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The Initiation of Growth-Focused Relationships Involving Healthy Accountability

Stephen Shaffer

Abstract: *This paper summarizes a Doctor of Ministry project thesis conducted in 2011 that introduced healthy accountability within growth-focused relationships to shape an emergent spiritual growth culture at the Carbondale Church of Christ. The theological basis for the intervention (1) uses Romans 12 to establish the Christian community, not the individual, as the ultimate vision of fully realized human life and (2) asserts that spiritual growth, following Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a practice, must involve virtues such that the means of growth are reflective of the desired ends of growth. The positive results demonstrate the effectiveness of healthy accountability, illuminate participants' motives for growth, highlights the importance of training, and reveals the need for ministerial structures when introducing new practices.*

Context

In 2011, at the time of the project, the Carbondale Church of Christ[1] had been declining in attendance and organizational vision since 1983. Over those twenty-eight years, the leadership attempted to address the declines using managerial and program-focused approaches, with limited success. In 2008 the leadership adopted a new vision for the congregation focused on spiritual formation and becoming a "growing community." After some initial success, the new congregational strategy was beginning to stall. Before initiating the project, I evaluated the congregational context with a Bullard life cycle analysis.[2] Bullard applies organizational life cycle theory

[1] Herein referred to as CCC. This project is completely described in: Stephen Shaffer, "The Initiation of Growth-Focused Relationships Involving Healthy Accountability at the Carbondale Church of Christ," DMin thesis (Abilene Christian University, 2012). Available at: http://digital commons.acu.edu/dmin_theses/2/

[2] George Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

to congregations. His analysis identifies key characteristics associated with five discrete stages in the natural cycle of a congregation's life: early growth, late growth, prime, early aging, and late aging. Bullard asserts that all congregations naturally progress through these stages from birth to death, unless a new vision initiates a new cycle.

The CCC began in 1936 as a home gathering committed to the vision of establishing a non-instrumental Restoration movement congregation. In the 1940s, the chartering of a University and the growth of the coal industry ushered in a decade of growth indicative of Bullard's early and late growth phases. A fire in 1957 destroyed the first building, causing the congregation to remain focused upon early life cycle concerns and delaying the transition from a late growth stage to a prime stage.

The growth of the congregation during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s correlated with the expansion of coal production and university growth during the same period. The concomitant expansion of ministry programs are indicative of a congregation in the prime phase of the Bullard cycles. After reaching a peak attendance in 1983, a leadership crisis combined with the secular decline of the local coal industry halted the progress of the congregation. The lack of leadership, decline in economics, decreasing attendance, and the absence of a new vision are signs that the congregation was transitioning from a prime to an early aging life cycle phase.

Internal conflicts and the lack of elder leadership from 1983 until 1996 forced the congregation to focus on management operational concerns and less on vision. This internal focus perpetuated the life cycle progression and prevented redevelopment. A new eldership in 1996 ushered in an era of stability but failed to establish a new vision. Without a new vision, the congregation inevitably advanced deeply into the early aging phase.

Between 2004 and 2008, the congregation attempted rebirth by hiring a new minister, restarting a campus ministry, expanding the leadership, and adding small groups. Instead of fostering growth, the flurry of efforts stressed the stability culture of the organization and triggered several negative reactions.

In 2008 the leadership began to focus on a new vision for the congregation anchored in being a culture that fostered spiritual growth. The new culture involved systemic changes in teaching and preaching, adopting a shepherding model of leadership, encouraging intentional personal growth efforts, and adopting growth-focused language in the public meetings.

Problem and Purpose

By 2011, at the start of this investigation, the congregation appeared to be experiencing rebirth and, from a Bullard perspective, was in an early growth life cycle phase with a new vision of being a growth community. The emphasis on spiritual growth resulted in a revitalized interest in personal reading and prayer, but not in increasing engagement or interaction between members on the topic of growth. These observations indicated that the congregation, while beginning to grow spiritually, was pursuing growth as individuals rather than in community. While these individual efforts were laudable, they reflected the surrounding culture's emphasis on individuality and missed the quality and intensity afforded by healthy accountability.[3] The project addresses the problem of pursuing spiritual growth via individual rather than relational efforts. The purpose of this project was to initiate growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability.

Theological Framework

The theological framework of this project argues from Romans 12 that there are no Christians outside the body and that all members of the body are interrelated, interdependent, and mutually essential. Paul's body image describes something very different from our cultural familiarity with collectives such from social clubs, corporations, or even popular conceptions of congregations. Culturally, we assume that individuals assemble to form the collective. Paul's argument moves in the opposite direction. Thus, growth in the context of a body is not the process of individuals becoming a community but rather realizing the fullness of life as community.

The theological framework includes six key points: (1) Christian community, not the individual, is the vision for fully realized human potential; (2) Christian spiritual growth is a communal practice that promotes individual spiritual formation via the intensification of body life that is interrelated and mutually interdependent; (3) the perfect vision for the body results from the voluntary sacrifice of individuality for the sake of mutual interdependence; (4) it is inconsistent with the goal of realizing mutual interdependence and interrelatedness to pursue Christian spiritual growth via isolated individually focused means; (5) it is also inconsistent with the vision of community to use the community simply as a means to

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[3] The project thesis contains several references similar to and including: Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 25.

realize an independent individual identity; (6) the virtues of freedom, uniqueness, love, devotion, honor, and hope must shape the communal practice of Christian spiritual growth.

The Body in Romans 12

In Romans, Paul uses a progression of images depicting the church as a collective. While Paul's characteristic term for the collective life of the church is "body," the term body does not appear until chapter 12. Paul opens chapter 12, saying, "I urge you to present your bodies (plural) as a living sacrifice (singular)."[4] The collective people of God worship and honor God by offering up their plurality as a sacrifice of unity. It is one sacrifice, comprised of the voluntarily presented offerings of each individual's body.[5] Paul suggests that the vision of a unified body, represented by the singular sacrifice, is the result of each individual sacrificing (plural) their autonomy. The body then, not the individual, is the primary context of our life in Christ. Paul does not imagine this as simply a nice idea but something that involves both body and mind. The presented bodies (Rom 12:1, NIV) combine with a transformed mind (Rom 12:2, NIV), giving birth to a form of life that pleases God (Rom 12:1, NIV).[6] The primary challenge, as signaled by Paul's use of the eschatological phrase "pattern of this world" (12:2, NIV), is for the people of God to recognize their existence as part of the new age.[7] Like baptism (Rom 6:1f, NIV) and heart circumcision (Rom 2:29, NIV), the worship of the new community consists in ongoing sacrifice of individuality through a transformed mind to give life to a new and singular body.

In Romans 12:3-8, Paul describes the new collective, saying, "Just as each of us has one body with many members . . . in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:5, NIV). By using the biological human body as an image, Paul asserts that life in Christ involves an essential unity. This essential unity is not uniformity, but rather the result of reflecting upon our specific place, role, or function

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[4] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 36.

[5] Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 638; D. Edmond Hiebert, "Presentation and Transformation: An Exposition of Romans 12:1-2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (July-September 1994): 309-24.

[6] N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, I Corinthians*, vol. 10 of *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 704.

[7] Ibid.

within the collective body of Christ. The shift in focus is important. Paul's urging of the Romans to "think soberly" (Rom 12:3, NIV) upon God's expression of grace shifts their attention away from the human comparisons evident in earlier chapters and anchors their identity in the activity of God. This is unity resulting from the work of God rather than unity resulting from the human pursuit of a corporate objective or personal goal.

To say that the church is a body can mean several things, but Paul has a particular image for the body in mind. His image of a body is one where "each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:5, NIV). A human body is not a simple collective. It differs from other collective images such as team, corporation, or family. In these collectives, the individual members have an existence apart from the team, corporation, or family. In a human body, there is no life for the individual body parts apart from the human body. Thus, by analogy, there also is no existence as a Christian outside the "body of Christ." The body existence is the essential form of life for members of the new humanity. Paul's presentation of this bodily existence involves several notable features.

First, the body life is essential and progressive. It is essential because there is no alternative form of Christian life other than the collective body. That is the meaning of Paul's "in Christ" (Rom 12:5, NIV). At the same time, the body life of the Christian is progressive and ongoing. It requires the continuous, voluntary sacrifice of ourselves and the ongoing transformation of our minds.[8] While individual Christians exist as full "members" of the one body in Christ, they are also still moving towards a full realization via progressive transformation. This infers that spiritual growth does not lead to the creation of the body; rather spiritual growth brings about the fulfillment of what already exists in Christ. Paul punctuates this progressive aspect when he presses for the pursuit of excellence for each gift using phrases such as "If a person's gift is. . . " let them use them "generously" or "diligently" or "cheerfully." The transformation of mind results in an increasing quality or intensity of the participation of the individual member in the collective life of the body.

Second, the language of the body involves both unity and diversity. The emphasis on "one body" stresses unity while the variety of gifts presents diversity. Romans emphasizes unity. The body image in chapter 12 diverges from the popular notion of the body politic familiar to Paul's

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[8] Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 286. Witherington emphasizes that "conform," "transform," and "renewing" should all be understood with a continual and ongoing sense.

audience. Ancient rhetoric employs the theme of a body frequently to discuss matters of concern for the city or state. While these classical political theories discuss the essential nature of the city as a body, the image functions to urge unity through the proper attitude of the individual members.[9] Thus, the classic image emphasizes the goal of functioning as well as a human body, asserting the body as the ideal form for what the community could become. While Paul also employs the body image to urge unity, his argument begins with the belief that the body describes the existing real and essential shared life of the members. The formation of the body is not the result of the political activities of the members, but rather the work of the Spirit who incorporates the individuals into the singular resurrected body of Christ.[10] Accordingly, as Paul employs the image, he is not saying that the church should become a well-functioning organization but rather that the church is essentially a body and challenges them to live as they essentially are.

Third, life in the body involves the cooperative efforts of both God and the individual. God determines the distribution of gifts within the body and thus the organic organization of the body. Individuals, however, must pursue the quality and intensity of their offering of that gift for the shared life within the body.

The Process of Christian Growth in Community

Having defined the ultimate vision or perfection of Christian growth as the realization of the fullness of community, my attention now turns to the process involved in reaching that goal. If there is a goal, there is a process. The concept of a process involves two independent dimensions of time and quality.

The time dimension of a process recognizes that Christian growth is a continual, ongoing, time-sequential life of pursuing the ultimate realization of community. Hauerwas has said,

> Conversion is something never merely accomplished but remains also always in front of them. Thus, growth in the Christian life is not required only because we are morally deficient, but also because the God who has called us is

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[9] Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 157-59.

[10] N. T. Wright, *NIB* 10:710; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 255.

infinitely rich. Therefore, conversion denotes the necessity of a turning of the self that is so fundamental that the self is placed on a path of growth for which there is no end.[11]

The second aspect of a process concerns the quality and character of the activities involved in the pursuit of Christian growth and the full realization of community. For the Greeks, the virtues (*arête*) were the "qualities that cause a thing to perform its function well."[12] This means that if Christian communities are to realize their perfected potential, they must embody the qualities associated with excellent communities. They will be communities where the virtues define not just the vision of the goal but also the means of pursing the goal. It would be inconsistent with the vision of living as an interdependent and interrelated body if the process of becoming increasingly interdependent relied upon independence and autonomy. Likewise, it would be inconsistent with the vision of living as an interrelated body if the process of becoming increasingly interrelated employed only privatized personal growth efforts. MacIntyre calls processes that embody the qualities of the desired end within the activities engaged to reach that end practices.[13] His discussion of practices illuminates our understanding of Christian growth.

First, practices are complex social endeavors using a single title to refer to a collection of smaller activities associated with the practice. Football is a practice that involves several specialized activities such as passing, catching, running, blocking, etc. For our purposes, life as a Christian community is a practice that involves the activities of prayer, Bible reading, worship, evangelism, benevolence, and our culture understands the grand collection of such activities to be a coherent whole. Second, in order for an endeavor to be a practice, every activity of the practice must embody a consistent standard of excellence. We have already said that our standards of excellence for a Christian community involve the interrelated and interdependent relationships among the members of a body. Thus, the efforts employed in the pursuit of excellence as a community will involve life-as-community within each effort. Therefore, the pursuit of the perfected vision of community must involve interrelated and interdependent community relationships for growth. It is important to

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[11] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 131.

[12] Ibid., 111.

[13] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187.

clarify two possible misunderstandings of this point. First, as I have already said, one of the measures of excellence associated with the Christian community consists of their interdependent interrelationships. Consequently, it would be inconsistent with the vision of living *as* an interrelated body if the process of becoming increasingly interrelated employed only privatized personal growth efforts. Likewise, it would be inconsistent with the nature of a practice if the interrelated and interdependent relationships of the Christian body were merely means of achieving increased individualized autonomy.

MacIntyre's definition constrains the practice of Christian community to reliance upon means consistent with the visionary ends. Interestingly, MacIntyre also asserts that if the means are consistent with the ends, then the conceptualization of the practice will continually improve and advance. Thus, the conception of what it means to be an excellent Christian community will continually deepen and expand if the community is involved in those efforts necessary for achieving the goal. In other words, our Christian growth efforts employed to realize the goal of being an increasingly interrelated and interdependent community would also extend our understanding of what it means to live as an interrelated and interdependent community.

The Implementation of a Community Growth Process

The goal of Christian growth is to realize an increasingly interrelated, interdependent form of community that reflects the mutual membership of the body. In addition, the specific activities used to pursue that growth goal should be consistent with the goal itself and involve interrelated and interdependent relationships within the community. The next two sections will address practical considerations involved in pursuing the perfected community. The first section will propose growth-focused relationships as a practical means of moving toward the goal. The second section will examine several guiding virtues that arise from Paul's discussion of body life in Romans that will serve as the standards of excellence for the process.

Growth-Focused Relationships—This project focused on increasing the use of growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability as one realization of how the interrelated community engages in spiritual formation as a community. Christian communities engage in a variety of activities related to spiritual growth. The collective and shared activities of worship, the Lord's Supper, preaching, and Bible classes all involve the

community and powerfully shape the affections of individual members.[14] While these large-group activities contribute to an overall ethos of community-based growth, individuals often pursue the actual efforts of growth privately. The praxis of growth in the average congregation displays an underlying belief that isolated private individual efforts for Christian growth are all that is necessary to build the body of Christ. This assumption fails in two significant ways. First, as we have already argued, the goal of Christian growth is the realization of an interdependent and interrelated community, not simply strong individuals. Individuals who have relied upon individual and private efforts for growth are not likely to become suddenly interdependent and interrelated. This common approach imagines the wrong goal for Christian growth. Second, even if the conceptualization of goal is corrected, individual efforts are inconsistent with the practice nature of realizing the goal. Employing purely individual efforts for the realization of community divorces the goal from means consistent with the goal.

Guiding Virtues—The goal was to pursue a form of growth-focused relationship that involved a high degree of interrelationship and interdependence. While it is theoretically possible to maintain mutually interrelated and interdependent relationships with a multitude of people, from a practical perspective most people struggle to maintain such intimate relationships with a very small number of people. Since, in the present context, most people consider growth a very private topic, the involvement of even one or two people in the process would reflect a significant advancement toward our goal. As people make this move to involve others in the growth process, it is important that these relationships are guided by and reflective of the standards of excellence, or virtues associated with our community vision. How we interrelate and interdepend in the process of growth must be consistent with the goal. Romans 12 provides the virtues used to guide the growth-focused relationships. These virtues include freedom, uniqueness, love, devotion, honor, fervor, hope, patience, and faithfulness. Finally, a virtuous growth process must recognize that relationships are not simply a means of growth, but are both means and ends.[15]

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[14] Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Mathews, *Shaping the Christian Life: Worship and the Religious Affections* (Louisville: John Knox, 2006), 3-32.

[15] The project thesis contains a full description of each virtue along with corresponding vices.

Intervention

Within a culture that treats faith and personal growth as private topics, people naturally lack the experience of inviting others to participate in their growth initiatives. This project prepared a small group of people to engage in growth as a community practice by initiating growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability. The group preparation involved both a theological reorientation and an experiential praxis with the hope that the combination provided a positive foundation for ongoing expansion of the communal practice of healthy accountability and growth-focused relationships. The nature of the project intervention suggested a qualitative research approach. [16]

Format of Project Intervention

The intervention proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, I trained participant pairs using a four-hour workshop on healthy growth-focused relationships, thus changing congregational perspectives of Christian growth from an individual to a community practice. In the second phase, the trained participant pairs practiced healthy accountability on a personally selected growth topic for four weeks in a supervised praxis.

The recruiting of the eight participants involved criterion-based purposive sampling to recruit the first member of each pair and snowball sampling to recruit the second. [17] Criterion-based purposive sampling begins by determining a description of an optimum member. For this project, an optimum member was a person who was motivated to grow and who had the potential for influencing the rest of the congregation according to the purpose of this project. I recruited four initial participants, three female and one male, to serve as primary members of the intervention group using the following criteria: over age 18, regular participants of the CCC, and interested in spiritual growth. To enhance the potential that this project would expand the practice of growth relationships within the CCC, I gave priority to participants previously identified as opinion leaders in an earlier congregational study. [18]

The initial criterion-recruited participants then recruited a partner using a snowball sampling approach. Snowball sampling utilizes the

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[16] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 57.

[17] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 83-84.

[18] Stephen Shaffer, "Congregational Study of the Carbondale Church of Christ" (class project, Abilene Christian University, May 2009).

natural social network of one set of participants to access another group.[19] The application of snowball sampling in this project allowed the first set of participants to work within their own social network to link to a participant partner whom they trusted. The relational comfort of the participant pairs was critical because the project expected each pair to practice healthy accountability, an expectation that was unfamiliar or uncomfortable at the start.

All participants attended a four-hour workshop consisting of three sixty-minute sessions with intermittent breaks. The workshop provided a theological foundation framing Christian growth as a relationship practice and prepared participants for the praxis of healthy accountability. Each of the workshop sessions began with a presentation followed by a reflection exercise and concluded with a group exercise.[20]

The praxis experience lasted four weeks during which the participant pairs conducted their agreed upon healthy accountability conversations at least once per week. The accountability conversations were simple and not expected to take more than ten minutes each week. During the praxis phase, I contacted each of the participants weekly by phone to ask them several open questions about the ongoing accountability praxis. The purpose of these weekly supervision calls was to ensure that the process of accountability remained healthy and to address misunderstandings of process, procedure, and purpose.[21]

Evaluation Methodology

The goal of the evaluation was to determine the extent of initiation the participants had toward the practice of growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability. The evaluation methodology used data triangulation combining three different perspectives: an insider, an outsider, and the researcher.[22]

The insiders of this project are the participant pairs involved in the intervention. I captured their experience in the workshop and four weeks

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[19] Chaim Noy, "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11 (2008): 327–44.

[20] The project thesis contains details of the workshop contents.

[21] The use of phone conversations has become commonplace within coaching and many spiritual direction settings. The use of phone instead of face-to-face meetings, while introducing some limitations for the interpretation of body language and gesture, will enhance the rate of successfully completed conversations.

[22] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 73. Data triangulation employs three different data sources to increase the understanding of the underlying phenomena.

practicing healthy accountability via an interview. As the sole source of insider data, it was vital to capture their perspectives immediately following the fourth week of the praxis so that the details of their recollections remained clear.

Dr. Earl Lavender served as the outside expert and provided his interpretation of the groups' degree of initiation into the use of growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability via a group interview. Lavender is the executive director of the Institute for Christian Spirituality, the director of Missional Studies, and a professor in the College of Bible at Lipscomb University. Lavender provided a unique blend of academic expertise in the field of Christian spirituality with years of active involvement in church ministry.

During the intervention, I recorded field notes about my observations during the workshop, the weekly one-on-one praxis supervision calls, and throughout the intervention. These notes provided the researcher data.

Evaluation and Outcomes

Qualitative data analysis techniques guided the interpretation of the data collected from the three sources. The goal of the interpretation was not to compare before and after but rather to form a thick description of the participant community's ongoing life as seen through the lens of the project purpose. Since this project originated with the researcher's *a priori* personal experiences as a member of the same community under investigation, it was impossible to isolate my prior experiences with the congregation from those associated with this investigation. This led to the natural conclusion that the interpretation approach for this project would follow a three-phased structure.[23]

Phase 1 of the analysis captured a description of the community prior to the intervention and involved identifying a preliminary story line for the interpretation along with a tentative list of topics I expected to emerge from the study. Phase 2 of the analysis examined the insider, outsider and researcher data independently to identify patterns and themes. In phase 3, the analysis compared and contrasted the data from the three perspectives. The following section summarizes the themes from the phase 2 analysis. The project thesis discusses the phase 3 results.

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[23] This is an abductive process as described in Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 171.

Researcher Data Findings

The researcher data generated five themes summarized below.

Motives for growth—Participants expressed their motives for growth with the vocabulary of want, need, and should. Those who expressed growth in the language of a need often expressed concerns of "not doing enough" or "not living up to God's will," or the need to "work harder." This basic, morally-focused, expression of the motive for Christian growth lacks any explicit recognition of the bodily nature of the church.

Desire for relationship—Participants viewed the inclusion of others in their process of growth positively, believing they would (a) reach their goals easier, and (b) build a close relationship.

Expectations about progress—Participants expected to make progress and were often dismayed that they failed to be successful reaching their goal. When they failed, they tended to blame themselves. Their internalized perception of personal failure often failed to account for unexpected circumstances, their own unrealistic expectations, or their discounting of the progress they had actually achieved.

Effectiveness of accountability—Participants all expressed that the healthy accountability applied in the praxis phase was effective and important in helping them make progress toward their growth goals.

The impact of the particular form of accountability—The healthy accountability employed in the praxis limited the accountability conversations to allowing their partner to ask them one or two questions that they designed themselves during the workshop. Participants acknowledged that this process insured that the conversations remained positive and healthy, but the procedure also limited and hampered free-flow relational exchanges.

Insider Data Findings

The insider data generated seven themes summarized below.

The goal to become Christ-like—When asked for their view of the goal of Christian growth, most participants expressed that goal using the phrases "to become like Christ" or "become what God wants me to be" as opposed to fulfilling God's mission or realizing the ultimate aim of being body.

Interest in relationships—The participants frequently mentioned both the importance and desirability of involving others in relationships focused on growth. Most expressed that these growth-focused relationships quell loneliness, providing encouragement, strength, and support for the journey of growth. Contrary to the idea that people prefer to grow independently,

this theme indicates that these participants prefer relationship so long as those relationships are virtuous.

Importance of virtue—Repeatedly the participants express the importance of virtue within accountability relationships. They consistently identify criticism, blame, guilt, shame, advising, and instructing as conversational vices to avoid.

Importance of mutuality—Participants spontaneously expressed that healthy accountability relationships needed to be mutual relationships where partners were accountable to one another.

Effectiveness of accountability—Participants expressed that healthy accountability was effective for helping them focus on their chosen growth goals.

Importance of training—Comments stressed the importance of the initial training workshop for keeping accountability healthy and positive. The structured conversation process provided a helpful formality that kept the conversations from devolving into guilt- or shame-based patterns.

Importance of structure—The participants indicated that they found it easier to practice the weekly discipline because their practice was part of a formal study, or group structure. My weekly supervision calls introduced a double accountability layer that aided their practice. This double accountability finding offers great insight for ministry practice.

Outsider Data Findings

The outsider data generated three themes summarized below.

Positive experience of the praxis—The outsider noted the participants' positive opinions of accountability as conducted in the praxis and taught in the workshop.

Impact on relationships—The outside observer noted that the participants strengthened their relationships with one another and they viewed this deepening of relationship as an important part of the practice.

Importance of training and structures—Repeatedly the outside observer referenced the importance that the participants placed on the initial training and the conversational structures used in the praxis phase. While they enthusiastically embraced the practice and the possible expansion to include others, they insisted that all future participants be trained in the workshop material.

Summary of Data Sources

The three data sources generated fifteen themes demonstrating the participants initiation into growth-focused relationships that resulted in

personal growth, strengthening of relationships, and the practice of virtues. In addition, the data triangulation contributed to significant insights related to the participants' motives and goals for growth, their interest in relationships, and the importance of training and structures associated with new practices. In total, the findings offer substantial contributions to the life of the congregation.

Discussion

The theological foundation of this study used Paul's image of a body in Romans 12 as an essential depiction of the essential reality of the body of Christ. The inherently interrelated and interdependent qualities of a body were contrasted with the culturally prevailing collectives of groups, teams, and corporations. These cultural collectives prioritize individual existence above interdependence and imagine the collective experience as an enhancement to the individual pursuits rather than vice-versa. Combining the Romans 12 understanding of the interrelated and interdependent body with the idea of a practice led me to conclude that the correction to the present anemic understanding of community would involve both teaching and experience. Thus it would be impossible to reach the goal of an interdependent and interrelated community by simply focusing on the cognitive understandings of community. In order to understand what it means to live as community, the community must experience interrelated and interdependent practices. This project demonstrated the validity of this premise. As the discussion of the findings revealed, the praxis participants increased their level of interdependence and interrelationship by involving others in the growth process. Their positive comments about the relationships, coupled with their experience of progress toward their growth goals, confirmed the positive conclusion. While they could not articulate their experience using the language of a practice, they, nevertheless, incrementally extended their understanding of living in a body through their mutual involvement with each other in growth-focused efforts.

The earlier theological discussion argued that the praxis of growth in the average congregation revealed an underlying belief in the sufficiency of isolated private efforts for Christian growth. This assumption, I argued, fails in two significant ways. First, the assumption fails by selecting the wrong goal for growth. The common error is imagining the goal of Christian growth to be strong individual Christians rather than an interrelated and interdependent community. Second, even if the errant goal is corrected, individual efforts are inconsistent with the practice nature of

realizing the body goal. Employing individual efforts for the realization of community places the "goods" of the process external to the "means." The findings of this project indicate that most of the participants continue to express the goal of Christian growth in individual terms using common phrases such as "become Christ-like." The teaching presented in the workshop phases was insufficient to change this deeply embedded belief. This negative finding is consistent with a group that is only beginning to conceptualize Christian growth in relational terms. MacIntyre's definition of a practice asserted that true practices systematically extend the understanding of the practice. Applying this definition, I would expect that the continued application of growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability would, over time, shift the understanding of the goals for Christian growth. Negative experiences with growth-focused relationships threaten this systematic extension and elevate the importance of procedural structures that limit negative occurrences during the formative stages.

The initial story line of this project was to reframe the theological importance of the body away from a simple collective and toward an interrelated, interdependent body through a combination of teaching and praxis. I hoped that this combined intervention would result in the participants' becoming increasingly motivated to involve others in their personal spiritual growth efforts. The findings confirm that the workshop's teaching and the positive praxis experience have indeed increased the likelihood that these participants will continue to involve others in their Christian growth efforts.

One final assumption made within the project needs examination. The project assumed that the prevailing emphasis on privatized growth originated from the surrounding cultural emphasis on individuality and independence. I asserted that this cultural disposition, combined with latent anxieties associated with unhealthy accountability, inhibited communal forms of Christian growth. The findings confirm the presence of significant anxieties associated with negative experiences of relational growth contexts such as guilt, shame, and control. The participants expressed these anxieties in indirect ways, stressing the need for training and process structures. Thus I conclude that there is a prevailing predisposition for individualized growth efforts and that this predisposition is related to latent anxieties that involving others in growth efforts would increase feelings of shame, guilt, or inadequacy. Some of the findings indicate that the anxieties may originate from dissatisfaction with

self and only expressed as a fear of others. However, there are insufficient findings from the study to isolate the source of this predisposition.

This project sought to encourage the burgeoning congregational interest in spiritual growth and steer the emerging efforts away from the default individualism using growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability. The results confirm that the study participants had previously been inhibited from involving others in their growth efforts because they feared that these relationships would increase guilt, shame, and embarrassment. The form of accountability introduced in the praxis overcame their hesitations, enhanced their peer-partner relationships, and intensified their growth efforts. The combined theological and experiential approach used in the praxis has increased their inclination to involve others in their ongoing growth efforts. Their initiation, with the help of ongoing congregational support structures, provides a foundation for growth-focused relationships involving healthy accountability to permeate the congregation over time.

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