹⁷⁷ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*.

rather, seeks to explore the popular opinions in regard to what specifically drew individuals to the classes and bands in the first place. This writer has yet to find this particular question explored elsewhere.

What about the merit of the popular opinion in general? Popular opinions can be less than helpful and sometimes even dangerous. The popular notion that "most people fudge on their taxes" does not make the practice good or even benign. How does one know that the ideas in this paper are not less than helpful? Popular opinion has produced the lottery, fast food, and all sorts of predatory ventures such as check cashing and high interest loans. Convenience stores capitalize on the popular demand for the Enquirer, frozen sugar drinks, cigarettes and cheap beer. How does one know that the popular perspective on the draw to Wesley's classes and bands is even worth exploring?

The paper does not seek to argue that in general the popular opinion is always good. Much writing is happening on the topic of populism. Books, collections of essays and the role of political figures and the media are all hot topics.¹⁷⁸ This writer does believe that Methodism's impact on the era of research in question was a good one. The impact argued in chapter 2 should suffice on this topic. Something made Methodism's impact a good one. This paper does not argue that the popular opinion is what made the impact good. This paper only seeks to give voice to the popular opinion in regard to what was experienced by those most touched by the classes and bands. The paper also argues that the popular opinion reveals the needs of the people that drew them into the classes and bands in the first place.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Frank has written *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism*. Cristobal Kaltwasser has written *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Benjamin Kramer has written *Perspectives on Populism and the Media: Avenues for Research*.

This writer believes that the categories of interest revealed in the popular opinion of the classes and bands are within the milieu of needs rather than wants. One of the main categories defining predatory ventures is the allure through popular wants. Providing community, overcoming weaknesses, and assisting with development or growth are all intrinsic needs of humanity. There is no predatory manipulating oversell, such as the promise of prosperity, certainty of lifelong health, or cult-like secret knowledge. There are no cult-like characteristics at all. One can leave whenever ready, one can associate with others outside class or band, one can leave and still associate with those in the band, one can disagree with leaders, and nothing is secretive.¹⁷⁹

Is the popular opinion informative for the church today? That is a great question and one that this writer hopes will find more research by others after this argument is published. One cannot know for sure, though my hunch is in the affirmative. Many of the churches that are growing today are focused on smaller groups such as Wesley's classes and bands. Churches such as Northpoint, Saddleback, Willowcreek all have as a major component of their ministry a focus on smaller groups. These churches have many critics, and for many reasons. That does not negate what may be real life giving features of the small groups within these ministries.

What about the voices of those at the time who experienced a class or band but were not favorable. This is a good question. This writer found some examples. Samuel Roberts who had detailed knowledge of Wesley's classes and bands, suggesting he had indeed participated, and had a clear and deep distaste for Methodism.¹⁸⁰ His description of class or band however did not stray much from what

¹⁷⁹ Rick Alan Ross. *Cults Inside Out: How People Get in and Can get Out*.

¹⁸⁰ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 130.

others within this paper have said. There may be many poor opinions of Wesley's classes and bands in other letters that this writer simply has not seen. There are many letters within the Early Methodist Volume and the Fletcher Tooth Collection that have yet to be digitized into a legible PDF format so as to make for legible reading. But even if there are alternative opinions of the classes and bands, these sources would not answer the question of the paper. It was the interest of this writer to find the reasons of those who were indeed drawn into the bands and classes. Someone with a negative perspective on the class and band likely would not be a good resource to answer that question.

So why not just focus on other churches to see what it is that they are doing successfully in regard to small groups as it relates to these three topics? I wanted to look into modern expressions of each topic where the popular desire, and success of each are intensely focussed on. Fraternities and sororities enhance life through community building in ways that are uniquely intentional, in a way that few churches do. CrossFit does personal development in more meticulous ways than churches. Addiction recovery programs place more emphasis on overcoming weaknesses than most churches. And I found no church that focuses on all three in a way that would inform this paper as deeply.

In the paper, the point is made that Wesley believed when his attention transitioned from working on Methodism as a society to Methodism as a church, that the sinews of Methodism suffered for lack of attention and the whole began to fly apart.¹⁸¹ So does this paper's initial emphasis and attention on the church at large have the potential of once again causing the church to fly apart? It is a fair question. I cannot

¹⁸¹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*,.

say I know for sure. My hunch is that since the redirective prescriptions for the church made in this paper are to focus more on small groups in specific ways, then it really is a shift of time and energy from the administration of the larger church to the resourcing of small groups, rather than the other way around.

Where is the power of prayer in this paper? Surely Wesley's small groups were engaging in prayer. Helping others overcome weaknesses, feel a part of a community or develop spiritually would surely be made more possible by prayer. This writer agrees with the prayer critique. I think prayer is a discipline that needs to be taught in every church. However, I think prayer is not a unique redirective to offer in this particular paper. Most churches have heard of the power of prayer.

Moreover, the popular opinion of what drew individuals into Wesley's small groups was the focus. Prayer was not mentioned as a motivator as much as the above points were. Additionally, there was plenty of prayer in the Anglican churches that these individuals were not attending. If prayer was a topic powerful enough to draw these individuals, they would have already been in an Anglican church.

Are fraternities and sororities really institutions able to inform the church of anything? Are not the hazing abuses too extreme to offer them a voice of instruction to the church? I understand this sentiment. However, the witness of Scripture is that quite often individuals and groups of much less standing were used by God to speak to his called gathering. A woman caught in adultery was used to teach a gathering of the most learned religious of Jesus' day that they too were not without sin.¹⁸²

Wasn't one of John Wesley's main draws his call to social reform? Where is that in this paper? When John Wesley spoke of social holiness, he did not mean social

¹⁸² John 8:3-12

justice as many understand it today. He did not mean to politically fight for legal rights of under-represented minority groups, etc. By holiness, he meant personal holiness. It was social insofar as it was chiefly accomplished with a small group of believers who were also seeking personal holiness.

There are many critiques of Alcoholics Anonymous. The basis of critique chosen to analyze in this paper will be done on whether or not the critique is able to inform the church. The two critiques of AA that this writer believes do just that are “some adherents are forced to attend as a result of legal proceedings”, and “graduates often see alcohol as evil.” The two critiques will be examined on the basis of informing the church.

There are cases where public offenders are given the choice of AA so as to minimize sentencing.¹⁸³ The perpetrator of a DUI might get less time in jail if they promise to spend a certain amount of time in AA. Quite often those who participate in the program because they have to, rather than want to, will do their time and be done. The motivation is thus compulsory rather than voluntarily. The adherent goes as the better of two evils, rather than because they personally want what AA has to offer. When individuals go to AA because of punitive measures, the outcome is less productive than when individuals go because they want to. This anecdotal idea informs the church by showing what form of motivation is more successful. Inviting individuals into an experience based on outcomes they positively want is far more productive than inviting people to consider the negative outcomes of non-engagement.

¹⁸³ Editorial Staff, “Criticisms of AA (American Addiction Centers)” March 23, 2021, Alcohol Rehab.com. <https://alcoholrehab.com/alcohol-recovery/criticisms-of-aa/>.

If an individual is in a small Catholic catechesis class so that when finished they might marry another catholic, this could be a type of punitive motivation. Do the class, or else you don't get married. The Catholic church which is seeing increasingly less people in their offered small groups, may do well by positively marketing their small group offerings. Indeed, all churches could positively market the benefits of their small groups. Name the ways in which a small group creates community, or assists in spiritual growth. Churches could create profiles of their open small groups based on the positive marketing and share the information on websites, pamphlets or church bulletins. If a small group is unable to name the positive reasons for being apart, then being viewed as irrelevant should come as no surprise.

Another critique of AA is that successful adherents often see alcohol as the ultimate evil.¹⁸⁴ Because the participant's life was almost lost to alcohol, it becomes a substance the adherent believes no one should ever touch. The position is understandable. However, the same position could be taken on a great number of areas. Individuals have almost lost their lives to excessive work, eating, and thrill seeking. To many on the outside of AA, seeing alcohol as something that no one should touch seems rather judgemental. In this light, if a church is known more for what it stands against, rather than what it stands for, it may be viewed by outsiders as judgemental.

Max Shippee, an owner of a CrossFit business, admits that there are common critiques of CrossFit. CrossFit can be intimidating, dangerous if done too quickly, and

¹⁸⁴ Editorial Staff, "Criticisms of AA (American Addiction Centers)" March 23, 2021, Alcohol Rehab.com. <https://alcoholrehab.com/alcohol-recovery/criticisms-of-aa/>.

coaches are often unqualified.¹⁸⁵ The intimidation comes from the gap between what is being accomplished in the gym versus a person's ability when they walk in the door. More thoughtful owners try to schedule introductory visits to times when entry level classes are utilizing the main space. This gives the shopper a heightened sense of ability and thus interest. In a similar way, a person new to small groups may not need to be put in a group that has been together for years. The layers of conversation in that sort of group have been textured by time in a way that likely seems impenetrable, even intimidating, by a newcomer. A newer group, or a group that is intentionally more sensitive to newcomers, will likely increase the chances of success.

CrossFit can be dangerous in regard to physical injuries if a person tries a skill that they are not developmentally prepared for. Deadlifting too much weight can easily lead to any number of muscle or joint issues. One must progressively work up to deadlift a particular amount. In the same way, perhaps age appropriate small groups should focus on what is developmentally appropriate. For instance, before learning about the atoning power of the blood of Jesus in regard to original sin, perhaps children just need to focus on the reality that God made them, God loves them. Maybe add a little weight by teaching God wants them to live forever. Otherwise some smart kid might ask why God punished His own son to death for something that someone else did.

Coaches in CrossFit are too often unqualified. It is typical, says this owner, that individuals who achieve a certain level of performance are allowed to coach up to that level of performance. The problem is that even though the individual can indeed

¹⁸⁵ Max Shippee, "A CrossFit Owner's Thoughts on 8 Common Criticisms of Crossfit." May 30, 2013. <https://www.paleoplan.com/2013/05-30/a-crossfit-owners-thoughts-on-8-common-criticisms-of-crossfit/>

perform, they are unequipped to deal with coaching topics such as assessing someone's starting point.¹⁸⁶ Setting developmentally appropriate goals and pathways to achieving those goals are another coaching skill that most coaches do not naturally have without training. The church could be informed to make sure their small group leaders are trained to some intended level. Some level of community building and spiritual growth training should take place if those are the desired outcomes. Otherwise you may see small group leaders emerge simply on the basis of knowledge level as it relates to Scripture. But just because Scripture is taught does not necessarily mean that community and spiritual growth is happening. The religious elites that had Jesus crucified were the most knowledgeable of Scripture.

The major critique of fraternities and sororities being exclusive can inform the church.¹⁸⁷ Once rush is over and brothers and sisters have been initiated into their new family, there is no getting in until the next season of rush. Moreover, even when rushing season is in full bloom it is quite an ordeal to get into either a fraternity or sorority. For starters one must have a certain level of financial security to even entertain the idea. Also, true or not, Greek life has a reputation of ranking each other, and seeing those outside Greek life as inferior. As mentioned in chapter one, churches have a reputation of looking down on those outside. Before seeing individuals outside the church as "sinner" or "non-Christian" or "not one of us", churches could do well to pay attention to the many reasons people may or may not be "in church." It is quite possible that if a

¹⁸⁶ Max Shippee, "A CrossFit Owner's Thoughts on 8 Common Criticisms of Crossfit." May 30, 2013. <https://www.paleoplan.com/2013/05-30/a-crossfit-owners-thoughts-on-8-common-criticisms-of-crossfit/>

¹⁸⁷ Mariah Stewart, "The 'Abolish Greek Life' Movement Calls for an End to Toxic Fraternity, Sorority Culture." September 15, 2020. <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/the-abolish-greek-life-movement-calls-for-an-end-to-toxic-fraternity-sorority-culture/>

de-churched individual's story were known, their non- church going status would make complete sense. Moreover, being sensitive to another's story increases the chances of one's church seeming invitational, even attractive. A study on "Mistakes Made by Churches" would be more helpful than "The Sinner and their Destination." Finding out the wants of the de-churched and providing small group topics accordingly would be for better than just viewing them as outsiders.

Ch. 7

Dissertation Conclusion

The diminishing church is the problem this paper addresses. One may argue whether or not a diminishing church is even a problem. If one considers issues such as higher dropout rates, less local volunteerism, fewer local safety nets, and a higher cost on federal government issues that are problems, then a diminishing church is a problem needing exploration. Those are just the secular and societal observations. The spiritual cost is the issue that carries much more weight to those leaders inside the concerned church.

A brutal reality of a diminishing church is that the church is presenting itself in a way that is repelling. People are leaving. There are not simply unchurched people outside the walls of the church. The vast majority of individuals disengaged with the church are in fact dechurched. Which is to say, they have experienced the church and its message to some extent and have decided based on their encounter that they do not wish to be a part. These individuals share their lack of interest in the redundant doctrinal messaging of the church. They find their spiritual needs met in other ways. Some have been personally hurt by what they perceive as a judgemental, hypocritical and anti-intellectual atmosphere. Finding little room for doubt and pondering over big questions in life, they look for the places where this is allowed. Whether one receives

these critiques as credible or not, it begs the question of those interested in the stated problem, “How might the church posture itself better?” Is the church presenting like a museum, full of rich history but sterile and cold to the modern spiritual journey? Are modern coffee houses the place to find deeper conversations and richer fellowship than the church?

The explosive growth of the first three centuries in the life of the church suggests this current reality does not have to be so. Even in eighteenth century England, when the Anglican Church became stagnant during its transition to becoming state run, the Methodists found a way to be appealing. The masses that found Anglicanism cold at best and repelling at worst, found something in the Methodist way of doing the spiritual life inviting and compelling. Methodists were posturing their way of the spiritual journey in a way that was attractive.

The impact and method of John Wesley’s Methodists is the context for this paper’s research. The growth of Methodists in the 1700’s was staggering. From 1760 to 1790 the Methodists in Wesley’s classes and bands rose from around 20,000 to over 53,000. That’s 6.5% of England and Wales’ total population. That number does not include those worshipping in the Methodist preaching houses, or those attending Society gatherings. Many believe the Methodist impact on England helped it avoid the bloody turmoil in France. Whether that is true or not, John Wesley is revered to this day by many in England as England’s most impactful son.¹⁸⁸

This impact cannot be attributed simply to Wesley’s field preaching. The most well known field preacher of Wesley’s day believed Wesley’s impact to be attributed to his organization of classes and bands. John Wesley believed this as well. His view on

¹⁸⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*,.

social holiness was born from his experience of small group fellowship. It was there that Wesley believed was the chief means of grace that led to sanctification.

As Wesley's attention transitioned from the society's classes and bands to the structure of a church organized by conferences of lay pastors, the classes and bands began to "fly apart." This was the point where Wesley began to fear the movement he so loved would begin to take on the form of a religion without the power.

So what was it about the classes and bands that set them apart from the church of England? Why did John Wesley, a learned and sober man, believe them to be so full of power? What made the Methodist class and band so compelling rather than repelling? The main research of this paper sought to answer this question. To do this a source that has had little attention was looked at. Many letters were written by the original individuals that attended Methodist class or band. These letters have had very little academic attention paid to them in regard to the study of Methodism. The little attention that has been paid to them centers mainly around theological questions such as Wesley's Moravian and Anglican impact on the organization of the classes and bands. My question is about the popular opinion itself. What do the people themselves say drew them into the classes and bands? What did they find so compelling about them? Why would they continue to be a part of the classes and bands for their spiritual edification? What was the draw in their opinion?

After analyzing eighteen different individual quotations that directly mention an experience in the context of a class or band, three different categories of interest were noticed. What seemed to interest the individuals were strength in community, a desire to overcome a weakness or some form of darkness, and a want to grow measurably in

some spiritual way. Community was a draw through mentoring newcomers, connecting with others that shared faith, finding spiritual journey partners and enjoying the shared witnessed experience of others. Overcoming weaknesses or darkness was a draw such as no longer fearing death, sensing being purified from sin, overcoming unwanted temptations, finding power over unclean spirits, and overcoming darkness of heart. Personal development or growing spiritually was a draw such as healing and learning, receiving an elevated sense of justification, experiencing a heightened sense of God's power, graduation from one level of band to another, making it through trial band, seeing better spiritually, and witnessing the growth of others.

Modern examples of institutions that employ small group atmospheres known to be successful in the areas of community building, overcoming weaknesses, and personal development were then looked at. The hope was to identify ways these groups have been successful so as to possibly inform the church today of how it may too also be successful in these areas. The institutions looked at were Crossfit for personal development, Alcoholics Anonymous for overcoming weaknesses, and college fraternities and sororities for developing community. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to just how those findings may indeed inform today's church.

The positive aspect of college fraternities and sororities is their ability to develop strong communities. They literally take complete strangers and turn them into brothers and sisters. Can the church learn anything from their tactics? A church's leadership team could be more intentional about creating pathways into the community of the church. It could give small groups that are willing the challenge of recruiting better. They can do more than have an open door. They can be more strategic with identifying

people they think would benefit from the atmosphere of their group. Also, identify someone in the existing group that would most relate to the identified guest and have that person reach out. Extend a personal invitation to the person in a way that seems warm. If the person actually comes to the small group or to church, make sure the active invitee introduces the person to several people. Let the person hear the active member say their name aloud many times. These steps communicate to individuals that a community has truly extended an invitation to be a part.

A mentor could then be assigned to the newcomer to begin communicating the core values of the church. If a church happens to have as core values serving and small group participation, then communicate why that is and show how the individual can take their next step. As the individual takes steps into the mission of the community they are also becoming a part of the fabric of it. The mentor could also be intentional about introducing the newcomer to all the key leaders in the church. This would increase the chances of the individual linking their personal interests to the activity of the church. If they have teens and have just been personally introduced to the youth leader, then they may decide to bring the family.

Personal and spiritual development also being a draw to the Methodist class and band, the CrossFit community can inform today's church. If the imagination of today's church leaders can leverage the strategy of measurements, goal setting, coaching, spiritual exercises, tracking, strength development and just plain fun for discipleship purposes, then the church might become compelling. This writer thinks it is not only possible, but would likely be an attempt that John Wesley would be proud of. Church members would likely want to know that someone is concerned about their level of

“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”¹⁸⁹ Tracking could be done by a trusted mentor within the church or by the individual themselves by using an app provided by the church. Goal setting could be someone wanting their joy to go from a 5 to a 6. Spiritual exercises could easily be designed for the purposes of achieving one's joy goal. For example, start thinking on things that are “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, [and] praiseworthy...” once a day every day for a month to see if the joy measurement increases.¹⁹⁰ Games could be done as groups or teams compete by tallying the spiritual development progress points. No one loses who participates in developing spiritually.

If a church prefers to be less aggressive, they could choose to see spiritual growth as someone's increased participation in a valued part of the ministry. If small groups and serving is a core value of a church, it would be a simple logistical task of tracking one's increased participation in either. In either scenario, celebrating development encourages it. Like the CrossFit community, in some way such as posting that someone reached a goal, actively celebrate the spiritual growth of those in the church community. A small group that has a guest visit more than twice could take a picture of the individual and simply post on facebook or on the door to the small group with a caption “Look who came back! We are so glad!!” If someone shadowing a hospitality server transitions to serving as a hospitality server themselves then celebrate it in some way. The CrossFit community has learned that what gets rewarded gets repeated. The church could benefit by rewarding what it wants repeated.

¹⁸⁹ Galatians 5:22

¹⁹⁰ Phillippians 4:8

Overcoming weaknesses or areas of darkness in one's life was a draw to the people in Wesley's classes and bands. They found there an atmosphere that enabled them to "confess their faults to one another", and eventually the power to overcome the named faults.¹⁹¹ Alcoholics Anonymous has also found a great deal of progress in strategically enabling individuals to overcome the addiction to alcohol. The atmosphere created in the AA groups that foster the overcoming of such a strong weakness could inform the church. The understanding, caring, and sharing of the many negative aspects of alcohol is a part of the transformative environment. This environment creates a safe space for deep and honest interior searching that many say is needed and rarely found elsewhere.

Churches could start by simply being aware that some individuals are drawn to a church or a small group because of their desire to overcome something. If the struggle is something as heavy as a strong addiction to alcohol, then the individual likely needs to be referred to a group that specializes. But maybe someone is simply struggling to get their life in order. Being intentionally invitational as a community will get this person only so far. Creating an environment that fosters interior searching and transformation takes more than an invitation.

What surprised many of the individuals quoted in this paper in regard to the atmosphere of AA was the openness of the discussion of the reality of life's struggles. Hearing individuals share with great candor and transparency about their own personal failures, and the subsequent negative effects of those failures, enabled the struggling individual to sense the group understood. Perhaps small groups could be intentional

¹⁹¹ James 5:16.

about having at least a moment in every session where the question is asked “in regard to the topic of discussion, where do you struggle?”

Church is described by many of the de-churched as a place where rather than sensing understanding, they sensed judgement. It is possible that as people dawn their Sunday best to go to church, that “confessing their faults to one another” is the last thing on their mind. Becoming an environment where the discussion of struggle is common will take some intentionality.

One way a small group could be more intentional about the discussion of topics that lend the conversation towards struggle is to periodically have topical studies on issues that people commonly struggle with. A Dave Ramsay class on money management would be a place that might increase the chances of someone feeling comfortable to discuss their struggle with creating a budget. A Daniel Plan class which focuses on healthy eating might be a place where someone would feel a little more open about their personal eating habits. A class on learning how to communicate better might be a place where an individual would be more willing to share their struggle with getting too loud with their children. A class on spiritual development might get someone opening up their weakness in that area. The topics are endless, but the point is to choose studies periodically with this angle in mind. If a study will foster discussions around weaknesses with a goal of overcoming, then the church just might start experiencing people being drawn in.

So, can the church become irresistible again? Can it link up to people’s desire to get closer to God, to develop their faith, and to embrace a life full of meaning? Is reversing the trend of repelling rather than drawing even possible? Can the church pull

people in with spiritual passion, rather than push people away with religious obligation? These are the questions that fueled this paper. By researching the strengths of the environment John Wesley created in his bands and classes as attested to by those who experienced them, looking for contemporary examples of successfully creating that environment, and cross pollinating the two ideas in application for today's church, this paper sought to provide those questions with hopeful possibilities. The Church can at least try to increase our chances.

What people were drawn to in Wesley's day is likely similar to today. The success of CrossFit, AA and Greek life suggest as much. Open doors are good, but it suggests a passive posture when an active one is needed. People want community but will be more likely to become a part if pathways into the community are created and actively offered. Developing best practices of how to recruit and plug in will likely increase chances of success. Open hearts are good but a more active posture is needed. People want help to overcome weaknesses. A community that is intentional about acknowledging their own weaknesses and offering a safe space for interior searching will increase their draw to those particular seekers. Open minds are good but actively helping others to develop healthy thought patterns is better. A church that designs the processes of programming around coaching people in personal and spiritual development will increase their draw. If the church dusts off these pathways found by John Wesley, perhaps we'll see an increase in traffic once again.

Successful small groups in churches, and other secular small groups, inform today's church that decline is not necessarily inevitable. There is a value the church is uniquely gifted with. There is a demand in the world that is still in want of the valued gift

the church still has. In Scriptural language “The harvest is plentiful.”¹⁹² What the above information also shows is that “the laborers are few.”¹⁹³ The church is diminishing in part because the demand of authentic community, overcoming of weakness, and development of strength is not being met. For the churches willing to meet that need there is hope.

The above information also informs leaders of churches, hopeful church attenders, and jaded church attenders. Leaders of larger church organizations such as The United Methodist Church are informed that stressing the “Open-ness” of the denomination is a passive approach that could be improved by becoming more active. Being simply open is a posture akin to a museum, or a library. The church could be led by a more active approach that offers the adding of value.

Leaders such as the every Sunday preacher, are informed that if they want to increase the chances of growth, teaching on the purpose, resourcing and execution of healthy small group ministry is an option with a hopeful track record. Rather than focussing on the binary choice of eternal heaven or hell after one dies, offer the everyday option of opening the window of heaven into life being lived through small group. Shift time and energy spent from one to the other.

To the jaded church attender, it is not the mission of the church that is the cause of its decline. It is the misguided presentation that has led to its decline. Churches that are presenting themselves as passively “open” rather than actively seeking to assist people in finding community and spiritual growth, are not following Jesus. He taught “go, and make disciples.” He did not teach “sit, wait, make sure the doors are

¹⁹² Matthew 9:37a.

¹⁹³ Matthew 9:37b.

unlocked. Turn the 'welcome' sign on. If people don't come in after that, then forget them."

To the hopeful church attender or Sunday School leader, the church still has tremendous value. It may need to be re-discovered. There are people in every town that need authentic community. As families continue to break up, and community shifts to online, real time in person community is harder to find. Churches are well situated to meet such a need. Overcoming darkness is a need that is growing. Addictions connected to greed, lust, sloth, anger and gluttony abound. People need and want help. People also want to grow spiritually in their levels of joy, hope, peace and love. These are all real time needs that have been, are, and can be met in the faithful offering of small group ministry. If teaching a Sunday School, or thinking of starting a small group, consider reflecting on pathways and best practices of small groups that might work in your context.

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