The Theological Praxis of Developing Relationships and Empowering Voices Within the Community: A Practical Method for the Church to Reflect on and Participate in the Kin-dom of God.

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THE THEOLOGICAL PRAXIS OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS AND EMPOWERING VOICES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY: A PRACTICAL METHOD FOR THE CHURCH TO REFLECT ON AND PARTICIPATE IN THE KIN-DOM OF GOD.

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THE THEOLOGICAL PRAXIS OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS AND EMPOWERING VOICES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY: A PRACTICAL METHOD FOR THE CHURCH TO REFLECT ON AND PARTICIPATE IN THE KIN-DOM OF GOD.

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ABSTRACT

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The Theological Praxis of Developing Relationships and Empowering Voices Within the Community: A Practical Method for the Church to Reflect on and Participate in the Kin-dom of God.

Jesus calls his disciples to follow his teachings of being ambassadors of God’s love, developing relationships beyond social barriers, and working toward peace, reconciliation, and equality. This dissertation explains the process of theological praxis – a means of developing relationships, peace, reconciliation, and equality within the local community.

This dissertation aims to promote a theological structure for transformative “Praxis.” This theological structure provides a means for disciples of Jesus Christ to engage in internal reflection of self and the local church. The reflection concentrates on the individual and shared theological tasks of developing relationships within the community, working alongside the developed relationships, and empowering the voice within the community.

The theological structure begins with the church engaging in a bible study focused on understanding and defining the kin-dom of God. The second action of the theological structure is reflecting on how one and one’s church demonstrate their understanding and definition of the kin-dom of God. The third action of the theological structure is adapting practices to indicate the new understanding of the kin-dom of God.

The process of praxis, as exemplified in the evolving project of Ready, Set, READ, is continuous as the fourth action of praxis is to start the process again – reflection, adaptation, and engagement. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, this theological structure offers space for individual and communal transformation to reflect the fullness of the kin-dom of God.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I give all honor and glory to the Triune God, whose eternal grace invites all creation to share in God’s divine relationship. This dissertation has come through my engagement with many disciples of Jesus Christ, who took the time to impart their wisdom and participation in God’s redemptive work of reconciliation. Along with the mentioned relationships, this dissertation developed from relationships with mentors of various faiths, cultures, and nationalities. Further, this dissertation was shaped by my experience of ministry experience as a lay member, local and international mission work, vocalist, director of youth ministries, pastor, and my academic journey of theology.

Second, I give thanks from my heart to my family. Thanks to my grandparents, who encouraged my parents to grow in their faith. Thanks to my parents, who supported my faith and educational journey over many years. I thank my brother and sister-in-law for their support during my ordination and education journey. I am thankful for the two who spark encouragement and hope for humankind’s future, my nephew and niece.

Third, I am thankful for my church, specifically members of the Arkansas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church; members of Levy United Methodist Church, Jacksonville First United Methodist Church; and Paragould First United Methodist Church. Pastors and Laity, thank you for investing in the life of an eighteen-year-old college student, guiding, and walking alongside him for the past eighteen years.

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“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” 1 Timothy 6:18-19
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. CONTEXT AND PRAXIS ................................................................. 1  
  1. Context  
  2. Praxis  
Chapter 2. FIRST PRAXIS CYCLE ............................................................... 10  
  1. Theological Focus  
  2. Missional Analysis of the Community  
  3. Initiative  
  4. Reflection  
Chapter 3. Second Praxis Cycle ................................................................. 34  
  1. Knowing the Community: Resource and Reflection  
  2. Going Deeper: Practical Experience  
  3. Considering Current Context  
  4. Beginning Outside Conversation  
  5. The Steps  
    1) Have an Intentional Plan  
    2) Set a Daily Goal  
    3) Build Trust  
    4) Mutual Respect & The Conversation  
  6. Our Community Representatives Developing Relationships  
Chapter 4. The Shared Initiative ................................................................. 64  
  1. The Shared Voice  
  2. The Shared Purpose  
    1) Family  
    2) Education & Literacy  
    3) Community & Connecting  
  3. The Shared Task  
    1) Griffin Memorial Food Pantry  
    2) Paragould School District  
    3) Arkansas State Parks  
    4) Kiwanis Club of Paragould  
  4. The Shared Event  
    1) Family Station One: *Lola Plants a Garden*  
    2) Family Station Two: *The Listening Walk*  
    3) Family Station Three: *Up in the Garden, Down in the Dirt*  
    4) Closing Station: Snacks, Music, Communion or Blessing  
Chapter 5. Reflection ............................................................................... 74  
Appendix A .............................................................................................. 77  
Appendix B .............................................................................................. 78  
Bibliography ............................................................................................ 81
Chapter I: Context and Praxis

Context

To reflect on the context of those engaging in theological praxis, Robert C. Linthicum’s *Building a People of Power* speaks to the congregation, exploring ways to exercise its gifts and power in Godly ways. The returning motif of this work is Shalom: A tangible gift from God, commanded by Jesus to distribute.\(^1\) The shalom is the relationship with the divine to the point of transformative work in action so that we (self and communal) reflect the system of sacred relationship.\(^2\) Establishing a sacred relationship is the work that Jesus came to do.\(^3\) The Christian calling is a continuation of Jesus’ work.\(^4\) That is, working toward a community that reflects God’s shalom even within our systems.\(^5\) The result is not individual but communal, connectional, and built on intentional relationships.\(^6\)

Paragould First United Methodist Church’s roots exceed the city’s incorporation. The current location of the church is nearing its centennial celebration. Located in the heart of downtown Paragould, Paragould First Untied Methodist’s campus connects to Paragould’s historic main street with highway 412 (Arkansas’ main highway across Arkansas’ north border).

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\(^3\) Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 69.
\(^4\) Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 87.
\(^6\) Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 125.
Paragould First United Methodist Church holds a strong-deep, rooted connection with our city. Many parishioners are leaders within our community's educational, healthcare, financial, agricultural, commercial, and governmental components. Since its erection in 1925, the current location of Paragould First United Methodist Church has hosted communal events such as the local farmers market, community egg hunt, harvest fest, boy scouts, girl scouts, and Alcohol Anonymous. The building also serves as the downtown public storm shelter.

The context for Paragould First United Methodist Church’s Christian Community is an association of the community at large. Our context can relate to the Lukan and Pauline references in which the community of faith has a direct link or connection with the leadership in the local community. For our seasoned-in-life members, there seems to be a strong sense of patronage when it comes to their relationship with the church-specifically the financial component. This relationship became evident within the second month of the senior pastors and my connection with the appointment. We held our first finance meeting during our second month to get to know the committee.

One item on the agenda was the budget line item for new projects. An attendee at the meeting informed us that it usually reflected as zero because it was customary to ask individuals directly for funds to address areas of the building if a

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project were to transpire. For example, the sanctuary doors needed replacing. People A, B, and C would be asked for sanctuary items because they would happily finance the work required. However, the finance members noted that funds would be allocated to requested purposes instead of the campus's new development. This concept has been in place for some time dating back to the recollection of our church historians' experience as a child attending committee meetings (our church historian is ninety-two). Thus, the connection to the local community and an understood patronage system is in our context. The challenge is defining the type of power assumed or engaged.

Our context can also relate to the Thessalonica experience as a socially mixed congregation. The benefactors of the newly constructed space (primarily funded by other donors who were interested in innovation, growth, and expansion of the church) are mainly those who are newlywed, beginning families and those who are just starting in life as adults. There is this notion of financial dependency on the church's elite (for lack of a better word).

Another segment of the community within our context is the dreamers. The dreamers are a group of roughly thirty people who are looking at creating third spaces for intentional relationship building. They meet in coffee houses, barns, bars, the laundry mat, a local assisted living facility, and other places. The goal is

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8 Linthicum, *Building a People of Power*, 118.
to be where people in the community are and see if there might be opportunities to establish a third space or worship component outside the church's walls.

Finally, I want to address the missional component of the church. The church’s mission outreach reflects our community's well-rooted patronage and benefactor relationship. Another segment within our local class system has a strong tie and established relationship with our mission portion of the campus and its volunteers (The Witt House). Yet, those in this class setting, who receive assistance through The Witt House, refrain from worshiping or attending activities on other parts of the campus.

I find it fascinating that any church member, regardless of class, connection, or participation – if asked where they worship or go to church – responds, “Paragould First United Methodist.” This response seems to speak of the desired community connection, Christian community, or family relationship.

Now that we understand the context we are engaging in, I would like to consider the capacity of power and the next step. As mentioned in the observation of the church, we meet the criteria of having a neutral ability. We have the resources together to exercise power. We can carry out actions (current and innovative actions). We are willing to carry out the mission before us (current and innovative). The challenge we face is that we are called to be an entity of relationship by the doctrine practices. Yet, there is a silent-embedded
understanding that the elite invests in their liking instead of the fundamental needs of the church. Thus, this juxtaposition of the church holding the potential to share relational powers while fighting the temptation of holding onto unilateral power is present.

“What is power? Power is the capacity, ability, and willingness to act. Every word in that definition is important for an adequate understanding of power.”

Regarding the subsequent step trajectory for our church, I would like to consider the missional component and our dreamer component. We have observed and named the difficulty of “bringing in” the community connected with The Witt House. Currently, we are considering what it would be like to create a third space at the Witt House. We are partnering with our dream team to develop intentional relationships with those already at the Witt House and, if interested, have the community dream of what that might look like. Creating partnerships is the beginning of kin-dom work.

Chapters five and six affirmed the actions our teams are already engaged in. In echoing this reading, “You can’t bring about significant change for justice and equality without building intentional relationships.” This statement is true for transformative relationships within the church. For example, we are meeting one

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on one with the significant givers of the church who are restrictive to the utilization of their gifts. Here we find a discipleship opportunity to teach others about the relationship between the skills one gives and the stewardship responsibilities of the trustees and finance committees. We do this in the most delicate sense. We can have these conversations because of our intentional relationship with the financial givers. This relationship is genuine and necessary for systematic pedagogical practices.

We are in the middle of a leadership change within the youth and children's departments. It is common within our system that staff will change every three to six years. A rotation in staff leads us to consider what systematic transformation needs to be our focus to create a platform of sustainable ministry that establishes and promotes relationships beyond the terms of the employed. These conversations occur in the same format as in chapters five and six. Finally, the last offered quote validates productive relationships beyond the church walls- as discussed in partnering with others and creating third spaces beyond the campus. These examples bring shalom within our parish (inside and outside the campus).

**Praxis**

An absence of an intentional theological praxis of defining the kin-dom of God as the foundation for a faith-based missional initiative will promote a “church to client” or “us and them" relationship. The reflection of any ties outside the
perimeter of a sharing in the kin-dom of God is a relationship that practices an inequality of voice. How can faith-based mission organizers lead participants to engage with and empower voices from within their mission fields?

In my practice of ministry, I have seen glimpses of the kin-dom of God in the reverberations of a developing project. *Ready, Set, READ @ The Park* was my effort to assemble several volunteers from my local congregation and congregation’s ministry committees into one combined effort to address deficiencies in literacy and nutritional education, as well as offer stability resources (food, SNAP application assistance, Medicaid/Medicare information, free medical screenings, and more) in our community, through fostering opportunities to develop relationships off-campus.

The planning team renamed this off-campus event, titled “*Ready, Set, READ – Community Event.*” The title change removes the limitations of holding the event in a specified location, the “park,” and broadens potential event locations within Paragould and surrounding communities. The planning team has expanded to include the original coordinators from the fruitfulness project and members of our community who relate to the Latinx, Marshallese, and African American communities. The new planning team has also implemented a rotating coordinator position, which is open to a community representative in which the next event will take place. Sitting down at the first *Ready, Set, READ – Community Event*
meeting, I felt full as I observed relationships between people from various backgrounds, experiences, social statuses, ethnicities, cultures, and faith practices. The committee members gathered at the table and shared needs within their communities. They worked alongside one another to plan efforts to support restoration. Witnessing this moment was truly a moment reflective of the reign of God’s reign—where God’s shalom among all of God’s people and bringing about reconciliation, restoration, and healing.

Encouraging the team to reach out to others within the community, I asked one of our team members to present the program to our local Kiwanis Club. This member serves as Paragould’s School District’s English as a Second Language Director. She spoke boldly of our community being predominantly Caucasian and seeing an influx of several cultures within our community – 300 students, 17 languages, and 23 countries. She was transparent in naming the misinformation we as a community hold regarding people who do not look, speak, or act as we do.

The members of Kiwanis were excited about this effort of engaging in a community asset-based initiative. Kiwanians dedicate themselves to improving the lives of children within their community. Our local club’s focus is literacy. After our presentation, the members pledged to purchase books for the next event. Several people remained after the closing of the meeting to inquire on how they could be a part of what Ready, Set, READ names the “we” factor. The “we” factor
is – that the community is not “us” and “them”; instead, the community is always “we.” Seeing the members of Kiwanis enthralled by this effort was terrific. Members wanted to participate in being a part of this ministry’s effort. A secular group excited about developing relationships, empowering the voice of the community, and participating in God’s reconciliation and healing work, was a colossal glimpse of the kin-dom of God among us.

In reading the ministry reflection, you might have noticed several changes in leadership and involvement throughout the developmental stages. The change was intentional, as the ministry fostered the practice of *Theological Praxis*. Praxis is a term utilized by Mark Lau Brandon and Juan F. Martinez to describe the ongoing action of a church that moves between scriptural reflection and engagement in ministry.\(^1\) Praxis is the repetitive cycle of scriptural study, review, and adaptive engagement in ministry. Theology is the theological reflection ministry leaders utilize to gain competencies and capacities specific to their engagement within their community. This process is ongoing and adaptive to reflect the community in which the ministry resides.\(^2\)

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12 If a church is to live in responsiveness to and dependence on God, reflective discernment is a continuous practice, rooted in the current environment and experiences of the church. Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 39.
Chapter II: First Praxis Cycle

Theological Focus “A”

The intentional theological focus for Ready, Set, READ’s off-campus development began with a Scriptural Study to define the Kingdom of God. This study consisted of two sessions (Kingdom Verbiage, Kingdom Definition: When/Where/What, and Kin-dom Theology) and one session of establishing logical foundations for the development of the initiative – specifically pairing our strengths with needs as understood through a missional analysis of our community and how we could assist others.

The first session addresses the question: What is the kingdom of God? When is the kingdom of God? Where is the kingdom of God? After we addressed those questions, the participants were challenged to develop the “Now what?” While working with a group of our project coordinators, I wanted them to voice their understanding of the questions personally and communally. I had them begin with individual reflections and then partner sharing, describing how they defined the kingdom of God. From there, we launched into the first topic: kingdom verbiage.

In modern-day Christianity, we often utilize what I have heard described as “Christian-speak,” or vocabulary not understood by or relatable to those outside the church and sometimes within it. This misunderstanding is not a modern phenomenon. Since the early Church, elements of baptism and Christian doctrine,
in general, were “hidden” from the non-Christian community until their baptism into the community. Unlike the experience of those who were brought into the community of the baptized in the early Church, several long-term church members were unable to articulate or relate to the verbiage of the kingdom of God.

To understand what the kingdom of God meant for the first-century church, we focused on the beginning of the Galilean Ministry in the Gospel according to Mark through the lens of the introduction of Mark and the openings counterparts within the remaining synoptic Gospels as well as John.

The Gospel, according to Mark, opens with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’’” 13

We worked through comparing the introduction of John the Baptist in Mark to the corresponding narratives within the other synoptic Gospels and the Gospel, according to John.

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.’” Mark 1:1-3 (NRSV)

13 Mark 1:2-3 (RSV)
“This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Matthew 3:3 (NRSV)

“As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’’” Luke 3:4-6 (NRSV)

“He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord, ‘as the prophet Isaiah said.” John 1:23 (NRSV)

Considering the verses mentioned, we find that the Gospels writers drew from Isaiah when speaking of the good news - that God is transcendent yet chooses to be brought low or suffer so that God can comfort God’s people. In presenting God as transcendent and permanent and removed from humanity, Isaiah implicitly raises the question of how humanity can have communion with God. The solution to the problem of God’s transcendence is not to imitate or compete with God’s power and glory. Contrary to the wisdom of this world, those who are honored and have power (that is, those who rule) are not the ones who broach the distance between God and humanity. They are not God-like but somewhat distant from God. Paradoxically, those who renounce worldly honor and power and suffer affliction at the hands of that power are closest to God. Rather than humanity
raising itself and counting equality with God as a thing to grasp, Isaiah presents a God who suffers for his people and comforts them like a mother.

Mark, however, utilizes an additional ancient scripture of reference in introducing John, “See, I am sending my messenger…” This segment of Mark's introductory phrasing comes from a text from Malachi. “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me…and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”14 The prophetic writing of Malachi continues to offer final words of wisdom in preparation for the Lord’s arrival. “Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”15 According to Mark, the readership of the Gospel would have understood that statutes and ordinances given to Moses at Horeb or Sinai were the law.

Furthermore, they would have also known that Elijah was a great prophet who intervened in the state of affairs of the people of Israel. The intervention was necessary because the succession of kings that had ruled was corrupt. Elijah’s work was to guide Israel out of corruption and suffering.

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14 Malachi 3:1 (NRSV)
15 Malachi 4:4-5 (NRSV)
Having the groundwork of John the Baptist introductions before us, we could see how the Gospel, according to Mark, craftily includes echoes of Isaiah and Malachi in chapter nine.

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling which, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses, who was talking with Jesus.” Mark 9:2-4 (NRSV)

For the readership of the Gospel according to Mark, this section of Jesus’ transfiguration marries the references of Elijah and Moses through Malachi and God’s transcendence and choice of becoming low for salvation. In hearing or reading of Elijah and Moses present with Jesus, the readership of the Gospel would have discovered the consummation of all that the people of Israel had dreamed of in the past. In Jesus, they saw all their history had longed for, hoped for, and looked forward to (Malachi).

At the closing of this section, we find a final benediction from the Divine, “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!” 16

In this first session, the participants learned that first-century believers understood that the kingdom of God is brought about by God alone. This is

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16 Mark 9:7 (NRSV)
contrary to the wisdom of their forebears, who believed that those in power—kings, rulers, and emperors of the day—were placed in a position to broach the distance between God and humanity. The first-century believers understood that those in power are not the ones who bring together the distance between God and humanity. Only God has the authority and power to establish a connection between God and humanity. “Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” 17 Jesus said, “The kingdom of God has come near.” The participants discovered that what Jesus said was essential to first-century believers. Finally, after kings and emperors who oppressed God’s people for centuries, after their kings turned away from God, the rule and reign of God—the mended relationship to God—is finally here through God in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ is appropriately proclaimed “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords” in the New Testament.

Our conclusion: The kingdom of God is God’s eternal reign; Jesus has made way for us to participate in the kingdom or reign of God; the fullness of the kingdom or reign of God is to come; we catch glimpses of the fullness of God’s kingdom or reign when we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit bringing about reconciliation, restoration, and healing between God, all people, and

17 Mark 1:14 (NRSV)
creation. We find equality and liberation in the fullness of reconciliation, restoration, and healing between God, all people, and creation.

After completing our first set of theological reflections, our next step was to discover how to harness the theological reflections and put them into action within our community. We spent time reflecting on scripture to gather a more in-debt understanding of the text. Our final reflection surrounded the title of our topic, “The kingdom of God.” Regarding the term ‘kingdom’ and its relation to modern social constructs, would there be a more relatable phrase to name the fullness of the reign of God? To address this question, I introduced and encouraged the participants to research Isasi-Diaz. My brief introduction addressed her encounter with Georgene Wilson and her introduction to the phrase “kin-dom.” Kin-dom of God offered a description of seeing God’s movement emerge within the community – the family God makes. It seemed appropriate to reflect on our community after naming God’s movement as emerging within the community. We began by seeking a more indebt knowledge of our surroundings and understanding better how to put our theological reflections into action beyond the church walls. Our reflection led to the missional analysis of our community.

**Missional Analysis of the Community**

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The presentation of the analysis and synthesis of data from our mission field was entitled, “Knowing Our Neighbors” - a misleading title as later we discovered that data and statistics were only a minute in knowing our neighbor. One of the strengths of this presentation was seeing patterns of needs within our community. Having the needs named from the data gathered enables us to partner the needs with the strengths the church offers. Several systems enable organizations to research various data within the organization’s fields. I chose to utilize MissionInsite.

Through MissionInsite, I gathered data reflective of a four-mile radius (the church being the center point of the radius). From the data collected, the selected four-mile radius would see a growth in both populations and household changes. The principal areas projecting growth will occur within the following phase brackets of life: 5-17 years of age and 35-54 years of age. Twenty-nine percent of the four-mile radius selection reported a household income of fewer than twenty-five thousand dollars annually. Depending on the number of household inhabitants, this amount would reflect either a low-income household or fall within the poverty parameters according to the Common Threshold Poverty Limits. Households within the four-mile radius selection reflected the following: 40% of households

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19 Population: the inhabitants of the area; Household: the make-up of a unit in which inhabitants reside.
20 A family of four with a household income of thirty thousand would fall within the poverty parameters as defined by the Common Threshold Poverty limits. A household consisting of a single individual with a total income of thirty thousand would not fall within the poverty parameters defined by the aforementioned.
with children are single-parenting households, with the remaining 60% reflecting dual-parenting households. Regarding education, only 82% of adults within the four-mile radius selection earned a GED or received a High School diploma (1% lower than the state's average).

Because our church had a well-established missional connection to the local community- I built a secondary data parameter reflective of our missional presence within the community. (Figure WH)
For visual placement, the blue roads crossing in the center of the map are West Kings Highway running west to east, and crossing Highway 49, running north and south. If you start at the intersection of West Kings Highway and Highway 49 and travel east, you will find the first green thumbtack, and touching the top right of the thumbtack is a little red box—the red box is our church property.

Each one of these tabs on the map represents the church’s missional drop-post for our produce distribution team. The green thumbtacks are delivery points our team visits, while the yellow thumbtack is delivery points other organizations will visit after receiving produce from the church. This map shows how
concentrated the church is within the city’s northeast quadrant. The second data parameter covers the boundaries of the concentrated area. (Figure Polygon SDP) (Figure Polygon SDP)

From the data gathered within the concentrated area, we discovered a trajectory of diminishing statistics, such as multiparent and educated households would decline in number. In contrast, a projected increase in single-parent/low-education households are present. The poverty level for Paragould at large reflects the norm in comparison to state levels. However, with the projected dynamics change within the concentrated area, poverty levels would increase above the
Arkansas Average. To give our team an idea as to where we, as a state, reside in the national poverty statistics, we referenced ACRE\textsuperscript{21}.

Even though Arkansas has seen a decrease in its poverty rate, the state still reflects a higher percentage of poverty within the nation and the southern states' average. The American Psychological Association, in speaking to families and poverty, states, “Poverty is inextricably linked with rising levels of homelessness and food insecurity/hunger for many Americans, and children are particularly affected by these conditions.” \textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Arkansas Center for Research in Economics at The University of Central Arkansas
\textsuperscript{22} Socioeconomic Status (SES) (apa.org)
Now that we had a focused area within our community and data gathered regarding the concentrated area, we were ready to begin developing our initiative of putting our theological reflections into action beyond the church walls.

**Initiative**

The vision for this initiative was born from four factors: Finding from *Exploring Your mission Field*, the question mulled over by those on our mission team for the past year, “How are we building relationships with our neighbors?”; the observation of the lack of presence where our community resides as opposed to strictly practicing on-campus ministry; Our Conference’s Mission Plan “Creating vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped and sent to transform lives, communities and the world!”; and the expanding components of the Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church’s 200k initiative to include the literacy and stability component and combating childhood hunger.

The vision developed through a progression of events. The first event was during a conversation with our *Ready, Set, READ* coordinators as we debriefed our on-campus summer program in mid-June of 2021.

Both coordinators are dreamers, whereas I am a planner. For example, the meeting took place in my office. I had all my spreadsheets, notes, and calendars opened on multiple monitors. I was ready to review our observations and begin
planning for the following year. They walked into the office with stenos and pencils – prepared to dream. During our reflection on the previous week's on-campus event, one of the coordinators said, “I wish there were a way to do this more than once a year.” It was at that moment that several things came to mind. I responded, “We can do it more than once a year. Could we do it off campus? Could we offer something at a place where our participants are already gathering?”

We reflected on our observations of Paragould’s general statistics, the data reflecting the neighboring area of the church. During our reflection, one of the coordinators pointed out that the park near the center of my focus area was a popular gathering place for her students. This coordinator’s profession consists of overseeing the Paragould School District’s English as a second language studies. The two language groups she works closely with are Marshallese and Spanish-speaking students. She indicated that the park we discussed had recently been updated and utilized by the local community. I suggest we explore the possibility of using this space for an off-campus Ready, Set, READ event and set our next meeting date for the following month to discuss what that might look like.

The day following the meeting with the Ready, Set, READ coordinators, I had an appointment with our Witt House Food Pantry Logistical Coordinator. Our meeting discussed plans to transition back into utilizing more volunteers at the Witt House Food Pantry as COVID case numbers within our area were declining.
During our meeting, the coordinator said something profound: "Does our congregation know why we do what we do?" At this time, I had a Holy Spirit – “ah-ha” moment leading me to consider if our active volunteers know why we do what we do. I suggested that we (our multiple mission teams) should be the first to discuss “why we do what we do.” A theological reflection would enable us to share with others why we engage in missional work and how the work we do relates to the life of the church.

After the flood of thoughts and questions, I contacted the Ready, Set, READ coordinators, the Witt House Food Pantry Logistical Coordinator, and the Chairpersons of the Mission and Hospitality Committees to see if we could meet that afternoon. As I met with the various coordinators, the same questions continued: “Could this become a communal-missional event? Can we develop and execute something that has never been done, something that can continue and be grounded in the understanding of the kin-dom of God and kin-dom work?” If so, we could be the church present in the community. Do our hospitality representatives engage in the component of welcoming others at church—could we extend that off-campus as well? What else could we do off-campus if we engaged in missional and hospitality work?

Due to various scheduling issues, I met with each person at different times throughout the afternoon. During each meeting, I began with my usual
introduction, “Let’s dream big and then dream bigger-er!” Then I presented my brainstorming questions. It was during these meetings that I became even more grateful that I could work alongside those who hold the gift of being dreamers. In each session, you could see the coordinator's excitement well up as I presented my list of questions. Each person offered several thoughts and suggestions, which I organized and added to my spreadsheet. After all, individual meetings ended and ideas listed, I began to categorize the ideas, create task teams, contact parishioners to help organize volunteers for each task team and schedule our first group meeting for the following Sunday.

The finalized event was an off-camp “next step” project in expanding the original week – on-campus – summer program, Ready, Set, READ, into an off-campus effort to engage in the following components: education in literacy, distribution of healthy foods, nutritional education, and worship experience. Our local teachers presented three books that embodied the theme of community. The reading component of this event focused on students in the second through sixth grades. Most students participating were from our local Marshallese and Latinx communities. Thus, many of our participants were students in Paragould’s ESL (English as a Second Language) program.

While the literacy component of the event took place, a nutritional cooking demonstration was available for the student’s families. Our focused area resided
within our local food desert, so our team wanted to offer nutritional recipes for the community members. I reached out to Arkansas State University’s Nutritional Department to help us develop nutritious dishes with ingredients that could be relatively easy to obtain. The conversation with the nutritional department evolved into the students of that program, some of whom are members of the Marshallese and Latinx community, developing and presenting their adaptations to staple cultural dishes.

As they presented each dish, nutritional values, and safe cooking practices, our partnering Marshallese and Latinx translators translated each step on-site. Our Hospitality Team worked alongside the students and created a cooking tri-fold that included each dish presented (Ready, Set, READ Figure 1) and a trifold that gave a healthy choice and practices information. Both documents were distributed, containing English, Marshallese, and Spanish verbiage. (Ready, Set, READ Figure 2)
(Ready, Set, READ  Figure 1)

**Baked Tortilla Chips**

- **Ingredient List**
  - Kon (10 inch) corn ak bilawe tortillas, whole wheat ne jab white
  - Cooking oil spray ko
  - Salt (ne kokana)

- **Kilen Komane**

**Blender Salsa**

- **Ingredient List**
  - 1 (14 oz) can diced tomatoes
  - 1/4 teaspoon salt
  - 1 medium jalapeno chopped, seeds and membranes removed
  - 1/4 cup loosely packed cilantro
  - 2 tablespoons lime juice
  - 1 clove minced garlic
  - 1/4 cup diced red onion

- **Kilen Am Komane**

**Healthy Refried Beans**

- **Ingredient List**
  - 1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
  - 1/4 medium onion, diced
  - 1/4 teaspoon chili powder
  - 1 (15 oz.) can pinto beans, drained and rinsed
  - 1/2 cup broth (chicken or vegetable)

- **Kilen Am Komane**

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Ak kom jab jela ke bwe abowrinim'i temgil an Jess of Kw jihar eo E jio kom, E oppeni jan Anji? Im kom jab ami make, Bwe emoj wilak kom kon akon, inna komwon kalbojlo Anji jio anbwinnem

1 Korint 6:19-20

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Kwe jitanbalo, lieti bwo kwon jeban kon men ko atermeyer im mour, akwoi am ej jeban.
Chips De Tortilla Al Horno

Lista de Ingredientes-Para 6 Porciones de 4 Tazas:
2 (10 pulgadas) tortillas de maíz o harina, Trigo entero o blanco
Spray de aceite de cocción
Sal (opcional)

Instrucciones:
Precaliente el horno tostadora a 400 grados F.
Engrasar ligeramente una hoja de horno con el spray de cocción
Corta las tortillas en 8 secciones (como si cortas una pizza) y coloca en una placa para hornear
Rocía las cubiertas de las secciones de tortilla con spray de cocción y ligeramente sal si se desea
Hornear durante 10 minutos, hasta que este crujiente, cuidando para que las chips no se quemen

No trabajéis por el alimento que perece, sino por el alimento que permanece para vida eterna, que el Hijo del Hombre ha de dar. Porque en el Dios el Padre ha puesto su sello
-Juan 6:37

Salsa Licuada

Lista de Ingredientes-Para 2 Tazas
1 lata (14 oz.) de tomates picados en cubitos
1/4 de cucharadita de sal
1 jalapeño medio picado, semillas y membranas retiradas
1/4 taza cilantro embalaje libre
2 cucharadas de jugo de lima
1 clavo de ajo picado
1/4 de taza de cebolla roja picado

Instrucciones:
Coloque todos los ingredientes en una mezcladora ypulse suavemente hasta que la salsa tenga el espesor deseado.

O no sabes que tu cuerpo es un templo del Espíritu Santo dentro de tu, a quien bendijo Dios? No es tuyo, porque fue comprado por un precio. Así que glorifica a Dios en tu cuerpo.
-1 Corintios 6:19-20

Frijoles Refritos Saludables

Lista de ingredientes-para 4 porciones
1 cucharada de aceite vegetal
1/4 cebolla mediana, cortada
1/4 de cucharadita de sal
2 cucharadas de jugo de lima
1 clavo de ajo picado
1/4 de taza de cebolla roja picado

Instrucciones:
Recoger, dar y medir todos los ingredientes
Caliente el aceite en un sarten grande sobre calor medio
Anadir la cebolla y concinar por unos 3 minutos hasta que la cebolla este suave
Agregar el ajo en polvo y el chile en polvo
Reduce el calor a bajo
Agregar frijoles pinto y caldo y cocinar por 5 minutos
Pure los frijoles con un mamador de patatas o un tenedor

Servir cliente
Amado, oro para que todo te vaya bien y para que goces de buena salud, como le va bien a tu alma
-3 Juan 1:3
(Ready, Set, READ  Figure 2).
**HANDWASHING 101**

01. Jaun Peium
   Kon dren bwil, enjab lukun bwil ak en meneen

02. Kejerbal Jop
   En emman jonaan am Jop e peium, enjab lukun drik, enjab lukun la jen jonaan

03. Kwal peium im En lukun
   Let am kwal Peium
   Bar juon alen, kwal peium kon dren meneen

04. Lak moj, komare ki Peium
   Kejerbal pepa tol ko, ne jab, koner en bar kejerbal dryar nan peh

**FOOD SAFETY 101**

4 CORE PRACTICES

1. Enne
   Kwal peium kon swap ou en mwa ajay meneen; houma ket krey ak ak krey
   amoun sa 20 jikel makit je en moj jilbna mwa en kejen, en akakina mwa
   mwa mona. Kwal mweko luku kejerbal e, kaij kantsi am pibon e en kave mona
   kafe, bar merew zeta komad le.

2. Reganeknb
   Kejerbaljok jadile ko, bj ko, kab mona ko jen fowana aiji ko mwa.
   Kejerbal nh lits majlij ko nan am majlik jadile ko am mona ko jet mwe
   kej ko am ak ak krey majlik. Abd liket mona kant mwa mae am mje.
   ko mwa koma kejerbaljok am mona kant mwe reganns kurt mwa am komad.

3. Komat
   Kejerbal kelin thermomete e, bwa en bar eren sa jihan rek bwe konam jela ke
   enoj nan konam. Taka nan lare ne renat meriece bwe oban enna am kant ne
   reganns lukun mwa.

4. Kamulelo
   Enn en ajet en nan wja ak jok ak jok im likim e fo aiji ko bwe renajab
   jonaan. Bwe en kant ak likim mwen sa jik ko am amoun ranana, enoj
   sa en mwa boier ina jonaan.
Our Mission Team prepared ninety reusable canvas bags containing all the ingredients necessary to prepare each dish for four people. After the literacy and nutritional component concluded their allotted gathering and presenting time, all participants gathered for closing worship, including a sermon, singing, and celebrating Holy Communion. Before we departed, our last team provided lunch for everyone.

At the program's close, everyone gathered under a large tent between the playground and the building where the literacy portion occurred. I recapped the themes of the books they read in a sermon that focused on God’s love for us and our responsibility to love each other (1st John 4:7-8).

In the book, *Wishtree*, we meet “Red.” Red was a location where everyone in the neighborhood hoped for something better. I shared that when we come to God’s table, we all come from many different places and hope for something better.

In the book, *Save me A Seat*, we meet Joe and Ravi. They are two very different people who discover they have a joint mission. I acknowledged that we all share a common mission, the same mission Joe and Ravi found: to welcome all.

I announced that the theme of God’s table is “to welcome.” Christ invites all to his table. I confessed that we do not always extend hospitality to others, so we ask God for forgiveness. I proclaimed the good news that even though we make
mistakes, Jesus forgives and loves us. I prayed that as we all came to the table that day, we would receive Christ's love for us. I prayed that as we departed, we would love others as Christ first loved us. Following this brief homely, I presided at the table, offering a brief thanksgiving for general use from The United Methodist Church Book of Worship.

The homely and thanksgiving were given in a tri-lingual setting. I would speak a phrase in English and pause for it to be translated into Spanish, followed by Marshallese. Following the homely and thanksgiving, I served communion to over forty participants. When our time together began that morning, we were strangers with various experiences. Some of us did not speak the same language or know each other’s customs. I know we held different theological beliefs, yet God invited us to God’s table to sit, share in these ordinary elements of bread and juice, and develop a deeper relationship with God and one another. At this moment, we experienced God’s grace upon grace.

**Reflection**

I strategically planned a meeting the following day. Even though we were all tired from the day, everything was fresh on our minds to review the event. I adapted the “Praise, Correct, Praise” management strategy into “Grace, Praise, Improve, Plan” to review our event. We evaluated and reflected on the initiative
and its correlation to our theological work and the data gathered. We named if and how we engaged in being the hands and feet of Christ in our community.

I began the review by having our coordinators name the moments they experienced God’s grace during the event. The moments listed were celebrating Holy Communion, sharing in caring for the community, testimonies from participants, and serving and receiving. The moments named went on our planning board as a reminder that we find glimpses of God's full reign within our work.

Next, I asked the coordinators to name the things that worked well. This brainstorming activity invited the coordinators to consider something that first came to mind as a successful component of the event in a holistic manner. Items named were as follows: having several teams designated to work one area, having coordinators for those teams, planning, flow charts, bulk purchases, and portioning items as opposed to purchasing many small items, the staging set-up, engaging with the local university in our efforts, and the weather was nice.

Following naming things that worked well, I invited the coordinators to unapologetically list items that did not work well. They were as follows: limited publicity, over-planning food, take down/post event not considered in planning, and the generators failed repeatedly.

The overall lesson from this initiative is that making disciples of Jesus Christ occurs on various levels, is continuous, and calls for adaptation in the effort. For
our dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ, I witnessed a deepening of faith practice as they focused on understanding the “why” behind their missional actions. They concluded that making disciples of Christ was their “why,” and making disciples of Jesus Christ comes about in the sharing in the body of Christ. The sharing is that we who are many – who hold our God-given talents, passions, and gifts – share ourselves in a communal effort to live into our faith and to make Christ known. Once this was understood, encouraged, and practiced – the “us” and “them” mindsets reconciled to “we.” I watched as one of our dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ invited a participant not just to receive but come and help in the planning and serving of others. It was time to begin our second Praxis Cycle.

**Chapter III: Second Praxis Cycle**

**Knowing the Community: Resources and Reflection**

“In churches that are growing, the clergy and the laity spend at least 20 percent of their time not maintaining the church but instead being out in the mission field with the unconnected, serving people they do not know. This means intentionally putting us in places to meet new people.” 23

In their book, From Lament to Advocacy, Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Nathaniel D. West, and Annie Lockhart-Gilroy offer a pedagogical approach in

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addressing various faith leadership practices and social components as an action brought about by reflective lament.24

The approaches consist of renewal of direction, experience, and resources to face the challenges in the Black life.25 The challenge begins within the church addressing the question, “Has the call for faithful living, a vital church, and action in the church and world denied the deep wounds and anxiety of the young and adults wrought by the toughness of their everyday lives and silenced their voices of pain and questions about God and faith and self?” 26 The answer to this question evolves as a resounding communal “yes” as current issues arising from the experience of the oppressed voice.

The challenge brings about the need for revision within the church’s education and operation. 27 A revisioning narrative evolves from an internal pedagogical assessment, grief, lament, and revision to leadership and action beyond the church walls. In this reflection, the movement beyond the church walls calls for a communal engagement in advocacy for the shared community. The community of advocates, religious educators, community members, and concerned

25 Wimberly, West, and Lockhart-Gilroy, From Lament to Advocacy, xiv.
26 Wimberly, West, and Lockhart-Gilroy, From Lament to Advocacy, 5.
27 Wimberly, West, and Lockhart-Gilroy, From Lament to Advocacy, 25.
others addressing the community’s needs. Not separately but rather in partnership to deal with communal concerns.28

While this book speaks to the work (reflection and action) by the black church and community for the black community, it is also a vital resource for one who is privileged to learn from the theological work within this community. Utilizing the practice of reflection and pedological revisioning as a guide to developing relationships within our shared community might result in a communal lament, leading to advocacy via empowering the voice within the community. Internal assessment, grief, lament, and revision were our focus components for our second praxis cycle. Developing connections within the community and working toward sharing in the community between the “us” (privileged people) and “them” (those in need and those marginalized) can be a difficult task. During our second praxis cycle, I shared my experience of this cycle, the challenge, and the importance of building relationships with others in the community.

Going Deeper – Practical Experience

“*The best testimony to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together. Jesus risked his reputation and the credibility of his story by trying them to how his followers live and care for one another in community* (John 17:20-23). *If we could cut through our complacency or despair, we might be shocked at what is really at stake here. The character of our shared life -- as congregations, communities, and*

28 Wimberly, West, and Lockhart-Gilroy, *From Lament to Advocacy*, 42.
families – has the power to draw people to the kingdom or to push them away.” 29

Several years ago, I received a call to be a youth minister to co-inside with my experience at Seminary at Memphis Theological Seminary. The church was in the center of the city. The church membership was primarily Caucasian and fell somewhere between middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. The church had seen substantial growth in its feeding ministry over several years. As the growth continued, they hired another youth minister who was in seminary at the time. The youth minister’s objective was to connect with the kids within the community and bring them into the youth program. He asked if the church was ready to receive the youth from the community as their own. The church agreed they would welcome the youth from the community. He did a spectacular job bringing the kids from within the community into the church. However, from my observation, this was not a shared initiative of developing relationships over time which resulted in the members of the church stepping back from engaging in youth ministry.

The week following the phone call, I began to serve as Director of Youth Ministries. Upon my arrival, an order of discipleship wasn't present. There was no scheduled programming, educational structure, volunteer recruitment, training

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logistics, or organic discipleship gathering. During my interview, the expectation was for me to organize anything for the youth over the next year. I responded, “I am up for the task – I just need to know that the church will support my efforts.” I was hired and got to work.

I began my work by creating a roster, gathering contact information, school info, a dream sheet for the future of the youth program, and all the standard stuff for a youth director. After finally registering over eighty youths, I began to memorize names (I am TERRIBLE at names). Within the first three months, I learned names, worked on putting faces with names, and tried to figure out how to engage with the youth with only four adult volunteers. After a few minor incidents, we lost two of the four volunteers. Eventually, it was down to one other volunteer and me. In an effort to gain assistance, I took members of the congregation out to coffee, made phone calls, went from Sunday school to Sunday school class, and then I began to recruit parents of the youth who were attending youth but not a member of our church. At times, I was furious. Our church was going through a transitional period during my first three months. We had a fill-in pastor who was a wonderful person, but only a pulpit supply because they had a full-time job. Finally, after a few turnovers of volunteers, a new pastor, and a few volunteers

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30 Member as defined as baptized, professing, affiliate, associate, or within the church’s constituency roll as defined by The United Methodist Church’s Book of Discipline Paragraphs ¶215, ¶227, and ¶230.3.
from the community, we had enough adults to at least cover our safe-sanctuary\textsuperscript{31} obligations. We were ready to begin our three-year discipleship program development trajectory at that point.

Our new pastor joined the youth during his first month to play basketball. That was our thing! Basketball was life! I had already introduced the pastor to the vital youth leaders, and he was now playing one-on-one with one of my main leaders-JP. During a break from their game, the pastor asked JP, “Where do you go to church?” Upset by the question, JP responded, “This is my church! I’ve gone here for four years! I don’t go inside the big building.” Along with JP, M (another one of our leaders from the youth) yelled out, “Hey, Mr. Rev. Pastor! I’ve been here five!”

A few months later, JP and M went through confirmation, were baptized, and became church members. In The United Methodist Church, part of our confirmation is publicly affirming our faith and sharing in covenant with those present. For JP and M, several covenants occur between God, the witnesses, and both JP and M through the traditional liturgy of a Baptismal Covenant (Confirmation, Affirmation of Faith, Reception into The United Methodist Church, and Reception into a Local Congregation). \textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Ratio of adults to minors during a church event.
\textsuperscript{32} Appendix A
In our Baptismal Covenant, several promises—rather—covenants take place here. Covenants are tri-directional between God, the individual, and the body of believers. The covenants JP and M stood and made that day were between God, themselves, and the church membership. The challenge I witnessed in their story is one we find across Methodism - the support of the membership and discipleship of those confirmed by the church is lacking. The covenants made in baptism and membership are responses for that moment and lifetime covenants - intentions for the future.\(^{33}\) There is accountability within these covenants, and they are not conditional promises. The relationship or the discipleship process does not dissolve when things get complicated. \(^{34}\)

After experiencing let-down after let-down in life, M made acquaintances that were not the best influences. My heart was heavy, wondering if we held to our covenant, would other negative relationships have been necessary? One day, M ran to the church, frantically looking for help. We brought him in, locked the doors, calmed him down, and notified the authorities. We asked for a specific officer who knew each of our communities’ kids by name and was a partner in our youth program to address the situation. The following Sunday, M, JP, I, and another youth parent were setting up the gym for our next meeting. A seasoned leader in

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34 Pohl, *Living into Community*, 87.
the church came up to us and said, “I heard about what went on the other day. The church is holy; we do not need that mess or those who cause it.”

This person, the pastor, and I moved the conversation into the pastor's office to place distance between the person and the youth. However, damage occurred. M overheard the comment. M had a history of being let down over and over outside the church walls. When he sought refuge at church, someone he respected voiced their heart and broke his.

In our nature, we will struggle in relationships. However, reconciliation is part of our faith and offered through Christ to one another. As far as I know, the parishioner did not attempt to reconcile with M. The commitment, the fidelity the church member covenanted to M, was broken. Visions had changed and evolved, and the reality of living in the Body of Christ, the divine relationship with God and One another, was too much.35 Even Though the leadership position and the covenant made were explicit.36 A covenant broke, and the results of this interaction and failure of reconciliation led to the church losing a part of itself; the loss of M.37

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it took three more years, working alongside other youth leaders and those who were committed to the covenant they had made, to create a new platform that worked towards dissolving the “us and them”

35 Pohl, Living into Community, 84.
36 Pohl, Living into Community, 85.
37 Pohl, Living into Community, 64.
mentality and establishing a “we” understanding of community. Changing platforms was an adaptive leadership-bottom-up movement within the church. We lost long-time members, grew the youth to twenty dedicated youths, and engaged in connectional ministries across generations. Once the structure was in place, a dream team began to look at other ways the church could be connected within the community. Now, the church is looking more and more like the “us” of the community. I left to attend my current appointment, and I’m always excited to hear how God works within that community. M and JP have reached out since our time together. JP is active within his wife’s church, and they just dedicated their firstborn. M is in Atlanta and said he had connected with a local church there. Thank you, God, for your grace in being sufficient where we have failed!

Based on my experience and context, another practice that is essential for sustaining a community is Discipleship. The practice of discipleship marries all the practices listed within Christine D. Pohl’s book, Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us. The Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church's contextual statement is, “Creating vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped and sent to transform lives, communities, and the world!” The United Methodist Mission is “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the world.” in looking at this from a secular lens, we can say apprenticeship compared with discipleship.
I reflected on a portion of M’s story from my previous youth group. M was six foot 14 inches tall at sixteen. Everyone looked up to him. Literally! His height, personality, laughter, and heart demanded attention everywhere he went. He is a natural leader. He was my go-to when things got out of hand. He could calm and excite the masses. During Lent, I urged the senior pastor to preside over the sacrament of Communion. It was Holy Week and the perfect time to teach about and celebrate Communion. We had a good size group in attendance, and M was so excited. He said, “Pastor Chase, how do we do this?” I explained that we would be celebrating by intinction and how that worked. He said, “Fire! I want to go first.”

The pastor taught about the last supper and did the alternative Great Thanksgiving. We then began to serve, starting with M. All eyes were on him. He looked at me and said, “I forgot.” I smiled and said, “you have received the body and presented with the cup. Now you dip the bread in the juice, taste it, and see it is good!” He did, and the biggest smile came across his face. M looked at the youth standing beside him, who looked worried. With all his excitement, M laughed and said, “100%! Jesus tastes like a PB&J, just without the peanut butter!” I fell out!

We served the rest of the youth and dismissed them. M stayed around for a while and asked more questions about the church, faith, Jesus, God, Holy Spirit, and Baptisms, and my heart became strangely warmed. It was then he wanted to
catch up in confirmation. So M, JP, his older sister, and the pastor did a crash course.

Being new to the church, we lacked sponsorship within the confirmation course. That came the following year. JP dated another one of the youths whose chosen mom was one of the youth volunteers. The youth volunteer became JP’s sponsor via the relationship that developed there. I encouraged JP and M to participate in other connectional aspects within the church. They settled on youth and Sunday school, which was also in a developing stage. Without a sponsor or connection to the church, I took on the role of M’s mentor to the best of my ability. I still ask myself, “could we have done more to reflect our discipleship practices?”

One of my friends returned from his tour overseas and joined our leadership team. Right off the bat, he connected with M. He mentored M and walked alongside M in some of the most challenging times. He deployed on another tour overseas, and M left the church shortly after.

Discipleship is not just one on one. It is communal. It takes a body of believers living into the life of Jesus Christ by being hospitable, truthful, keeping the covenant, and being grateful for grace. Over a year, the church's attitude slowly began to change. Other members of the church began to take JP under their wings. JP became active and inspired several other youths to join him for more than just youth activities. Within that first year, four youths walked to church to attend
Sunday School, worship, and youth. As mentioned, some are grown, some still participate, and others have moved. But the fruits of Discipleship are so real. The challenge, from my experiences, is to encourage, lead, and example practicing discipleship as a body of believers as opposed to the ideals of “It’s the Pastors/Children’s Director/Youth Director’s job.” It is our calling to be the body of Christ – to be vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped and sent to transform lives, communities, and the world!

**Considering Current Context**

For our second praxis, we intentionally developed relationships with people in our community as our theological task, responsibility, and calling, beginning with internal assessment, grief, lament, and revision. This process of developing relationships beyond the wall of the church takes time. The resource we utilized for our team’s reflection to develop new relationships was *Get Their Name* by Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan.³⁸

**Beginning Outside Conversation**

“But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

³⁸ Farr, *Get Their Name*, 31–54.
And for their sakes, I sanctify myself so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” John 17:13-19 (NRSV)

Bob Farr reminds us of Francis Asbury’s vision for Methodism in four enduring ways that came to define much of the evangelical culture in America. 39

1. The first was through his legendary piety and perseverance, rooted in a classically evangelical conversion experience.
2. The second way that Asbury communicated his vision was through his ability to connect with ordinary people.
3. The third conduit of Asbury’s vision was how he understood and used popular culture.
4. The fourth way that Asbury communicated his message was through his organization of the Methodist Church.

From our foundation as a church, building relationships with others within the community was at the forefront of evangelism. Today's challenge is not intentionally connecting with our community as a priority. Farr offers six steps to connect with others within the community intentionally. 40

Step One: Have an Intentional Plan
Step Two: Set A Daily Goal
Step Three: Build Trust
Step Four: Mutual Respect
Step Five: The Conversation
Step Six: Become A Model

“We keep thinking people should come to us. We think people should act like us. We think people should like what we like. At best, we are pretending that we are visiting a foreign land but don’t intend to stay. Our defenses rise when we encounter this new culture. The church is

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39 Farr, Get Their Name, 32.
40 Farr, Get Their Name, 35–42.
supposed to be a refuge and fortress! Yet wasn’t it Jesus who challenged us to live in the world but not of it?”\textsuperscript{41}

**The Steps**

*Have an Intentional Plan.*

Having an intentional plan is being aware of opportunities to begin a conversation with people we do not know and doing so within the parameters of our everyday life in a natural way. Of course, this might take some practice to become a part of our regular engagement. One way of practicing this type of engagement is by finding common interests.

Several years ago, I was driving through Little Rock, Arkansas, on my way home from Dallas. I listened to a cooking podcast, and they made fresh salsa! As one who loves to cook and try new things, I had never made salsa and thought attempting to make my own sounded like an adventure. I found a Walmart end route home. The Walmart was on the south side of Little Rock. I pulled off the interstate, into the Walmart parking lot, parked, and went inside. The fresh produce isles were near the entrance. I grabbed a small basket and began searching for the ingredients I needed.

First, I picked up an onion, followed by a tub of cilantro, a jar of pre-diced garlic, and fresh tomatoes, and then I went to look at the jalapenos. As I stood there

\textsuperscript{41} Farr, *Get Their Name*, 32.
looking at the jalapenos, a young man walked up to me and, in a broken-English accent, asked me, “What are you cooking?” I smiled and said, I will try making salsa for the first time. Laughing, he responded, “It’s good! But what is that?” Pointing to the tub of cilantro and then to the jar of pre-diced garlic, he held a curious look on his face. Nervously, I smiled and said, “The recipe said to use cilantro and garlic.” At that time, his mother came around the corner, and he addressed her in Spanish. They laughed, and she spoke to him for some time in Spanish. He nodded his head up and down in a “yes” gesture, turned to me, and said, “You need fresh not can, and we will show you how to make. I am Vicente, and this is mother.”

I placed the cilantro tub and garlic jar back on the shelf. Vice taught me how to find the best fresh jalapeno and cilantro bundle. Fresh garlic went into the basket, and we gathered a few more items around the store. After we checked out, I asked Vice if he would still share the salsa recipe with me so I could make it when I got home. Again, curious, he looked at me and said, “No. We teach you. You come to our house.”

Under normal circumstances, I would suggest avoiding going to a stranger’s home. However, during our brief time at the store, I got to know and trust Vice and his mother. They were preparing for a gathering that would take place in their

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42 Also known as Vice or Vincenzo to his family and friends.
home over the next few days. Today was their cooking preparation day, and they invited me to be a part of the preparation. Thus, we loaded up the cars, and I followed them to their home.

That afternoon, I learned not only how to make fresh salsa but also how to make tamales, sopas, slow-cooking lingua for tacos, and pozole. Before I left that evening, Vice’s mother invited me back for the festivities during the weekend. The festivities they were preparing for were for her birthday. Wanting to respect their time and plans, I inquired about the time of the activities, what I should bring, and what to expect. She informed me that I would be expected to come hungry, and the gatherings would be continuous as family and friends would stop by whenever they could to eat and visit.

Vice’s brief conversation began a lifelong friendship between the Castañeda family and me. I have not been able to replicate that interaction with others. However, I have since drawn on Vice’s example of small talk via a simple question. Sometimes encounters are easy and natural; other times, the situation can be awkward. When I am aware of a potential encounter, I do my best to ask a simple and relevant question to the encounter's variables (location, purpose, people, attires, scenes, scenery, and anything that might provide commonality between a stranger and me in a particular space).

“We want to get to the point where our radar is always engaged naturally when it becomes a part of who we are and how we go about
life. Being missional is a way of life. It is not just a trip, a check, or donating a can of green beans. But before it becomes woven into who we are and how we operate, we must first be aware, be intentional, work a place, assess how we are doing, and make adjustments to our approaches. Every approach will be different. Remember, this is more of an art than a science.”43

**Set a Daily Goal**

The second step in beginning conversations outside our comfort zone is setting goals. It is easy to be a community within our established community. But as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to do the very opposite! Jesus went outside the cultural norms of his time and built relationships with those outside the established community.

He (Jesus) left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So, he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks, drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be

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43 Farr, *Get Their Name*, 38.
thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So, the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here, the saying holds true, ‘One sows, and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered their labor.”
Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So, when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his words. They told the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” John 4:3-42 (NRSV)

Have you ever been approached by a stranger? What happens? A series of questions come to mind: Who is this? Why are they talking to me? Do they look familiar—are we friends on Facebook? What should I say? How much should I divulge in our conversation? Should we have a chat? How can I avoid a conversation? These are the questions that come to mind during encounters with unexpected people in unexpected places.

I imagine John is writing about this in the telling of Jesus and the woman at the well. This story is about encounters between unexpected people in unexpected places. This story takes place in the middle of a journey. Jesus and the disciples are on their way back to Galilee from Judea. To get from Jerusalem (Judea) to Galilee, Jesus and the disciples would have had a few options for routes to travel. The typical choice of travel would have been to cross the Jordan, moving north, until they could cross back over Jordan and enter Galilee (bypassing Samaria together). Why take a long way around Samaria? Jews and Samaritans hold differences in cultural practices and faith. A problematic relationship between the Jewish and Samaritan cultures was a reality during Jesus’ time. So, one option for traveling
from Judea to Galilee was to utilize a route detouring Samaria together. The downside to avoiding Samaria is that the journey is two days longer.

The Second option is a route that would have shed two days off the bypass journey. Still, it goes through the heart of Samaria, passing Mt. Gerizim (the holy place for the Samaritans), through the heart of Samaria, and continuing north to Galilee. In this story, Jesus and the disciples go right through the heart of Samaria—an unexpected place.

Jesus and the disciples had been on the road, and it was time for a break. Tired from their journey, they pulled over in a Samaritan city. Jesus sat by the well as the disciples went into the city to buy food. At the well, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman, and Jesus asked her for a drink.

Knowing the relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews and the cultural taboo of a man addressing a woman outside their family, we can imagine the Samaritan woman having an internal dialogue. Perhaps several questions came to mind as Jesus, the stranger, approached her and asked her for a drink. She responds to Jesus's request: “Why are you talking to me?” In answering her question, Jesus says, “If you knew the gift of God, and if you knew who I was asking you for a drink, you would have turned the tables and asked me for a drink, and I would have given you living water.”
Jesus’ response seems appropriate for an “I beg your pardon moment!” Perhaps her internal dialogue went something like this, “Not only has this Jewish stranger approached me, but He’s also answering my questions with riddles; I mean, who is this guy?” Her response is quite entertaining, “Sir, who are you to offer me living water? Why would I need it? We have a well. The well built by our ancestor Jacob was good enough for him. His family used it, and it was good enough for them; his family’s children used it, and their children and their children, and it was good enough for them. And if it was good enough for them, it’s good enough for me, this well, this water, it’s how it is, and that’s how it has always been; where is your bucket?”

Jesus goes on in their exchange, “I hear you. You can do things as they have always been, but it will not resolve the issue. Like your ancestors, you will have to keep coming back repeatedly, and the issue will remain; you will still not be fully satisfied.”

Jesus isn’t talking about water. Jesus is speaking in a proverbial manner, and the Samaritan woman understands this. Understanding the conversation has taken a metaphoric identity; she continues this engagement. Fun fact: there are a total of thirteen exchanges that take place in this conversation. This conversation that Jesus is having with the Samaritan woman is one of if not the most prolonged one-to-one
exchange between Jesus and an individual in any of the Gospels—a good conversation between unexpected people in unexpected places.

What happens when you meet someone new and have a good connection? A Good Conversation. As you engage in dialogue, you learn more about the other person; you get a sense of their personalities and who they are, and you find common ground and the developing stages of friendship. In the dialogue, as this conversation unfolds between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, the woman gets a sense of who Jesus is.

She asks Jesus, “May I have some of that living water?” And she begins to offer her metaphoric responses, “Let me have some of this living water because I’m tired of being thirsty because I’m tired of having to come back to this well over and over and over. I’m tired of things going on the way they have always been without resolution. I’ve been living with temporary satisfaction. I’m just getting by. I want, no, I need something lasting in my life. I need something in my life that is sustaining. You have something to share with me, so please enlighten me.”

Jesus then reveals that he is more than just a Jew passing through; Jesus tells her things about herself that a stranger would not have known. At that moment, she knew Jesus was more. At first, she calls Jesus a prophet. She begins to ask theological questions. Then Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah.
In the first century, it was uncommon for males outside the family to speak or address women. Yet, scripture tells us Jesus sat with the women at the well. The disciples questioned why Jesus engaged in conversation with her. The community questioned his intentions as well. Yet, Jesus sat and engaged in a lengthy one-on-one conversation with a stranger outside his cultural comfort zone.

There are several stories in the bible of Jesus connecting with the stranger. How do we follow Jesus and connect with new people outside our comfort zone? Farr suggests we set attainable goals with a means of measurement and practice. Farr recalls a tactic used by an insurance salesperson he met. The salesperson planned to obtain a set number of contacts during the day. The salesperson measured their progress by having the number of connections set for his goal represented by the number of coins they held in their right pocket. As the salesperson made a new contact, they would move one coin from their right to their left pocket. The number of connections made is represented by the number of coins in the left pocket, and the number of coins in the right pocket represents the number of contacts remaining. This practice enabled the salesperson to see where they were on their contacts for the day.

If you don’t set a goal to start conversations, then it is not going to happen. What can you do in your personal life to set a similar goal and accomplish it! Being a follower of Christ takes much self-discipline. Practice! The more we do it, the more comfortable we
become with the process and the more effective we will become. The more we do it, the more it will also become a natural process.\footnote{Farr, Get Their Name, 39.}

**Build Trust**

“Country” is the name of an enforcer for a local motorcycle club. His job is to uphold the rules of his club of safety, etiquette, and retaliation. Known for his willingness and ability to fight, he thrived in this role. Meeting him for the first time, you would not think he was a violent person. He kept to himself, was quiet, and could usually be found at the back of the clubhouse tending the wood-burning stove.

When interacting with a motorcycle club for the first time, the tradition is to introduce yourself to all the officers. My first visit to Country’s clubhouse was in August 2019. I followed my mentors into the clubhouse, and after I introduced myself to all the officers, including Country, the person who invited me to the event informed the officers that I was one of the pastors at Paragould First United Methodist Church. The other officers took note and smiled while Country pulled me aside to converse.

I was thrilled to engage in this conversation in such a unique location. Our conversation included questions Country had about the Bible. As we talked, I sat down in an empty chair near Country. He stopped the conversation and said he had
not asked me to sit. My action of sitting broke an understood code. Taking note of my reaction, he invited me to continue the tour of the clubhouse instead of throwing me out. I took the hint and moved on.

I encountered Country over the next few years at different events. Making sure I shook his hand and greeted him. Sometimes we engaged in small conversations, and other times we just acknowledged one another.

In September of 2021, I attended another event at Country’s clubhouse and found Country in his usual spot, next to the wood-burning stove. He noticed, waved me over, and asked me to sit and chat. He explained that his experience with God was not unlike my experience with him. He said he knew God was there and needed to talk to God. But he didn’t want to hang around God because he was uncomfortable. He told me that he had just started attending church but was still not living a life that reflected his faith – remaining distant from God. He shared with me how God changed his behavior through his experience of practicing prayer, reading Scripture, and going to church. “The more I got to know Jesus, the more comfortable I sat with God.”

Step three is building trust. In building trust, we trust God is coordinating a genuine and authentic relationship between ourselves and others.

“Be Yourself! Don’t be somebody else. Be open to having a natural conversation that might lead to a genuine faith conversation. This is
why it is important to work through your connections and affinities in your natural hang-out places.”

Mutual Respect & The Conversation

At first glance, Country was intimidating. Country’s job as an enforcer was to ensure that all the rules were followed – by any means necessary. Six years ago, Johnny (our chapter president) made it his mission to connect with the local biker community by learning how respect was earned - eventually leading to developing a relationship within the community of bikers in the Northeast Arkansas area.

Johnny was consistent in only wearing his colors when riding, addressing each officer of the club in ranking order, and always riding to any event regardless of the weather. After six months of observing Johnny, Country invited Johnny to sit by the fire pot (as you can tell, this was Country's sitting and talking spot). He looked at Johnny and said, “yeah, you're ok-so. Give me the spill on Jesus.” Johnny smiled and said, “not a lot to tell, but there's so much there! God loves you, and if you follow Jesus, you'll learn to love God. It’s the best thing in this life and after that.”

One of my run-ins with Country between the first time I met him and our second sit-down at the firebox, where Country shared another part of his story with

\[45\] Farr, Get Their Name, 39.

\[46\] A patch on the back of a vest or jacket containing symbols and colors associating the person to the motorcycle club or organization.
me, was an unforgettable experience. Simple words planted a seed that would develop into questions and conversations around the smoke-filled lean-to clubhouse. Months later, Country would attend biker church and eventually said “yes” to following Jesus.

A few days before this invitation, our group was at biker night hosted by a local pizza joint. Country rode up and ran inside, skipping all the “to-do’s” of biker protocol, grabbed Johnny in the biggest bear hug, and with tears in his eyes, said, “It’s working! I should have beat his ass! But I prayed and walked away! That’s that cheek-turn thing from the Bible, right?” Johnny gathered us together to pray over Country. We thanked God that Country did not kick someone's tail. After we prayed, I looked at Country, and there stood a biker who looked the part! Wind and sun-beaten skin, hardworking calloused hands, scars from fights, standing with a solid but worn body from life choices, smiling and radiating with a spirit of newness and change which prompted me to say, “I just met you, but I want to know your story.”

Country noticed me riding alongside Johnny to all those events. I assume that seeing me follow Johnny’s example of learning the protocols of the biker community was received as an act of showing respect for that community. I respected Country and the biker community at large. Over time, I earned their respect and trust as well. Earning respect led to the ability to have a conversation
around the fire. At one time, we shared our interests and personal stories of faith.

“We believe the reason conversations have not gone bad is that we have mutual respect for others.” 47

_Become a Model_

“When you practice starting conversations with people, you become a model for others. Others will begin to watch and listen and be curious about how your conversations are going. It also gives you stories to share back at the church. It gives you stories to share in small group settings, Bible studies, and Sunday School classes. It may give you testimonies to share in a worship setting. Pastors, if you have not practiced starting conversations with people you don’t know, you don’t have any stories to tell. It is difficult to teach and preach about evangelism if all you have is the theology but not the practice of evangelism. If you start doing this, you will have stories of evangelism for your faith sharing in service, small groups, and worship.” 48

We utilized this resource along with personal reflections. Our group began to consider how we might develop and engage with people in the community we serve.

_Our Story with Community Representative_

_Developing Relationships_

“We need to operate with the theologically confident belief that when we create the opportunity, God can and will bring credible, diverse, and dynamic voices. As God does, they will lead us into a fuller, more equitable, and more representative picture of the body of Christ.” 49

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47 Farr, Get Their Name, 40.
48 Farr, Get Their Name, 41.
Our team began with church members, specifically those who served as chairs of several committees within the church. The chairs included the following: Hospitality Chair, Mission Committee Chair, Witt House Food Coordinator Chair, Witt House Produce Coordinator Chair, Myself (Pastor), and Ready, Set READ Coordinators. After relationships developed, our second team comprised the Ready, Set, READ Coordinators, Mission Chair, Hospitality Chair, and several non-member partners: Karina, Joe, Sally, and Sauni.

Karina’s family attended the first Ready, Set, READ event. Karina works with one of our local school districts as a Spanish and English as a Second Language educator. For the past several years, Katina has worked with the on-campus Ready, Set, READ event and was vital to spreading the word that an off-campus event was in the works. Having worked alongside Katina for several years, one of the Ready, Set, READ Coordinators suggested inviting her to the planning board. Karina was thrilled to work alongside the second committee to plan the next event.

After our team's second theological reflection, one of our members reached out to Joe and Sally, met with them for a few weeks, and eventually invited them to join the second committee to plan the next Ready, Set, READ event. Joe and Sally are members of another congregation located in our focus area. Joe and Sally are also long-term residents in the focus area. Joe’s native language is Spanish; he
has lived in this community for over forty years. He met his wife, born and raised in this community, at their church. Both serve a local community kitchen that provides meals for the residents of the focused community. Both were excited to share their wisdom and other potential relational opportunities from within the community.

Sauni has been a part of our community as an advocate for the Marshallese community. Sauni served as a migrant tutor at one of our local school districts and has been phenomenal in helping us connect with our Marshallese residence. Sauni has a standing relationship with one of our Ready, Set, READ coordinators and Karina and has been a great addition to our second planning committee. Sauni gave her time to translate the cooking demonstration during our first event and the recipe books provided during the first event.

Chapter IV. The Shared Initiative

The Shared Voice

“People are not voiceless. Everyone has a voice, and we don’t need to speak for them. Instead, we need to understand and address the process that steals their voices or the reasons we aren’t hearing them.”

Our pilot initiative was titled “Ready, Set, READ @ The Park.” This program came about through members of our church who resided outside the

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focused community. Our team gathered data and developed a strategy to meet the community's needs, as listed from the statistics we gathered. Those willing and able assisted with the initiative in areas of diversity roadblocks such as language barriers. The response we received from our on-site interviews and reflections from our second coordination team was cordial but not transformative. The reviews from those connected to the community offered thanks and appreciation. However, they noted that connectional transformation seemed lacking. Namely because the initiative lacked a vital ingredient for development—the voice from within the community. As our first team experienced and reflected on this response, it was our time of grief and repentance. As we developed relationships during the next phase of our theological reflections, we named our shortcomings and invited others to engage in this initiative as a shared community.

“It can be hard for organizers to include other voices in planning. It requires stepping outside their comfortable circle of friends (who often look and think a lot as they do) and finding diverse voices who can speak on issues of theology, justice, leadership, and other topics.”

It was roughly three months before our second committee came together. During the opening session, revision began with open and honest conversations. Naming our theological task of addressing needs within the community again is a

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shared and relational effort. The second event was titled to reflect this effort, “Ready, Set, READ in the Community!”

**The Shared Purpose**

The first session was logistical; we sat meeting dates and development goals. From the representations of the community present, we named food insecurity for children during school breaks, growth in literacy, community activity exposure, and educational opportunities for the new residents. The team ended the session with the question, “Who, What, and How?” Whom are we looking to serve? What are their needs? How can we help meet their needs? “If our circle of friends are not diverse, our leadership circles will not be either.”

*Family*

Children attended the literacy rotations during the first Ready, Set, READ off-campus event while the adults participated in the cooking demonstration. After the second team surveyed residents surrounding the next event, they found that families sought time to spend together. Being separated from family during school hours and even at night, when parents work late and overnight shifts, parents/guardians and children would plan to spend time together whenever that time was available. Thus, if we were to offer an event for families to come to, it

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would serve the families more, so if we offered an event that kept families together – even encouraged families to attend.

Hearing the community's voice, the second event would also have rotations. The committee designed rotations around the entire family by offering family stations of activities surrounding the initiative's focus and theme.

*Education & Literacy*

The Literacy initiative has been the supporting connection between the church and the community for the past decade. The need for education, specifically the ability to read and write in English, was named a need for and by the community. Most students who attend the historical program are English as a second language students. Once again, hearing the community's voice say that a promotion for literacy is a need for the community, our literacy team was ready to think about a theme book for the initiative and was on standby to consider books to present at the family stations offered.

Having a connection with our local school, two of our coordinators began to reach out to their co-workers for support for the program’s date. They solicited ideas for the educational components of the initiative. One of the educators realized that one of the dates we were looking at having the program fell on a registration date for the school’s following school year. They suggested the school offer registration before our event. Registering on-site would place some of our
education volunteers, ESL staff, office administration, and school executives at the location where our families would gather. Having the registration before the event would offer a convenient way for new families to enroll and provide parents and guardians, who might not otherwise have the opportunity, to meet teachers, administration, and school executives.

Community & Connecting

Two responses that sparked an interest in responses from our community conversations were Community Activities and Connecting. First, from our Marshallese families, we learned that the majority would remain in our area for a year or two, working with several farmers. However, they will likely transition to another location for a steady line of work. Recently, the community has seen more families settling as the industrial industry grows and offers sustainable income. These families are looking for things to enjoy in our local area. Second, one of the groups we sought help with in planning the next event was the recently graduated students who attended Ready, Set, READ! Over the last decade, students who graduated and attended Ready, Set, Read! Return to help with the following year's summer event. They suggested encouraging the participants to consider how they might help their neighbors.
From the voices in our community, we had our focal points: Family, Education, Literacy, Community, and Connecting. From here, the second coordination team began considering bringing the focal points together.

**The Shared Task**

The returning motif of Linthicum’s *Building A People Of Power* is *Shalom*: A tangible gift from God, commanded by Jesus to distribute.53 The shalom is the relationship with the divine to the point of transformative work active so that our beings (self and communal) reflect the system of divine relationship.54 Creating relationships is the work that Jesus came to do.55 The Christian calling is a continuation of the work.56 That is, working toward a community that reflects God’s shalom even within our systems.57 The work is not individual but communal, connectional, and built on intentional relationships.58

From our theological reflections, our team named the following: shared relationship extended beyond the developing relationship between those in the church, the community members serving on the second initiative committee, and the community in which the second initiative was taking place – our shared relationship extends to the community, its businesses, and organizations.

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“…unless a church joins with other relational institutions and is adequately equipped to use its relational power, it will have an exceedingly hard time being effective in bringing out significant systemic transformation in its parish area, community, or city.” 59

Griffin Memorial Food Pantry

Joe and Sally attend Griffin Memorial, and Joe volunteers as a cook for the Griffin Memorial Food Pantry. As we contacted a few local parks and organizations within our initiative-focused area, Joe suggested reaching out to Griffin Memorial, as the facility resided in the center of our site. While living near the facility, Joe was optimistic that several of his neighbors and their connections would be interested in attending the event. The facility was excellent, with an open space for activities and a few classrooms for the event’s stations.

Paragould School District

Paragould School District partnered with us by arranging one of their three off-campus student registration events before our event, including our local school representatives, counselors, principals, teachers, and even RAM, the mascot. We were present to engage with the families registering for school and those waiting for the event to start.

Arkansas State Parks

59 Linthicum, Building a People of Power, 109.
Considering the community and connecting focus points of the event, the committee wanted to promote our local, accessible outdoor facilities. We are blessed to have several State Parks in our area. One committee member mentioned the two nearest State Parkes during our planning conversations. We contacted one of our local parks, which connected us with Matt Manos, the Superintendent at Lake Frierson State Park. The conversation with Matt went from seeking suggestions to promote our local state parks to Matt clearing his calendar the day of the event to join us and do a short presentation.

*Kiwanis Club of Paragould*

The Kiwanis Club of Paragould is part of a community of clubs, members, and partners dedicated to improving children's and communities' lives internationally.60

Our local Kiwanis Club meets every Tuesday for lunch at Grecians Steak House. During the lunch hour, club business is first on the agenda. The remaining time offers a guest speaker from the community to represent a local non-profit, civil society, city, county, state, or national representative of a governmental entity.

*Ready, Set, READ*’s originating coordinator was invited to present the program's history and the developing community initiatives. After a phenomenal presentation, Kiwanis asked to partner with *Ready, Set, READ* for our second

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community event and potential for future events. Kiwanis granted *Ready, Set, READ* $800 for purchasing books to give to the participants. Kiwanians also volunteered to help during the event where needed.

**The Shared Event**

The Event took place the first weekend in April 2022. The event’s theme focused on shared outdoor activities. Each family station included a shared reading section of the promoted book and an activity or information correlating with the promoted book. The closing event included a final book presentation, snacks, songs, and communion or blessing.

*Family Station One: Lola Plants a Garden*

Family Station One was a great hands-on station! For many in this community, springtime consists of preparing the family garden for the summer harvest. This station offered an activity family and neighbors work on together. This station covered all the focal points named by the community (Family, Education, Community, Connecting). The station covered all the focal points by promoting time with the family, encouraging communal connections by sharing the harvest or a plant with a neighbor and reading about Lola. In the book *Lola Pants a Garden*, Lola was inspired by her trip to the library to plant a garden full of sunflowers.
As the students listened to a section of *Lola Plants a Garden* by Anna McQuinn, they planted seeds with their families. They were provided with the tools and information to help the seedling grow and be transferred to the ground once the soil was conducive for planting.

*Family Station Two: The Listening Walk*

Families would listen to a section from *The Listening Walk* by Paul Showers at the second station. This book promoted considering activities while being active outside by utilizing the senses for observation while engaging in a walk! This book offered reading practice for students and adults and ideas to consider practicing with the family during an outing—a small group within the community or as an individual activity.

*Family Station Three: Up in the Garden, Down in the Dirt*

This station was my personal favorite. The participants gathered around the inflatable fireplace as Matt (Lake Frierson State Park’s Superintendent) sat in his camping chair near the tent and read a section of *Up in the Garden, Down in the Dirt*. After reading the passage, he did a presentation on our local state parks closing with a Q&A session with the participants.

Another reason this station was a personal favorite of mine is the surprise. Because of our community financial partners' generosity, we provided a copy of each station promoting the book to each participating household. Along with the

*Closing Station: Snacks, Music, Communion, or Blessing*

Many of the participating students read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* book by Eric Carle. Our English as a second language educators informed us that it was one of the most popular books for that school year. Thus, our closing station’s theme focused on that book. Many volunteers transformed the grand hall into a caterpillar wonderland: tables and partial walls adorned with caterpillar décor; snacks, sandwiches, fruits, and cupcakes resembled the hungry caterpillar.

As families made their way to the closing station, snacks were available, and students, parents, guardians, teachers, and community members gathered around the tables. Brian, Paragould First United Methodist’s Director of Music and local junior high band teacher, grabbed his guitar and introduced Joselin Diaz. Joselin is an incredible vocalist. She helps lead worship at her church, across the street from our event. Joselin attended Ready, Set, READ’s summer camp at Paragould First United Methodist during her grade-school years. Now a graduate of one of our local schools, Joselin has volunteered with Ready, Set, READ for several years.
Joselin and Brian lead our closing station in song. We sang several familiar songs in both Spanish and English. The closing station was a great time to share the gift of music. Following the music session, I offered a prayer and extended the invitation to share communion or a blessing (prayers were offered in English and Spanish).  

Chapter V. Reflection

The theological praxis of developing relationships and empowering voices within the community is participating in the kin-dom of God (or the equality of relationship as exemplified by the Divine).

“At a theological level, the church is called to strive to be a reflection of the kin-dom family of God on earth as in Heaven. Our entire purpose of existence is to reflect the heavenly banquet where all are welcomed and know they are loved…living in community with a diversity of people, each made in the image of God, is how we more fully catch glimpses of a God we can never fully know.”

The continuous work of theological praxis is the action of advocacy for justice and reconciliation within the community. Constant reflection in the praxis cycles, we examine and name growth areas in developing new relationships. Each

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61 Originally, the event was planned for a shared experience of participants who spoke English, Spanish, and Marshallese. However, a week before the event, a relative of several our Marshallese community members passed. The funeral service for the relative took place a few hours away. Our coordinator who worked closely with this community informed us that if a member of this community was not working the day of the event, they would be traveling to the funeral service. This led our teams to adapt and offer a bi-lingual experience for this event as opposed to a tri-lingual. This was well received by the community at large as we explained and offered up a prayer for traveling mercies and comfort for our fellow community members.

examination presents the opportunity for assessment, grief, lamenting, and revisioning. As new relationships from revisioning occur, new voices are heard within the community, specifically marginalized voices. The process can be challenging yet transformative.

“We (the church) must work to create communities in which we consistently do the hard work of justice and reconciliation, where we model for the world the possibility of beloved community.” 63

Transformation takes time. As mentioned in my experience while serving as a youth director, the program developed over the span of four years. Likewise, the theological praxis cycles within my current context are entering the fourth-year cycle. In both scenarios, trauma, pain, and a need for healing were present.

Reconciliation derives from engaging in work that leads to transformation reflective of a growing understanding of and participation in the kin-dom of God. The work is hard, and the transformation is slow. However, slow transformation enables all to name and address trauma, pain, and the need for healing from within the community.

“The ministry of the Holy Spirit happens not by moving fast through the places of pain and heartache but by witnessing the middle where all remains broken and where the violence is part of the present.” 64

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I hope Christian organizations will engage in the theological praxis of developing relationships within the community. Through this shared work, we can use our resources to lift all voices within the community. As we see the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within our lives and our beings, may we teach others to engage in this kin-dom work.

“…be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of may witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.” 2 Timothy 2:1-2
Appendix A: Ready, Set, READ first initiative.

https://vimeo.com/651169000
THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT I

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERVICE

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

Through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.

PRESENTATION OF CANDIDATES

RENUNCIATION OF SIN AND PROFESSION OF FAITH

Since the earliest times, the vows of Christian baptism have consisted first of the renunciation of all that is evil and then the profession of faith and loyalty to Christ. Parents or other sponsors reaffirm these vows for themselves while taking the responsibilities of sponsorship. Candidates for confirmation process for themselves the solemn vows that were made at their baptism.

The pastor addresses candidates: On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? I do.

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? I will.

The pastor addresses the sponsors: Will you who sponsor these candidates support and encourage them in their Christian life? I will.

The pastor addresses the congregation, and the congregation responds:

Do you, as Christ's body, the Church, reaffirm both your rejection of sin and your commitment to Christ? We do.

Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care? With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will
pray for them, that they may be true disciples
who walk in the way that leads to life.

The Apostles’ Creed in threefold question-and-answer form appeared at least as early as the third century as a statement of faith used in baptisms and has been widely used in baptisms ever since.

Let us join together in professing the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Do you believe in God the Father? I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ? I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, [who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.]

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? I believe in the Holy Spirit, [the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.]

THANKSGIVING OVER THE WATER
The Lord be with you. And also, with you.

Let us pray. Eternal Father: When nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah, you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised. Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of God’s mercy each day.

In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit. He called his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations. Declare Christ’s works to the nations, his glory among all the people.

Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that, dying and being raised with Christ, they may share in his final victory. All praise to you, Eternal Father, through your Son Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever. Amen.

BAPTISM WITH LAYING ON OF HANDS
The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Amen.
Now it is our joy to welcome our new sisters and brothers in Christ. Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood. We are all one in Christ Jesus. With joy and thanksgiving, we welcome you as members of the family of Christ.

CONFIRMATION OR REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH

RECEPTION INTO THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
As members of Christ's universal Church, will you be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries? I will.

RECEPTION INTO THE LOCAL CONGREGATION
As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness? I will.

COMMENDATION AND WELCOME
Members of the household of God, I commend these persons to your love and care. Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love. We give thanks for all that God has already given you and we welcome you in Christian love. As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, establish you and strengthen you that you may live in grace and peace.
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