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Southern Methodist University, gfox@smu.edu

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Gary A. Fox

OPENING YOUR DOOR AND DINNER TABLE AS EVANGELISM

April 25, 2018

Approved:

Advisor – Dr. Robert Hunt

Second Reader – Dr. Carlos Cardoza

ABSTRACT

Gary A. Fox

B.S. Illinois State University, 1990

M.Div. Perkins School of Theology, 2011

“Opening Your Door and Dinner Table as Evangelism”

With the decline of membership in most mainline denominational churches, can people with no religious affiliation, or who have left the church, or who want nothing to do with the church, enter into a relationship with God through community in small neighborhood groups meeting in homes?

The problem for most mainline churches is that small groups are viewed as only being for short term Bible Study, or information gathering. Yet, a life transforming encounter with God often happens through long-term small groups that are focused on relationship building and life stage support as the primary focus. It is in community that people experience God in profound and transformational ways. If small groups can be utilized for outreach into the community by neighbors building relationships with neighbors and offering one another support through holy listening and radical hospitality, then space can be created for conversations around faith that lead to people committing to faith in Christ.

This thesis develops a model to train church members to build relationships with their neighbors through holy listening and radical hospitality around a shared meal where an encounter might be had with the God who is in Godself, relationship. Humankind being created in the image of God is also created to be in relationship with God and one another. By attending to their own spiritual lives, prayer, and the Holy Spirit, church members can learn to welcome their neighbors into their homes for food, drink and relationship building, and by committing to this work, create the kingdom of God in their midst.

This project developed a training model that was presented in two sessions over an eight week period to eight church members and evaluated through written evaluations, observations during the training and discussions during and after with participants. This thesis concludes that the training model is viable and worthwhile. Although, while people find transformational work necessary and good, they appear to not be willing to reach out to their neighbors for the purpose of faith building.

OPENING YOUR DOOR AND DINNER TABLE AS EVANGELISM

A Professional Project Submitted to
The Faculty of Perkins School of Theology
In
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Of
Doctor of Ministry

By

Gary A. Fox

B.S., Illinois State University, 1990

M.Div., Perkins School of Theology, 2011

Dallas, Texas
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Introduction

With the decline of membership in most denominational churches, and in particular Walnut Hill United Methodist Church (my ministry context), I wondered if the church could be revitalized by changing the long-held view that small groups were for short-term Bible Study to one of outreach into the community by neighbors building relationships with neighbors and offering one another support. Could people who had been members of the church for most of their lives, and who viewed small groups as information-based groups, reach neighbors with no religious affiliation, or who had left the church, or who wanted nothing to do with the church, create transformation based small neighborhood groups meeting in homes around a shared meal? And with training, could these leaders create space for conversations around faith that would lead to neighbors committing to faith in Christ?

To test these questions, my purpose became the development of a model to train church members to build relationships with their neighbors through holy listening and radical hospitality around a shared meal where an encounter might be had with the God who is in Godself, relationship. Humankind being created in the image of God is also created to be in relationship with God and one another. By attending to their own spiritual lives, prayer, and the Holy Spirit, church members could learn to welcome their neighbors into their homes for food, drink and relationship building, and by committing to this work, create the kingdom of God in their midst. Following the creation of the training model, I met with a small group in two sessions over eight weeks.

This Doctorate of Ministry project is presented in four chapters. Chapter one is the theological reasons for humanity to be in relationship with one another; chapter two is

the theoretical considerations, what have others said about community creation and faith growth through small groups; chapter three is the development of the training and what resources were used; chapter four is the evaluation of the training program, its effectiveness, changes that could be made, and the final assessment of this project, especially how it relates to my context for ministry.

Background – Context for Ministry

Walnut Hill Methodist Church was established in 1950 in the rapidly growing area of North Dallas. By knocking on doors, Rev. Charles and Kathleen Denman saw the church grow to 2,500 members by the early 1970's with a large campus and a 40,000 square foot facility. Founding members of the church who are still alive, most in their 90s, share fondly of how the church would have fisherman club meetings. These were potluck meals where four to five couples would gather together, eat and pray, then go out into the neighborhood and introduce themselves to other families and invite them to church. This was exciting! The church was founded and grew on a method similar to my project training model. Church members were excited about their faith, loved their church, and they were willing to intentionally go out and share that faith and love. Unfortunately, the church did not maintain this sharing of faith and love. Over the last forty years, the church has steadily declined like most denominational churches. We average now about 180 people on Sunday morning. The church is actively looking for ways to use the church property to generate income to keep the church financially solvent.

Chapter 1: Theology

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
- Genesis 1:26*

God's self-description in Genesis 1:26 is one of plurality, using the descriptors of "us" and "our." In the Christian context, we understand this to represent the Trinity, the nature of God as three-in-one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Early in the fourth century as the doctrine of the Trinity was taking shape against various claims regarding the relationship of Jesus to God as one of subordination, the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus) made the impressive move to define the Godhead as one of primary relationship as opposed to individuality and autonomy.¹ In essence, the divine being was purely relational. Therefore, as God created humankind in God's image, humankind is also purely relational. This is not just the relationship between humanity and God, but also between one another. Humankind in its essence is also one of relationality, regardless of markers used by humans to separate one another, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religious practice, skin color, national origin, age, mental or physical capability.

Humanity does indeed offer a wide array of difference, and this should not be ignored. In fact, since all humanity is created in the image of a relational God, these differences should be celebrated in the midst of human relationships. Because of sin though, too often these differences are used to separate, exclude or oppress. Wholeness in

¹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 85-86.

relationality might then be considered a part of salvation wrought by Christ. As the evangelist John proclaimed, “I [Jesus] have other sheep [those that do not worship God as the Jewish people] that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). The wholeness that Christ came to bring was one of relational unity between differing groups. Paul echoed this in Galatians when he said, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Christ came to end categories of separation.

Separation by creating categories or classes of people was not specific to the time of Jesus. The prophet Habakkuk complains to God that the people have used their houses for evil by setting them up on high “to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples” (2:9-10). Essentially, those who can afford it have left areas deemed unsafe to live, leaving those who cannot afford to live elsewhere in a space of danger and violence. John J. Collins says Habakkuk 2 “is an indictment of the proud and the wealthy.”² Collins believes Habakkuk clearly references the solution to this separation of people by economic class to be the Davidic kingship through theophany so that God can save God’s people.³ Salvation through the appearing of God was then to be an end to separation by economic class. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Good news to the poor is the end to

² John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 333.

³ *Ibid.*

separation by economic class, and the beginning of a new economy, God's economy, where all people have access to the abundant life of God.

But the wholeness of relationality wrought by Christ was not just the end to ethnic separateness (Jew or Greek) and economic class (slave or free), it was the end to gender discrimination (male and female). The patriarchal nature of scripture is well known and it has taken thousands of years for women to even begin to live into the image of God given them, one of equal worth to that of their male counterparts. Even within the United Methodist Church for which this doctoral study is a part, did not lead society in the Christ affirming role of equality between men and women. As noted by Dr. William B. Lawrence in *Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History, Restoring Health*, women were granted full clergy rights in 1956 in The Methodist Church, but it took twenty years before women were granted formal approval to attend theological schools and were approved by the clergy of annual conferences for ordination.⁴ He says, "at best the church was a mirror of American society on the acceptance of women in professional leadership, not a leader within the society."⁵ Full relationality with God and one another, although won by Christ, has been a long struggle.

In *A Male/Female Continuum: Paths to Collegueship*, the authors quote a Maenka West African tribe saying, "If you force people to be the same, the only way left for them to be different is to try and get on top of one another."⁶ Wholeness in

⁴ William B. Lawrence, *Methodism in recovery: renewing mission, reclaiming history, restoring health* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 96-97.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carol Pierce, Bill Page, and David Wagner, *A male/female continuum: paths to collegueship* (Laconia, NH: New Dynamics, 1998), 1.

relationality means an end to dominance and subordination, an intentional striving away from such relationships, and a recognition of the vast difference within human creation, all bearing the image of God.

If all of humankind, in its various richness, is created in God's image, then no one can be excluded from the image of God or relationship one to the other. The evangelist Matthew helps define this when he records Jesus as saying, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 40). This text affirms all humanity is included in the family God, with a special place for those who are excluded or considered the least. Human relationships are tied to relationship with God. What one has done to another is done to God. Paul affirms this in his testimony of encountering Christ on the road to Damascus.

Acts 9:1-9 records Paul, while still known as Saul, approaching Damascus when light flashes all around him and he hears a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul has no idea who is speaking and of whom he is supposedly persecuting when he asks, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply is Jesus. While Saul was not directly persecuting Jesus, only those who followed the Way of Jesus, he would not have claimed to personally have been persecuting Jesus. What this interaction communicates is that Jesus understood Saul's persecution of his followers to be direct persecution of himself. What was done unto the least was also done unto Jesus. Not only does Jesus take the persecution of his followers personally, he indicates he and his followers are one. This encounter was a powerful teacher for Saul who became Paul, not just because of the supernatural events surrounding it, or even the temporary blindness in which it resulted, but because it caused Paul to boldly state there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free,

male and female “for all of you are *one* in Christ” (Galatians 3:28, emphasis mine). The oneness Paul preaches does not erase or eradicate the national origin, social class or gender. It returns humanity to its original image of relationality. Paul even rebukes Peter, the Rock, for his inability to recognize this oneness of all humanity.

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul tells of Peter, whom he calls Cephas, coming to Antioch where he confronts Peter for the apparent hypocrisy of openly treating the Gentiles as equals until some members of the Jerusalem Council come to Antioch and cast aspersions on him for eating with Gentiles. Paul feels compelled to confront Peter because he was not acting in consistency “with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14). For Paul, the truth of the gospel was about relationality, the oneness of all humanity in Christ. For Peter, it reveals the human condition all too well of creating separation between one another.

Peter’s vision recorded in Acts 10 of unclean animals being lowered three times before him with the Lord commanding him to kill and eat was the witness of the Spirit saying to Peter not to declare any human being unworthy of God’s grace. Yet, this did not keep Peter from distancing himself from the Gentiles in Antioch. Unfortunately, Peter’s situation is not unique. Humanity continues to justify exclusion and separation due to ethnicity, cultural traditions, race, and gender.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna, a feminist theologian, critical of the Catholic church for its continued insistence that women cannot serve as priests, says that together men and women represent the full image of God and it is the Christian hope initiated by Jesus that “in the reign of God, when all tears have been wiped away, women and men will no longer find themselves in the estrangement of ‘otherness’ but will be one in Jesus Christ,

living together harmoniously....”⁷ The harmonious oneness between all of humanity is the eschatological hope Christians are to be demonstrating and offering to a world that continues to divide and separate. Those who have truly glimpsed this hope become its greatest advocates. Paul was one of them.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabus are in Lystra. When Paul heals a man who had been crippled from birth, the people believe them to be gods and wish to offer sacrifices to them. Paul and Barnabus are distraught and tear their clothes for they wish only to point to the one true God who has done this great miracle. But those of the Jewish faith who are threatened by this new Way of Jesus stir up the crowds against the two and Paul is stoned, dragged out of the city and left for dead. There is no indication in the scripture that Paul actually died, only that it was after the disciples surrounded Paul did he get up. If Paul did die and it was the prayers of the disciples while encircling him that brought him back, Paul would have had what is called a Near Death Experience (NDE). While this cannot be certain, Paul does indicate in what is known as Letter D in Second Corinthians 10:1-13:10 that he was caught up into heaven fourteen years previously. If one follows the revisionist Pauline chronology, Paul would have written Letter D in roughly 56 C.E. Fourteen years earlier would be 42 C.E. when Paul was on his first missionary journey in which he was stoned at Lystra. This is significant in that research into NDEs reveals that people who have them most often return profoundly changed, often desiring to live a life of whole relationality through love.

⁷ LaCugna, 99.

Terence Nichols, a theology professor and department chair at the University of St. Thomas, shares in *Death and Afterlife: A Theological Introduction* many first-hand stories of NDEs. In the majority of cases, regardless of religious affiliation, those who have died have a sensation of leaving their bodies.⁸ Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:2 “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know.” While he cannot confirm whether he had an out of body experience, he does acknowledge it was possible. Additionally, those who have NDEs often indicate they have a “profound sense of peace and love,” being met by a “high spiritual being” who welcomed them as though they were an old friend or family member, a “living being of perfect love.”⁹ These experiences return them to life with hearts “on fire with love,” desiring to make amends with those they believe they have harmed, and live the rest of their lives with compassion giving back to others in any way they can.¹⁰

If Paul did indeed have a NDE, his rhetoric indicates that he too was profoundly changed, believing that love was patient, kind, not boastful or arrogant or rude, not resentful or insisting on its own way, not keeping a record of wrongdoing, but rejoicing in all that was true, providing hope, and that love never ends (I Corinthians 13:4-8a). If God is love as the author of First John proclaims in 4:8, the living being of perfect love encountered in NDEs would be God, revealed in Jesus Christ who is the “exact imprint of God’s being” (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus lived a life revealing God’s love for humanity by healing the sick, caring for the poor, eating and spending time with those considered less

⁸ Terence L. Nichols, *Death and afterlife: a theological introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 92-93.

⁹ Ibid, 95-101.

¹⁰ Ibid.

than or other. Jesus intentionally lived the relational life he came to restore, where no one was separated or considered “less than.”

Jesus embodied relationality. Jesus exemplified God’s desire for humanity to live in oneness. The evangelist John writes of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples that they will be one as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe in Jesus, and ultimately, his message of love (John 17:20-23). “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” (John 15:9-10). Jesus goes on to instruct the disciples that by abiding in his love they will also experience his joy in themselves, a joy that is complete (John 15:11).

A result then of living in a state of harmonious love as God intended for humanity is complete joy. Randy Alcorn in his book *Happiness* goes in depth through the scriptures and the historical writings of the church fathers exhorting a biblical command to be happy or joyful!¹¹ Using two of Jesus’ parables, the wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14 and the great banquet of Luke 14:14:15-24, Alcorn points out that the host who represents God invites the guests to join in the festivities of free food, drinks, music and laughter. Those who decline are saying no to happiness. In fact, the excuses given for not coming are work, inspecting livestock or staying home. Who would rather be engaged in these things than a large party? Alcorn believes those who said yes were those with grateful hearts, those who knew God desires humanity to be in relationship with God and one another and that this relationality brings joy.¹² In terms of evangelism, I believe there are few who would turn down the opportunity for free food, drinks, and laughter. This is

¹¹ Randy C. Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2015), 17-23.

¹² *Ibid*, 54-55.

the theological heart of *Opening Your Door and Dinner Table as Evangelism*. I am proposing church members be taught to see small groups as more than a short-term bible study (an informational based group) or an affinity group (a group organized around similar interests, like a book club or sewing group), but a group organized around living life in relationship with one another and sharing a meal together in one another's homes.

Kevin Watson, author of *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, believes that small groups led by people who are willing to step outside their comfort zones by the grace of God and grow in their love for God and other people within the context of a supportive community of faith, will “midwife life-changing encounters with the Holy Spirit” that will revive people “created in the image of God... [to be] renewed in the image in which they were created!”¹³ I agree. If humans are created in the image of a relational God, then we are created to be in relationship with one another. Not just any relationship, but one characterized by love and joy. Christine Pohl in *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* says that communities that embrace gratitude as a way of life find ways to celebrate with one another and often this spills over into shared meals, spontaneous and planned parties that “brings hope and new strength to take up again everyday life with more love.”¹⁴ Humanity needs one another. Yet in that need, persons must be aware that relationships are created, built and sustained within a fallen world.

¹³ Kevin M. Watson, *The class meeting: reclaiming a forgotten (and essential) small group experience* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 90, 147.

¹⁴ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into community: cultivating practices that sustain us* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 55.

It would be naïve to believe that simply by gathering together relationships of love and joy will be the result. Just as Jesus intentionally developed relationships, humanity must also intentionally develop relationships. This means expecting that some will experience hurt, some will be reluctant to engage with others perhaps because of being wounded while being vulnerable, some will use position or power as a means to influence the relationships being built instead of simply enjoying time together. Recognizing that sin has broken the original image of relatedness is essential to creating authentic community.

Pohl shares an experience that while regularly attending a mission church primarily consisting of members economically disadvantaged, a larger, wealthier, suburban church offered to provide a dinner, gifts and a worship program at the mission church during the holiday season. While well intentioned, the larger, wealthier church, did not include any of the local church members in their planning or even in the worship service making the mission church members guests in their own church.¹⁵ Pohl wisely posits that persons who have never experienced need or being on the margins or even being vulnerable, often prefer to be hosts in control, then to be guests. It is the complaint of Habukkuk all over again. This power dynamic reinforces stereotypes and while appearing good, actually is not. It does not create opportunities of relationality where all persons are held with dignity and respect. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a prime example of how those who have not experienced need can sometimes end up not treating others as whole persons, with dignity and respect.

¹⁵ Christine D. Pohl, *Making room: recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 119.

In the story of the Good Samaritan of Luke 10:25-37, the priest and Levite pass by the man who has been beaten, stripped, robbed and left for dead, while the Samaritan, one considered “other” by the Jewish people, has pity on the man, bandages his wounds and at great cost to himself, pays for a room for the man in which to stay while he heals. Anything the innkeeper spends to care for the man, the Samaritan will reimburse. It is often interpreted that when Jesus instructs the lawyer to whom he tells the story to “Go and do likewise,” that humanity is to care for one another as the Samaritan cared for the beaten and left for dead robbery victim. Surely, this is true. But using Christine Pohl’s example of the missionary church, is the message to that church “You are beaten up badly and left for dead?” While the congregation may consist of those with less economic advantage, they were not dwindling quickly, nor struggling to keep their doors open. And if they were, the Samaritan response would have been to actively engage with the congregation in their need to help determine the best course of action. True relationality would require it. Perhaps this is Jesus’ message to the lawyer. Being a neighbor requires a deep, heartfelt concern for others. The Greek word for “pity” in this passage is *σπλαγχνισμομαι*, which means to be moved with compassion or figuratively “to have the bowels yearn.” Humanity living out the relational image of God is to have a deep yearning for the well-being of others. There is an additional consideration in this parable.

As a lawyer, the man hearing this parable would not have been surprised by the priest and Levite passing by. To modern ears, the two passing by are seen as examples of what not to do. They are the contrast to the Samaritan who does what is right. But this parable is much more in line with Jesus’ proclamations of “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” To the lawyer and anyone hearing the parable, the law would have required

both the priest and the Levite to pass by. In all appearances, the man is dead. According to Leviticus 21:1 and Numbers 19:11-13, touching the body would have required the men to go through a week-long purification process, stopping any work the men were required to do, such as caring for the temple, even giving alms to the poor. Jesus was telling the lawyer and all listening, “You have it heard it said, ‘You must not touch a dead body,’ but I say to you, go and examine the body. Determine the need and address the need with compassion.” This is someone’s son, brother, husband, friend. His body deserves dignity and respect. And if he is not dead? Help him. Restore him to health; restore him to those who care about him. Jesus is talking about the human image as created in the relational image of God. This parable can be taken even one step further.

Suppose Jesus is saying to the hearer *you* are the broken one laying in a ditch.¹⁶ Do you wish to be passed over? What if it is one you hate, one you consider an enemy, who has compassion on you? What if your salvation depends on one you despise?¹⁷ If fallen humanity is to live into the God-image of relationality, concern from whom our help comes should not be an issue. Just as importantly, concern for whom help is offered should not be a consideration and it should be offered in a way that preserves dignity and respect for all involved. If evangelism is inviting others to be a part of God’s restored wholeness in relationality, this will mean welcoming those to whom there is a dislike. Jesus, even as the embodiment of love upon the earth, was greatly disliked, even to the point of being killed.

¹⁶ Scot McKnight, “The Parable of the Good Deplorable,” Jesus Creed, January 28, 2017, accessed February 07, 2017, [http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2017/01/29/parable-good-deplorable/?utm_source=%5B%21%5D%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL Best of Patheos &utm_content=9072](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2017/01/29/parable-good-deplorable/?utm_source=%5B%21%5D%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos&utm_content=9072).

¹⁷ Ibid.

Addressing the death of Jesus is essential when inviting others into relationship with God because the gospel message is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Ted Campbell says it best, “The gospel cannot be a vague expression... it refers to the central teaching about Christ’s life, death, and resurrection that was at the heart of the earliest Christian message, transmitted from generation to generation...”¹⁸ Death could be argued is the single most destroyer of human relationality as it separates people from the ones they love. Even Jesus wept when he saw the heartbreak death caused to the ones he dearly loved (John 11:35). So, if the heart of evangelism is to invite others into whole relationality, then sharing that Christ came to put an end to death as part of his restoring relationships is essential.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians sees death as a great and last enemy to be destroyed (I Corinthians 15:26). Drawing from the Genesis text, Paul surmises that death entered into the world through one man, Adam, and that death is ended in one man, that is Christ (Romans 5:12, I Corinthians 15:21-22). Christ’s atoning work is then ending death, resulting in eternal life for humankind. This is not simply life after death, but also for whole and restored relationships here and now (John 10:10), an abundant life filled with joy. Being a Christian should make a meaningful difference in a person’s life.¹⁹

A joy filled life should be the result of having human sin wiped away. Yet, there are popular notions in many Christian groups that God required a blood sacrifice in order to end humankind’s enslavement to sin. I believe it is important to address the theological stance of substitutionary atonement as this can impact an individual’s desire to enter into

¹⁸ Ted A. Campbell, *The gospel in Christian traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24.

¹⁹ Watson, 65.

restored relationship with God because it paints God as requiring death, a relationship ending act, in order to bring about a relationship restoring act. If God's act of atonement is to end sin (a negative condition), then why would God use a negative condition? In law, there is an ethics theory called positive rights versus negative rights. Positive rights require that individuals be provided with things that are good and necessary for flourishing. Negative rights require that individuals not infringe upon the freedom of others to exercise their rights. It would seem that in atonement, God is exercising positive rights. Negative rights would be God giving free will to humankind, an exercise that left humankind in an enslaved state because humankind consistently chooses sin. Therefore, the death of Jesus was not required by God, but a result of the human condition. By exercising positive rights, God used the negative death of Jesus to bring about a necessary good and flourishing act for all of humankind. This is characteristic of the God who brings good out of all things (Romans 8:28).

An additional consideration regarding substitutionary atonement is that it is predicated on human sin being transferred to the sacrificial substitute. This would result in the victim being regarded as "unclean."²⁰ But Jesus is largely regarded as the spotless or sinless lamb of the Passover, an animal sacrifice that used blood to mark the doors of a home's occupants, so that death would pass by those living there. There was no transfer of guilt or sin, simply God's preservation of life and relationship with the Israelites. This understanding of the atonement follows Paul's understanding of Jesus' death as one that ended death for the purpose of restoring relationship. God raised Jesus from the dead as a

²⁰ Robert H. Culpepper, *Interpreting the atonement* (Wake Forest, NC: Stevens Book Pr., 1988), 25.

“first fruit,” so that all might be “made alive in Christ” (I Corinthians 15:20, 22). The mark of lamb’s blood upon the door frame was a mark symbolizing life and the passing over of death. Blood as having the power of life was crucial to Jewish understanding.

In Leviticus 17:11, life was in the blood and it was not to be consumed by any person. The life of every creature was in its blood (17:14). This same passage does state that blood makes atonement (17:11), but this not a requirement. Leviticus 5:11-13 states that a poor person who cannot afford an animal sacrifice, may instead bring an offering of fine flour. This then begs the question, What is the purpose of sacrifice? Robert Culpepper says that heathen religions required a blood sacrifice to appease a wrathful god.²¹ The Jewish understanding on the other hand was that “it is God himself who manifests his grace to man in providing a means of covering sin so that it no longer has the power of disturbing the covenant relation between God and man.”²² The purpose of sacrifice is to restore relationship. Jesus, who never broke relationship with God or others, continued that faithfulness by not overriding human will toward death and also demonstrated God’s desire to maintain relationship with humankind no matter the cost. The requirement on humanity’s part is to use its free will to accept God’s gift of grace that restores wholeness of relationship. This is actually the complex issue of agency.

If humanity is created in the relational image of God, and God in God’s being is relational, then human interaction with God is an interchange between persons.

Personhood in this context is not to be understood as relating to human beings only.

Personhood here is to refer to two separate entities, each retaining its own individuality,

²¹ Ibid, 27.

²² Ibid, 28.

characteristics and feelings. It is what Robert Ellis calls “party integrity” where persons are “free beings, with rights over their own futures, rights to choose even the wrong options” where “human beings are persons” and “God is personal.”²³ In this sense, God is a Person with a will, desires, dreams, hopes, and ability to choose and bring that choice into reality. If God’s dream is restored relationality with humankind and God has the power to achieve it, then why allow human free will or agency at all? Because for relationships to be whole, they must include reciprocity. Another way this might be stated is if God knows every choice every human will make at all times, even before it is made, what is in the relationship for God? If the relationship is a reciprocal one, God must also be willing to give something up.

Vincent Brümmer, in his book *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, says, “God is a God of love, he chooses to become vulnerable in relation to us. In this respect, the cross of Christ is for Christians the paradigmatic manifestation of God’s loving readiness to suffer on account of the evil that we do to him and to each other.”²⁴ God gives up God’s right not to suffer evil, even at the very hands of God’s own creation because of love. It is in this love God and humanity share together in relationship. This means though that in the death of Jesus, we find a God who is willing then to self-limit for the sake of the relationship, even to the point of death.

Because of our tradition, where God is understood to be omnipotent, it is difficult to have a God who purposely self-limits. Yet, scripture itself points out, God does indeed self-limit and God even changes God’s mind. Moses changed God’s mind when God

²³ Robert Ellis, *Answering God* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 19.

²⁴ Vincent Brummer, *What are we doing when we pray?: on prayer and the nature of faith* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008), p. 158.

decided to destroy the Israelites after they left Egypt and worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 32:14). In Numbers 14, the Israelites once again began to complain against God for delivering them from slavery in Egypt. God then decides to wipe them out and start over with a new nation born from Moses. But Moses changes God's mind once again. It does not seem that everything is written in stone. There are possibilities with God.

In *The Suffering of God*, Terence Fretheim points out that when God presents two options to Israel, these also have to be options for God.²⁵ For example, in Jeremiah 22:4-5, Judah is presented with the option to end oppression, violence and bloodshed, in order to see realized a succession of kings on David's throne. Not to end this violence and bloodshed will result in Judah becoming desolate. As Fretheim points out, if God already knew the decision that Judah would in fact make before the decision occurred, God's word to the people would be both pointless and a deception.²⁶ God had to self-limit God's knowledge in order for there to be a truly personal, reciprocal relationship. "God, too, must face possibilities. For God, the future is not something which is closed. God, too, moves into a future which is to some extent unknown."²⁷ When inviting others into our homes for the purpose of evangelism through relationship building, we too are committing to a future unknown for the sake of relationship.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a beautiful picture of what committing to an unknown future looks like for the sake of relationship. In Luke 1:38 when Mary responds to the angel Gabriel upon hearing the news of her pregnancy with "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," she is setting aside her own plans,

²⁵ Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 48.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 48-49.

her own way, or at least the way she believed her life would be married to Joseph. Even Joseph had to walk into an unknown future for the sake of his relationship with Mary and be convinced of it through angelic visitation in his dreams (Matthew 1:18-23). These decisions came with a cost. Peter's sermon at Pentecost illustrates God's willingness to walk into a future with a cost – the death of Jesus.

In Acts 2 when Peter addresses the crowd, he says, “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man... you crucified and killed” (2:22-23). Humanity acted in free agency to crucify and kill Jesus. Peter does not say crucified and killed as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. He squarely places the death of Jesus at the people's hands. But God does act as a free agent to reverse this death: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death... (2:24). Death is the enemy to relationality. It is as Paul said in I Corinthians 15:26, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is the enemy to life, and God is “God not of the dead, but of the living” (Luke 20:38). Life is relationships.

The cross was death, but it was not the end. What God demonstrated through the cross is that in order for relationships to be whole, violence cannot be used. Jesus resisted using violence to save himself. When Peter pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus said “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take up the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:52-53). Humanity then is at odds with the image of the relational God in whom they were created when they use violence against one another. Walter Wink, a theologian and biblical

scholar, was involved in the civil rights movement in the United States and worked to end apartheid in South Africa. Wink believes God's redemption of humankind was necessary because humankind ultimately resents God and uses free will to kill, leaving us unable to turn toward God.²⁸ He goes on to say, "God needs no reparation, but human beings must be extracted from their own prison if they are to be capable of accepting the pure gift of freely offered love.... It is not God who must be appeased, but humans who must be delivered from their hatred of God" and one another.²⁹

Being delivered from hatred of God and others is embodied in Jesus' summation of the Law and Prophets as "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). The evangelism project I am proposing, where church members are trained to invite and welcome their neighbors into their homes for the purpose of building relationships and sharing the gospel, is based on loving one's neighbors, building relationships with them in order to see relationships restored with God. A critical point to the theology behind this is that the Holy Spirit's presence has already been at work in one's neighbors before an invitation is ever extended.

Donal Dorr in his book *Mission in Today's World* says, "salvation is a gift from God, that... brings joy, and that in some respects... has already taken place before any action of ours...."³⁰ This prior presence of the Holy Spirit helps eliminate a desire to

²⁸ Walter Wink, *The powers that be: theology for a new millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 92.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Donal Dorr, *Mission in today's world* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 83.

“save others” as some Christian groups propose as the Christian vocation. It also helps prevent the desire to communicate the gospel as a message to be proclaimed. Some have interpreted Paul’s words in Romans 10:14-15, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” to mean that proclamation is necessary. But this is to take Paul’s words out of context. Paul goes on to make his point by quoting Isaiah, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask” (Romans 10:20). If it is understood that God is able to make God’s self known apart from human words, then it frees individuals to authentically build relationships with others. It frees individuals to not think of Christianity “as primarily *news*,” but “as a *life lived out in a community*.”³¹ Thomas Groome says Jesus wanted “his listeners to recognize that great things like the reign of God and their own eternal destiny were being negotiated in the ordinary and every day of their lives.”³² This is why the evangelism training I am proposing is designed around individuals inviting their neighbors into their homes. This is the ordinary space of human lives. This is where the kingdom of God is being negotiated every day. And beyond the individual home is the neighborhood in which the home resides.

Neighborhoods are areas where one already has a concrete connection – everyone lives in the same vicinity. Proximity in and of itself does not lend itself to living life as community, but it is a good place to start. In the Beatitudes, Jesus lays out guidelines for

³¹ Ibid, 85.

³² Thomas H. Groome, *Will there be faith?: a new vision for educating and growing disciples* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 35.

living in community, such as comforting those who mourn, showing mercy in order to receive mercy, and being a peacemaker. But he also says that the “pure in heart shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). This can be interpreted in many ways, especially when it comes to moral behavior. This can lead to some not wishing to engage with their neighbors for fear of judgement or rejection. James Brownson notes that this is exactly how purity codes were used. They were:

a different way of socializing communities into shared commitments, values, and behaviors. It involves an appeal to the emotions as much as to the mind and will. Purity regulations direct the social formation of the emotional response of disgust. Most of the forbidden conditions and behaviors in the purity codes of Leviticus and elsewhere in the Old Testament are designed to identify very clearly for Israel what they should regard as disgusting and abhorrent – in food, dress, use of bodies, social roles, and relationships.³³

The purity codes were ways to create barriers to creating and building community. But is this what Jesus meant when he said the pure in heart will see God?

Paul was extremely reactionary to those who insisted that Gentile believers, or all believers for that matter, must ascribe to the Jewish ritualistic purity codes. The basis for his letter to the Galatians was to persuade the church in Galatia that the “super apostles” who had come to the church insisting that the Gentiles of the church be circumcised should be ignored. If they were to be circumcised, they would be forfeiting all they had gained in Christ (Galatians 5:2). In Paul’s ministry, he held high the regard for freedom in Christ away from ritualistic purity codes. Paul seems to understand what Jesus meant with the use of the word “pure.”

³³ J. Brownson, *Bible, gender, sexuality: reframing the church's debate on same-sex relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 185.

The Greek word used in Matthew 5:8 for pure is καθαρό. The translation can be clean, clear and pure. If the translation is clean or pure as in ritualistically clean or pure by following all the Mosaic laws, most assuredly Paul would have held to the maintenance of these laws. But if the meaning is much closer to clear, one might interpret Jesus' message as being "Those who are authentic will see God." Jesus certainly lived an authentic life. He did not live to please others, nor did he seek others approval. He touched those who were deemed untouchable by society. He welcomed and ate with those who were deemed unworthy or sinners. Jesus' life was one based solely on relationship with God and others, not on social expectations.

The interpretation of Matthew 5:8 as a guiding principle for living out one's faith in restored relationship was also part of John Cassian's *Conferences*. Written between 426-429 C.E. after fifteen years of studying Eastern monasticism, Cassian was convinced that no form of monasticism could match the excellence of Eastern monasticism, specifically Egyptian monasticism.³⁴ He determined that the goal of the monastic life was to direct oneself toward the goal of the kingdom of God.³⁵ Cassian believed Matthew 5:8 was a promise that one could have the vision of God, and thereby lead one to the kingdom of God.³⁶ While he believed purity of heart could be described as the avoidance of vices, he also believed in a positive interpretation of Matthew 5:8 where purity of heart meant "nothing else but love."³⁷ I agree with Cassian. If God desires restored relationality between God and humanity, then the kingdom of God is where

³⁴ Bernard McGinn and Patricia McGinn., *Early Christian mystics: the divine vision of the spiritual masters* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 61.

³⁵ Ibid, 63.

³⁶ Ibid, 64.

³⁷ Ibid.

humanity lives out the *Imago Dei* in oneness through love. It is what Christians are inviting others of which to be a part.

Up to this point, I have discussed the nature of God as one of relationality and how Jesus exemplified this in life. I want to now consider the role of the Holy Spirit, who is an integral part of God's relational being. Humanity has proven that it cannot on its own live in perfect harmonious love. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians (now lost) advising the church they were not to associate with immoral people (1 Cor. 5:9). The church misunderstood the letter and believed Paul was asking them not to associate with any immoral people (1 Cor. 5:10). Paul corrects this in his canonical letter of I Corinthians by explaining he was referring to a member of the congregation who was living with his step-mother in a sexual relationship (1 Cor. 5:1). His rebuke of the congregation led to a strained relationship with the Corinthian church and hindered his collection from them for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 12:17-18). Yet, even with his contentious relationship with the Corinthian church, he never stopped seeking reconciliation with them. Paul set love as the highest ideal – “Love is patient; love is kind.... It bears all things, believes in all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:4-8a). “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love” (v.13). Paul goes on to say that love should be pursued with a striving for the spiritual gifts (14:1). The human work of pursuing love is coupled with the gifts of the Spirit. Humanity cannot achieve perfect love in relationships without the Spirit.

Sze-kar Wan, professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, notes that Paul understood the conflict between the temporary, or human time on earth,

and the eternal, when all would be restored.³⁸ Wan describes Paul as seeing believers “yearning to be clothed with the heavenly dwelling,” and providing the Holy Spirit as a “down payment for the full payment as a guarantee that perfection will be realized in the final consummation.”³⁹ The Holy Spirit’s work is to strive with humanity toward perfect love, but the Spirit’s work will not be complete until Christ returns. Humanity must then be diligent in striving with the Spirit. Cassian understood this to be achieved through “unceasing prayer.”⁴⁰ If believers are to witness to perfect love and strive to restore relationships, then their lives must be characterized by prayer – prayer offered in faith.

Here I want to offer a brief illustration of what faith is not. This is important because by building authentic relationships with our neighbors so that they might come to faith in Christ, we are inviting them into a transformation of the heart, not a mental decision based solely on reason. Brümmer, in illustrating the importance of faith in prayer, tells the story of Anthony Flew, a British atheist who during an interview on the BBC said he had been converted to belief in God. Flew shared that after the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA, he no longer could substantiate life springing from a primordial chemical soup; life was too complex and most likely had taken its form through intelligent design, that designer being God.⁴¹ What Brümmer aptly points out is that belief in God does not constitute faith in God. Flew merely accepted one hypothesis over another, which “is not the kind of belief in God that is constitutive for the practice of

³⁸ Sze-kar Wan, *Power in weakness: conflict and rhetoric in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2000), 81.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ McGinn, 64.

⁴¹ Brummer, p. 140.

prayer,⁴² or a relationship with a God of relationship. What Flew's experience demonstrates is a cognitive recognition of God while Jesus' mother Mary's response of "Here I am" demonstrates an experience of the heart. Brümmer calls this experience of the heart "the eyes of faith."⁴³ This discernment is the Spirit of God working together with the human spirit to reveal God's agenda for a restored world of harmony. It is the Spirit's work of guiding us into all truth (John 16:13).

Here it is important to note that "truth" sometimes gets confused in human agency to mean one's own interpretation of scripture or faith tradition. Brümmer believes that the eyes of faith mediate prayer through the experience of a community, handed down through religious tradition.⁴⁴ I agree that apart from a community of faith, one's understanding of God's desire to restore humans to their intended wholeness in relationality can become divergent. The community does help the eyes of faith to discern where the Spirit is leading, but one must also recognize that faith communities and their traditions can also be askew. Therefore, prayer as a long-term journey that moves one toward God's ultimate life must be mediated by the Spirit with a willingness to depart from tradition when necessary. Departure from tradition can be difficult when considering the demands of relationship. It can become tiresome to work with God toward restored relationships. Even Jesus grew weary and had to rest (Luke 8:22-25).

In concluding her study of Christian hospitality, Christine Pohl acknowledges that the work of relationality through hospitality is demanding. She suggests that human

⁴² Ibid., p. 141.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 147.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

lives must be nourished through personal prayer and community worship.⁴⁵ She also notes that the Christian life of hospitality is much less about dramatic gestures and more about steady work – “faithful labor that is undergirded by prayer and sustained by grace.”⁴⁶ I cannot stress enough the connection between the work of the Holy Spirit and prayer. Paul points out that it is precisely in our weakness that the Spirit helps humanity and when one does not even know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). Paul provides a picture of the relationality of God working perfectly together on humanity’s behalf when he says, “And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:27). God and the Holy Spirit work together for the good in all things so that humanity might be “conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family” (Romans 8:28-29). In prayer, God and the Holy Spirit move together to bring about the good of creating a large family, one of perfect love, with God as the perfect Father and all of humanity the children of God.

Walter Wink considers the human family “the most basic instrument of nurture, social control, enculturation, and training” in society.⁴⁷ Yet, Jesus consistently critiqued the family and said that he came to divide families where sons and daughters would be against their parents and their parents against their children (Luke 12:51-53). Wink concludes that Jesus’s critique was of the fallen human family and that Jesus came to restore the human family, not as a patriarchal unit of male, female, and children, but

⁴⁵ Pohl, 182-183.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wink, 75.

one where God is the Father of all humanity.⁴⁸ He supports this claim with Jesus' deliberate omission of father in Mark 3:35, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." And also the omission of father in Mark 10:29-30, "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields... who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands." One can leave their father but they do not receive a new father in the hundredfold blessing, for in the new family God is creating "you have one Father – the one in heaven" (Matthew 23:9). The hundredfold blessing is the kingdom of God, the blessing of restored relationality between God as father and the rest of humanity as family. Wink is insistent that because societies are so heavily patriarchal, fathers must be eliminated to subvert the broken power structure – "no one can... claim the authority of the father, because that power belongs to God alone."⁴⁹ With God as the restored head of the new family created in Christ, proper relationality can begin.

I began this theological exploration with the Genesis text "Let us make humankind in our image." I want to return to Genesis at the end. James Brownson, in his book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, interprets the Genesis narrative with male and female created in the divine image "to convey the value, dominion, and relationality shared by both men and women."⁵⁰ It is the relationality between the two genders that reflects the divine image. He confirms relationality is what reflects the divine image – two physical persons reflect the divine image. In the Christian understanding of the Trinity, God is three separate

⁴⁸ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 26.

hypostases in one *ousia*, or three separate persons in one nature of love. Humanity is more than just two separate genders, humanity is made up of a vast number of different persons, now in Christ, restored in the divine image of relationality – one relational family. Brownson notes that the one-flesh union in Genesis 2:24 does not connote “physical complementarity but kinship bond.”⁵¹ And the kinship bond was created to end loneliness. In Genesis 2:18, the text says “It is *not good* that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner.” When something is “not good,” God redeems or restores it. Companionship as illustrated in the Genesis text is redemptive. Human relationality is redemptive.

In summation, the theological position undergirding the project to train church members to open their homes to their neighbors for food, drink and relationship building is that God in Godself is relational. God’s state of being is one of pure relationship. Humankind being created in the image of God is therefore also meant to exist in a state of pure relationship. Humankind was created to be in relationship. This requires authentic living by boldly rejecting categories that separate human beings from one another, and living into the eschatological vision of God’s dream for a harmonious future where relationships are perfectly restored in love. It also requires that humankind realize what is done to one another is also done to God. We are one family. Christ came to restore humankind to be one family, living in harmony with God as Father of all. Encounters with God, as in NDEs, change individuals. They become loving, living lives of compassion, like Jesus. Those who encounter God in the life, death, and resurrection

⁵¹ Ibid.

of Jesus begin journeys characterized by love and joy. Death, the ultimate enemy to life, love, and joy, is overcome by Jesus.

Ultimately, all relationships, even those between God and humankind, are based on shared mutuality and reciprocity. Both God and humankind give up something, including a known future, to maintain love and harmony in the relationship. For humanity, we must give up our own agendas, especially those focused on creating division and violence, and take up lives of prayer in faith with the Holy Spirit. I believe church members who go through training to welcome their neighbors into their homes for food, drink and relationship building, and commit to this work, will be creating the kingdom of God in their midst.

Chapter 2: Theoretical

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

- Acts 2:42

The theoretical considerations of inviting neighbors into one's home to break bread with the intent that through building relationships, neighbors will devote themselves to the apostles' teaching about Jesus and to Christian fellowship and prayer, starts with the reality that the church is changing in the west, people need community and belonging, and that it models the primitive church. In Acts 2:46, the primitive church is characterized as spending "much time together in the temple," breaking "bread at home," and eating "their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*" It seems eating food in homes with a glad and generous heart, while praising God and intentionally spending time in church (the temple), leads to goodwill of those outside the community of faith, which causes them to encounter God in a saving way.

This early form of church was birthed out of the way Jesus lived his life. Jesus called together a small group, ate meals with them, formed a communal bond with them all the while instructing them on how to share the kingdom of God. The calling of the first four disciples, the two sets of brothers – Simon and Andrew and James and John – as recorded in Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, and Luke 5:1-11, sets the precedent that one must be willing to leave everything from catching fish (work) to family (James and John left their father), to create something new for God. Amy-Jill Levine and Mary Ann Tolbert both identify this new creation as a family for God. In Matthew, Levine says

these first four disciples “form the basis of the new community that Jesus will gather: a family defined by service to others and commitment to Jesus.”⁵² She further defines Matthew’s position of service to others as “proper actions rather than biological lineage determine one’s relationship to heaven.”⁵³ Proper actions as demonstrated by Jesus are feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick. It is care of the whole person. In using small groups as a basis for evangelism, I am proposing that neighbors form groups that will eventually care for one another as whole people. It is this type of relationship that will create community and belonging, which will cause those who take part to share how it has transformed their lives with others and cause others to take notice. Tolbert indicates it was precisely this type of community that appealed to the audience of Mark’s Gospel.

Tolbert believes that the Gospel of Mark was most likely written for an audience of lower to middle class people who had left their homelands in search of a better life and ended up in large urban areas in Rome or Egypt, alienated from their kinship and support groups, finding themselves living in overcrowded conditions with poor sanitation.⁵⁴ Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as one who calls into existence a new family not based on blood relationship, but on doing the work of Jesus, which was to heal disease and multiple bread, was very attractive to this group of people.⁵⁵ In ancient Mediterranean society, class created an important hierarchy that left many as outcasts.⁵⁶ This made

⁵² Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 342.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 351.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Christianity very attractive because the followers of Jesus seemed not to be concerned with these social norms. Instead, they shared stories about Jesus that encouraged generosity, courage, and healing and they lived these stories out in their daily lives.⁵⁷ They shared and lived the Jesus stories about belonging. Peter Block, a specialist in forming community around belonging, breaks down this human need inherent in all people in two ways: human suffering and political suffering.

Block self identifies as one who struggles with feeling as though he is left out and on the margins. It drives his work to bring about reconciliation in communities and an end to human and political suffering. He defines human suffering as “the pain that is inherent in being alive: isolation, loneliness, illness, abandonment, loss of meaning, sadness, and finally... death.”⁵⁸ These things he says are unavoidable as human beings, and while one can choose how to respond to such suffering, all of these things will come. They are a part of life. Political suffering on the other hand he defines as avoidable, unnecessary and “very visible: poverty, homelessness, hunger, violence, the diaspora of those unable to return to their homeland, a deteriorated housing project, or a neighborhood in distress... dependency... oppression, the absence of possibility... powerlessness that breeds violence, imperialism, and a disregard for the worth of a human being.”⁵⁹ Block does not attribute these to any political party or ideology. He does attribute them to human choice and believes that this type of suffering can be overcome through more widely distributed ownership, accountability, and reconciliation. Block

⁵⁷ Ibid, 353.

⁵⁸ Peter Block, *Community: the structure of belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), 163.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 164.

says, “Reconciliation for me is the possibility of the end of unnecessary suffering.”⁶⁰ In order for this reconciliation to take place, communities must come together, but this will not happen on a large scale. He believes it happens when neighbors gather together in small groups and he specifically uses “mega-churches” as an example of organizations that have effectively used small groups to create reconciling communities.⁶¹

Mega churches have used the small group model to create reconciling communities of belonging with great success. In *The Church that Multiplies: Growing a Healthy Cell Church in North America*, Joel Comiskey cites two research studies conducted for a project called Natural Church Development. Both studies, one in 1996 and a second in 2002, found that cell or small group centered churches “not only grew faster but were far healthier” than non-cell or small group centered churches.⁶² The study also showed that worship, no matter how inspiring, only made a small difference in people’s lives, regardless of whether or not the church used a small group model.⁶³ The largest influencer in a person’s life was the small group. Churches that primarily focused on small groups and not corporate worship, still found their numbers increase in corporate worship. And while church planting was not necessarily a part of small group-based churches, cell churches averaged 2.5 more church plants compared to 1.9 for non-cell churches. Finally, small group centered churches growth rate doubled for non-small group-based churches.⁶⁴ These figures support what Peter Block discovered regarding

⁶⁰ Ibid, 163.

⁶¹ Ibid, 165.

⁶² Joel Comiskey, *The church that multiplies: Growing a healthy cell church in North America*. (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2007), 50.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

community in mega churches: small groups form a sense of community and belonging that attracts people and creates growth even if that is not the intent. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, also believed in this model.

According to Kevin Watson in *The Class meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, George Whitfield was the face of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival that swept through the American colonies in 1739-40 leading tens of thousands to faith in Christ.⁶⁵ Yet, he is largely forgotten while the name of John Wesley is still spoken of today. Watson believes it is because of Wesley's insistence on small group formation or what Wesley called the class meeting. According to Adam Clarke, a contemporary of Wesley and Whitfield, Wesley advised that a class meeting be formed wherever one preached, "for, wherever we have preached without doing so, the word has been like seed by the way-side."⁶⁶ He continued, "Mr. Wesley saw the necessity of this from the beginning. Mr. Whitfield, when he separated from Mr. Wesley, did not follow it. What was the consequence? The fruit of Mr. Whitfield's labor died with himself. Mr. Wesley's remains and multiples."⁶⁷ In roughly 70 years from 1776 to 1850, Methodism grew from a few thousand to 2.5 million. During this period, the class meeting was a requirement to be a Methodist.⁶⁸ Wesley saw the class meeting as a way for Christian's to watch over one another in love and to support and encourage one another in their lives with God.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Watson, 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 25.

Wesley's class meetings were not to have more than twelve people and they were based primarily on geographical location; in other words, people were placed in classes based on the neighborhood in which they lived.⁷⁰ The first four disciples were in a sense, neighbors. They were all fishermen, fishing in the same location. More than likely, they knew each other and shared information about the best places to catch fish. The first four brothers formed the core of the Twelve. The number twelve is important in small group formation. It is a social principle Malcolm Gladwell calls the tipping point.

Gladwell discovered while writing about fads for *The New Yorker* magazine that human relationships work best when they are comprised of less than twelve. Once a group reaches between twelve and fifteen people, the group begins to experience insurmountable conflict. Here is why: In a group of four people, there are six relationships to manage. Each individual in the group must manage his relationship with the other three people, while also managing the relationships the other three have with each other as well. Once a group grows to fourteen people, there are now ninety-two relationships the human brain must now manage.⁷¹ At this point, it becomes too stressful to manage all the relationships and people will begin to leave the group until it reestablishes itself below twelve people. This is why a group must split once it grows larger than twelve people. In *The Myth of the 200 Barrier: How to Lead Through Transitional Growth*, Kevin Martin takes the work of Malcolm Gladwell and combines it with Robin Dunbar.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kevin E. Martin, *The myth of the 200 barrier how to lead through transitional growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 39-40.

Dunbar is a British anthropologist who studied the brain size of primates and the size of their social groups. He discovered a direct correlation between the size of the brain and the size of the typical primate social group. Based on this, he set the size for human social groups at 147 then tested his hypothesis by studying twenty-one tribal peoples worldwide. The average size of the groups was 148. He then formulated what he called the Rule of 150, which briefly states “at 150, the number of relationships among people becomes so complex that the group must either divide or face social disintegration.”⁷² Martin believes that healthy churches are arranged around the numbers twelve and one hundred fifty. Healthy large churches are made up of small groups with six to twelve members, which feed into larger groups of 150. Churches larger than 150 people are essentially combinations of these number groups. Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson also affirm Martin’s conclusion.

In *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Church Movement*, the Ferguson brothers identify five principles for starting a church that will reproduce and grow. The first principle is to establish small groups with eight to twelve people in each group.⁷³ By using this principle, the church the Ferguson’s started grew from six people knocking on doors in a Chicago neighborhood to 7,000 attenders with multiple locations worshipping 30,000 people, all with reproducing small groups.⁷⁴ The term “reproducing” is key to the Ferguson’s strategy. Reproduction is necessary for living organisms to continue. For the Fergusons, this meant Christianity was not about

⁷² Ibid, 41.

⁷³ Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: how you and your friends can start a missional church movement*(Zondervan, 2010), 24.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 23-24.

church, it was about a movement.⁷⁵ Jesus called the twelve apostles with the expectation in mind that they would reproduce. Apostle is from the Greek word meaning “one that is sent.” Jesus called them to be sent out, never to stay huddled in the upper room after his death and resurrection. Jesus also did not send them out unprepared. They spent three years (or four depending on which gospel chronology one follows) with Jesus, watching, listening and learning. Using Jesus’ example, the neighbor dinner home group model I propose for evangelism would then require that there be a co-leader of the home group who would watch and learn and as the group grows, be willing to split off and form a new group, inviting a new co-leader to watch and learn who can then lead a new group when necessary. The apostles also had an important helper that leaders who choose to do evangelism with this method will also need, the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was provided by Jesus to the apostles to do the work Jesus asked them to do. Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit is often left out when discussions are had about evangelism. The United Methodist magazine *Interpreter*, a publication for United Methodists who desire to live out their faith, devoted the entire September/October 2015 issue to evangelism in the 21st century. From art festivals, food trucks, film festivals, smoke detector programs to yard signs and hospitality, the Holy Spirit was never mentioned once in the publication. Yet, it is the Holy Spirit who gave instructions to the apostles about what to do after Jesus was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:1-2). It was the Holy Spirit for whom Jesus told the apostles to wait because the Holy Spirit would be the one to provide the help and the power needed to do the work of evangelism, being

⁷⁵ Ibid, 28.

witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). When the Holy Spirit is not consulted or considered when doing the work of evangelism, then the very help God provided is neglected. This is not insignificant considering that the Holy Spirit is mentioned over 200 times in the New Testament, over half of those are in the synoptic gospels and the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is essential when considering evangelism through small groups.

In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer notes that small groups, or what he calls circles of trust, have been around since the beginning of humankind. For Palmer, small groups are necessary for helping the soul to access its “inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader;” and people need others “to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice.”⁷⁶ As a Quaker, Palmer identifies that inner voice as the Holy Spirit. If the work of evangelism is to be done with the voice of the Holy Spirit clearly discerned, then small groups are necessary to help clarify what God is saying. This means one does not absolutely have to have their faith understanding clearly formed, or even be convinced God is at work in their lives. Simply by trusting that God can and does work through the Holy Spirit in small groups, one can open their home for a meal with their neighbors on a regular basis and see what God does. And the empowerment by the Holy Spirit to do this work is not just for individuals. It is for the whole community of faith. In *Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples*, Thomas Groome notes that when Peter stood up to speak on behalf of the believers who had gathered to await the One Jesus promised, it was not just the twelve but “together the

⁷⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.), 22.

crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons” (Acts 1:15). Groome says, “Clearly the whole Christian community there assembled, every member, was now empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the great commission that the Risen Christ gave to his Church.”⁷⁷ This is what the Ferguson brothers discovered when starting their Chicago based church.

After their church had grown substantially, Dave Richa, a church staff member, approached the Ferguson’s about starting a church in Denver, Colorado. The Ferguson’s were not convinced that the role of their church was to start new churches so far from the mother church. But they decided that if Christianity is a movement, it has to continue to expand. So an appeal was made to the congregation for people to move with Dave to Colorado. Over a two-week period, thirty-five people agreed to sell their homes, get new jobs or transfer, in order to respond to “God’s prompting.”⁷⁸ This models the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church.

Throughout Acts, Paul moves from city to city “resolved in the Spirit” to share the good news of Jesus Christ (Acts 19:21) and is even warned by the Holy Spirit that his going to Jerusalem will end in his being bound and turned over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:11). Even the threat of jail and possible death, does not stop Paul from going where the Holy Spirit directs for the sake of proclaiming God’s good news revealed in Jesus Christ. Radical and amazing things happen in the lives of those who follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. For many people, Paul is the exception, one who was called and sent by God in a special way. But the people of Community Church in Chicago who followed Dave Richa to Denver, Colorado probably have similar stories. It would not have been

⁷⁷ Groome, 84.

⁷⁸ Ferguson and Ferguson, 28.

easy to leave homes, jobs and schools to move to a new place. What they and Paul have in common is a complete trust in God.

The Greek word for faith in much of the New Testament is πίστις, which means complete assurance or trust. Nowhere in scripture is this faith limited to a select few. It is the faith all believers are invited to have. It is the faith of Jesus. Jouette Bassler in *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts*, notes that the phrase *pistis Christou* can be translated “faith of Christ” or “faith in Christ” in Paul’s writings in the New Testament.⁷⁹ This is important to discuss when talking about small group evangelism. Certainly, one must have faith *in* Jesus if they want to invite others into their homes to form relationships with their neighbors in order that their neighbors might come to have faith in Jesus as well. But I would argue that the type of faith necessary to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit is the faith *of* Jesus, or the kind of faith Jesus had. Bassler illustrates this using two translations of Galatians 2:16:

Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but *through faith in Jesus Christ*. And we have come to *believe in Christ Jesus*, so that we might be justified *by faith in Christ*, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. (NRSV)

Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in [lit. into] Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faithfulness of Christ, and not by works of the law. (AT)

Faith *in* Jesus leaves one to interpret Paul’s meaning as one of individual choice.

This sounds as though salvation is removed from God’s hands and based on human belief

⁷⁹ Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul: an introduction to key theological concepts* (Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 27.

in Jesus alone. Ultimately while it is still God who saves, it creates the expectation that God saves only through human decision. This opens a whole host of concerns such as, What constitutes right belief in order to be saved? Once one comes to faith in Christ, can one choose to live anyway they wish because God has acted based on their decision to believe in Christ? But if the translation is the faith *of* Christ, then salvation rests on God. The demonstration of Jesus' faith that God does not desire that any be lost and that God forgives even when the one needing forgiveness does not expressly ask for it. For example, Jesus praying at his death sentence "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

This may sound as though I am a Universalist. I am not. I do believe God delights in human freewill, which includes the choice to say "no" to anything God offers, including eternal life with God. For me, this means that the faithfulness of Jesus is still intact and every person, regardless of whether or not they claim faith *in* Jesus, is allowed God's mercy and acceptance. This means the offer of life with God is still available even after death. Sharon Baker also concludes this in *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about God's Wrath and Judgement*.

In *Razing Hell*, Baker says that if God exists outside of time, and longs to be gracious and show compassion (Isaiah 30:18), then God's grace also exists outside of temporal time.⁸⁰ In terms of judgment, God is consistent in God's longing to be gracious and compassionate if God's judgment is for the purpose of reconciliation. For Baker, God's judgment is restorative where God's intense and burning love saves humanity

⁸⁰ Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: rethinking everything you've been taught about God's wrath and judgment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 146.

through fire by burning away every sin and impurity.⁸¹ For those who did not have any affinity for or faith in God, “the fire will encompass them, love will convict them, and the flames will burn away their impurities,” so that God’s will prevails where every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Romans 14:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15).⁸² By standing in the light of God’s incomprehensible and extravagant love, God’s judgment actually heals and provides forgiveness that was always there. It is at this moment, one chooses to embrace that healing and forgiveness or refuse it. If refusal is the choice, Baker offers that if one has been purified through the fire of God’s love, they are no longer a slave to sin and death; therefore, they no longer desire to choose death, making refusal a moot point.⁸³ This preserves free will and God’s act of salvation through Christ. Baker does also mention that if one were completely evil, with nothing left of the *imago Dei* in them, God’s burning love would simply consume them so that there would be nothing left.⁸⁴

Having offered the above, I do want to point out that initially in small group formation, such detailed understandings of theology would not be necessary. In fact, it would be overwhelming for people getting together and forming new relationships. Only after the groups have been established with deep relationships formed, would such questions begin to arise. If such discussions were to begin, I recommend that the group leader read a book such as Baker’s and offer a summary to the group or have the group study it together. In order that this not become an information-based group, which

⁸¹ Ibid, 165.

⁸² Ibid, 165-166.

⁸³ Ibid, 144-145.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Watson warns against, it would be prudent to offer a text in short amounts and then have the group reflect on how the new information has affected their experience of God throughout the previous week. This keeps the focus of the group as a transformation-based group.

As transformation-based groups are formed based on reflection of God in one's life together, this includes how one experiences God in the world and culture in which one lives. In the West, the culture surrounding church and Christianity is changing rapidly, making evangelism through small groups all the more important. Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, quotes a Newsweek article that reported on two significant polls in American religion, showing that Americans who self-identified as Christians fell ten percentage points 1990 to 2010 from 86 to 76 percent, while those claiming affiliation with any religion doubling to 16 percent.⁸⁵ Bass offers a few reasons for this trend.

One, religion is seen as institutional and what most people are looking for today is “spirituality” or something that is lively.⁸⁶ I would surmise that what people view as institutional would be an information-based approach to spirituality, which is not what people desire. They desire the lively faith of the transformational based approach found in a small group experience. Two, the “horrible decade” happened. This is what Bass calls the “religious recession” at the dawn of the new millennium.⁸⁷ Five things happened that contributed to this religious recession. In 2001, the September 11 terrorist attacks

⁸⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after religion: the end of church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 77.

happened. After the first few months of a national resurgence in church attendance, the media and politicians began blaming the attacks on religious zealots of Islam, while some well-known Christian religious leaders like Pat Roberston, Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham blamed the attacks on homosexuals and feminists.⁸⁸ Those who were seeking an authentic connection to God were quietly dismayed by such reactions and walked away with a feeling that “religion poisons everything.”⁸⁹

In 2002, there was the Roman Catholic sex abuse scandal revealed by the *Boston Globe*. In 2003, there was the public Protestant debate over homosexuality with the election of Gene Robinson to an Episcopal Diocese. In 2004, George W. Bush’s reelection was largely seen as accomplished because of his association with the Religious Right, a group seen as largely more interested in politics and promoting their own social agenda than witnessing to a God who cares deeply about people.⁹⁰ Bass says Christianity was seen by young people as “antihomosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, out of touch with reality, overly politicized, insensitive, exclusive, and dull.”⁹¹ It is also what David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons discovered when they studied the data collected in a Barna Group study on what 16-24 year olds thought about Christianity.

They identified six broad themes believed about the church by 16-24 year olds within and outside the church: 1) it is hypocritical, appearing to only want those who are virtuous and morally pure, 2) it only cares about converts or getting people “saved,” 3) it

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ While Bass’s book was written before the 2016 elections, there is no argument now about the role the religious right played in the election of Donald Trump, which has soured even more people on Christianity. Trump’s life and words reflect very little about concern for others, a tenet of the Christian faith.

⁹¹ Ibid, 81.

is antihomosexual, 4) it is sheltered and out of touch with reality, 5) it is too political, 6) it is judgmental, not caring about the attitudes and perspectives of others.⁹² What Kinnaman and Lyons do with their findings is offer suggestions for churches to change these perceptions. One of these suggestions is the heart of opening your door and your dinner table to your neighbor so that they may encounter God in a saving way: “Jesus laid the foundation for the church through relationships. His influence was (and is) indelible because he changed people... frequently referr[ing] to God in relational terms... [leaving us with] communion, which began in the context of a meal Jesus shared with his closest friends. Relationships mattered to Jesus.”⁹³ This relational God encountered around a shared meal is in many ways a return to the early church in Acts, where people gathered in homes for food and to share their experiences of God, where relationship between humanity and God are restored and between each other. For this to be successful, one must see people as Jesus saw people, through what Kinnaman and Lyons call a lens of compassion and non-judgment, with the ability to cultivate a picture of people’s “genuine emotional, social, and spiritual needs.”⁹⁴ This may mean bringing people back to their own faiths rather than converting them to the Christian faith.

Groome in *Will There Be Faith?* says that “1 Peter 3:15 wisely advises Christians to share their faith ‘with gentleness and reverence’... [with] ‘gentleness’ to mean without imposing, claiming superiority, or being pretentious about one’s own faith claims and tradition... [and] ‘reverence’ to mean with respect for other persons, openness to share

⁹² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity and why it matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 29-30.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 208-209.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 216.

with and to learn from them, to hear their faith story that might enrich our own.”⁹⁵ He shares of meeting a young girl who was culturally Jewish, but wanted to learn about the religious nature of her Judaism. Groome encouraged her to go to Sabbath school where she encountered God in a life transforming way that led to her whole family returning to an active life-giving faith in God in their synagogue. People who engage in evangelism by getting to know their neighbors may discover people of a wide varieties of faiths. This should not be discouraged as part of evangelism is learning from one another as Kinnaman, Lyons, and Groome point out. Our own faiths will be deepened and relationships with our neighbors made richer. Also, one must be careful not to engage in the evangelism program I propose as a way to “prop up” or “save” their own church or denomination if it is experiencing decline. This is not genuine. One must truly be concerned about and care for their neighbor. It is as Watson says, “I believe I am saying something that is actually much more important than saving a denomination. I am talking about people created in the image of God being renewed in the image in which they were created!”⁹⁶

It is unfortunate that the findings reported by Diana Butler Bass and Kinnaman with the Barna Group show a perception within the West that Christians and the church are hostile and unyielding instead of open and inviting, such as Groome and Watson encourage. Yet, while damaging to the institutional church, these perceptions have helped spark the emerging church movement, which gained world-wide notice with Brian

⁹⁵ Groome, 85.

⁹⁶ Watson, 147.

McLaren's book *A Generous Orthodoxy*. The emerging church movement helped reenergize the small group movement *as church*.

Rad Zdero is a mechanical engineer who runs a hospital-based research group, but he has a passion for seeing the Gospel come alive in small groups through house churches. What Brian McLaren identified in the early 2000's in the West, Rad Zdero noticed ten years earlier on a global scale. From the early 1990's to 2000's, Northern India had 4,000 churches planted, Latin America 3,200 churches, Ethiopia had a Pentecostal church grow from 5,000 to 50,000 members after a persecution by authorities, Cuba saw 6,000 house churches grow to 10,000, and Cambodia grew to 220 house churches with over 10,000 during the same period.⁹⁷ Zdero believes that this rapid growth is due to what he calls "saturation church planting through simple, inexpensive, reproducible, and missional congregations of 'house churches'."⁹⁸ He categorizes the church that occasionally uses small groups as a traditional church with small groups. I would identify these as information based groups, like Bible studies or book study groups. The second type of church he categorizes is a cell church of small groups, or a church that exists because it uses home groups for people to grow in and share their faith in a missional way that multiplies the number of cell groups. This is the model I am advocating for use as evangelism. But Zdero's third category he calls the House Church Network or Nexus is a church that is small groups.⁹⁹ In this model, each small group that meets in someone's home is in itself an autonomous church, with all the house churches

⁹⁷ Rad Zdero, *Nexus: the world house church movement reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007), 7.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 8.

coming together periodically for a large celebration. I would call this the church universal, that is, all believers, regardless of what church they belong to – traditional, cell group, or house – are the Church, with a capital “C.” But the house church model bears consideration.

It is the way the early church began. And as Mike Barnett points out in Zdero’s *Nexus*, house churches and small groups have persisted throughout church history.¹⁰⁰ Barnett notes that the pendulum has swung back and forth from one ecclesiological model to another throughout Christian history from a persecuted small home church Jewish sect called “The Way” to a large institutional church as the religion of the empire. Yet, throughout its varied history, the church has always existed through its small groups. The obvious question is “Why?” The answer to this question is foundational to my thesis of creating a model to train people in traditional churches to tap into this necessary root of Christianity.

Barnett believes it is the movement created and modelled by Jesus.¹⁰¹ With his disciples, Jesus went from house to house having dinner and discussing with those present the things of God. For example, in Luke 11:37-54 and 14:1-24, Jesus has dinner with some of the Pharisees and the discussions quickly turn to discussions of how life is to be lived if one follows God. In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus is invited to eat in the home of Zacchaeus and discussion centers on what is God’s salvation. In Luke 24:30-31, it is in the sharing of bread that Jesus is recognized as the Son of God. In Luke 10:8-9, the disciples are instructed to eat whatever is set before them when they are welcomed into

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 161.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 163.

someone's home and to tell the homeowner "The kingdom of God has come near you." Food and discussion about God, even more so food and the *presence* of God, are knit together.

Barnett goes on to offer that the lessons learned from the continuance of small groups throughout church history is "that God still intends for believers to gather in their homes for worship, study, friendship, and mutual service to the body of Christ and surrounding community."¹⁰² Barnett also notes that the home is central to the daily lives of believers and this is where the gospel flows "from the house to the marketplace and back."¹⁰³ And finally, whenever the church has stood in the need of reform, when what Diana Butler Bass calls "Holy Discontent" happens, the small group in the home ensures the gospel continues to be shared and lived out, even while public trust in religion erodes.¹⁰⁴

So if public trust in religion has eroded, how does one invite neighbors into their home for a dinner that has the purpose of eventually centering on discussions about God? This is where it is important to remember that people are not turning away from God as much as they are organized religion. As mentioned above, Bass discovered that people are seeking a "lively spirituality" for faith and do not believe they will find this in institutional religion.¹⁰⁵ It is perfectly natural to want to get to know one's neighbors. Introducing oneself, or for that matter reintroducing oneself if it has been awhile since talking with a neighbor, and depending on how long one has lived in a neighborhood,

¹⁰² Ibid, 165.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Bass, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Bass, 71.

should be a natural thing. The Holy Spirit provides the support and encouragement needed! Letting a neighbor know that a few neighbors are getting together at your house for food and conversation, should provide the necessary welcome. Once everyone has gathered, questions to spark discussion and to learn where individuals are in their faith walk are simple. As part of the training program for church members, I would include questions offered by Groome: “So, what are your best hopes?” “How do you make sense out of it all?” “What brings you joy in your life?” “So what do you most want for your kids?” If the person has already used God language, “So, what do you think is God’s desire for you now?”¹⁰⁶ These questions get at the heart of life and life with or without God. They are important questions for getting to know someone without the expectation of interjecting religion onto them.

It is also important to note that one should not approach an evangelism program that requires vulnerability with one’s neighbors with an attitude that he will only invest in his neighbor’s lives when it is convenient for him.¹⁰⁷ This is a problem for the Western church. The west, in particular America, prides itself on its independence and individual rights. In *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, the authors of the chapter on the Holy Spirit says, “The community-forming activity of the Holy Spirit challenges us to move beyond the contemporary assumption that the Spirit’s actions center exclusively, or even primarily, on the individual soul.”¹⁰⁸ In fact, they argue that modern Western Christianity has negated the creating power of the Holy

¹⁰⁶ Groome, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Watson, 132.

¹⁰⁸ Lois Barrett and Darrell L. Guder, *Missional church: a vision for the sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 142-143.

Spirit identified in Genesis 1:2 and relegated the Spirit to a mysterious power used to explain the extraordinary or gaps in human knowledge.¹⁰⁹ By doing this, the Western church has missed the important ongoing work of the Spirit in reconciling all humanity to God and the healing of all creation, which is a communal activity.¹¹⁰ Our neighbors are more than just a part of our community that we engage when it is convenient for us. They are our constant community, those to whom we live the closest, and in a very real sense, live with on a daily basis. They are those we should most engage with the Good News. Mark Glanville in his blog post “Jesus ate his way through the gospels – eaten with a tax-collector recently?” affirms this.

In his post, Granville proposes that Jesus created community through “fellowship meals,” meals based on following the Old Testament’s feasts and celebrations central to the Jewish faith.¹¹¹ He says, “Jesus was being what Israel was always supposed to have been: a center of joy, celebration and justice for the whole world!”¹¹² And Granville believes that this is formative for the mission of the local church today. I agree. My thesis to create a training program for members in the local church to learn how to reach out to their neighbors and create small groups around a meal as evangelism is needed in today’s cultural climate of individualism and isolation. Granville says that Jesus’ ministry of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 143.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 144.

¹¹¹ Mark Glanville, "Jesus ate his way through the gospels – eaten with a tax-collector recently?" ...for he has made you beautiful, July 20, 2012, accessed October 20, 2016, <https://markgrlanville.wordpress.com/2012/07/20/jesus-ate-his-way-through-the-gospels-eaten-with-a-tax-collector-recently/>.

¹¹² Ibid.

relationship building through shared meals stands in contrast to “the isolation of suburban life today... how private and isolated the lives of westerners have become.”¹¹³

Granville says western culture has created lives of private consumption with family homes surrounded by fences, and then within the home, family members are zoned into private bedrooms with televisions, internet, and cell phones, which has all led to individualism and isolation.¹¹⁴ This is driving people to desire richer and fuller relationships. “Jesus’ fellowship meals speak into our culture of individualism and isolation. They show us the shape of life and flourishing... [and] teach that we as Christians ought to be hubs of relationship and celebration in our communities.”¹¹⁵ I believe Granville is correct. Members of the local church need to actively invite their neighbors into their homes for a shared meal and relationship building.

Neil Cole believes that this necessary part of Christian life has been abdicated by the church in the west to other parachurch organizations such as seminaries, mission agencies, Christian counseling agencies, and evangelistic ministries.¹¹⁶ Instead of creating a community that feels like family, as Tolbert and Levine believe Jesus came to create, Christians send those who are hungry to food banks, those who need clothes to clothing ministries, those who need shelter to temporary over-night places, and those who need a listening ear to Christian counselors. This is not to negate the importance of these places, but as Block points out in *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, restorative community begins with welcoming the stranger.¹¹⁷ He says, “Historically, if strangers knocked on

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Neil Cole, *Organic church: growing faith where life happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), xxiv.

¹¹⁷ Block, 114.

your door, you automatically invited them in. They would be fed and offered a place to sleep, even if they were your enemies... They were treated as if they belonged, regardless of the past.”¹¹⁸ While personal narrative is not the point of this work, I do feel a personal story can be offered to support my thesis and what Block and Cole are saying.

I was having a conversation with a clergy person and a church staff person. One says, “I heard you brought a homeless person to your house.” This was indeed true. A person had showed up at the church where I worked soaking wet, with only a sweater, on a cold and rainy day. He spoke little English. What I could surmise through translation apps was that he was an illegal immigrant who was released from a three night only shelter and had walked many miles to the church seeking help. He asked if he could work for the church as a handy person to make money and sleep at the church for shelter. This was not something we could offer him. I was told by various people to take him to the Salvation Army shelter many miles from the church. When I took him to the shelter, I was told there were no beds available, but he could wait in their lobby for three hours, then he would be given a hot meal. After this he could wait another four hours until they opened the gym at 10:00 p.m. He could sleep there on the floor, but had to be out by 7:00 a.m. I cannot say I would do this for every person who comes to the church seeking assistance, but at that moment I knew in my heart of hearts, I could not leave him there. So, I took him home.

The outrage of my fellowship church workers was that I took this homeless person home to where I have a five-year-old daughter. I understand their concern. I was

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

concerned as well. But as I told them, I had to listen to the Holy Spirit, and I knew this is what I was supposed to do. I never felt as though we were in any danger. Within four days, he found a job painting houses, made enough money to put down a deposit on a place to stay, and was gone. Obviously, there was risk involved, but in the words of my mother, “You probably saved his life.” There is no guarantee that life with God will be convenient or comfortable or without risk. This is why prayer and discernment through the Holy Spirit are essential when opening up one’s home to invite their neighbors in for a meal, relationship building and attending to the whole person. The text in Acts which I am basing this evangelism program on is 2:46-47, which says “the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” The word for “saved” in this text is σωζομένους, which means “to be made safe, protected, do well, made whole.” This is not about an afterlife experience. It is about a very real sense of well-being in the physical world. The church has lost this sense of purpose.

Cole says that if you ask someone what the purpose of church is, they will generally respond, “It’s where you go to get married and have a funeral.”¹¹⁹ This is what Martha Grace Reese calls *chaplancy*. In *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, Reese shares part of a letter she received from a pastor detailing his excitement about his newly appointed position as a senior pastor:

I can’t believe what it feels like to look into the faces of these children and think that I’ll be able to help teach them about Jesus and then baptize them. And the adults are wonderful. They’ve been so welcoming to Sarah and me. I see these old ones and want to know their stories. I wonder if I will be part of their final transition into a full life with God. The thought

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

of summing up their lives in a celebration of life sermon overwhelms me. I know I am to be here, and I am so grateful to God for leading us here.¹²⁰

Reese says he is clear about his love for God's people and mentions every age group within the church, "but never mentions anyone outside the church."¹²¹ Caring for those who are already inside the church without considering the lives of those outside the church who have not yet encountered the loving care of God keeps the church inwardly focused and is what sends the church into a death spiral. People may come to church for baptism, marriage and burial, but this for the most part is not an invitation into a reconciled life with God and others.

Reese believes that when a life is transformed by God, he or she will desire to share that with others.¹²² A crucial part of the small group evangelism program I am proposing will be to ask existing church members to recall their own transformational experiences with God and be willing to share those with their neighbors when the time is appropriate. This will also require church members to reframe their understanding of evangelism as "y'all come" to church.¹²³ Simply inviting people to church, especially in a culture that views religious institutions as suspect, is not an effective way to evangelize. The idea that if I invite someone to church, then they will have this amazing transformative experience with God, creates an environment in churches where those in leadership feel pressured to entertain. Cole calls this a "religious show" in which a large amount of time, money and effort are put into a production for one hour a week on

¹²⁰ Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: real life evangelism* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 72.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 73.

¹²³ Cole, xxiv.

Sunday morning.¹²⁴ He shares the story of a missionary family arriving to a local church on a Sunday morning early where they had been invited to share of the work they were doing in a marginalized part of the world. As they watched the lights, sound system and instruments being checked before the worship service began, one of the children exclaimed, “Mom, are we going to see a show?”¹²⁵ This is not to imply that worship should be done poorly, but it returns us to the question, “What is the purpose of the church?” As mentioned earlier, if the purpose of the church is to invite others into a saving or whole relationship with God and others in this life, then church must be about developing relationships. This means the liturgy, music and preaching must all serve this purpose.

There is no magic formula as to what liturgy, music and preaching will look like that focuses on pointing people to reconciling relationships. It will be as different as every church and congregation. But there is one thing that is consistent in churches that do see growth through reconciling relationships, and that is churches that consistently create small groups for evangelism. In what some consider the Fifth Great Awakening, there was what was called the Jesus Movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Diana Butler Bass was part of this movement in 1976 as a high school student in Scottsdale, Arizona. She grew up in a Methodist church, but started attending a nondenominational church when she heard friends talking about being born again and feeling the presence of God in their lives through the Holy Spirit.¹²⁶ She later understood that the 1970’s were a time of

¹²⁴ Ibid, xxv.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Bass, 1-2.

profound change in American culture. It was a time where people longed to reconnect to a spirituality that mainline denominational churches seemed to have lost by replacing the experience or transformational based small group model, such as in the early Methodist class meetings, with an information-based Sunday School approach. Richard Peace opened his 1971 book *Witness* with the words, “In recent years the Church has re-discovered an old truth: namely that the work of ministry is meant to be done *by the layman*. It has also become evident that part of this work of ministry involves evangelism. It is the layman’s job to spread the Good News about Jesus.”¹²⁷ The old truth he goes on to discuss is in fact the laymen, or church member, is responsible to share their faith through small group evangelism. “The... intention is to help the layman learn how to share his faith alongside his brothers in Christ by means of small groups... the idea of *witness as a community*... seems to be self-evident.”¹²⁸ Peace goes on to provide lengthy instruction on how to witness first as an individual and then in small groups. Forty years later, Bass also agrees that witness as a community is the path that Jesus laid out. She says, “Long ago... Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two.”¹²⁹ She goes on to offer that the church in recent history reversed this order, placing belief first, practices second and then community formation as a result, or what she calls *believing, behaving, and*

¹²⁷ Richard Peace, *Witness; a manual for use by small groups of Christians who are serious in their desire to learn how to share their faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1971), 11.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 11-12.

¹²⁹ Bass, 203.

belonging.¹³⁰ In order to return to Jesus' way of table fellowship in order to create a spiritually vital faith, the order must be *belonging, behaving, and believing*.

So, I propose a training program for church members, those who have already shown that they are invested in the way of Jesus by choosing to belong to a local church. They obviously have found a community that feeds their faith and helps them grow spiritually while nurturing relationships. It seems natural then that these should be the ones who will embrace what Richard Peace believed forty years ago: it is the church member who is responsible for evangelism. Since the thought of sharing faith with others makes most people of even the most loving and good-will spirit uncomfortable, I will create a training program showing church members how to engage their neighbors by inviting them into their homes for a meal and through hospitality and asking the right questions, neighbors can become valued friends that desire to follow Jesus.

Culture in the west has left people feeling isolated and alone. By engaging the model Jesus demonstrated, through prayer and the Holy Spirit, church members can create a sense of community and belonging that leads to faith such as those had in the early church. The small groups created for this work of evangelism will be about caring for the whole person, which will lead to God adding to their number day by day.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 204.

Chapter 3: Action

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:13

The purpose of this evangelism project is to connect intentional and well-meaning Christians with their faith in a deeper way by inviting their neighbors into relationship so that they may watch over one another in love, understand what it means to be saved as whole people, and to have confidence and trust in the relational God in whom each is created thereby creating transformed lives and community. The object is to train church members to invite six to eight neighbors into their home for a shared potluck meal once a week or every other week, and while together, intentionally create a caring community through hospitality. This will mean one must set aside preconceived expectations and outcomes and trust the Holy Spirit to move in people's lives. It will mean setting aside any prejudices one has because all people are created in the good and holy image of God. It will mean setting aside "feeling right" about theology, ideologies, political views, or solutions regarding a host of problems. It will require setting aside the need to heal, fix, or solve anyone's problems. It absolutely will require laying aside any need to control. And finally, it will require church members or home hosts and small group leaders to actively resist and reframe the creation of pseudocommunity.¹³¹

In determining who would participate in the training group, I met with the senior pastor at Walnut Hill United Methodist Church, Rev. Alexandra Robinson. We identified

¹³¹ Julie Gorman, *Community that is Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 186-202. The things to avoid and the explanation of pseudocommunity, which will be explained later in this chapter, are part of Julie Gorman's group development turning points.

a list of twenty people for me to contact about participating in the training who ranged in age from young adults in their late twenties to older adults, retired and in their early seventies. I began calling people on the list sharing with them roughly the following script: “This is Gary Fox from church. I am calling to invite you to participate in a training on how to create small groups that meet on a regular basis in your home by inviting your neighbors over for a potluck for the purpose of sharing faith in Jesus Christ. Through these groups, you will get to know your neighbors on a deeper level and will eventually create conversations about faith. We hope that through these groups faith and community will grow. In full disclosure, this is part of a project for my doctoral work, but we hope that it will be something that continues and grows as part of the ministry of Walnut Hill. We want people to engage their faith and share Jesus Christ with the larger community.” What surprised me was the number of people who said no, nineteen out of the twenty. The excuses ranged from “I am too busy with my children’s soccer practices” to “I am a single older adult female and would not feel comfortable inviting my neighbors into my home because I have some Hispanic men that live next door and I don’t feel comfortable talking to them.” I confess that I had not considered from a safety perspective how a single adult, particularly a female, may not feel comfortable about having others come into her home. I was surprised by the racist undertone though.

Because only one person from Walnut Hill UMC agreed to participate, I met with my Doctorate of Ministry advisor at the time.¹³² Dr. Elaine Heath recommended

¹³² I had to change advisors before the completion of my project because Dr. Elaine Heath was hired as the Dean of Duke University’s Divinity School. Dr. Robert Hunt became my advisor after the completion of my project.

contacting Lakewood United Methodist Church who sponsored the St. Francis House and Grace United Methodist Church who sponsored the Bonhoeffer House. Both of these houses are part of the Epworth Project, new monastic residential communities through the Missional Wisdom Foundation. In these communities, people live in intentional Christian community where residents of the house decide through a rule of life what it means to be community by deliberately sharing life through their commitment to God and to one another. They experience community through prayer, community meals, and getting to know their neighbors.¹³³ I spoke with Stefanie Hayes of the St. Francis House (which has since disbanded) and Adam White of the Bonhoeffer House and both agreed the training was perfect for their settings, but that with school schedules and the community time tables of the houses of which they were apart, they could not participate in the training. A final suggestion by Dr. Heath was to contact Rev. Mitchell Boone of White Rock United Methodist Church.

White Rock UMC had created a co-working space where community members could rent space for business, have access to a commercial kitchen, a conference room, and collaborate with others establishing a small business. WRUMC had partnered with the Missional Wisdom Foundation, founded by Dr. Elaine Heath. The Missional Wisdom Foundation had several partners that worked in the co-working space at WRUMC, such as an African refugee group that created hand sewn items. I met with Rev. Boone. He gave me a tour of the space but did not believe that the training I developed was a good fit for his congregation or the members of the co-working space. His approach to ministry

¹³³ "Epworth," Missional Wisdom Foundation, accessed February 19, 2018, <https://www.missionalwisdom.com/epworth/>.

involved more of a social justice approach and the need to generate income through the co-working space to keep the doors of the church open.

Through prayer and seeking discernment from the Holy Spirit, I contacted a few members from a church I had previously served at for three years, Greenland Hills United Methodist Church. Two couples agreed to be a part of my training. This meant that my training group would be short of the six to eight people for which I had hoped. I had determined this number for training since this was the number of people I was asking the church members who participated in the training to use to start their neighbor small groups. On the night of the training of the first session, I was able to convince the director of the Project Transformation After School Program at Walnut Hill UMC to stay and participate. This brought the total participants for my training to six people, the bare minimum for which I had hoped and prayed.

The training involved two sessions. The first session introduced the purpose and objective of *Opening Your Door and Dinner Table as Evangelism*. This included four sections: John Wesley's class meeting, structure of the potluck home gathering, personal preparation as a small group leader, and the theology behind creating community that is specifically Christian, its practical application and risks. The second session was practical and eight weeks after the first session, allowing group members time to invite their neighbors into their homes and begin the small group evangelism. At the second session, everyone brought a dish as part of a potluck meal and we met at a group member's house to put into practice what we had learned and to share how each had reached out to neighbors to begin the neighbor small groups.

I began putting together the first training session by using six primary sources: *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* by Kevin Watson, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* by Peter Block, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* by Andy Stanley, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* by Christine Pohl, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* by Neil Cole, and *Community that is Christian* by Julie Gorman. The information was presented as a Power Point presentation (see appendix A) and with handouts (see appendix B). The first section of the training used Watson's *The Class Meeting*, specifically the information about the early Methodist church and Wesley's belief that small groups were essential to growing in faith and watching over one another in love.

As United Methodists, it was important to include Wesley's insistence on small group formation to ground the group in the reality that this type of evangelism was not "new," but essential to Methodism and being a United Methodist. The Power Point slide provided an overview of Wesley's model: 1) Those who came to faith in Christ were immediately placed in a weekly meeting of no more than twelve people in their social location or neighborhood to help them grow in their faith and practice it; 2) The purpose of the meeting was to support, care for, and encourage one another in their lives with God, specifically "to watch over one another in love;" 3) Each person was asked to answer the same question each week, "How is your life with God?"; 4) All people regardless of faith, need support, care, and encouragement. Neighbors are a natural means for this; 5) Faith becomes a natural point of discussion as deeper relationships are built. [A verbal review of Groome's questions as provided in Chapter 2 was covered here]; 6)

Wesley gave and expected responsibility of the Class Meeting leader. They were to be a shepherd of one's group members by checking in on them weekly. Neighborhood community building will not happen without a leader.

For those that feel uncomfortable with leading in this capacity, I used the quote, "Comfort is ultimately not the best indication of whether something is good for you" from Watson's book *The Class Meeting*.¹³⁴ Watson believes that being a leader involves risk, vulnerability, and can be scary.¹³⁵ I wanted to affirm the feelings of those participating in the training. I also wanted them to be aware that this was not an easy task that was being asked of them, but that nothing worthwhile comes without some sort of effort. I used a graphic image of runners with the quote because exercise is the best example of gains through effort.

At this point in the training, I provided an opportunity for the group to share with each other what were some things they found uncomfortable or difficult but did anyway and saw great benefit? One participant shared that she had partnered with a refugee agency to help find apartments for refugees just arriving in the United States. She helped organize donations of clothing, household goods, furniture, and pantry items so that when the family arrived, they would have a home and a place to start. This was difficult work, but ultimately, provided great benefits, not only to the family she helped support, but to her family as well. By keeping in contact with the families she helped, her family developed deep and abiding friendships with them. I couldn't have asked for a better

¹³⁴ Watson, 97.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

illustration of the point that risk and vulnerability create vital, loving and caring communities.

Section two was designed to provide training in hospitality. I used Peter Block's six design elements for structuring hospitality from his chapter "Bringing Hospitality into the World" from *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. The six elements are: 1) welcome and greeting, 2) restating the invitation, 3) connection before content, 4) late arrivals, 5) early departures, and 6) breaking bread together.¹³⁶ I explained each section to the group allowing for questions as necessary. In welcome and greeting, the important fact to remember is that people need to feel that they are wanted, valued and belong. To help the training group grasp this concept, I had them break into two groups and discuss questions from the *Study Guide for Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* by Christine Pohl.

The two questions I felt most compelling were 1) Take turns describing a personal experience of having been a stranger in another culture or in an unfamiliar setting. How did you feel? How did people treat you? What made you most uncomfortable?, and 2) Tell about a relationship with someone very different from yourself for which you are grateful. Briefly describe how your differences make the relationship more interesting.¹³⁷ I choose these two questions specifically because I wanted the participants to get in touch with feelings they may have experienced in the past where they were welcomed as a stranger to create empathy for those who would be coming into their homes for the evangelism small groups. The questions were also chosen to affirm the reality that this is

¹³⁶ Block, 145-149.

¹³⁷ Christine D. Pohl, Pamela J. Buck, and Christine D. Pohl, *Study guide for Making room: recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 20.

difficult work. As Pohl says, “Claims of loving all humankind, of welcoming ‘the other,’ have to be accompanied by the hard work of actually welcoming a human being into a real place.”¹³⁸

The second point of structure is restating the invitation. This seems odd on the surface, but the purpose is to make sure that everyone present understands the reason for being gathered together. The challenge for the group leader will be to make sure this seems natural and not wooden or obligatory. My suggestion to the group was something natural like, “Hey, thanks for coming over. We all have been neighbors for awhile. It’s great to get to know each other better. I hope that we can continue doing these potlucks and really get to know each other.” The phrasing is casual, but also sets the expectation for everyone that this is not a one-time event. The expectation is to continue meeting on a regular basis to really build a community of caring for one another.

Prior to the meal, it is important for everyone to know each other and feel comfortable. Using Block’s third element, “Connection before Content,” the small group training participants were offered this: make sure everyone is seated comfortably, then invite them to share their names, how long they have been in the neighborhood, what they like best about being in the neighborhood, then use Block’s questions. They are 1) What led you to accept the invitation?, 2) What did it take to be able to make it tonight? (A baby sitter, rearrange work schedule, etc.), 3) If you could have invited someone to come with you, whom would that be?¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Pohl, *Making Room...*, 75.

¹³⁹ Block, 146.

Block's questions are crucial. They establish that being in community takes effort. Each neighbor has chosen to be there and no one is there by accident. The third question also sets the expectation that the group is meant to grow. Others are to be invited. This follows the Ferguson brother's model of living organisms reproduce. Small groups must continually be growing and breaking off to form new groups. Setting this expectation at the beginning is important for the leader to do and the participants to hear.

The welcoming and inclusion of late arrivals sets the tone that everyone is important and valued as human beings created in the image of God. This does not have to be stated, but it does need to be felt. By acknowledging the late arrival, welcoming them and including them in the conversation through sharing what the group has already discussed and inviting them to participate with their own answers helps them take ownership of the group and feel as though they are not on the margins.

For those who must depart early (hopefully this will be after the meal), they must feel the very real hole their departure will create. This is more than a casual, "Oh, don't go! We'll miss you!" They need to recognize their contribution to the group, and not just by the content they shared (whatever that may be), but their very personhood or being. In hospitality, this is one area that is often overlooked. While not in the training slide, I shared directly from Block's book some of his suggestions: 1) do not let people sneak out. Make them announce to the group they are leaving and share where they are going. Block says this may cause discomfort for some, but that is "the nature of separation."¹⁴⁰ Make sure people feel their departure is a loss to the group. By feeling valued and

¹⁴⁰ Block, 148.

honored, they will want to come back. In order to establish the importance of this step with the training group, I asked them to share different ways they might recognize someone's departure.

Finally, it is time to break bread. As stated in the theological and theoretical sections of this work, gathering together for community around a meal invites the very presence of God. This is a critical part of the training model. Making sure everyone understands where plates, silverware, napkins, drinks, etc. are and where to sit, including any expectations in terms of coasters for drink placement, are part of hospitality. Even if the host does not care about drink placement on furniture, the guest may. So, it is always best to over specify instructions. But even if a mishap occurs, it is all part of the experience. The most important part of the potluck is that everyone feels as though they are a valuable part of the community life being created. The actual setting of the meal will depend entirely on the home situation of the host. The beauty of being a neighborhood group is that many of the homes will be similar. It is always fun to see how different people decorate and live in similar spaces. This can be a part of welcome and invitation by asking others who have similar homes what they have done in terms of décor, improvements, furniture, etc.

There was one couple that participated in the training who were actually living in an older established neighborhood that was experiencing a lot of gentrification. This brought up an issue I had not considered during the development of the training model. What does one do when there is an obvious gap in socio-economic living within the same neighborhood? I will explore this in my concluding chapter: Evaluation and Conclusions.

The group at this point needed a break. So instead of holding the break where I had planned, we took a break and I invited the participants to refreshments. I held the training in the Youth Center at Walnut Hill UMC where there is a kitchen area with a bar for snacks and drinks. I chose this area for training because adjacent to the kitchen area there is a seating arrangement much like one might find in a living room with comfortable couches, chairs and floor lamps. After the break, we reconvened, and I divided the group into two groups to discuss spaces of hospitality (slide 12 in the Power Point). After each group had time to discuss, we came together to share as a large group.

The third section of the training was about personal preparedness. To my surprise, this section was most valued by participants in the training. Using Andy Stanley's "essential ingredients" exhibited by those who have a deep faith, I wanted to challenge and encourage those participating not to overlook their own spiritual lives. As mentioned in the previous chapters, prayer and the Holy Spirit are essential to the work of small group evangelism. This requires those wishing to engage in small group evangelism to attend to their own faith first. These are the five dynamics Andy Stanley identifies for a deep faith in *Deep & Wide*: 1) practical teaching, 2) private disciplines, 3) personal ministry, 4) providential relationships, and 5) pivotal circumstances.¹⁴¹

Stanley's first point, "practical teaching," I changed to "personal devotion and Bible Study." The reason for this was that Stanley defined practical teaching as exposure to practical Bible teaching, such as the Beth Moore bible studies.¹⁴² This is problematic because what Stanley calls practical bible teaching is someone's theological

¹⁴¹Andy Stanley, *Deep & wide: creating churches unchurched people love to attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 109.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 111.

interpretation of what they believe particular scriptures mean. By changing this to “personal devotion and Bible Study,” I am leaving this open for people to choose scripture studies that reflect their own spiritual walk with God and not any particular person’s point of view, while also honoring what I believe Stanley was trying to make clear: people must intentionally attend to their spiritual growth through knowledge, or what the Wesley quadrilateral would call “reason.” I also combined part of Stanley’s second point “private disciplines” with my first point. Personal devotion is part of one’s private disciplines, whether that be reading scripture and journaling, or reading a devotional book that the Holy Spirit can use to encourage faith. Private disciplines most assuredly encompasses prayer, but I wanted prayer to be a separate category from study. Prayer is where one not only brings things before God, but it is also where one listens for the Holy Spirit. So I made the second point “private prayer,” a time for speaking and listening to God. This was part of Jesus’ discipline and essential to the founders of the early church.

Stanley’s third point, “personal ministry,” I changed to “use your spiritual gifts actively in ministry.” This phrase seemed to more adequately describe what Stanley intended. He mentions things like serving on a short-term mission trip or volunteering to teach children’s Sunday School.¹⁴³ While worthwhile examples, I did not wish for those participating to feel like church related activities were sufficient to cover using one’s spiritual gifts. God is bigger than the church box. Unfortunately, people fall into a trap (and churches are responsible for this), that all of God’s gifts are in service to the church.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 124.

This is not necessarily the case. Case in point, leading a neighborhood small home group may or may not directly benefit the local church. It is about connecting people to God.

The fourth point, “providential relationships,” I fully embraced as Stanley presented it. People often overlook those moments when God speaks to them through another person. Stanley points out that people of deep faith recognize those moments when God gets their attention through someone else.¹⁴⁴ I intentionally included this in the training model to remind the participants that God is always at work and the Holy Spirit is always drawing us and others closer to God and each other. The neighborhood groups are an important way for God to work providentially in each other’s lives.

The final point is “pivotal circumstances.” Again, I included this just as Stanley outlined in his book. Stanley notes that good and bad circumstances happen to all people and he calls these “defining moments.”¹⁴⁵ Good defining moments might be getting married, the birth of a child, getting a scholarship or promotion. Bad defining moments might be illness, loss of a job, death of a friend, betrayal by a friend. What is key to Stanley’s point is that these moments have the ability to push people closer to God or farther away. This is why they are pivotal. The important aspect of these moments is how one *interprets* them.¹⁴⁶ If one views God as good and loving, even the bad circumstances can increase faith when one believes God will bring good out of it. But if, for example, one has a deterministic view of God, and sees God as having caused a bad thing to happen, it can have the detrimental effect of pushing one away from God. This is why I included this in the training model: faith communities are essential for helping

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 132.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 137.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 138.

individuals make sense of pivotal circumstances. If a neighbor has a terrible tragedy happen in their family, having a neighborhood small group with which to share and process this event can help increase trust in God instead of decreasing it.

Following Stanley's five points, I also included five more brief practical points designed to encourage participants in the task they are being asked to undertake. These five points came from Neil Cole's *Organic Church*: 1) Practice of Prayer, 2) Pockets of People, 3) Power of Presence, 4) Person of Peace, and 5) People of Purpose.¹⁴⁷ I simplified these to "The Five P's:" Prayer - Ask God for opportunities to meet the people who live near you. Again, following the example of Jesus and the leaders of the early church, small group leaders need to pray and ask God to open their eyes to those living right next to them. In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus tells the parable of a widow who persistently pleads for justice from a judge who has no fear of God or humanity. The judge grants her justice against her adversary because of her persistence. The parable is offered as an example of how we are to pray – never giving up, for God is just and knows our every need. God desires every person come into loving relationship with God. By persistently asking God to help us meet our neighbors for the purpose of inviting them to a neighborhood small group is wholly part of God's desire. I also shared with the group how my own three-year-old daughter provided a providential circumstance when she was standing on the patio of our apartment as our upstairs neighbors, who we had not yet met, arrived home. She boldly and innocently said, "Hi, my name is Olivia and this is my dad. What's your name?" God answers prayer to meet our neighbors!

¹⁴⁷ Cole, 173-186.

The second “P” is for Pairs – go two by two. *Mark 6:7* “Then Jesus called the Twelve to Him and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits.” I included this because just as Moses was afraid to go to Pharaoh alone, we too may be afraid. This is natural and nothing to be worried about. Just as God sent Aaron to go with Moses, couples can go together to meet neighbors or single people can ask a friend to participate with them. The friend option is attractive because it provides a natural co-leader that can lead another group once the group grows and splits.

The third “P” is Presence. There are a lot of lonely people in the world. Cole illustrates this beautifully. One of the people he led to Christ was a young man that he started playing chess with at a local coffee shop. He discovered as the relationship grew, that the young man had attempted suicide because he felt the world was a dark place and he was all alone. It turned out, the young man loved to play guitar. He soon began playing in the worship band at Cole’s church.¹⁴⁸ Providential circumstances and being the relational being God created Cole to be helped a young man see God’s light in what can be a dark world. This is why the neighborhood small groups are essential. There are lonely people living next door to us.

The Fourth “P” is Person of Peace. This is very simple. Be this. In Luke 10:5-7, Jesus instructs the disciples to offer peace to a household and if it is received, to stay there. Of this verse Cole says, “Jesus said to look for and even inquire about someone who would be receptive to our message of peace.”¹⁴⁹ Not only must we look for people of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 180.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 181.

peace, we must be people of peace as well. As leaders who wish to impact their neighborhoods with God's love and peace, we must also be examples of peace.

The final "P" is People of Purpose. I summed this up for the training as "The life of Christ is attractive; be yourself and let Christ's light shine through you" as an encouragement to the participants and as an affirmation of their being created in the good image of God. Cole said this, "Jesus instructs us that when a pocket of people receive your message of peace via a person of peace, it will rest upon them, and they become the church in their own rich soil."¹⁵⁰ In the training, I reiterated to the participants that they became Christians because someone invested in them. This is being the peace seed planted in the good soil that produces a crop of plenty!

The final two slides in the training model cover what I began this chapter with, the things to avoid as a small group leader. The things to avoid are universal for any leader of a small group and not specific to the home group model I was proposing. What I did spend a fair amount of time on with the group during the training was what Julie Gorman calls "pseudocommunity."¹⁵¹ Gorman posits that fear is the dominant emotion being exercised when people join a group with which they are unfamiliar. This causes "safe chatter" or discussion about things that are surface. If this continues, Gorman says the group will never develop deep relationships built on vulnerability; instead, they will create pseudocommunity, or the appearance of community. Signs of pseudocommunity are when people make general statements like, "Divorce is terrible," or "My parents did the best that they could."¹⁵² In order to avoid this type of surface community, small group

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 185.

¹⁵¹ Gorman, 188.

¹⁵² Ibid.

leaders must push the person to go deeper. For instance, if someone says, “Divorce is terrible,” the leader must follow up with, “Why do you believe divorce is terrible?” In order for vulnerability to develop in the group, the leader must demonstrate vulnerability themselves and insist that those also in the group be vulnerable as well.

At this point in the training, I felt it was important to include an exercise that would help leaders be more self-aware and be appropriately vulnerable when the time arose in their small groups. For this exercise, I chose the Johari Window as illustrated by Gorman in *Community that is Christian*.¹⁵³ Gorman describes the Window as “a model that provokes self-disclosure awareness in interpersonal relationships.”¹⁵⁴ I created a handout for the Johari Window (Appendix C) that I had the participants fill out and then go through with one another in order to discern how verbal and nonverbal cues inform how others perceive us. A few of the participants had used this model before, but still found it informative and useful.

At this point in the evening, it became clear that I was overly ambitious to accomplish everything I included in the training for one evening session. Participants were tired and ready to leave. I briefly touched on the theology behind the training model I developed for neighbor small group evangelism from Gorman:

God created us as ‘persons.’ Personhood is only known in relation to others. Our identity as relational beings is carved out of interpersonal relating. Because God knew and experienced community [in Godself], he made his creatures capable of the same. The creature must be separate but with a drive to relate. It is through encounter with others that the self exists ‘in the image and likeness of God....’ Adam was created with the capacity and necessity for relating to God. The Divine made a creature

¹⁵³ Ibid, 136-139.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 136.

with whom he could interact... The creature was what God wanted...
As bearers of his image we hunger for community to fulfill that image.¹⁵⁵

Following this brief statement, we scheduled the second session for eight weeks later in order to allow the participants to put into practice the training and begin inviting their neighbors to their homes for a shared meal and community building. We decided at whose home we would meet and who would bring which items to the potluck. We closed with a written evaluation of the first session (Appendix D) and with a prayer.

For the second session, I did not have any particular information to share. I only wished to listen to the participants, how they had proceeded with inviting their neighbors into their homes, how the groups were going, discuss any questions they had and do our final evaluation (Appendix E). This second session was eye opening for me and very disappointing. I will cover it in depth in the final chapter of this thesis: Evaluation and Conclusions.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 27-28.

Chapter 4: Evaluation and Conclusion

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.... Extend hospitality to strangers.
- Romans 12:9-13*

Before beginning the evaluation process of the evangelism training model I developed, it will be important to be reminded of the purpose and objective of the training. The purpose of this evangelism project was to provide a training model that could be used by Christians who desired to share their faith with others in a way that would create transformed lives and build community. The object of the model was for those who participated in the training to invite six to eight neighbors into their home for a shared potluck meal on a regular basis and that through hospitality, opportunities would be created to share faith and see others commit to Christ. The training model was designed with two sessions, one being informational and experiential through small group exercises, and the second wholly experiential. In order to evaluate the success of the training model, I employed two written evaluations, direct observation, and interviews with participants.

At the beginning of the first session, participants were asked to answer two questions: “1) Briefly define what you believe evangelism is, and 2) Have you ever participated in a small group before, yes or no? If yes, briefly describe what you felt was the most beneficial aspect of being a part of that group.” In *Questionnaires: Design and Use*, it is stated that surveys should be designed and conducted so that the questions are *reliable* by conveying the same meaning to all people who participate and *valid* because

those participating in the survey are qualified to answer them.¹⁵⁶ Both of these criteria apply to the questions asked in the surveys as the participants were Christians who were members of churches and understood the meaning of evangelism. The first question was used to set a baseline for what each participant believed evangelism was so that at the end of the training, I could evaluate whether or not the training had changed their view or understanding of evangelism. I did not provide a definition of evangelism in the training. What I hoped would happen during the training is that participants would come to understand evangelism as holistic, that is encompassing the whole person as we discussed the need for community as part of God's design of humanity, use of hospitality when meeting with others, and the very real need for every person to eat by sharing in a meal, instead of a narrow view of evangelism as simply talking with others about Jesus Christ.

The answers to the first question confirmed that all participants but one viewed evangelism as sharing Jesus Christ with others for the purpose of those hearing coming to faith in Christ. Only one person said, "Sharing the love of God with others." I call attention to this answer because it is more closely related to relationship building, community creation, and caring for the whole person. The responses gathered by the second question though validated what I hoped the training would achieve, that is that small groups create a sense of belonging necessary for growing faith. All the participants had previously participated in small groups and all felt the most beneficial part of their participation was that they developed a sense of community and learned to appreciate differences of others.

¹⁵⁶ Douglas R. Berdie, John F. Anderson, and Marsha A. Niebuhr, *Questionnaires: design and use* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 3.

At the conclusion of the training, I asked participants to answer five questions with the first one being: “Has your definition or understanding of evangelism changed? If so, why?” The purpose of this question was to evaluate if the training had successfully moved the participants from an understanding of evangelism as simply a conversation about Jesus to caring for whole persons in community. All of the participants except one said their definition had *not* changed. This was disappointing. Only one person said his understanding changed to see evangelism as relational. I purposely did not provide a written definition of relational evangelism because I wanted people to discover this through the training. I wanted to avoid a parroted written definition that had been seen in the training. By having the participants actually break up into groups to discuss the concepts being presented, I had hoped they would glean a sense of relational evangelism.

What I learned from this question is that churches do not provide adequate training on relational evangelism. In Western culture where individualism is prized, including what one chooses to believe, having a view of evangelism as simply sharing one’s own belief about Jesus is not enough to move anyone to faith. I believe more sermons on evangelism as relational with training opportunities within the church in relational evangelism are necessary.

The second question was regarding the information provided on the Wesleyan Class Meeting. The question was: “Were you familiar with John Wesley’s class meeting structure? Yes or No. Do you believe it is or is not a beneficial way to build faith in community? Please explain.” Two out of the five said they were unaware of Wesley’s

class meeting structure.¹⁵⁷ All five agreed that Wesley's approach was beneficial for building faith in community. Only one person questioned whether or not it would work with neighbors who were relative strangers.

The third question dealt with the structure of small groups as presented in the training. The question was: "Did you find the structure of the small group home neighbor meeting as explained new and different or common knowledge? Will the information on how to structure your home group be helpful to you in building and deepening relationships with your neighbors? Please explain." All agreed it was new and different. All agreed also that the information was extremely helpful. One person noted that having the handout (Appendix B) was a helpful memory tool. **What I learned from this question is that the training model is valid.** I also learned that providing a "quick start" guide or handout with the information presented is essential to the training so that participants can refer back to it when developing their small groups.

The fourth question had five parts to it. Each part was designed to assess whether or not the training on personal preparation for small group neighborhood evangelism was beneficial. Question 4A was: "Faith. How important to you is attending to your own personal faith? Do you view this as necessary for developing relationships with others?" Based on the responses, I believe this was a leading question. Every person indicated that attending to their own personal faith was very important. For those choosing to participate in the training, it was probably a given that they viewed their faith as

¹⁵⁷ My initial training group was confirmed at six people, but the night of the training, one of the members had to work and was unable to attend. His spouse attended the first session and they both attended the second session. But I still only had five at the second session because one of the members who participated in the first training session was unable to attend the second.

important. Four out of the five viewed their faith as important for developing relationships with others. Only one person felt faith was not necessary for developing relationships with others. To this person, faith was an internal matter and not relevant to dealing with others. This is a curious answer. It affirms the Western cultural view that faith is individual, but for someone who is an active church member and chose to attend a training on sharing one's faith, it seems odd. Because these were anonymous evaluations, I do not know who wrote the answer. My observation is that it was written by one of the members who is a couple and he came because his spouse asked him to. This same person indicated in their answer to question number two before the training began that they believed small groups to be beneficial, but that they felt on the outside of such groups. What I learned from this is that individuals who have difficulty being vulnerable with others tend to view faith as a private matter. If the training model were expanded, it would be helpful to do some exercises around creating vulnerability in groups.

Question 4B was "Five P's. Do you consider the five p's good examples of how a disciple should live, why or why not? Will they assist you in being intentional about how you live a life of faith?" The five p's were included in the training to encourage participants to do the work of small group neighborhood evangelism. The purpose of this question was to understand if the participants felt encouraged to undertake this work as a necessary part of their discipleship. All five responded that they were encouraged by the five p's, that they were concise, clear and helped them understand the need to be intentional in evangelism as part of their faith. I learned that people do desire clear and simple ways to share their faith. The five p's are an important component in the training model.

Question 4C was in relation to Julie Gormon's things to avoid in small groups. These dealt with self-awareness as leaders. The things to avoid were expectations or outcomes; prejudice; feeling right (theology, ideology, solutions); need to heal, fix, or solve; need to control; pseudocommunity. The evaluation question was "Were any of the 6 things to avoid new to you? Which one will be the hardest for you to overcome and why?" The question was designed to have participants self-reflect. It also was designed to provide information on how participants understand group dynamics and leadership. All five participants said these were not new items for them. Two felt that managing expectations and outcomes would be difficult for them. The other three identified that giving up the need to fix others and take control would be difficult for them. I learned from this question that the training should incorporate discussion on how to avoid these items, particularly the ones with which individuals struggle. If the training model were broken up into smaller modules over a longer period of time, it would be helpful to have a professional in group dynamics to lead a session on overcoming the things to avoid.

Question 4D was on pseudocommunity and asked, "Was the practice of asking deeper questions to surface responses helpful in understanding how to avoid pseudocommunity?" The purpose of this question was to learn if participants understood that they must intentionally move their small groups into deeper vulnerability, that this will not happen on its own, especially if surface answers to questions are provided in their small group settings. All five participants answered "yes" with little additional information in their answer. This tells me that this question was poorly worded. Perhaps a better question could have been, "Do you believe pseudocommunity inhibits group vulnerability? How can you specifically help your small groups avoid

pseudocommunity?” The individual who, based on previous answers, seems to have difficulty with vulnerability offered an interesting answer to this question. He said that he has difficulty identifying surface questions. This is consistent with my view that he has difficulty being vulnerable. In terms of improving the training model, again I would offer an expanded model where a session could be held to help individuals learn to be more vulnerable.

The final question of section four was 4E on the Johari Window. The question was lengthy: “Did this exercise help you to gain a better self-understanding of how others might view you in an initial encounter? Is there anything you might do differently in order to disclose hidden or secret areas in order to encourage reciprocal sharing by others, thus developing a basis for trust and growth in relationships?” This question was designed to assist participants in understanding their own barriers to being vulnerable in a group setting. Overall, all the participants liked the activity and agreed it was helpful in growing their self-awareness. But all also agreed more time was needed with this exercise. There is a pattern emerging that the training model is worthwhile and helpful, but that it is a lot of information and more time is needed to cover all the information. It is interesting to note that the individual who appears to have trouble with vulnerability indicated this was his favorite activity. This affirms that a component should be added to the training that helps the participants learn and practice vulnerability.

The last question of the evaluation for session one was on theology. The question was “Do you view God as a relational God, yes or no? Please explain your answer.” Every participant indicated “yes.” Because the final slide and reading from Gorman in the training essentially said God is relational and we are created in God’s image as relational

beings, everyone used this in their explanation. While this understanding of God was part of the purpose of the training, I wonder if this question simply invited the participants to parrot what was covered in the training? Could the question or the training have been changed to help participants uncover this truth for themselves so that it would be more impactful and memorable? I believe I would like to change the session one evaluation by including this as a third question at the beginning with the first two questions. Then at the end, change the question to: “Has your view of God as a relational God changed or stayed the same as a result of this training? Please explain. How will your view of God impact relationship building in small group evangelism?” This question actually provides the information I am seeking, which is “Has this training model changed how you view God and will you engage in evangelism as a result of the training?”

Based on the written evaluations, observations during the training and discussions with participants during and after, I would say the training model is worthwhile and successful in achieving its goal of helping people view evangelism as a necessary part of their lives with God and that evangelism is more than just telling people about Jesus, it is about caring for whole people. In terms of the model itself, I believe it needs to be broken down into parts over several weeks. It is too much information for a single session. It also needs to include more hands-on training on how to be vulnerable with others. This is particularly important when discussing matters of faith.

It also would be helpful to include in the training a section on transitioning to a group like Watson suggests based on Wesley’s question, “How is your life with God?” As small groups achieve what they are designed to do, which is become a community that

is Christian, transitioning to a Wesley group that answers the “How is your life with God?” question each week would be necessary.

At the session two training, we met at a group members house for a shared potluck meal two months after the first session. Five of the six were able to participate. One person there had not been at the first session of training due to work. The sixth person who was at the first session but could not attend the second sent his final evaluation to me electronically so that I was able to capture all six participants final evaluations of the model. The afternoon lunch and following interviews revealed that none of the participants had used the training and invited their neighbors into their homes for small group evangelism. The exception was the individual who could not attend the second session. I will review his findings at the end.

The reasons provided for not engaging the model with their neighbors were as follows: 1) This person is a middle age single female who is a nursing instructor at a local university. During the two months since the first training, her home had flooded due to faulty plumbing and she could not invite her neighbors into her home. This is completely understandable. I did ask though if she could have employed the second “p” in the five p’s, which is pairs, and invited a friend to participate with her while meeting at that person’s home. She admitted that this was a possibility but had not occurred to her. 2) The second couple had experienced the death of one of their mothers during the two months and were gone for three weeks out of the eight. Again, this is completely understandable. They did admit that the training had made them more conscious of their neighbors. Before the training, they tended to park in their driveway and immediately go into the house. Now, they paid attention to who was outside and would engage them in

conversation. They mentioned that while they were gone, one of their neighbors had mowed their lawn. I asked if they had gone over to thank him as this was an excellent opportunity to invite him to their home for a potluck meal! They confessed they had not spoken to him.

The third group was the second couple in whose home we were meeting. It was an older home that they had lived in their whole married life. They had raised their two children there, but during the two months between sessions, they had decided to put their house on the market and sell because their neighborhood was changing through gentrification. This particular couple out of the six participants intrigued me the most. This was the couple that worked with a refugee organization. I also believed that if anyone would have great success at employing the model, it would be this couple. It was understandable that if they were moving, they would not wish to start a neighborhood group since they would no longer be a part of the neighborhood. In my interview with this couple though, they provided some important information.

When they first moved into their neighborhood, they were only the second owners of the home. They quickly developed deep and abiding relationships with the families that lived around them. In fact, the family directly across the street (they had since moved and the home torn down to build a much larger modern home), held weekly barbeques that all the neighbors came to bringing food with them. The adults played cards together while the children played. They spoke of this time very fondly. When I asked why they felt this had so organically developed, they believed it was because they were all young families whose children enjoyed playing together. When I asked why they did not feel this same connection to their neighbors now, they said “People move.” This is true. In

Western culture, people are more mobile. Families do not stay in one place like this family had. This couple in many ways were an anomaly.

There are two things I learned from this couple. First, the mobility of society today cannot be an excuse for not engaging in small group evangelism. For that matter, it should not be an excuse for not getting to know our neighbors at all. We are created by God to be relational, regardless of how long someone may or may not be in our lives or us in theirs. Second, the fact that they had enjoyed gathering with neighbors while their children played is proof that we are designed to be in relationship and it is a necessary part of God's work. It also helped me realize that small group evangelism may work best when people of similar ages and stages in life gather together.

Before getting to the final participant who could not be present and his written evaluation, here is my conclusion drawn regarding those present at the second training session and their oral interviews. Life events like plumbing issues, family deaths, and changes in neighborhoods are always going to happen. It is as Block pointed out in his two types of suffering, human and political, mentioned in Chapter Two: Theoretical. Human suffering such as isolation, loneliness, illness, abandonment, loss of meaning, sadness, and death are all unavoidable and part of life.¹⁵⁸ These things are what connect us as human beings. They are also pivot points as identified by Andy Stanley.¹⁵⁹ It is in these moments that one can pivot toward or away from God. It is especially in these moments that community that is Christian is needed so that members can help encourage those experiencing difficult life events to trust in God who carries us through. These are

¹⁵⁸ Block, 163.

¹⁵⁹ Stanley, 137.

the perfect opportunities to engage our neighbors and invite them to one's home for a shared meal with other neighbors.

The final participant who could not be present for the second session, emailed me his written evaluation. I chose to include his evaluation separately because he is the only participant that did attempt to create a neighborhood small group during the two months apart. I will include the final evaluation questions along with my assessment of his and the rest of the groups responses.

The final evaluation (Appendix E) was broken up into four sections. The first section was *Formation of Groups*. These questions were designed to understand how each participant actually experienced the process of reaching out to their neighbors and if the information in session one was helpful. The second section was *Group Formation*. These questions were designed to see if the groups were able to form and continue meeting on a reoccurring basis, going deeper with neighbors while becoming vulnerable with one another. The third section dealt with the personal preparation covered in the first session. These questions were designed to see if the information presented in the first session was actually beneficial and put into practice by the participants. The final section was simply two conclusion questions designed to see if the training would continue to be used and if it would be worthwhile for others.

Formation of Groups: "1) Did you intentionally reach out to meet your neighbors? Yes or No. If yes, was this: Easy or hard for you? Comfortable or uncomfortable? What challenges did you encounter? What rewards did you experience? How has this experience affected your spiritual life and faith? Did the training in Session One assist you in reaching out to your neighbors?" Because all of the participants

answered “no” to this question, I will focus primarily on the one participant that did form a neighborhood small group. He felt that the process was easy for him because he was a college student who lived with other college students. He felt he had good relationships with his neighbors and knew them well. It was uncomfortable because of frustration that everyone’s schedules were so busy, it was difficult to schedule a time when everyone could meet. This was the main challenge he identified. The rewards he identified were that he was able to get to know people he thought he already knew better and it created a stronger sense of community within his apartment building. In terms of growth in his spiritual life and faith, he said that in meeting with his neighbors, he realized they all were experiencing similar struggles in life, mainly because they were all college students. But he did learn his neighbors were all at various points in their faith journeys, which provided an opportunity for encouragement. He felt the small group experience helped grow his faith and those in the community. He agreed the training in session one provided the necessary tips he needed to begin reaching out to his neighbors.

The second question in *Formation of Groups* was “If you were unable to reach out to your neighbors, what prevented this from happening? What could have been done differently? How could this be addressed in the training program?” I was extremely interested in the participants responses to the last part of this question since the majority of them did not actively reach out to their neighbors. All provided explanations for their not participating as was shared in the personal interviews: plumbing issues, moving, death in the family, and a family illness. Only two participants offered items that would encourage people to actually do the program 1) time of year training is offered, and 2) more time to actually implement the small group process. None provided any response to

how they felt information in the first session could change or be added to assist people in actually using the program to create small neighborhood groups for evangelism.

In response to the two items offered as encouragement for people who took the training to actually do the program, the time of year training is offered can easily be addressed with offering the training program multiple times throughout the year. But I believe this would have little to do with people actually reaching out to their neighbors, just as I do not believe offering more time to implement the groups would make much difference. **Relational evangelism only makes a difference when people actually desire to create relationships.** Without intentionally reaching out to one's neighbors, small group formation for the purpose of sharing life and faith will never happen. Neil Cole in *Organic Church* says it like this, "If Jesus has all authority of heaven and earth and is always present, then church will be different. But if Jesus is docile, passive, and indifferent, your church will be as well."¹⁶⁰ I believe people do see Jesus as loyal and active, even in their own lives, but they want someone else to do the work of creating relationships and sharing faith. Just as many pastors are comfortable with being chaplains who baptize, marry, and bury, so are congregants comfortable with churches and pastors who simply baptize, marry, and bury.

I am also reminded of Jesus words as the evangelist Luke wrote, "To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at

¹⁶⁰ Cole, 7.

my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ (Luke 9:59-62). Jesus is not advocating one not bury their parents or dishonor them in this way. His meaning is illustrated in the second example. If one is continually looking back while plowing a field, his rows will not be straight. It is like driver’s education 101. While driving a vehicle, if one is always looking in the rearview mirror (or at his phone) he will drive off the road! Following Jesus means making changes in one’s life, being more loving, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, welcoming the stranger, taking risks, and always making necessary changes.

The rest of the questions in the second section of the evaluations were left unanswered or contained more of the same, “need more time to reach out,” “life events prevented me from reaching out to neighbors.” One person said, “I really have to get out of my comfort zone to initiate meeting my neighbors.” This response was troubling since the training was designed to actually help people get out of their comfort zones. To the interview question “How would you suggest dealing with life events be incorporated into the training program?” two people offered using role playing with examples during the training. I believe this would be very helpful and something definitely to include in future revisions of the training model.

In the review of the personal preparation section and how it applied to their group formation, all commented that their faith had grown as a result of the information provided in session one. One participant shared that they were reading their bible more. Another shared they were more attuned to listening to others. The participant who actually started a small group included in his evaluation that he used the personal preparation information of personal devotion, bible study, prayer and using spiritual gifts

with his neighbor group and discussed with them going out as a group to meet more neighbors. I applaud his enthusiasm, but it does assume that everyone in the neighborhood group is already a Christian, and far enough along on their faith journey to be using these spiritual disciplines.

For the participant who started a home group, he also stated that in the things to avoid, he not only wrestled with wanting to heal, fix and solve people's problems, but others in his group also wanted to do this for those in his small group. He used his training and reminded those present that this was not the purpose of the group. He also used his training in avoiding the formation of pseudocommunity. He shared there were a number of people who offered surface answers and he was able to ask for more information that lead to deeper conversation within the group.

The final question in the personal preparation section of the evaluation dealt with whether or not the Johari Window exercise was helpful in self-awareness. To my surprise, the participant used the exercise with his home group as an ice breaker activity. He believed it was a good tool to use in this way and recommended other groups use it too. This was a bold move and I definitely feel this could be offered as a suggestion during the training if participants felt it would be appropriate for their own small groups.

The concluding questions on the final evaluation of the evangelism model were: "At the conclusion of this program, will you continue to reach out and develop intentional relationships with your neighbors for the purpose of faith building? Has this program changed the way you view your faith life and build relationships with others? Please explain." And "Would you recommend the training program to others?" All six of the participants said the program encouraged them to continue to reach out to their

neighbors for the purpose of faith building. All six also said they would recommend the training to others. Two people included that they would pursue intentionally reaching out to their neighbors for the purpose of inviting them to church in order to see their church grow. These comments tell me that the training needs to more clearly state that the purpose of neighborhood small group evangelism is not for church growth, but for connecting people to God and one another. Church growth may be a result, but it is not the goal. This is an important point. Inviting people to church offers the perception that the invitee needs to see religion the way you do; or worse yet, think you want them to “get saved.” In the Kinnamon and Lyon’s book *UnChristian*, one of the key points that drove people away from Christianity was the perception that Christians are only interested in “saving souls.”¹⁶¹ What they offer as a change to that perception is “Christians cultivate relationships and environments where others can be deeply transformed by God.”¹⁶² This is exactly the purpose of *Opening Your Door and Dinner Table* as a training model for evangelism. Let God do the transforming work in people while Christians simply love others by building relationships and community.

Application for Ministry

Preparing for this training model affirmed my understanding that evangelism is relational and based on the responses of those who participated, there is a desire for this type of training in the church. What I was unprepared for was the number of people in the church who are unwilling to be intentional about sharing faith and creating relationships.

¹⁶¹ Kinnamon and Lyons, 67.

¹⁶² Ibid.

In my own context at Walnut Hill United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, I see why the church is in decline. The older members of the congregation who are actually keeping the church doors open through their financial giving, do not wish to actively engage the changing world by creating new relationships. The younger generation that has left the church or never entered the doors of a church with which to begin due to the reasons identified by Bass and Kinnamon and Lyons, will not come back to the institutional church, which they view Walnut Hill UMC as such.

A recent survey was sent out by the senior pastor and chair of the church council to Walnut Hill UMC church council members asking for members to respond to a series of questions, all of which revolved around how to improve the worship service to make it more invitational and attractive to visitors. This type of activity is about filling seats in the sanctuary. As Cole says in *Organic Church*, "...filling seats one day a week is not what the Kingdom is all about."¹⁶³ How can I apply what I learned through this project?

Relational evangelism begins at the top with the senior pastor and must be communicated in sermons, all church literature, all church programming, all the time. And it must be communicated within the context of what the Christian life means, which is that God is relational, actively involved with us every day of our lives, and God's involvement in our lives makes a difference to us and the people around us. Martha Reese says it best, "If members are not afire with love for God, from a vivid sense of what God is doing every day, it is inconceivable that they will do much to share their faith with others."¹⁶⁴ This means ministry must be more than church programs,

¹⁶³ Cole, xxiii.

¹⁶⁴ Reese, 62.

finding people to run those programs, so that more people will come to the church and its programs. Ministry must be about connecting people to God. This requires a culture shift within the church, away from paying bills and propping up the church building.

Small group neighborhood evangelism has to become imbedded in the DNA of a church. This is much easier to do with a new church start; harder to do in an established church with a long history that is in decline. In order for relational evangelism to work in an older church like Walnut Hill UMC, a dedicated staff or lay person must be assigned to prayerfully seek out with the guidance of the Holy Spirit those individuals who are afire with love for God, bring them together and train them to use the Opening Door and Table model. This person must periodically meet with them one-on-one and as a group to ask how things are going, to encourage them, and ask them where they see God at work on a daily basis in their own lives. This means an investment in the future of the church, because this type of change will not happen overnight.

I hope I do not sound discouraged. I believe God is actively at work in people's lives. The positive response by all six participants who volunteered to be a part of this study encouraged me that they found the information helpful to them in their own journeys with God. I am thankful to them and their willingness to give of their time. As the wonderful Christian hymn "Pass It On" by Kurt Kaiser says, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." It truly can be just one individual excited about his or faith that reignites the embers of church members to reach out to their neighbors.

APPENDIX A

Power Point Training Session 1

Slide 1

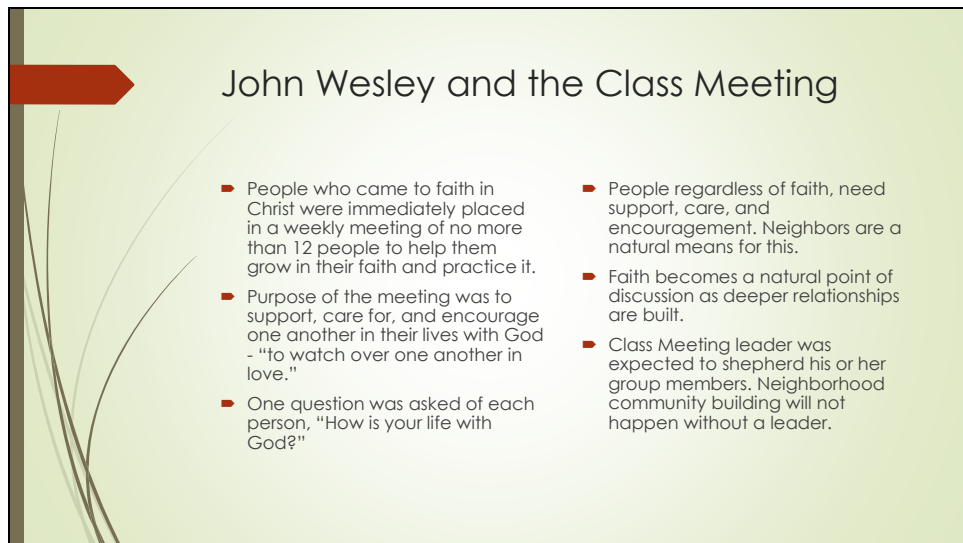


Opening Your Door & Dinner Table

Training for Small Group Neighborhood Evangelism

The slide features a light green background with a decorative graphic on the left side consisting of thin, dark lines and a solid red arrow pointing to the right.

Slide 2




John Wesley and the Class Meeting

- People who came to faith in Christ were immediately placed in a weekly meeting of no more than 12 people to help them grow in their faith and practice it.
- Purpose of the meeting was to support, care for, and encourage one another in their lives with God - "to watch over one another in love."
- One question was asked of each person, "How is your life with God?"
- People regardless of faith, need support, care, and encouragement. Neighbors are a natural means for this.
- Faith becomes a natural point of discussion as deeper relationships are built.
- Class Meeting leader was expected to shepherd his or her group members. Neighborhood community building will not happen without a leader.

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Slide 3



"Comfort is ultimately not the best indication of whether something is good for you."
– Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*

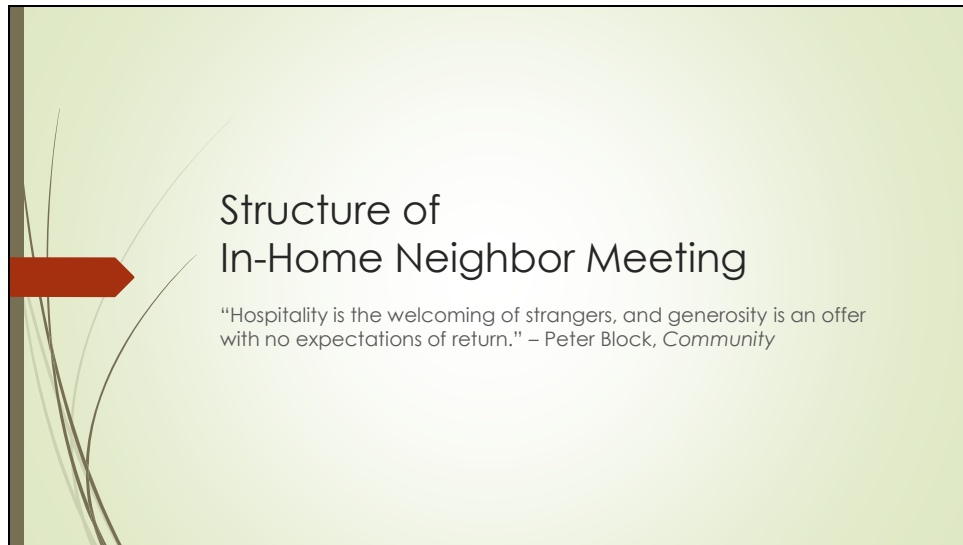
Slide 4

Discussion Questions:

What are some things that you find uncomfortable, but ultimately you believe are good for you?

Do you do them or not and why?

Slide 5

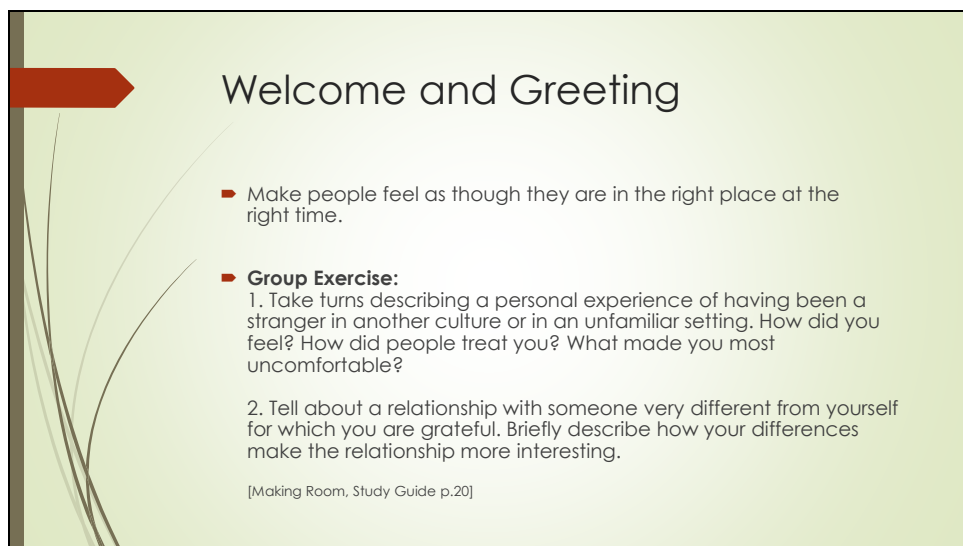


Structure of
In-Home Neighbor Meeting

"Hospitality is the welcoming of strangers, and generosity is an offer with no expectations of return." – Peter Block, *Community*

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Slide 6



Welcome and Greeting

- Make people feel as though they are in the right place at the right time.
- **Group Exercise:**
 1. Take turns describing a personal experience of having been a stranger in another culture or in an unfamiliar setting. How did you feel? How did people treat you? What made you most uncomfortable?
 2. Tell about a relationship with someone very different from yourself for which you are grateful. Briefly describe how your differences make the relationship more interesting.

[Making Room, Study Guide p.20]

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Slide 7

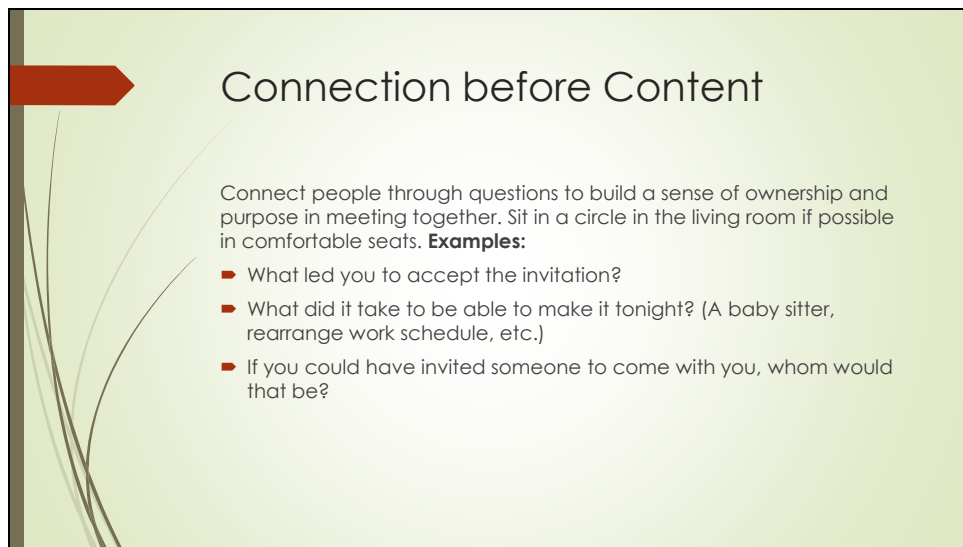


Slide 7 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Restate the Invitation" is centered at the top. Below the title is a bulleted list with one item. The background also includes faint, stylized grass-like lines on the left side.

Restate the Invitation

- Begin with why everyone is there and declare the possibility of creating a deeper sense of caring for another as neighbors.

Slide 8



Slide 8 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Connection before Content" is centered at the top. Below the title is a paragraph of text followed by a bulleted list with three items. The background also includes faint, stylized grass-like lines on the left side.

Connection before Content

Connect people through questions to build a sense of ownership and purpose in meeting together. Sit in a circle in the living room if possible in comfortable seats. **Examples:**

- What led you to accept the invitation?
- What did it take to be able to make it tonight? (A baby sitter, rearrange work schedule, etc.)
- If you could have invited someone to come with you, whom would that be?

Slide 9

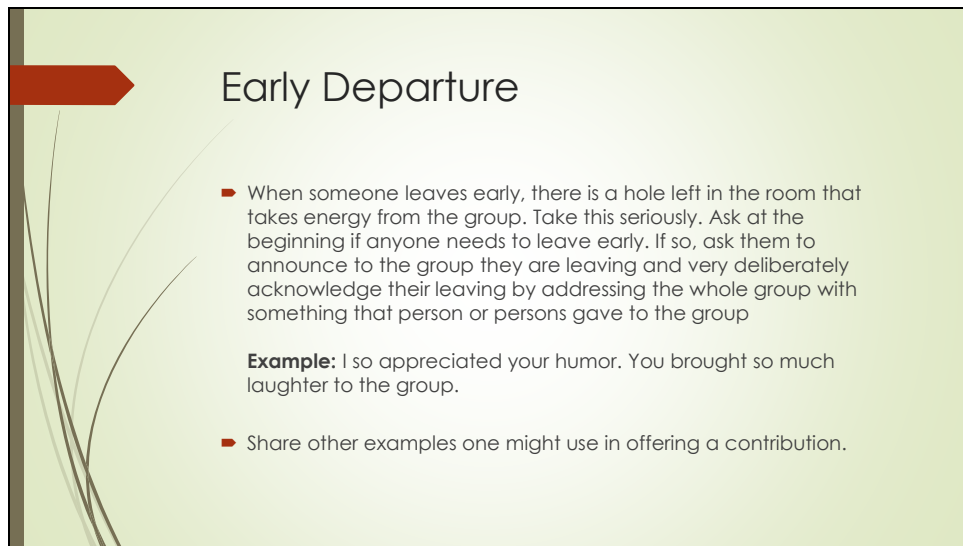


Slide 9 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Late Arrivals" is positioned at the top right. A decorative graphic of thin, curved lines is on the left side of the slide.

Late Arrivals

- Someone always comes late. Acknowledge everyone whenever they show up and welcome them without humiliation and connect them to the group through introductions and asking a few of the others to share their answers to the Connect Questions then ask the arrival to share their answers.

Slide 10



Slide 10 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Early Departure" is positioned at the top right. A decorative graphic of thin, curved lines is on the left side of the slide.


Early Departure

- When someone leaves early, there is a hole left in the room that takes energy from the group. Take this seriously. Ask at the beginning if anyone needs to leave early. If so, ask them to announce to the group they are leaving and very deliberately acknowledge their leaving by addressing the whole group with something that person or persons gave to the group

Example: I so appreciated your humor. You brought so much laughter to the group.

- Share other examples one might use in offering a contribution.


Slide 11



Breaking Bread Together

- Food brings sacredness into the room. It is symbol of hospitality. Since everyone has brought food, it truly is a shared meal. Acknowledge this and thank everyone for bringing something. Part of hospitality is providing clear instructions on how everyone should be served and places to sit. Ask if anyone has any food allergies or restrictions and let the group know so that everyone can partake fully.
- Before the group departs, ask everyone if they found your time together valuable. If so, set a date for the next potluck and ask for a volunteer to host the next one. Set a date within one to two weeks. More than two weeks will decrease participation at the next potluck. Ask for suggestions for a themed potluck or a "mix it up" potluck.

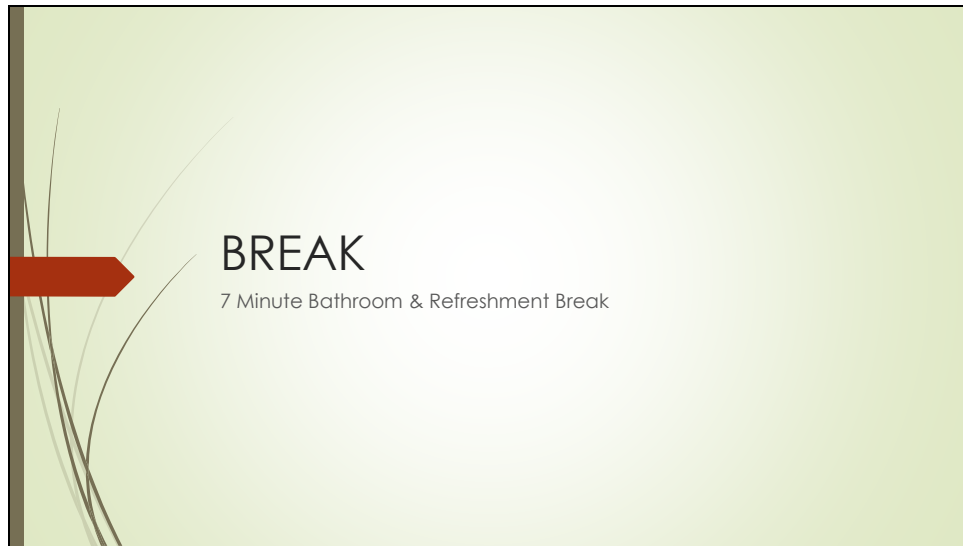
Slide 12



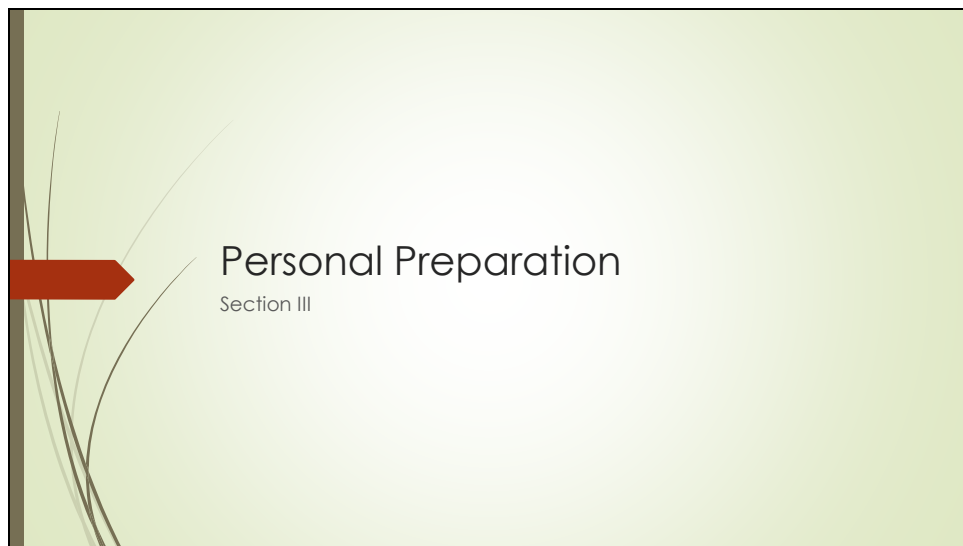
Group Exercise

- Describe a place that is special to you.
What makes it special and inviting?
If you have an "imagined" place, what does it look, smell and sound like?

Slide 13



Slide 14



Slide 15

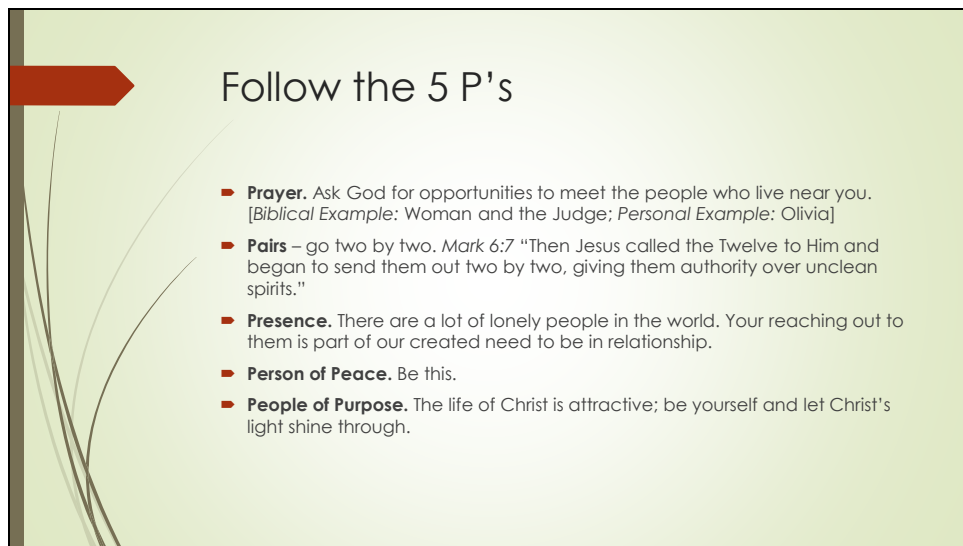


Slide 15 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Attend to Your Faith" is centered at the top. Below the title is a bulleted list of five items, each preceded by a small red square. The list includes: "Personal devotion and bible study", "Private prayer", "Use your spiritual gifts actively in ministry", "Providential relationships, listen for God: 'When we hear from God through someone and when we see God in someone.' – Deep & Wide p. 131", and "Pivotal circumstances: Good or bad events can pull us toward or away from God. Interpretation of the event is what matters. This is why small group connection is vital to life. The group helps with this interpretation."

Attend to Your Faith

- Personal devotion and bible study
- Private prayer
- Use your spiritual gifts actively in ministry
- Providential relationships, listen for God: "When we hear from God through someone and when we see God in someone." – *Deep & Wide* p. 131
- Pivotal circumstances: Good or bad events can pull us toward or away from God. Interpretation of the event is what matters. This is why small group connection is vital to life. The group helps with this interpretation.

Slide 16

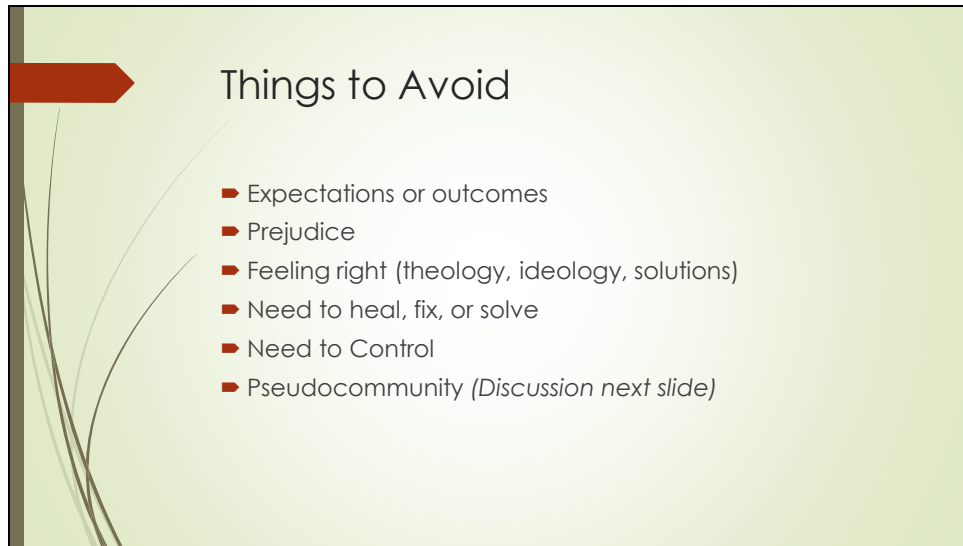


Slide 16 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Follow the 5 P's" is centered at the top. Below the title is a bulleted list of five items, each preceded by a small red square. The list includes: "Prayer. Ask God for opportunities to meet the people who live near you. [Biblical Example: Woman and the Judge; Personal Example: Olivia]", "Pairs – go two by two. Mark 6:7 'Then Jesus called the Twelve to Him and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits.'", "Presence. There are a lot of lonely people in the world. Your reaching out to them is part of our created need to be in relationship.", "Person of Peace. Be this.", and "People of Purpose. The life of Christ is attractive; be yourself and let Christ's light shine through."

Follow the 5 P's

- **Prayer.** Ask God for opportunities to meet the people who live near you. [Biblical Example: Woman and the Judge; Personal Example: Olivia]
- **Pairs** – go two by two. *Mark 6:7* "Then Jesus called the Twelve to Him and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits."
- **Presence.** There are a lot of lonely people in the world. Your reaching out to them is part of our created need to be in relationship.
- **Person of Peace.** Be this.
- **People of Purpose.** The life of Christ is attractive; be yourself and let Christ's light shine through.

Slide 17

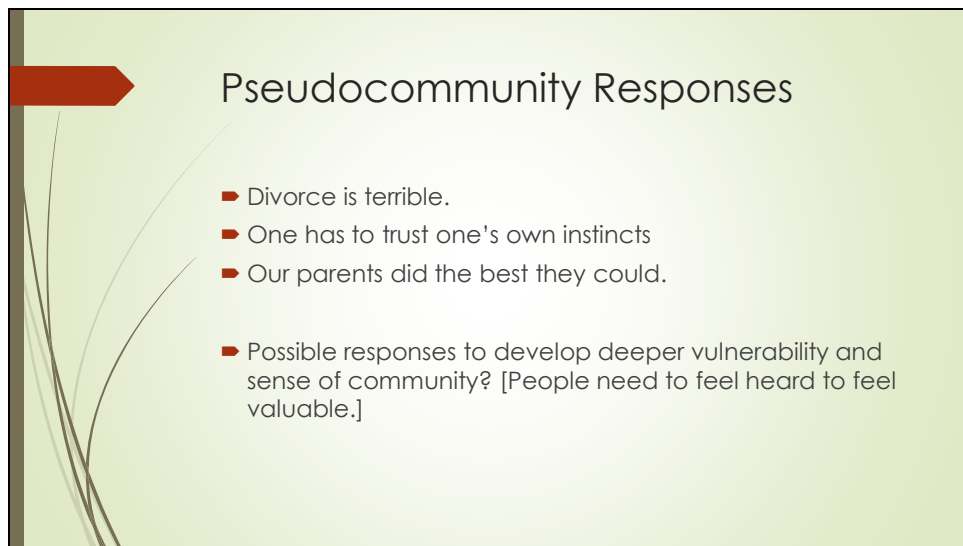


Slide 17 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Things to Avoid" is centered at the top. Below the title is a bulleted list of six items, each preceded by a dark red square bullet. The list includes "Expectations or outcomes", "Prejudice", "Feeling right (theology, ideology, solutions)", "Need to heal, fix, or solve", "Need to Control", and "Pseudocommunity (Discussion next slide)".

Things to Avoid

- Expectations or outcomes
- Prejudice
- Feeling right (theology, ideology, solutions)
- Need to heal, fix, or solve
- Need to Control
- Pseudocommunity (*Discussion next slide*)

Slide 18



Slide 18 features a light green background with a dark green arrow pointing right on the left side. The title "Pseudocommunity Responses" is centered at the top. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items, each preceded by a dark red square bullet. The list includes "Divorce is terrible.", "One has to trust one's own instincts", "Our parents did the best they could.", and "Possible responses to develop deeper vulnerability and sense of community? [People need to feel heard to feel valuable.]".

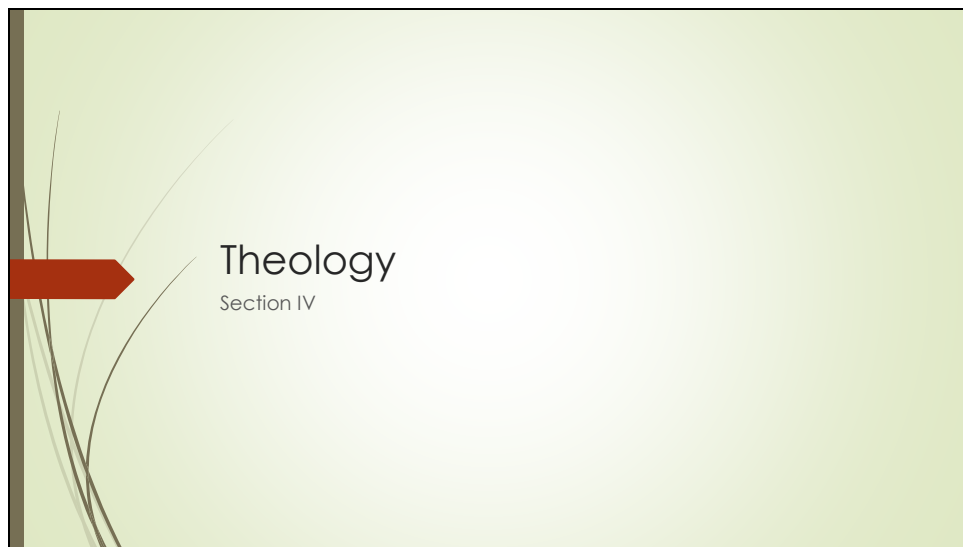
Pseudocommunity Responses

- Divorce is terrible.
- One has to trust one's own instincts
- Our parents did the best they could.
- Possible responses to develop deeper vulnerability and sense of community? [People need to feel heard to feel valuable.]

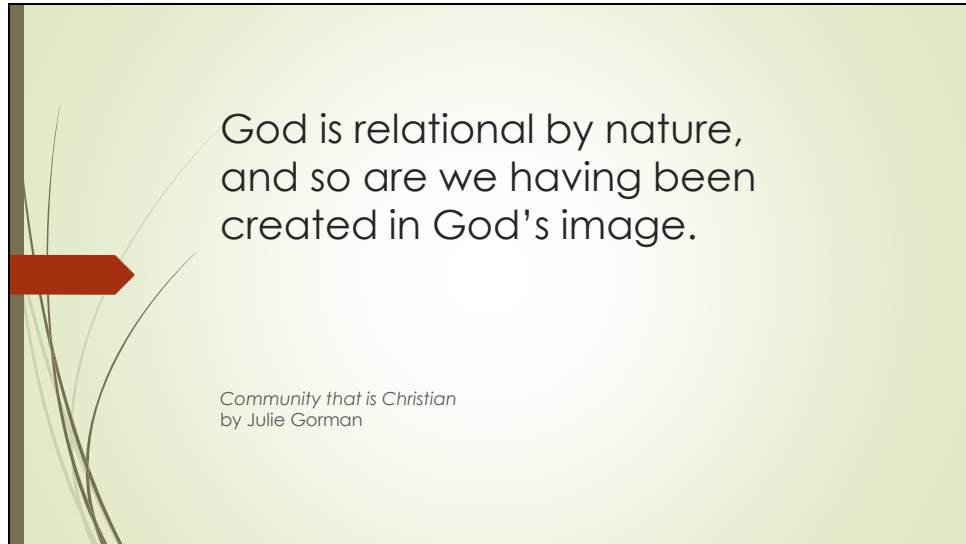
Slide 19



Slide 20



Slide 21

A presentation slide with a light green background. On the left side, there is a decorative graphic consisting of several thin, dark, curved lines resembling grass or reeds. A solid red arrow points horizontally to the right, overlapping these lines. The main text is centered in the upper half of the slide. Below it, in a smaller font, is the author's name and book title.

God is relational by nature,
and so are we having been
created in God's image.

Community that is Christian
by Julie Gorman

Slide 22

A presentation slide with a light green background. On the left side, there is a decorative graphic consisting of several thin, dark, curved lines resembling grass or reeds. A solid red arrow points horizontally to the right, overlapping these lines. The main text is centered in the upper half of the slide. Below it, in a smaller font, is a question.

Schedule our Practice Potluck

When is everyone available to meet one more time?



APPENDIX B

**Handout for Training Program
Session 1**

Opening Your Door and Dinner Table Training for Small Group Evangelism

Purpose: The purpose of this evangelism model is to connect intentional and well-meaning Christians with their faith in a deeper way by inviting their neighbors into relationship so that they may watch over one another in love.

Objective: The objective is to invite six of your neighbors to your home for a potluck meal for the purpose of getting to know one another and building community.

Section I: The Class Meeting

Review John Wesley's class meeting structure and purpose. Discuss how this can be applied to meeting and building relationships with our neighbors.

Section II: Structure — Community by Peter Block

"Hospitality is the welcoming of strangers, and generosity is an offer with no expectations of return." — Peter Block

A. Welcome and Greeting — Make people feel as though they are in the right place at the right time.

Group Exercise: 1. Take turns describing a personal experience of having been a stranger in another culture or in an unfamiliar setting. How did you feel? How did people treat you? What made you most uncomfortable? 2. Tell about a relationship with someone very different from yourself for which you are grateful. Briefly describe how your differences make the relationship more interesting. [*Making Room, Study Guide p.20*]

B. Restate the Invitation — Begin with why everyone is there and declare the possibility of creating a deeper sense of caring for another as neighbors.

C. Connection before Content — Connect people through questions to build a sense of ownership and purpose in meeting together. Sit in a circle in the living room if possible in comfortable seats. Examples:

What led you to accept the invitation?

What did it take to be able to make it tonight? (A baby sitter, rearrange work schedule, etc.)

If you could have invited someone to come with you, whom would that be?

D. Late Arrivals — Someone always comes late. Acknowledge everyone whenever they show up and welcome them without humiliation and connect them to the

group through introductions and asking a few of the others to share their answers to the Connect Questions then ask the arrival to share their answers.

E. Early Departure — When someone leaves early, there is a hole left in the room that takes energy from the group. Take this seriously. Ask at the beginning if anyone needs to leave early. If so, ask them to announce to the group they are leaving and very deliberately acknowledge their leaving by addressing the whole group with something that person or persons gave to the group (Example: I so appreciated your humor. You brought so much laughter to the group.)

F. Breaking Bread Together — Food brings sacredness into the room. It is symbol of hospitality. Since everyone has brought food, it truly is a shared meal. Acknowledge this and thank everyone for bringing something. Part of hospitality is providing clear instructions on how everyone should be served and places to sit. Ask if anyone has any food allergies or restrictions and let the group know so that everyone can partake fully.

Before the group departs, ask everyone if they found their time together valuable. If so, set a date for the next potluck and ask for a volunteer to host the next one. Set a date within one to two weeks. More than two weeks will decrease participation at the next potluck. Ask for suggestions for a themed potluck or a "mix it up" potluck.

Group Exercise: Describe a place that is special to you. What makes it special and inviting? If you have an "imagined" place, what does it look, smell and sound like?

Outside Assignment: *Watch Weapons of the Spirit* about the Le Chambon community in France that sheltered 5,000 Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Discuss with your watching partner how this town showed hospitality.

Section III: Preparing

Attend to your faith. 1) Personal devotion and bible study, 2) private prayer, 3) use your spiritual gifts actively in ministry, 4) providential relationships, listen for God: "When we hear from God through someone and when we see God in someone." [*Deep & Wide p. 131*]

Pivotal circumstances: Good or bad events can pull us toward or away from God. Interpretation of the event is what matters.

Follow the 5 P's. 1) Prayer. Ask God for opportunities to meet the people who live near you. [Biblical Example: Woman and the Judge], 2) Pairs — go two by two, 3) Presence.

There are a lot of lonely people in the world. Your reaching out to them is part of our created need to be in relationship., 4) Person of Peace. Be this., 5) People of Purpose. The life of Christ is attractive; be yourself and let Christ's light shine through.

Avoid. 1) Expectations or outcomes, 2) Prejudice, 3) Feeling right (theology, ideology, solutions), 4) Need to heal, fix, or solve, 5) Need to Control

Discussion: Pseudocommunity Questions- "Divorce is terrible" "One has to trust one's own instincts." "Our parents did the best they could."

Group Exercise: The Johari Window.

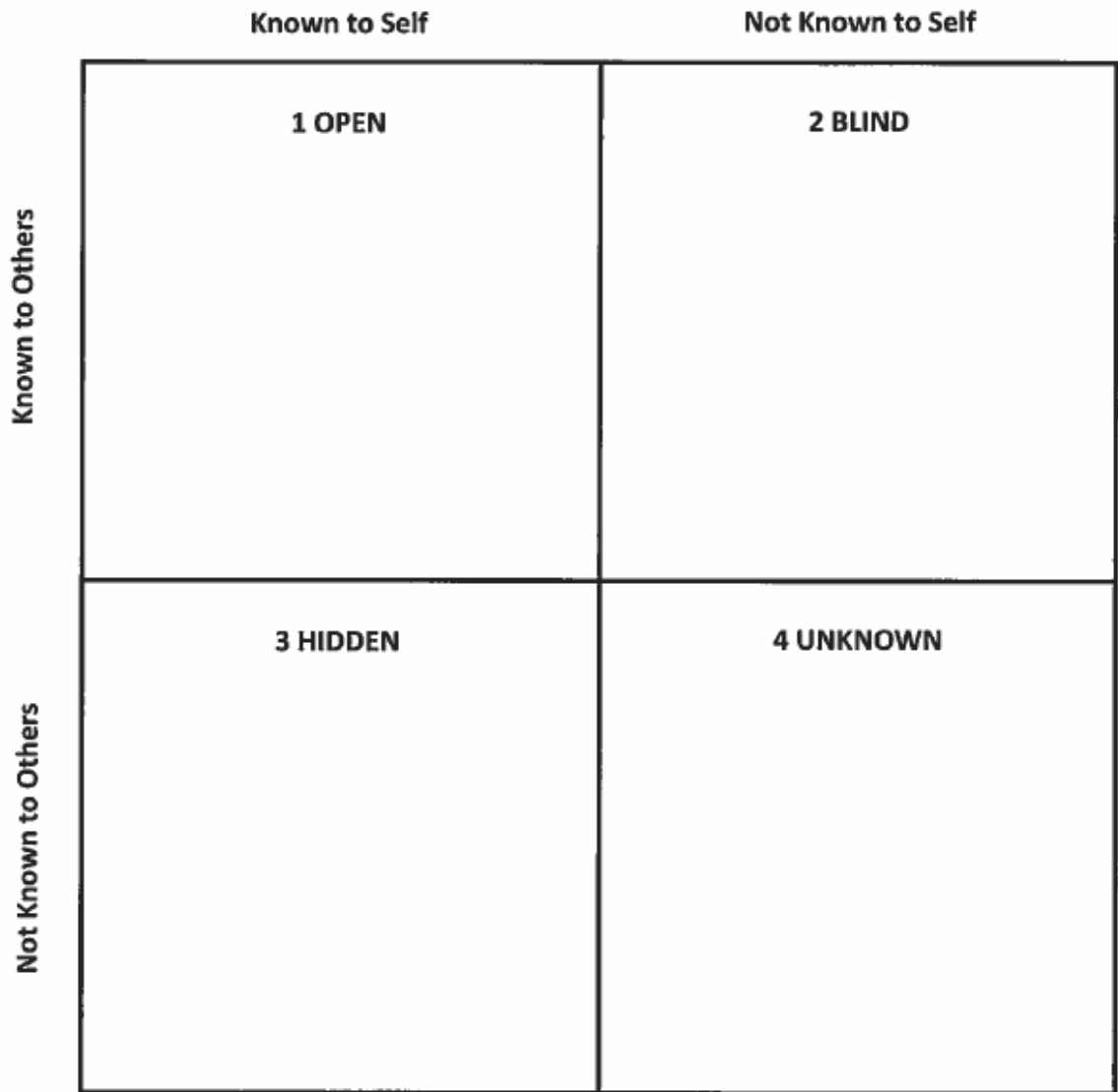
**Section: IV: Theology -
Community that is Christian by Julie Gorman**

God is relational by nature, and so are we as created in God's image.

APPENDIX C

Johari Window Exercise

Johari Window Exercise



- | | | | | |
|-------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------|
| • able | • dependable | • intelligent | • patient | • sensible |
| • accepting | • dignified | • introverted | • powerful | • sentimental |
| • adaptable | • energetic | • kind | • proud | • shy |
| • bold | • extroverted | • knowledgeable | • quiet | • silly |
| • brave | • friendly | • logical | • reflective | • spontaneous |
| • calm | • giving | • loving | • relaxed | • sympathetic |
| • caring | • happy | • mature | • religious | • tense |
| • cheerful | • helpful | • modest | • responsive | • trustworthy |
| • clever | • idealistic | • nervous | • searching | • warm |
| • complex | • independent | • observant | • self-assertive | • wise |
| • confident | • ingenious | • organized | • self-conscious | • witty |

Name of person in your group :

Select 4 adjectives from the list on your Johari Window worksheet that describe the personality of this person in your group and list them here. Once everyone has completed a sheet for each person in the group, please give this sheet to the person for them to record in Quadrants One and Two.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

Name of person in your group :

Select 4 adjectives from the list on your Johari Window worksheet that describe the personality of this person in your group and list them here. Once everyone has completed a sheet for each person in the group, please give this sheet to the person for them to record in Quadrants One and Two.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

APPENDIX D

Session One Evaluation

Evaluation Session #1 — Opening Your Door & Table, Small Group Evangelism

Before session begins:

- 1) Briefly define what you believe evangelism is:

- 2) Have you ever participated in a small group before? Yes or No. If yes, briefly describe what you felt was the most beneficial aspect of being a part of that group.

After session ends:

- 1) Has your definition or understanding of evangelism changed? If so, in what way?

- 2) Section I: The Class Meeting. Were you familiar with John Wesley's class meeting structure? Yes or No. Do you believe it is or is not a beneficial way to build faith in community? Please explain your answer.

- 3) Section II: Structure. Did you find the structure of the small group home neighbor meeting as explained new and different or common knowledge? Will the information on how to structure your home group be helpful to you in building and deepening relationships with your neighbors? Please explain.

- 4) Section III: Preparing.
 - A) Faith. How important to you is attending to your own personal faith? Do you view this as necessary for developing relationships with others?

 - B) Five P's. Do you consider the five p's good examples of how a disciple should live, why or why not? Will they assist you in being intentional about how you live a life of faith?

C) Avoid. Were any of the 6 things to avoid new to you? Which one will be the hardest for you to overcome and why?

D) Pseudocommunity. Was the practice of asking deeper questions to surface responses helpful in understanding how to avoid pseudocommunity?

E) Johari Window. Did this exercise help you to gain a better self-understanding of how others might view you in an initial encounter? Is there anything you might do differently in order to disclose hidden or secret areas in order to encourage reciprocal sharing by others, thus developing a basis for trust and growth in relationships?

5) Section V: Theology. Do you view God as a relational God, yes or no? Please explain your answer.

APPENDIX E

Session Two and Final Evaluation

Evaluation Session #2 — Opening Your Door & Table, Small Group Evangelism

Formation of Groups:

1) Did you intentionally reach out to meet your neighbors? Yes or No. If yes, was this:
Easy or hard for you?

Comfortable or uncomfortable?

What challenges did you encounter?

What rewards did you experience?

How has this experience affected your spiritual life and faith?

Did the training in Session 1 assist you in reaching out to your neighbors?

2) If you were unable to reach out to your neighbors, what prevented this from happening? What could be done differently? How could this be addressed in the training program?

Group Formation:

1) Were you able to form a neighbor group that agreed to meet more than once? If so, explain how the process went. What worked/what did not. Will the group continue to meet? How was the training helpful in this process? What could be done differently in the training to be more helpful?

2) If you were unable to form a neighbor group that agreed to meet more than once, why do you believe this was so?

Pivotal Circumstances. The training discussed that good and bad events are part of life. Both have the potential to pull us toward or away from God. Ultimately, it is the interpretation of the event that matters in terms of building or hindering faith. How have life events over the last two months helped or hindered your view of small group neighborhood evangelism?

How would you suggest dealing with life events be incorporated into the training program?

Preparing: In the training, five areas were discussed in order to prepare for small group neighborhood evangelism. Please review each area and respond accordingly.

A) **Faith.** In the training, it was presented that it is important to attend to one's own personal faith in order to share faith with others in the context of developing relationships. How have you attended to your faith over the last two months? Please be specific.

B) **Five P's:** Prayer— pray for opportunities to meet people who live near you; Pairs — go two by two; Presence — We are created to be in relationship with God and others; Person of Peace — be this; People of Purpose Christ has given us purpose as agents of love in the world. This is attractive and necessary in the world and is nothing of which to be ashamed.

How have the Five P's been helpful to you over the last two months when reaching out to your neighbors?

C) **Avoid:** 1) Expectations or outcomes, 2) Prejudice, 3) Feeling right (theology, ideology, solutions), 4) Need to heal, fix, or solve, 5) Need to Control.

Did you encounter any of these over the last two months? If so, which ones? How did you overcome them?

D) **Pseudocommunity:** The practice of asking surface questions and responding with surface answers in order to avoid questions of deeper meaning.

Did you encounter pseudocommunity questions? If you so, was the training helpful in recognizing them, allowing you to rephrase or ask more probing questions to deepen relationships?

E) **Johari Window.** Was the Johari Window exercise done during training helpful in recognizing ways others might perceive you as you reached out to get to know your neighbors? Would you recommend keeping the Johari Window exercise in the training?

Conclusion. At the conclusion of this program, will you continue to reach out and develop intentional relationships with your neighbors for the purpose of faith building?

Has this program changed the way you view your faith life and build relationships with others? Please explain your answer.

Would you recommend the training program to others?

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VITA

Gary A. Fox received the B.S. in Art with a concentration in Graphic Design from Illinois State University, Normal, IL, in 1990 and the M.Div. from Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, in 2011. After working professionally as a graphic artist for fifteen years, he surrendered to the call of ministry as a vocation. From 2005 to the present, he has served three United Methodist churches in youth ministry and is currently the Children and Youth Minister at Walnut Hill United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. He has one daughter, Olivia Chapman-Fox.

