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Extending Story Listening as a Practice of Communal Formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

This doctor of ministry thesis presents the results of a project that explores the potential for extending a practice of story listening as a way of forming community across social circles at the Lake Orion Church of Christ in Lake Orion, Michigan. The intervention involved guiding a group of six participant-researchers, each of whom had previous experience in story listening, through six sessions in the fall of 2011. Each phase of the project was informed by a participatory social Trinitarian theology. The first three sessions were designed to empower participant-researcher pairs to facilitate story listening groups of four to five people from different social levels in the congregation. After the first three sessions, the pairs facilitated three weekly meetings of their own story listening groups. The final three sessions were designed for reflection, employing insights from grounded theory and hermeneutic phenomenology to assess the week's experiences within each story listening group and to discover the emerging theory regarding the potential of story listening at the Lake Orion Church. Evaluation of the project revealed three key insights: (1) story listening leads to solidarity, both by connecting individuals to others and by shattering the judgmental assumptions and preconceptions listeners have about others; 2) listening is vital to communal formation; 3) story listening levels the social playing field in the group and exposes the myth of closeness that persists in congregations.

EXTENDING STORY LISTENING
AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION
AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis prescribes a ministry intervention to address a congregational need for communal relationship formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ.¹ The intent behind this project is to extend a practice of story listening more deeply into the congregation and thereby to develop a grounded theory concerning the connection between shared story, listening, and communal formation at LOCC. Chapter 1 introduces the project with an ethnographic description of the general history of the congregation, including recent transitions within the congregational membership and leadership that contributed to this project; an analysis of the current congregational focus; and a clarification of the problem, purpose, assumptions, definitions, and delimitations affecting the project. Chapter 2 outlines the operative theological framework undergirding the project. Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach to the project by describing the intervention format, participants, sessions, and methods of evaluation. Chapter 4 describes and evaluates the results of the project. Finally, chapter 5 concludes the thesis by discussing the project's implications for ministry, issues of internal and external validity, and areas for future consideration that emerged from this project.

¹ Hereinafter also referred to as "LOCC."

Title of Project

The project's title, "Extending Story Listening as a Practice of Communal Formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ," captures four important elements of the project. First, the term "communal" suggests that the practice does not primarily target the individual but focuses instead on the formation of the greater congregational community. While the parameters of this project did not include the use of story listening within the context of the entire congregation, the focus and impact of the practice itself and the emerging theory always have communal ends in view. Second, the term "practice" identifies the intentional and potentially ongoing experience of listening as a response to the current situation of this particular community. The term "extending" highlights the fact that the particular practice envisioned in this project builds upon a previous story-listening experience with a small group within the congregation. Finally, the term "story listening" captures the dialogical/dialectical nature of the practice. Story assumes a particular narrative accounting of an individual's life, shared with others who create space in their lives to listen. In this way, the community receives both the story and the storyteller. The theological rationale in chapter 2 examines this practice of sharing and receiving one another through story through both its roots in and its reflection of the life of the triune God. Story listening is crucial for the cultivation of a community that honors the particularity of persons and their stories, while drawing individuals into deeper communion with one another.

Ethnographic History of LOCC

Around 160 people gather weekly at the Lake Orion Church of Christ. Despite little racial diversity, a range of other demographic groups contributes to a growing sense of diversity in a congregation that historically has eschewed highlighting differences. On any given Sunday, people with very different stories and situations gather for worship: young and old, union members and corporate executives, highly educated professors or professionals and men and women with minimal formal education. Some have deep roots in the Churches of Christ, and others come from different denominational (primarily Catholic) backgrounds or from no religious background at all. Although the congregation thrived for decades as a small assembly with tight connections, transitions in the recent past have exposed three distinct social levels within the congregation's interconnectivity. These transitions have left the congregation poised for a positive rethinking of these social groupings and for relational transformation in the church community.

1950s-1960s: A Neighborhood Church Plant

The Lake Orion congregation was born nearly sixty years ago in north Oakland County, Michigan. In 1955, several local families began meeting for Tuesday evening Bible studies in the home of Ralph Darnall.² While a man named Brother Truax led the Bible studies, the Darnalls were the linchpin that held the

² The information in the following sections was collected from a congregational process of appreciative inquiry from 2007 and from ethnographic research. Garth Pleasant, a former minister at LOCC, gathered much of the history from 1955-1980 through conversations with Wilma Darnall, Lenzie Waggoner, Nancy Mercer, and Bob and Marge Norton.

congregation together in its early days. When Hiland and Etta Waggoner were baptized in early 1956, the group outgrew the Darnalls' home. In August 1956 the group began to meet in a theatre in downtown Lake Orion.

Shortly thereafter, in 1957, the burgeoning congregation purchased the property where LOCC still meets today. Initially, they met in a modest house on the property. A few years later Ralph Darnall drew up plans for a new building. Men from the congregation who worked the evening shift in the automobile industry then spent their days constructing the small building on the property. In December 1967 the congregation met for the first time in what long-term congregants remember as the "white building," just south of the current LOCC building.

Shortly after completing the building, several men in the congregation hired a minister named Brother Kennedy to "straighten the church out." They were worried at the time that the women were "running the church" and they needed a stronger preaching presence. Later, four men who thought that Kennedy was using Scripture to support certain unbiblical positions fired him without the knowledge or support of the rest of the congregation. They did, however, allow him to continue living for three months in the minister's house that was located on the property. In the wake of the firing, the congregation split. For those three months one half of the church met with him in the parsonage while the other half met in the church building. This story from the foundational history of LOCC suggests that some of the habits of conflict mismanagement and divisiveness that occurred in the later history are woven early into the fabric of the congregation.

1960s-1990s: Growth of a Family Church

A pivotal moment in LOCC's history occurred in 1977. Five new families moved to the area and visited the congregation (Mike and Karen Burstein, Bob and Nancy Mercer, Al and Brenda Warner, Bob and Marge Norton, and Jerry and Virginia Ebling). An elderly member named Sister Bostwick located the Nortons' address, drove to their farmhouse, and asked them to teach the young adult class at the congregation even though there were no young adults and only one man regularly attending the congregation at that time. The five families came together and agreed to commit one year to the Lake Orion Church of Christ. After that year, four of the families stayed at the congregation. The church grew as these families opened up their homes and invited people to become a part of this small, family church.

During this period, a number of part-time ministers served the church successively, including Royce Dickenson Jr. and Garth Pleasant, who began his work with LOCC in January 1980. In 1982 the congregation constructed a modest building on the property, consisting of an auditorium and a few small classrooms. As with the "white house," members of the congregation completed much of the construction on the new building.

By 1980, LOCC had thirty-five to forty members. One member from that period said, "We did a lot of fellowship activities all together, both inside and outside of worship. Because we were so small, we really knew each other. . . . We had all ages of members and everyone felt needed and part of a 'family.'"³ Another member

³ "2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project: The Calling, Vision, and Dreams of the Lake Orion Church of Christ."

said, “Church activities and the people at the church were our lives.”⁴ One young father, who has attended LOCC since he was a child, reminisced, “because of the smaller environment, we were able to connect with each other and know everyone and be active in people’s lives.”⁵

During the 1980s LOCC developed several habits and practices that nurtured the family environment and the closeness of the congregation. In the spring of 1980, members hosted their first annual “Super Sunday,” which they called “Reach Out Sunday.” This became an important tradition for the congregation. For years after that the congregation would divide into “Blue” and “Red” teams and compete to see which team could get the most visitors to attend. The losing team cooked dinner for the winning team. While “the competition was fierce,” it served a vital role in community formation.⁶

In addition to the annual “Super Sundays,” several regular practices reinforced the closeness of the community. At the beginning of worship services, the minister would read “Kindness Notes” from a box in the foyer. Each note began “I like [name] because . . . ,” followed by a reason the writer appreciated that person. The “Kindness Notes” were supplemented by “Love Lines,” simple postcards on which members could write notes of encouragement to mail directly to another member. During this period, the two sections of the auditorium would turn and face each other while

⁴ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

⁵ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

⁶ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.” Reflecting on the Super Sundays, Garth Pleasant said, those were “great days. The members just kept coming together.”

singing during worship, rather than “singing to the backs of each others’ heads.” Members started a Vacation Bible School. They regularly met at homes for “card groups” that played, prayed, and fellowshiped together, and for “fireside chats,” times for fellowship around tables and campfires.⁷ These practices helped reinforce and achieve the informal congregational goal, namely to help people feel the closeness and connection of a family, “to be a part of us.”⁸ During this season, what would become the “core family” of the congregation began to develop and solidify.⁹

By the late 1980s, LOCC had doubled in size to approximately eighty members. The congregation continued to grow slowly but steadily through the early and mid 1990s, reaching around 135 members just before the turn of the millennium. The slow, steady growth during that period enabled the congregation to integrate people deeply into its life over time. Much, but not all, of the growth came from people who had deep roots within the congregation, especially family members or friends transitioning to LOCC from other congregations. These two factors contributed to keeping a small, close-knit sense of family at LOCC, even though the congregation was growing.

2000-2010: Growth, Transition, and Social Circles

The turn of the millennium marked an important season of growth and transition for the congregation. Members created much-needed extra space for

⁷ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

⁸ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

⁹ “Core family” is a technical term used in this thesis to describe the central social group of a congregation. See n. 20 for clarification of the model used.

worshippers by removing a portable partition that separated the auditorium from the fellowship hall and setting up folding chairs for the overflow. During this time, two events served as mile markers of this transition: the March 2000 hiring of Randy Speck to serve part-time as the congregation's youth minister and the major building addition project of October 2001.

As the congregation began to grow numerically, members sensed the need for a larger space to accommodate the changes. They decided to remain on the original property, converting and expanding the building they had constructed in 1982. Once again, members of the congregation at that time did nearly all the work for the addition. The partnership the congregation shared during this process shaped the congregation deeply. Ken Mitchell, a former LOCC elder, said, "The new building brought us all together. Everyone was a part, had a distinct purpose, and worked together."¹⁰ One member who joined LOCC in 1989 said that he "felt most alive when able to help during the construction of the auditorium."¹¹

In the final stages of construction, families and individuals wrote favorite passages and blessings under "the spots for their seats" in the new auditorium. This symbolic act continues to give that particular group in the congregation a deep sense of ownership over the life and function of the church.¹² One member who still looks

¹⁰ "2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project."

¹¹ "2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project."

¹² John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 26. Inge's work on the relationships among God, a community, and a place is very helpful in understanding this situation. Inge rightly notes the "human hunger for a sense of place" (35) that is satiated by virtue of familiarity with that place. The symbolic acts

back on that occasion as vital for her experience at LOCC says, “What an impact to walk every Sunday upon all the Scriptures that were written!”¹³

For some, though, the construction of the building serves as a negative mile marker in the congregation’s life. One former member said, “I wish that I could feel the closeness that we had at one time—before we added on—that was a turning point.”¹⁴ For another member, the memory of the addition actually carried her back to a different era in the congregation. She said, “I want us to be more like the church in the ‘white building.’ Our closeness for each other was so strong. The atmosphere and relationships were wonderful. We were smaller in size but with lots of love. I’m more comfortable with a smaller size.”¹⁵ These retrospective comments point to a sense of loss felt by some members as the close family experience changed with the numerical growth of the congregation.

These two changes, the positional change of a new minister joining the staff and the physical change of the new building, stand as markers beginning a difficult season in the life of the congregation. On the one hand, they signal a season of significant numerical growth, during which the congregation grew from just over one hundred members to nearly 170 in about five years. Much of this growth resulted

of constructing the building and signing the floor of the auditorium gives a certain “sweat equity” to the feeling of ownership for those who participated. However, its symbolic value in connecting those members to the space also excludes and alienates those who come later. The latecomers continue to “hunger for a sense of place.”

¹³ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

¹⁴ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

¹⁵ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.”

from families transplanting to LOCC from other local congregations. Many of these transplants were dissatisfied with some aspect of the life or leadership at their former congregations.¹⁶ Ironically, the speed of the growth made it difficult for the congregation to continue to feel like a “family congregation,” resulting in the development of palpable social groups or levels within the congregation and creating dissatisfaction at LOCC.

Congregations often negotiate balancing the poles—intimacy and closeness versus openness and welcome.¹⁷ While both are important aspects of congregational life and mission, LOCC tended to focus on the former. The congregation regularly advocated outreach and numerical growth, yet in practice members fiercely guarded the deep sense of community they shared together.¹⁸ As a smaller congregation, they

¹⁶ Historically, most numerical growth at the congregation is biological or transfer of membership. Recently, though, a number of strangers, including young singles and several single mothers, have started attending LOCC gatherings.

¹⁷ Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 73-90. In this section, Beck considers the profound psychological tensions inherent in making missional choices in congregations. He explores the categories of love and boundaries in a way that relates closely to the ideas of intimacy and openness used here. He concludes, “Calls for embrace, hospitality, or solidarity will flounder if churches are not attentive to the psychological dynamics governing these experiences. Calls for love and community are all well and good, but churches often undermine these efforts by failing to help their members navigate their psychological experiences of purity and holiness” (89).

¹⁸ Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2004), 79-81. This is a typical experience of what Galindo defines as “Family-Size” congregations. While at this time LOCC fit numerically into his category of “Shepherding-Size” congregation, they still functioned in many ways as a “Family-Size” church due to the deep familial and historical bonds members shared. One now-former member highlighted this tension when she said, “I wish we were smaller and that we would reach out to the people within the church more than the community” (“2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project”).

had been able to nurture deep relationships over time. During seasons of slow but steady growth, new members integrated more naturally into the congregational family. This season of rapid growth, however, did not allow time for the communal formation or the establishment of deep relationships necessary to help the congregation navigate differences of preference and opinion that would surface in subsequent years.¹⁹

In the wake of the period of growth in the early 2000s, the congregation entered into several years of conflict and transition, beginning in 2005. This season of growth, conflict, and transition has deeply shaped the current congregational composition. A strong central core group is deeply connected, both emotionally and socially. Many of the people have a long history with one another and form the “family,” or “original gang,” as some have called them, of the congregation.²⁰ This group maintains an implicit, often explicit, power over the congregation and the decisions made in the church community.

¹⁹ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.” One member highlighted the growing sense of this loss of closeness when she said, “My first ten years [1993-2003] were the best times. I knew everybody.”

²⁰ Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon, 2006), 77-78. Keifert’s concentric model of social groups is helpful and formative for this project. He suggests that congregations typically consist of three different social groups. Moving outward from the smallest, he labels them family, inside strangers, and outside strangers. The “family,” at the heart of the congregation, communicates, recruits, and makes decisions. “Inside strangers” attend regularly but generally do not feel ownership as the family. “Outside strangers” are the “persons who, when they enter the gathered community, are clearly outsiders.”

Many of the families that came during the period of rapid growth have never felt welcomed into the inner family.²¹ While official membership in the congregation historically has been encouraged and granted easily, some people feel that inclusion into the core life of the congregation is difficult. During this period of time, little intentional space was created for new members to come into deep communion with others. Many people remain strangers to one another, though they have been in the same community for some time. This fragmented experience helps explain why many have remained inside strangers, members on the periphery of LOCC, hesitant to commit to full participation in the life of the congregation, even though they attend worship gatherings regularly.²²

The relational and theological fragmentation has also created a sense of multiple churches meeting in the same building. An increase in social, economic, educational, and theological diversity accompanied the growth at LOCC, providing an interesting mixture of perspectives, which could potentially offer a good foundation for relationship, dialogue, and growth. Unfortunately, rather than embrace others in their particularity, many have closed themselves off from others relationally because of their differences. One member of the core family recently confessed to

²¹ By the summer of 2010, many of these families, feeling unsatisfied as inside strangers, had made the decision to leave LOCC quietly, having never felt fully welcomed into the family.

²² Inge, 124-25. Inge suggests that places “develop their own story as a result of human experience in them,” something akin to developing a “personality.” If a particular subset of the congregation has greater ownership over the experiences, then they have a unique impact in shaping the story and, therefore, the personality of the congregation. One ongoing challenge for missional transformation will be for the worshipping community to create open and shared experiences to become a “place” for all.

me, “I think one of our real challenges is that we don’t know each other well.” His confession points to a significant problem. If individuals have not created space in their lives to know and be known by others, then it is easy for them to view people primarily as an opposing position when disagreements surface.

This was indeed LOCC’s experience from 2005-2009. In the wake of the growth, the congregation was ill prepared to handle or navigate relationally a period of successive conflicts and controversies that followed. These conflicts resulted in another season of transition in the congregation, affecting both the membership and the leadership. As tensions surfaced over who contributed to the shaping of the congregation’s life and experience, a number of the families that came during the growth in the early 2000s quietly left the congregation, while some others who had been at LOCC from well before that period left as well.

For example, in May of 2009, some inside strangers began to raise questions and concerns over the influence and power the central group held over the congregation.²³ One member who joined Lake Orion at the beginning of this period of growth confessed her feeling that the “‘older gang’ assumes that no one ‘new’ should have input into change.” She went on to describe a conversation with a member of the core family, during which she discovered that “the feeling is that newcomers [are] new. . . . They knew what they were getting when they came.” Her pressing questions

²³ See Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 29. Keifert rightly suggests, “The extended family can become a small clique that establishes the norms for worship; its needs and interests become the focus of worship. For the inner circle, worship therefore seems very warm, open, and intimate. To other members, it appears exclusive.”

to me were, “How long do you have to be here before you have a say? Who owns the congregation?”

The congregation also experienced transition in its leadership. This started in early 2006 when the entire eldership resigned. Strongly encouraged by a group of men from within the congregation, the eldership disbanded and allowed a new elder selection process to occur. Two years later another elder selection process resulted in the reaffirmation of the current elders and the addition of four new elders. Shortly after the process was completed, the reaffirmed elders both stepped down for personal reasons.

The eldership transitions have been mirrored by ministry team transitions. LOCC survived for years with only part-time ministers until I joined the ministry staff as the congregation’s first full-time minister in 2004. In November 2009 the congregation’s longest tenured preaching minister resigned after serving part-time for nearly thirty years, followed by the resignation of the youth minister in early 2010, after ten years of part-time service. After several months of discernment during the summer of 2011, my family made the difficult decision that it was time for us to transition out of ministry at LOCC.²⁴ I discussed a transition plan with the elders over the course of several weeks in September 2011 and announced the plan to the congregation on October 9, 2011. I continued serving the congregation until the end of January 2012.

²⁴ My transition conversations and planning did not impede my ability to initiate or complete this project thesis intervention. I was, however, concerned about the potential impact of my decision to catalyze the Hawthorne Effect among the participants. See the discussion on the Hawthorne Effect below, pages 122-23.

Current Church Situation and Focus: A Church in Revitalization

LOCC entered the new decade as a church in need of revitalization. The congregation needed to discern ways to partner in the mission of God, to discover a new congregational identity, and to rework congregational organization and interrelation. While the conflicts and transitions of the 2000s have in many ways reinforced the social levels within the congregation, they have also helped elucidate the problem, creating new possibilities for connection and communal formation within the congregation.

By the summer of 2010, a new ministry staff had been created, several of whom emerged from within the congregation. The team consisted of one full-time associate/spiritual formation minister and five part-time ministers: two preaching ministers, a youth ministry couple, and a children's minister. In addition, the current eldership was reaffirmed in June 2011. As mentioned above, in October 2011 I announced to the congregation that I would be transitioning out of ministry at LOCC. While this decision undoubtedly contributed to some temporary instability in the leadership, I was convinced that a transition was needed in order to achieve long-term stability in a leadership that is not so dependent on part-time ministry staff. By solidifying a stable leadership presence in the congregation, LOCC creates more potential to reimagine its common life.

Currently two vital facets of congregational life nourish this potential:

Mission: Possible (MP) and small groups. Mission: Possible, an annual local mission event, began in 2006. During the first week in August, the congregation immerses itself in the community, doing a wide range of projects and activities that require a

variety of gifts and skills. This variety allows a large portion of the congregation to participate. Many members even choose to reside on the LOCC property during Mission: Possible, living in classrooms in the building or bringing tents or campers to the campus. In the recent past MP has been the most vital shared communal activity in the congregation. Yet even something that provides as many opportunities for service as MP has the potential to reinforce social groupings and levels. The planning team for MP is composed mostly of people from the “core family.” Also, most people who stay at the building during the week of MP find themselves closer to the center of the congregation’s life.

Small groups, likewise, have had an important role in communal formation at LOCC. Several small groups have been meeting for a number of years. Those longstanding groups tend to deepen relationships that had already been strengthened over time, while inviting only a few new people into them. In general, small groups at LOCC have done as much to reinforce social levels within the congregation as mitigate them.²⁵

An additional factor contributes significantly to congregational formation: heavy reliance on part-time ministers historically has shaped the congregational ethos deeply, building the climate of a part-time congregation. Shortly after I arrived at LOCC, one member told me, “Part-time pastors have nurtured a part-time church.” In

²⁵ “2007 Appreciative Inquiry Project.” As one of her “three wishes for the future of our church,” one inside stranger concluded, “Break the cliques, and break the long standing small groups. People need to reach out to others that they aren’t so close to and *make new strong relationships!*” (emphasis original). While this is an older quotation, the general sentiment persists among many inside strangers in the congregation.

some ways this part-time ethos makes it challenging for people to grow in their depth of relationships with one another.²⁶ Little formal activity occurs throughout the week, though many members will respond quickly to help someone in need. Some families meet together socially on a regular basis, but most of them are a part of the deeply connected core of longer-term members and those close to them. This situation unintentionally reinforces the boundary between the family and inside strangers. One inside stranger recently described LOCC as a “last minute church.” He was highlighting the role particular informal and flexible ministries at LOCC play in defining boundaries. Though important, by their nature these ministries exclude many by primarily involving only those who can respond spontaneously to requests.

This brief snapshot of the congregational life at LOCC underscores the systemic disconnection between social circles in the congregation. At least some members sense that a close-knit and inward-focused inner fellowship circle is becoming calcified in its exclusiveness. This experience and tension suggests a struggle to embrace a robust ecclesiology reflective of the Trinity. Rather than exhibiting the virtues and habits of welcome and embrace, of creating space in oneself or one’s community for others, congregants within the family tend to remain in long-established but enclosed relations within the family. Others-centered openness and community-forming love give way to a community of one’s own comfort and preference.

²⁶ It is important to point out that the flexibility of time can also provide a great opportunity and some open space for people to share life with one another. Since LOCC is not an over-programmed congregation, it gives freedom for participation with others outside of church-sponsored activities.

This challenge has become increasingly poignant recently. Over the past year, a number of strangers have started visiting LOCC. Most have little or no direct connection with the congregation. They were not explicitly invited to come. They do not have family or close friends here. Several are single parent-families. One is an engaged couple; another a woman and her developmentally challenged, thirty year-old nephew who received help during an MP; another a young professional in his late thirties. Their presence has opened a door for the congregation to rethink what it means to welcome strangers more fully as a way to rediscover LOCC's identity in the mission of God. Once outside strangers, these people are quickly becoming new inside strangers. They come bringing stories that we do not know, and there can be no illusion that they know the stories of others at LOCC. But their lives are beginning to merge with the community like tributaries running into the larger stream of the congregation.

Their presence has helped the congregation begin to discover the ways in which we all remain strangers to one another, in spite of how we might arrange various social circles. As new inside strangers join LOCC, the relational disconnection within the congregation becomes more palpable. In March 2011 the elders commissioned a team of members, both family and inside strangers, to reflect together on the opportunities and threats facing the congregation. Not surprisingly, the group discerned the lack of deep relational connections as one of the primary challenges.

This ethnographic analysis of the congregation made evident the crisis of disconnection facing LOCC, manifested in three identifiable ways or areas. First, a

historical myth of closeness has operated in the core family of the congregation. Although most members of this congregational circle have known each other for decades, and many are related, it became apparent in the process of evaluating the congregation that their relationships are based on common experiences and social interaction, but include little deep sharing of their lives or stories. Second, within the last decade there have been at least two significant moments of conflict in the congregation. Little has been done to facilitate reconciliation, so those divisions persist, even if latently. Third, there is a fairly strong sense of disconnect between the family and inside strangers, which has been made evident and exacerbated by the recent addition of new inside strangers.

Statement of the Problem/Opportunity

As the Lake Orion Church of Christ experienced a season of rapid growth beginning in the early 2000s, it became increasingly difficult for members to develop deep relationships with one another, leading to a lack of meaningful community within the congregation. During this transitional growth, three basic levels of social groups began to emerge within the congregation: “core family,” “established inside strangers,” and “new inside strangers.” Recent expansion in the middle group means it now includes many who are newer in addition to a number of people who have been at LOCC for some time.

Six years of congregational conflict, flux, and transition have rearranged the composition of the congregation. Both the ministry staff and eldership look very different than they did a decade ago. Significant change in the membership of the congregation has caused fluctuation within the social circles of both the core family

and the inside strangers. These transitions open the possibility of pursuing and living out a new vision of congregational life that reflects more fully the social relationality of the triune God.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this project is to extend a replicable practice of story listening into the Lake Orion Church of Christ, to elucidate the impact of this experience in cultivating communal formation, and to develop grounded theory regarding story listening and formation at LOCC. I will empower and partner with the planning group to facilitate the emerging learning, based upon the ethos of an open and participatory Trinitarianism.

This project builds on exciting possibilities experienced during a recent listening project entitled: “The Development of a Participatory Theology and Practice of Listening.”²⁷ For that project, I gathered a small group composed of core family members and newer and established inside strangers for an experience of story listening. The group gathered for a one-day retreat, to share and to listen to one another’s stories. The insights gained during that project greatly influenced the development of the current project. This intervention builds on the previous project by utilizing the group that shared in that experience as facilitators and field observers for additional story listening groups at LOCC.

²⁷ Eric Magnusson, “The Development of a Participatory Theology and Practice of Listening: An Intervention for Missional Transformation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ” (unpublished paper for BIBM719, Abilene Christian University Graduate School of Theology, 2011).

Basic Assumptions

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to clarify two basic assumptions operating in the development of this project. First, an understanding of the Trinity informs and enhances the experience of communal life by intentionally expanding reflection upon the *imago Dei* from a purely individual focus to a communal focus. Understanding the relationality inherent in the social model of the Trinity helps us develop a theological anthropology for a community of faith that highlights the social and interdependent characteristics of individuality.²⁸

The second assumption is that story plays a vital role in the lives of individuals, relationships, and a community. Communities and individuals order their lives around the particular stories that they tell about themselves, others, and the world. They understand their lives in relation to the ways they narrate their own stories. Interpersonal relationships, therefore, are deeply impacted by the sharing and receiving of stories.

Definitions

Practice: “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental needs and conditions of humanity and all creation in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Christ Jesus.”²⁹

²⁸ See, for example, the helpful reflection on the correlation between the Trinity and the ecclesial community in Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

²⁹ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Way of Thinking about a Way of Life,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 2nd ed.; ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 204. See also their extended discussion of this definition in “A

This basic definition of practice captures a number of important facets of practice as understood in this project. First, Christian practices are normed internally by the Christian story and tradition, but also in responsive relationship to God. In other words, Christian belief and practice are in a dialogical relationship and mutually inform each other.³⁰ Second, coherence between the ends and means of a practice results in the end goals of the practice being realized at least partially in the carrying out of the practice. Finally, practices are socially established and cooperative activities that may be developed and extended over time in response to the developing experience and needs of the people in a particular Christian community.

Story Listening: Story listening is a practice of communal formation that involves the sharing of individuals' stories and their reception by others.³¹ Story listening is based on a narrative-relational ontology, which assumes that relationality is at the core of what it means to be human. Relationality finds its pinnacle in shared narrative. Humans tell stories as a primary vehicle for establishing and sustaining both individual (one-on-one) and communal relationships.³² This presupposes that

Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 13-32.

³⁰ David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayers and Gareth Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 223. When describing the connection between Trinitarian belief and practice, Cunningham concludes, “Particular practices help to form us in the trinitarian virtues . . . , but the virtues help direct us toward specific forms of practice as well.”

³¹ The actual practice of story listening employed in this project will be described more fully in chapter 3.

³² Catherine M. Wallace, “Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation,” *AThR* 81 (1999): 42. Wallace highlights the role of narrative in a relational ontology

storytelling is one of the primary ways in which people give meaning to their lives and structure and understand their experiences.³³ Not only do stories have the power to stabilize both life and experience, they also unsettle lives and social realities by shaping relationships and inviting a reevaluation and reinterpretation of an individual's or community's experience.³⁴

Story listening for the purpose of communal formation requires two elements. First, the story. For the purposes of this project, story is a particular narrative accounting of an individual's life. It is self-ordered, but also has been influenced in its construction and ongoing development by experience and by the other stories that one uses to structure those experiences, as well as by the primary narrative world of the community.³⁵ Story is personal and particular and is, therefore, a primary source of relational formation when it is freely shared and received. The reception—or listening—provides the other necessary element. Listening is an activity by which people open or create space in their life to receive another. When relationality is construed and ordered narratively, listening becomes a vital aspect of ontological and communal formation.

when she suggests, “We belong to the stories that hold us, which are the stories that we hear from or with the people who matter to us the most” (41).

³³ Richard Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” *Int* 38 (1984): 32-33.

³⁴ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 19. Anderson and Foley rightly suggest, “Telling stories is the way to be human. Even as we create our stories, we are at the same time being shaped by the stories we fashion.”

³⁵ Janet K. Ruffing, “Spiritual Identity and Narrative: Fragmentation, Coherence, and Transformation,” *Spiritus* 12 (2012): 66-69.

Delimitations

For the purposes of this project, I utilized as the primary participant group only those who participated in a previous exercise of story listening and sharing in the ministry context of LOCC. The project's story listening groups consisted of four additional LOCC members per group. Additionally, I evaluated only story listening as a particular practice in communal formation, while understanding that congregational formation is a multifaceted process. The members of LOCC are also being formed as individuals and as a community in and through a wide range of other activities and practices.

Conclusion

The Lake Orion Church of Christ is a congregation with a history of shared community life and experiences. After a recent season of growth and transition, three social groupings have solidified within the congregation: core family, established inside strangers, and new inside strangers. As a result of the growth and transitions, members of the congregation have experienced an absence or a loss of relational connectivity in the congregation. While it takes time and intentionality to form and nurture relationships and connectivity, the results of a recent mini-intervention recommend the practice of story listening as one way to begin to address the congregation's need for relational growth. The ministry context is ripe for the greater integration of a practice of story listening that creates opportunities for individuals to share their own stories and to receive the stories of others.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGY

As schedules get busier, noise gets louder, time gets shorter, and relationships grow thinner, communities of faith struggle to understand how to nurture a robust ecclesial life that cultivates the formation of intimate community. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of creative opportunities for people to share deeply with one another from their own experiences in life. The spiritual individualism in American culture often equates spiritual health with one's personal relationship with Jesus, which does little to promote the need for the development of deeply transformative relationships within a community of faith.

The contemporary American church is weak in its reflection on the life and nature of the church. Conversations focused on the ways churches function, whether held in the pews, among pastors, at popular Christian conferences, or even at some academic gatherings, typically begin with an assessment and evaluation of contemporary business models, leadership strategies, or group dynamics ideas.¹

¹ Consider, for example, the impact of Jim Collins's book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). This business leadership volume became fodder for conversations about church life and leadership among pastors and people in the pews, as well as in seminary ministry classes. In fact, Collins's book had so much circulation in those circles that he wrote a supplemental monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), to appeal more specifically to that audience.

While these tools can provide helpful insights that bless congregations and their leaders, they rarely address the deeper theological foundations that should undergird a rich ecclesiology and vision of a church's common life together.

As an alternative, I develop in this chapter a theology of participation for communal relationship formation founded on a Trinitarian theology. The Cappadocian Fathers' narrative-relational Trinitarian theology, integrated with developments in contemporary Trinitarian thought, leads to a theology of participation. Exploring the implications of the church's participation in and reflection on the life of the triune God suggests the practice of story listening as a way for communities of faith to embody a theology of participation.

God's Life in Trinity, Part 1: Cappadocian Trinitarian Reflections

Historical Background to the Cappadocians' Work

The history and development of the doctrine of the Trinity during the patristic era has received much attention, especially in recent years. A number of contemporary Trinitarian models point to patristic antecedents as the foundation of their work. Social Trinitarians, for example, frequently point to the Cappadocian Fathers as their theological predecessors. Yet such claims are often based only on passing glances rather than intense scrutiny of the development and heart of these patristic theological forebears. The remedy lies in considering the development and content of the Cappadocian Trinitarian vision more fully. While neither time nor space permits the depth of historical examination that the development of Trinitarian reflection in this period deserves, even a brief discussion must take into consideration

the significant historical complexity that contributed to the theological conversation.² I will proceed by establishing a historical context for the Cappadocians, considering alternative perspectives that influenced their work, and exploring the content of Cappadocian Trinitarian thought.

Arius and the Council of Nicaea

In the early fourth century the teaching of an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius catalyzed the church's emerging Trinitarian understanding of God. Ultimately, his teaching called into question the place of both the Son and the Spirit within the life of God, but his direct work concerned the relationship of the Son to the Father. Arius was deeply concerned with preserving the absolute distinction between God and creation. As he reflected on God, he based his contemplation on the presupposition that the essential attribute of God is being “unbegotten” or “underived” (*agen[n]ētos*). The Son, on the other hand, was “begotten” or “created” (*gen[n]ētos*). Because the Son came into being or started at some point, he must differ essentially from the Father. Arius, therefore, placed the Son among created things, preserving God's distinction from nature and ultimately differentiating Jesus from the Father³ and assigning the Son a position subordinate to the Father.⁴

² For an in-depth consideration of the historical and theological developments during this period, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (2004; repr.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 43-45.

⁴ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (new ed.; New York: Penguin, 1997), 208.

Arius's teaching was met with both resistance and support, leading to controversy and division within the church. In an effort to settle ecclesial conflict in the Empire, Constantine decided to intervene, calling what is now referred to as the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325.⁵ The Council of Nicaea ultimately rejected Arius's teaching on the sharp division between the Father and the Son and began to clarify an orthodox definition of the place of the Son in the Godhead, characterizing the Son as "begotten not made, *one in essence* with the Father."⁶ This affirmation set in place a strong Christological foundation for the later development of a more robust Trinitarian theology.

The Aftermath of Nicaea

In the wake of the council of Nicaea, the Roman Empire was thrown into a turbulent season of political, theological, and ecclesial shifts. Rather than achieving Constantine's goal of settling matters and achieving stability within the Empire, the council catalyzed a season of diverse change. Theological developments abounded in the years between the first two ecumenical councils, Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). Theologians made numerous attempts to understand and clarify the nature of God and the relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Additionally, the political changes immediately preceding Nicaea and continuing into the decades

⁵ Young, 43-44. See also Ayres, 86-92, for his evaluation of Constantine's role in Nicaea.

⁶ Young, 49 (emphasis original). Historically, much emphasis has been given to the role of Athanasius at the council, even though he was only a deacon at the time. Yet the few extant records for the council have recently called his role into question. Young, for example, tempers the traditional "enhanced role of Athanasius at Nicaea," suggesting that he grew comfortable with the *homoousion* formula only over time.

following it significantly impacted the ecclesial and theological landscape of the Roman Empire. For example, in the period between the reigns of Julian (361-63) and Theodosius (379-95), the political landscape of the empire shifted continuously between active non-Christian (Julian), pro-Nicene (Jovian, 363-64; Valentinian I, 364-75; and Theodosius) and pro-Arian (Valens, 364-78) leaders.⁷ This intersection of political conflict and theological concern significantly influenced the ongoing development and clarification of doctrine, especially the thinking regarding the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity.⁸

During these decades the character of adherence to the Nicene definition changed significantly; neither support of nor opposition to the council's solution was monolithic.⁹ For example, strong ambivalence toward the terms used at Nicaea to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son turned to direct opposition—opposition seen especially in the rise of homoian theology. The term “homoian” serves as an umbrella to capture a broad school of thought that is united in its strong resistance to the Nicene concept of commonality of essence between the Father and the Son. Homoian theologians preferred the subordinationist language of the Son

⁷ This sampling is intended to be instructive, rather than exhaustive. Other emperors, such as Gratian (375-83) and Valentinian II (375-92), seem to have been more willing to include different theological perspectives. The overlapping dates are a helpful reminder that there were periods when multiple emperors ruled at the same time.

⁸ For an insightful contribution considering the impact of the political and ecclesial climate in the polemical debates of the fourth century, see Ayres' *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. For the period between Julian and Theodosius, see pp. 168-71.

⁹ Ayres, 138.

being “like” (*homoios*) the Father.¹⁰ Heterousian theology, which emphasizes the differences between the *ousia* (essence, or substance) of Father and Son, emerged around the late 350s and was seen by some as a logical pole of broader homoian thought.¹¹ This will be significant when considering the emerging opponents below.

An important generation of younger pro-Nicene theologians took up and reinforced the Christological work from Nicaea and extended it to develop the doctrine of the Trinity. Among these pro-Nicenes were the Cappadocian fathers, three theologian-pastors who emerged in the latter half of the fourth century as some of the most significant voices in theological conversations in the East. These three, Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-91), Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-79), and Basil’s younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-94), joined other pro-Nicene theologians in an effort to reinforce and expand the doctrinal developments of Nicaea for both pastoral and polemical purposes. Their collaboration culminated in a vision of God as a profoundly interrelated communion of persons, bound together both by essence and by unity of work.¹² Before considering the development of the Cappadocian

¹⁰ Ayres, 138. As a point of reference to differentiate some of the key theological categories emerging during this time, we can speak of those who understand the Son’s relationship with the Father as “same in being” with the Father (homoousians), “like in being” with the Father (homoiousians), “like” the Father (homoians), “unlike” the Father (anhomoians), and “unlike” the Father “in being” (heteroousians).

¹¹ Ayres, 144-45.

¹² It is important to note that the Cappadocian writers did not have a monolithic theological perspective. Recent scholarship, especially, has done much to elucidate the unique contributions and particularities of each of these writers. However, similarities and overlaps in their thought often cause their theological contributions to be considered together. Since it is beyond the scope of this project to adequately consider each perspective individually, I too will be considering the

perspective, I will briefly examine the lingering and newly emerging theological perspectives of their polemical opponents.

Emerging Opponents and Lingering Perspectives

Just as Nicaea was called in response to the controversy surrounding Arius's christological teaching, the Cappadocians' theological reflection came about as a result of heavy involvement in the dogmatic controversies that surfaced in the years between Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople in 381. These polemical debates played a significant role in forging the Cappadocian theological positions, and much of their published work directly concerned these issues.¹³ The heart of these polemical debates, however, was not simply doctrine but also theological practice. The Cappadocians dialogued with and responded to other voices, voices that were shaping a theological practice they thought did not befit God—especially God's historical self-revelation in the work of the Son and the Spirit.¹⁴ Three key opponents for the Cappadocians were the Eunomians, the Sabellians, and the Macedonians.

contribution of the Cappadocians as a whole, except when specific examples highlight the particularity of a contributor.

¹³ Young, 156.

¹⁴ The Cappadocians focused much attention on the practice of theology and the question of what language is befitting to speak of God. This emphasis on practice lies at the heart of much of their doctrinal work and is clearly seen in their three most cited Trinitarian works: Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*, Nyssa's "An Answer to Ablabius: On Not Three Gods," and Nazianzus's five theological orations. For a helpful consideration of this historical context, see John D. Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution" in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwobel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 45-50.

Eunomians

In 358 the emperor Constantius was persuaded by a pro-Nicene delegation to abandon his policy of favoring the homoian Arian party and temporarily support Basil of Caesarea.¹⁵ As a result, Constantius banished two influential Arians, the bishop Eudoxius and a Cappadocian named Eunomius, who was a proponent and promulgator of an extreme, philosophically sophisticated neo-Arianism. In 360, shortly after their return from exile, Euxodius used his influence to have Eunomius named bishop of Cyzicus.¹⁶

Eunomius, like his fellow heterousian Aetius, sums up the nature of God's essence with the term *ingenerate* (*agennētos*).¹⁷ The Father and the Son must be distinct in essence—totally unlike one another—simply because the Son is begotten and, therefore, falls outside the being or the substance of God.¹⁸ Eunomius distinguishes between generation from essence and generation by will. Something generated by essence shares in the essence of that from which it was generated. On the other hand, something generated by will clearly is subordinate to that from which it was generated.¹⁹ Since ingenerateness or unbegottenness protects the unity and

¹⁵ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 357. For a helpful discussion regarding the development of homoian and heterousian Arianism, see Ayres, ch. 6. The Cappadocians primarily directed their attention toward the latter.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 612-13.

¹⁷ Ayres, 146-47.

¹⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 160.

¹⁹ Ayres, 147.

simplicity of God, the Son—who is begotten—must be generated by will and therefore be subordinate to the Father.²⁰ Each of the Cappadocian Fathers, along with several others, wrote against Eunomius and this strand of neo-Arian thought that was influential in the wake of Nicaea. These opponents honed their own theology in response to Eunomius’s thinking.

Sabellians

As Trinitarian thought developed, especially in the east, orthodoxy was often presented as residing between two extremes—Eunomian neo-Arianism and Sabellianism, or Marcellianism.²¹ While relatively little is known about Sabellius, a third-century theologian, his name has come to be associated with another idea intended to preserve the unity of God. Sabellians, or modalist monarchialists, rejected

²⁰ Hanson, 621, 624. Hanson concludes, “The basic belief of it, from which all else flows, is the ingenerateness (*agennesia*), and with that the incomparability, of God, the Father. For [Eunomius] there is only one God, strictly speaking, who exists neither from himself nor from another. God must be before everything, for this follows from his ingenerateness” (621). “Eunomius is quite ready to say that the Father is complete without the Son (which of course Gregory [of Nyssa] denies). To say that the Son is a product (*gennema*) is to describe his *ousia* as well as his *hypostasis*” (624).

²¹ Basil, *Ep.* 69.2 (*NPNF*² 8:165). Marcellus “propounded a heresy diametrically opposite that of Arius, and impiously attacked the very existence of the Only begotten in the Godhead” See also *Ep.* 226.4 (*NPNF*² 8:269): “For I shun and anathematize as impious alike all who are affected with the unsoundness of Sabellius, and all who maintain the opinions of Arius. If anyone says that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are the same, and supposes one thing under several names, and one hypostasis described by three persons, I rank such a one as belonging to the faction of the Jews. Similarly, if anyone says that the Son is in essence unlike the Father, or degrades the Holy Ghost into a creature, I anathematize him, and say that he is coming near to the heathen error.” See also Joseph T. Lienhard, “Basil of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra, and ‘Sabellius’,” *Church History* 58 (1989), 166. Lienhard shows convincingly how Basil developed his view of Marcellus and Sabellius as theologically interchangeable, both for political and theological reasons.

any suggestion that the Godhead could be divided ontologically. In their opinion, this could too easily lead to bi- or tri-theism. Instead, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were not understood as distinct Persons but as modes of being or roles assumed by the one God in the divine economy.²² At various points in history, God would go forth in a particular mode and then return to the source, without having or acquiring in the going forth any unique ontological reality.²³ Sabellianism preceded Nicaea, and modalistic thought continued to persist through the fourth century among theologians such as Marcellus of Ancyra and Athanasius and Apollinarius of Laodicea. The Cappadocians considered it important to differentiate themselves from Sabellianism, especially as they honed over time their technical language regarding the Trinity.

Macedonians

While the Eunomians and Sabellians primarily addressed the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Macedonians focused their attention on the relationship of God and the Spirit. Macedonius was a deacon and then bishop of Constantinople. He was deposed from his position, exiled at the Council of Constantinople (360), and died shortly thereafter.²⁴ During the late 370s and the 380s a group holding a position on the Son that was close to the pro-Nicenes arose in Asia

²² Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 156-57. See previous note for Basil's description of Sabellianism.

²³ Basil, *Ep.* 69.2 (*NPNF*² 8:165). Basil attacks Marcellus for granting "indeed that the Only Begotten was called 'Word,' on coming forth at need and in season, but states that He returned again to Him whence He had come forth, and had no existence before His coming forth, nor hypostasis after His return."

²⁴ Hanson, 760.

Minor. This group felt anxious that the emerging position on the Spirit hovered dangerously close to modalism.²⁵ Their doctrine denied the divinity of the Spirit, while accepting the full divinity of the Son. At some point, the origin of this doctrine was credited to Macedonius, and those who held this position were referred to as Macedonians or, more antagonistically, Pneumatomachians (“Spirit-fighters”).²⁶ While the Macedonians rejected the Arian subordination of the Son, they defended their own position regarding the Spirit using arguments similar to those the Arians applied to the Son.

The Cappadocians’ Trinitarian Vision

The standard shorthand way of referring to the so-called “Cappadocian settlement” in Trinitarian doctrine is “three *hypostases* in one *ousia*.”²⁷ While this precise formula is rarely seen in the actual writings of the Cappadocians, it does serve as a nice summary of their ultimate, shared Trinitarian thought and, perhaps more so, of the legacy of their work in subsequent generations of theologians. This formula in

²⁵ See Hanson, 760-72. Hanson’s historical reconstruction of the development of Macedonian thought is helpful. He places the origins of the Macedonian school of thought earlier, around 360, based on Athanasius’s letter to Serapion. However, it is unlikely that the doctrine had fully developed until the 370s.

²⁶ Ayres, 214-15. See also Hanson, 761. The position has also been attributed to Marathonius, whom Macedonius had named bishop of Nicomedia.

²⁷ Basil’s *Epistle* 38 (*NPNF*² 8:137-41) likely provides the clearest extended explication of these terms. Though more likely written by Gregory of Nyssa, it reveals a clear distinction between the two terms in defining the difference between what is common (*ousia*) and what is particular (*hypostases*) in the Godhead. See also Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998), 51. Lossky concludes, “The genius of the [Cappadocians] made use of the two synonyms to distinguish in God that which is common—ousia, substance or essence—from that which is particular—ὑπόστασις [sic] or person.”

itself fails to do justice to the fluidity, growth, and development in their language regarding the Trinity over the course of their writing. It does, however, summarize the basic thrust of their thought regarding the relationship between what is common in God and what is diverse.²⁸ This relationship requires a delicate balancing act to preserve both unity and diversity within the Godhead. Gregory of Nazianzus described this paradoxical union in difference when he suggested “the divine is indivisible in its divisions.”²⁹ The three-in-one construction attempts to express and clarify something about the dynamic inner life of the Trinity—which all three of the Cappadocians would agree is ultimately beyond human comprehension—with respect to the way that God has self-revealed historically.³⁰

In order to understand the Cappadocian contribution to a contemporary theology of participation, one must first consider the narrational ontology that undergirds their work. Then one must consider three important aspects of Cappadocian Trinitarian thought—unity of substance, the diversity of persons in the

²⁸ As an example of this fluidity, in *Oration* 31.28, Gregory of Nazianzus uses the three-in-one formula: “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit . . . one nature in three things (μία φύσις ἐν τρισὶν ἰδιότησι).” For a helpful critique of this formulation and an analysis of the fluidity of the language of the Cappadocians over time, see Joseph T. Lienhard, “*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘One *Hypostasis*,’” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99-122.

²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.14. One of Nazianzen’s unique approaches to Trinitarian discourse was to intentionally juxtapose seemingly contradictory images to reinforce the mutual unity-in-diversity.

³⁰ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222.

Trinity, and relationality in the Godhead—as it developed with respect to the three particular controversies introduced above: the Eunomians, Sabellians, and Macedonians. While these are not the only polemic fronts that shaped Cappadocian Trinitarian thought, they do provide a representative understanding of their views. Finally, one must consider some of the implications of Cappadocian thought for the relationship between the Trinity and humanity.

Historical Revelation of God and a Narrativ Trinitarian Ontology

The starting place for Cappadocian Trinitarian reflection was the revealed work of God in Scripture and in the ongoing experience of the life of the church. In the midst of the Cappadocians' parsing of words and reflecting on prepositions, this important facet of their work can easily get lost. For each of the Cappadocians, God's nature ultimately exceeds the human capacity of understanding, but God is most fully known through God's revelation in the divine economy: God's deliberate, beneficent, and ordered presence in and activity toward creation.³¹ In *On the Holy Spirit*, for example, Basil responds to questions about the language of one of his liturgical doxologies with a reflection on the role that syllables and prepositions play in his own theology and that of his opponents, the Macedonians.³² Within a few chapters, he

³¹ Beeley, 196. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, "An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods," (trans. John Baillie; ed. Edward Roach Hardy; Library of Christian Classics III: *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 256-267; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1977), 262, "We cannot enumerate as three gods those who jointly, inseparably, and mutually exercise their divine power and activity of overseeing us and the whole creation."

³² Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, (trans. Stephen M. Hildebrand; ed. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 42, Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011) 2, 3.

shifts his focus to begin developing a case for the place of the Son and the Spirit in the Godhead by clarifying their role in the divine *oikonomia*, or economy.³³

Gregory of Nazianzus's Trinitarian theology depends heavily on a narrative, economic framework that undergirds his work.³⁴ For Gregory, this overarching narrative of God's historical and continuing action in the world outweighs any particular individual texts, especially as he explains the place of the Spirit in the Trinity.³⁵ Gregory describes a progressive and gradual revelation of God that has occurred in three stages, or "shakings of the earth," over the course of salvation history.³⁶ He writes,

Growth towards perfection comes through additions. In this way, the old covenant made clear proclamation of the Father, a less definite one of the Son. The new covenant made the Son manifest and gave us a glimpse of the Spirit's Godhead. At the present time, the Spirit resides amongst us, giving us a clearer manifestation of himself than before.³⁷

Gregory considers the present and eschatological nature of this revelation as vital for the place of the Spirit in the Trinity. God has revealed God's self over the course of salvation history as Father, then also as Son, and additionally now in the church as Spirit. Yet the church experiences only penultimate communion with God; its fullness will be realized when the Trinity's work is wholly manifested in the coming

³³ Ibid., 6, 9-10.

³⁴ Beeley, 122-23. Beeley calls this Nazianzen's "economic paradigm."

³⁵ Ibid., 170. Beeley rightly suggests, "Gregory focuses not on any individual texts that might prove the Spirit's divinity, but rather on the overarching narrative of the covenants and the divine economy as a whole."

³⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.25.

³⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.26.

eschatological transformation.³⁸ In other words, the Spirit continues to be revealed in its work in the church,³⁹ beyond the narrative of Scripture and into the church's experience of worship and sanctification.⁴⁰ The church, caught up into the life of God through the Spirit, moves toward the full communion to be experienced when the narrative of God's work in the world is complete. This progressive revelation of God and the experience of sanctification in the church serve as a narrative foundation for the development of Cappadocian Trinitarian thought.

Communion and Personhood: The Trinity as Profoundly Interrelated Communion

As stated above, Cappadocian theology developed in a highly polemical environment. All three of the Cappadocian Fathers were heavily involved in the dogmatic controversies that persisted in the wake of Nicaea. Since several key debates shaped the development of their thought, we will explore three facets of their Trinitarian reflection—the unity, the diversity, and, more fully, the relationality of God—as they developed in the polemical environment.

³⁸ Beeley, 171.

³⁹ It is exceedingly difficult to choose an appropriate pronoun to refer to the Spirit. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to utilize the neuter pronoun in keeping with the Greek context of the Church Fathers. While this could perpetuate the idea of the Spirit as an impersonal force, I in no way intend to deny the personal nature of the Spirit.

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.26. Here Gregory suggests that even the disciples were not ready for a full revelation of the Spirit, so the Spirit made “his home in the disciples in gradual stages proportionate to their capacity to receive him.”

The Unity of God in Trinity

Following Nicene orthodoxy, the Cappadocians continued to affirm the unity of the *ousia*, the substance, or essence, of God. The theology of a fellow Cappadocian, Eunomius, raised the ire of all three Cappadocian Fathers. Each spent a considerable amount of time attempting to refute his position, both through treatises and letters against his theology and through their preaching. Although both Eunomius and the Cappadocians were committed to preserving the simplicity of God,⁴¹ they differed greatly in their perceptions of potential implications that this simplicity might have on the relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Eunomius extended the Arian tradition of protecting God's unity at the expense of the Son. He argued that God is knowable because God is simple unity.⁴² The most basic characteristic of God is that God exists apart from any other source, which forms a sharp distinction between God and creation. He describes God as "unbegotten essence" (*ousia agennētos*).⁴³ By placing the substance of God in the unbegottenness of the Father, the Eunomian definition of God maintains as a matter of principle that the difference of substance, or being, between the Father and the Son must be maintained in order to keep with Nicaea's definition. Since the Son is "begotten," he necessarily falls outside of the being, or essence, of the Father.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Young, 157.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Beeley, 91-92.

⁴⁴ Zizioulas, "Holy Trinity," 49. See also Ayres, 144-45, who refers to Eunomian theology as Heterousian or Anomoian that emphasized the "unlikeness" or difference between the οὐσίαι of Father and Son.

The Cappadocians responded by defending the unity of God's nature, both in its singularity (or simplicity) and in its incomprehensibility.⁴⁵ They first argued that the nature of God is mystery, ultimately unknown, beyond human comprehension and, therefore, cannot be confined to being unbegotten.⁴⁶ They then affirmed that the Father and the Son do not express different beings but eternal relationships within God. Without the Son, the Father exists neither in name nor in relationship.⁴⁷ Basil, for example, suggested, "The communion and the distinction apprehended in Them are, in a certain sense, ineffable and inconceivable, the continuity of nature being never rent asunder by the distinction of the hypostases, nor the notes of proper distinction confounded in the community of essence."⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, similarly, concluded, "In speaking of the mysteries [of the faith], we acknowledge three Persons

⁴⁵ See the helpful discussion in Ayres, 278-84. Ayres also rightly notes that the Cappadocians connected the unity of God to indivisibility in their operations.

⁴⁶ Zizioulas, "Holy Trinity," 49. See also Beeley, 93. Beeley concludes "In [Nazianzen's] view, Eunomius's real error is that he selectively, with no apparent justification, elevates unbegottenness above all other attributes, to the point of making it the very definition of God's essence and the one quality that encompasses all others and exactly expresses the entirety of what God is, with no remainder. As a result, Eunomius in effect claims to know God's essence completely."

⁴⁷ Young, 158.

⁴⁸ Basil, *Ep.* 38.4 (*NPNF*² 8:139). Similarly, regarding 1 Cor 8:6, Basil suggests, "These are not the words of someone who is making a law, but rather of someone who distinguishes the persons [ὑποστάσεις]. For the Apostle [Paul] speaks thus not to introduce a difference in nature but to establish the unconfused conception of the Father and the Son" (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 5.7).

and recognize there is no difference in nature between them.”⁴⁹ For the Cappadocians, the distinction or diversity in God never necessitates separation.⁵⁰

The Diversity of God in Trinity

While defending the unity of the Godhead against the Eunomians, the Cappadocians also had to secure the place of the Spirit against the Macedonians and defend the diversity of the three persons against Sabellianism.⁵¹ Although Nicaea did much to resurrect the place of the Son in the life of God, little attention was given to the place of the Spirit in the Godhead. The Macedonians, or Pneumatomachians, resisted treating the Spirit as a sharer in the one divine power of God.⁵² Led by Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*, the Cappadocians each countered the Macedonians’ subordinationist theology of the Spirit. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa mainly sought to “apply to the Spirit arguments about the unity of activity and nature that had been developed in polemic over the Son’s activity,” especially the Spirit’s role in creation, baptism, and sanctification.⁵³ Gregory of Nazianzus used a slightly different tactic,

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “Ablabius,” 257.

⁵⁰ This notion of distinction without separation could also combat the ideas of less sophisticated Arian sympathizers, who might still be inclined to call the Son a “creature.”

⁵¹ Ayres, 210.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 215. See, e.g., Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 16.37-38. “You would learn the communion of the Spirit with the Father and the Son also from what was created in the beginning, for the pure, intelligent, and other-worldly powers both are and are called holy because they have acquired holiness as a gift given to them by the Holy Spirit” (16.38).

highlighting the role of the Spirit in this third historical epoch, in which God the Spirit moves the church and history towards the final consummation.⁵⁴ Gregory extends Scripture and tradition into the present to suggest that the Spirit's divinity continually becomes clearer in the life of the church.⁵⁵

Sabellianism, or modalism, refers to a pre-Nicene strand of thought that preserves the ontological simplicity of God. As Trinitarian thought continued to develop through the fourth century, modalism reemerged as a tempting way to explain the revelation of God. As Zizioulas says, "Sabellianism represented an interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity which involved the view that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, were not full persons in an ontological sense but *roles* assumed by the One God."⁵⁶ In an effort to preserve the unity of God, Sabellians seem to identify the term "person" with God's essence or substance, so that there is only one "person" in God.⁵⁷ Believing that God's person was revealed historically as Father, Son, and Spirit in three different modes of being, Sabellians favor the term *prosopon*, or "mask," to describe these modes. Zizioulas points out that *prosopon* is "a term loaded with connotations of acting on the theatrical stage or playing a role in society."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See the extended development in his *Oration* 31. He also makes a philosophical argument based on the Church's theology of the Spirit's role in baptism and *theosis*.

⁵⁵ Young, 160.

⁵⁶ Zizioulas, "Holy Trinity," 46 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ Basil, *Letter* 236.6 (NPNF² 8:278).

⁵⁸ Zizioulas, "Holy Trinity," 46.

The Cappadocians dissociated *hypostasis* from *ousia* and connected it to *prosopon*.⁵⁹ As a poor English equivalent, one might consider the shift as moving the conversation from one nature with three masks to three persons in one nature. Over time the Cappadocians rejected the use of *prosopon* because of its possible modalist connotations and shifted to using the term *hypostasis* to define the personhood and particularity of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.⁶⁰ As seen above, the three *hypostases* revealed themselves and were encountered primarily according to their roles in God's unfolding economy (*oikonomia*) of salvation.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Beeley, 303. Beeley rightly notes that Basil uses *hypostasis* in a more technical sense than Gregory of Nazianzus, who is content to use the language of “the Three” or to refer to them simply as Father, Son, and Spirit. See also, Stephen M. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 82-92. Hildebrand's helpful discussion of the development and increasing nuance of Basil's thought places the linguistic development, especially regarding the relationship of *hypostasis* and *prosopon*, in the third developmental stage of Basil's thought and connects it specifically with his engagement with Marcellus and “new” Sabellianism.

⁶⁰ E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or. 31.9*, “The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities.” As noted above, the Cappadocians' language contains much more fluidity than is sometimes assumed. Yet even Ayres, who is skeptical of traditional readings of the Cappadocians, notes that Basil sees *πρόσωπον* as less appropriate. “*Hypostasis* indicates a reality of existence that [Basil] feels *πρόσωπον* may not” (210). For example, when refuting the Sabellians, Basil concludes, “Like the texts, ‘I and the Father will go’ (Jn 14.23) and ‘I and the Father are one’ (Jn 10.30), [the preposition ‘with’] is an excellent witness of the eternal communion and unending union [of persons] . . . and a proof of the individuality of the persons [τὸ τῶν ὑποστάσεων ἴδιον] in the same way as ‘and.’ For he who says that the Son is with the Father, simultaneously indicates both the particularity of the persons [τὴν τε τῶν ὑποστάσεων ιδιότητα] and the inseparability of their communion” (*On the Holy Spirit*, 25.59).

⁶¹ Basil, *Ep. 236.6* (NPNF² 8:278). “The distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* is the same as that between the general and the particular . . . Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give various existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception

Trinitarian “Relations,” Inseparable Operation, and the Divine Economy

In order to defend the fullness and integrity of each *hypostasis* while also preserving the unity of God’s *ousia*, the Cappadocians developed the notion of relation. Persons are relations (*scheseis*), or modes of existence towards one another.⁶² The language of “Father” and “Son” presupposes and denotes relationship to something. The Cappadocians believed this language of relationship has important consequences for how people understand God, even though it says nothing about God’s *ousia*.⁶³ Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, continues to assume that the persons are one in the Godhead and of equal status. As Ayres says, “‘Relation’ in Gregory [Nazianzen]’s theology is thus a category that primarily serves to uphold the paradoxical unity in distinction as consonant with Scripture.”⁶⁴ Nazianzus suggests, “‘Father’ designates neither the substance nor the activity, but the relationship, the manner of being, which holds good between the Father and the Son. Just as with us these names indicate kindred and affinity, so here too they designate sameness of

of Father, Son, and Spirit may be without confusion and clear There is a satisfactory preservation of the unity by the confession of the one Godhead, while in the distinction of the individual properties regarded in each there is the confession of the particular properties of the Persons.”

⁶² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 29.16; also *Or.* 31.9, 14. See Beeley (208) on *σχέσεις*, where he rightly suggests that for Nazianzen what distinguishes the “Son” and “Spirit” from one another and from the “Father” is their unique modes of generation.

⁶³ Ayres, 202.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

stock.”⁶⁵ This kindred affinity produces in turn a “convergence toward the source . . . though there is numerical distinction, there is no difference in being.”⁶⁶

Cappodocian thinking about the interrelationship of the persons, the “convergence” of the three into one another without coalescing, points forward to the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, which Eastern Orthodox theologians such as John of Damascus would later clarify.⁶⁷ In an unbreakable communion, the three persons of the Trinity give of themselves freely and fully to one another in love.⁶⁸ The relationships among the persons genuinely unite them to one another while preserving distinctness and enabling mutuality and interchange of life.⁶⁹

It is in and through this deep communion of the persons that God reaches out to humanity and all of creation. The Cappadocians recognized a threefold structure in

⁶⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 29.16. See also *Or.* 31.9, “God lacks nothing. It is their difference in, so to say, ‘manifestation’ or mutual relationship, which has caused the difference in names.” Lossky suggests that relation of origin is the only characteristic we can claim to be exclusively proper of the *hypostases* (54-55). Ayres rightly notes that Cappadocians typically preserve paternal priority, identifying the Father as source of persons and the essence they share (Ayres, 206). This is especially true for Nazianzen, who assumes that divine life is eternally rooted and expressed in the monarchy of the Father” (Beeley, 213). In *Or.* 31.14, however, Nazianzen seems to suggest that the Godhead in general is the cause of the three.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 29.2.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus used the term to refer to the dual nature of Christ in *Ep.* 101, but the Cappadocians never used it explicitly to refer to the Trinity. See Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium*. Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 59.

⁶⁸ Nonna Verna Harrison, “Human Community as an Image of the Holy Trinity,” *SVTQ* 46 (2002), 361. Harrison suggests, “In God, self-offering is infinite and eternal life and joy; to empty oneself is to be ever filled to overflowing, so the total self-emptying never exhausts the giver or the gift but renews both unceasingly.”

⁶⁹ Verna Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *SVTQ* 35 (1991), 65.

God's reaching out to the world that both reflected and manifested the relationships among the three persons themselves. On the one hand, the divine will and activity originate in the Father, are actualized by the Son, and are perfected by the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰ In this basic movement of the economy of God, as it is revealed in history and in the present, we can differentiate the particular qualities of each *hypostasis*.⁷¹

On the other hand, to preserve the unity of God, the Cappadocians also asserted that in no action or activity does one of the persons act without the co-operation of the others.⁷² This doctrine of "inseparable operation" suggests the constant unity of being that is shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit, while honoring the unique ways that each is revealed in history.⁷³ In a way, the doctrine of inseparable operation at times blurs the lines of distinction between the Three, so that Cappadocian thought reflects a good deal of fluidity among the persons. At other

⁷⁰ E.g. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 18.47; Gregory of Nyssa, "Ablabius," 262; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.20, 26, 31. In the last of these, Nazianzen compares this movement to a source, a spring, and a river.

⁷¹ E.g., Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.37-38. Basil differentiates the qualities of the *hypostases* in the administration of gifts: "When God works differences of operations, and the Lord works the differences of ministries, the Holy Spirit is present, freely arranging the distribution of gifts according to each man's worth" (16.37). Similarly, according to Basil, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit each has a distinctive role in creation: "In their creation, consider for me the initial cause of their existence (the Father), the Maker (the Son), the Perfector (the Spirit)" (16.38).

⁷² Gregory of Nyssa, "Ablabius," 261-62.

⁷³ Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa's Ad Ablabium*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 60. Maspero suggests, "All flows from the intimacy of the Trinity and the unity of action is the consequence of the immanent perichoresis: activity flows forth from intimacy." Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, asked, "Is there any significant function belonging to God, which the Spirit does not perform?" (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.29).

times it emphasizes the particularity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in their relationships to one another in the divine economy.⁷⁴ Verna Harrison rightly suggests,

This is of crucial importance in enabling us to know and participate in the Trinity as created beings, since God is known to creatures in and through God's presence, self-manifestation and activity *ad extra*. The three persons have a hidden life, the unique interpersonal relationality that joins them to each other, yet together they also reach out in love and act openly in the created realm, so the immanent Trinity is the same Father, Son and Spirit made known, not completely but truly, as the economic Trinity.⁷⁵

Not only does God reach out to humanity and the world, but God also encircles the world. In this way, God creates space in God's life for the world to participate and be transformed by God or, as Gregory Nazianzen said in his sermon on baptism, to be "illuminated from all sides by the three."⁷⁶

Thus the Cappadocians' Trinitarian theology could at the very least lay a foundation for a narrational, relational ontology of God and, by extension, lay the foundation for a robust, participatory practice of story listening, reflecting a Trinitarian theology of participation. The Cappadocians' depiction of God as an

⁷⁴ Ibid., 59. Maspero suggests, "For the Nyssian the activity of the three Persons is always unique, without this unicity veiling the personal characteristic of each one. This is possible since the Persons act δι' ἀλλήλων, and this in its turn is possible because they act with one another, that is ἐν ἀλλήλοις ἀμφοτέρα and μετ' ἀλλήλων. The unity of action is nothing other than the economic revelation of the perichoresis, in which the three Persons are united without being confused, co-present one to another in reciprocal love."

⁷⁵ Nonna Verna Harrison, "Greek Patristic Foundations of Trinitarian Anthropology," *ProEccl* 14 (2005), 408.

⁷⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 40.41 (*NPNF*² 7:375). Harrison, "Anthropology," 410-11. Regarding this passage, Harrison concludes, Gregory "sees himself, the Christian community, and by implication all of creation, as encircled by the manifest and active presence of the three, existing, as it were, within the space where their common activity is unfolding. It is precisely in this place that God can be perceived as both one and three."

interrelated communion of persons who participate in and envelop the world has had vital implications on the methodological development and practice of story listening.

These three factors—God’s unity, diversity, and relationality—have profound implications for spiritual community. God invites humanity, those created in God’s image and likeness, to participate not only in the life of the Trinity but by extension in the lives of one another. Life together in the world is a reflection of the life of God. It assumes communion with others. Growth as a Christian community consists of “a radical giving of one’s own being to God and to all other persons, as far as is possible, and a receiving of theirs in return. This perichoresis of love is the created likeness and manifestation of the Holy Trinity, and it ultimately extends through glorified angelic and human persons to include all varieties of created beings in a coinherence with God and with each other.”⁷⁷ In other words, relationship and communion with God and others—life that participates in and reflects the triune God—is the *telos*, or ultimate end goal, of the Christian life.

God’s Life in Trinity, Part 2

Developing a Contemporary Trinitarian Practice of Participation

For several centuries during and after the Cappadocians’ work, the doctrine of the Trinity elicited ample reflection in the church.⁷⁸ While the Eastern and Western traditions approached the doctrine in significantly different ways, both were committed to the centrality of the Trinity in the life of the church. This central focus

⁷⁷ Harrison, “Perichoresis,” 65.

⁷⁸ Consider, for example, other important Trinitarian works, including Hilary of Poitiers’ *On the Trinity* and Augustine of Hippo’s *On the Trinity*.

slowly waned in the Western church in the wake of the work of Thomas Aquinas. Trinitarian thought came to be considered too complex for the simple and devout piety of most Christians. It was not, therefore, a primary lens through which they understood or expressed their relationship to God, especially in the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, during which popular piety focused heavily on the incarnation and Eucharist. In addition, the elevation of reason as the primary arbiter of truth during the Enlightenment made discussions of a triune God difficult, at best. The challenge to Trinitarian reflection both from the simple piety of the people and from academia led to an “eclipse of Trinitarian theology” until the work of Immanuel Kant.⁷⁹

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner initiated a resurgence in Trinitarian reflection. Both Barth and Rahner began their Trinitarian reflection on God as the one divine subject and then moved to explain the threeness of God. Subsequent theologians have gone the opposite direction by beginning with the Three and moving back to the unity of God. To do so, they integrate a vision of God as a deeply interrelated communion of persons with contemporary reflections on the progression of history or social identity.⁸⁰ Interestingly, these two streams of thought for exploring the Trinity (the Trinity as the fullness of history and the Trinity as

⁷⁹ For a helpful narrative of the “eclipse” and resurgence of Trinitarian reflection, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 6-32.

⁸⁰ Grenz, *Social God*, 23-57. These two methods of approaching the Trinity—from the One and from the Three—essentially represent the two classical modes of Trinitarian reflection in Christianity. The Latin Fathers tended to start from the One and move to explain the Three, while the Greek Fathers preferred to move in the opposite direction, as is illustrated in the reflection on the Cappadocians above.

relationality) connect very well with two of the primary modes of Trinitarian definition explored in the Cappadocian writings above.⁸¹ The streams have the potential to merge nicely to support an ecclesial theology of participation grounded in a narrative-relational Trinitarian model. As a next step in developing a foundation for a theology of participation, I will explore the implications of contemporary Trinitarian thought, integrated with reflection from the Cappadocians, for the church's participation in and reflection on the life of the triune God.

Jürgen Moltmann's Social Doctrine of the Trinity

While many contemporary theologians have worked to recover a more narrative or relational understanding of the triune God, Jürgen Moltmann stands as one of the most important voices reconsidering traditional Western understandings of the Trinity. Next to Karl Barth, some consider Moltmann the best known, and one of the most influential, Reformed theologians of the twentieth century.⁸² While Moltmann's entire corpus of work has a Trinitarian conceptual framework, it is beyond the scope of this brief examination to consider the important contributions of each volume to his overall project. Instead, I will consider three important themes he develops in *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, the most complete explication of his doctrine of the Trinity: the Trinitarian history of God, *perichoresis* and the Trinity's relations of fellowship, and God's openness to humanity and the world.

⁸¹ Ibid. I am indebted to Grenz's work for these terms. In the former he categorizes theologians such as Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Jenson, while in the latter he puts Boff, Zizioulas, and LaCugna.

⁸² Grenz, *Rediscovering*, 73-74.

The Trinitarian History of God

Moltmann was convinced that Barth and Rahner chose the wrong point of departure for their doctrines of God. As a corrective, he shifted the starting focus of his Trinitarian reflection away from God as the one divine substance to the history of God and the ultimate eschatological goal of the uniting of all things with God and in God.⁸³ He contends, much as the Cappadocians in their emphasis on the divine economy, that Trinitarian reflection begins with the history of relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as revealed in the biblical witness, and only subsequently moves to consider how these relationships reveal the unity of God.⁸⁴ In other words, rather than following the path taken by Barth and Rahner, beginning with the oneness of God and proceeding to the three Persons of the Trinity, Moltmann begins his consideration of God with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and then develops his understanding of Persons and of the unity of God in Trinitarian terms.⁸⁵

In his evaluation of the biblical witness, Moltmann demonstrates how the sequence of relations or priority of action among the Persons changes in various scenes in the Trinitarian history of the kingdom of God. He suggests:

⁸³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (1981 repr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 149. “If the biblical testimony is chosen as the point of departure then we shall have to start from the three Persons of the history of Christ. If philosophical logic is made the starting point, then the enquirer proceeds from the One God.” This does not mean that he denies a shared, common substance; rather that he does not want to focus on substance as a starting place (174).

⁸⁴ Gary M. Simpson, “No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity,” *WW* 18 (1998): 270.

⁸⁵ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 174; see also p. 19.

In the sending, delivering up and resurrection of Christ we find this sequence:
 Father—Spirit—Son.

In the Lordship of Christ and the sending of the Spirit the sequence is:
 Father—Son—Spirit.

But when we are considering the eschatological consummation and glorification, the sequence has to be:
 Spirit—Son—Father.⁸⁶

The importance of this compelling schema to understanding Moltmann's social understanding of the Trinity cannot be understated. When Moltmann considers the activity of God in the world, he sees a picture of robust interdependence and interrelation among the Persons in the historical divine economy and in the eschatological revelation of the kingdom. In the kingdom the arrows of action do not all point in the same direction; in different scenes different Persons have the priority of action, while others receive.⁸⁷ This scheme of action in relationships among the Father, Son, and Spirit differs from traditional and contemporary Trinitarian approaches that, like the Cappadocians' approach, begin with the paternal priority of the monarchical Father or from a single persisting substance (*ousia*).⁸⁸ The mutual,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 127. When comparing examples 2 and 3 above, for example, Moltmann suggests, "In *the first order* the divine Trinity throws itself open in the sending of the Spirit. It is open for the world, open for time, open for the renewal and unification of the whole creation. In *the second order* the movement is reversed: in the transfiguration of the world through the Spirit all men turn to God and, moved by the Spirit, come to the Gather through Christ the Son. In the glorification of the Spirit, world and times, people and things are gathered to the Father in order to become *his world*" (emphasis original).

⁸⁸ For Moltmann's critique of inner-Trinitarian patriarchal monarchy, which he concludes makes the Son and the Spirit subordinate and inferior, see *Trinity and Kingdom*, 240-41.

reciprocal, and diverse relationships that Moltmann suggests reveal a highly social view of God, one in which each of the triune Persons is open to the others and the movement of relationships proceeds in all directions. The world constituted by a triune God is a participatory drama, replete with multiple characters who cooperate mutually to bring about the eschatological consummation of the kingdom.⁸⁹

Since Moltmann's theology places such heavy emphasis on an eschatological ontology, it is not surprising that he sees the unity of God as emerging from the eschatological future.⁹⁰ As Moltmann describes it, the ultimate revelation of God's unity in the immanent Trinity will not come until the final consummation at the *eschaton*, when the economic Trinity will be swallowed up in the immanent Trinity.⁹¹ For Moltmann, any understanding of the Trinity that attempts to do justice to the biblical witness to God must begin with these relationships and only then proceed to an understanding of the unity of God.

⁸⁹ Mark Love, "Missio Dei, Trinitarian Theology, and the Quest for a Post-Colonial Missiology," *Missio Dei* 1 (2010), 64. Compare this to the Cappadocians', especially Gregory of Nazianzus', focus on the role of the Holy Spirit in the present manifestation and in the eschatological consummation of God's work, as described above.

⁹⁰ Grenz, *Rediscovering*, 75.

⁹¹ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 160-61. Moltmann concludes, "When everything is 'in God' and 'God is all in all,' then the economic Trinity is raised up into and transcended in the immanent Trinity. What remains is the eternal praise of the triune God in his glory." Although Moltmann typically avoids reflection on the immanent Trinity, preferring to focus on the divine economy in God's eternal history, this conception of the internal life of God is his attempt to apply Rahner's Rule, which suggests that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa.

Perichoresis and Trinitarian Relations of Fellowship

As Moltmann considers this activity of God in history, he makes a connection between the historical action of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and the relationships shared among them, concluding that the three Persons exhibit a circulatory communion with one another, an openness to act and to exchange their action, activity, and energies.⁹² This willingness to make room for the others is vital to Moltmann's conception of the unity of God and his understanding of God's being as love. In order to deepen this reflection on the Trinity, Moltmann turns to a concept hinted at in the work of the Cappadocians, *perichoresis*.⁹³ The doctrine of *perichoresis* typically attempts to describe the interior life of the three Persons of the Trinity.⁹⁴ Moltmann extends this description to refer to the relationships among the Persons as they occur in the eternal history of God. By doing so, Moltmann shifts the focus from *perichoresis* as a move to explain the immanent Trinity to *perichoresis* as it might relate to the economic Trinity.⁹⁵ Moltmann considers the significance of the

⁹² Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 174. He suggests, "If the concept of person comes to be understood in Trinitarian terms—that is, in terms of relation and historically—then the Persons do not only subsist in the common divine substance; they also exist in their relations to the other Persons."

⁹³ See discussion above.

⁹⁴ Moltmann, for example, concludes, "In respect of the Trinity's inner life, the three Persons themselves form their unity, by virtue of their relation to one another and in the eternal perichoresis of their love" (*Trinity and Kingdom*, 177).

⁹⁵ This, again, must be kept within the understanding that Moltmann's work adopts Rahner's Rule and sees the ultimate revelation of the connection between the economic and immanent Trinity in the eschatological consummation. Compare Moltmann to the Cappadocians, for example, who understand the action of divine economy not as reciprocal, but as unilateral, moving from patriarchy of the Father through the Son to the Spirit. See above.

way the Three interact with one another by creating open space in each of their Persons or making room in themselves to receive the actions of the others. He concludes,

The doctrine of the perichoresis links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness The unity of the Trinitarian Persons lies in the circulation of their divine life which they fulfill in their relations to one another [The divine life] is bound to consist of the living fellowship of the three Persons who are related to one another and exist in one another.⁹⁶

Here, as in his schema of the three scenes of the kingdom mentioned above, Moltmann communicates the circulatory character of the divine interaction.

In this eternal history of mutual and reciprocal action, Moltmann sees an important connection between the particular, unique natures of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and the relationships among them, which helps deepen his understanding of the unity of God.⁹⁷ He adopts the doctrine of *perichoresis* to explain this Trinitarian conception of unity and suggests, “The Persons do not merely ‘exist’ in their relations; they also realize themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love.”⁹⁸ This is seen most fully in the way the Persons make room for the others to act in the eternal history as seen in the schema above. For Moltmann, the personal characteristics that distinguish them from one another as Father, Son, and Spirit are the very things that cause them to communicate eternal life to one another

⁹⁶ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 175.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 172. Moltmann suggests, “The three divine Persons exist in their particular, unique natures as Father, Son and Spirit in their relationships to one another, and are determined through those relationships. It is in these relationships that they are persons. Being a person in this respect means existing-in-relationship.”

⁹⁸ Ibid., 174.

and dwell in one another.⁹⁹ This captures, in a sense, what Moltmann understands as God's freedom, or the capacity of God to be true to God's own being as love. The fellowship, the mutual and common participation in life, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit express this freedom most fully.¹⁰⁰ *Perichoresis* captures the circular movement and the living nature of these relations as they are perceived through the history of revelation and as they reveal the particularity of each of the triune Persons, specifically in the history of the self-emptying and glorification of the triune God.¹⁰¹

God's Openness to Humanity and the World

While it might seem that this deep inner-connection and unity in the Trinity could exclude the world from God, this reciprocity in the life of God actually makes possible and even deepens the God-world relationship. Rather than closing off God's life in the interrelation of the Three, Moltmann's social doctrine of the Trinity describes the very mode by which God's life opens to receive the world in love. For Moltmann, "God loves the world with the very same love which he himself is in eternity Love cannot be consummated as a solitary subject."¹⁰² If the doctrine of *perichoresis* signifies and describes the mutual giving and receiving of action shared between the Persons, then it also hints at one way that God receives the world.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 175.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 57. Moltmann concludes, "Love is the power of self-differentiation and self-identification, and it has its source in this process [of God's communication with the world in history]."

¹⁰² Ibid.

Moltmann connects this kenotic self-limitation and self-opening in the Trinitarian relationship with the act of creation itself.¹⁰³ “In his creative love God is united with creation, which is his Other, giving it space, time and liberty in his own infinite life.”¹⁰⁴

In the context of the God-world relationship, the mutual, dynamic, and diverse Trinitarian relationships, as conceived in Moltmann’s work above, are compelling. If all arrows of action and activity in God point one direction, scope for the mutual giving and receiving that creates mutual and reciprocal space is limited. Arrows pointing in all directions, on the other hand, mean each triune Person creates space to receive the action and presence of the other two in self-giving love. This kenosis, or self-emptying, for the sake of the others is the very thing that opens the space by which God creates and receives the world. In fact, Moltmann sees a reflection of the intra-Trinitarian relationships within God’s relationship with the world. In the first order, God throws open space in God’s life by the Incarnation and the sending of the Spirit. The eschatological consummation reverses the movement, so that through the Spirit people and things are gathered to the Father to become God’s world.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ibid., 109. Moltmann suggests, “The Trinitarian relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is so wide that the whole creation can find space, time and freedom in it.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 127. Moltmann’s understanding here echoes the Cappadocian understanding of how humanity comes toward God, while differing in its view on the precedence of the Father. While God’s movement toward humanity proceeds from *monarchia* of the Father, humanity comes to know God in the reverse order. Basil, for example, concludes, “The way, then, to knowledge of God is from the one Spirit, through the one Son, to the one Father. And conversely the goodness and holiness by nature and the royal dignity reach from the Father, through the Only-begotten, to the

Extension to the World

Finally, for Moltmann, theology requires a social application that connects with God's eschatological hope for the world; thus Moltmann's ultimate "aim is to develop and practice Trinitarian *thinking* as well."¹⁰⁶ Just as God's identity is established within history in relation to creation, so the church's identity is established in relation to God and to the world.¹⁰⁷ Just as God's freedom is realized in love, "it is only in love that human freedom arrives at truth."¹⁰⁸ Moltmann calls this the social side of freedom, the love and solidarity that opens people to one another, just as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit open themselves to receive each other. In this open giving and receiving, people experience the uniting of things that were previously divided in a way that socially reflects the unity of God, which provides a helpful starting place for developing a narrative-relational theology of participation that is rooted in the triune life of God.

A Narrative-Relational Theology of Participation

The church is called to participate in and reflect the life of God in the world, a fact that significantly impacts the ways in which we define the community life of

Spirit. In this way the persons [ὑποστάσεις] are confessed and the pious dogma of the monarch does not fall away" (*On the Holy Spirit* 18.47).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 20. Likewise, Moltmann suggests, "Thinking in relationships and communities is developed out of the doctrine of the Trinity, and is brought to bear on the relation of men and women to God, to other people and to mankind as a whole, as well as on their fellowship with the whole of creation" (19).

¹⁰⁷ Love, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 216.

local congregations. While it is beyond the scope of the current project to explore this claim fully, suffice it to illustrate this idea from the gospel of John before constructing a theology of participation more fully. Jesus' teaching in John 13-17 has a markedly Trinitarian feel.¹⁰⁹ Relational and participatory language describes the Father and the Son, as well as the connection between God and believers. For example, in John 14:20 (NRSV), Jesus says, "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." The "you" in this passage is in the second person plural, rather than singular, pointing to the corporate nature of the mutual indwelling. From this it can be seen that the church participates in the life of God and, by extension, that those who abide in God (to use the language of John 15) participate in and love one another.¹¹⁰ This mutual abiding of persons in the ecclesial community corresponds to the participatory relationships in the social Trinity described above, both reflecting the life of God and revealing God and God's eschatological purposes to the world.¹¹¹ In John 13:34-35 (NRSV), Jesus sums up the reflective nature of the

¹⁰⁹ This particular example is helpful since I utilized John 14:15-21 as a dwelling text during the first session of the project, "Knowing the Social God." See chapter 4 below for more.

¹¹⁰ For a similar conclusion on the nature of ecclesial community, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 206-7. Volf rightly suggests, "As *Christians*, human beings cannot live apart from fellowship with other Christians. Salvation has an indispensable ecclesial structure, and in this sense relations between Trinitarian and ecclesial persons do correspond" (emphasis original).

¹¹¹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 199. Volf notes these two themes, Trinitarian correspondence and eschatological character of the local church, when he suggests, "The correspondence of ecclesial to Trinitarian communion is always lived on the path between baptism, which places human beings into communion with the triune God, and the eschatological new creation in which this communion is completed."

ecclesial community's relationships with one another succinctly, "Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples."

In light of our exploration in this chapter so far and in light of the God who is revealed in the Divine economy as a communion of persons, what does it mean to participate in church? The answer is significant. Cultivating a particular understanding of the nature and work of God could help cultivate a particular type of person who reflects and participates in that very life of God with others.¹¹² Yet many Christian communities define participation functionally, as taking part in a particular activity of the church. A theology of participation shifts this understanding, so that participation has less to do with taking part in a particular activity and more to do with taking part in the life of another. Rooted as it is in the life and economy of God, a theology of participation is grounded in Trinitarian notions of *perichoresis*: communion, fellowship, and relationality.

All church life should be defined in relation to the triune God and the economy of God in the world: God's work of redeeming, reconciling, and renewing creation. Salvation in this light necessitates participation in the life of God for the sake of the world. The church, those who participate in the life of God through the Spirit, takes part in the ongoing process of transformation into the likeness of God.¹¹³ Since God's mission is grounded in the Divine *oikonomia*, the practice of story

¹¹² This understanding lies at the heart of the definition of practice in chapter 1. A practice both is shaped by and actually participates in the ends toward which it points.

¹¹³ The Cappadocians called this process *theosis*.

listening at the heart of this particular project (described more fully below) must participate in and reflect the life of the triune God and participate in God's economy.

At its core, a historically orthodox Christian understanding of salvation must be rooted in the work and action of the triune God, who is both Creator and Redeemer. Understanding Christian life and community requires an understanding of God as triune.¹¹⁴ “God is one, but not in a homogenized, monolithic, inaccessible, uniform, unvaried manner. God is one in a dynamic, passionate, relational, mutual indwelling of persons in love.”¹¹⁵ The essence, the very nature of God is relational—open, participatory, receptive, welcoming—characterized by self-giving and other-receiving love, in which each person of the Trinity creates space in God's self for the other persons.¹¹⁶ The three divine persons exist in unity of communion as God but with unique, particular characteristics as Father, Son, and Spirit.¹¹⁷ In fact, the particularity of each divine person is discovered and determined through these

¹¹⁴ Jannie Swart, et al., “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Reflections on Contributions to Trinity, Mission, and Church,” *Missiology* 37 (2009), 77. The authors offer a compelling “socially embodied theology of participation” based on an “understanding of the life of the Triune God as a community of love in mutual relationality and genuine otherness.”

¹¹⁵ J. Patrick Vaughn, “Evangelism: A Pastoral Theological Perspective,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 267. Vaughn builds on Moltmann's important work on the social Trinity and the kingdom of God.

¹¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 127.

¹¹⁷ This builds well upon the notion of *ιδιότης/ιδιότητες*, or the unique characteristics of Father, Son, and Spirit, prevalent in the works of the Cappadocians. For an example, see n. 60 above.

relationships with one another.¹¹⁸ This relationality lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of *perichoresis*—the mutual interiority or reciprocal relationship within the triune God.¹¹⁹ It suggests that the three divine Persons must dwell in community but must also resist the temptation to slide into pure identity, thus erasing the communion for pure, undifferentiated union.¹²⁰ In fact, the deeper the communion among the persons, the more clearly the particularity of each is revealed.¹²¹

Salvation is God’s invitation for humanity and all of creation to participate in this divine life in community.¹²² Miroslav Volf suggests, “When the Trinity turns

¹¹⁸ Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 196-97. Cunningham rightly suggests that it is only through participation that the particularity of each person can be determined. He expands this to consider how “Trinitarian virtues” can transform human relationships, including the practice of listening.

¹¹⁹ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 172.

¹²⁰ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 172. Moltmann rightly suggests that being a “person” in the Trinity means “existing-in-relationship.” It is not difficult to hear echoes of the Cappadocian reflection on relations between Father, Son, and Spirit as a means to protect the three from sliding into undifferentiated union.

¹²¹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians 4 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985), 105-6. Zizioulas notes that a “person cannot be imagined in himself but only within his relationships” (105). Thus the mystery of the Triune God and of true human personhood “lies in the fact that here otherness and communion are not in contradiction but coincide” (106). See also Cunningham (chs. 5-6), who advocates the importance and interconnectedness of participation and particularity as Trinitarian virtues. For Cunningham, the notion of participation emphasizes mutual indwelling with others. This participation highlights not just the similarities, but more importantly, the things that differentiate people.

¹²² Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 155. Webber suggests that the “church is by the power of the Spirit brought into the dynamic fellowship of the triune God.” See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 85-86. Moltmann suggests that in sending the Son God turns toward the world and the life of God is opened for humanity and the

toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace. That same love that sustains nonself-enclosed identities in the Trinity seeks to make space 'in God' for humanity."¹²³ This participation in the life of God is a present reality, yet not a possession to be grasped or achieved once and for all, which would go against the Trinitarian nature of God's welcome. This welcome never erases or subsumes the otherness of others at the expense of relationship. Instead, it forms a dynamic and growing participation that continues to change over time and in the course of a changing context. If it is static or waning, the relationship with God weakens, perhaps ceases to be.

It could be assumed that participation in the life of God is dualistic or disconnected from the world. In fact, it is much the opposite. Salvation as participation in the life of God presupposes incorporation into a tangible expression of God's community and God's story in the world,¹²⁴ a socially embodied theology. Participation in the life of God gives a particular Trinitarian shape to life in the world, defined by dynamic, reciprocal, and open relations.¹²⁵

First, while salvation is personal, it is always communal, or ecclesial, as well.

As we participate in the life of God, we come to understand and experience more

world. Gregory of Nazianzus similarly suggested in his oration on baptism that the divine life encircles humanity and is open with room to receive the world (*Or.* 40.11).

¹²³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

¹²⁴ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 107-10.

¹²⁵ Love, 64.

deeply the corresponding communal shape of our salvation.¹²⁶ Life in God assumes that those who are saved are drawn into communion with all of those who find their life in the life of God.¹²⁷ This ecclesial dimension has deep implications for local communities of faith. Where individualism has hindered or weakened the communal experience of the modern church, the Trinitarian virtue of *perichoresis* makes creating space in one's life for others, whether they are currently inside or outside the ecclesial community, a part of Christian existence.

Second, the deep hospitality revealed in the inner life of the Trinity shapes a Trinitarian ethic of hospitality.¹²⁸ As those who have received and continue to participate in the hospitality of the triune life of God, Christians too must open our lives for the other, whether an insider or outside stranger. Volf puts it this way: “Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and

¹²⁶ Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 389. Gorman suggests that salvation is revealed in “others-centered and community driven” love.

¹²⁷ Stone, 188-89, discusses the important connection of salvation, communal existence, and participation in God when he suggests that salvation is incorporation into the social existence of the ecclesia. “Christian salvation *is* ecclesial—that its very shape in the world *is* a participation in Christ through the worship, shared practices, disciplines, loyalties, and social patterns of his body, the church” (15, emphasis original).

¹²⁸ Mortimer Arias, “Centripetal Mission, or Evangelization by Hospitality,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 424-35. Arias describes the role of hospitality in creating a mission that is centripetal, drawing people into the life and story of God and the church, rather than the traditional centrifugal model of moving from the center to the periphery. This centripetal model reflects the inner, *perichoretic* life of the Trinity.

invite them in—even our enemies.”¹²⁹ Participation in God assumes participation with others in God, so that the transformation occurs through the Spirit (*theosis*) not only on an individual basis but also as a corporate venture.

Story Listening as a Practice of a Trinitarian Theology of Participation

I briefly introduced story listening above and will explain the practice more in chapter 3, but in the context of this chapter it is important to note that story listening is an act of hospitality, a practice of participation. From this vantage point, listening is properly understood not as an action but as the essence of a life of openness grounded in the life and openness of the triune God.¹³⁰ Story listening “requires both vulnerability and response, a being-in-relation.”¹³¹ As a faithful embodiment of the triune God’s welcome, Christians must create space in their own lives to receive others as they are, to welcome them and embrace them without sweeping away their otherness or erasing their particularity. As living extensions of God’s salvation, Christians must invite others to participate in their lives, in their stories, and in their community, so that they may also be welcomed more fully into the life and story of God.

¹²⁹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 129.

¹³⁰ This vantage takes seriously and extends the idea that the ecclesia somehow becomes the “body of Christ” in the world. See an insightful exploration by Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 55-59. Zizioulas suggests “the Church becomes Christ Himself in human existence, but also every member of the Church becomes Christ and the Church” (58). Thus those in the community of faith need to be continually drawn to participate more fully in the life of God.

¹³¹ Love, 68.

How then do Christians, both individuals and communities, begin to practice this socially embodied theology of participation and open their lives, their stories, and their communities to one another and to strangers? To “open one’s life” means that someone invites another to experience God’s welcome, love, and grace through her life.¹³² It means reflecting the Trinitarian model of being-in-relation, of creating space in one’s self for others. It requires vulnerability and response. It also requires “opening one’s story,” inviting people more fully into someone’s own story, especially as she imagines and narrates her story within the story of God. And it requires her to step into their lives and their stories.¹³³ Creating space in life for another is a risk-filled venture. To be in relation, to risk opening one’s self to being changed by another, demands vulnerability. Care must be taken by all involved, so that the sharing and receiving of stories do not become acts of violence—an outcome directly counter to a participatory theology rooted in the life and the narrative of the triune God. For in the end, opening one’s life and one’s story leads to “opening one’s

¹³² Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 7. Anderson and Foley rightly suggest, “When the aim of storytelling is to interact with others and identify common ground, stories have the potential to build authentic communities of shared meaning and values.” See also Dale A. Ziemer, “Practices That Demonstrate God’s Intent for the World,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (ed. Lois Y. Barrett; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 86-88. Ziemer connects the practice of listening to one another specifically with the practices of a missional church, as defined by the *Gospel and Our Culture Network*.

¹³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2d rev. ed.; trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; 1989; repr., New York: Continuum, 2006), 303-4. Gadamer describes this as “transposing ourselves.” He suggests, “Into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves. Only this is the full meaning of ‘transposing ourselves.’ If we put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, for example, then we will understand him—i.e., become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person—by putting *ourselves* in his position” (304).

community,” expanding the invitation of hospitality so that strangers can be welcomed into the larger communion that is shared with others.

Conclusion

A culture of low commitment and high mobility makes it difficult to cultivate deep communal relationships within a community of faith. Our North American context, with its privatized religion, compounds the difficulty in cultivating relational community by condoning a rugged spiritual individualism that considers an individual’s personal relationship with Jesus the most vital aspect of faith. These factors lead easily to a church culture wherein anemic expectations regarding church participation equate such participation simply with doing church activities.

A theology of participation rooted in the life and the narrative of the triune God provides a robust foundation for reimagining Christian community and relationality. Both the Cappadocian Fathers and contemporary social Trinitarian thinkers affirm that the triune God exists in community as Father, Son, and Spirit. The intimate participation and reciprocal relationality of the Three highlights the particularity of each without ever dividing them from one another and without allowing their uniqueness to be washed away to pure unity.

As individuals participate in the life of the triune God, they must also grow in their communion with others in a local community of faith. God calls local churches to imitate and reflect God in the world, to live a life of deep relationality in startling contrast to many congregational experiences today. Thus a congregation that wants to explore initial steps in communal transformation could begin by creating space for intentional listening and sharing of stories. Story listening is a practice that creates

such space, a practice of participation, reciprocity, and openness, a being-in-relation that reflects and participates in the life and mission of God.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to replicate and extend a practice of story listening into the life of the Lake Orion Church of Christ to determine its potential as a means for communal formation. LOCC's recent history of ongoing transitions has revealed concentric social levels within the congregation and has exposed as myth the idea that the closeness once prevalent among the core family endures today. The lack of deep relational connections within the congregation has become palpable. Relational formation, therefore, is an area ripe for exploration and experimentation in the congregation. As living extensions of God's salvation, members at LOCC must invite others to participate in their lives, in their stories, and in their community so that they may also be welcomed more fully into the life and story of God. I believe that cultivating the practice of story listening at LOCC will create opportunities within the life of the congregation for narrative-relational formation with others and with God.

This project involved collaborative research by pairs of participant-researchers empowered to lead story listening groups at LOCC and to cooperatively reflect on those experiences. The project utilized a participatory action research methodology, informed by grounded theory and hermeneutic phenomenology, in order to derive substantive theory about the practice of story listening in communal formation at

LOCC. This qualitative, multi-methods approach “allows various perspectives to engage in a critical dialogue that leads to several sets of rich data, resulting in the possibility for deeper understandings”¹ so that theory might emerge from data gained during the experiences.² This chapter provides details about the strategy, format, participants, project sessions, and methods of evaluation that were utilized.

Project Methodology

For this intervention I empowered members of an inter-social planning group to co-facilitate three story listening groups at LOCC as a step towards communal formation. As leaders of these groups, the facilitators functioned as secondary researchers, collecting observations and reflections as field notes. Their insights were vital to the dialogical analysis of data throughout this intervention, and a substantive theory for the role of story listening in communal formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ emerged.³

The project involved three ninety-minute foundational sessions for the preparation of the participant-researchers, three ninety-minute reflective sessions

¹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 54.

² Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 190-91.

³ Lela Zimmer, “Qualitative Meta-synthesis: A Question of Dialoguing with Texts,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 53 (2006): 311-18. This theory is influenced by Zimmer’s helpful synthesis of grounded theory, ethnography, and Gadamerian interpretative process. In the latter, an ongoing dialogical process in which phenomena are questioned yields data that build understanding. Zimmer concludes, “The process of interpreting a description of lived experience, that is a text, is one of dialogue with that text, of questioning and being addressed. This questioning is the task of the interpretive inquirer” (316).

based on their field experiences, and a two-hour review and evaluation session with members of their story listening groups. During the first three sessions the participant-researcher group (1) reconsidered their previous experience of story listening as a first-step in extending an emerging practice, (2) developed an emerging theological rationale for the practice of story listening, and (3) was empowered to lead story listening groups reflectively. During these sessions I utilized insights and methods from a variety of approaches, including teaching, appreciative inquiry,⁴ congregational story mapping,⁵ and dwelling in the Word.⁶ The fourth through sixth sessions blended insights from grounded theory and ethnography with Gadamerian interpretive dialogue in an effort to explore collaboratively various meanings of the phenomena the facilitators experienced in their groups and to discover the emerging possibilities for the experience of story listening as a practice in communal formation at LOCC.⁷ I designed this approach to reflect the relational and collaborative vision of life in the triune God described in the previous chapter.

⁴ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004). Branson's work is a helpful adaptation of the principles of appreciative inquiry for congregational discernment and visioning processes.

⁵ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003), 262-68.

⁶ Dwelling in the Word is a communal practice of *lectio divina*. A number of different forms of this spiritual practice have developed. Rather than following a formal model, this project utilizes a modified version appropriate for the planning group's size and setting.

⁷ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine, 1967).

The Practice of Story Listening: A Methodological Description

Since a previous listening project I conducted with a small inter-social group from LOCC influenced and formed the basis for the development and practice of the current intervention, I will describe the story listening practice utilized in that project. In April 2011 a small group assembled for a one-day retreat of story sharing and listening. The retreat was structured around a cycle for sharing and listening to each individual story, followed by a time of blessing. I provided a few prompting questions for individuals to consider as they prepared for the event, but the focus and structure of each story was left up to the teller. Each participant received approximately thirty uninterrupted minutes for autobiographical story sharing.

Immediately following each story, listeners had a chance to respond to the story sharer, speaking words of blessing designed to honor the presence of God in the person's life and story, as well as to make connections with the listeners' own stories or the divine economy. The group also had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions or to explore various aspects of the story a little further—but not to critique the storytelling or to denigrate or controvert the content of the story.

Study Participants

Inside Group: Participant-Researchers

The success of this project depended greatly on the investment and enthusiasm of the participant group. Since the previous experience in story listening (April 2011) influenced the particular intervention explored in this thesis, it made sense to develop a participant-research group from individuals who had had exposure

to story listening.⁸ I initially recruited participant-researchers only from the group of eight who had participated in the story listening project from April 2011, to ensure that everyone in the group started from a common, shared experience.⁹ I thought this insight into story listening was important as they prepared to co-facilitate their own groups. However, even though I attempted to accommodate as many from that group as possible, I was able to secure commitments from only five of the eight previous participants—one member short of the critical mass of six I had determined I needed for this project.

As I evaluated the group that had committed, I realized that I had two of LOCC's three elders involved. While the remaining elder had not participated with us in April, he did have previous exposure to similar story listening experiences. Therefore, I invited him to participate in the project. This decision served the process well for a number of reasons. First, it ensured a level of ownership and investment in the project among the congregation's spiritual leaders. As noted in chapter 1, LOCC has experienced much transition in the eldership since 2004. These changes have made it challenging for the current elders to know the congregation well.¹⁰ Involvement in this project provided an opportunity for them to deepen their

⁸ This group will be referred to as participant-researchers or facilitation-pairs throughout the remainder of this project.

⁹ The participant group for the April 2011 project consisted of a purposive sampling of eight participants, representing a cross section of the congregational population (Sensing, 83). While age, gender, and race were considered, special attention was given to ensure representative diversity across three social levels within the congregation: the core family, longer attending inside strangers, and new inside strangers.

¹⁰ Two of the three elders have been members at LOCC for about five years.

relationships with a number of people at LOCC. Second, it balanced the leadership of the story listening groups. Since half of the participants were elders, each facilitation-pair consisted of one elder and one other participant. Finally, it ensured that the basic sociological criteria for the participant-researcher group were maintained. Of the six participants, half were core family members and three were inside strangers—one of those a new inside stranger.

Non-participant Observer

During each of the six sessions with the three facilitation-pairs, a non-participant observer recorded information discussed during the sessions as well as observations about rudimentary group dynamics and interactions.¹¹ Jan Cohu served as the non-participant observer for this project. Cohu has a master's degree in English and serves as a university instructor at two local colleges. She was selected because of her trustworthiness and respectability, as well as her observational and organizational skills. Her observer's notes provided an important foundation for my own field notes.

Outside Group: Story Listening Participants

An outside participant group provided an additional perspective of interpretation based on their perceptions of the story listening group experience. Each story listening facilitation-pair selected and invited four to five other members of the congregation to participate in their story listening group. A purposive sampling of

¹¹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3d ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 265-67. See Patton's helpful comparison of participant and non-participant observers.

thirteen people representing a cross section of the adult congregational population was selected under my guidance. Again, special attention was given to ensure roughly equal numbers of core family, inside strangers, and new inside strangers in each of the story listening groups.

Description of Ministry Intervention

The participant-researcher group met for six ninety-minute sessions beginning Thursday, September 29, and ending Sunday, November 6.¹² Holding the first session on a Thursday evening allowed the participants a few additional days to contact and confirm their SLPs before the second session.¹³ The remainder of the sessions occurred on Sunday afternoons from 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. Five of the six sessions convened in the auditorium annex in the LOCC building. The annex provided a flexible, multipurpose space that fostered a good environment for both teaching and group interaction.¹⁴

I began each session with a time of prayer that invoked the presence of God among us as we discerned communally how we could participate in God's life together. During the sessions I attempted to create a collaborative, participatory ethos that reflected the openness, humility, and interrelatedness of the triune God. My

¹² For a detailed description of the project session plans, see appendix E.

¹³ Throughout the remainder of the project, members of the story listening groups, or SLGs, will be referred to as story listening participants, or SLPs.

¹⁴ Due to an unanticipated scheduling conflict, the group met in LOCC's conference room for the third session. Interestingly, one of the members commented on the impact the space and arrangement made on the experience. It reminded the group of the impact aesthetics has on group dynamics. This happened, significantly, immediately before the story listening groups began to meet.

intent was to honor and welcome each participant's contributions to the process, empowering open reflection, dialogue, and the emergence of theory.¹⁵

During the first three sessions, I pursued three primary goals. First, I invited the participant-researcher group back into their previously shared story listening experience, so that it could inform and shape our common preparation for replicating and extending that practice at LOCC. Second, I used the sessions to empower the participant-researchers to facilitate story listening groups at LOCC in pairs. Finally, I created space for the group to discern an emerging theological foundation and rationale for story listening as a practice at LOCC. A mixture of shared experiences, communal reflection, and guided teaching led to the accomplishment of each goal.

Session 1: "Knowing the Social God"

Session 1 introduced the group to relational and narrative reflection on the Trinity. I began by providing an introduction to the project as a whole, including a verbal explanation of its purpose and a written schedule and overview of the sessions and subsequent homework.¹⁶ I also introduced the nonparticipant observer, described her role in the process, and encouraged each participant's openness and authenticity

¹⁵ Glaser and Strauss, 32. In their development of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss put a "high emphasis on *theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product." This methodology attempts to capture that ongoing process of emergence. Grounded theory methodology usually develops "substantive" theory. Since this research approach is grounded in a specific location and situation, this emerging theory displays a high degree of specificity and particularity (Merriam, 17, emphasis original).

¹⁶ For the "Project Schedule and Session Overview" handout, see appendix F.

in our sessions.¹⁷

After the introduction, the group shifted to a more relational and participatory mode in an effort to propel our story listening experience from April into the present. The group was invited to remember, celebrate, and explicitly build upon our previously shared experiences.¹⁸ Utilizing principles from appreciative inquiry, I encouraged the group to answer the following questions: (1) What was life-giving about the experience we shared together in April? (2) How has the experience changed the way you experience others in this group? and (3) How have you imagined and experienced your life with other people at LOCC differently since that experience?¹⁹

After reflecting on our past experience, the group spent time dwelling in the Word. I introduced the practice by encouraging the participants to allow our

¹⁷ It is common for participants in projects to modify their behavior in response to the realization that they are being observed and evaluated in a project. This tendency is called the “Hawthorne Effect.” For a brief explanation and suggestions for additional resources, see Sensing, 82.

¹⁸ This session laid an important foundation in the intervention, closely akin to Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle, which is a dialectic movement between the background of shared meaning or tradition and the finite phenomenological experience of it. See Gadamer, 291-99. Gadamer concludes, “We must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine the whole Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally” (291).

¹⁹ See Branson, 19-41. As a methodology, appreciative inquiry “provides an organization-wide mode for initiating and discerning narratives and practices that are generative (creative and life giving). Then AI guides and nourishes (“reconstructs”) the organization along the line of its best stories” (19).

conversation about the previously shared experience of story listening to be the specific lens through which they heard the passage. We utilized John 14:15-21, a rich point of reflection on inter-relationality both within the life of the triune God and between God and humanity, as our dwelling text.

Next, I guided the group through a short reflective teaching designed to help the group discover an emerging foundation for a theology of participation at LOCC. Building on the group's previous reflection and dwelling in the Word, this action-reflection exercise helped the group bring together the rich resources of the Christian tradition with their own experience and learn to name their experience more clearly.²⁰ Though time did not permit us to engage this section as much as I had planned, it did allow them to connect their story listening experiences more explicitly with concepts related to God's life in Trinity.

The final portion of the session was devoted to taking the first steps for empowering the participant-researchers to facilitate their own story listening groups. First, I helped pair the participants into facilitating teams, with one elder and one other participant-researcher in each pair. Second, I advised the facilitation-pairs on how to discern potential members for their groups and guided them through the selection process. Each group was designed to consist of six people: two facilitators

²⁰ Methodologically, this is a move toward understanding through the merging, or fusion, of the horizons of the tradition and the phenomenon of the group's recent shared experience, influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutical phenomenology. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, 299-306. Gadamer later suggests, "For tradition is a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it" (352).

and four story listening participants.²¹ Potential members were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a ratio of 1 or 2 core family members to 2 or 3 inside strangers for each group, plus one additional core family member and inside stranger as a backup. Finally, I reminded the group of the week's homework: (1) spend time prayerfully reflecting on their own stories in the life of God and (2) secure SLPs and solidify a weekly SLG meeting time for the three weeks following October 2.²²

Session 2: "Finding Our Life in the Story of God"

Session 2 continued to introduce the group to relational and narrative reflection on the Trinity. I began the session with a short reminder of the experiences we shared during session 1, then led the group through a modified "Wall of Wonder" experience.²³ In this action-reflection exercise participant-researchers worked together to record the story of God on a timeline. I functioned as the scribe as the group dialogued and interacted with one another to describe God's historical economy with humanity and the move toward the future horizon of God's new creation.

The short reflective teaching session that followed, called "Our Lives in the Economy of God," built on the Wall of Wonder exercise by describing how people

²¹ The final ratio of core family to inside strangers in the groups ranged from 1:1 to 1:2, ideal for the purposes of this project. One group initially ended up with seven participants, but one opted out after the first week due to scheduling conflicts.

²² Starting after session 3, each SLG met for three one- to two-hour gatherings before the following session.

²³ See Rendle and Mann, 127-28, 262, and Nancy Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 209-10.

continue to participate in God's story through sharing life together. The group then continued with the second part of the Wall of Wonder experience, exploring ways the Lake Orion Church of Christ is woven into God's story. Pulling out a portion of the timeline that marked the history of LOCC, I invited the participants to come up to the timeline to mark and initial the dates of significant moments in their lives. When everyone had finished, we briefly shared the stories behind these dates, giving everyone an opportunity to see the ways God has been weaving our lives together into the timeline of God's story at LOCC.

We spent the next portion of the session reconsidering our emerging understanding of participation and formation for LOCC. We did so by reflecting on the following questions: (1) What have we done today that we want to remember as we move ahead with our story listening groups and with LOCC? (2) What have we experienced today that is important for thinking about our life together? and (3) How has our experience today been a participation in the very story we have been sharing?

Next, I helped prepare the participant-researchers to facilitate their groups by discussing with them issues related to group formatting, group dynamics, and aesthetics. Building from our earlier action-reflection experience, I offered a few points of advice for empowering SLPs to share their own stories.²⁴ Finally, I reminded the group of the week's homework: contact all SLPs and empower them to develop their own stories.

²⁴ See appendix F for a written copy of the suggestions.

Session 3: “Story Listening: Empowering to Facilitate, Observe, and Reflect”

Session 3 was devoted to the final preparations before the participant-researchers facilitated their groups and began the process of reflecting on the experiences. The key element of this preparation involved walking the group through a microcosmic sample of one story listening experience, reminding the group of the basic flow of the experience and helping elucidate any structural questions that needed to be addressed. In particular, I emphasized the time of blessing that occurs after each story is shared. After walking through the flow of a story listening gathering, I opened the discussion to let the participant-researchers share what experiences they anticipated in their SLGs and consider any questions or apprehensions that they might have. Finally, I taught the group some basic tools for making observations during the session and for recording those observations as field notes.²⁵

The end of session 3 marked a turning point in the project. At the end of the session, the facilitation-pairs were charged to begin meeting with their story listening groups. Each group gathered for approximately sixty to ninety minutes, during which two group members shared their stories according to the basic structure described above. I encouraged each participant-researcher to compose a set of field notes after each gathering and make initial observations and reflections on the story listening experience, preferably as a short written reflection. I provided participant-researchers

²⁵ The tips on careful observation were modified from the helpful sections on the qualitative observation of phenomena in Merriam, 94-111, and Ammerman, 199-203. See appendices B and C.

with field note worksheets and with some initial questions for reflections.²⁶ I repeated this process after sessions 4 and 5. The field notes and reflections served as important data for determining the insider angle of evaluation at the end of the project.

Sessions 4 through 6: “From Experience to Understanding”

Sessions 4 through 6 of the project were designed to help move the group from their experiences in the story listening groups to a deeper understanding of those phenomena. These sessions were devoted to the ongoing articulation and questioning of the experiences of each SLG as a way to interpret data and discern the potential for story listening as a practice of communal formation at LOCC based on the participant-researchers’ observations and reflections. As stated above, this action-reflection approach to theory discovery is based on a qualitative interpretive methodology that synthesizes grounded theory’s constant comparative method²⁷ with insights from Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Both approaches assume the ongoing nature of the interpretive process, as well as the importance of questions and dialogue in deepening understanding.²⁸

The actual content of these sessions depended much on the nature of the

²⁶ See appendix F.

²⁷ For a foundational description of the constant comparative method in qualitative analysis, see Glaser and Strauss, 101-15.

²⁸ As noted above, Glaser and Strauss refer to “theory as an ever-developing entity” (32). Gadamer suggests, “Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing Questioning is not the positing but the testing of possibilities This is the reason why understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject” (368).

conversation and reflection of the group. The participant-researchers brought to each session a wealth of data, experience, and initial reflections from their SLG gatherings. Through much dialogue, the group analyzed the information. As the participants listened to one another, the group discovered the emerging understandings together.²⁹ Analysis took place in the interplay and exchange between researchers and data.³⁰

The first half of each session initiated the move from action to reflection. I invited the participant-researchers to articulate their experiences and dialogue on the phenomena described from their story listening groups. Methodologically, opening the conversation with questions is vital to this type of understanding and discovery.³¹ I chose, therefore, to initiate the conversation in the sessions with the following questions: (1) What did you experience in your group this week? (2) What happened that surprised you or that you did not expect? (3) What might God have been doing among members of the group?

During the second half of these sessions I guided the group through the constant comparative method. Through a period of collaborative reflection, the participant-research group discovered, honed, and modified categories or themes that

²⁹ This approach is influenced by Gadamer's understanding of the relationship between conversation and understanding. Gadamer suggests, "To reach an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (371).

³⁰ Sensing, 207. These conversations provide a rich source of what Zimmer calls "first level" interpretation, or the reflections, utterances, and behaviors of the participants. My interpretation of these data is "secondary level" interpretation (316).

³¹ Ibid., 298. Gadamer concludes, "The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open" (emphasis original).

emerged in the group's questioning and conversation.³² This was an important step in the developmental discovery process of grounded theory that emerges in a particular context. Each successive week we ended by revisiting the emerging themes as a way to confirm and clarify what we were discovering.³³

Evaluation Methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of this project, I utilized a qualitative synthetic approach to describe and assess the phenomena and to ground the emerging theory that developed through the project. Qualitative inquiry provides an ideal research approach for developing and evaluating theories that emerge in contextualized situations in the real world.³⁴ In qualitative research, the participants' perspectives, perceptions, and evaluations serve as a ripe source of information for the researcher.³⁵

My evaluation methodology utilized data triangulation to provide a thick

³² Glaser and Strauss, 107-8. Glaser and Strauss note the helpfulness of research team collaboration in grounded theory methodology, concluding, "Teammates can help bring out points missed, add points they have run across in their own coding and data collection, and crosscheck [the analyst's] points. They, too, begin to compare the analyst's notions with their own ideas and knowledge of the data; this comparison generates additional theoretical ideas. With clearer ideas on the emerging theory systematically recorded, the analyst then returns to the data for more coding and constant comparison."

³³ An important point of clarification in grounded theory is the relationship between categories and properties. Glaser and Strauss differentiate the two as follows: "A category stands by itself as a conceptual element of the theory. A property, in turn, is a conceptual aspect or element of a category" (36). Merriam clarifies this by adding, "Properties are not examples of a category but dimensions of it" (190).

³⁴ Patton, 10-11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10. Patton rightly notes that this differs greatly from quantitative approaches, which focus on "knowing how many came into the program, how many completed it, and how many did what afterward."

description of the intervention from multiple perspectives.³⁶ Using multiple angles of evaluation increases the validity of the finding by providing depth and sharpening the focus of the researcher's analysis.³⁷ Triangulation also empowers the researcher to develop a thicker interpretation of the data by bringing three angles of evaluation into conversation with one another.³⁸ For this project I evaluated the researcher's perspective, the insider perspective of the participant-researcher group, and the outsider perspective of story listening group participants.

Procedures for Data Collection

Throughout the project I followed certain basic procedures for collecting data from these three angles of evaluation.

Researcher Perspective: Personal Field Notes

Throughout the course of this project, I served as a participant observer. During each of the sessions a non-participant observer collected initial field notes, following a basic observation protocol and orientation I provided her before the first

³⁶ Sensing, 72-78; also Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 184-87.

³⁷ Moschella, 184. See also Zimmer, 316. Zimmer concludes, "In Gadamerian terms, the synthesist comes to understanding in this way by deeply questioning multiple secondary interpretations, exploring from within the hermeneutic circle where the parts [perspectives of interpretation] illuminate the whole (the phenomenon of interest)."

³⁸ Patton, 247. Patton compares triangulation to land surveying. "Knowing a single landmark only locates you somewhere along a line in a direction from the landmark, whereas with two landmarks (and your own position being the third point of the triangle) you can take bearings in two directions and locate yourself at their intersection."

session.³⁹ These field notes consisted of detailed descriptive observations and comments and direct quotations from the sessions, rather than interpretations. The purpose of using a non-participant observer for this project was twofold: (1) it allowed me to gather as much raw data as possible from each session, and (2) her observations about my own behavior increased my reflexive awareness.

Immediately after each gathering, I reviewed, assessed, modified, and interpreted the observations and used them to develop my own personal field notes for the session.⁴⁰ While reviewing and assessing the field notes, I carefully noted my own behavior throughout each session. This vital practice of reflexive awareness both made my tacit assumptions explicit and honored the reality that my participation in the project influences my perception of that which I am observing.⁴¹

Insider Perspective: Participant-Researcher Field Notes and Reflections

The second angle of evaluation for this project involved the insider perspective of the participant-researchers. I encouraged the participant-researchers to develop field notes after each SLG session that they facilitated. These field notes provided rich data regarding their group experiences. Careful consideration of these data provided two interesting points of comparison. First, it allowed me to explore how each participant-researcher's observations changed over the course of the project

³⁹ Merriam, 94-111; Ammerman, 199-203. See appendices B and C.

⁴⁰ Moschella, 118-23; Patton, 302-6. Patton's "**basic rule of thumb is to write promptly**, to complete field notes as soon and as often as physically and programmatically possible" (306, emphasis original).

⁴¹ For more on the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, see Mochella, 103-8, and Sensing, 43-45.

as the research group dialogue informed and deepened the observations made each week. Second, it allowed me to juxtapose each participant-researcher's individual insights with those of the facilitating partner.

Outsider Perspective: Semistructured Group Interview

As the final angle of evaluation in this project, I considered the perspective of an outside evaluation group, which I collected through a semistructured group interview.⁴² This outside evaluation group consisted of six of the story listening group participants. Although I attempted to accommodate as many participants as possible, a number of scheduling challenges made it impossible to get higher participation in a timely manner.

While I had hoped to get an even broader perspective, I was pleased that I was able to get feedback from half of the participants. As mentioned above, the SLPs were selected as a purposive sampling of members from LOCC. Not only did these six represent perspectives from each of the three SLGs, but they also provided helpful insights from the sociological groupings under consideration in this project. Two of the six were members of the core family. Four were inside strangers. Two of the inside strangers have been at LOCC for less than eighteen months. The interview group, therefore, provided a broad and helpful perspective on the story listening experience.

The semistructured group interview format proved ideal for this project, since it explores specific topics of interest with planned questions but also allows the

⁴² Ammerman, 206-7. See appendix G for protocol.

freedom and flexibility of an unstructured approach. I conducted the interview myself and captured the session as a digital file to supplement and expand my initial field notes. After a brief introduction I opened with a grand tour question with a number of additional prompt questions.⁴³ Immediately after the interview, I transcribed the digital recording, as well as my handwritten field notes. As with the researcher's field notes, I made observations on my own reactions in the process to demonstrate reflexive awareness.

Procedures for Data Interpretation

All three angles of evaluation provided field notes that were subsequently coded. Coding is a process by which data are brought together and analyzed based on the emergence and prevalence of major themes, ideas, concepts, and interpretations.⁴⁴ Yet grounded theory depends on the ongoing discovery of emerging theory throughout the project, so data are not simply coded and then analyzed.⁴⁵ Instead, the

⁴³ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), 85-88. A grand tour question is an open, descriptive question often used by ethnographers to initiate conversation on a particular event or topic. Spradley suggests, "Whether the ethnographer uses *space, time, events, people, activities, or objects*, the end result is the same: a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene. Grand tour questions encourage informants to ramble on and on" (87, emphasis original). Spradley mentions four different types of grand tour questions: typical, specific, guided, and task related. I employed a grand tour question of the "typical" variety, which asks "the informant to generalize, to talk about a pattern of events."

⁴⁴ Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (3d ed.; New York: Wiley, 1998), 151. Taylor and Bogdan provide helpful tips for coding data. See also Patton, 462-68, and Sensing, 202-7.

⁴⁵ See Glaser and Strauss, 101-2. My coding methodology was also informed by the subsequent clarifying work on "classic GT" by Cheri Ann Hernandez,

development of a coding scheme for data is a living process, discovered as categories and properties emerge through data analysis during the course of the project itself.⁴⁶ As soon as possible after each session, I reviewed the field note data and recorded additional observations.⁴⁷ As I reviewed the data I began to develop a coding scheme based on emerging conceptual categories and properties. As categories and properties emerged I tentatively coded both direct statements and indirect observations that seemed significant.⁴⁸ I continued to review and modify the coding scheme as I acquired more field notes, utilizing the constant comparative method to discover similarities and differences in the data.⁴⁹ Additionally, the participant-researchers helped in identifying and verifying emerging categories and properties from the data at the end of the final three sessions.

After I collected and initially coded the data from all three angles of evaluation according to the emerging coding scheme, I began to analyze the coded data as a whole, juxtaposing data sets and bringing them into conversation with one another. In order to generate hypotheses I paid special attention throughout the

“Theoretical Coding in Grounded Theory Methodology,” *The Grounded Theory Review* 8 (2009): 51-60; and Judith A Holton, “The Coding Process and Its Challenges,” *The Grounded Theory Review* 9 (2010): 21-40.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 36-37. Glaser and Strauss highlight the importance of “emergent conceptualizations” rather than utilizing or fitting the data to borrowed categories in the discovery of grounded theory.

⁴⁷ See appendix D for protocol for reviewing and coding field notes.

⁴⁸ Taylor and Bogdan, 151.

⁴⁹ Glaser and Strauss, 36, 105-13.

process to the relations among the data and the emerging categories and properties.⁵⁰ First, I read through the collected data sequentially to grasp an overall impression of the three angles of evaluation. Second, I reviewed and revised the coding scheme in response to new insights that surfaced during this reading, arriving at a final coding scheme for the data.⁵¹ Third, I reviewed the coding of each piece of the data individually and revised it according to the final coding scheme as needed. Fourth, I manually sorted the coded data into categories and properties, so that both the data and the context are retrievable.⁵² Fifth, I reviewed the sorted data again using the constant comparative method to determine convergences, divergences, and the substantive significance of the data.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to develop a substantive grounded theory regarding the potential for the practice of story listening in communal formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ. I accomplished this goal by empowering participant-researchers to facilitate story listening groups and by then guiding them through a hermeneutic dialogue on their experiences. This Gadamerian-informed, grounded theory approach combined elements of teaching, action-reflection exercises,

⁵⁰ Glaser and Strauss, 39-41. Glaser and Strauss note the importance of generating hypotheses from the data. They conclude, “In the beginning one’s hypotheses may seem unrelated, but as categories and properties emerge, develop in abstraction, and become related, their accumulating interrelations form an integrated theoretical framework—*the core of the emerging theory*” (40, emphasis original).

⁵¹ See appendix J.

⁵² Taylor and Bogdan, 154-56.

participatory dialogue, dwelling in the Word, and elements of appreciative inquiry in order to thicken the interpretation of the emerging theory. I then used the constant comparative method to gain insight into the use of story listening as a practice of communal formation for the Lake Orion Church of Christ.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In April 2011 I led a small group in an experiment with story listening at the Lake Orion Church of Christ. Could that experience be replicated and extended to create a venue for communal formation? In my quest to find out, I spent six sessions guiding a group of participant-researchers through a series of exercises and conversations that empowered them to describe and question their own experiences, creating in the sessions an opportunity for dialogue and communal theological reflection.

As previously mentioned, grounded theory, hermeneutic phenomenology, and ethnography—each of which is highly focused on human interaction, description, dialogue, and perspective as a way to elucidate emerging themes and to evaluate the effectiveness of the project—all influenced the methodology behind this qualitative research. To facilitate a thick interpretation of the intervention and to discover the emerging theory, I utilized three different angles of description and data:

(1) researcher's field notes, which represent my inside perspective as the researcher; (2) insiders' field notes, which represent the perspective of the participant-researchers as they facilitated their story listening groups; and (3) outsiders' perspectives, which were gathered through a semistructured group interview with the story listening participants. This chapter describes the findings and emerging theory suggested by

analyzing each angle of description and interpretation in an ongoing manner and then bringing these insights into conversation through the use of the constant comparative method.

Statement and Description of Evaluation Results

Researcher's Perspective

Throughout the six project sessions I served as a participant observer.¹ During these sessions a non-participant observer recorded observations, conversations, and quotations from the session. Immediately after each session, I reviewed these rudimentary notes, amended them by recording my own observations and memories from the sessions, and made additional notes about the characteristics of the participants, their styles of interaction with each other, and the content and manner of their conversations, as well as more subtle factors of their nonverbal participation. I also reflected on my own behavior, practicing in the process the reflexive awareness that my participation both influences the sessions and changes that which I am observing.² I then typed all of the field notes, following a standard format, and saved them as electronic files. These field notes served as the primary data set for constructing my interpretation of what was happening within the participant-researcher group over the course of our six sessions.

¹ Merriam, 94-106.

² Ibid., 100-102. Without reflexivity, the conclusions drawn in the research process will say more about the researcher than about the people or issue being studied. Cf. Kristy Nabhan-Warren, "Embodied Research and Writing," *JAAR* 79 (2011): 378-407. Nabhan-Warren makes a strong case for the presence and experience of the researcher in phenomenological and ethnographic religious research, challenging the traditional Cartesian dualism in research.

Throughout the sessions, I reflected on the available field notes, allowing a coding scheme to emerge and adjust over time. Additionally, as field notes from the other two angles of interpretation became available, I brought the data sources into conversation with one another through the constant comparative method. As the project continued, core categories emerged, along with properties and dimensions of those themes. The final articulation of the coding scheme is represented in appendix J.³ From these categories, I generated themes regarding the potential of story listening as a practice of communal formation at LOCC and compared those interpretations with the other methods of evaluation as the basis of the emerging theory.⁴

Solidarity Experienced through Story Listening

One of the most important themes that emerged from an analysis of my field notes is the role of story in the experience of solidarity between individuals and among groups. As early as the first session of the project, the participant-researchers highlighted the importance of story for deepening the relationships between people. I began that session by inviting the group to reflect on the story listening experience they had shared together in April 2011. The first person to speak up said, “What was most life-giving to me was the different ways we could look at our life experiences and our upbringing.” He went on to explain the importance for him of both the differences and the similarities or overlaps in the stories told that day. Another group

³ The general coding method utilized in this project adapts the “grounded theory” (GT) method developed by Glaser and Strauss. It is also informed by the subsequent clarifying articles on “classic GT” by Hernandez and Holton.

⁴ Holton, 21.

member shared about the power of the story listening experience in helping create a “deep connection or bond” between himself and someone else. He went on to ask the group, “When do you really share your life story with someone else? Hardly ever, so it’s a precious experience, a connection of people.”

In the second session the group continued to focus on the role of story in bonding people with one another. They shared a timeline event, which began with the participants’ narrating the story of God together. Then each member of the group marked on a timeline in different colors the dates of key moments in their own lives. An interesting interweaving of colors and initials resulted. Due to time limitations, they were not able to explain fully why those dates were significant, but it was a reminder that those moments marked key experiences in the lives of different people in the group. During the time of reflection that followed, the first responder said, “I’m amazed by the bottom illustration. Two of us both have 1985. It’s fascinating.” Another individual replied, “We may each be individual strands that are being braided together, even if we didn’t know we were being braided together.” In my field notes, I observed, “It was interesting to watch their reactions as they began to see their stories intersect. It’s like a tapestry that is being woven together, a part of the work of creation and recreation.”

The role of story listening in creating group solidarity became even more obvious once the story listening groups began to meet. After the first meeting one participant-researcher in particular reflected that it seemed as if everyone in his group felt awkward as they gathered for the first meeting, but by the end of the session the environment seemed completely different. In my field notes I recorded,

It seems like as early as the first session, groups began to move from awkwardness to comfort with closeness. The barriers between people seem to have become more porous, even before everyone had shared their story. Things shifted significantly, as groups went from feeling ‘strained’ at the beginning to people ‘lingering’ to continue ‘self-sustaining dialogue’ after the session ended.

This experience continued to grow through the weeks as the participant-researchers noted that the SLPs seemed more “engaged,” “comfortable,” and “attentive,” as well as practicing more intentional “deep listening,” with each successive week.⁵

Not only did story listening serve to connect people to one another, it also exposed the judgmental assumptions and preconceptions that listeners had about others. Through analyzing my field notes, I discovered that judgmentalism had been operative in two different ways among participants, both of which inhibited the formation of deep community. First, the more prevalent prejudice lay in judging others negatively before hearing their stories. As early as session 2, one participant confessed his growing realization that his “perception isn’t reality.” He continued, “It’s important that we all know each other’s story, so we can learn to be more forgiving.” I noted,

This is a vital way that story shapes community. He is discerning something important in this articulation. He’s helping the group connect individual stories and experiences with the ways that they impact life in the greater church community. It empowers people to be more tolerant, empathetic, compassionate, and understanding.

After the three gatherings with his SLG, he concluded, “My perceptions were shattered. That really impacted me. It’s given me an opportunity to understand that

⁵ This was true in all but one group, which had a “business-like” final session. Only one story was shared that week and there was little conversation during the time of blessing. Rather than lingering afterward, the group dispersed fairly quickly.

people aren't on my same page.” Another participant-researcher confessed, “I realized [after listening] I was judging people—I was wrong about all four [group members]!”

The second type of prejudice involved people who were judging themselves because of their preconceptions about others. One participant-researcher recounted the words of an SLP who said, “I always put the members of this church on such a high pedestal . . . and then I heard their stories!” One participant-researcher noted, “I am realizing that God works in family and important people, but most of us didn't realize it until afterward. Ultimately, people are mostly the same.” In my field notes, I concluded,

Here, he seems to be discussing and wrestling with the role of a “spiritualized impression” of other people. Sometimes our overspiritualized view of others actually makes forming community with them more difficult. Yet story rehumanizes them, bringing them back to earth and making community possible again.

These comments and revelations about prejudice reveal the important ways in which story sharing and listening not only empower relationship formation but also help mitigate certain forces that inhibit relationships.

Listening and Relational Communal Formation

A second major theme that emerged from an analysis of my field notes is the vital role of listening in relational and communal formation. While the project necessitated the willingness of individuals to share their stories, willingness to listen to those stories supplied an imperative component of the experience as well. In my field notes I highlighted the participant-researchers' recognition of a pattern of increasing openness and transparency each week. They connected this pattern both to

the willingness of people to experience vulnerability through sharing their own stories and to the SLG's willingness to listen. The group recognized in this type of "deep listening" a countercultural aspect requiring discipline, intention, and time. One participant said, "What was vital was that we made intentional space in our lives for one another." Another added, "Society teaches us the opposite; it teaches us to separate ourselves. But we crave telling about our real selves. We need to find a way to do it. I think it is in us to connect with others." Finally, another added, "We don't pour out our lives at church. This [experience] is a really unusual thing. It just doesn't happen in this world." In my field notes, I noted that they wrestled with how the desire to be known in community matches up with having little space for sharing about our lives with others.

Three additional properties of listening emerged and are worth considering here. First, a mutual, reciprocal relationship exists between listening and sharing. When people intentionally listen, others are freed to share; when others share, people are freed to listen. During our fifth session one researcher noticed that his SLG shifted from mostly looking down in their first gathering to having more eye contact in the second—to looking engaged and practicing "deep listening." At the end, as we considered what we had learned, he said, "People are getting more attentive; there's excitement in their listening."

Second, the act of listening frees people to share more deeply about their lives and experiences. Each group noticed that the level of authenticity and disclosure seemed to grow each week. In our second session one participant-researcher asked the group about a potential SLP who was anxious about the experience. "She didn't

want to talk about the ‘bad things,’” he said, “so I told her to talk about the good things.” I encouraged him, saying, “That’s fair. Free people to tell their own stories. Things may change after they hear other group members share their stories.” Indeed, during session 5, he told us, “She was anxious and eager to share during the second [SLG] session. She shared everything about her family and about disappointments because the person [who shared] before her had.” Another participant-researcher reflectively concluded, “By listening I experienced an openness to be open. I was more comfortable to be more open after [others] shared.” I observed in my notes that people seem to be “liberated to free speech through another’s transparency. There is a solidarity that forms in story listening.” During the fourth session, I noted with surprise that several people who are not naturally outgoing wanted to be a part of the SLG experience, agreeing to do it “without reservation.” This unexpected enthusiasm certainly merits consideration in thinking about story listening as a practice of community formation.

Third, the practice of listening liberated the group from its captivity to time. Most groups discovered that, as the weeks progressed, stories got longer and included more depth and detail. Several of the facilitators initially experienced anxiety about this time stretching, but they quickly recognized that the rest of the group was deeply connected with the stories, not showing any signs of time anxiety. In session 5, one participant-researcher shared, “Our second gathering went for two hours. Each person talked for forty-five minutes. I didn’t feel any pressure from others to end it.” His facilitating partner added, “The two stories were enrapturing.” This phenomenon

suggests that when others share deeply about their lives, people feel both the freedom and the patience to listen.⁶

Expanding the Tradition: God-talk and Blessing

A third theme that emerged from an analysis of my field notes is the relationship between the time of blessing and the role that explicit language about God in the sharing of stories may have in expanding our tradition's language. Despite my verbal guidance to the participant-researchers about the time of blessing following each story, they returned from their first gatherings feeling confused and struggling with questions about how to strengthen this portion of their time. The uncommonness of blessing in our tradition, noted by the groups, made it necessary for the members to learn and develop the skill over the course of the gatherings.

In this vein, one member commented in session 4, "I didn't think they talked about God enough. God was only mentioned in passing." Another agreed, saying, "I had the same thought. That's hard for us to talk about sometimes in our fellowship." Interestingly, one participant-researcher shared that, during one of the stories, he wrote in his notes that he had seen her overcome obstacles in her life, but he subsequently crossed out his note because the storyteller herself clearly felt and conveyed that God had led her through life's circumstances. This scene marked an early shift in perception that continued throughout the weeks. Three factors were experienced fairly consistently across the groups: (1) the ability of group members to talk explicitly about God increased as the story listening and times of blessing

⁶ One participant-researcher did suggest that, if individuals simply repeated themselves, then the listeners might show more signs of anxiety and frustration.

continued; (2) the females tended to be more apt to apply active verbs to God's action and presence in their lives; and (3) people found it easier to spend the time of blessing reflecting on connections or divergences between their own stories and the storyteller's than to talk about where they saw the presence of God in a story.

Participant-Researchers' Insider Perspective

A second angle of evaluation involved the field notes, personal insights, and reflections of the participant-researchers from each of the three story listening group gatherings.⁷ Since each person had previous experience in story listening, they served not only as group facilitators, but also as informed researchers. I empowered them during the third session to take notes and make reflections on their groups. Before the gatherings, I provided the participant-researchers with field note worksheets and a series of questions to stimulate their ongoing reflection after the gathering.⁸ They returned field notes and reflections to me at the end of each subsequent session. I noticed in their notes several of the same themes that surfaced in my own field notes from the six sessions with the participant-researchers.

Solidarity through Story Listening

The participant-researchers' field notes, like mine, reveal that story listening brings people closer together. The facilitator-pairs noticed early in the SLG gatherings the impact of the practice on the transformation of relationships. One

⁷ I received field notes and reflections on the sessions from five of the six participant-researchers.

⁸ See appendix C and appendix F respectively.

facilitator noted, “Everyone opened up more [after the first session] and the conversations were about life experiences versus the beginning of the session where they were just generic.” He went on to suggest, “I’m learning that, if we take the time to listen to each others’ stories, we can and will all grow.” One facilitating elder indicated surprise at the diversity of the SLPs in his own group, including one participant with significant health considerations and a single mother who had to arrange for childcare so she could attend. He suggested that the practice has the potential to attract and bond those who may not be attracted to other forms of activity or fellowship offered at LOCC.

While many participants expressed similar insights in passing, it was enlightening to follow the progression of one facilitator in particular. After the first session, during which he shared his own story, he noted,

It is with excitement and reservation that we share our stories, not knowing how far to go in the details and interaction with God. Before we start we are a community in Christ, but we have surface relationships, not deep relationships. . . . My story is predicated upon the trust and relationships I currently have with the people in attendance.

After the second session, he not only noted the increasing depth and transparency of the stories others shared, but also the impact that listening to them had on him. He concluded,

The stories this week went deeper with more detail. The storytellers this week had more willingness and comfort to share the ugly details in their life stories. [The experience this week] caused me to rethink my story. My story was a little protected during the first week. I’m learning that it is safe to share more of my story because many other people have walked down a similar path. In doing so, my relationships will grow closer.

This shift in the depth and transparency of the stories, as well as the bond experienced in the SLG, continued as the group met for the third time. In his reflections after the final session, this facilitator concluded,

Story listening provides an opportunity and creates space to allow listeners to develop or grow in relationships with others. The result of this is the potential to form community. Each week we went even deeper. The one person who was most reluctant and nervous to share her story gave more detail than the others. The experience of this practice changed from week to week in the following ways: (1) Depth of stories; (2) Detail of the stories; . . . (8) increase in verbal confirmation of other stories (like experiences, similar thoughts and feelings); and (9) open expressions of the personal benefit to be a part of this experience together. . . . We have all traveled on a path that led us to LOCC, to be drawn together—woven in love and unity for His purpose and His glory. My relationships have greater meaning and hope now and in the future.

In addition, the co-facilitators of a different SLG both underscored the ways their group came to experience and appreciate the stories they heard. One of them concluded, “Our stories are alike in more ways than we would imagine.” His co-facilitator remarked, “I know I will be much more comfortable talking to these people in church or at any place since I feel connected to them through both sharing and listening.” They each specifically noted that their group decided to share lunch together after their final gathering. It was a spontaneous but unanimous decision made by the group. During lunch they continued to talk about the different “connections the stories elicited.” This simple, spontaneous experience affirms the potential of story listening to form community.⁹

⁹ It is important to note that one of these facilitators struggled to process one group member’s decision to quit the SLG after the first gathering. While he made note of this in his reflections from the second and third sessions, the subject did not come up in either his co-facilitator’s notes or from the SLPs in the outside interview.

Listening and Preconceptions

One key theme that emerged from my field notes was the role of story listening in exposing and shattering preconceptions. The participant-researchers' notes and reflections reaffirmed this theme. For example, during their second gathering one of the facilitators noted the following insight from a storyteller, "I was amazed by the story last week. Now I realize that we do not know someone if we do not know their story. Do not judge!" The facilitator went on to reflect that the turning point for this individual was learning while listening to the other person's story that she shared a similar, significant experience with the storyteller.

While the role of story listening in overcoming preconceptions about others was mentioned in many of the reflections, it was again interesting to track the theme through one particular facilitator's reflections. After the first gathering he noted, "Telling my own story is easy. I'm more than willing to talk, but need to learn to listen!" He went on to note his surprise that people with such diverse backgrounds have so many similarities. After the second gathering he reflected, "I learned I am horrible at knowing my brothers and sisters and I am the most judgmental guy on the planet." After the final session he wrote, "I believe God has placed me here now to grow into a less judgmental person. I also believe he is constantly working in the lives of his people. This time shattered my false perceptions."

Story Listening, the Social Playing Field, and the "Myth of Closeness"

One of the premises underlying this project was the recognition that different social levels operating at LOCC make it difficult to form deep, relational community. On the surface, people consider the church a close family. However, while several

years of congregational study and ethnographic reflection has disclosed a strong “core family” that is socially connected, a second social ring, which I have called “inside strangers,” finds it difficult to be a part of that core group. The participant-researchers’ field notes revealed two ways that the practice of story listening addresses this reality for the sake of communal formation.

First and foremost, story listening has the ability to level the social playing field. Several participant-researchers suggested that they felt the group helped mitigate the distinctions between the social groups. In particular, one said, “I do not think the individuals see themselves as ‘core’ or ‘strangers.’ It seems everyone feels on an even playing field. I never caught myself regarding anyone differently either.” Two other facilitators noted that they felt the inside strangers in their groups appreciated the space to share their stories with others. One wrote, “[Story listening] provides an experience for our core family members to understand the lives and experiences . . . physically, emotionally, and spiritually, of our inside strangers.” These data suggest that the practice of story listening groups has the potential to initiate important bonds between the core family and inside strangers and mitigate the social distinctions within the community.

Second, these field notes revealed the potential for story listening to expose a “myth of closeness” that has been operative at LOCC—a myth especially prevalent among members of the core family. Since this group spends a lot of time together, many believe they are close and know one another deeply and intimately. This assumption was challenged as early as the first week. One participant-researcher noted, “It was observed that we learned a lot about the two who shared, even those

who had known these people for several years.” Another facilitator concluded his reflections on their first gathering,

We often assume we know the quality of relationships between two people. You can't know this until you are with people and spend time with them; then you get to know them and see how they interact with others, especially when they are sharing something personal.

After the second gathering, a facilitator who is a part of the core family wrote, “This week I learned not to put expectations on others, or think they should act a certain way, because I don't know them at all!” Giving me his field notes and reflections after the final gathering, he said, “I've decided I want to do this with my men's small group. We've been meeting together for years and I'm pretty sure I don't know any of them.”

Story Listening Group Participants' Outside Perspective

The final angle of evaluation involved a semistructured group interview of the story listening group participants. Since they had neither the training and ongoing reflection that occurred in the project sessions nor preconceived notions about the project's purpose and goals, this group provided an ideal outside perspective. They came with nothing but their experiences from the story listening group gatherings. Therefore their descriptions, insights, and perceptions added vital insight to the phenomenological process and the emergence of ideas about story listening as a practice of communal formation at LOCC.

While not all of the SLPs were able to participate in the interview, representatives from each SLG attended. Both core family and inside-stranger perspectives were represented in the conversation as well. The group met on Sunday,

November 13, 2011, from 1:30 to 3:30. The interview followed the protocol represented in appendix G. While I handwrote initial notes and reflections, I also recorded the session as a digital MP3 file. I transcribed the session and combined it with my initial and ongoing reflections to serve as field notes from the interview. I then coded the notes to discover the significant themes emerging from the conversation. Several of the same themes surfaced during the interview that emerged from the other two angles of evaluation.

Cultivating Relationships God Intends

The primary theme that emerged from the group interview addressed the role of story listening in forming and nurturing relationships. During the conversation both the core family members and the inside strangers noticed that LOCC has traditionally ordered its life around worship and social gatherings, but this has not cultivated and likely never will cultivate deep community. One participant said,

After sharing my journey, I felt others connected to something in my life and their life. We now have a common appreciation. Sometimes this appreciation is hard to find in a church worship setting. Here the blessing of community and love grew out of sharing our life experiences with one another.

Similarly, a member of the core family shared, “What came out of this activity for me was getting to know each other deeper than the surface on Sunday morning. Even in just twenty or thirty minutes it was much deeper, a quick dip into their life.” The group agreed that story listening could be a vital practice for helping the congregation deepen the bonds of the LOCC community.

Later in the session, an inside stranger offered what she felt was one of the most important ways story listening can impact community formation. She suggested

a direct relationship exists between knowledge, accountability to one another, and unconditional love. “As we learn more about one another, it leads to increased accountability and dependence.” Later, another individual built on this comment by suggesting that listening opens up new possibilities for people. “People are struggling with something and so scared to share or talk to anyone about it. If we shared more, then we might be more open to depending on one another.” An inside stranger responded that she was initially scared to let people know the hard parts of her story, but by listening she realized she was not alone. “That’s how two of us became sisters,” she said. “We saw what we’d been through and how we searched for the same thing We became sisters!” By listening to one another share their stories in the SLG, these two women, who were strangers to one another, became family.

Countercultural Nature of Listening

A second theme that emerged from the interview was the countercultural nature of listening. This was felt on two levels. As noted above, listening as a practice is not a common habit among the LOCC community. The congregation’s culture tends to order its life around activities, which do not cultivate deep listening practices. In addition, listening runs counter to the surrounding culture, which the interviewees suggested works against listening on three important levels.

First, the group agreed that our culture of busyness makes it hard to listen. One SLP reaffirmed the group’s conclusion by confessing, “My initial reaction when I was asked to participate was ‘Do I have time for this?’ Then I read [the invitation] again and realized that I wanted to make time for this. I’m learning that having time to have relationships is so important, so I’m trying to declutter and simplify my life

right now.” The tension he expressed points up the conflict between a culture of busyness and the time needed to cultivate relationships.

Second, one member made an incredibly insightful observation about the impact of the experience on the listeners. She said that over the course of the three weeks she felt more and more “liberated to listen.” She reflected,

In our society we are always thinking of how to get our thoughts out there. [During this experience] thinking about the next thing we wanted to say wasn't an option. It was off the table. We could just listen. That was really cool. It makes it different for the speaker also, knowing that nobody is going to come back and say anything to me right now, whether negative or positive. It takes the pressure away, especially from those who are timid. For those who were in the circle, we all had the same goal: we were listening. For those who were speaking, you didn't have to try to grab attention. You already had it.

Finally, the group affirmed that this experience of story listening reminded them that the Christian community is supposed to be a community of relationship and interdependence. They suggested that American culture teaches people to be independent and not to rely on others for help, support, or encouragement, but couched their dreams for a Christian community in very different terms, using words such as “acceptance,” “relationships,” “knowing each other,” and “unconditional love and compassion.” It was obvious as they talked that this is not what they normally experience in church. Instead, they felt that, even though the congregation gathers together in the same building, LOCC more accurately reflects American culture, where people are independent and isolated. One SLP expressed the tension this way, “In our society, we are taught that we are independent In the church we are supposed to be upside down from that, but we hear [about independence] so much that it is hard.” Another interviewee confessed her initial experience of this tension

as fear, but allowed the story listening experience to change her. She concluded, “When I came and the group started, I didn’t have the fear anymore. I just felt safe, loved, prayed for, and not judged. I was able to talk about a lot of things.”

Judgment and Preconceptions

This final observation leads to the third major theme that emerged from the interview. The group felt that story listening helped address false judgments and preconceptions that people have about and toward others. In the first place, they pointed out, it is easier to judge people when they are not known. One core family member said, “You can’t love and support people the way we should if you don’t know them. We tend to judge people when we don’t know them well.” They agreed that the experience of sharing and listening to stories had torn down walls between themselves and others in their SLGs. One participant explained the dual impact the experience had on him. On the one hand, listening to someone else’s story gave him a deeper respect, appreciation, and tolerance for the other person. On the other hand, his willingness to share his own faults with others alleviated his worry about what others might be thinking of him since he no longer had to hide his fears, failures, or doubts. Sharing his story and listening to others freed him to live more authentically. He concluded, “It enriches the entire communal experience.”

The group also mentioned the liberation found in a space free from judgment. All of the participants expressed an initial anxiety with the story listening experience, primarily because of a fear that others would judge them. One inside stranger confessed, “I discovered that I will always judge myself more harshly than others are going to. You expect them to judge you harshly, and then they don’t.” Not only were

fears allayed, they also confessed that their own preconceptions about others were undone. One SLP shared, “I was surprised by certain people’s stories. I thought I knew something about who they were, but I didn’t. It shattered certain expectations I had about people.”

Together, these two facets show the power of story listening for mitigating preconceptions. When the truth about others’ lives remains shrouded in mystery, it is far easier to judge or to create preconceived ideas about others. When we enter into deeper relationship by listening to their stories, we come to a deeper appreciation for who they are, even if the truth of their lives is more sordid or more idyllic than we imagined. As the group noted, stories have power to redeem and reconcile relationships with others. This realization provides an important contribution to reflection on the role of story listening in communal formation, especially as it enriches the themes from the previous two angles of interpretation.

Conclusion

The goal of this project was to empower a group of participant-researchers to facilitate inter-social story listening groups as a way to determine the potential impact of story listening as a practice of communal formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ. Notes from our project sessions, the participant-researchers’ field notes, and an interview with story listening group participants revealed several key themes that highlight the positive potential for story listening as a practice of formation. First, the practice of story listening enriches the relationships between individuals, creating a deeper level of solidarity, respect, and understanding between individuals and among groups. Solidarity emerges when individuals discover both the similarities and

differences between others' stories and their own. Second, the countercultural practice of listening to others cultivates the formation of deep relationships between people. Third, story listening can play a crucial role in mitigating or correcting the influence of prejudices and preconceptions people have about others. Finally, in a congregation that exhibits a sharp distinction between those who are a part of the core family and inside strangers, inter-social story listening groups have the potential to overcome distinctions and make the boundaries between these social circles more porous. The overall consensus from each angle of interpretation is that story listening groups have the potential to transform the communal life and experience of LOCC and that the practice should, therefore, be expanded into the congregation. The next chapter concludes this thesis by summarizing the lessons learned from this project, discussing various ways those lessons might be generalized, and anticipating potential post-thesis opportunities for expanding the practice of story listening at the Lake Orion Church of Christ and beyond.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the course of this project, I attempted to apply to my particular ministerial context the ministry competencies that I developed during the doctor of ministry program. By integrating a Trinitarian theology of participation with ministerial leadership, I sought to empower members of a participant-researcher group to facilitate a practice of story listening at the Lake Orion Church of Christ. The focus of the project was to extend story listening into the congregation to determine its potential as a practice of communal formation. This final chapter expands the scope of the project by considering its validity as well as its ministerial and ecclesial significance and the implications for further actions resulting from it.

Interpretations and Validity

To ensure the credibility of this project, I must consider how issues of external and internal validity affect its interpretations. These interpretations arose from my synthesis of methodological insights from hermeneutic phenomenology and grounded theory—qualitative research methodologies that assume a level of subjectivity in their research data acquisition and analysis. While grounded theory depends on the emergence of themes from sets of data, the discovery, determined importance, and interpretation of those themes depend on the researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenology assumes a fusion of horizons in the descriptive and dialogical process that leads to the

discovery and deepening of understanding. In other words, while describing and questioning phenomena with others, the participants bring their particularity, from past to present, to bear on the conversation.¹ While a shared religious tradition currently unites the participants, the story listening process highlighted not only the similarities but also the differences of the participants' life experiences and engagement with the tradition. In this section I reflect on the validity of this approach.

External Validity

While this project was conceived for a particular context, and while the phenomena described and considered herein emerged from that context, at least three implications from this project may be generalized to potential applications in other ministerial contexts.

First, this project emerged from a perceived congregational need of the Lake Orion Church of Christ. In the beginning I had three potential project topics in early stages of development, each of which addressed a need that I perceived in the congregation. I knew, however, that the project would fail if others did not perceive the need as well. After a positive group response to the story listening experiment in April 2011 and the group's encouragement to build on that project, I decided to develop an idea for a larger congregational project focusing on the practice of story listening and communal formation. The fact that the participants in the original story listening experience lent full support to the new project and invested time, effort, and energy to serve as participant-researchers evinces such a felt need in the

¹ Gadamer, 305.

congregation.

While not all congregations will exhibit the same social structure as LOCC, all congregations must consider issues of communal formation and deepening interpersonal relationships. Even individuals and congregations with strong interpersonal relationships can benefit from ongoing experiences of story listening. Throughout the course of the project, as both the participant-researchers and the story listening participants continued to hear others share their stories, they were forced to rethink and reimagine their own stories. Listening deepens understanding, not only of those sharing their stories, but also of the listeners.

I have discussed the project with leaders and members from other congregational contexts and have found significant interest in LOCC's story listening experience. I think that this is simply because many congregations do not experience deep, relational formation as a community, especially in the American context where individualism and busyness influence most church experiences. The specific practice of story listening could be helpful for congregations addressing deeper social and relational formation needs or the need for intentional openness in communal formation.

Second, the success of this project depended on the personal, emotional investment of participants from two different groups. The first was the participant-researchers. I originally intended to assemble a planning group with previous story listening experience and help them develop a model for the practice of story listening at LOCC. We would work together to create a product that could be instituted later, as a second step, after the thesis was completed. Yet while I did get a group to

commit to help with that idea, I could tell their enthusiasm level was low. This surprised me since they all spoke so positively of their story listening experience in April 2011.

After consulting with my thesis director, I made a methodological shift and reimagined the project as a more participatory and dialogical one. Before finalizing the plan, I discussed the new idea individually with each committed participant-researcher. They all embraced the new methodology with excitement and enthusiasm, even though it demanded a substantially greater level of commitment from each of them. The new approach invited them into a living experience, rather than a dry, academic exercise, and they embraced the goal and committed willingly to the extra effort.

This moment was significant to the project, and researchers and leaders in other contexts would do well to keep in mind the key importance of the relationship between the participants and the project. My methodological shift gave the participant-researchers a great deal of ownership in the process. They recognized that their own shared experiences with story listening could add a wealth of insight to the project. They wanted to test and explore their own understandings more fully by directly leading story listening groups and reflecting deeply on those experiences. Such action-reflection approaches to congregational projects benefit everyone because they allow participants to be more fully and directly engaged in the project and the research. In addition, the members recognize that they are doing theology, whether inchoately or formally, even if they are reticent to call it that. This more phenomenological approach invited the participant-researchers to put those natural

theological skills to work in a safe community of learning that deepened their reflection as individuals and as a group. I am convinced that the opportunity to work together in this type of environment, one that cultivated open dialogue and virtuous conversation, deepened the relationships between the participant-researchers and the project, as well as the relationships the participant-researchers shared with one another.

The participant-researchers were critical to the success of this project. Its final shape depended on their previous experience in story listening as they facilitated their own groups in pairs, modeling story sharing for their SLGs and cultivating an environment conducive to story listening. During the three preparation sessions of the project, I frequently invited the participant-researchers to recall their own story listening experience as a way to prepare them for facilitating through communal reflection. Their experience was vital to the process, and the project's success depended on their ability to facilitate the groups. For this reason I decided to organize the facilitators in pairs. Working with a partner both relieved the anxiety that often comes with leading a new group and expanded the giftedness that the participant-researchers brought to the facilitation process. The loosely defined structure for the gatherings enabled the facilitator-pairs to shape the final experience of their SLG in a way that met their giftedness. I suspect this had an important impact on the groups' experiences, as did the willingness of the participant-researchers to articulate and reflect deeply on their own experiences. Other researchers or congregations attempting to initiate this type of experience will find it important to utilize participant-researchers who bring to the table this mix of experience, facilitation

giftedness, and reflective ability.

The second group with a vital investment in the process was the story listening participants. The project demanded not only their commitment to be present through the story listening gatherings, but also their willingness and ability to attend to others as well as to expose their own stories. The participant-researchers organized their groups with relative ease, and I was pleased to discover during our research sessions that the level of interest and disclosure seemed to grow with each story listening group gathering.

One final ingredient for the success of the project lay in utilizing action-reflection as a mode of research and of leadership. A chief method that I wanted to employ in the final framework of this project was the democratization of leadership in the group as a way to move from a top-down leadership approach to a more communal-collaborative approach influenced by the Trinitarian insights described in chapter 2. The strength of this project depended on the particular type of leadership and research community cultivated throughout the course of the project. Such action-reflection methodology transfers easily to a wide range of contexts.

Dependability

While qualitative research can make reliability problematic, two specific facets of the project strengthen the dependability of this thesis. First, this project served as an extension of a previous story listening project. Since the first experience was deemed successful, a second, more intentional, extension of that experience

increases the level of dependability.² Additionally, the research for this project compared the experiences of three concurrent story listening groups. While each group displayed its own uniqueness, primarily based on the ethos of each group and the particularity of both the facilitators and the participants involved, surprisingly consistent findings resulted from the phenomenological examination of each group. This comparison of results from multiple story listening groups increases the level of credibility.

Internal Validity

This thesis presents a study internally valid in methodological delivery, data collection, and data analysis. The methodological approach utilized in the six sessions was grounded in rigorous, constructive theological research, much of which is reflected above in chapter 2. This social Trinitarian theology of participation undergirded the decision to utilize the insights of grounded theory and phenomenology in the development of the final methodology. While the focus in the three preparatory sessions involved a mixture of action, reflection, discussion, and teaching, the theological research provided the foundation for each exercise and all of the content. Data collection followed well-established methods of qualitative research, including participant observation and semistructured group interviews with an inside group (the participant-researchers) and an outside group (the story listening participants). This standard qualitative research approach involving triangulation of

² Glaser and Strauss, 230-33. When reflecting on the credibility of grounded theory methodology, Glaser and Strauss conclude, “Multiple comparison groups make the credibility of the theory considerably greater” (231).

data collection methods helps neutralize particular biases or opinions. Accompanied by insights from hermeneutic phenomenology, the data analysis followed the grounded theory approach of discovery. Both approaches assume that understanding emerges through the insight of study participants as they articulate and reflect upon particular experiences. I employed reflective confirmation of key themes in the data by consulting with representatives of the inside and outside interview groups to ensure a fair representation of their groups' perspectives and insights. Additionally, in the results I attempted to point out any negative cases or divergent patterns that surfaced in the data collection.

Hawthorne Effect

Throughout the course of the project, I paid special attention to how the Hawthorne Effect could influence participants in the project. I did not want participants to feel anxiety about taking part in a project that would be analyzed and evaluated or to feel pressure to make the project succeed on my behalf. The announcement early in the course of the project of my forthcoming transition out of ministry at LOCC made this consideration doubly important.

The members of the participant-researcher group committed to the project early, based on their previous experience in a story listening project. Their involvement was rooted primarily in their enthusiasm for the particular project and their support for its goals—confirmed by their desire to use a methodology that demanded more commitment but allowed more participation in the experience. Most SLG participants committed to the project prior to the announcement of my transition as well, and the participant-researchers selected the SLPs themselves. This again

helped mitigate the potential impact of the Hawthorne Effect.

Finally, at least one SLP displayed personal reflexivity on this topic during the outside group interview, saying, “I originally did this for Eric, but realized quickly that I was going to get so much out of it.” Then, in the wake of the project’s conclusion, one participant-researcher and one of the SLPs collaborated to initiate a story listening group of their own—hinting that their primary interest was the potential impact of story listening for the LOCC community, not having the project succeed for my sake. For these reasons I believe that the Hawthorne Effect was minimized and did not play a significant role in skewing the collected data.

Reflexivity

A final area of consideration is reflexivity. I took great care throughout the project to note my own behavior during the sessions and consider the ways my own participation might be influencing the unfolding of the project. In this regard, the use of a non-participant observer enriched my self-awareness. Her invaluable record of basic information regarding my actions and behavior in the sessions served as a helpful entry point into ongoing reflection on my presence and behavior in the sessions. I believe this reflexivity minimized the possibility of compromise to the rigor of the project.

Significance and Implications

As I near the close of this thesis, I want to consider the implications of the project by exploring its sustainability, its ecclesial and personal significance, and the

ongoing potential at LOCC and beyond of the practice of story listening and of insights gained from this project.

Sustainability and Ecclesial Significance

While the project did achieve the goal of communal formation among the participants, those temporary effects will not be sustained if the practice of story listening is not expanded or integrated more fully into the life of the congregation. A few long-term possibilities for LOCC exist, including implementation strategies, congregational impact, and the potential for ongoing practice within the community.

First of all, since I will not be at the congregation to encourage its continuation, the sustainability of story listening as a practice at LOCC will depend on the willingness of participants to seek additional opportunities to extend the practice into the life of the congregation. At the end of the inside group interview, I encouraged each member of the participant-research group to consider inviting one of the SLPs to co-facilitate additional SLGs. This strategy would replicate the project model by creating teams of two facilitators, each of whom had previous story listening group experience. One participant-researcher has already initiated this action by inviting one of the SLPs to co-facilitate a men's small group through the story listening experience beginning in March 2012.

One consideration behind my design of this project was the potential impact the practice of story listening could have on the relationship between the elders at LOCC and members of the congregation. The current leadership model at LOCC tends to distance the elders from deep relational interaction with members. Two of the three elders feel gifted in administration and gravitate toward those responsibilities,

while the other elder is a natural pastor. Creating space to share deeply in the lives of others through story listening would profoundly change the relationship the elders have with the congregation.

With that in mind, I encouraged the elders to consider a second possibility for sustaining and extending this practice at LOCC—the development of pastoral care groups. By dividing the congregation into three pastoral care groups, each under the care of one elder, they could utilize the story listening practice as a way to connect with their respective groups and to effect communal transformation. Since each elder participated in a different group in this project, the formation of pastoral care groups could begin with the members of their SLGs, creating a natural pool of five to six potential co-facilitators.

A second facet of sustainability involves the ongoing impact on the relationships of the participants of each group. While the temporary group impact was positive, the initial experience of story listening simply lays the foundation for continual communal formation. Admittedly, the experience itself does change the way the members of the groups view one another. Several participants said that they could already sense the way listening to another individual's story changed the way they experienced them in other contexts. For example, one person talked about the impact the SLG had on her experience of worship as she felt more able to engage fully in worship because she felt more connected to the people who were worshipping with her. This observation has profound implications for individualistic ecclesiologies

that focus on personal experiences of God.³ Another member said his time in Bible classes was enriched because he was able to understand better other members of his class and their particular perspectives. Thus the initial impact serves as one important aspect of formation. However, to fully achieve the ultimate communal goal, SLG participants must commit to reinforcing and deepening these relationships through other practices and opportunities for fellowship.

Finally, this project has the potential to positively affect the congregational structure at LOCC. The congregation is in the midst of a season of rediscovery and transition. A part of that process involves rethinking the ways the congregation and its leaders function. Through this project I invited the elders to participate in the life of the congregation in a new way, both by facilitating groups and by creating space in their own lives to receive the perspectives and stories of others. In this way, all who participated in the project, including the elders, were invited to develop skills to reimagine and embody a different ecclesial future, a future more collaborative and participatory in its approach, valuing and welcoming all voices and living differently in relation to God and one another.

Personal Significance

In addition to the important congregational insights I gained through the course of the project, I also learned much about myself, both personally and professionally. I will mention three of those areas of significance. First, this project

³ While space does not permit me to explore the implications of this observation more fully, this insight on the relationship between story-formed relationships, worship, and ecclesiology could serve as an area of ongoing exploration and research.

has renewed and strengthened my commitment to communal learning and discernment. The basic theological premise undergirding this thesis is that human community, particularly the ecclesial community, should exist as a reflection of the life of God as revealed in the Trinity. This project demanded that I move beyond merely theological belief and work to embody that belief. The success of the project depended on group theological reflection and on assuming that others play a vital role in the description of phenomena and dialogical discovery of understanding. This reality forced me to grow in my ability to trust others, both leaders and congregants, in this process of shared discovery and in my openness to learn from and with others.

This personal insight also led to a rethinking of the heart of the doctor of ministry project thesis approach and purpose. I began the project working with a model that depicted the theological and theoretical underpinnings of the project as information to be disseminated in the course of the project. The sample theses I was given as models employed this approach, which, in essence, contributes to the idea that the doctoral candidate is the theological expert who has the information or content to deliver to the participants. This approach places all of the theological goods on the side of the minister. Yet in honing my own Trinitarian theological underpinnings for this project, I discovered a need to rethink the heart and method of the project and seek a more collaborative and dialogical approach. This shift away from an approach that moved from content dissemination to action toward a more phenomenological approach that began with action and moved to reflection did not shirk my responsibility as the trained practical theologian in the project group. Instead it helped me reconceive my own contribution to the group process. If ministers

assume that congregants are always doing theology, whether sophisticated or not, then doctor of ministry projects would do well to consider a shift in focus that empowers congregants to participate more fully in the theological enterprise.

I also gained through the project a second insight: I have the ability to facilitate groups. For most of my time in ministry to this point, I have worked behind the scenes and in “second chair” roles. I have had opportunities to teach and lead classes and have been affirmed in those experiences, but I have not explored fully my role in facilitating different types of group processes. Through this process, especially because of the theological and methodological commitments described in chapters 2 and 3, participants in the project affirmed in me a gift for guiding groups in participatory dialogue, initiating theological reflection, and empowering individuals and groups to go deeper in their reflections. As a result of their responses, especially as I guided the phenomenological action-reflection sessions with the participant-researchers, I am considering ways to continue to utilize these gifts in the future.

Finally, this project has shown me the importance of the connection between theological reflection and the practice of church life. Not only have I been rethinking congregational life and community as a reflection of the Trinity, but I have been reimagining congregational leadership as well. Leadership both shapes and participates in the ecclesial reality and, therefore, must be coherent with the particular understanding of the nature of the church and of God that the congregation and its leaders are attempting to cultivate. Historically, LOCC’s leadership has been disconnected from the life of the congregation and has taken a patriarchal approach to leading and decision-making. A relational leadership model that reflects a

participatory and social understanding of the Trinity, on the other hand, better positions leaders to pilot the congregation into a deeper experience of community. This does not mean that congregational leaders avoid the responsibility to lead, guide, and contribute to congregational vision and direction, but rather that this leadership extends naturally from their openness to receive others, to learn from the congregation and the world, and to welcome others' contributions and particularity in all of their otherness. As I continue to grow as a leader, my own functioning within a congregation will be significantly different because of this insight.

Future Actions and Questions for Consideration

Although this project was one of my last official responsibilities before transitioning out of ministry at the Lake Orion Church of Christ, I continue to have a vested interest in the impact of the practice of story listening on the congregation. At the end of January 2012, I met with the elders to discuss their experiences in the wake of the project and to dialogue about future possibilities. I encouraged them to explore the expansion of story listening through pastoral care groups. Although I am no longer in Michigan, I will continue as a consultant, advising the elders and other participants in the project on ways they can replicate story listening groups and extend the practice more fully into the life of the congregation. It is important for LOCC to discover ways to build organically on the project for the sake of its own future.

A number of additional questions arise from this project that also warrant further research. I will mention several of these briefly, then explore one future area of consideration more fully. The first question concerns the relationship between

story listening and insight. What is the role of story listening in deepening personal and communal spiritual insight in a congregation? How does story listening impact congregational discernment and decision making over time? A second question considers story listening as a practice of spiritual formation. How can the church integrate story listening into its vision of congregational spiritual formation? Third, how does story listening impact individuals' ongoing understanding of their own lives? In other words, how do the stories of others serve as an interpretive lens through which people understand their own lives with God, the church, and the world? Congregations already use such a lens when they identify their lives with particular characters from the biblical narrative and figures from church history. If we expand that lens to include the local community of faith, how might this openness to others help people understand their own lives? Finally, the practice of story listening explored in this project deals specifically with communal formation among inside strangers and the core family in a particular congregation. An important next step would be to explore the possibility of story listening in the mission of God as the church created space in itself to receive the world and expanded the listening participants to include outside strangers, such as its neighbors.

A larger question serves as a thread weaving these others together: What is the relationship between the formative practice of story listening and the story of Scripture? This remains an area ripe for future reflection and research. As mentioned in chapter 3, the project's methodology depends on insights from hermeneutic phenomenology. This particular philosophical approach assumes that people in a community of understanding "belong" to a particular tradition. The stories and texts

of that tradition impact the language they use to describe and come to understand their experiences, and vice versa. Understanding occurs as the horizon of individual or communal stories intersects or fuses with the story of the tradition.⁴ In chapter 2, I suggested that humans come to understand the nature of God in large part through the divine economy, or God's interaction with humanity and creation throughout history.

Communities of faith today access this tradition through Scripture. The Bible is the primary, normative text of the tradition. It gives them language to describe and understand their experiences. Individual and communal stories hold great potential for transforming the way the community understands and discovers meaning in the story of Scripture.⁵ The stories in the canon illustrate communal meaning-making as the people of God work to discern God's presence and leading in their midst in light

⁴ Gadamer, 295. Gadamer associates "belonging" with the element of tradition in the historical-hermeneutical activity. He suggests, "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which the text speaks."

⁵ Gadamer, 296. On this relationship between text and interpreter, Gadamer suggests, "Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history." See also Ruffing, 70. Reflecting on spiritual transformation and personal life stories, Ruffing concludes, "Such an ["open Christian narrative"] is as poised toward the future as it is rooted in the past. This opens a wider horizon of meaning than looking exclusively to the past for the moorings of our spiritual identities in how we recognize how God has broken into history. This pre-existing story into which each of us was born becomes the starting point for our story. And our story remains open to the future."

of the stories of the past and their experiences in the present.⁶ The canon models the ways the people of God bear witness to the present and superimpose their own experiences upon the continuing tradition. The encounter between the horizon of the present in the contemporary stories of God's people and the historical horizon in the story of Scripture creates tension between the text and the present that becomes a place for communal discernment and meaning-making for the people of God.⁷

I mentioned the importance of this connection between our stories and the story of Scripture briefly in chapter 3 and took some small steps to raise awareness of these two horizons with the participant-researchers, but it was beyond the scope of this project to explore the relationship explicitly. In the first three sessions of the intervention, I attempted to usher the horizon of the Christian tradition into the present of our experience through two activities, namely, dwelling in the Word and the story of God timeline. The latter included an opportunity for the participant-researchers to mark the dates of significant moments in their own story on the timeline. I intended by this to create a physical representation of the merging of our stories with the overarching story of Scripture. While I believe that these reflective

⁶ Two very different, but helpful, approaches to this kind of reading are Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), and Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (trans. James W. Leitch, 1967; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). Johnson's volume is a helpful consideration of the early church discernment process as described in Acts 10-15, which he suggests involved rereading the tradition in light of the stories of people in the present. Moltmann's volume considers the ways the horizon of promise and hope, which is grounded in the tradition of the word of promise but looks ahead to the eschatological future, engages experiences in the present. For Moltmann, the past is reinvested with new meaning in the light of the emerging future.

⁷ Gadamer, 304-5.

exercises were important for the participant-researchers, they only hinted at other research possibilities.⁸

As a future consideration and expansion of this project, I would like to suggest two different, but related, project interventions that more explicitly examine the connection of the formative practice of story listening with the story of Scripture. First, it would be worthwhile to consider how the horizon of individual or communal stories intersects the story of Scripture. In my field notes from the SLP interview, I noted the realization by one of the participants that a recent LOCC teaching series from Exodus had reshaped the way he understood and shared his story. The Exodus narrative became a lens through which he interpreted his own story. His experience suggests several potential avenues for exploring the intersection between the horizon of individual or communal stories and the story of Scripture. One interesting approach would be to design the story listening process so that it intentionally initiates this fusion of horizons. For example, the members of the SLG could engage a particular narrative section of Scripture for an extended period of time as they prepare to share their stories.⁹ The participants would be invited to contribute their stories through the lens of this particular shared narrative. After each story was shared, the

⁸ It is important to note here that the time of blessing at the end of each story was designed to cultivate this fusion of the horizon of individual stories with the story of Scripture. Unfortunately, since this was a foreign approach to the SLPs, the participant-researchers and the SLPs reported more on the ways the time of blessing functioned to highlight the similarities and particularities of the stories of those in the SLGs.

⁹ While narrative is not the only mode of Scripture, participants will likely find it easier to make connections between their own stories and the stories of Scripture. This could be a first step to a similar experience with texts from the other modes of Scripture.

group would be able to question not only their story listening experiences, but also how the process impacts the language and the stories they use to make sense of their experiences. They would also be able to question both the text's strangeness and its familiarity as it was expressed in the stories.¹⁰

This fusion of the horizons of the present and the tradition leads naturally into a second potential project for exploration: how does the interaction between the horizon of individual or communal stories and the horizon of the tradition influence a congregation's view of the nature of Scripture and its interpretation? In contemporary society, Christians from a broad range of perspectives—even within the same congregation—attempt to address numerous ethical and theological questions with Scripture, yet sometimes hit an impasse. Underneath the differences lies a foundational question regarding how individuals and communities understand and interpret Scripture. By inviting a group or a community to experience the intersection of Scripture and their own stories and then reflect on the experience, a congregation could begin to clarify how it understands the relationship between Scripture and its own common life. As noted above, Scripture itself could serve as a model for this process. The interaction between individual or communal stories and the story of Scripture provides an opportunity for communities to discern whether their stories can function in the same way and, if so, how they can become normative for the community's understanding and meaning-making.

¹⁰ Ibid. Gadamer concludes, "The true locus of hermeneutics is the in-between space of a text's strangeness and familiarity to us." I think this focused story listening project would actually help people experience both the familiarity and the strangeness of the text as it found new life in the stories, thereby impacting the group's reflection on the horizon of the tradition.

Conclusion

This thesis reports a doctor of ministry project to extend a practice of story listening into the life of the Lake Orion Church of Christ. The project resulted in the formation of a participant-research group that facilitated three story listening groups as a way to understand the potential of the practice in communal formation. The group not only provided thoughtful reflection and insight, but it also modeled the kind of community and openness to one another that reflected the Trinity. I believe that if these facilitators, in cooperation with participants from their story listening groups, will continue to extend this practice at LOCC, the culture of the congregation will be transformed and the community will grow more deeply in its commitment to each other and to the world.

Near the end of his theological anthropology, Stanley Grenz concludes, “The social nature of personal identity formation bestows on the ecclesial self a communal character. Those who are ‘in Christ’ form a ‘corporate personality.’ They share a common identity, a solidarity that fosters the new sense of personhood enjoyed by each participant in the ecclesial community.”¹¹ I pray that my project embodied this same spirit, as people discovered themselves anew in their deepening relationships with others.

¹¹ Grenz, *Social God*, 332.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS
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August 22, 2011

Mr. Eric Magnusson
Graduate School of Theology
ACU Box 29422
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX 79699

Mr. Magnusson,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board I have approved your project titled *Developing a Communal Model for the Practice of Story Listening at the Lake Orion Church of Christ*. You are now approved for data collection and analyses. Please notify this office when you have completed your study. Should any problems develop with the study, please inform the Office of Research promptly.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Scott Perkins".

Scott Perkins, Ph.D.
Director of Research
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
perkinss@acu.edu
325-674-4920

APPENDIX B

PROTOCOL FOR TAKING FIELD NOTES

1. The Non-participant observer should take extensive notes.
 - A. Notes should be recorded on the sheet provided for each session.
 - B. Arrive and set up 15 minutes prior to the session.
 - C. Field notes are detailed and descriptive accounts of each session.
 - D. These observations should include, but are not limited to, comments, interactions, levels of participation, and non-verbal communication.
 - E. Notes should contain certain characteristics.
 1. Be as descriptive, concrete, and detailed as possible.
 2. Avoid analysis and judgment.
 3. Avoid vagueness and overgeneralization.
 - F. *Field notes should contain everything that you feel is worth noting!*

2. Observe the following things during a session.
 - A. Note social interactions that occur before each session.
 - B. Describe the physical setting.
 1. How is the space arranged?
 2. What kind of interaction or behavior is it designed to cultivate?
 - C. Note the attendance and arrangement of the group.
 - D. Note the content of dialogue, and when possible, capture direct quotations.
 - E. Note the style and energy of interaction.
 1. What is going on?
 2. How are people engaging the activity?
 - F. Note the participation and non-participation of individuals.
 1. Who speaks to whom, and how are they interacting?
 2. Who listens?
 - G. Note non-verbal communication among members of the group.
 - H. Look for subtle factors.
 1. Do any activities seem to be spontaneous or unplanned?
 2. What do you notice does *not* happen?
 - I. Note key words, concepts, or ideas that may connect with the theme. Include language about the following things.
 1. What do they say about God?
 2. What do they say about the church?
 3. What do they say about relationships?
 4. What do they say about participation?
 5. What do they say about story?

6. What do they say about listening?
 - J. Note social interactions that occur after each session.
 - K. Reflect on your behavior in the session, how it impacted the session, and what thoughts you have about what is occurring.
3. Return data sheet to the researcher at the end of each session.

APPENDIX C

FIELD NOTE WORKSHEET

Session Title: _____ Session Date: _____

Social interaction before the session:

Attendance and seating arrangement (provide a simple sketch):

Observations during the session:

Comments and Quotes

Social Interactions

Social interaction after the session:

APPENDIX D

PROTOCOL FOR CODING FIELD NOTES

Protocol for coding field notes:

1. Review the non-participant observer's notes to clarify, revise, interpret, and provide additional notes and reflexive observations.
2. Create an electronic document of the field notes by date.
3. Read through the data collected to date using the constant comparative method, creating a list of emerging categories and properties (including concepts, ideas, and recurring topics).
4. Begin to generate hypotheses based on the relations, both similarities and differences, among the data and groups.
5. Provisionally sort categories, grouping them under broader coding categories and clarifying properties.
6. Once the data from all three angles of analysis has been collected, review all data in the light of the emerging coding categories using the constant comparative method.
7. Revise and finalize the coding scheme, assigning codes to each category and property.
8. Review all data and assign codes corresponding to all relevant categories.
9. Sort the data into categories, noting both the content and the context of the data.

APPENDIX E

PROJECT SESSION PLANS

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 1 OVERVIEW & PLAN

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

Session 1: “Knowing the Social God”

Session Overview: This session will introduce the whole project by reminding the group of our previous story listening experience and our hope for this process. We will experience some group reflection, a focused Dwelling in the Word, and a time of discerning an emerging theology of participation for LOCC. Finally, we will take some first steps to organize story listening groups.

Homework:

(1) Spend time prayerfully reflecting on your own story in the life of God. It may be helpful to jot down some notes for yourself.

(2) Each facilitation team should solidify their “story listening participants” (SLP) for the listening groups and secure a weekly meeting time with the group for the weeks following session 3.

Introduction (7:30-45)

1. Overview:
 - a. Verbal introduction and explanation of the project
 - b. Schedule of sessions and homework
 - c. Introduce Jan as NPO
2. **Internal Review Board Consent Forms**

PRAYER! (7:45-48)

Participation, part 1 – bring back our experience (7:48-8:05)

1. Invitation to remember, celebrate, and explicitly build upon our previously shared experiences from April.
2. Questions:
 - a. What was life giving about the experience we shared together in April?
 - b. How has the experience changed the way you experience others from that group?
 - c. How have you imagined and experienced your life with other people from LOCC differently since that experience?
 - d. How have you experienced life with God differently?

Participation, part 2 – Dwelling in the Word (8:05-8:20)

1. John 14:15-21
2. I want you to bring everything that we've just shared with you as we read this text.
3. Let those experiences and our conversation be the lens through which we read this passage.

Participation, part 3 – emerging theology of participation for LOCC (8:20-8:30)

1. Discovering the group's operative theology of participation
2. Name experiences more clearly:
 - a. God's life in Trinity
 - b. Trinitarian virtues for theology of participation; i.e.:
 - i. self-emptying
 - ii. humility
 - iii. love
 - iv. fellowship/koinonia
 - v. abide/remain
 - c. Humanity and church as *imago Dei (Trinitatis)*

Empowering to Facilitate (8:30-8:55)

1. Facilitating teams
 - a. One elder and one other participant-researcher per team
 - b. Each group will consist of 6 total people
2. Defining the terms:
 - a. Congregations typically have three different social groups.
 - b. Moving outward from the smallest: family, inside strangers, and outside strangers.
 - i. The "core family" is at the heart of the congregation, communicating, recruiting, and making decisions.
 - ii. "Inside strangers" attend regularly but generally do not feel ownership like the family.
 - iii. "Outside strangers" are the "persons who, when they enter the gathered community, are clearly outsiders."

3. Discerning potential members
 - a. 1-2 core family
 - b. 2-3 inside strangers
 - c. One additional name from each social group as backup

PRAYER! (8:55-8:57)

Homework Reminder (8:58-9:00)

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 2 OVERVIEW & PLAN SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9

Session 2: “Finding Our Life in the Story of God”

Session Overview: This session will help us think about our stories within the story of God. We will work together to create a “Wall of Wonder” that tells the story of the historical economy of God. Then, we will think about how our own lives and LOCC’s story merge together with God’s story.

Homework: At the end of the session this week, contact all of your SLPs and empower them to develop their own stories to share with the SLG.

PRAYER! (1:30-35)

Homework Review: Story Listening Group Progress (1:35-45)

1. Group members?
2. Meeting Date/Time?

Participation, part 1 – Wall of Wonder, part 1: “God’s Story” (1:45-2:00)

1. Following the basic “Wall of Wonder” pattern, participant-researchers will tell the story of God.
2. Dialogue and interaction good....

Reflective Teaching: “Our Lives in the Economy of God” (2:00-10)

1. Consider the historical work of Father, Son, and Spirit in the world.
2. Consider our participation in that story through our life together.

Participation, part 2 – Wall of Wonder, part 2: “Our Story in God’s Story” (2:10-35)

1. Share and weave our stories together into the timeline of God’s story.
2. Allow for interaction and dialogue, as participants write significant dates on the timeline.
 - a. Three to four significant moments in spiritual journey
 - b. Why significant?

Emerging Theology of Participation for LO (2:35-45)

1. What have we done today that we want to remember as we move ahead with our story listening groups and with LOCC?
2. What have we experienced today that is important for thinking about our life together?
3. How has our experience today been a participation in the very story we have been sharing?

Preparing to Facilitate (2:45-3:00)

1. Group formatting & dynamics considerations
 - a. Time and space matter!
 - b. Prayer!
 - c. Modeling is important!
 - d. Boundaries – covenanting to create safe space!
2. Aesthetics (Where? Set up? Feel?) – religious imagery/reminder
3. Empowering SLPs to tell their own stories

PRAYER! (3:00)**Homework Reminder:**

At the end of the session this week, contact all of your SLPs and empower them to develop their own stories to share with the SL group.

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 3 OVERVIEW & PLAN SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16

Session 3: “Story Listening: Empowering to Facilitate, Observe, & Reflect”

Session Overview: This session will be devoted to final preparations before you facilitate your SL groups. Special attention will be given to the time of blessing after each story is shared, as well as to providing you with basic tools for recording observations and field notes during and after each session.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the first of three one-hour sessions. Two group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes from your experience. These will be an important source and starting place for our conversation in the next session. You might specifically reflect on the following questions:

- What am I learning about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
- What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships?
- What am I learning about God? Where is God in the midst of these experiences and these stories?

PRAYER! (1:30-35)

Homework Review: Story Listening Group Progress (1:35-50)

1. Group members?
2. Meeting Date/Time?
3. How did your “empowering” conversations go with your SLPs?
 - a. How do you sense they feel?
 - b. How are you feeling heading into the first week?

Preparing to Facilitate, part 1: The Microcosm (1:50-2:10)

1. Walk group through a sample of one SL experience
2. Basic Flow:
 - a. Prayer
 - b. Reminder of safe space and covenant to each other
 - c. One person's story in the life of God (15-20 min)
 - d. Time of blessing (5-10 min)
3. *Do you have any questions about the basic flow???*

Preparing to Facilitate, part 2: Time of Blessing (2:10-20)

1. What is the time of blessing?
2. What should the time of blessing be?
3. What is it not?
4. End in prayer!

Preparing to Facilitate, part 3: Open Questions, Clarification, and Apprehensions (2:20-35)

1. Create a safe space for participant-researchers to express themselves.
2. What do you anticipate? Expect? Hope?
3. Important things for you to remember.
 - a. Group formatting & dynamics considerations
 - i. Time and space matter!
 - ii. Prayer!
 - iii. **Modeling is important!**
 - iv. Boundaries – covenanting to create safe space!
 - b. Aesthetics (Where? Set up? Feel?) – religious imagery/reminder

Preparing to Facilitate, part 4: Observations and Field Notes (2:35-55)

1. Using appendices B & C as guide, teach basic tools for observing and note taking.

PRAYER! (2:55)**Homework Reminder**

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 4 OVERVIEW & PLAN SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23

Session 4: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 1”

Session Overview: Sessions 4-6 will help us move from our experiences to understanding. In each of these sessions, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups as a way of interpreting data and discerning the emerging theory based on your observations and reflections from your sessions.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the second of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. In addition to the questions above, specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why? What are you learning? How does the sharing this week compare to last week?

PRAYER! (1:30-35)

Action to Reflection: Dialogue on Phenomena (1:35-2:15)

1. The first half of the session will invite the participant-researchers to dialogue on the phenomena experienced in their SLGs.
2. “During our conversation today, I want to invite you to pay special attention to the key themes that you sense emerging. Also pay attention to the places that you think conversations diverge....”
3. Initiating questions:
 - a. What did you experience in your group?
 - b. What happened that surprised you or that you did not expect?
 - c. What might God have been doing among the group?
4. Did you notice anything about the relationships between core family and inside strangers?

Constant Comparative Method: Discovery of Emerging Themes (2:15-2:45)

1. Through a period of collaborative reflection, the research group will take the first steps to discover categories as they have emerged in the group's questioning and conversation.
2. This is an important step in the development of grounded theory that emerges in a particular context.
3. What are the key or central themes that emerged for us from our conversation today?
4. I will continue to develop the categories, as well as generate theoretical properties and hypotheses and code field notes, between sessions.
5. At the following meeting I will begin by discussing these theoretical notions with the participant-researchers for confirmation and clarification. These categories and properties that emerge will become points of comparison that will be honed or rejected in successive sessions.

PRAYER! (2:55)

Homework Reminder:

Meet with your SL group for the second of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. In addition to the questions above, specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week.

Original questions:

- What am I learning about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
- What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships?
- What am I learning about God? Where is God in the midst of these experiences and these stories?

New questions:

- Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why?
- What are you learning?
- How does the sharing this week compare to last week?

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 5 OVERVIEW & PLAN SUNDAY, OCTOBER 30

Session 5: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 2” (Sun, Oct 30)

Session Overview: Sessions 5 will continue to help us move from our experiences to understanding. In this session, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups. We will pay special attention to the way our learning is deepening and changing in light of our dialogue in the previous session and our successive experience.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the third of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. Specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why? What are you learning?

PRAYER! (1:30-35)

Action to Reflection: Dialogue on Phenomena (1:35-2:15)

1. The first half of the session will invite the participant-researchers to dialogue on the phenomena experienced in their SLGs.
2. “During our conversation today, I want to invite you to pay special attention to the key themes that you sense emerging. Also pay attention to the places that you think conversations diverge....”
3. Initiating questions:
 - a. What did you experience in your group?
 - b. Did anything happen that surprised you or that you did not expect? How do these impact your thinking?
 - c. What might God have been doing among the group?
4. **Did you notice anything about the relationships between core family and inside strangers?**

Constant Comparative Method: Discovery of Emerging Themes (2:15-2:45)

1. Through a period of collaborative reflection, the research group will take the first steps to discover categories as they have emerged in the group's questioning and conversation.
2. This is an important step in the development of grounded theory that emerges in a particular context.
3. **What are the key or central themes that emerged** for us from our conversation today?

PRAYER (2:55)

Homework Reminder:

Meet with your SL group for the third of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. Specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why? What are you learning?

Original questions:

- What am I learning about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
- What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships?
- What am I learning about God? Where is God in the midst of these experiences and these stories?

New questions:

- Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why?
- What are you learning?
- How does the sharing this week compare to last week?
- What are you noticing about the relationships and/or participation of core family and inside strangers in your group?

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SESSION 6 OVERVIEW & PLAN SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6

Session 6: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 3”

Session Overview: Session 6 will continue to help us move from our experiences to understanding. In this session, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups. We will pay special attention to the way our learning continues to deepen and change through naming and questioning our experiences in dialogue.

Homework: Be warmed and filled!

PRAYER! (1:30-35)

Action to Reflection: Dialogue on Phenomena (1:35-2:15)

1. The first half of the session will invite the participant-researchers to dialogue on the phenomena experienced in their SLGs.
2. “During our conversation today, I want to invite you to pay special attention to the key themes that you sense emerging. Also pay attention to the places that you think conversations diverge....”
3. Initiating questions:
 - a. What did you experience in your group?
 - i. What am I learning about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
 - ii. What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships?
 - b. Did anything happen that surprised you or that you did not expect? How do these impact your thinking?
 - i. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week?
 - ii. If so, why?
 - c. What might God have been doing among the group?
4. **Did you notice anything about the relationships between core family and inside strangers?**

5. **What have you learned most over the last three weeks?**
 - a. **What are your hopes from here?**
 - b. **What would you change?**
 - c. **What do you think about the potential impact for this in shaping the community at LOCC if it was practiced over one year? three years? five years?**

Constant Comparative Method: Discovery of Emerging Themes (2:15-2:45)

1. Through a period of collaborative reflection, the research group will take the first steps to discover categories as they have emerged in the group's questioning and conversation.
2. This is an important step in the development of grounded theory that emerges in a particular context.
3. **What are the key or central themes that emerged** for us from our conversation today?

PRAYER! (2:55)

APPENDIX F

PROJECT SESSION HANDOUTS

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

PROJECT SCHEDULE AND SESSION OVERVIEW

Session 1: “Knowing the Social God” (Thurs, Sept 29)

Session Overview: This session will introduce the whole project by reminding the group of our previous story listening experience and our hope for this process. We will experience some group reflection, a focused Dwelling in the Word, and a time of discerning an emerging theology of participation for LOCC. Finally, we will take some first steps to organize story listening groups.

Homework:

- (1) Spend time prayerfully reflecting on your own story in the life of God. It may be helpful to jot down some notes for yourself.

- (2) Each facilitation team should solidify their “story listening participants” (SLP) for the listening groups and secure a weekly meeting time with the group for the weeks following session 3.

Session 2: “Finding Our Life in the Story of God” (Sun, Oct 9)

Session Overview: This session will help us think about our stories within the story of God. We will work together to create a “Wall of Wonder” that tells the story of the historical economy of God. Then, we will think about how our own lives and LOCC’s story mesh together with God’s story.

Homework: At the end of the session this week, contact all of your SLPs and empower them to develop their own stories to share with the SL group.

**Session 3: “Story Listening: Empowering to Facilitate, Observe, & Reflect”
(Sun, Oct 16)**

Session Overview: This session will be devoted to final preparations before you facilitate your SL groups. Special attention will be given to the time of blessing after each story is shared, as well as to providing you with basic tools for recording observations and field notes during and after each session.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the first of three one-hour sessions. Two group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes from your experience. These will be an important source and starting place for our conversation in the next session. You might specifically reflect on the following questions:

- What am I learning about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
- What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships?
- What am I learning about God? Where is God in the midst of these experiences and these stories?

Session 4: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 1” (Sun, Oct 23)

Session Overview: Sessions 4-6 will help us move from our experiences to understanding. In each of these sessions, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups as a way of interpreting data and discerning the emerging theory based on your observations and reflections from your sessions.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the second of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. In addition to the questions above, specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why? What are you learning? How does the sharing this week compare to last week?

Session 5: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 2” (Sun, Oct 30)

Session Overview: Sessions 5 will continue to help us move from our experiences to understanding. In this session, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups. We will pay special attention to the way our learning is deepening and changing in light of our dialogue in the previous session and our successive experience.

Homework: Meet with your SL group for the third of three one-hour sessions. Two different group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes for our conversation in the next session. Specifically reflect on how the experience was different this week. Are you thinking about or experiencing the group differently this week? If so, why? What are you learning?

Session 6: “Experiencing, Dialoguing, & Discerning, part 3” (Sun, Nov 6)

Session Overview: Sessions 6 will continue to help us move from our experiences to understanding. In this session, we will reflect on and ask questions of the experiences of each of our story listening groups. We will pay special attention to the way our learning continues to deepen and change through naming and questioning our experiences in dialogue.

Homework: Be warmed and filled!

Session 7: “SLP Evaluation Dialogue” (November 9, 10, or 13)

Participant-Researchers do not need to be present for this conversation!

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

SUGGESTED CORRESPONDENCE FOR EMPOWERING PARTICIPANTS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES

As you reconfirm with your story listening group members this week, do not forget to empower them to share their stories. The following is an example of correspondence that could be helpful to them and valuable for your group. I encourage you to pass it along to each of your group members.

The purpose of our time will be to listen to one another as we each share the stories of our journeys of faith and life with God. We want to learn to narrate our lives in such a way as to notice God in our experiences and in others'. Each person will have around 20 minutes to share his or her story. After each person shares, those of us who have been listening will have about 10 minutes to offer words of blessing and encouragement. At the end of our time of sharing, we will spend some time reflecting on what God has been doing among us during our time together and how the experience is reshaping how we think about what it means to be a part of the Lake Orion community.

Our stories are filled with life and hope, brokenness and darkness, death and resurrection. As you prayerfully reflect on your story this next week, think about what you would say to someone who asked you to share your story of faith and why you are the person you are today. As you continue to think about your story over the next several days, you might want to think about:

- ***Significant events** in your life, both the mountaintops and the valleys. (The walk through life's valleys or deserts is often the most important of times in our faith.)*
- *Times when God has seemed **close** to you or times when God's seemed **absent**.*
- *Moments when you've **discovered something new about God** or when you have connected to God in a new or transformative way.*
- ***People who have been important on your journey** and how and why you are different because they have been or are in your life.*

Try, if you can, to bring that story up to today, to what you think you sense God doing at the Lake Orion Church today and why you are here now. These are not hard and fast questions that you must answer, but some things that might spark some ideas for how you would tell your story of your life with God.

While 20 minutes might seem like a long time, I think that we'll all be surprised at how quickly that time can go, especially when we share stories that have impacted us in such profound ways. It might be helpful to jot down a short outline of what you would like to share, since it is easy to lose track of what we had planned to share.

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

Story Listening Group, Gathering 3:

Meet with your SL group for the final one-hour sessions. The remaining group members should share their stories. During and after the gathering, record observations and field notes from your experience. These will be an important source and starting place for our conversation in the next session.

You might specifically reflect on the following questions:

- What am I learning this week about story listening as a way to form community? How do I think story listening has impacted core family members and inside strangers in my group? What differences and similarities do I perceive?
- What new or unexpected things happened this week? How do these impact my thinking?
- What am I learning about myself? My own story? My relationships with others at LOCC?
- What am I learning about God? Where is God in the midst of these experiences and these stories?
- Is there anything else that God is revealing to me?

APPENDIX G

PROTOCOL FOR OUTSIDE GROUP EVALUATION

STORY LISTENING AS A PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FORMATION AT THE LAKE ORION CHURCH OF CHRIST

STORY LISTENING PARTICIPANT CONVERSATION SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13

1. Introduction to the Interview
 - A. Welcome
 - B. Introduction to the project and to story listening
2. Describing the Phenomena: Questions and Dialogue
 - A. Grand Tour Question: If you were to describe your dream for a Christian community, what would be your top three characteristics?
 - B. Dialogue on Phenomena
 1. What did you anticipate or expect before you met with your group for the first time?
 - a. What were your expectations?
 - b. What were your hopes?
 - c. Were you anxious about anything?
 2. What did you experience in your story listening groups?
 - a. What did you expect to happen in your times together?
 - b. What did you *not* expect to happen?
 3. If you think back on your experience, what did you learn about story listening as a way to form community at LOCC?
 - a. What did you learn about yourself? Your own story? Your relationships?
 - b. Did anything happen that surprised you or that you did not expect? How did those things impact your experience and your thinking?
 4. What might God have been doing in the group?

C. Summative Question Series:

1. How could this experience contribute to the formation of community at LOCC? Should it be a part of the fabric of LOCC's life together?
 - a. What are your hopes for LOCC and yourself?
 - b. What would you change?
 - c. What do you think about the potential impact for story listening in shaping community at LOCC if it was practiced over one year? three years? five years?

APPENDIX H

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Story Listening as a Practice of Communal Formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ

Principal Investigator:
Eric R. Magnusson Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX

Advisors:
Stephen Johnson Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University
David Kneip College of Biblical Studies, Abilene Christian University

Introduction: I understand that I have been asked to participate collaboratively with a group in a project to extend the practice of story listening into the Lake Orion Church of Christ (LOCC).

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to extend a practice of story listening into the life of the Lake Orion Church of Christ. LOCC's recent history of growth, conflict, and transitions has shed light on concentric social levels or groupings within the congregation. This proposed study will empower a participant-researcher group to lead and reflect on the practice of story listening as a particular way to address a congregational need for communal relationship formation at LOCC. The project will incorporate reflection upon experiences and upon biblical and theological principles, collaborative work, and other practice exercises in developing a theory regarding the role of story listening in communal formation at LOCC. At the conclusion of the project, the participant-researcher group will also reflect on the possibilities of extending the practice more deeply into the LOCC community.

Procedures: This project will engage an inter-social participant-researcher group to extend story listening into three test groups at LOCC. The project will involve seven sessions, beginning on September 29, 2011, and ending November 13, 2011. The first six sessions will be 75-minute preparation and research sessions. The final session will be 2-hour review and evaluation session with the outside story listening participant group. During the first three sessions the participant-researcher group will be (1) invited back into their previously shared story listening experience, so that it can inform and shape our common preparation for replicating and extending that practice at LOCC; (2) empowered to facilitate additional story listening groups at LOCC in pairs; and (3) asked to discern an emerging theological foundation and

rationale for story listening as a practice at LOCC. The following three sessions will involve dialogue surrounding the articulation of and reflection on the story listening group experiences during the previous week.

Upon signing this document, you acknowledge your understanding that your opinions will be solicited and incorporated into this thesis and presented to the church leadership and, potentially, the LOCC congregation.

Potential Risks: There are no identifiable risks to participants in this research study. All published participant quotations will remain anonymous.

Potential Benefits: Your participation may be of direct benefit to you by creating an opportunity to enhance and develop your own relationships within the participant-researcher group, as well as develop relationships within the story listening groups. Additionally, your participation may empower you in a new area of potential leadership within the life of the congregation for the sake of the ongoing formation of the LOCC community. Your participation may also benefit the ongoing relational formation and health of the LOCC community as story listening is integrated into the life of the community.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this research.

Rights of Research Participants: I have read the above. Mr. Magnusson has explained the nature of the group and has answered my questions. He has informed me of the potential risks and benefits of participating in this research.

I understand that I do not have to participate in this research and can withdraw from this research at any time.

I understand that all of the information I provide will remain confidential.

If I have questions or concerns, I can contact Mr. Magnusson by telephone at 248-842-1859 or by email at eric-lococ@sbcglobal.net.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Principle Investigator: _____

APPENDIX I

INFORMED CONSENT FORM – STORY LISTENING PARTICIPANTS

Title of Project: Story Listening as a Practice of Communal Formation at the Lake Orion Church of Christ

Principal Investigator:
Eric R. Magnusson Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX

Advisors:
Stephen Johnson Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University
David Kneip College of Biblical Studies, Abilene Christian University

Introduction: I understand that I have been asked to participate collaboratively in a project to extend the practice of story listening into the Lake Orion Church of Christ (LOCC).

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to extend a practice of story listening into the life of the Lake Orion Church of Christ. LOCC's recent history of growth, conflict, and transitions has shed light on concentric social levels or groupings within the congregation. This proposed study will empower a participant-researcher group to lead and reflect on the practice of story listening as a particular way to address a congregational need for communal relationship formation at LOCC. The project will incorporate reflection upon experiences and upon biblical and theological principles, collaborative work, and other practice exercises in developing a theory regarding the role of story listening in communal formation at LOCC. At the conclusion of the project, the participant-researcher group will also reflect on the possibilities of extending the practice more deeply into the LOCC community.

Procedures: This project will extend story listening into three test groups at LOCC. You have been invited to participate in one of these story listening groups. The group will meet for three sessions, beginning the week of October 16. Each session will last approximately one hour. During each of these sessions, two individuals from the group will share their stories.

After all story listening groups complete the three sessions, all story listening participants will be invited to participate in a final review and evaluation session the week following November 6. The exact date for this session will be determined on

participant availability. Your perspective on your experience is vital for learning and discerning the potential for story listening as a practice at LOCC.

Upon signing this document, you acknowledge your understanding that your opinions will be solicited and confidentially incorporated into this thesis. The final findings may be presented to the church leadership and, potentially, the LOCC congregation.

Potential Risks: There are no identifiable risks to participants in this research study. All published participant quotations will remain anonymous. Additionally, the specific content shared in an individual's story is not the primary focus of this research and will not be included in the thesis.

Potential Benefits: Your participation may be of direct benefit to you by creating an opportunity to enhance and develop your own relationships within the story listening group. Additionally, your participation may empower you in a new area of potential leadership within the life of the congregation for the sake of the ongoing formation of the LOCC community. Your participation may also benefit the ongoing relational formation and health of the LOCC community as story listening is integrated into the life of the community.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this research.

Rights of Research Participants: I have read the above. Mr. Magnusson or my story listening group facilitators have explained the nature of the group and have answered my questions. They have informed me of the potential risks and benefits of participating in this research.

I understand that I do not have to participate in this research and can withdraw from this research at any time.

I understand that all of the information I provide will remain confidential.

If I have questions or concerns, I can contact Mr. Magnusson by telephone at 248-842-1859 or by email at eric-lococ@sbcglobal.net.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Principle Investigator: _____

APPENDIX J

CODING SCHEME FOR FIELD NOTES

1. Solidarity is experienced through story
 - 1.1. Bonded or deeply connected to others through story sharing and listening
 - 1.1.1. Similarities and differences highlighted in stories
 - 1.1.2. Particular moments of transformation
 - 1.1.3. Redemptive work between people through story
 - 1.2. Judgment
 - 1.2.1. Undoing prejudices: listeners' judgmental assumptions and preconceptions shattered when listening to stories
 - 1.2.2. Safe-space: free from judgment as liberating speakers
 - 1.2.3. Revealing the self: new insights into own story through listening to others' stories
 - 1.3. Exposing "the myth of closeness"
2. Listening as a vital component of relational communal formation
 - 2.1. Listening as liberating
 - 2.1.1. Listening frees people to speak and share deeply
 - 2.1.2. Countercultural activity, requiring discipline, intention, time
 - 2.1.3. Freed to listen: mutual, reciprocal influence between listening and speaking
 - 2.1.4. Freed from time: freedom to share and patience to listen when sharing deeply
 - 2.2. Increased openness and transparency each week
 - 2.2.1. Confidentiality, trust, and disclosure
 - 2.2.2. Limits to openness and freedom
 - 2.2.3. Removing the façade
 - 2.3. Igniting Passion
 - 2.3.1. Attentiveness, excitement to listen
 - 2.3.2. Emotion and closeness
 - 2.3.3. Fear and excitement
 - 2.3.4. Vulnerability
 - 2.3.5. Desire to be known
3. God-talk
 - 3.1. Ability to talk about God increased as story listening and blessing continued
 - 3.2. Females tended to be more apt to apply active verbs to God's action and presence in their lives
4. Expanding the practice of story listening at LOCC

BRIEF VITA

On March 31, 1975, Eric R. Magnusson was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he attended Wright Christian Academy. He graduated from Harding University in 1997 with a bachelor of science in biochemistry. After beginning his graduate studies in biochemistry and molecular biology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, he transferred to Oklahoma Christian University in Edmond, where he completed the master of arts in ministry in 2000, while working with a campus ministry and an urban ministry. He received a master of divinity from Abilene Christian University, in Abilene, Texas, in 2004. While studying Hebrew one afternoon in an Abilene coffee shop, Eric met Natalie Dunn. They married in the summer of 2003, and together they have two daughters, Melaina Joelle and Zoë Elizabeth. From October 2004 through January 2012, the Magnusson family lived in Lake Orion, Michigan, where Eric served as a spiritual formation minister at the Lake Orion Church of Christ and an adjunct professor of religion at Rochester College.