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Blessing and Sending the Church into the World for the Sake of the World, Using Congregational Blessings as a Missional Enterprise

Michael Harbour
mah99q@acu.edu

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project equipped the elders to function as a community of men called and authorized by God to bless and send his people into the world for the sake of the world. They were equipped through seven sessions of theological reflection on Scripture and reflection on narratives of those who have offered pastoral blessings. The sessions also included an examination of templates and the opportunity to practice writing and speaking blessings. The elders have been speaking a shepherd's blessing as the last liturgical act of the Sunday assembly. In this project, missional and textual focus was given to the words our elders use in the shepherd's blessing. Through this project, our elders were encouraged to speak on God's behalf and with God's authority, sending the church into the world to function as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The project demonstrated that true words spoken with authority have the capacity to function as deeds. The project also revealed that words well spoken need to be repeated creatively over a long period of time in order to fund people's imagination effectively. Words spoken this way can shape the world we inhabit. The intention of this project was to bless the congregation, reminding the community that they depart from the assembly with the presence and power of God that will enable them to carry out God's mission in the world for the sake of the world.

BLESSING AND SENDING THE CHURCH INTO THE WORLD FOR THE SAKE OF
THE WORLD, USING CONGREGATIONAL BLESSINGS AS A MISSIONAL
ENTERPRISE

A Project Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Michael Harbour

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This project thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Doctor of Ministry

Dean of the Graduate School

Date

Project Thesis Committee

Chair

To Sandra, Jake, and Jacquie, for you know the power of words well spoken.
You are God's beloved! In my inadequate imitation of that graceful and steadfast Love,
you are also my beloved!

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CHAPTER I

MINISTRY SETTING AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This project addressed a need that was discovered by the leadership of the Southeast Church of Christ. As the leadership began asking questions about the future viability of the congregation in 1995, some concrete strategies were developed, with relocation from a semi-industrial area of Houston, Texas, into the southeastern suburbs being the most dramatic element. The elders were aware that relocation was not a complete solution to the problem of declining and aging membership. Relocation made sense only if the congregation developed a keen sense of mission. This project was a key element in the development of this keen sense of mission. The project began with the ministry setting analysis of the Southeast Church of Christ followed by an overview of the basic assumptions, definitions, and delimitations of the project. The introductory material is followed by an examination of the theological framework that guided the project. The ministry intervention methodology emerged out of this theological framework. The final section of the project includes the results of the ministry intervention and the conclusions drawn from these results.

Title of the Project

The title for the project is “Blessing and Sending the Church Into the World For the Sake of the World, Using Congregational Blessings as a Missional Enterprise.” For the last ten years the elders of Southeast have had the last word in the Sunday assembly. The moment is called the shepherd’s blessing. The conceptual idea was to improve the traditional way of closing the assembly, which had been through a non-scripted prayer of dismissal. The theology offered in this prospectus unfolds the importance of the language spoken over the people, language that shapes their imagination concerning God’s plan for their day, week, and life. The imagination that is shaped by, or funded by, these spoken words involves their participation in the mission of God for the sake of the world.

Ministry Setting Analysis

Southeast Church of Christ is a congregation of stability and transition. Southeast began as the Central Park Church of Christ in 1914 in southeast Houston, Texas. The congregation relocated three times, each time moving further southeast from downtown Houston. The church moved to the intersection of Wayside and Sherman streets in 1916 and took the name Wayside and Sherman Church of Christ in 1936. The congregation moved to a location on the Gulf Freeway in 1964 and the next year took the name Southeast Church of Christ. In January of 2004, the church moved from the semi-industrial area near Houston Hobby Airport to the suburb of Friendswood, Texas, eight and a half miles away. Each of these moves was a search for growth and vitality. The congregation has had thirteen preachers over a period of ninety-one years. Five of the preachers served for ten years or more.

The history of the congregation is a blend of traditional Church of Christ theology and creative energy. The traditional theology of the Church of Christ includes a high view of Scripture and a determination to act in accordance with the perceived will of God. The congregation has had a persistent understanding of the call of God to share the good news. This was the home church for Jule Miller, who produced his evangelistic filmstrips that proved to be an effective instrument for sharing the prevailing view (in Churches of Christ) of the way to “rightly divide” the Word of God. This view kept the Psalms, and the musical instruments found there, out of the will of God for the practice of singing in the New Testament church. Miller’s work also well articulated the prevailing understanding of the plan of salvation that culminates in baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins.

The congregation experienced both growth and decline over the years. The church began with fourteen people. The peak in attendance happened in the 1970s during the ministry of Dick Case with a Sunday morning attendance as high as eleven hundred when Southeast merged with the Broadway Church of Christ. Into the middle 1980s, attendance was consistently more than nine hundred. On one Sunday in 1986, just more than one hundred people placed membership, coming to Southeast from the neighboring Sun Valley Church of Christ.

The early 1990s brought a season of decline. The more distant suburbs were growing, and the area around the church building began to industrialize. In 1995, John Ellas from the Center for Church Growth conducted an analysis of the congregation. He suggested to the elders and staff that relocation would be the best course for revitalizing

the congregation. The congregation was aging and was not eager to evangelize with the methods available. Before the relocation and after the capital campaign to fund the relocation, Sunday morning attendance was averaging 480. Since opening the new facility in January of 2004, attendance has grown to 725 with more than 50 baptisms and 190 people placing membership.

Southeast is currently situated in an environment that is rich with missional potential. From the 2000 census, the church has learned about its external context for ministry.¹ The neighborhood has 154,000 people and has grown by 29 percent since 1990, which is double the national average. There are 55,000 households in the neighborhood, with 34,000 owner-occupied homes. During the next five years the population is expected to grow by 8.1 percent. The population is economically affluent. Ninety percent of the adult residents are high school graduates. More than 40 percent have earned college degrees. The area is ethnically diverse (68.4 percent Anglo, followed by Hispanic and Asian). There are 48,000 people under the age of twenty in the neighborhood. There are 26,000 elementary and high school students within four miles of the building. The neighborhood is described as traditional because most of the people are married and most of the children are being raised by two parents.

Seventeen to 19 percent of the church's neighbors have a high interest in finding a good church. They are interested in a church that offers recreation, spiritual development and personal development. They do not want church people to come to their door. They are very interested in worship that is intellectually challenging and fundamentally

¹ *Ministry Area Profile for Southeast Church of Christ 2003* (Rancho Santa Margarita: Percept Group).

traditional, yet emotionally uplifting. They are most interested in participatory music styles. Twenty-three percent of the people in the neighborhood consider themselves Baptist, and 10 percent consider themselves Methodist. Eighty percent of the people prefer a leadership model in which the leader will work with them, helping them decide what to do and then help them accomplish their goal. Eighty percent of the people in the neighborhood believe in God, and 54 percent of them believe that God is actively involved in the world. The greatest concern articulated by the church's neighbors, about 12 percent greater than the national average, regards their hopes and dreams. The people in this neighborhood hope for, and dream of, financial security and time for recreation and leisure. They dream of a fulfilling marriage and a great job. They hope to be good parents and to achieve their educational objectives.

These data indicate that Southeast is situated in an environment that has significant opportunity for ministry. The church will not bring these people into the community through a door-knocking campaign. However, if Southeast will send the congregation out into this kind of neighborhood to offer the love of God and relationships that are wholesome and meaningful, to reframe their hopes and dreams with the kind of life that God has in mind for them, the church will have an opportunity to shape their world.

Currently (2005), Southeast has eight elders, five ministers, and three full-time ministry assistants. The elders exercise the positional and functional authority roles in the congregation. All major and most second-tier issues, such as fees charged and part-time help hired, are decided by the eldership. The ministers manage the daily operations of the

congregation and the routines of their ministry. Southeast has a children's minister, a youth minister, a creative arts minister, an equipping minister, and a preaching minister. The ministry assistants manage the finances, the communication instruments, and the logistics necessary for church operations.

In 2003, Southeast commissioned the equipping minister to lead the church through the Natural Church Development instrument. This instrument helped the congregation articulate its strengths and weakness as a church. Of course, the goal was that the congregation would possess the characteristics that would facilitate growth. The Natural Church Development instrument proposes eight such characteristics. This instrument was attractive because it helped the leadership examine the whole congregational system.

The survey asked thirty of our highly involved members about their impressions of the congregation and compared their responses with other congregations who have participated in the study. Southeast found that they were strong in three of the eight characteristics that describe a growing church system, near the 65th percentile. The strong areas were empowering leadership, loving relationships, and holistic small groups. Three of the eight other characteristics scored just beneath the growth threshold. Southeast found that it has developed adequate functional structures of the church, that it generally facilitates gift-oriented ministry, and that they provide worship services that are generally inspiring. Natural Church Development recommends that churches focus their energies on their areas of greatest growth potential, which means in the areas of their greatest weaknesses. Southeast scored low in two areas, both of which are pertinent to this

project. The core group of invested members believe that Southeast has room to improve their practice of passionate spirituality.² The group is also convinced, according to the survey results, that Southeast is not effectively evangelistic.

Generally, the elders and ministers recognize the validity of these results.

Southeast's small group ministry is a significant strength of the church community. This is where genuine community has the best chance to occur. Southeast has seventeen small groups, in which 35 percent of those who attend on Sunday morning assemblies also gather for a greater level of community. It is not surprising to the leadership that loving relationships is a strength because they are convinced that holistic small groups foster loving spiritually intimate relationships. It was a pleasant surprise that empowering leadership was affirmed as a congregational strength. The survey group did not see the eldership and staff as heavy handed. Of course, this impression is subject to change. Issues of control have become significant as Southeast has grown from a medium-sized church into a large church system. The survey group and the ministers recognize that our elders are good leaders who are seeking the healthy spiritual vitality of the congregation. They are not typically interested in controlling the details. Rather, they are interested in keeping us within the boundaries of Scripture while keeping us sensitive to the traditions of our heritage. Continued non-anxious leadership will be a key to having functional

² Church Smart, the institution that promotes Natural Church Development, defines passionate spirituality as an attitude expressed in churches where the people are serious about the practice of their faith in a way that expressions of joy and enthusiasm are evident. Schwartz says that churches that tend toward a focus on having the right doctrine, moral code, and church membership typically are places where passionate spirituality is below average. See Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1996), 26.

structures and to facilitating of gift based ministries. A congregation cannot guess the nature of the gifts that God will send to its community. If ministries are predetermined, based on traditional ministries of churches instead of based on the gifts of the members, and if the leadership fails to empower ministry to take place, people will not find a place to be partners with God in his mission in and for the world. Without empowering leadership, Southeast will never have the courage to launch ministries that make sense. The leadership group, through life lived under the rule and reign of God, commissions ministry that emerges out of the gifts and talents that are present in the church community. This is a model of leadership and ministry that will manifest good news.

Southeast's present focus is set on the mission of God in the world and God's invitation for us to join him in that mission. For the last three years, the congregation has been hearing the language of the missional church. The congregation has been encouraged to engage in a new reading of their traditional context, leading to a new reading of the gospel, which in turn has led to a new understanding of the role of the church in the world.

For four years the congregation has been hearing the gospel that Jesus preached as revealed in Mark's gospel account; that the kingdom of God has come near in the person of Jesus (Mark 1:15). This move came about through the my own angst over the Church of Christ's traditional models of evangelism that seemed to be individualistic, argumentative, and potentially coercive reductions of the gospel. The traditional evangelistic enterprise has emphasized that people should want to be baptized so that they would not "go to hell" when they died. The church has always wanted people to live moral lives, but new Christians were not really expected to do anything more than support

the institution of the church until the Lord returned. There must be more to church than propping up the enterprise until the Lord returns. William Abraham's *The Logic of Evangelism* provides a dynamic eschatological setting for understanding the task of evangelism. Speaking of the early Christians, Abraham says, "Yet the last thing that would have been in their minds was that eschatology was merely a matter of things yet to come and that their first responsibility was to buy celestial fire insurance."³ Those early Christians had a sense that the kingdom of God had been reasserted in their midst with the coming of Jesus, with the announcements of Jesus (Luke 4:18-21), with the giving of the Holy Spirit, and especially with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Through the coming of Jesus, God has moved decisively to assert the ethic of his kingdom (Mark 1:15). God has always been the king of his people (1 Sam 8:7). In the coming of Jesus, the promises of God were being actively realized. In Luke's second volume, the early church facilitated the realization of the promises made to Abraham (Gen 12:3; 13:15-16) as they bore witness to Jesus from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The ultimate promise was that through him all the families, or nations, of the earth would be blessed. All nations have been blessed with the call of God to live as subjects of the benevolent creator of the cosmos. God loves the world enough to live and die for the world. In the coming of Jesus, we have witnessed the ethical model for humanity, the quality of life that God had in mind. Traditional methods for evangelism have not well articulated this good news. It would be too bold to say that Southeast has fully grasped this concept as a church community. The congregation is in the process of discovering

³ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 19.

and adopting a language for evangelization that helps people understand that they are being invited to participate in, to receive, enter, and inherit the eschatological reign of God.

In 2002, the staff began working toward a shared direction for Southeast. The physical relocation of the church facility motivated the church to articulate clearly an identity that could be shared with the new neighborhood, the neighborhood that would be the most immediate mission context. The staff read through the Gospel and Our Culture Network's *Missional Church* as an orienting exercise.⁴ The staff found substantial agreement with the fundamental assertions of the book that the church finds itself in a post-Christian culture, and that the church can and should be called to live up to the biblical design of existing as a community called by God to embody the ethic and mission of God for the sake of the world. The staff understand this to be a radical re-conception, for most members, of the nature and purpose of the church. The ministers believe that as we give the gospel a fresh hearing among us, we will be called into concrete practices that will lead us out of the Sunday worship assembly with a sense of participation in the ongoing mission of God in and for the world. The congregation is coming to see more clearly that God has always been at work in and for the world, even if we have traditionally retreated from the world or if we have bifurcated our lives into the sacred or secular. Southeast has adopted the language of being a signpost of the kingdom of God. The stated ideal is that the congregation is committed to pointing beyond themselves to the rule and reign of God. The staff resists the conception that God's reign or God's field

⁴ Darrell L. Guder et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.

of activity is limited to the church. The church is not equivalent to the kingdom of God. Southeast has adopted the idea that the church is to function as a foretaste of the alternative world of the eschaton. They desire to be the kind of people in whom *perichoresis* happens, at least in instances. They seek to approximate the communion of the Trinity, saying that God's highest aim is holy communion, not to be confused with the Lord's Supper, but is that to which the Lord's Supper points. They have adopted the idea that they seek to be instruments in the hands of God. God's agenda, as they are able to discern that in Scripture and local context, is their stated agenda.⁵ Now Southeast finds itself prepared for a concrete step toward the actualization of these ideals. In 2005, the leadership laid ground work for the community's self-understanding by studying Philip Kenneson's book, *Life on the Vine* in the adult Bible classes. Kenneson sparks the imagination with regard to the practice of a spiritual life, an actual cultivated practice of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. If the church is to be sent into the world for the sake of the world, the people will need to have some suggestions for action. How might they cultivate love, joy, peace and patience in the face of the pressures to be selfish, discouraged, violent and demanding? Kenneson's proposal for the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit in a North American context has been helpful in enlivening the congregation's imagination. Kenneson helps the community of Christians investigate "what it might mean at the close of the second millennium for Christians to live as the body of Christ in the midst of a culture like ours."⁶ In 2005, the congregation heard two sermon series' that have emerged from missional thinking. The first series was promoting

⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶ Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 9.

missional practices as articulated by *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*. These practices were discovered as operational behaviors of churches that could be identified as missional.⁷ The lessons spoke about the members' public language, their practice of hospitality, the implications of their baptism, and a review of the story of God from Genesis to Revelation. The second series of lessons emerged from *Storm Front: The Good News of God*. The book was designed to be a performance of the gospel.⁸ The sermon series was designed to set before the people of the church the clash that ensues as they begin to participate in a faithful performance of the gospel, a gospel that clearly calls for allegiance to a particular kingdom. The church is poised to be sent into the world for the sake of the world.

Statement of the Problem

For the last ten years the Southeast church has concluded the Sunday morning assembly with a shepherd's blessing. In many Churches of Christ, the final act of the Sunday assembly is a closing prayer. To call this closing prayer a benediction would probably sound peculiar to many of Southeast's members. For them, benedictions are something spoken by Catholics and Episcopalians, or other formally liturgical traditions. However, through consistent practice over these years, the members have become comfortable calling these closing comments a blessing. As this project seeks to reshape the elder's comments into a spoken blessing for the people, my anticipation is that there will be very little resistance. Robert Webber says, "The benediction is a pronouncement

⁷ Lois Y. Barrett et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), ix.

⁸ James V. Brownson et al., *Storm Front* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), viii.

of a blessing. It originated with the benediction given to Aaron and his sons. In this act they were to communicate God's name and, therefore the blessing of his presence on the people (see Num. 6:22-27)."⁹ Webber also points out the New Testament parallel to this blessing found in 2 Corinthians 13:13, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Over the last four years the elders of the church have each taken their turn offering the shepherd's blessing. Sometimes it has been a Scripture reading. The Scripture that the elder chose may or may not have been related to the message of the day. Sometimes the shepherd's blessing has been a comment on the lesson. On occasion, the blessing has even been a countering thought to the lesson. Sometimes the blessing has been a closing prayer asking for God to watch over the people as they go. The shepherd's blessing has most often been a fitting conclusion to our time of gathering. However, it has not functioned as a commissioning of the church to go and fulfill God's mission in the world. The confession of the church is that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but often the Sunday worship hour has become a substitute for being the church.¹⁰ If the people have had an encounter with God in the community gathering for worship and praise, the idea of being connected to their fellow Christians in a common cause in the world, for the sake of the world, quickly fades from their imagination. What could be done to shape their imagination in the Sunday assembly that would remind them of the abiding presence and power of God for them as they depart in order to be the church in

⁹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids,: Zondervan, 1994), 191.

¹⁰ Attributed to Craig Van Gelder, Barrett, et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 110.

and for the world? William Willimon's *Pastor: A Reader in Ordained Ministry* provided the idea for making use of the shepherd's blessing in a more intentional way. This liturgical moment could be a word that shapes the imagination of the congregation. Willimon tells the story of meeting a woman at a dinner party who was particularly complimentary of a new pastor who had come to her congregation. What she liked most about the new pastor was his benedictions. Willimon was surprised and asked her to explain what he did that was exceptional. Her answer has shaped my thinking with regard to the shepherd's blessing:

Well, we had never thought much about benedictions. Perhaps we had never really had one. But the first Sunday he was with us, at the conclusion of the worship service, rather than rush back to the door to greet everyone, he stayed at the front and said something like: 'Now I am going to bless you. I want you all to look at me and receive my blessing because you may really need it next week.' We all watched as he raised both hands high above his head, stretching out as if to embrace us, looking at each one of us, and almost like a father, blessing us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. His benedictions have become the highlight of each Sunday as far as I am concerned.¹¹

Willimon then pointed to an argument made in an essay by Paul Pruyser.¹² Pruyser lamented the loss of the power of the words and the gestures of the pastoral blessing in

¹¹ William Willimon, ed., *Pastor: Reader in Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 96-98.

¹² Paul W. Pruyser, "The Master Hand: Psychological Notes on Pastoral Blessing," in *The New Shape of Pastoral Theology*, ed. William B. Oglesby Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

the assembly. He noticed that ministers were “terminating their services with a rushed and hardly audible benediction, uttered on the way out from the back of the sanctuary where nobody could see them. And if the benediction was pronounced from the pulpit, audibly and visibly, the spectacle for the beholders was often little more than a slovenly gesture, consisting of only one arm, raised half heartedly and only halfway up.”¹³ Pruyser explained that the gesture that he recalled from his childhood was the full extension of both arms, with palms turned toward the congregation. The minister would speak a blessing over the people, sending them out under the empowering providence of God. He related this gesture and words of blessing to the private blessings spoken by parents over children, touching their heads and sending them off with words such as the French *adieu*, or the Spanish *adios*, or Austrian *grüss Gott*. In English we say ‘good-bye,’ which “is linguistically derived from ‘God be with you.’ They are well-wishings which dedicate the individual to the divine providence.”¹⁴ The pastoral blessing does not generate the grace of God’s providence. Rather, the blessing words and gesture function as a pastoral response to human need. It reminds the people that they are being sent out from this assembly on a mission under the empowering care of God.

The shepherd’s blessings have not intentionally functioned in this way. Their function has been to close the assembly prayerfully. They have specifically functioned to help the elders be visible to the congregation. The elders and ministers have seen the need for the church members to be able to identify the elders and to know that their intention is to be shepherds, to provide pastoral care for the people. The existence of this practice of

¹³ Ibid., 353.

¹⁴ Ibid., 355.

the Shepherd's blessing is helpful and provides the opportunity to maximize the impact of that moment and to shape the words that are spoken by the elders.

Willimon indicated that pastoral blessings have fallen out of practice in churches for a number of reasons that may have bearing on this project. Do pastors believe that they have the right or privilege of extending the blessing of God? If speakers are not convinced that their words are commissioned and empowered by God, then they will probably not speak them with conviction. Pastors, elders in our tradition, may also be concerned that they will appear presumptuous by speaking for God. The project needed to equip the pastors with a warrant for extending the blessing. Pruyser said:

Another possible reason . . . lay in the pastors' own conflicts concerning their professional identity: When worship leaders perform sloppily in their liturgical work, they are obviously not attributing a high professional value to this part of their activities. And when they perform badly in benedictions, the unspoken messages to the congregation are that: (1) benedictions are rather meaningless, (2) the pastor does not deem the people worthy of receiving them, (3) the pastor himself has long given up thought of providence, or (4) the pastor refuses to shoulder the shepherd's role.¹⁵

Willimon went on to say:

The poor performance of significant liturgical gestures like the benediction, indicates that the pastor may have let his own misgivings about his ability to bless overcome the community's authorization of the pastor as the one to whom is given the power

¹⁵ Ibid., 361.

to bless. By refusing to bless, the pastor shows insensitivity to or lack of knowledge about the needs of people. The pastor also shows that he or she may be so consumed by his or her own conflict about authorization and competence, or need for self-fulfillment and self-understanding that the pastor cannot respond to the needs of others.¹⁶

These paragraphs, along with thinking about the missional language that has been shaping Southeast's congregational identity – Signpost of the Kingdom, Foretaste of Heaven, and Instruments in the Hands of God – have led us to consider how the elders may make more of the shepherd's blessing as an intentional act of empowering the people to live up to their confessions, living out the implications of their baptismal identity as the people of God for the sake of the world.

Why would elders struggle with speaking an empowering blessing over their people? As Willimon states, one of the problems may be that they have not seen themselves as worthy or authorized to speak a blessing over God's people. It could also be that elders have particularized their own lives to a degree that they are not sufficiently aware of the need of people for the assurance of the continuing powerful presence of God in their lives. It is possible that elders, ministers, and Christians have even the vestiges of the idea that their spiritual duty to God is somehow accomplished in the Sunday assembly. Those who lead and care for the church can fall into institutional thinking. If the people are showing up on Sundays and if the contributions remain strong, then those will be key indicators of the spiritual well-being of the people. Well-informed

¹⁶ Willimon, 97.

congregational leaders know better than that, but they are also susceptible to the principalities and the powers in the same way that all humans are. A spiritual life is a life that is lived under the reign of God in a community that God blesses. God reigns twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. The forces of evil and demoralization work the same hours. Those forces are meant to be countered by the people of God, who are strengthened and made competent by the Spirit of God who lives in them.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this project is to prepare the elders dynamically and intentionally to equip the Christians in this community to take their spiritually formed competencies into the world for the sake of the world through the words spoken in the shepherd's blessing. In this project, the elders met for a series of studies, prayers, conversations, and participation together in practices that equipped them to bless the congregation. The blessing is always God's blessing, but that blessing is communicated through his servants, the leaders of the community, in the words of the prophets of the Old and New Testaments, in the words of the priests, pastors, elders and evangelists of every age.

The elders were equipped through seven ninety-minute sessions that were a combination of conversation, study, and practicum. In the first session, the elders explored the Scriptures together, looking at key passages that describe the importance and power of the words of God in shaping the cosmos as well as the people. A biblical model for offering a blessing in order to shape the imagination of the elders for speaking the blessing at the end of the Sunday assembly was set out. In these sessions, the elders communally considered the way in which words shape their own world. The second

session was a conversational reflection on a narrative written by Fred Kane of Hillsboro, Oregon, called “Our Ministry of Blessing.” Through overhearing this story, the elders related to Kane’s reluctance to be a vessel for blessing. In the third session the group worked to develop a sense of moral authority for offering a blessing. The elders considered a short narrative written by Sarah Keyser that described her journey toward accepting the responsibility for speaking a blessing over the people of her congregation. In this session, they also used Jackson Carroll’s *As One with Authority* to think about relational and positional authority in the church. The group was reminded that the most powerful authority is relational.¹⁷ The group also recognized that the congregation does expect the voice of authority from those who lead, that the elders represent God to the people, and that the church is intended to represent God to the world.¹⁸ In the fourth session the group returned to the Scriptures to practice discernment of the mission of God. During this session they spent time with 2 Corinthians 4 as a model for developing a sense of what God is doing in the world and considering the mission of God for the world. The group also had conversations about the future that God has in mind for the world in general, for this church family, and for the surrounding community. They explored the idea of “for the sake of the world.” The fifth session began the concrete practice of creating a blessing that sends the church out of the assembly and into the world. The elders read through sample blessings provided by Bass Mitchell of Charlottesville, Virginia. They considered the connection between the blessing and the

¹⁷ Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

Scripture texts being used for worship. Each of the elders was assigned to write a blessing based on particular Scripture texts. In the sixth session, the elders shared those written blessings with the group, offering a constructive communal critique. The elders were then assigned a new set of texts and another round of blessings to be crafted for oral presentation. The seventh session involved the presentation of those blessings and another round of communal critique. The presentation of the blessings was recorded on video.

The intent of the ministry intervention was to equip the elders to function as a community of men authorized by God to bless and send his people into the world for the sake of the world. The intention was to equip the elders through theological reflection on Scripture and on the narratives of those who have fulfilled the role of pastoral blessing. The goal was to equip them through following templates and through practicing writing and speaking blessings. The desired outcome was that the elders would be equipped as a community of shepherds who are prepared to speak a blessing over the congregation at the conclusion of the Sunday assembly, sending people into the world for the sake of the world.

Basic Assumptions

The project is based on the following assumptions:

1. The people who come to the assembly of the Southeast Church of Christ are hoping to be empowered to live the life that God calls them to live. In order to fulfill this hope, the people are waiting for a clear articulation of what that life might look like. When they are presented with a clear picture of the world that God has in mind and when that is accompanied by a word of empowering blessing that sends them into the world,

their hope will have a chance of being realized. The people are in need of being sent into the world under the power of God for the accomplishment of the purpose of their lives.

2. The Church of Christ, as a tradition, has not used the language of blessing as sending. A comprehensive study of the tradition has not been undertaken, but during twenty-five years of participation in Churches of Christ, I have not seen the kind of blessing described in this project.

3. There is no systematic training for elders or ministers in the practice of blessing and sending the church into the world. An informal survey of more than a thousand ministers across a number of denominations revealed that none of them had had formal liturgical training in extending the kind of blessing described in this project.¹⁹

Definitions and Delimitations

Definitions

1. Missional is defined as the quality of life that is submitted to the mission of God. “Mission,” says the authors of *The Missional Church*, “is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”²⁰ In this project, our purpose is to facilitate the practice of participation with God in God’s purposes for the world.

¹⁹ The following question was asked on the Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary ListServ on May 10, 2005. “Do you end your worship service with a congregational blessing? Is that a formal part of your local or denominational liturgy? Do you find it a significant moment for the life of the church? How were you equipped to speak this blessing? <http://www.louisville.edu/it/listserv/archives/prcl-l.html>.

²⁰ Guder *et al*, *Missional Church*, 4.

2. Blessing is defined as the gracious and benevolent attention of God. This definition will find significant development in the theological perspective chapter. The argument will be that the blessing of God is the presence of God with his people.

Delimitations

1. The elders of the Southeast Church of Christ were the primary participants in this ministry intervention. The secondary participants, of course, were and are the congregation. For the purposes of this project, the focus was restricted to the equipping of the elders of this church to speak a blessing that sends the church into the world.

2. The focal point was the shepherd's blessing spoken during the Sunday morning assembly of the Southeast Church of Christ. Perhaps every gathering of the church should have a last word that reminds the members of the community that God is going with them. However, for the purpose of this project, the Sunday morning assembly of the church was addressed.

Conclusion: Ministry Setting and Analysis

The existing practices of the shepherd's blessing and the progress of the missional journey of Southeast make a project as this possible. The description of the history of the Southeast church demonstrates that this project is an important and significant step along that missional journey. Southeast is poised both theologically and contextually to send themselves under God's watchful eye powerfully into the world. The elders have experienced a renewed sense of their calling. Through the words of the blessing, the congregation has heard of a world where they are called to be the salt of the earth and the

light of the world. Through this shepherd's blessing that blesses and sends the church into the world, for the sake of the world, the members of Southeast may find themselves in a new era of evangelization in our community. The next section articulates the theological perspectives that formed the foundation of this project.

CHAPTER II
THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Our confession is that God speaks and the world is created. In the section to follow, we will look at God as our model for performative speech.¹ As the words of God create an inhabitable world of a particular kind, we will consider how our language in church, the language of Scripture and blessing, has the capacity to shape the lives of those gathered as the church. Our confession is that God's words actually create the actual physical reality of the world. As church leaders, in our feeble attempts to be imitators of God, we have no delusions of creating rocks or oceans with our words.² As human beings, we listen to words and find that they have transformative power when they are spoken appropriately.³ In this theological chapter, the formative story for Christians from the text of the Bible with regard to appropriate speech will be laid out. God encourages

¹ Performative utterances are those sentences that are not intended to describe or constate facts. Rather a performative utterance, according to J. L. Austin, is a part of the doing of an action. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

² This view is consistent with what Searle calls external realism. The brute facts of the physical world exist independently of our linguistic representations of them. See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 150.

³ The criteria for an appropriate performative word, according to Austin, include an authorized speaker communicating a conventional procedure in conventional circumstances with honorable participants. One example would be a wedding ceremony. A ten-year-old could speak the conventional wedding words over two of his or her ten-year-old friends without a performative effect. Austin would call this an unhappy performative utterance. Austin, 14-15.

speech that continues the shaping of our worlds. The people of God, the church of the Old and New Testaments, continue the formative and performative speech of God especially in a theological and social sense. The church has the capacity to embody the blessing of God and as a part of that embodiment speaks of God's intention to bless the whole world. When those who are called by God and the congregation to speak, speak an appropriate word, the eschatological world where God rules and reigns comes into a clearer focus, funding a world of expectation. As we listen to God's formative words, we have come to believe that God intends to bless and save the whole world. God's presence, when welcomed and received, will provide the wholeness and gracious goodness that God has in mind for humanity. We will consider the intention of God for his people to be assembled to hear and to speak a word that will be worship for the sake of the world. The Sunday morning liturgy is a significant context for God's blessing. Liturgical worship functions to sustain the faithful in their mission to be signposts of the kingdom of God, to be exemplars of the community that God has in mind, and to be cooperative agents with God in his mission for the sake of the world. When a formative word is spoken over the people in the assembly by those commissioned to speak, the church leaves the assembly as the church for the sake of the world. They have not assembled as a substitute for being the church. Rather, they are being sent into the world to be the church.

Words That Create Worlds

The story of Scripture begins with performative speech. "God said, 'Let there be light': and there was light" (Gen 1:3). In each of the moves of primordial creation, as one reads the story, seeing or hearing the words, the hearer or reader is making a choice about

the appropriateness of these words. The hearer is asking, are these words utterances that adequately describe the way the world around us works? Christians have adopted this story as their conceptual reality.⁴

God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so (Gen. 1:9). He said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so (Gen 1:11). For Christians, and other believers in the authority of the Genesis account, their confessional statement is that God spoke and the world came to be in an ontological sense. That confession may also extend to say that what God has spoken into existence has an ongoing relational connection to the creator. God not only spoke the world into existence as the creator, but he continues to speak to, and with, the creation. Even now, as we are readers of the Genesis account, being significantly removed from the original voice, we wrestle with the ideas presented. As people hear or read the words, they may ask, in our world, is God transcendent and removed from the action or is God “walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen 3:8)? They may ask, if God has created us, then is God responsible for our security and significance, or do we strive after those things through our own means? At Southeast, in their times of worship, they approach the God who speaks their world into reality. They think that the words spoken then and now are of supreme importance.

⁴ Searle would call this “conceptual relativity,” contending that such choices are arbitrary systems of representations, vocabularies, and conceptual schemes. For the Christian, however, the choice to believe God’s words has life and death seriousness. From the outside it could be viewed as a human creation, but from the inside of the community of belief, this world is created by God. Our response to the words of Scripture has created a particular kind of world. See Searle, 151.

Before examining the biblical witness in some detail as a warrant for the practice of speaking an appropriate blessing over the people, it is important to consider the impact of language as a practice of a theology from below. How does language function?

George Lindbeck said “To become Christian involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms.”⁵ Everyone has a brain and senses through which they can collect data about their environment. As people develop language skills, which is always a matter of socialization, they are able to articulate those data points, systemizing the data into meaningful conceptual frameworks. Lindbeck said, “It is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied and differentiated can be our experience.”⁶ It could be that Lindbeck has over-stated the case. It is certainly true that a richer vocabulary helps people express and analyze their experiences. It would be appropriate to be skeptical about the nuances if not the nature of an experience if one could not express that experience linguistically. However, if humans had no word for sunburn, their skin would still be burned by excessive exposure to the sun. Physical ecstasy happens without a person’s ability to articulate the sensation. The joy of a first bite of food when one is genuinely hungry would be experienced whether or not one had a word for joy or hunger or could explain ecstasy. Lindbeck’s statement, however, is still useful. People know they have had an experience of pain when nerve sensors have fired in their finger-tips. They may

⁵ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

react, but they cannot understand the experience until they are told about and develop words to express the nature of that experience. We learn linguistically. As we learn language, we develop understandings that allow us to differentiate between hot or sharp or bruised. People need the words in order to navigate in the world. How do humans know what words such as “God” mean? Language is a social construction, a matter of groups of people developing the means of communication, recognizing that we are genetically programmed for language, finding some form of agreement on the meaning of our words.⁷ When we say that words make worlds, we are not saying that our words do the same thing that we imagine that the words of God do. The Christian confession is that the words of God create the natural world. The contention of this project was that words authentically spoken, along with the authorization that arises out a social ethic, create a social reality.⁸ Language is vitally important. The words people speak shape the reality of the lives of those people around them. When people say that they love another person or that they reject them, they are impacting the other person’s self-conception. When people stand before witnesses on their wedding day and say, “I do,” their self-perception changes, and they behave differently because of their performative utterances and the

⁷ This apparent biological programming is an instance of external realism. It is noted here to emphasize that there are realities that are not in fact socially constructed. John Searle says, “To construct money, property, and language, for example, there have to be the raw materials of bits of metal, paper, land, sounds, and marks, for example. And the raw materials cannot in turn be socially constructed without presupposing some even rawer materials out of which they are constructed, until eventually we reach a bedrock of brute physical phenomena independent of all representations. The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed.” Ibid., Searle, 190-91.

⁸ Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor, 1966), 3.

performative utterances of the preacher. Their self-understanding changes because their social context affirms that a change has taken place.⁹ The self-conceptions change because those who speak and hear the words believe them to be valid or appropriate. The couple leaving the ceremony now inhabits a new social reality. Berger and Luckmann have said,

Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of ‘bringing back’ these symbols and appresenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the common-sense apprehension of this reality.¹⁰

The newly married couple is genuinely changed. They and we live in a world that is created and sustained by the signs and symbols that are socially constructed.

People who live in Houston, Texas, in the first decade of the third millennium live in a context that allows for a greater impact of our words. Walter Brueggemann has said, “Hegemony, intellectual and political, as it always does, had eliminated probing speech, daring rhetoric, and subversive text, and had insisted that reality is a settled matter that language can describe, but upon which it cannot actively impinge.”¹¹ The hegemony that

⁹ This is not the whole of the story of the transformation, either. If we were to slip into the theology from above, we would have to say that it is God who, in the midst of our covenantal promises, through our sacramental use of language, is actually making one out of two (Matt 19:6). Our words transform our self-conception, but when we are Christians, we confess that our identities have actually changed.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 12.

Brueggemann is talking about is the interpretive lens through which we view the world. The lens has been dominated by the Enlightenment enterprise, and perhaps by white men from the colonial west. Once a social group has a dominant point of view about the reality of the world, there are forces that seek to maintain that dominance.¹² When words are spoken that deconstruct that dominance, the impact is inherently subversive. This hegemony has been broken by the confession of uncertainty, by the communal loss of objectivity. Thomas Kuhn's work in the field of the history of science demonstrates that what we thought of as an objective enterprise revealing the world as it "really is," is actually a political and sociological enterprise. Science tends to live within a stream of achievements that form a foundation for the further practice of scientific investigation. He calls this "normal science" or a "paradigm."¹³ Normal science does not seek to establish new theories, discover new phenomena, or find out how the world really works. Normal science seeks to articulate the phenomena and the theories already supplied by the ruling paradigm.¹⁴ A paradigm functions until a crisis emerges that demands a new way of looking at problems or until, as Thomas Nickles says, "a group of mostly younger practitioners advocating a new paradigm succeeds in shoving aside the old paradigm and its supporters and subsequently rewriting the history of the field to make their new

¹² The domination system, the desire to maintain the hegemony, says Charles Campbell, "is characterized by power exercised over others, by control of others, by ranking as the primary principle of social organization, by hierarchies of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed." In Charles L. Campbell, *Word before the Powers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 26.

¹³ Thomas S. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

paradigm appear to be the final stage in the progressive development of the field.”¹⁵ The point is that there are circumstances in which the rules of knowing are variable. The variability in the rules of knowing undercuts objectivity. We live in paradigms, or world-views, that are based on data points that are necessarily interpreted by individuals in communities. This is not a rejection of external realism. Rather, this is a recognition that the interpretation of data, the examination of how the world works, is an ongoing enterprise that is made up of conversations. The data are always open to “probing speech” and “daring rhetoric.” The brute facts may or may not be up for discussion, but certainly the meaning of life is open for conversation. The fact that the meaning of life is open for discussion is what makes this first decade of the third millennium a context in which words may have greater impact than in previous eras.

Brueggemann contends that “preaching and proclamation are essentially an enterprise of imagining the world through the rhetoric of this text.”¹⁶ Those who hear a proclamation that is rooted in the rhetoric of the biblical text, are imagining the world in a particular way. His example is helpful. The gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus healing a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17). For eighteen years she had been crippled. Jesus called to her and announced a new reality for her. He told her that she had been released from the spirit that had held her captive. He identified her as a daughter of Abraham, as one who was included in the promises of God for blessing and purpose. Her “social context had construed her otherwise—crippled, dysfunctional, and worthless. She, moreover, had

¹⁵ Thomas Nickles, ed., *Thomas Kuhn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, 14.

accepted that debilitating ‘as’ for her life.”¹⁷ Jesus offered her a new imagination, a picture of who she really was. Her confidence, or faith, in that redefinition created a new world, or as Brueggemann might say, funded an appropriate and godly view of reality. This is the power of our words, too. When we make a credible proclamation of the narrative of God, when people grasp the life that God has in mind for them, they have the capacity to leave their old paradigms for living, experiencing a fully funded imagination for the life that God has in mind for them.

The Word and Words That Shape Us

In this section, we inhabit the text of Scripture as words that shape our people in specific ways. These are the words that the elders of Southeast find as the warrant for offering a blessing from God for the people. Without being rooted in the story, the elders would be unable to speak an “appropriate” word, resulting in what J. L. Austin calls a “misfire.”¹⁸ Taking Genesis as the example, those who read and hear are developing a world view, a world of imagination. This imagination is the hearer/reader’s perspective on how the world exists and functions. People behave in certain ways because they have heard, understood, or believed that God creates powerfully and benevolently. At Southeast, the elders, ministers, and members order their lives based upon a word such as this.

God speaks. The witness of Scripture is one of a high value on a speaking God. God speaks the world into existence, and the story that speaks our world into existence

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Austin, 16.

says that God made humankind in God's own image. God spoke to Adam and Eve, laying out the rules for managing life in the garden (Gen 2:16-17). God was establishing an inhabitable space. When the serpent entered the picture, he countered the speech of God and proposed another view of reality, one in which God is preventing the full potential of humanity. Sin is the failure to believe the word of God, and thus a failure to live in the world that God has in mind. The Bible is the story of God speaking an intelligible, formative, holy, and graceful word to his people. The task of the Sunday assemblies at Southeast is to hear and respond to that word and to leave the assembly with the determination to live in the world that God has in mind.

The world that God has in mind is one of relationship between people and God. The biblical story says that human beings live in the kind of world where God interacts with people in a necessarily unequal partnership that has as its goal the benevolent blessing of all people. God spoke promises to Abraham that assured him of a place, a people, and a long-range purpose (Gen 12:1-3). That purpose, the blessing of all people, was central to this project. God reiterated these promises to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen 28:13-15). God defines the blessing as a matter of participation in the life of Jacob and, by extension, participation in the life of humanity. God says, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" and "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28:15). While this was the conceptual world for the patriarchs, it is by extension pertinent to the ongoing mission of the church. The presence of God with us is the definition of blessing. The delivery of this blessing is the fundamental thread holding together the narrative of the Bible. Can God maintain his presence with and for

humanity without growing so frustrated that he must withdraw from or destroy humanity?

The answer is yes. God can manage to bless in the face of our unfaithfulness.

This is the thread people need to see. God spoke through the prophets, from Moses to Malachi. The promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were still in play. God spoke to Moses from the bush to commission Moses to speak for God in delivering the people from Egypt. God had promised the land and a blessing for the nations. The children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could not remain in captivity in Egypt. More about Moses will appear in the following section concerning God's commission for his servant to speak. In this section, the focus is on the speech of God. God redirected the lives of his people as he spoke to Moses, and through Moses to Pharaoh, and through Moses to deliver the Torah. God spoke an instruction that was meant to define the way the people of God should live. The Torah was a new expression of the garden, a habitable space where God and people could live in proximity, in the character of communion. God's speech made this habitable space possible.

The psalmists recognized the performative nature of the words of God. In Psalm 29, the worshipers are oriented to the God whose voice thunders, is powerful, and is a force with which to reckon. This fearsome God, however, brings a blessing, the intimacy that brings peace (shalom, wholeness, salvation). The psalm itself, as a word, brings peace for those who trust that God is "enthroned over the flood." The powerfully speaking God is the king forever. This is a word about how the world operates.

The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He

makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, “Glory!” The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace! (Ps 29: 4-11)

Psalm 46, likewise, is an affirmation of the God who speaks. As in creation, the voice of God brings order out of chaos.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. (Ps 46:4-8)

The blessing is again given voice. “The LORD of hosts is with us.” The force of the announcement is that the people are comforted to have the God of Jacob with them. The voice of the Lord is performative. The world, the cosmic reality of the believer, is changed.

When God withholds his word, the people of God suffer. As the prophet Amos sought to gain the attention of the nation of Israel in the eighth century B.C., he spoke a word of the Lord about a famine:

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. (Amos 8:11-13)

God claims that his word is a sustaining force. The word of Yahweh is the presence of Yahweh. The world that God has in mind is not only created by the word, but the world created subsequently becomes dependent upon that word. In Colossians 2:17 one can see the affirmation of this proclamation as it relates to Jesus, through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together. The testimony of the writer of Deuteronomy, and of Jesus, is that we live not by bread but by “every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3, Matt 4:4).

The Gospel of John identified Jesus as the word of God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John proclaimed that this word is and was the agent of creation. Jesus, as the Word, was the power that brought order out of chaos in the original creation. The message, for those who can imagine it, is that the original power is visited once again in a new context, once again doing the work that is consistent with its nature, which is making the world that God has in mind. The writer of Hebrews says that God spoke long ago by the prophets, “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2). The message of Jesus is an eschatological word. By eschatological, I do not mean an end-times word, but a word that creates an alternative and ultimate world, the world where God reigns. Through Jesus,

God spoke a word of invitation into that reign as he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15). It was a word that constituted good news because the peace of God had come for all people, at least for all who would hear it, believe it, and live under the rule of the king. God was inviting all nations to be blessed through the seed of Abraham, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus came with the purpose of proclaiming this message of the kingdom (Mark 1:38; Matt 9:35).

Jesus's word about the kingdom was also a word of love from God for all of humanity. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes (accepts this view of how the world works, along with the attendant ethical implications) in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16). The life of Jesus is a word spoken from a cross. It is a word about the love of God, the kind of love that would go to the greatest possible lengths to bless all people. The cross of Jesus says that the God who knows the story of humanity is not exasperated with us. Rather, in the cross we find a high anthropology. Humanity is worth dying for. God is willing to suffer for the sake of humanity. That is an inhabitable world, a world worthy of our imagination.

In Jesus, there is also a word of life. He has come to say that there is more life than the here and now. Jesus told the disciples to be fearless when it came to physical threats (Matt 10:28). How could Christians not fear death? In the resurrection, Jesus demonstrated a reason to be fearless. The Hebrew writer said that through death Jesus destroyed the devil, the one who had the power of death, and set free those who had lived all of their lives in fear of death (Heb 2:15). Without a resurrection word, this would not

shape the world of those who believe. As it is, these words create the world Christians inhabit, which is the world that God has in mind.

In Jesus, there is also a word of sending. Jesus makes Christians missional. Jesus sent the disciples on dangerous missions (Matt 10:26). After the resurrection, Jesus was clear about the nature of his sending. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Jesus said that we were the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14). Jesus claimed that his disciples would be witnesses clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit sent to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The world of the Christian is one in which current-day disciples are sent with a responsibility for extending the blessing of God to the people Christians encounter.

God speaks and makes a particular kind of social world, a God centered social world. Those who can hear the words that God speaks in Scripture find themselves in the kind of world where God reigns, where God promises his presence, where order is brought out of chaos, where people are loved, where people can have peace and wholeness, where human beings find a particular kind of companionship, and where disciples are sent into the world on a mission. As the elders speak a blessing over God’s people, the people are being assured that God is helping them live in this reality.

Salvation and Blessing for the World

The contention of the argument above is that the life that God has in mind is one that is blessed. To be blessed means that God is benevolently and powerfully present in and with his people. God told Jacob when the promises made to Abraham were extended to him, “Know that I am with you and will keep you where ever you go, and will bring

you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen 28:15). The promise of God was that Abraham’s family would inherit the land, would be a family whose number was beyond counting, and that through his offspring all the families, peoples, and nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 28:13-14). The children of Abraham, either through the descent of Jacob or through the faith of Abraham (Rom 4:16), were intended not only to be recipients of the blessing of God, but to be vehicles for God’s blessing of all people. The Apostle Paul calls this blessing for all people the gospel. “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles will be blessed in you’” (Gal 3:8). The blessing is the benevolent presence of God for the world.

The priests of God were given words of blessing to speak over the people. They were to say, “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26). The understanding was that in the speaking of this blessing, the name of the LORD (YHWH) was placed on the people (v. 27). It is a rather astonishing invitation to an intimate connection with God.

God told Jacob that he would keep him (Gen 28:15). What might it mean to be kept by God? The witness of Scripture is that Jesus died on a cross. To be kept must not mean that God will disallow suffering or a particularly humiliating death. The story of the Bible is that the lives of the prophets were difficult. To be kept, or blessed, by God must not mean that life is or will be easy. The people of God all through the narrative of Scripture experienced suffering and chaos in their lives. Nevertheless, there is a comfort

in believing that God would keep his people. If the LORD's face would shine upon his people, it would mean that God was aware of their needs and was watching over their daily lives. People under this blessing would know that they were not alone, that their Creator cared about the chaos surrounding them and would be working to bring order and wholeness (salvation) to their lives. As the elders practice blessing in the congregational context, they are not saying that God will make life easy for his people. They are encouraging the congregation that God is present with them in their routines and their relationships. When they extend the blessing of God, they extend salvation.

When the psalmist cries for mercy from God, he says, "Do not cast me from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps 51:11-12). Salvation is participation in the life of God, in the character of God, dependently receiving all of the gracious benefits that God has in mind for his people.¹⁹ In Psalm 22:1 we hear, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." The one who cries out thus confesses that life is desperate away from the presence of God. When Jesus quotes this psalm, he reminds those who hear that they need God's attention, especially in the most disorderly and chaotic moments. When the psalm resolves, there is an announcement of the abiding blessing of God, "For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted: He did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (Ps 22:24). The face of God grants peace. Psalm 17 echoes this theme, saying, "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness" (Ps 17:15). Walter Brueggemann says, "This collection of

¹⁹ Joel B. Green, *Salvation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 9.

prayers makes clear that the full, hoped-for self is a self who will live in full communion with God, enjoying God's presence, being utterly safe, at home, at peace in God's presence. This affirmation may strike us as odd and offensive, but it belongs to the core of our faith."²⁰ The salvation that comes from God is characterized by this holy communion. As the Father, Son, and Spirit experience community and intimacy (*perichoresis*), so also God's intention for humankind is a practice of intimacy that approximates, or is a foretaste of, the communion of God. When the elders speak the priestly blessing, or words formulated with those themes, they are encouraging the listeners to live in the peace of God for the sake of the world.

The Church Speaking God's Word

Who may appropriately speak for God? As the elder group considered the challenge of speaking the congregational blessing at Southeast, they needed the theological reassurance that it is appropriate for them to bless the people and to send them out to inhabit the world that God has in mind. Moses had doubts that he was competent to speak a word on God's behalf. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commissioned him to go to Pharaoh to secure the release of the captive Israelites, Moses declined. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11). God responded with the language of blessing, "I will be with you." God instructed Moses to speak to the Israelites. He is to share with them the name of God, and the fact that God is the one who has sent Moses (Exod 3:14). Moses is to go to Pharaoh with the elders of Israel. Moses and the elders are to speak to Pharaoh about God's will

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 44.

for his people (Exod 3:18). It is important to see the expanding expectation of God. Moses speaks for God to Israel. Moses and the elders speak to Pharaoh. God is communicating his will through the mouth of his servants. Moses was unconvinced, or perhaps the story unfolds this way in order to teach those who read the story about their own hesitation, to accept such a responsibility. Moses says what people in any era might say, "I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, or even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod 4:10). God responded to Moses and for those who come after Moses, saying, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you should speak" (Exod 4:11-12). Moses responded again as the elders might, "O my Lord, please send someone else." God did not and does not send someone else. God calls and commissions and sends. The task of speaking for God was and is not an easy one. Even in the face of the markers of authenticity such as the rod that became a snake, the plagues, the pillar of fire and smoke, Pharaoh and the Israelites remained stubborn in their unbelief. Even after the miracle of the parting of the sea, the people were still prone to disbelief. Those who would answer God's call to speak should be prepared to face their own doubts as well as the doubts of those to whom they speak.

The chain of authority was still in place when the priestly blessing was commanded. God spoke to Moses, commanding him to speak to Aaron and the sons of Aaron, who were to be priests (Num 3:3), "Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, 'The Lord bless you and keep you'" (Num 6:23-24). These priests would be

ordinary people except that God had instructed them to speak on his behalf. They were commissioned to shape the understanding of the people of God, helping them know that God was benevolent with them. Essentially, the whole nation of Israel was to fill a priestly role. At Sinai God communicated his purpose to the people:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exod 19:4-6)

If the whole nation was to be a priestly kingdom, who would be the worshipers served by the priests? Their worship would have been for the sake of the world. The whole people of God would usher the rest of the world into the presence of God that all people would be blessed. Christians will hear these identifying and commissioning words, too (1 Pet 2:9). Priests speak the blessing of God for all the people.

Prophets also have a speaking responsibility. When Moses balked at his speaking assignment from God, God gave him Aaron as a mouthpiece. "The LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land'" (Exod 7:1-2). The prophet had to speak, and the people were held accountable for listening. In Deuteronomy Moses told the people that God would raise up another prophet like him and that the people were to listen. God affirms

this report, saying, “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable” (Deut 18:19). This is a collective reference to the fact that God was not finished speaking when Moses died. Other prophets would be commissioned to speak. Their task is to remind the people of the presence of God and of the covenant expectations of God. Men such as Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, and women such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, attempted to keep the word of the Lord before the people of God. They all found that speaking to the people of God was a frustrating task. Isaiah’s call is typical. After he agreed to speak on God’s behalf (Isa 6:8), he was told that the people would not be responsive. Isaiah asked, “How long, O Lord?” (Isa 6:11), and the answer was that he was to keep speaking until the land was laid waste, until the people were carried into exile. The prophets spoke as an act of the grace of God, without a consideration for the effectiveness of the words spoken. Prophets sought to be effective, but the measure of their faithfulness is not the apparent successful blessing of the people. This is the world that God has in mind for those who will speak on his behalf. The elders who will speak a blessing do not speak only when they are assured of a hearing. They speak because they are commissioned to do so. Likewise, the people sent out under the blessing to live in the world for the sake of the world also speak in such a way that they manifest the presence of God in a persistent way, regardless of the effect.

John and Jesus are prophets in the sense that they bring a word from God for the people. Jesus called and sent the twelve with his gospel of the kingdom of God (Matt 10:7). When Jesus rose from the dead, he met them behind closed doors and sent them

into the world for the sake of the world. He said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Jesus is speaking the ideal shepherd’s blessing. The disciples’ world is changed as Jesus speaks the gospel of peace over them. In the midst of the chaos of grief, the risen Lord comes to bring peace and purpose to their lives. A new world begins for them, one where they understand, or begin to understand, that they are sent out to reconcile the world to God under God’s own power and care (Acts 1:8). Matthew also reports this blessing as Jesus says to the disciples, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

The same power that enabled the mission of the apostles is poured out upon all flesh on the day of Pentecost (Joel 2:28; Acts 2). This power is the presence of God that empowers people to live the eschatological life. In this new world, the apparent power structures are turned upside down. This has been true all through Scripture, but often we are blinded by the old world structures. According to old world structures, Jacob, the supplanter, the liar and schemer, would not be chosen to receive the blessing of God or chosen to become Israel (Gen 32: 38). Who, in an old-world scheme, would have sent their son, the king, into the world to be born in a stable to such humble characters as Mary and Joseph? The new world, the eschatological life, is powerfully described in John’s revelation. In chapter 5 we see the lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered. When John looked to see the lion, what he saw was the lamb, standing as if it had been slain (Rev 5:6). David Barr says, “A more complete reversal of value would be hard to imagine.”²¹ The point is that the world created by the word of God is radically different

²¹ David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World,” *Interpretation* 38 (Winter 1984): 41.

from the conception of the world under the rule of the principalities and the powers. This is the kind of world where a widow gives her last lepta because she trusts that this life in the flesh is not all the life there is (Mark 12:44). This is the alternative world where the poor are blessed (Luke 6:20), where those who mourn are blessed (Matt 5:4). It is only by the presence of God through his Holy Spirit that those who are poor or grieved would believe it. This is the Spirit that enables the church to be the body of Christ, a community of people who are living with the intention of being a foretaste of the future that God has in mind for the world. This is the world created by the word of God and by the words repeated in worship. As the church leaves the assembly and enters the world, the people speak the words of blessing. God loves them enough to live in them and through them. God loves them enough to commission them to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14). The church is authorized and expected to speak the words that create a Christian world.

Authority to speak a blessing from God seems presumptuous if it were not for the witness of the commissioning we have seen in these Scriptures. God is seeking to make a particular kind of world, the world where *shalom* is manifest. As Fred Aquino and Jeff Childers say:

Everywhere human beings show their brokenness and reveal their longing for peace. . . . *Shalom* has been dashed into a thousand pieces, in ten thousand ways.

Yet it has left a sweet residue on the wrecked fragments of our world. Like an aroma that invokes a vivid recollection from childhood, we sense the memory of

peace, and we long to get it back somehow. We crave good relationships with one another, with our world, and with our God.²²

This is the foretaste of heaven that our churches pray is manifest in them. This is the alternative eschatological world to which we bear witness. This is the world that God's words and our words of blessing seek to create. Typically, the men and women of the church do not see themselves as prophets, yet many of them effectively speak and act in such a way that the world God has in mind is created in pockets among them. Christians, particularly elders, are more inclined to accept the role of priests because of the announcement of Scripture that we are priests (1 Pet 2:9). There are men who accept the roles of deacons and elders. When men were selected to serve the community to insure the fair distribution of food, the criteria for service was that they be men who were well-spoken of, men who had the evidence of wisdom and were full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3). In the narrative of the Book of Acts, these men were not known for waiting on tables. Rather, the reader finds Philip and Stephen, two of the seven, speaking the word that creates the world that God has in mind. All through Scripture, elders have had a leading role in the life of the community (Exod 3:18; Num 11:16; Mark 7:5). The *presbuteroi* were men who had spent much of their life with God and the people of God. Elders were mentioned in the Christian church in Antioch without preamble (Acts 11:30). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:21-23). These elders were expected to be the leaders of the community.

²² Frederick D. Aquino and Jeff W. Childers, *Unveiling Glory: Visions of Christ's Transforming Presence* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2003), 8.

Paul commissioned the elders of the church in Ephesus in such a way that we might see what God expected of elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31)

The people have expectations of those who oversee, who shepherd, who have walked in the faith for a long while. The authority to speak a blessing over the flock is imbedded in this description. As the deacons were to be men full of the Holy Spirit, so also the elders have been empowered and commissioned by the Holy Spirit to oversee the development of the gospel of peace in the community. The elders are the pastors of the church, who protect, guide and nourish the people into the future that God has in mind. The authority of the elders to guide, protect, and speak is based on the life and humility of Jesus. The alternative world is always in view. The authority of the elders is always relational in nature as evidenced in the encouragement from 1 Peter 5:

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief

shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (1 Pet 5:1-5)

The words of encouragement are clothed in a gentle, fatherly spirit. Tending to the flock is a pastoral responsibility, one of compassionate care. The elders are to be practitioners of the gospel of peace. It is this Christlike character that makes them leaders. Elders are uniquely positioned within the Church of Christ to speak words that bless and send the church into the world for the sake of the world.

In the act of blessing, there are also meaningful gestures that accompany the words. When people were bringing children to Jesus to have him touch them, he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them (Mark 10:16). In the worship of the Old Testament, we see Aaron raise his hands toward the congregation to offer the blessing (Lev 9:22). This same gesture is mentioned in the apocryphal book of Sirach. The high priest raised his hands over the worshipers: “Then Simon came down and raised his hands over the whole congregation of Israelites, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord with his lips, and to the glory in his name; and they bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High” (Sir 50:20-21). The significance of the gestures is important. Jesus took the infant in his arms, or laid hands on the child. This was the benevolent touch of a father, offering his reassuring presence that is representative of continuing care. The arms raised toward the congregation represent the

compassionate care of God, the symbol of his reassuring presence. The hands reaching toward the congregation are God's hands on their heads.

Worship That Speaks a Blessing

The blessing of God is extended in the assembly of the church for worship in ways that it is not extended in other venues. When Christians are gathered for worship, there is an expectation that they are gathered in the presence of God. The words spoken in the assembly formulate the world where God lives and moves and has his being (Acts 17:28). Donald Saliers calls worship an eschatological art, a place where we dare

To speak and sing in such language that we mean far more than can be said; to break bread together and feast on more than we can know; to wash and be washed, body and feet, and thus belong to far more than the living empirical world; to sing a sound more than the ear can fully take in of the glory of creation; to bring all of life (the mundane, the frightening, the joyful and a hope for the world) to a place where it is held in the light of One who knows us; to bring joy and heartbreak to a place of ordered Word and sacramental action only to receive healing and a greater hope than we could imagine: this is the transformative art of the assembly. This is to learn the true advent of God, ever-fresh. Such revelatory art is not mere utopian projection. It is the *parousia* made accessible in human form.²³

²³ Donald E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: A Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 201.

In worship, the gathered people intend to come into the presence of God, and as they meet God, they find that they are changed and sent out into the world (Isa 6:1-8). God calls his people into assembly and into community for worship for the sake of the world. The worship of the people, and God's presence in those gatherings for worship, functions to sustain worshipers in their missional lives, being signposts of the kingdom of God, reminding them that they are to be exemplars of the community that God has in mind, that they are cooperative agents with God in his mission for the sake of the world. Thomas Schattauer makes the case that worship is at its very conception by the Spirit the place for God's people to witness to the reconciling nature of God. He says, "The gathering of a people to witness to and participate in this reconciling movement of God toward the world is an integral part of God's mission. The visible act of assembly (in Christ by the power of the Spirit) and the forms of this assembly—what we call liturgy—enact and signify this mission."²⁴ His argument is that the very act of worship is priestly service for the sake of the world. As Christians gather for worship, they are a signpost of the kingdom. What Christians do in worship is directed to God on behalf of the world. Paul told the church in Corinth that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" and that the message of reconciliation has been entrusted to those whom God has called, including them (2 Cor 5:19). People, even church leaders, have a tendency to bifurcate the liturgy of the church from the life of the church. However, the words that are spoken and the rituals that are enacted in the assembly create the conceptual world that Christians inhabit. When Christians gather at the table of the Lord, they are reminded that

²⁴ Thomas H. Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 3.

this is the living bread that they eat. As Jesus said in the gospel of John, this bread is his flesh that he gave “for the life of the world” (John 6:51). In baptism, Christians die and are resurrected to new life. This is a living sacrifice that leads to a new ethical life (Rom 12:1-2), which is spiritual liturgy. To be baptized “is to be numbered with those who are sent to be the suffering body in the world, showing forth the Lord’s death till he come.”²⁵

The words that are spoken in prayer and proclamation are not just for the peace and comfort of those gathered, but for the peace of the world. Paul, again speaking to the church in Corinth, identified them as the temple of the living God (2 Cor 6:16), the place where God lives with his people in covenant faithfulness.²⁶ “To Paul this shrine of the divine presence is no longer an isolated and insulated architectural space; it is the living community in the world.”²⁷ Christians and church leaders often forget that, however, and find themselves rebuilding a place where certain things happen with our language. People still say that they “go to church.” Or they ask one another, “Are you coming to church?” If words create a particular understanding of the world, it is important to find a way to reconstitute the community linguistically as an assembly of human beings where the presence and power of God is found and mediated.

When Christians leave the assembly, they do not leave the shared life. They have been changed by the words of God even if the change is gradual. They now are bound together in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). They are those who have a single-minded

²⁵ J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 78.

²⁶ Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 98.

²⁷ Davies, 15.

purpose (Phil 1:27), namely the reconciliation of God and the cosmos, and each human being into a harmonious relationship with one another and with God. Christians leave the assembly as the foretaste of heaven, or at least that is the intention. Modern disciples of Jesus are often like the disciples described in the gospels in that we quickly forget the glory we have beheld when we were gathered in the name of Jesus. They are not like Moses, who came down from the mountain wearing a veil to cover the fading glory of God on his face. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that they are those who have unveiled faces, who are being transformed from glory unto glory into the image of him (2 Cor 3:17-18). However, the world rushes in as the congregation walks out the doors of the holy place, or even before they get out the doors. This forgetfulness demands attention. If the last word heard in the assembly is the blessing that sends the church into the world to live as the body of Christ, Jesus in the world, carrying the divine presence into every place they go, then perhaps they will forget less quickly.

Words create social worlds. It is important not to underestimate the significance of the words people use. God speaks and commissions his people to speak. As people hear and read Scripture and as they hear the concepts of Scripture enacted liturgically in the assembly of the community for worship, they are inaugurated into the eschatological world that God has in mind. They are becoming witnesses for God of the shalom that God has in mind for the whole world. As the elders at Southeast speak words of blessing over the assembled people, the congregation is sent into the world to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They will speak to their neighbors, to the cashiers at the grocery store, to their fellow workers, to all of the people they encounter. If they have

been formed by the story of God, if they have been reminded that God is with them and has sent them into the world to manifest his benevolent presence, then their public speech will reflect that power and that mission. The words that are spoken in their homes and in these public venues are important. The elders are sending them from the assembly under God's power and providence to be the kind of people that God has in mind for the whole world. The church is being sent to testify to the love of God, to the grace of God, and to the intention of God to reconcile the world to himself in peace.

Conclusion: Theological Perspectives

In the worship of the church, in the speaking of the blessing of God over the people, articulating that God's powerful presence goes with them into the world for the sake of the world, the elders are creatively acting with the authorization of God to fund the imagination of the gathered people in a way that nourishes and strengthens the people to live differently from the kingdom of this world. With God's presence, they will have the strength to extend the blessing of God to every other human being they encounter. As the hearts of the people are full of what it means to 'live according to the Spirit' (Rom 8:5), the realization of the abiding nature of the community that is cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, the world is changed for all concerned. The world of those encountered by the church dispersed is enlightened and salted!

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

How can the elders be equipped to speak a blessing that will remind the congregation that the power of God is with them and that will also send the people into the world for the sake of the world? At Southeast, training often happens through facilitated conversations. The elders bring a lifetime of wisdom to the task of equipping themselves to fill their role as a shepherd of the church. With this in mind, the equipping intervention was conducted through seven ninety-minute sessions that provided opportunity for communal theological reflection concerning the shepherd's blessing. The project plan was that the first six sessions would meet away from the church facility in order to foster a relaxed atmosphere found in a living room environment. That did not turn out to be practical or convenient. All of the sessions met at the church building. The seventh session was designed for the practice of oral delivery of the blessing and was convened in the Worship Center. This final session was captured on video for review. Since not all of the men were able to tape their blessing on the scheduled evening, the communal critique of those blessings was conducted several days later.

The Ministry Intervention—Training for Blessing

Session 1—The Power of Words/The Power of God

In the first session, the elders considered the importance of words; how words might be deeds. We considered the creative power of the words we speak in our families, in romance, in business, in conflict, and in the community of the church. We turned to the Scriptures to think about the power of words in the creation account in Genesis. In this conversation, we confirmed our belief that our words really shape what we believe about the world and about our lives. “Life for us is linguistically constituted; that one can hear and speak words is one’s primary gift.”¹ As leaders of the church, we considered how we might use that primary gift to accomplish God’s mission in the world, namely the blessing of all people.

We looked at the model Scriptures for blessing, considering the blessing of Jacob by Isaac (Gen 27) and the blessing of Jacob by God (Gen 28: 32). We set out this scriptural model for a blessing in order to shape the imagination of the elders for speaking the blessing at the end of the Sunday assembly. We read the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:22-27 and noticed the blessing gesture of raising the hands toward the people in Leviticus 9:22. We shared the comments from Paul Pruyser² that formed the foundation for this project. The goal of this session was that the elders would experience a fresh realization of the way God works through living words to shape the lives of people. Another goal of this session was to encourage the elders that their words can create worlds that the congregation can inhabit. Words that are spoken by the elders, as those who are expected to feed and nurture the sheep of God, help the church become the

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 35.

² Pruyser, 354-355.

people that God has in mind. The pastors speak, in a sense, as the prophets of God, as those who speak a word on God's behalf. William Willimon says, "A prophet works primarily through words...Through words, imaginative metaphors, and symbolic gestures, a prophet invites the covenant community to a reconstruction of reality...in light of eternity."³ He goes on to say, "The spoken word is never an isolated event; it takes place where at least two or three are gathered together. It presupposes that which it also creates: Community. Spoken words that do otherwise are disruptive and violate the very nature of the church."⁴

Words are important. We pointed out that Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, and that by our words we will be justified or condemned (Matt 12:34-37). This final point of the first session emphasized that the elders are speaking a blessing that is intended to have an effect on the congregation. The congregation is sent out with a transformed vocabulary, a vocabulary for blessing their family and all those they meet with the presence of the Lord in them.⁵

Session 2—God's Agents for Blessing

The second session was a conversational reflection on a lesson written by Fred Kane of Hillsboro, Oregon, called "Our Ministry of Blessing."⁶ Through overhearing this story, the elders related to Kane's reluctance to be a vessel for blessing. We overheard

³ William H. Willimon, "Pastors Who Are Preachers Who Are Prophets," in *Preaching the Eighth-Century Prophets*, ed. David Fleer and Dave Bland (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2004), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ See appendix A for session handouts.

⁶ See appendix A, session 2.

Kane ask the important question, “Who am I to stand in the place of God and offer a blessing?”

Kane’s narrative led us into conversations about the congregational expectations of the elders to be pastors (Acts 20:28-32; Ezek 34:4). William Willimon reminds those who are called to serve God’s people that “[o]ur words become God’s word as God calls our word into his service.”⁷ The operative and performative power is always God’s power.

Kane’s narrative and our consideration of Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian elders led us into conversations about systems of power and authority in the church and away from the church. We explored the idea of the calling of God and the calling of the congregation upon our lives. We considered the idea of living beyond our own insecurities and into the ministry that God has in mind for his called servants. The goal of this session was to create a sense of imagination in the elders. As they thought about this narrative, they found points of connection, experiencing and confessing their own inner doubts about their worthiness to speak a blessing. The intent was for them to imagine overcoming that doubt in the same way that the narrative unfolds.

Session 3—Developing Moral Authority for Blessing

In the third session, we worked to develop a sense of moral authority for offering a blessing. We considered a short narrative written by Sarah Keyser.⁸ As we overheard her struggle with offering the liturgical blessing, we considered how the spoken blessing

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ See appendix A, session 3.

by the elders might be received by the people. Would the congregation wonder, “Who do these men think they are to speak that kind of blessing on us?” We considered ways that the elders could develop a level of comfort with speaking the blessing. We asked about our willingness to accept the mantle of the shepherd.⁹ In this session, we also used Jackson Carroll’s, *As One with Authority*, to think about relational and positional authority in the church. Carroll says, “Authority is the right to exercise leadership in a particular group or institution based upon a combination of qualities, characteristics, or expertise that the leader has or that followers believe their leader has.”¹⁰ In a congregation that understands their need for passionate spirituality and for effective and appropriate evangelism, our leaders are ready to accept the positional authority that the congregation has granted them. As they develop relational authority, the power of their words of blessing will be magnified. Carroll says that the basis for authority is ultimately rooted in the sacred and that the leaders in the church are representatives of the sacred in our society.¹¹ We talked about the fact that the elders are representatives of the sacred to the congregation. We reminded one another that the most powerful authority is relational. We also recognized that the congregation does expect the voice of authority from those who lead, that the elders represent God to the people, and that the church is intended to represent God to the world.

Session 4—Discernment of the Mission of God

⁹ Pruyser, 351.

¹⁰ Carroll, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

In the fourth session, we returned to the Scriptures to practice discernment of the mission of God. During this session, we spent time with 2 Corinthians 4 as a model for developing a sense of what God is doing in the world and considering the mission of God for the world. The elders read this chapter through the lens of the Missional Bible Study.¹² This lens led us to ask specific missional questions such as how does this text send us and equip our witness, how does this text read us and our world, and how does this text evangelize us with good news? The group also asked how this text converts us in personal and corporate life. We asked how this text orients us to the future that God has in mind for us and for the world.

The elders explored the idea of “for the sake of the world.” Jesus was sent into the world by the Father and in turn sends his disciples into the world (John 20:21). Jesus says that his flesh was given for the life of the world (John 6:51). Since we are the leaders of the body of Christ, how are we carrying out the mission of God for the sake of the world? The goal was to have our sense of mission clarified in our own minds so that as we bless and send the church we might understand what we are asking them to do. To what end are we blessing and sending the church?

Session 5—Following the Models

The fifth session began the concrete practice of creating a blessing that sends the church into their local contexts. The group read sample blessings provided by Bass Mitchell of Charlottesville, Virginia. Mitchell has written congregational blessings based

¹² Lois Barrett, “Missional Bible Study,” Gospel and Our Culture Network, <http://www.gocn.org/MissionalBibleStudy.htm>. (accessed July 21, 2005).

on Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary.¹³ The elders considered the connection between the blessing and the Scripture texts being used for worship. They saw how following the theme of the text for the day would lead to clarity of mission for the congregation. The elders were asked to write blessings based on specific texts. The men presented these written blessings to the group at the following session.

Session 6—Presentation of Written Blessings

In the sixth session, the elders brought their written blessings to the meeting to share with one another and to receive communal critique. The task was to listen to one another's attempt to craft a blessing that would send the church into the world for the sake of the world. The men presented their blessings and the group offered questions and criticism. We assigned a new set of texts for the next round of written blessings. These written blessings were spoken in the Worship Center without the assembly of the congregation to prepare the shepherds to speak the blessing with confidence. The elders were encouraged to attempt the accompanying gesture of reaching their hands toward the congregation as they offered the blessing.

Session 7—Presentation of Oral Blessings

The seventh session was comprised of two parts. The elders came to the Worship Center to practice delivering their blessings, which were recorded on video. After the recordings were made, the group assembled a few days later to watch each other's blessing and to offer a critique of their own performance and of the presentations made by

¹³ See appendix A, session 5.

their peers.

Methods of Evaluation

The project was evaluated using qualitative methodologies. To insure validity, the project uses conventional models of triangulation. “Triangulation suggests that when the same theme emerges from three independent data sources, the theme is probably solid.”¹⁴ In this project the three data sources were field notes taken during the sessions which represented the researcher’s perspective; an analysis of narratives written by the elders which represented the participant’s perspective; and a review by an independent expert which represented a third objective perspective.

Field notes were taken by Sandra Harbour, L.B.S.W., L.P.C., using James P. Spradley’s dimensions and methods of analysis.¹⁵ She observed and reported on the space related to the meeting, the actors involved, the activities of those involved, the actions of the participants, the sequencing of actions and statements, and the emotional interactions. She recorded substantial verbatim material. The field notes have been assembled in narrative form in the results portion of the project.

We examined the process of the project from the participant’s point of view through a narrative methodology described by Timothy Sensing.¹⁶ This methodology is especially pertinent to this project in that we have asserted that narratives are linguistic

¹⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and William R. Meyers, “The Doctorate of Ministry as an Exercise in Practical Theology: Qualitative Research with Living Human Documents,” *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* 11 (1989): 19.

¹⁵ James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1980).

¹⁶ Timothy Sensing, “Narrative as a Critical Tool for Research Methodology,” typewritten manuscript, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX.

tools through which human beings make meanings. Our elders have been through ten hours of reflective conversation about Scripture, about God and his people and their own role in shaping the future of Southeast. These ten hours should add to their narrative. Open-ended questions were developed to ask the elders, with the fundamental question being, “In the light of your role as an elder, tell me the story of your life.” They were asked to write several paragraphs in response to the questions. Their responses were analyzed to discover the underlying narrative for their role as an elder. We looked for statements that were relevant to the practice of speaking a blessing that shapes the lives of the people they shepherd. Every sentence that contributed toward this phenomenology of language in pastoral relationship was closely scrutinized. The analysis of these narratives appears in the results chapter of the project. The narratives themselves appear in the appendices for review.

Fred Kane has provided feedback as an independent expert. Kane received the final video capture of the oral blessings. He provided an independent evaluative perspective on the process and the result of the project. Kane analyzed the video presentations for style and theological content. He considered the texts that were the source for the blessings to determine if the elders had been equipped to craft the blessings out of the themes found in the Scriptures. Kane offered an opinion concerning the effect of the oral presentation, asking, “Was this a blessing? Might I feel blessed and sent into the world by these spoken words?”

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Ministry Intervention Sessions

In late April of 2005, the elders agreed to participate in a series of conversations and practices that would equip them to refine their blessing spoken at the end of our Sunday morning assemblies. While they believed that the shepherd's blessings were important, they were also aware that the purpose of the blessing was generally unclear. On Sunday, 18 September 2005, we gathered for the first of seven sessions. The sessions were a combination of Bible study, exercises in theological reflection, and practice in crafting words of blessing to be spoken to the congregation. There are eight elders. Four are retired from full-time non-church employment. The other four are professionally employed outside the church. It was difficult to schedule sessions when all of the elders could be present. Attendance was generally good, but only one session was fully attended. The participation of the elders reflected the general nature of this suburban congregation. The men find it difficult to create time to be together even when their motivation to be together is high. Seven elders were present for sessions 1 and 2. All of the elders were present for session 3, concerning the realization of moral authority for leadership and blessing. The least attended session was 4, concerning the discernment of God's mission. Six of the eight men were present for session 5, when the templates for blessings were considered. Seven of the men wrote blessings for session 6, and two were unable to attend the session when those blessings were critiqued. All of the men wrote blessings for

the oral presentation, and all came to have their blessing recorded on video. Six of the men came on the night scheduled for the video recording, and two came when they could, one earlier than the group and another three days later. All of the men answered the narrative questions at the end of the sessions. All of them took the assignment seriously, demonstrating considerable reflection about how they had learned to be elders and about their sense of mission for the church. The last two men to turn in their narratives, at the close of this project, announced that they are taking jobs away from Houston. All of the men were fully engaged in the conversations in the sessions they attended, demonstrating engagement with the material and with one another. The elders are comfortable with one another and enjoy spending time together. At the conclusion of session 7, one elder was speaking to another in the hallway saying that when new elders are selected, they will need to go through some of this training.

The project was founded on the belief that words have great power. The proposal was that the elders of the church could be equipped to speak a blessing at the close of the Sunday church assembly that would fund the imagination of the people for the abiding care and power of God for them. The elders were equipped to send the congregation into the world with a sense of mission for the sake of the world. Extensive notes were taken of the sessions. The matrix for analysis of the field notes was comprised of simple categories. Moments in the conversations were categorized as teaching moments and revelatory moments. The revelatory moments were further categorized as examples of apprehending the ideas being presented or as examples of resistance to the ideas being presented.

Session 1

In the first session, the elders gathered in a classroom and were offered refreshments. Elder 2¹ was unable to attend this session, but the other elders were present. The project was introduced in general terms, the fact that it was about the shepherd's blessings, and about sending the church out from the Sunday assembly with a sense that God was with them, helping them to live the life that God has in mind for them, a life that will bless the world as they encounter it.

Elder 3 was reading the handout as the conceptualization of the project was being given to the group. He was trying to make sense of the blessing of Isaac for Jacob rather than Esau (Gen 27-28). This was not how I had conceptualized the session. The plan was that the case for the power of words would be made prior to substantiating that case from the examples of Scripture. Elder 3 was demonstrating a challenge that groups, including elderships and congregations, often face. We process information in different ways and at different speeds with a diverse set of interests. Elder 3 was listening to the concept of blessing and, seeing the Scripture passages to be presented, ran ahead of the group process. He made a quick analysis of Isaac's blessing of Jacob and determined that to Isaac this blessing was apparently a big deal, but that the deception on the part of Rebecca and Jacob "turns out to be nothing." In short order, elder 3 had processed and dismissed the passage. However, elder 3 was engaging the idea of blessing and encouraging the group to get the session started by challenging our thinking processes. As the facilitator, I

¹ The specific elders will be referred to in this section by a numerical designation. The designation is random, but is consistent through all of the field notes, the sequence of elder narratives, and the analysis of the video presentations.

affirmed the importance of the blessing of Jacob, and indicated that we would process that passage with some depth. We ask ourselves what this blessing was about. We prayed for God's blessing on our time together and began the conversation with a teaching moment statement: "Words are deeds. When is this true?" Elder 1 began the conversation with examples of the potential for words to do harm in the family. Elder 7 thought of the wedding ceremony and other covenantal language that was performative and binding. Elder 4 agreed. Elder 5 said, "God created the word," indicating that God's words were deeds, and the group agreed. I used this opportunity to mention Moses as the one who delivers the Genesis story. In this potential teaching moment, the cycle of creative words was proposed. Moses tells us that God's words create the world. Even now when people hear those words from Genesis, their imagination is being funded. They are learning how the world works, which in turn shapes their behavior. Elder 3 did not stay focused on the Scripture passage under discussion. He began to talk to the group about the book of James and the relationship between words and deeds of faith. I directed the conversation back to examples of words as deeds. Elder 5, perhaps tracking off of elder 3's idea, said, "If you have character and say you'll do it, it is done." The group affirmed this line of thinking. Elder 7 re-entered the conversation about performative speech by talking about the relationship of trust between a parent and a child, "If daddy says there is no demon in the closet, you can go to sleep because you trust his word." In light of this, I proposed the idea that when a father says that he is proud of his child, or when a husband tells his wife that he loves her, those moments might function as deeds. We then considered the power of words in the work place. The first thought of the group was about the nature of verbal

commitment in the work place. If a person says they will do a task, they are committed. Or if someone in authority commits a person to a task, that person is committed. We thought about the effect of the words “You are fired” or “You are hired” when spoken by someone with authority. Even the words “Good job,” can change the way we inhabit the workplace. Elder 3 affirmed this idea saying, “I use these words to channel employees’ behavior.” Elder 1 drew us back to the biblical story, referring to the impact of Jesus’ choice on his disciples, the impact of being chosen. He said, “I remember once hearing someone say, ‘nobody ever chose me.’” He followed this up with a comment that expressed what we want to accomplish with the blessing. “I try to think of the right words to say when I have the attention of the flock that will create a picture in their mind that ‘I get it.’” The “it” is either the point of the Sunday lesson the fact of being chosen as a follower of Jesus. The group was then asked about the impact of their words within the context of their role as an elder of the church. The general response was that the church tends to take the words of the elder with seriousness. Elder 4 said, “Sometimes our word is taken as final.” Elder 7 said, “They will take our kidding words as serious.” This was a reference to a blessing elder 3 gave that appeared to be critical of the preacher when no criticism was intended. Elder 8 said, “It is a scary thought that because of the title of elder, people think we know more than we do.” Elder 4 said in a joking way, “Yes, like it is from God.” In this teachable moment, the I said, “These people, entrusted to you by God, will live into what you say.” In this interchange the elder group began to realize that the congregation is listening to them and that their words have an impact on the lives of the congregation. As the elders considered that idea, I introduced J. L. Austin’s criteria

for performative speech. All the men were listening and were fully engaged.

Following the conversation about performative speech, we talked among ourselves about the history of the shepherd's blessing at Southeast. None of the elders have a clear recollection about either the history or the rationale behind the practice. It is thought that the practice began in the time between Doug Peters' departure as the preacher and my hiring. Peters had reported that according to his recollection, the practice predated his tenure. The practice has been operating under its own momentum without critical reflection for more than ten years.

We then returned to key passages of Scripture that may inform our thinking about the power of words to make or shape worlds. We talked about God's interest in speaking. As we discussed the Genesis passage, we thought about God speaking the world into existence. We talked about the reason for the use of words. To whom was God speaking? Our conclusion was that God was not speaking to anyone. He was making proclamations that ordered the world. We connected Genesis with the language of the gospel of John. We briefly discussed Hebrews 1 and the fact that God has a history of speaking to his people and in the last days has spoken through his Son. We concluded this section of our discussion with reference to Jesus' words of warning about the serious nature of our words. Christians are held accountable for every careless word spoken because by our words we are judged and/or acquitted (Matt 12:36-37).

The group engaged the idea that when God speaks, there may be times when human beings can negotiate an outcome different from the one spoken by God. God's words are not irrevocable. Those occasions are exceptional and do not negate the fact that

God has a high view of appropriately spoken words. How does this truth inform the act of speaking a blessing over the congregation? Elder 8 asks if we have a feeling for what the congregation thinks of the current shepherd's blessings. "It is not as if the congregation is sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for us to speak." Elder 4 said, "They are eagerly waiting for us to say, 'You are dismissed.'" In this teaching moment, I proposed that the congregation might be thinking that the worship, the song service, and the message were good, but that they may be waiting intuitively for a fitting conclusion, a word of blessing and sending from the pastors of their church.

In light of what they have heard taught about blessings, what do the elders think it means to be blessed? Elder 7 said that being blessed is the calling down of God's favor. Elder 4 agreed that blessing is a matter of God's affirmation. Elder 1 said that being blessed is like getting a warm comfortable blanket when one is cold. Elder 8 asked, "What in the Old Testament did conveyance of a blessing mean?" This led into our conversation about Isaac's blessing of Jacob. We read the text together and marveled at the power of the words of blessing. Elder 8 said, "That sounds powerful. I don't have that kind of power." In light of that skepticism, we agreed that we do not have that kind of power in the congregation because we do not have that level of relationship existing in the church. In this teaching moment, I conveyed that the words of blessing spoken by the elders have power because of the power of well spoken words to shape the imagination of the people. The elders are reminding the people about an already existing reality. God is with the people, leaving this assembly with them, empowering them to live the life that God has in mind for them. We then turned to the passage in Numbers 6:22-27. The

facilitator asserted that this text describes their task in blessing the people. The elders are placing the name of God on God's people. Whatever the topic of the lesson is, the blessing is an announcement that God's attention is present for his people, seeing through the challenges and joys of life that imitates God's character. We discussed the need for the blessing to be consistent with the theme of the lesson, helping the people move into the world with a sense of purpose and power.

We turned next to consider Leviticus 9:22 and the gesture of Aaron. Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. Why would we make such a gesture as we offer the blessing? Elder 7 speculated that the gesture was a matter of indicating the importance of the moment, the equivalent of placing our hands on a person's shoulder for emphasis. Elder 4 speculated that the gesture was a matter of inclusion, that the blessing was for all of the people. Elder 1 said, "Something is created in the mind if I hold my hands up. Energy is flowing from my hands." Elder 8 reacted with some resistance, "I have a hard time thinking that power is coming from my hands." Elder 5 said that it is an attention getter. Elder 3 joked that it is a wave offering. In this teaching moment, I indicated that the gesture is an extension of one's heart. The gesture is not one of imparting power, grace, or anything magical. However, the gesture does have meaning. It is an expression of fatherly care for the people. Elder 1 believes that something does flow through our hands as we lay hands on the sick. Elder 8 is resistant. Elder 1 said that he has been known to extend a symbolic hug to the congregation. Elder 8 responded, "But don't hug me." He wondered how the congregation would react if the elders suddenly start raising their hands during the blessing. I pointed out that preachers and elders used

to raise one hand during baptisms, that the gesture itself would not be foreign to our people, and that it would be accepted if the elders did not seem anxious about the practice. I encouraged them to try lifting their hands in the practice sessions. During the video taping at the end of the project, none raised their hands.

Session 1 ended with a reading from William Willimon and Paul Pruyser. This gave the elders a source for my thinking about the shepherd's blessing, and a synthesis of the ideas about which we had been talking.

Session 2

The second session convened on Monday, 20 September 2005. We decided that meeting in homes of the participants was not the most convenient for everyone. Instead, we met in the elders' conference room. We met at 6:30 p.m. and intended to complete the session by 8:00 p.m. Elder 2 was the only participant absent from this session. He had received the handout from session 1. He was invested in the process and had already been working on refining his shepherd's blessings, including the raised-hand gesture. Session 2 was a conversation about acting as God's agents for blessing God's people. We explored the role of Moses as God's spokesman. We considered how God used human prophets to speak to the people. We wrestled with the continuity between Moses, the prophets, and the pastors of the church. The session sought to anticipate the elders' question, "Who am I to speak a blessing over God's people?"

We began the session with a recapitulation of session 1. "We know from last time that words are important. Why might we be reluctant to speak on God's behalf?" Elder 1 said that speaking on God's behalf seems presumptuous. Elder 8 asked, "What do you

mean by ‘Speaking on God’s behalf?’” Elder 5 answered that we sometimes are called to make a judgment on God’s behalf. Elder 8 was wrestling against the idea of speaking for God. He drew our attention to Moses, indicating that Moses’ face shone when he came down from the mountain where he met with God. “I don’t believe this group of men speaks in the same way as Moses, telling the people directly from God that they should shape up.” Elder 5 said that we have God’s word, indicating that we have a resource similar to Moses. Elder 1 indicated that the Scriptures can be twisted to say just about anything.

In this teaching moment, the elders are asked to consider the calling of Moses (Exod 4:10-16). They are asked, “How far are you from Moses? Draw some parallels or some contrasts. What is your calling and commission?” Elder 6 indicated that he believes that we are a long way from Moses because Moses had direct access to God. He believes that God speaks through Scripture, but not directly in response to contemporary circumstances. Elder 1 indicated that he thinks that if we had been there with Moses, we could have heard from God in a direct way. Elder 7 agreed that we do not have a direct word, that we have to practice discernment from our study of Scripture. He said that our understanding of God’s instructions is less certain, but that we are not without guidance. Elder 8 made an interesting proposal, “Moses probably had one hour total conversation time with God and then had to operate most of the time in the same way that we do, making application based on his conversations with God.” Elder 5 affirmed this possibility. Elder 8 went on to say, “Maybe Michael is trying to tell us that we are more like Moses than we know.” Elder 3 said, “Does God speak today? I think he does, but not

like with Moses.” Elder 4 affirmed this and said, “not in audible or tangible ways.” Elder 3 remembered our study called “Twelve Ordinary Men,” where our Bible classes rehearsed the fact that God uses ordinary people for his purposes.

In this teaching moment, the elders are asked, “Is there a difference between you and your role and the role of the average member?” Elder 3 talked about why some people are positioned as leaders, or overseers and pastors. The rest of the group was listening and considering the call of God upon them as elders of the church. The group then read Acts 20:28-32, Paul’s blessing of the Ephesian elders. “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” I asked, “How is this similar to Moses’ responsibility as a shepherd of God’s flock?” The group seemed to make the connection, especially with the danger of a lack of leadership, or the presence of malicious leadership. The elders who were a part of the Sun Valley congregation spoke about the failure of leadership in that congregation that led to the merger with Southeast. The conversation then leaned toward the elder’s responsibility for protecting the congregation from bad decisions on the part of ministers or other leaders. I reoriented the conversation with a statement of interest, “My interest is to be sure you feel empowered by God to make a statement to his people.” Elder 3 responded, “But there is a foundation you have to have; the authority to do it.” Elder 8 said, “Moses had it. We have it.” In this teaching moment, I affirmed the elders’ authority saying, “The congregation has called you to this group of men. The congregation trusts you and has been entrusted to you.” Elder 5 confessed, “Sometimes we have the responsibility to speak. Sometimes we are more apt to want to ignore the problems instead of speaking to them, instead of addressing the issue.”

Elder 7 called us back to Acts 20:32. He asked about the meaning of, “And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace,” saying, “Is this a recommendation? Could we recommend men to God?” In this teaching moment, I said, “This is in fact a good example of a blessing. To commend is to turn the Ephesian elders over to the care of God as Paul departs from their presence. He is announcing something that is a reality; that God is watching over them. He is calling that watch-care into their imagination.” Elder 7 responded, “The message of grace is the one they are to carry.” I answered, “The very same message we carry. This is the essence of the blessing that you will speak to this church, with energy!” Elder 6 still struggled a bit with the idea of commendation. The other elders helped him to see that it means to give them over to God. Elder 5 rephrased the idea of commendation saying, “I now place you in God’s care.” Elder 8 paused and considered the implication, saying, “Wait. I struggle with that. For me to say, ‘I now turn you over to God’s care,’ implies that they have been in my care.” Elder 4 answered that the Ephesian elders have been under Paul’s care for three years. Elder 8 reflected, “So now we say to them, ‘You have been taught, and now we want you to go out into the world as you speak for him.’ It sounds as if these men (referring to the elders in the room) are taking on a flavor, or an idea of our position we have never taken before. The people have come and been cared for, taught, encouraged, and we have supplied all of that through the building, through the staff, through the worship, and now we are releasing them under the care of God to carry on with their Christian lives.” Elder 4 affirmed that this is exactly the case. Elder 7 wondered if the elders are hesitant to fill that position of responsibility. He said, “Maybe we are in a

position to do this.” Elder 8 responds, “Don’t hear me arguing about that. I am just getting my head around this idea that we have brought them here. We, through Michael, are teaching them, through hospitality, teachers and more, through what we speak, and what we teach in Bible classes, have spoken to you, and the elders want you to take that into the world.” Elder 1 said, “We have no choice really. We are to turn them over to God.” The group of elders wondered if the congregation has this understanding of the elders’ role, especially since the elders themselves were just then realizing that this was their role. Elder 8 spoke again, asking me and the group, “Does the congregation have this in mind? If we were handing a person ten thousand dollars and said, ‘Make sure you use this as I have taught you, as if you were my own son,’ they would be clear about that, but does the congregation have the idea that they have been given something like that, and that we expect them to make use of what they have been given? I think we are doing the same thing as handing them ten thousand dollars. We expect them to put into use what they have been given.” In this teaching moment, I said, “As you speak the shepherd’s blessing in this way, I think they will come to see this more clearly.” The elder group responded that it would be useful to educate the congregation through a Sunday lesson, perhaps entitled, “Who are these guys?”

The next step in session 2 was the reading of Fred Kane’s narrative called, “Our Ministry of Blessing.” The elders were invited to react to the narrative. Elder 8 responded that he could relate to Kane’s hesitance to speak a blessing. The elders were recently invited to come to a member’s home and to lay hands on a young woman and pray for her healing. Elder 8 said, “Who does she think we are, and what does she think we can do? I

am too practical. God is not going to channel some power through our hands, is he?" The elder group was mixed in their response to this. Elder 1 believed that power is transferred through the laying on of hands. Elder 5 said, "Not exactly." Elder 3 remembered a time when he and his wife had the elders come for prayer, but that they did not anoint with oil. In this teaching moment I said, "Sometimes we do these things because the Scriptures say to do them, not because we believe that God's power can really be mediated through our hands. That kind of power makes us anxious." The elders wondered again about the expectations of those who invite them for prayer. I said, "And you are asking the question, 'Who am I that God would work through me?'" The group had a lively conversation about the blessing moments that they are involved in, such as hospital visits and baby blessings in the assembly. In a teaching moment I said, "You are exemplars of the faith who have had more practice. You are not different from other Christians, but you have spent more time following Jesus. You are experienced practitioners of the faith. That is what makes you a leader. You are out front." Elder 8 was still thinking about James 5, and said, "I want to pause at this comment about Elijah, who was a human being like us. I think that helps me." I affirmed the group by saying, "Your prayers can change the world. Your prayers, your blessing, as it sparks their imagination." Elder 8 said, "Elijah's words mean more to me." Elder 6 said, "They mean more to me, too." My response was, "What I hope to do is spark your imagination, for you to see that the words you say have great power. You have been given a commission to speak to God's people." Elder 4 said, "Like Moses and Elijah." Session 2 ended with an invitation to session 3.

Session 3

The third session involved all eight of the elders. The elders and I met in the elders' conference on Sunday afternoon from 2:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. The agenda was to talk about the moral authority for leadership, which was an extension of the conversation from session 2: "Who am I to stand in the place of God to offer the people a blessing?" In this session the group read through and talked about a short narrative from Sarah Keyser that tells the story of her doubt, of her wrestling with the issues of authority to act on God's behalf. The elders also worked through material from Jackson Carroll's book, *As One with Authority*.²

The session began with conversation about the shepherd's blessing from that morning's assemblies. I affirmed that the blessings were consistent with our conversations in this project, and that the song leaders had been instructed not to have another song after the blessing to allow the blessing to function as the final word to the people. I offered a brief summary of the ground that we had covered in sessions 1 and 2. The question that launched this session was "How do we come by the intrinsic motivation to offer words that shape the world of the people of God?" Elder 1 responded that we see Paul blessing the congregations who read his letters. Elder 2 (his first comment in the conversations) said, "I think it is really important for the church to hear from the elders and I think that folks are really starving to hear God's blessing, that God is blessing us to go into the world." Elder 1 observed that "the brain recycles on the last thing you hear." Elder 7 was asked about congregational responses to his blessing from one of the morning assemblies. He said, "[The Youth Minister] came to me with several things to

² See appendix A, session 3.

say. Several people talked to me.” The group was told about the blessing. “[Elder 7] said, ‘I want you to take this personally.’ It was very personal and very direct. He took the Aaronic blessing and gave it as if God had commissioned the Southeast elders to place the name of God upon this assembly.” The group also asked about elder 4’s blessing in the other assembly. Elder 4 said, “I think people pay closer attention to my words than I thought. Two people asked me today what the Scripture reference was that I used today.”

In a teaching moment, I shared that, “When I show up in a hospital room, the people think I am showing up for God. What I want to convince you of is that you carry that same weightiness.” Elder 1 affirmed that when they visit the hospital, it is no ordinary visit. Elder 8 said, “Maybe we need a red hat.” The group laughs about having credentials for visiting. They are resistant to the idea that their prayers and presence have particular significance. Elder 2 commented that those who know James 5 have some expectation that the prayers of the elders are powerful and effective, even if they do not anoint with oil. Elder 8 joked that we are supposed to use olive oil to keep the smell down. Everyone laughed and the room had a friendly lightheartedness to it. In this teaching moment I comment, “We are not comfortable with our role, and you don’t want to feel as if you are tooting your own horn. Yet you have accepted the role. You were called to be the wise old men of this congregation. The difference between you and Bill Aven, who has walked the faith, is that he has laid the mantel of leadership down. You still hold the responsibility.” Elder 3 indicated that the reluctance is to negate the power of the prayers of others. He affirms that the obligation does rest on the elders as a group.

The Sarah Keyser pastoral blessing narrative was read. The floor was opened for

reactions. Elder 8 commented that Keyser thinks well and he relates her words to an article that he has read about the early church. He said, “The issue is that ultimately the elders are above in God’s organization, the top ones. In a lot of ways we have misunderstood that.” Elder 5 commented, “I appreciate her honesty, that she grew into this. You don’t really feel magically empowered, but you grow into your sense of authority.” Elder 1 commented, “The other thing that impacted me was that as she struggled through it, she had occasional glimpses of the holy. I think we will get those glimpses more as we walk with people.” Elder 5 commented again, “I know all too well that we need to be told again and again. Your child and spouse need to be reminded that they are loved.”

The conversation then turned back to the gesture of hands lifted with palms toward to congregation. I again encouraged the elders to use the gesture in the practice sessions, but they are resistant. Elder 3 said, “I can’t see the purpose of raising my hands in that outward gesture. I can see an immediate effect and a one-time type of effect, but I can’t see the longer term purposes of it.” I answered, “You might be right. To be less than genuine would be wrong. However, I want to push you through your initial discomfort.” Elder 8 responded, “Our congregation does not know us as that. This tells the congregation that we are changing in some dramatic way. They will say, ‘In my forty years I have never seen Bob do that. Is he coming unglued?’” Elder 2 said, “With almost half of our people being new, we have an opportunity to do something new.” My response is, “It used to be that when you baptized someone, you raised your hand. I believe that there is a cultural pressure to individuation, to keep it (expressions of faith) inside

yourself.” Elder 7 commented that Southeast has broken with a lot of routine practices, and that the congregation is comfortable with change and variety. Elder 1 said, “If we all did it (the blessing) the same way, it would be hokey.”

The group made a transition to a conversational reflection over the material from *As One with Authority*. We talked about how the world has changed. The church, at one time in the recent past, had a privileged place in the community. Sunday and Wednesday evenings were reserved for church activities. We talked about how this has impacted family systems and church systems.

The group began to struggle with the source of their authority. Does the authority of the elders come from God or from the people? The group settled in the middle. Authority is derived from the people appropriately when they are yielded to God. In this teaching moment I said, “Real authority is relational authority. Those you have helped, attended their weddings and funerals, shared sacred space with, are those with whom you have authority. Part of why God wants elders is that you have walked with them and been with them in sacred spaces.” The group talked about the difference between positional and relational authority. We talked about the potential for conflict if the elders and ministers fail to develop appropriate relational authority. If the minister has the relational authority and the elders lack it, the elders lose the power they need to lead. Elder 8 resisted the idea that the congregation bestows authority on the elders. He said, “That is partly turning their backs on God’s authority. God made the plan that this position would have some authority. People can choose not to follow the authority, but then they are choosing not to follow God’s authority.” I responded, “If you have been through the death

of a congregation, the people withdrew the privilege of authority.” Elder 8 grasped the point. Elder 1 pressed, “You either put yourself on the side of the elders, or you don’t and you leave.” The group recognized that in an ideal situation, the ultimate authority is God, whose purposes are communally discerned from Scripture.

As we drew this third session to a close, we turned back to the original question. Who are we to speak a blessing over God’s people? In this teaching moment the I proposed that half of the congregation already expects the elders to be their leader. The other half of the congregation will come to see you as their leader as they hear you speak a blessing over them week after week. Elder 3 commented, “I go back to Sarah Keyser, where she comments that she has no problem announcing what God has promised upon us. I have no problem doing that.” I responded with an encouragement for them to see that we are not just announcing God’s blessing on the people, but we are sending them out on a mission to bless the world. “My goal is to say that you have the moral authority to speak a blessing to the people.” Elder 2 said, “I hope you can help us move out of our comfort zones. We don’t grow if we don’t push a little bit.” Session 3 ended with a prayer and the group agreed to meet again on Sunday, 9 October 2005.

Session 4

The fourth session met on Sunday afternoon of 9 October in the elders’ conference room. Four of the elders were unable to attend (elders 3, 4, 6 and 8). The men who came gave some consideration to postponement until more of the men could attend, but chose to engage the material and bring the other men up to date when they were available. I began the session with a review of the previous sessions. Elder 2 commented

that he had spoken with the church office manager this week about the elders raising their hands for the blessing. He reported that she and some of her friends liked the idea. Elder 1 commented, “And you did it today and I looked at you!” The topic of the session was discernment of the mission of God and the church. The task was to read 2 Corinthians 4 as a guide for discerning that mission.³

The session began with a general question: What does God want his people to accomplish with their lives? The group talked about faithfulness. We talked about the difficulty in helping people to focus on having a good attitude, one of confidence in and dependence on God. The elders gravitated toward the idea that they should help people be involved in one another’s lives. In this teaching moment, I pressed, “Why is that important? What is Christ up to? The reason I am pushing you is that you are sending people out into the world and what are they supposed to do out there?” The elders understand that people are sent out into the world, but they found this question difficult. Elder 7 said, “God is showing himself to the world because he wants to attract us to him.” I asked, “How did you learn that?” My hope was that they would say, “That is the story in the Bible,” but that is not what immediately occurred to them. In this teaching moment I said, “Lots of people don’t have their Bibles open. For the next hour I want us to practice doing that; trying to discern God’s mission out of a particular text. The goal is for you to see clearly what you are sending these people out into the world to do.” Elder 1 commented, “The Old Testament is full of God trying to get the people to do what he hoped for, but the people kept wanting to go back.” The group talked about the fact that if

³ See appendix A, session 4.

the people could have been constantly reminded that God was with them, they would not have wandered.

The group began the task of reading the chapter. They read through the chapter four times, each time thinking about a different question. Elder 1 read first while the group considered the first question. “How does this text send us and equip our witness?” The group was fully engaged as the text was read.

The first notion of the group was that we have ministry by the mercy of God, and that we are sent out with courage in the face of difficulty. Elder 2 noted that God is revealed by Jesus. If we get people closer to Jesus, or help them see Jesus, they will be brought into the presence of God. The group related this to the Hurricane Katrina relief effort by the congregation. They thought that perhaps the mission of God was to bring people into his presence. They connected this to the blessing, saying that they are sending the people out with this mission, too, to usher people into the presence of God.

Elder 7 said, “The first paragraph, down to the treasure in clay jars, is equipping because you recognize that you are clay jars and that his power shines through that, and that we can accomplish much through him.” The conversation that followed was about the ability of the ordinary Christian, as opposed to the leadership, or the professionals, to carry the treasure of God. Elder 7 grasped the mission, saying, “We have it mixed up. We try to get people to understand our rules, and try to refute what people believe, instead of saying that this plan is for everyone.” They talked about the clay jar as a metaphor. Perhaps the Corinthians thought that Paul was a clay jar, that the treasure of God should come in a better package than the one Paul presented. Paul is saying that this is exactly

how God works, using simple folks to carry a blessing for the sake of the world. Elder 2 said, “The mission is not about Paul, but about the treasure.”

Elder 5 read the chapter aloud while the group considered the second question. “How does this text read us and our world?” The group was fully engaged as the text was read. The question was posed again after the reading. The group was silent for several seconds as they considered the question. Elder 5 said that he was inclined to encourage people to realize that life is short and that they should not lose heart. They talked about affliction, recognizing that not many of the people on this congregation are living in chains, in prison, nor in fear of their lives. However, the people in this congregaiton may know something about being perplexed. The group talked about the gospel being veiled. Elder 2 said, “Mostly they are in the world too much.” Elder 1 added that people are “looking for health and wealth gospel. God wants you to get your Cadillac like I got mine. Some show their Rolex.” Elder 2 said, “It is almost like we are drunk with this world; drunk on the ways of the world.”

In this teaching moment I said, “This whole chapter is about not losing heart. Do we have to work hard to make that relevant?” Elder 1 said, “Some people have to work at that very hard.” I understood him to be saying that we have people who have to work very hard at not losing heart. The group talked about some of the people in the congregation that are struggling with chronic life threatening illnesses. I said, “If we believe that the blessing of God is that we won’t die in the flesh, we don’t understand.”

Elder 2 read the chapter aloud while the group considered the third question. “How does this text evangelize us with good news?” All continued to listen to the reading

with focused attention. The question was restated and the men spent several seconds in silence. Elder 2 said, “We are running our lives in a way that is not for us, but for Jesus’ sake, for the gospel’s sake.” Elder 7 said, “We know that the one who raised Jesus from the dead has proven that he can do it.” The group asked if the good news is only a future reality. Elder 5 said, “Joy and peace come from the knowledge of God, that you are his child, part of the family, and we will get over the difficulties.” In this teaching moment I said, “The good news is that God wants you to be in his presence, that he accepts you. You are useful.” The group affirmed that this is good news. The teaching moment continued, “The good news is that the king has won a great victory. How might the church be different if we were able to say, ‘You don’t have to fret?’ If one aspect of the gospel is that God welcomes people into his presence, that God desires communion with human beings, then this may empower Christians to live with more confidence. The shepherd’s blessing is a reminder that God is with his people.”

Elder 7 read the chapter aloud while the group considered the fourth question. “How does this text convert us in our corporate lives?” The group listened with focused attention as the text was read. Elder 5 responded to the question saying, “We refuse to falsify. We refuse to do things that are wrong even if that is what our boss wants us to do. Also, we live so that the life of Jesus may be ‘made visible in our mortal flesh.’ So, while we are working, and in our work or personal lives, Jesus is made visible.” The conversation slipped into a conversation about homosexuality, alcoholism, and the news that the Catholic Church is wrestling with the idea that homosexual orientation, rather than homosexual practice, is a reason to be excluded from formal service in the church.

Elder 2 indicated that in our corporate lives we should be working to keep the flesh under control. This led the conversation toward the idea that the physical life is in fact a spiritual life. In this teaching moment I said, “Our mission is to participate in God’s mission. If God loves the world, we love the world. Our mission is not to park inside the building, but to live for the sake of the world in our neighborhood. If we don’t send our people out for the sake of the world, we will have been unfaithful.” Elder 2 commented, “We have always had problems with what going out looked like. And I really think that we have hit on some things that will help us go out. We are doing more than just sitting in the building. We are being encouraged to be Christian when we go out, to not become worldly, so we can influence the world.”

The fourth session was designed to let the elders spend time in the Scriptures discerning the mission of God and the mission of the church. The group gained glimpses of the purpose of God described in 2 Corinthians 4. As we closed the session, I encouraged the men to see the shepherd’s blessing as a privileged opportunity to announce good news over the congregation and to send them out to participate with God in his mission to love the world and draw the world to him. The next session was scheduled for Sunday, 16 October 2005.

Session 5

The fifth session met in the elders’ conference room on Sunday afternoon, 16 October. Two of the elders were unable to attend (elders 7 and 8). Elder 4 arrived about half way through the session. We spent a few minutes reviewing the content from sessions 1 through 4. The group was reminded that the blessing is not their personal

reflection on the events of the week, or a critique of the lesson, or a separate additional lesson. In preparation for this session, the group was introduced to the Revised Common Lectionary. I shared with them the seasons of the traditional Christian year, including Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Elder 3 joked, “And in the last advent they unite?” The elders are given examples of blessing that were written for Year B of the lectionary.⁴ The elders sought to grasp the idea of the blessings that are written for the texts from the lectionary. They were concerned that I was suggesting that they read these particular blessings in the assembly instead of speaking from their heart. Elder 2 said, “I do best when I write it down. I may not read it all.” Elder 6 commented that he is more comfortable using Scripture rather than offering his own thoughts. He then added that he is comfortable adding an application for the passage. The elders remembered that they get the sermon notes every Thursday through e-mail, which gives them the themes for Sunday, as well as the Scripture references that drive the sermons. Elder 3 commented that he does not currently prepare his blessings in advance. He prepares the blessing while listening to the sermon. In this teaching moment I said, “I hope that the lesson is worth carrying outside and that the church is going to make a difference out there; that their religion is not inside the walls, but out there. We are here to be oriented.” Elder 2 suggested that the congregation needs to understand that.

As I sought to point the group to a starting place on page six of the handout, elder 1 pointed to the blessing written for Advent 4B, saying “I like ‘when your surprises burst on us we should greet them.’ That is the way to take the stuff that comes to you.” Elder 5

⁴ See appendix A, session 5.

said, “And if that was me, I would have to simplify it.” The group was engaging the material and struggling with the models. They wanted to know how much like these models their blessings should be. Elder 5 said, “To me it is just words. I go to the Methodist church and hear these words and they are just words to me.” I responded, “That is not how you are being equipped.” We talked about using these templates to see that a short blessing can be crafted that emerges out of the text for the lesson. Even if the elders don’t have the sermon notes, if they only have the Scripture passage for the lesson, they can think about how the passage sends God’s people into the world. We turned to the blessing written for Epiphany 6B. We read the blessings written for services through Ash Wednesday. There was discussion about the significance of these days. It was clear that the written blessings are a useful guide, but that the surrounding liturgical traditions are foreign.

We read the blessing written for Pentecost 3B: “Jesus told the woman who had suffered for so long, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace.’ Now, you too, go in peace, holding onto your faith which will also make you whole. And the God of peace will go with you. Amen.” Elder 6 said, “I don’t think I could do this.” In encouragement, I responded, “The best blessings come from you and are your words as they are formed by Scripture and the theme of the day.” The elder group took a playful moment to read the blessings and imagine one another saying the blessings as they are written. Elder 2 said, “What is going to happen is that the blessing you give that day is going to hit a certain percentage of people. Some of it will go over their heads.” The group looked through the remainder of the blessings written by Bass Mitchell,

commenting on several.

At the end of the handout were eight texts from the Bible which were the texts for the next eight Sunday morning lessons. I said, “These are the next eight topics. The stewardship lessons are numbers four, five, and six. This assignment will be for our next gathering. If Sunday is not going to work, I will work hard to negotiate a time when we can all be together. This time, you write a blessing based upon that theme or text. Next week we will share them in this group and offer a communal constructive critique. Let’s read through these texts and talk about what we see happening.”

The first text for the group to consider was Deuteronomy 7:7-9 and the theme of the text is faithfulness. The group thought about some Old Testament history, asking the question, “Why would God choose to work through flawed people like these?” They thought about the fact that we live in a culture that values things that are disposable, one that easily gives up on people and products that fail. In a teaching moment I said, “The contrast is that God is steadfast and faithful while we do not deserve it.” Elder 3 thought that if he was writing a blessing about this idea, he may jump to 2 Timothy 2:11-13 for the blessing passage. I reminded him that the point of the blessing was to send the people out of the assembly to practice faithfulness. The blessing is not intended to provide more data. Elder 3 pressed that he also thought of the story of the woman caught in adultery, how Jesus rescued her in spite of her sin. Elder 1 said, “Why did he choose us? I don’t know.” Elder 3 was processing the idea aloud. He said, “I would jump to the side of saying that we may come and not feel worthy or that we are not worth anything to God.” Elder 2 shared a story about some member who was living on the margins of the church

community, but then came around to be involved. Elder 4 said that we should be extending the welcome of God in this way. Elder 1 said, "It is a loaded passage," referring to the passage from Deuteronomy. Elder 3 said, "That is why this is good. We are all coming from different places." Elder 5 proposed a blessing, "God is faithful. Put him first in your decisions this week."

The group turned to the second passage for assignment, James 3:14-18, and the theme of gentleness. Elder 3 was processing the data, considering other passages with similar ideas. Elder 2 said, "I see this gentleness as something the elders have to learn because there will be many people that will come with one thing or another." The others agreed that they need this gift of gentleness. Elder 2 added, "I am saying that they need to see us as gentle, if my blessing is going to be gentle." I suggested that one could use Philippians 4:5, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near," as the whole blessing. Elder 6 commented that many of our people do not see God as gentle.

The group then turned to the third passage, 1 Peter 1:13-16, and the theme of self-control. Elder 1 proposed, "Reflect God as He is holy." Elder 3 reacted, "That is the easy one. I don't like to do things that way." The group discussed the general idea of self-control or restraint, offering examples in our culture of the lack of restraint and a lack of wisdom. Elder 1 thought of the confession of the teacher in Ecclesiastes, "There was nothing I withheld from my life and it was a waste of time. I tried it. So I can tell you that if you try it, you will find it a waste of time."

The men then chose their passages for writing their blessings. Elder 3 asked, "How is the best way to present this?" The group was instructed to write two or three

sentences to share with the group. Elder 2 suggested that the blessings have some repetition built in so people can process the words. The group was hesitant to claim a Scripture passage and asked to be assigned. I made the assignments in the order they were seated around the conference room. The session seemed to have been a constructive learning event. The next meeting is announced for Saturday, 22 October.

Session 6

The sixth session met at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday, 22 October 2005. Three of the elders were unable to attend the session (elders 2, 6, and 7). The group reviewed the main ideas of the previous sessions. The main idea was set before the group: “You are reminding the people of God that the God who loves them and pursues them goes with them into the world, for the sake of the world.” The group was also reminded, as they were in the previous session, that the blessing is not a reflection on the significant events of the week in the life of the elder. The blessing is not a critique of the lesson and is not a separate lesson. The blessing is a pronouncement of God’s care over God’s people. It is a reminder to the people that God is with them as they leave the assembly in such a way that God’s purpose can be carried out in their lives, and through their lives, God’s purposes are enacted for the sake of the world. The purpose of this session was to practice crafting blessings. The elders were reminded that they were assigned the task of writing a blessing that would follow the Scripture and theme for a particular Sunday. They were reminded that the task of the day was to share their work with each other, and to offer a communal constructive critique.

The group began with written blessings from elder 2, who was unable to attend

the session, but did write two blessings. Elder 4 read the first blessing from elder 2. “We often ask the question? How can I get closer to God in my daily walk? We must believe that God can do what he said he can do. Our faith is strengthened by acts of kindness and goodness that we show others. As God's messengers it is my encouragement that you go out this week and be faithful, showing your love for each other and caring for someone’s needs. God is faithful, let’s also be faithful.” Elder 5 laughed and said that it is a little long compared to what Elder 2 usually says. Elder 3 asked, “Is that a blessing? It sounds like an admonishment, not a blessing.” In this teaching moment I said, “One of the essentials of a blessing is that it is a pronouncement of God’s blessing over God’s people; that God is with you. Every Sunday, in some way or another, that is what you are saying to the church. The blessing is that God has chosen you. Go and hold on! Be faithful as God is faithful.” Elder 1 commented that elder 2’s blessing could be changed to say “God is with you. Go with God.” He also said, “There are times to rap people on the knuckles, but this isn’t it.” Elder 4 then reads elder 2’s second attempt. “God has been faithful in so many ways in our lives. He gave us our spiritual lives by sending Jesus. He works goodness in our Christian walk. Since He has been faithful to us, it is my encouragement to you to be faithful to Him. Go and see what blessings come when we are faithful to God’s call.” Elder 3 said that it seemed a little better, but that it seemed that he is saying that God will bless you if you are faithful to him. The group discussed the fact that we are not sending the church out to earn a blessing, but that God is with His people.

Elder 5 was asked to read his blessing based on James 3:14-18 and the theme of gentleness. He said, “God gives us his blessing to be gentle and yielding and so this week,

when you are in Wal-Mart in the express lane with twenty items and the person behind you has two, yield. Embrace God's blessing as you go from this place." Elder 5 said, "I didn't have your sermon, but you underlined yielding, so I made sure that I put that in there. That is what I read there." The group asked about his writing process. He said that he made about six attempts to write the blessing. We talked about how God yields in some instances in the stories of the Old Testament, especially in his willingness to practice patience with his stubborn people. The group appreciated the concrete nature of the blessing.

Elder 6 was assigned a blessing on the theme of self-control from 1 Peter 1:13-16. He was unable to attend and did not submit a written blessing.

Elder 1 read his blessing on the theme of generosity from 2 Corinthians 8:1-7. "Well, probably the most familiar and quoted verse in the Bible is judge and you shall not be judged, but the very next verse said, 'give and it shall be given to you, for with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.' I love that picture and it is either true or it is not. It is absolutely true and reliable. Try him and you will know it." My response was, "That is a very good admonishment. How can we turn it just a tad to place it on the people as a blessing?" Elder 3 and elder 5 offered suggestions. We considered some ways that the Luke 6 passage could be used as a promise of God's goodness for his people. I suggested that one could say, "As you are generous in your words and in your giving, the world changes. Go change the world!" Elder 1 responded, "I can't get up there and say a one-sentence thing." The group affirmed that elder 1 has the gift of genuineness that is often effective when he makes appeals to the congregation for funds. Elder 1 asserted that

he does believe that it is somewhat of a *quid pro quo* relationship. If we give to the church, then God will prosper His people. As he makes an extemporaneous second attempt at the blessing, he said, “It may not be what you asked for, but you will get blessings. You get them anyway, if you look around. You are here this morning without a walker. Ain’t it great to be able to come in here and worship here? God is blessing you already.” Elder 5 suggested caution when talking about blindness, or walkers, or cancer. He said, “Sometimes we say things that we have not thought about and we cannot get ourselves out of it.” The group spent several minutes talking about the need to be sensitive and politically correct. The unspoken trouble is that words are powerful and when they are not well spoken they become bad deeds.

Elder 3 read his blessing based on the theme of participation from Romans 12:3-8. “At the age of fifteen, I wanted a motorcycle really badly. I walked home from school that day visualizing a motorcycle in my driveway. When I couldn’t see it in my driveway, I thought maybe it was in my garage. That was a good gift that my dad had the opportunity to give me that he did not. But what my dad did give me was the gift of encouragement, presence in speaking. Because of other things that God has given me, I am able to stand before you with confidence. Who among you is left without a gift? No one. I pray that you will have the knowledge and understanding of using your blessings.” Elder 1 commented light-heartedly on the length of the blessing, thankful that it was not short. Elder 8 noted that the language of blessing seemed to be “may God bless, keep, or do something. Isn’t that the first three or four words in a blessing?” The group was hesitant to agree with that. I took the opportunity to commend elder 3 on his gift for imagination,

and propose that the blessing might be more clear if he were to tell the people in a more economical way that they have been given “the motorcycle in the garage.” The whole group engaged in a conversation about elder 3’s blessing, encouraging him to remain with his concrete metaphors. I concluded the conversation with, “Add or say that God’s presence with you has given you gifts. You are empowered. Maybe those gifts are in your garage. Take them on a ride of blessing. That way you are closing the parentheses of your idea.”

Elder 4 read his blessing based on the theme of gratitude from 1 Timothy 1:12-17. “‘Thank you Lord’ is to be our attitude. It is an attitude of gratitude. If it isn’t quite good, praise God because He is good. Be joyful and do not put out the Spirit’s fire. That is God’s will for you. Go out and share your joy with those you come in contact with. Go and share your joy as you have been blessed by God.” The group was very affirming of elder 4’s blessing.

Elder 7 was not present to offer a blessing from Isaiah 64:1-9. The Scripture theme was not given, but the lectionary calendar date was Advent 1. We spoke briefly about the season of Advent. Elder 8 read his blessing for Advent 2 based on the gospel reading of Mark 1:1-8. He said, “See I am sending my messenger ahead of you. Prepare the way for the Lord. Just as God used John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, a way that leads to a glorious eternity with God. May we hear God calling this week, expressing his wonderful call for us as we help others see eternity with God.” Elder 4 suggested changing “May we hear,” to “Will we hear?” Elder 8 said, “The point of mine was that God would walk with us. May we hear God calling us this week, hearing his

wonderful plan for us. I could add, ‘God is walking with you and so am I.’” Elder 3 asked, “What is the most important thing that you wanted people to get out of it?” Elder 8 restated his interest, and elder 3 suggested that the ideas were muddled. Elder 8 then said, “When you hear God calling, it is to keep on the path.” I suggested that he could turn that into a direct statement, “God is calling you. Hear him. He is calling you to the straight paths that lead home. And call on others out there where you work and live. You can help them, lead them. God is calling them through you!”

Elder 3 asked, “So how would you summarize what you’ve heard today, versus what you have heard in the last few months? Do you see movement?” I answered, “I think this is a quantum leap. It is a shaping, the difference between a sawed-off shotgun, or an out right miss-fire and a rifle shot. Sometimes the shepherd’s blessing wasn’t something we knew what to do with. At times it has been another lesson, or a commentary on the sermon, or a contradiction.” Elder 8 said, “Sometimes it was just something that was on my mind, not attached to the lesson.” The group closed the session with a consideration of how much information, or how many ideas the congregation can carry out of the room with them. Elder 8 suggested that the last three to five sentences of the sermon could be very similar to the content of the Shepherd’s blessing.

At the close of the session, I made the assignments for the oral blessing that were to be recorded on video. The group was curious about the difference between a written and oral blessing. They understood that the blessings were going to be spoken in the worship center. What they were wondering about was the priestly gesture. Elder 8 asked, “Are you trying to critique our physical gestures?” The tone is light. I responded, “It is an

opportunity to practice doing that. You have to try something on to know if you could grow comfortable doing it.” There was general resistance to the gesture. I conceded that the success of this project had little to do with the gesture.

Session 7

Session 7 was the recording of the elder’s spoken blessings and the communal critique of the oral presentations as we watched them on video. The elders had been assigned to prepare a blessing for an oral presentation in the worship center. The texts selected were based on the Revised Common Lectionary, beginning with the first Sunday after Christmas. The scheduled meeting time for recording their blessings was Thursday evening, 3 November. The men had twelve days to prepare their blessings. Elder 1 and elder 2 could not make the scheduled taping. Elder 1 came to the worship center to deliver his blessing during the afternoon of 3 November. Elder 2 recorded his blessing on the afternoon of 9 November. The group of six men who came to record their blessings on the scheduled evening were light-hearted and a little bit nervous as they arrived. The group then met on Monday evening, 14 November 2005, for the communal critique and to conclude our formal time together on the subject of blessing and sending the church. Elder 6 was the only one absent from the meeting.

The first blessing on video was of me quoting Numbers 6:24-26 with my hands outstretched as if to the congregation. As we entered this last time for analysis and critique, I wanted the group to see an example immediately before their video presentations and critiques. We did not discuss the sample blessing.

The group then watched elder 1’s blessing which was based on Mark 1:4-11, the

text for the Baptism of the Lord. He said, “A few years ago we took a trip—a number of us here in the congregation—to Israel, and when we got to the place, somewhere on the river Jordan. I don’t know if it was the right place, but it was a place, and it was the River Jordan. We went down and baptized one another—about half a dozen of us. And it was the coolest thing. There was no voice. I can tell you there is no magic in those waters. There was no voice coming out of heaven. But here is the good news. Over in Romans the sixth chapter. All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death, united with him in his death, united with him in his resurrection. And you are God’s beloved child, in whom he is well pleased. You need to act this week like you are a child of the king, an offspring of the God of the universe. You are dismissed.” Elder 1 was the first to respond to seeing his blessing. He commented that it would have been better if he had more time to prepare. He said, “That was with very little preparation. Typically, I will put in more than five minutes, like I did with that one. I don’t make apologies for the content.” Elder 8 commented on the warm and engaging style of elder 1. The group commented on the fact that he did hold one hand out. Elder 1 said, “I could have held my hands up, but I held my Bible.” In the teaching moment, I asked, “What made this challenging?” Elder 1 responded that the challenge was to be upbeat and to give the church something they can carry away with them. Elder 3 wondered if there was a specific charge. He commented that elder 1’s blessing would help the congregation to feel good, but that it may not encourage them to act. Elder 7 heard the charge to live as a child of the king, that the congregation was to go from here and live in light of that truth. The group supported Elder 1’s genuineness. In the teaching moment, I offered the

following feedback:

One of the things that I hear you saying, that I want to affirm, is that you are shaping the imagination of the congregation just before you leave. That is exactly the blessing. You are a child of the king. God is with you. And do not forget who you are. And it shapes their imagination for the events taking place. I like the personal story because people relate to that. You had three elements to this blessing, and I wonder if that is not too much. You had the personal story. You had the Romans passage, and the charge to go out remembering that you are a child of God. You might want to consider using one less, for effectiveness sake.

Elder 1 said, "If I had more time, I would have paraphrased more." I responded, "I want to support that, too. This is worth preparing for."

The group watched elder 8's blessing which was based on Mark 1:29-39, the text for the Fifth Sunday After Epiphany. He said, "I want you to leave here today knowing that your heavenly father is the source of all good things. You can go through this week with the knowledge that God, made possible through his son Jesus Christ, is the great healer. The challenge you face this week, the answers you are searching for, or the healing you need, are all found in the awesome power of God Almighty. Embrace God's word. Embrace the love he has shown for you. Embrace the peace that comes from an Almighty Father. You have access to the healing power of God. Accept God's love. And be blessed and go from here and bless others. You are dismissed."

Elder 2 affirmed the blessing. Elder 4 wondered if he sufficiently scanned the worship center. Elder 8 agreed that it would be better to memorize the blessing which

would allow for more eye contact. Elder 3 commented that elder 8 has a natural charisma that lends credibility to his words. Elder 3 said to elder 8, “I don’t know if I see a big difference in [elder 1]’s blessings from before, but I do see a bigger difference in your focus.” Elder 8 responded with some resistance, “When I watch [elder 1], that is the man I know. When I watch the other ones, that is not how I know those people. When I really try to drive something home, I wonder if the church wonders, ‘Who is that guy?’” Elder 8 has not seen the video recordings. He was speaking about his impressions after seeing the six men who presented their blessings on the evening of 3 November. My response was, “I think there is much power in that difference. It is exhilarating.” What I was attempting to communicate to the group was that the congregation will come to know them differently through the speaking of the blessing. Elder 8 was and is concerned about being perceived as less than genuine. Elder 5 commented, “If that is what you thought should be said, then it is you. I couldn’t do that because it was too long. If you can memorize that much, great.”

The group watched elder 6’s blessing based on Isaiah 60:1-6, the text for Epiphany of the Lord. He said, “There are many reasons for us to be happy. Just think of the spiritual darkness that covered the minds of mankind before Christ, the true light, came to this world. Just as he brought light to everyone everywhere, so you too are to go forth. Be a blessing and bring light to those you meet. You are dismissed.” The group was universally impressed with this blessing. “That was probably the best he has ever done,” said elder 3. Elder 8 recognized that elder 6 had memorized it. Elder 7 said, “He took us a great distance in a short amount of time.” Elder 6 has not commented very many times

during the sessions. It is evident from his blessing that his lack of conversation is not a manifestation of a lack of interest in the process or the product.

The group watched elder 7's blessing that was based on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, the text for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. He said, "Go from here loving God. All things are from God. Use everything for God, for the benefit of yourself, and for your brothers and your sisters. Go from here, loving God." Elder 7 held his hands out in an open gesture, but not the raised hands with palms outward as we had talked about. Elder 4 was the first to comment on the blessing saying that it was not fair, because elder 7 has had theological training. The group discussed the connection between the blessing and the text, and remarked that if the preaching theme was fully explored out of the Scripture passage, that this blessing would be a fitting conclusion to the assembly.

The group watched elder 5's blessing that was based on Ephesians 1:2-14, the text for the Second Sunday After Christmas. He said, "You are not forgotten. God knows your name. He not only knows your name. He has adopted you through Jesus. You are sons and daughters of the King of Kings. So hold your head up. You are his child. You are dismissed."

Elder 4 affirmed the blessing. Elder 8 said, "That's not the [elder 5] I know." He was saying that it is unusual and perhaps more assertive than elder 5 usually is in the shepherd's blessing. Elder 7 agreed, saying, "[Elder 5] is conversational and that wasn't conversational." Elder 5 shared that he has been carefully preparing by repeating the lines as many as fifty times before stepping onto the stage to offer them. He said, "It is different, but it is still me. I will start out and look at what I am saying and think, no. I

will change it four or five times before I am ready.” In this teaching moment I said, “What you are describing is the power of your words. You are wanting to be intentional about how you shape their imagination.” My intention was to point out to the group that in their critique they are taking their words with the seriousness that we have been emphasizing in the sessions. Elder 7 said that elder 5 “is normally conversational and maybe the congregation will see that preparation was involved and, therefore, take it more seriously.” The group affirmed the quality and the content of the blessing.

The group watched elder 4’s blessing that was based on 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, the text for the Third Sunday after Epiphany. He said, “Go now into the world that is always passing away, always changing, always moving, always drawing us off course, off center, and seeming to leave us Christians with little time to do what we know we must do. Therefore, love each one that you meet as if this moment was the last one you will have, knowing that God’s love for you never passes way, never changes, never ends. Why? Because we know the end. We know that Christ has claimed us. We know that nothing else is important, because Christ has blessed us. You are dismissed.” Elder 4 was the first to critique his own blessing, recognizing that he was nervous. Elder 3 commented that he thought it was two good blessings. He said, “You could have stopped in the middle and both were very good. When you said to greet everyone as if it was the last time you would see them, that was a powerful place to stop.” I responded with, “I would encourage more sending language, especially at the end of the blessing. The unpacking of the Scripture content was right on the money.”

The group watched elder 3’s blessing that was based on Psalm 139, the text for

the Second Sunday after Epiphany. He said, “You know we see so many things in nature, that God took such great pains to create the things that he did, to be able to create the balance in nature that he did. And so much more attention he applied to us. Scripture tells us that God created man in his own image. And Scripture tells us that God so loved you that he gave us his son to die on a cross for our sins. And as you leave here today, I want you to leave with a couple of things. One is may God fill your heart with the knowledge that you are important, and may he grant you the warmth that comes from that. You are dismissed.” Elder 8 commented that the shorter blessings appear to keep the power of the thought. We talked about trying to narrow the blessing to one idea, which is also something that we have been seeking to do with the sermon. The group encouraged elder 3 to make use of the ideas in the Psalm passage in a more direct way. The fundamental blessing was delivered in the final sentences and the preamble may not have been necessary. Elder 8 said, “Every one of those (blessings) had a short phrase that was said a couple of times. You are adopted. You are a child of the king. You could reduce that to a ten word sentence and drive that home. Putting in a bunch of stuff begins to sound like another sermon and people get out of sync with you.” The elders thought back to their blessing, looking for the key phrase.

The group watched elder 2’s blessing that was based on Isaiah 61:10-11; 62:1-3, the text for the First Sunday after Christmas. He said, “Good morning everyone. I hope your worship experience was good today. One of the things I want to do today is encourage you as a Christian people. We have been given unmerited salvation. Because of this, God wants us to be a bold people. And he wants us to let our light shine before

the world. What I want you to do today is to have you to go out and be a bold people. We have been greatly blessed by God and we have received great blessings from him, and he will bless you as your light shines to the world. You are dismissed.” The group had lost some of its steam for analysis. There was only a brief comment about the phrase in the blessing that seemed to imply that God would bless his people if they will shine their light in the world. The group did not affirm that God will only bless those who are living according to His will. As we came to a close of the communal critique, I said, “We are trying to hit a target, and the target is God’s mission in the world. You are leading them somewhere toward that mission for the sake of the world.” The session was wrapped up with an assignment. The men were asked to write the story of how they learned to become an elder. They were asked to write about the people and the words that shaped their imagination for serving as elders. They were asked to share their vision for the mission of this church. They were asked to complete this narrative by Sunday, 20 November.

Summary of the Intervention Sessions

The plan for the sessions to operate as an equipping exercise functioned well. The elder group engaged the material with thoughtfulness. In each session the men stayed focused and were congenial to each other, to me as the facilitator, and to the subject matter. They showed a level of investment, which was anticipated. These men are interested in their role as elders. They are motivated to fill their role as it is articulated by Scripture. If there was a weaker session out of the seven, the fourth session on discerning the mission of God would be the weak one. The men who attended the session showed great interest, and their reflections on the text showed that they could be motivated

practitioners of discerning God's mission. The weakness of the session was not the design, but the attendance. We only had four of the eight elders for that session. The session is critical to the equipping task because the elders are being encouraged to send the church from the assembly to carry out the mission of God in the world. The elders need to be clear in their understanding about that mission in order to cast the imagination of the people in such a way that they will choose to be a participant in that mission. The most challenging and useful session was session 3 on the development of the moral authority to speak the blessing. A blessing cannot be effectively spoken until someone accepts the authority to speak. The elders demonstrated both reluctance and eagerness to accept and use the authority that Scripture ascribes to the pastors of the church, and the authority bestowed on them by the people of the church. Their reluctance to accept and use that authority emerged from appropriate humility. Their eagerness to accept and use the authority was made clear in their willingness to carry out this project and in their willingness to speak the blessing in such a way that people remember that God is with them as they depart from the assembly. All of the sessions appeared to be necessary and well sequenced.

Elder Narrative Results

The proposal of this project was that words have formative and performative power. The project uses words to fund the imagination of a group of elders, helping them to see their role as those who are able to speak words in such a way that the assembled church will leave the assembly under the power and care of God to participate with God in his mission for the sake of the world. The expectation of the project was that the

sessions, where these men spent up to ten hours in communal conversation about speaking a blessing over the church that sent the church into the world, would be an important formative event in their lives as elders. The expectation of the project was that the elders would develop a sense of clarity concerning their mission as elders and the mission of the church as a community of Christ followers. In an attempt to measure the level of fulfillment of these expectations, a series of indirect inquiries were posed to the elders at the conclusion of the final session. The men were given a week to write a few paragraphs in response to the questions. The key question asked was: “How did you learn to become an elder?” The following statements were offered as a guiding prompt to help them to answer the question: “Tell about the people who influenced you and about the words spoken that shaped your imagination for the task of ministry. Tell about your on-the-job training and about words you have spoken that were taken seriously. Tell about your vision for the mission of the church. Where did this come from?” The men were encouraged to write as much as they wished. They were encouraged to tell stories. All eight men responded thoughtfully and with detail sufficient for reflection on the project.⁵

In the elder essays, I was looking for a number of key ideas. Would evidence for the formative power of words emerge; words that the elders heard and words the elder spoke? Would their narratives provide descriptions that implied that the elders had been equipped to speak important words for the church? Would their narratives supply evidence that the elders possessed a self-understanding that they had been called by God to send the church from the assembly in order to live their Christian lives for the sake of

⁵ See appendix C for the text of the elder participant narratives.

the world? Would there be evidence that the elders felt called by both God and the congregation to fulfill their role as leaders?

In the review of the elder narratives, reading for evidence of the formative power of words, there is abundant evidence that words are critical in the formation of the role of elders. Of course this is not necessarily, nor specifically, a testimony to the effectiveness of the project. The fact of the importance of words, rather, underscores the pertinence of the project. Each of these elders revealed that words effectively spoken were essential to their formation as elders. The following paragraphs reflect the key findings from the narratives relevant to the importance of words in their development as elders. These paragraphs also reflect the degree to which the elders believe that they have been equipped to speak formative words to the congregation.

Elder 1 indicated that even the very question of “how does one learn to become an elder” reminds him of his questions about what kind of man he would become, questions that he said have “been reverberating in my mind for over half a century.” He confessed that the capacity to do harm in the position of leadership is significant. One does not have to read far beneath the surface of those words to find that the damage is done by words spoken, either in the care-giving enterprise or in the exercise of leadership. Elder 1 has learned his role through Scripture and by following the example of those who have preceded him. He has also learned the role through the words and examples of his co-elders. He said, “I am aware of the need to be careful with the words I speak.” He experienced the power of the words of an elder when he was first asked to teach by his elders. He felt the weight of their request. If the elders felt that he should teach, who was

he to think that they were wrong? He has since learned that his words may have more weight than he knows. He has also experienced some angst over words that the elders have used, especially an apparently authoritarian quote on a previous eldership's stationery that said, "From the Elder's Chair." The words offended him, and shaped his imagination for how the elder group should conduct themselves. Elder 1 points to the words of Scripture as a formative source for learning how to become an elder. Tradition has also played a role in his instruction. When he speaks of tradition, there is evidence of some level of irritation concerning the restrictions that those traditions have imposed on the work and progress of the church. Elder 1 offers several maxims in his narrative. These maxims are one way that elder 1 orders the world he inhabits.

Elder 2 has been influenced by words that were effectively spoken to him by his mother, by an especially influential preacher in his life, and through the education and mentoring he received at Abilene Christian University. His mother's words provided a foundation for honesty and integrity. His minister encouraged him that he could serve God as a leader and teacher. Abilene Christian confirmed and funded his ability to lead and teach. He found that his willingness to teach, which is obviously a word-centered enterprise, was a key formative activity that prepared him for leadership as an elder. Elder 2 was also highly influenced by the elders in the churches where he served. He found their encouragement significantly formative. As a deacon, he found himself in the middle of leadership issues that involved conversations that included conflict management. He learned the value of pastoral care. He said, relevant to the current project, "Our current minister has encouraged all of the current elders to be more communicative with the

church as a whole.”

Elder 3 indicates that he was selected as an elder, most likely, because of his service as a Bible teacher in the congregation. His words had earned him some relational regard. His early formation for the task of serving as an elder came from listening to his father-in-law, who had served as an elder in another congregation. He listened to the conversations around the Sunday dinner table. Since becoming an elder himself, he has seen his words have direct impact in situations of pastoral care, and in the community of elders as they chart the direction of the congregation. His experience of significant speech has encouraged him to give shape to the thinking of the group by sharing his opinions. It is also clear that he has been formed by listening to Scripture.

Elder 4 was tutored by his experience with other elders. He saw men who behaved with gentleness, Bible knowledge, and love. His narrative reveals evidence of Christian performative utterances by those who tutored him. He also saw men whose words were sarcastic and abusive of authority. Their words were so offensive that he resolved to never imitate that behavior. The most significant times of formation for elder 4 have come through times of extended study and conversation with the elder group. Reading has been another significant formative source for elder 4.

Elder 7 initially learned about the role of elders as he was being oriented to the polity of the Church of Christ. Soon after becoming a member, he was asked to participate in serving the Lord’s Supper. He was hesitant, but his wife told him that the request was coming from the elders and that it was significant to be asked by the elders to participate in service to the congregation. He said, “She was telling me that their words

and requests carried extra weight.” As elder 7 grew in his familiarity with life in the church, he found mentors who happened to be elders. There was a particular elder who was present in the midst of a crisis that was especially helpful to him and his family. He said, “He listened to me and then spoke healing words of comfort and encouragement.” On one occasion a respected member of the congregation complemented his spoken words, saying that perhaps he should consider preaching. Those words of encouragement sparked his imagination in such a way that he considered pursuing that vocation. Elder 7 commented particularly about this project saying, “The lessons of the last few weeks, as we have studied the shepherd’s blessing, have brought out the importance of my words to the flock over which I am given responsibility.” He also remembered a couple of concrete episodes where his words as an elder were important. He confessed that he is uneasy when a conversation often begins, “As an elder,...” and the weight of responsibility that falls upon his response. He said, “We can lead by example and we can speak words that matter. It is because of the intimacy of fellowship that my words as an elder have impact.” He said, “Since we have been studying the shepherd’s blessing, I have felt a growth in what I say during my blessings. I never before had the idea that I have the authority to actually speak God’s blessing on the people and that it might make a difference in their lives.”

Elder 8 agreed that learning to become an elder is a process of observing godly men who, over significant periods of time, “demonstrate love for the church.” He noted the example of his father, who has for many years been a quiet, positive, and steadfast servant of the church. He also noted the example of two men who have offered him wise

counsel and served as examples of wise decision making. These men were both affirming and constructively critical in ways that he found formative. He was formed by examples of two of the ministers from the Sun Valley congregation who were exemplary and sacrificial in their service. Their service was in teaching the Bible and in relational expertise.

Elder 5 was equipped to serve as an elder through the words of Scripture and the words of significant mentors. His best learning, he said, has come through the exercise of providing care which has been expressed through teaching, visiting, and through involvement in the lives of his shepherding group. He said, “They know my voice.” He also indicated that he has been equipped through lessons taught at Elder Link and “most recently through an intense study on the shepherd’s blessing. The study helped me to go from reading Scriptures that I thought were relevant, to giving true blessings that are in sync with the lessons and encouraging to the sheep.” He went on to say, “Our words and actions can be a great blessing or can cause much damage to the cause of Christ.”

Elder 6 began being equipped to serve as an elder by watching his father fill that role. He learned from listening to what his father and other men said about the qualifications of elders. Both of his parents helped him to learn how to be a servant in the church, to practice honesty and to provide care to those in need. Obviously, these lessons would be comprised of words authenticated by action. Elder 6 is a quiet man. He said, “Since I don’t talk a lot in meetings, I have noticed that others seem to be attentive when I do say something.”

The following paragraphs reflect the key findings from the narratives relevant to

the elders' understanding that they are sending the congregation to engage in the mission of God for the sake of the world. The shepherd's blessing only functions as a missional enterprise if the elders believe that the mission of the church is to foster community in such a way that the life of the church becomes a witness for the sake of the world. The questions the elders were asked about the mission of the congregation were meant to reveal their thinking about the mission of God as the mission of the congregation.

Elder 1 said that his vision for the mission of the church was that it would be a place where people look forward to attending services. He mentioned that he has a serious interest in World Bible School, and sees that there might come a day when there are more Christians in Africa than in the United States. A second vision that elder 1 expressed for the mission of the church was a matter of members realizing their wealth. His vision is that the church would learn to give in such a way that important work could be done. In a comment about traditional churches, he indicated that the church should be vibrant, militant, and evangelistic. He did not speak of the mission of God in any direct sense.

As elder 2 told his story, it was clear that he was equipped in an institutional model of the church. He filled the functions that the congregations trained him to fill. He was a song leader, a teacher, and a youth leader. The implication was that the church is a place where these things happen. When he spoke about the Sun Valley congregation that contributed considerably to the strength of Southeast, he noted that it was the leaders, teachers and workers who came to join. It appears that upholding these traditional structures is central to the functional mission of the church. He spoke about elders that wanted to control every cent that was spent. Even in this institutional model, elder 2 was

clear that “We must be outwardly focused in teaching the gospel and totally focused on God and his mission at all times.” His most direct statement of mission grew out of his statement about the shepherd’s blessing project. He said, “I personally feel that the encouragement and support given the elders by our minister over the past several months has helped us rethink our roles as elders and be godly men participating with God and his mission.”

In the narrative from elder 3, there was evidence of an understanding that the emotional and redemptive care of people was important. However, his institutional world view was clear when he said, “My vision for the church is to generate a place that provides a place of worship that is so fulfilling to those that come, that they can’t help but let it shine through their lives that encourage others to attend.” The thrust of the mission of God appeared in this statement to be attendance.

Elder 4 said that his dream for the church was that it become the type of place where our children will return after going to college. Reading just below the surface of the narrative, one can perhaps see that he seeks a church that is reflective, one that questions traditional practices and seeks to be the kind of community that values people in the same way that God values them.

Elder 7 did not directly answer the question about vision and mission. However, as his narrative unfolded, it is possible to see both institutional and relational elements. In a church of a thousand members, being institutional is necessary. Elder 7 was drawn into the activities of the church, including driving for a bus ministry, an outreach to neighborhood children. As he grew in his understanding of the church, he learned that

relationship work trumped administrative duties. In dealing with a difficult member, he learned that it was important to help the congregation feel secure while being redemptive toward people whose behavior is disorderly. What he was describing is a community that is able to practice fellowship. He said, “I think God wants him (the disruptive member) in fellowship with us.” Without describing God’s mission for the world, he has summarized it pretty well. He said, “In fellowship is where we can help each other to grow and overcome our mistakes.”

Elder 8 has also been trained in a traditional Church of Christ setting. His story told of appreciation for hours spent by youth deacons and ministers. This may have included ministry that was away from the building, ministry that was about more than information. However, he appeared to be speaking of a program of the church. He indicated that his vision for the church was that it be “a place where people are encouraged to lead a godly life by seeing examples of people who are consistent in their Christianity in both good times and bad, and by experiencing first hand the servant nature of Christians.” Elder 8 was saying that the mission of the church is stability, integrity, service, and godly influence that happens within the programs of the church.

The story that elder 5 told reveals that his interest in people is more important to him than the institution of the church. He said that his vision for the mission of the church was “to reach out to the community that is lost while taking care of the members both physically and spiritually.” People who are wounded and troubled are of particular interest to elder 5. The mission of God and of the church was to bind up the broken, and he is interested in attending to that missional sensibility.

Elder 6 said, “My vision for the mission of this church is what the elders had decided would be the mission: Living Christ and Sharing Christ. This was Southeast’s motto before we began conversations about being a Signpost of the Kingdom of God, a Foretaste of Heaven, and Instruments in the Hands of God.”

None of the elders used any of the language that we have been using for the last several years to describe the mission of our church. None of the elders mentioned their task of sending the church into the world to exercise their Christianity. None of the elders mentioned discerning the mission of God through reflection on the life of God revealed in Scripture. Only two elders used the language that could be construed as participation with God in establishing fellowship with the world. The vast majority of the language in these narratives reflected the opinion that the church is a place where certain things would happen, instead of a people who were actively living with God to fulfill God’s purposes.

The following paragraphs reflect the key findings from the narratives relevant to the elders’ sense of calling from God, and their calling and commissioning from the congregation. For the shepherd’s blessing to have power to fund the imagination of the congregation, both the elder and the congregation need to have some sense of authoritative nature of the words being spoken.

Several of the elders did not address the idea of authority in any direct sense. Elder 1 mentioned that there are members of the congregation that assume that since he is an elder that he knows what he is talking about when he shares ideas and opinions. He also indicated that he held the elders in high regard when he was not an elder. The implication was that he understands that this is a position of authority, even if, as one who

fills the role, he is unsure about that authority. Elder 2 and elder 3 directly indicate that they were asked to serve, or nominated to serve. The narrative from elder 2 indicated that he understands that the congregation expects him to provide leadership and care. The implication was that the congregation has called him to fulfill those expectations.

The narrative from elder 7 had the most developed and overt comments concerning authority. He has had similar experiences to the other elders. He came to understand that elders spoke with of authority when they asked him to serve in various ministries in the church. As a new elder, he found that his ideas and comments were treated as authoritative utterances. His direct comments were most revealing, “My authority in these people’s lives comes from God. But their acceptance of my authority is solely because they know me and they have chosen to yield that authority to me.”

Elder 8 perhaps has the most relational authority of our eight elders. In the sessions, he was reluctant to accept that the authority to speak on God’s behalf had been bestowed on him. He recognized that the congregation looked to him for leadership and he has exercised it well, but he has been highly resistant to any idea that appeared to be democratic. There was nothing in his narrative that revealed the nature of his calling or commission. Beneath the surface of the narrative, it appeared that he believed that authority comes from the exercise of wise and godly influence over many years.

Summary of the Elder Narratives

It is interesting that in the sessions that were designed to fund the imagination of

the elders for the authority to speak the blessing, the group was reluctant to confess that the congregation had given them the authority to speak. They were much more willing to consider that God was the one who had given them the authority to lead the church. However, in their narratives, they did not report that their sense of mission was derived by the invitation of God, that God had positioned them or called them to lead his people. They did not say that their vision for the mission of the church had come through prayer or through communal reflection on the will of God found in Scripture.

Independent Expert Analysis

Fred Kane served this project as an independent expert. His material *Our Ministry of Blessing*, was used in session 2 with the elders, helping them reflect on their calling and commission to bless God's people. He wrote this narrative partially in response to an inquiry that I made to a group of ministers, asking how they had learned to give blessings in their ministry contexts. Kane is a minister in the United Methodist church, currently living in Beaverton, Oregon. He received the video recordings of elders and evaluated them for theological content, for their function as a blessing, and for style of delivery.⁶

Kane began his analysis with two significant observations. The first observation was that each of the blessings end with the words "You are dismissed." His question was "Does that phrase create a world that is meaningful and blessed?" In our local tradition those words really say "We're finished here. You can now leave." In the context of this project, we are attempting to give the elders the last word in the assembly, to have the words of blessing be the idea that resonates in the minds of the people as they go into the

⁶ See appendix D.

world. It had not occurred to me that we might make better use of this departure cue. Kane's second observation is an independent observation that the gesture of blessing would add to the congregation's experience of the blessing. He said that he thought there was a good reason that through much of Christian history ministers have raised their arms toward the congregation as they offered a blessing. He said, "There is power in that gesture." He points out that an important aspect of this gesture is to manifest the embrace of God for God's people.

Kane's remarks about the individual blessings closely resemble the analysis that the elders offered in their periods of communal critique. Generally speaking, the blessings that the elders recorded were too complex, often offering too many ideas. The blessings were not straightforward assertions that God was present with those who had assembled for worship and that this presence would go with them into the world. Kane also affirmed each of the blessings, recognizing that the blessings had substantial content and that the presentations were in fact blessings.

With regard to the blessing offered by elder 1, Kane notes that it was too long and too complex, calling it a "mini-sermon." Kane asked, as did the elder group, "Is that a blessing?" Kane noted that elder 1 never used the word 'blessing,' but the lack of that word did not necessarily negate the fact that a blessing was being offered. The strength of elder 1's blessing was in the genuineness of the speaker and the fact that he was not relying on notes.

Elder 8's blessing, according to Kane, was focused and coherent, but was perhaps too information driven. Elder 8 encourages the congregation to know certain truths about

God, namely that God is the great healer and that with that knowledge the people should be able to embrace the Word, love and peace of God. Elder 8 encourages the congregation to “be blessed,” which is an imperative. Of course, it seems that any invitation to receive or enter into the blessing of God would be an imperative form. Even the blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 implies an imperative form, saying, “The Lord bless you and keep you.” Even if the language is hortatory, the question remains, “How is the blessing transaction made?” Essentially, we are inviting people to be aware of the gracious presence of God. What Kane says is that these thoughts led him away from the experience of blessing.

Kane was very affirming of elder 6’s blessing, as was our elder group. He said, “There is something about [elder 6’s] voice that mesmerized me, and I was drawn in and almost entranced by it in such a short time. I felt blessed.” He also affirmed the fact that elder 6 did not use notes, was on target, and was simple, and brief.

Elder 7’s blessing was also brief, but Kane was struck by the density of the propositions in the blessing. How would one leave here loving God? Was it possible really to use everything for God? Is loving God in one’s own best interest? Kane concluded that all of these ideas were good, but that he was provoked to thinking rather than leaving empowered by the presence of God. Kane affirmed again the good body language and the lack of notes. Elder 7 did lift his hands slightly toward the congregation.

Kane was very affirming of the blessing spoken by elder 5. He said, “If I had to pick one of the blessings that especially touched me, it is [elder 5’s] blessing, short as it is, because he gives me a reminder for my journey this week that is visceral and

powerful—to ‘hold your head up’ because ‘you are his child!’” Kane affirmed the simple structure and genuine emotion of the delivery.

In the days leading up to the assignment of the texts for the oral blessings and session 7 in the ministry intervention, I sent the list of texts to the Reverend Kane. He responded with some interest in the fact that I thought that a blessing based on 1 Cor 7:29-31, “those who have wives should live as if they had none,” would be challenging. Kane wrote back with a proposed blessing. I passed his words on to elder 4 who had drawn that text as his assignment. Elder 4 was wise to adopt the language of that sample blessing as a template for his own thoughts. Kane was somewhat surprised to see some of his ideas being used. Of course, Kane affirmed some of the theological thinking behind elder 4’s blessing. However, he did find some points of concern, most pointedly that in elder 4’s blessing he said that “Christ has blessed us,” which is not a false statement, but may imply that the attention of God for us was once for all delivered in the past. Kane was keenly aware that elder 4 was uncomfortable delivering this blessing.

Elder 3’s blessing was a return to multiple themes and the problem of complexity, according to Kane. He said, “I was somewhat overwhelmed by the numerous concepts in [elder 3’s] blessing.” He added, “If there are too many concepts, then I may tune it all out.” Kane affirmed elder 3’s ease with public speaking, the fact that his tone was warm and encouraging. He did encourage more eye contact with the audience. Of course, we were recording these blessings in an empty worship center. The men were working hard to manifest a spirit of connection with an audience that was present only in their imagination. Kane affirmed the connection between the blessing and the sermon, which

elder 3 did with his opening phrase.

Kane's chief concern with the blessing spoken by elder 2 was also a concern mentioned in the elder group. "Are we blessed because of particular behavior on our part?" Does God pay more attention to us when we are well behaved? Do good things happen to us specifically because we are living God's way? There are stories in the Bible that could substantiate both a negative and a positive response to those questions. We should be aware of our intention as we speak the blessings. Have we thought this concept through? Kane comments on elder 2's lack of a gesture, that his hands were locked together. He affirmed his tone and eye contact, but was distracted by the lack of smooth linkages in the sentence structure.

Summary of the Independent Expert

Kane's analysis appropriately evaluates the work of this project. Kane has recognized that the men are prone to give information as a blessing. Equipping the elders to speak a blessing that funds the imagination of the congregation and reminding them that God is with them and in them, empowering them to participate with God in his mission in the world is important and difficult work. The elders will have to continue to work at the task of speaking words of blessing. They will have to be thoughtful and self-critical about the words they use.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of Results

The elders met for seven sessions that were intended to equip them to speak the shepherd's blessing at the conclusion of the Sunday morning services in such a way that the congregation would have a clear idea that God is with them and in them to help them carry out God's mission for the world. Each session was crafted to meet particular goals. Did the sessions meet their goals?

Session 1

Session 1 was designed to accomplish several goals. The group was oriented, or reoriented, to the importance of words and to their own belief about the performative character of words. The group appeared to grasp the idea of words as deeds and the criteria for performative speech. After laying that foundation, the group considered some examples of performative speech in the Bible. I introduced God's interest in blessings, including patriarchal and priestly blessings. I then made the connection between God's interest in these blessings and the existing exercise of the shepherd's blessing at Southeast.

Was this session effective? All of the elders were engaged in the conversations. They grasped the idea that words, phrases, sentences that they spoke in various contexts

were performative. The group also made the connection between their positions as elders and the power of their words. It was clear throughout the project that the elders as a group were less than comfortable with the power of their words. To think that they speak to the church on God's behalf was disconcerting to them. They appeared to be aware that people have been listening to them, expecting them to have a definitive word from God on a variety of biblical and social topics. The group was eager to consider the texts from the Bible, thinking together about the power of God's blessings and God's words. The only idea that met resistance in this session was the use of the priestly gesture from Leviticus 9:22. One elder consistently used the raised-hand gesture in the weeks between April, when the project was proposed to the elders, and September, when these sessions began. It is interesting that in the video recorded prior to session 7, this same elder did not use the gesture. As the sessions unfolded, the concern of the group was that such a display would appear to the church as something less than genuine, perhaps a pretension on their part, or that they were extending to the congregation some kind of supernatural power through their raised hands. The session funded of the imagination of the elders for how their blessings might be an extension of the performative speech of God.

Session 2

Session 2 was designed to encourage the elders in asking and answering the question "Who am I to stand in the place of God and offer a blessing?" The session began with a discussion about the calling of Moses to lead the people of God. The elders were challenged to contrast their calling with the call of Moses. They made the connection between the task of Moses as a leader of the people of God and the elders of the Ephesian

church (Acts 20:28-32). This was an active learning session for the group. I could see them grappling with the ideas of being called or commissioned in the same way as Moses. I could see them grappling with the idea that God had entrusted them with this group of people. They had not previously considered that God and the congregation had called them to responsibility in such a direct way. In the elder narratives, this sense of calling was still absent. The group seemed to grasp this significant concept while in the group, but the discovery did not accomplish a transformed self- understanding for the men. Words are important. We say that words shape (or make) the world that we inhabit. However, it is clear in this project that words that are deeds do not change the world with the saying of them, or even understanding and believing them. More is required. It could be that the more that is required is repetition. People need to be told again and again that God is with them. People need to be told repeatedly that God expects them to speak or to act in a particular way. People need to be told often that they are loved and known. This is one of the significant findings of the project. The elders would like the preaching minister to help the congregation understand the role of the elders, that the elders are equipping the members to be Christians and that the responsibility of the members is to receive that blessing and put that blessing into practice in the world.

Was session 2 effective? Session 2 was critical to the project. The narrative from Fred Kane was useful, but needed to be edited for length. The men made an emotional connection to the narrative and were encouraged that God calls rather ordinary people into extraordinary service. They connected Kane's story with their own experiences of gathering around sick people who have requested the elders to come pray over them and

anoint them with oil. The elders were and are concerned about the expectations of those who might call them for prayer. The men were willing to find some comfort in James 5:17, which says that Elijah was a human being just as we are.

Session 3

Session 3 was designed to make room for more extended conversation about the moral authority to speak on God's behalf. How might they develop the strong conviction that they should offer words that shape the world of the people of God? The session began with questions concerning the shepherd's blessing. Why have the elders been closing the assembly with this liturgical act for so many years? What have they been trying to accomplish? When they began this project, they tried to apply what they were learning each week. The congregation responded positively to the change that they perceived in the focus of the blessings. The elder group felt encouraged by this early response. The group talked about the weight attributed by the members to a hospital visit by the preacher or one of the elders. There was some initial reluctance to affirm that a visit by an elder had any particular significance. However, as the session unfolded, the group recognized that they have received a trust that grants them moral authority and, thereby, moral responsibility to lead the church. In this session there was another round of resistance to the raised-hand gesture that accompanied the priestly blessing.

Was session 3 effective? During this session, there was an atmospheric change in the relationship between the elders and the preacher. In our conversations about the moral authority for leadership, the elders found a new, apparently more comfortable relationship with their preacher. They heard their preacher affirming that they were called by God and

by the congregation to be the real leaders of the church. There was, however, an abiding uneasiness in the elder group about the power of God working in them and through them in any extraordinary way. In the blessing, they were comfortable announcing truths about the love of God and the presence of God for God's people. What they did not believe at this point was that God blesses these people because the elders say the people are blessed. What they did not fully grasp at this point was that their words were funding the imagination of the people through the repeated announcement of the presence and power of God. They have learned that they are announcing the blessing for the people. They have not fully learned that when the people appropriately imagine that God is with them, they are being blessed in that moment in a very genuine way.

Session 4

Session 4 was an exercise in discerning the mission of God by reading the text of 2 Corinthians 4. If the shepherd's blessing was to be a missional enterprise, it was vital that the elders have some sense of God's mission in the world for the sake of the world. The fact that half of the elder group was absent for this session may have been significant. If the elder narratives had reflected that the four men who were in this session captured the idea that God's mission was something that we could discern from a careful reading of the text, then the absence of the other four would have been profoundly significant. The men who were present engaged the text carefully and came to very fine conclusions about the nature of God's mission for the world. What does God want to accomplish with the lives of Christians? The elders' narratives might indicate that the mission of the Christians here is to attend church services and lead moral lives. When the participants in

this session were asked about the mission of God, they had good proposals, but they could not readily say that those proposals came from the Bible. They believed that they had learned the mission of God through experience. This session demonstrated that we know intellectually that this mission of God is to bring people into the presence of God, that being “saved” has a purpose that is greater than the rescue from hellfire.

Was session 4 effective? The men processed the text very well. In the ninety minutes of this session, the men gathered could see the mission that they were sending the church out to accomplish. They saw that ordinary people could be commissioned to bring the presence of God into the world, to bring the love of God into every relationship that Christians possess. The elders who participated in this session felt that they had a clearer sense of what they were doing with the shepherd’s blessing. Elder 5 said, “It used to be something you just did, but now, hopefully, we are thinking of what the congregation needs at this time. We have more passion for it.”

Session 5

Session 5 was designed to give the elders a template for crafting a blessing based on the passage of Scripture. The elders have the opportunity to see the manuscript of the Sunday lesson several days before the sermon is delivered. However, if they only had the Scripture text, they were well equipped to reflect on that text and draw out the themes that would form the heart of their blessing for the week. In this session, especially since four of the men had been unable to attend session 4, we spent time summarizing the territory that we had covered. The elders were seeing that the sessions were using some of the same principles that they are to use in the shepherd’s blessing. We were reminding

ourselves about the story that defines our lives. We were reminding ourselves of our mission as church leaders. We were sending ourselves out of these gatherings in order to fulfill that mission, to facilitate God's intention for his people.

Was session 5 effective? There were some challenges in session 5. We may have been distracted by conversations concerning the lectionary. Bass Mitchell's blessings for Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary were very good. However, it may have been less distracting if I had written sample blessings based on the texts that I had chosen to preach in the eight weeks following the project. We did not need fifty-two examples. Fundamentally, the session was effective because the men were actively involved in imagining what form their blessing could take. It was effective because the men saw that the blessing could and should come from their reflection on a particular Scripture text. In the last half of this session, we practiced thinking through the texts that were being assigned for the written practicum. This was a model of preparation that the men followed as they wrote blessings for session 6 and session 7. They learned how to prepare a blessing.

Session 6

Session 6 was the first of two practicum sessions. We learn by doing and by analyzing what we have done. The men crafted blessings based on assigned texts and presented them to the group for communal critique. Three of the men were absent for this session. One of the men sent in his blessing for critique even though he could not be present.

Was session 6 effective? This was an essential session for the project. The men

engaged one another's work with diligence and grace. As they were considering one another's blessings, they were also thinking about what they had prepared. They were also imagining standing before the congregation to speak these blessings, wondering how their words would be received. This session was an exercise, not only in communal critique, but in theological reflection. The men were considering the words of the blessing based on a particular text and reflecting on the character and nature of God being described by the blessing and by the text in question. They discovered that the blessings were more effective when they were concrete, brief, and focused on one idea. When the assignments were made for the video recording of the blessings they would craft for the next session, there was another round of questions concerning the priestly gesture. I encouraged them to give the gesture a try, but it is clear from the results that they were unwilling to extend their hands to the congregation during the blessing.

Session 7

Session 7 was designed to take the experience of crafting the blessing to delivery phase. Another series of texts were assigned, and the men were asked to prepare the blessing and deliver the blessing in the Worship Center in front of a video camera. All of the men completed the assignment. Elder 6, who had been quiet through most of the sessions and was unavailable for several of the sessions, had an excellent blessing. He had memorized what he wanted to say. His content was appropriate. This is interesting in that one might surmise that the words being spoken in these sessions, or in the shepherd's blessing for that matter, are not hitting their target or doing transformative work when the evidence is unclear or absent in the stream of the equipping exercise. Words can fund the

imagination even if the immediate feedback is unclear or ambiguous.

Was session 7 effective? Session 7 was necessary. The group learned to ask themselves, “Is this a blessing?” They learned that there is a core idea in their blessings and that if they can focus on that core and deliver it in some repetitive way, they will accomplish the goal of sending the church into the world for the sake of the world. The analysis by Fred Kane challenged the men to continue to craft their blessings carefully, to narrow the focus, and to memorize their text. He strongly encouraged them to make use of the priestly blessing gesture.

Conclusions

Do words make worlds? In the exercise of this project, I have used words that were intended to shape the imagination of these church leaders. I sought to fund their imagination for possessing and using the moral authority necessary to speak a blessing over the assembly of God’s people in a worship setting. These men have been living with words for a long time, words that have shaped their self-understanding and their understanding of God and God’s mission. These men have been hearing missional language for a number of years in the preaching and teaching that has taken place in their church. When I read their narratives, I do not see a missional sensitivity. To say that words make worlds appears to overstate the case. Words shape worlds slowly. Our imagination is funded partially, but not as if it is being newly or totally funded. Saying true words well is important and necessary. The impact of those words is never certain. Words land in a particular context that is as varied as the people who hear the words.

The language of the intervention sessions did help the elders understand and

articulate what it means to be blessed by God, that the fundamental blessing is the benevolent attention of God on his people. These elders believe that God is watching over his people. They also believe that reminding the people about the love, attention and presence of God for and in their lives has real value. The elders have not resisted the language of discerning the mission of God. They have not resisted the idea that God seeks to accomplish his mission through the lives of ordinary Christians. Even though their narratives do not reveal this kind of missional thinking, in the sessions their participation with God in God's mission for the sake of the world made sense to them.

Even though the men struggled with accepting the idea that they were authorized to bless God's people, that they could stand in the position of Moses or Elijah and speak on God's behalf, they were comforted to know that I, their preacher, believed that they possessed such a privilege and responsibility. They do realize that the congregation expects the words of the elders to be authoritative. Their fundamental humility is encouraging. If they were eager to be God's spokesmen, perhaps that would be a matter of serious concern. The elders will need to hear more about "treasure in clay jars" and the certainty that God can make use of flawed human beings to accomplish his mission.

The ministry intervention sessions prepared the elders to craft blessings that are focused and, therefore, effective. The group asked in the midst of the sessions if there was a recognizable difference between what they had been doing in the shepherd's blessing and what they were producing in sessions 6 and 7. It was clear that they saw dramatic differences in each other's work. The blessings were focused on the text to be used for a particular assembly. The blessings were being prepared in advance and were seeking to

stay on a single theme. These elders love God and love this church. Their blessings will take another big step as they learn to let their blessings reflect that regard.

Will the blessing words of the elders fund the imagination of the congregation in such a way that the congregation will be sent into the world for the sake of the world? As with the realization that the elders were not spontaneously transformed through ten hours of theological reflection and practicum in constructing and delivering the blessing, church leaders should not expect a quick result in those who hear their elders speak to them for thirty seconds a week even if that is a well-spoken final word in the Sunday assembly. Words shape worlds when well spoken, when accompanied by the appropriate ethic over a long period of time.

Was this project successful? The project was well designed and well executed. The participants were motivated and cooperative learners. The final outcome of the project is left to the willingness of the elders to continue to shoulder their privilege and responsibility to speak a blessing over God's people and to their willingness to send the church into the world to be the church. The idea of the blessing of God has been delivered into the hands, if not the imagination, of the elders. They know intellectually that the purpose of God is to draw all of his children into a relationship in which they might be comforted and energized by God's loving and gracious presence. God is seeking the salvation of the world.

Implications

What are the implications for further ministry growth? As we listen to the important rhetoric of post-liberal thinking exemplified by Lindbeck and Brueggemann in

this project, we hear the conception that the world is socially and linguistically constructed. As far as this is true, it is critically important that we constructively and assertively speak words that tell the story of God week after week. Our congregations need to have a word that resonates in their imaginations, a word that says that God is with them and in them, giving them peace, purpose, and energy. On the other hand, it is important not to overestimate the power of words to construct a reality. The elder narratives in this project were disappointing. These men are highly invested in the well-being of this church. They have been listening to the lessons being taught. In many circumstances they use the language of being a signpost of the kingdom of God, a foretaste of heaven, and being instruments in the hands of God, but that language did not appear in their narratives. They have been listening with interest to the series of lessons called *Storm Front* and *Life on the Vine*, yet none of that missional thinking is reflected in their narratives. They spent these ten hours together practicing theological reflection, and very few of the ideas that appear in the field notes appear in their narratives. The story that they tell in their narratives needs to be taken seriously. If words create a social world or social reality, and I think they do, that world or reality is created contextually and longitudinally. The good news is that we are speaking words in a context. The words of blessing are being spoken in the worship conducted by the church. The world that we have accepted is the world created by the word and Word of God. We are intentionally surrounding ourselves with practitioners of the faith, people who see that the life of Christ is the model for humanity. Those kinds of practitioners do show up in the elder narratives. If these elders become those who speak the blessing of God for the people in

such a way that the people believe that the presence of God is with them and in them for the sake of the world, then these elders will eventually include these ideas in the narrative that describes how they learned to become an elder. The implication is that while words are critical to the funding of our imagination, those words will have to be spoken repeatedly over many years and lived persistently in the lives of those who will dare to shoulder the priestly and prophetic role of speaking on God's behalf. Speakers will have to practice the fruit of God's spirit of patience.

For those ministry leaders who want to replicate the project, what are the implications? It is my hope that many ministry leaders would replicate some form of this project. The affirmation of the role and authority of the elders in the church is powerful. Through the ten hours of these sessions, I could sense a development in the relationship between me, as the preaching minister, and the elders, as a group and as individuals. The way Churches of Christ are organized leaves some functional ambiguity when it comes to power, authority, and control. When elders are not in the daily flow of the ministry of the whole community, there is a tendency for them to feel that they are in a vulnerable position when it comes to the relational, if not positional, authority in the community. This project not only helps the congregation learn that they have a role in the mission of God for the sake of the world, but it also clarifies the priestly and prophetic role of the elders.

As was reflected in the evaluation of the individual sessions, it is important to have all of the elders present for the session about discerning God's mission from the text of Scripture. In the future training of elders, I will find this session to be crucial. In

addition, depending on the readiness of the elders to engage the idea of the Revised Common Lectionary, I would recommend avoiding that distraction. I would suggest that ministry leaders lay out a series of texts that are a part of their preaching plan in the church and to provide about a dozen examples of blessings that they have crafted from those themes and texts.

A further implication for those who might replicate this project is that liturgical change will meet resistance. In this project, our men were used to offering what they called the shepherd's blessing. The language of blessing and the existence of that moment in our assembly was an advantage. However, when it came to adding something unfamiliar, specifically the raising and extending of their hands toward the congregation, our men were resistant. They were concerned that the congregation would see this as something inconsistent with the character of these men. Six of our eight elders are firm in their unwillingness even to try this gesture. The first step in a replication of this project might be a series of lessons about the meaning of God's blessing and for the preacher to offer a closing blessing. This would introduce the idea to the congregation and provide the elders an example to follow.

Future Actions

After the completion of this project, there is a significant chance that our elders will tend to fall back into their pre-training way of approaching the blessing. My specific concern is that they will not spend sufficient time with the Scripture text for the lesson or with the text of the lesson itself. We are about to enter into the season of epiphany. In order to encourage the practice of the blessings, the elders will be receiving, through e-

mail, the texts scheduled for preaching in the month of January along with some exegetical notes. The exegetical notes will include some articulation of the themes and metaphors found in the pericope, along with one blessing template. I do not want to create a dependence; thus each of these e-mails will indicate that they will be receiving these only in the month of January. We currently have eight elders; therefore if exegetical notes are supplied for the last four weeks of January, then each elder will receive some help on their blessing for the month since we have two assemblies each Sunday with different shepherds offering the blessing.

Another future action will be the development of a training system for men who are entering the role of elder. We need to develop a full system that introduces men to the various tasks of the elder, overseer, and shepherd. This curriculum will include training for creating and delivering the shepherd's blessing. The elder narratives revealed that the men who are serving as elders have learned how to serve through a combination of watching others who have served and on-the-job training. Without being intentionally equipped for the role, it is likely that the new elders will be disoriented and less than competent in the early years of service. Somehow, men are still agreeing to accept the responsibility for the spiritual well-being of people and for the mission and direction of the church without knowing how actually to carry out the responsibility. It is doubtful that the practice of speaking the shepherd's blessing will remain a missional enterprise without the continued training of those who are entering leadership positions. I will seek permission from the elders to schedule time to take individuals or small groups of incoming leaders through the first six sessions of this project. The benefits of session 7

can be captured by reviewing the video recording of the first several blessings that the new elders offer.

Another future action that was mentioned by our elders in the process of this project was a system for tracking the effectiveness of their blessings. Specifically, what we would want to know is the effect of the blessing on the congregation. Does the blessing facilitate the mission of God for the world through calling the church into action? How might church leaders track the effectiveness of the blessing? In preliminary thinking, I have considered selecting a group of thirty members to represent a highly involved cross-section of the congregation to participate in a year-long study, similar to the process used when Southeast used the Natural Church Development instrument. I would develop a battery of questions that would measure their current sense of being blessed and commissioned for ministry in the world. I would administer the instrument at some point in the near future and then administer the instrument fifty-two Sundays later, measuring the change in attitude. The longitudinal nature of this study makes sense, especially in light of the finding that words create social worlds and realities over a long period of time.

In response to Fred Kane's expert analysis, the elders should consider some alternatives to ending the service with "You are dismissed." He asks, "Does that phrase create a world for the worshiper that is meaningful and blessed?" The phrase functions as a signal for the congregation that they can leave. Perhaps we could make a better choice. We will experiment with some words similar to "Go with God."

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APPENDIX A

MINISTRY INTERVENTION HAND-OUTS

Session 1 - The Power of Words/ The Power of God

Sunday, 18 September 2005

Words are deeds. When is this true?

God's words?

Your words?

Consider these contexts:

Within your family.

In the work place.

In your social relationships.

In your role in the church family.

Consider some criteria for words being especially powerful:

1. Authorized Speaker
2. Communicating a conventional procedure
3. Communicating in a conventional circumstance
4. With honorable participants. (J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 14-15).

Even the expression of these criteria indicates the importance of our relationships, and those relationships are linguistically dependent.

From Scripture consider:

God's interest in speaking:

Genesis 1

John 1

Hebrews 1

Matthew 12:34-37

God's interest in blessing:

Genesis 27 – 28

Numbers 6:22-27

Leviticus 9:22

Point:

Words are deeds.

God means to bless his people.

God means for authorized people to be his agents for bringing this about.

Paul Pruyser and William Willimon:

Pruyser laments the loss of the power of the words and the gestures of the pastoral blessing in the assembly. He noticed that ministers were “terminating their services with a rushed and hardly audible benediction, uttered on the way out from the back of the sanctuary where nobody could see them. And if the benediction was pronounced from the pulpit, audibly and visibly, the spectacle for the beholders was often little more than a slovenly gesture, consisting of only one arm, raised half heartedly and only halfway up.” Pruyser tells us that the gesture that he recalls from his childhood was the full extension of both arms, with palms turned toward the congregation. The minister would speak a blessing over the people, sending them out under the empowering providence of God. He relates this gesture and words of blessing to the private blessings spoken by parents over children, touching their heads and sending them off with words such as the French *adieu*, or the Spanish *adios*, or Austrian *grüß Gott*. In English we say ‘good-bye’ which “is linguistically derived from ‘God be with you.’ They are well-wishings which dedicate the individual to the divine providence.” In the same way the pastoral blessing is not a sacerdotal function, meaning that the words spoken generate the grace of God’s providence. Rather, the blessing words and gesture function as a pastoral response to human need. It reminds the people that they are being sent out from this assembly on a mission under the empowering care of God.

Words are deeds.

What are we trying to accomplish with the Shepherd’s blessing?

Proposal: We are opening the eyes of our people to the possibility that they are under God’s watchful care as they are out there being the church, extending God’s care to God’s world.

Words that are spoken by the elders, as those who are expected to feed and nurture the sheep of God, help the church to become the people that God has in mind. The pastors speak, in a sense, as the prophets of God, as those who speak a word on God’s behalf. William Willimon says, “A prophet works primarily through words. ... Through words, imaginative metaphors, and symbolic gestures, a prophet invites the covenant community to a reconstruction of reality...in light of eternity.” He goes on to say, “The spoken word is never an isolated event; it takes place where at least two or three are gathered together.

It presupposes that which it also creates: Community. Spoken words that do otherwise are disruptive and violate the very nature of the church.”

The elders are speaking a blessing that is intended to have an effect on the congregation. The congregation is sent out with a transformed vocabulary, a vocabulary for blessing their family and all those they meet with the presence of the Lord in them.

Session 2 – God’s Agents for Blessing

Monday, 20 September 2005

Why would we be reluctant to speak on God’s behalf?

See Exodus 4:10-16; Exodus 7:2; Exodus 19:6; Exodus 34:33-35 – and counterpart in 2 Cor 3:17-18.

Twenty-one times in Leviticus alone God calls his servants to speak to his people.

Consider the question- “*Who am I to stand in the place of God and offer a blessing?*”

Acts 20:28-32 (NRSV)

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. ²⁹ I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified.

Ezekiel 34:4 (NRSV)

⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

The congregation expects you to care for them, encourage them, and to speak to them on God’s behalf. William Willimon reminds those who are called to serve God’s people that “Our words become God’s word as God calls our word into his service.” The operative and performative power is always God’s power.

What has God called you to do as an elder?

Consider the following narrative...

“Our Ministry of Blessing” by Fred Kane

It was a snowy and cold evening in Rapid City, South Dakota when our choir director Joan brought the rehearsal to an end. After a while the usual after-choir chatter centered on next week’s Thanksgiving holiday. It was the first Thanksgiving away from family back in Oregon for Barbara and me and our little nine-month-old daughter Jennie. Joan

and her husband Dick wouldn't hear of us being alone without family or friends at Thanksgiving and so they asked if we would like to come to their house.

I was a little startled by the invitation. Dick was a lieutenant colonel and the chief of safety at Ellsworth Air Force Base. His office was on the floor level of the mammoth hangar and my little solitary office as the air man first class historian for the 44th Strategic Missile Wing was high up off the balcony. Whenever I saw Dick at church it was hard to call him by his first name. In the hangar and at the wing commander's weekly staff meeting I called him, "Sir." I told Joan and Dick that I'd ask Barbara, but I was thinking about how awkward it would be for an airman first class and his family spending Thanksgiving with a lieutenant colonel and his family. Could I even enter their home without saluting?

As I left the choir loft and stepped into the center aisle I saw a man walk into the back of the sanctuary. I'd noticed him a time or two on Sunday mornings. It was Lieutenant Paul Harrison, my squadron commander. I'd never spoken to him at church. Actually I'd never spoken to him anywhere, anytime. I was sure he didn't remember me. I was sure that one day we'd run into each other at church and I'd have to decide how to address him. Should I say, "Good morning lieutenant"? I knew that I should address him by his Christian name because we were in church and I should say, "Good morning Paul," but I had no idea how he'd react.

It got confusing at times being an enlisted man in the Air Force during the day and working part time at Canyon Lake United Methodist Church as the youth director in the evenings and on weekends. It created some interesting role conflicts for a young guy like me.

I looked back at him and I knew that we were on course to meet halfway up the center aisle. What would I say? Why was he here? It was 9 o'clock at night and it was freezing cold out!

He stopped. "Are you Fred Kane?"

What had I done? Why was my squadron commander looking for me on a Wednesday night at 9 o'clock off the base in my church? It must be serious. Was I in trouble? Will they let me make a phone call before they ship me off to Leavenworth?

A weak, "Yes Sir," came from my lips.

"You're like the youth pastor here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"I tried to call the Senior Pastor, but he wasn't home and he isn't in his office. I know you're in my squadron, but, you're like a pastor here, aren't you? Or you're training to be one or something."

I didn't tell him that my interest in the ordained ministry had pretty much evaporated in the past year. I was 23-years-old. I'd flunked out of college in my first year and didn't have a student deferment for the draft. My draft lottery number was 16 and I had received a pre-induction notice that I was going to be drafted into the Army. Barbara and I were

married in June and the next December I left for Basic Training at Lackland Air Force Base. I became a journalist and then a historian at Ellsworth. The thought of going back to college for four years and then going to a graduate school of theology for another three years with a wife and a daughter to support seemed impossible. So I was considering a career in the Air Force.

Lieutenant Harrison looked at me and extended his arm, not in a salute, but to shake my hand. "So, my wife is really sick and she needs somebody to talk with her and pray with her. Will you come with me? I can drive you to our house. It's just down the hill from here across from the turn-in to the church and then I can bring you back here. Can you come? Can you help?"

I hesitated. I wasn't a pastor. I didn't know this man or his wife. I didn't know what to say or what to pray. I quickly began forming an excuse. No way could I do this! He needs a professional. He needs someone who is trained, someone who is ordained.

"Please," he said, "She's in terrible pain. Please would you help us?"

Talking with someone who is sick and in pain wasn't something that I knew how to do. Praying with someone wasn't something that I knew how to do. But, helping someone who needed help was something that I believed in and I was willing to try to do what I could to help.

"Sir, if you could just give me your address I'd be glad to meet you there, sir."

"Please, don't call me sir. Just call me Paul."

I rang the bell and Paul opened the door. The living room was dim. His house was nearly as small as our apartment. Somehow I imagined a well-paid lieutenant would have better. His wife Nancy laid there on the living room sofa covered with a blanket.

"Nancy, one of the pastors is here," he said.

I wanted to explain to her that I really wasn't a pastor. I was just an airman first class who kind of enjoyed being around teenagers and wasn't much older than many of them and that I liked to play games with them and listen to them complain about their parents and their teachers.

I wanted more than anything not to be there now with her.

"My wife, Nancy has shingles. She has them in her throat and her throat is raw inside and it hurts to swallow. It even hurts to breathe. She says it's like it's on fire. You ever had shingles?"

I shook my head, "No." I thought to myself, "Shingles? Aren't shingles what I helped my dad put on our roof once?"

I moved a step closer to her.

"Here, I'll get you a chair so you can sit close to her. She can only whisper. It hurts to talk. So you're going to have to sit close if you're going to pray."

Lieutenant Harrison - Paul - pulled a dining room chair over next to the sofa and motioned for me to take a seat.

“Honey,” he said, “I’m going to go to the Dairy Queen and get you a milkshake before they close at 10. You and the pastor can have some time together.”

He turned and headed for the door.

A voice inside me screamed, “No! Don’t leave me here! I’m not a real pastor! I don’t know what to do! I don’t know what to say! This is a big misunderstanding? This is a big mistake! Don’t go!”

Silently I watched as the door closed behind him.

She reached out and took my hand. Her gasped through a thin voice, “Would you please give me a blessing?”

“Give me a blessing. Please, give me a blessing.”

I know now what I didn’t know then. She was giving voice to one of the most common wishes within each one of us when she asked, “Would you please give me a blessing.”

We look to the universe, to the world around us, to each other, and if we are people of faith to the invisible world of the sacred and if we have one basic desire - voiced or not, recognized or not - it is that all these things would be on our side. We want life to be our ally: helping us, empowering us, enabling us to be safe and happy. We want good things to come our way. We want our wounds healed, our loneliness banished, our power restored, our fears allayed. We want alienation to be replaced with belonging, impoverishment with abundance, bondage with liberation, and darkness with light. We want healing where there is brokenness. We long to be whole. When we are in pain or we face an uncertain future we long to be blessed. I believe that we all want to be blessed and in our better moments we want to be a blessing for others.

“Give me a blessing,” she said.

Have you ever been at some gathering when you are ready to eat a meal and someone asks, “Who would like to give a blessing before we eat?” There is a moment of uncomfortable silence. No one volunteers. Had the host said, “Would anyone like to say a few words before we eat?” Almost anyone can say something, *but to give a blessing?* It seems presumptuous. Finally, one person speaks a few words, and you can see relief on the faces of the others. Sometimes I feel relief. Why? What is it about giving a blessing that makes us feel uncomfortable?

“Give me a blessing,” she begged.

“Who am I?” I wonder, “Who am I to stand in the place of God and pronounce a blessing?” After all of these years I still have my doubts.

But still she pleaded with me, “Give me a blessing.”

If I came to you and said, “Please do me a kindness,” or, “Please help me,” you might feel put upon by my request, but at least it would fall within a familiar range of human

interaction. You would have an idea how to proceed. You could, for example, inquire as to just what help or kindness I needed or wished, and then see if you had the resources or willingness to proceed.

There is nothing unusual about being asked to help. But you may find it unusual and disconcerting to be asked to give a blessing. *The implication is that you have access to a spiritual source capable of making that blessing real.* The implication is that there is holiness within you.

So when she continued to cry out to me, “Give me a blessing,” I faced a challenge. Who am I to give a blessing?

The issue of identity is important for most of us, if not all of us. We identify ourselves in so many ways, but most often through our roles or our possessions or our social status. We may rarely say, “I am myself. I am spirit. I am soul. I am a child of God. There is holiness in me. Therefore, I am someone who can bless.”

No, we rely on the right credentials for personal validation. But, blessing isn’t anything for which we need credentials. We don’t need to be ordained.

We don’t need anything more than simple compassion for another.

“Give me a blessing,” the woman said. She lay there helpless on the sofa in that dim room on a cold November South Dakota night and we were alone there together. She lay there expecting and trusting and I knew that I could not say no to her. I had no idea what I was going to do or how to go about it. I didn’t know why she wanted a blessing more than medicine - much less wanted it from me - but in that moment, it didn’t seem right to ask. The correct response was... to respond: *to meet her face to face, to match her trust in me with my trust in her and in God.* If I could not approach her with knowledge and experience and ordination papers and a seminary degree then I could approach her with compassion in faith and hope and love.

It was hard. Part of me wanted to turn and walk away and then run out into the night or suggest she see the real pastor. He was a loving and wonderful person of high integrity whom I knew gave blessings regularly as part of his ministry. I was a fraud, a sham, a poor imitation of the real thing.

She reached over and grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard and I caught the glint of the dim light on the tears streaking her pale cheeks. I felt empty, ignorant, unprepared, and altogether unsuitable for what she was asking.

“What if nothing happens?” I thought. “What if it’s only words?” You see, I was afraid. I saw with perfect clarity that my image of the kind of blessing I wanted to give was a cartoon. It was an image of a burst of spiritual power, heavenly choirs singing, inner lights blazing, magical bells and whistles going off, with this woman having all her pain gone, her problems solved, her life transfigured. She would rise from that bed and walk. She would be healed. It was pure Hollywood. It was pure ego.

“Give me a blessing.”

But then with equal clarity I knew that such a display would not be a blessing at all. She would see right through that and if she didn't, I did. A blessing had nothing to do with esoteric or spiritual fireworks. A blessing is a whisper, a gentle voice speaking not of my power but of the power of God already there within the recipient. It isn't a hurricane of energy but a soft warming breeze on a cold winter night inviting us to open the windows and doors to let stuffiness out and new life in. It is an invitation to openness. It isn't meant to impress but to touch and to connect. It can take whatever form makes that connection.

I understood then that whatever spiritual forces might flow within a blessing, what was most needed was simple human caring and presence, a mindfulness of being present to the other. It required nothing more magical or grandiose than meeting her there as two human beings - one in pain and the other filled with fear - both needing a blessing. I realized that it is a two-way street: not something someone does for someone else, but something we become together praying that the Spirit may flow in us.

The principle is deceptively simple, but very familiar to me: Where two or three are gathered together in the name of that which loves, that which connects, that which is compassionate, that which liberates, that which heals, there blessing is also.

As we sat together in this way, there was warmth enfolding us, a loving presence that was sweet and unpretentious but seemed to stretch on into infinity. There was a sense of opening out to a vastness and down my arms and through my hands into hers there was a sense of something flowing, as if part of that warmth that embraced us had become fluid and was moving from me into her. No bells, no whistles, no radiant rainbow lights flashing about our auras, but just being together, two people acknowledging the presence of God that emerges when human beings gather each other to their hearts in mindful compassion and loving kindness.

The feeling of this presence lasted for about a minute or so then receded. We opened our eyes and smiled at each other. She simply said, "Thank you." I got up, pulled on my parka and said, "Thank you," and went out into the cold November night. I had never said a word.

That was it. I never saw her again. Never knew what if anything happened as a result of it. And it didn't matter. She may have asked me for the blessing, but I was the one who was blessed.

That evening, I learned something important about letting go and letting God, about our human connection and the divine power that can arise from it, and about love, and about blessing. In a way, a blessing is just such a moment of re-connection with each other, with the world, and with God, the source of our being. There is, in our world, a desire for that connection, for wholeness, for empowerment, for life. There is a desire for all that a blessing can give. At the heart of the world, in the hearts of each other, a voice speaks out, sometimes so softly that it cannot be heard with the ears, sometimes with a cry or a shout: "Give me a blessing."

Sunday, 2 October 2005

Why would we be reluctant to speak on God's behalf?

We have spent time considering the power of words (week one).

We have seen God's commission to speak (week two).

This week we consider together the development of the moral authority for blessing. How do we come by the intrinsic motivation to offer words that shape the world of the people of God?

This is a continuation of the basic conversation, "Who am I to stand in the place of God and offer a blessing?"

One of the questions that I have heard you raise is: How will these blessings be received by the people? Who are these men that they should speak a blessing over us?

Let's begin with a reflection from a minister who wrestled with the authority to speak a blessing.

From: Sarah Keyser
 Sent: Thursday, May 12, 2005 9:15 PM
 To: Michael Harbour
 Subject: RE: [PRCL-L] Pastoral Blessing

Michael,

I have been thinking about this all day, and I'm thinking that I had to get past a specific view of "authority" that was in the way—the notion that ordination confers an authority to act on God's behalf that others lack.

In responding to the call to ministry, I had to overcome a very powerful belief that I was not someone God could use in this way. It took many years to even admit to myself, and then to others, that God was calling me—that God could and did consider me useful and able to be of use to others. And then, when I was sufficiently persuaded that God could indeed use me, I ran up against the notion that I lacked the authority of age (and gender!) and ordination. Thanks to some who didn't see it that way, I was thrown into opportunities I would never have decided on my own that I was ready for, and it was in the act of leading worship, and in the relationships that developed with the people in the congregations, that I began to change my understanding.

I've come to the realization that it isn't about having a level of authority to speak or act on God's behalf that is conferred upon me by education or training or title. It's about acting and speaking with the authority that comes of sincerely believing that the Holy Spirit is at work among us—me and the people I am with. I'm acting upon and expressing that faith. I am able to raise my hands in blessing, and to pronounce "you are forgiven," and to preside at the communion table, and to do all these and the rest of it

with “authority” because in doing so I am testifying to my belief that it is true. I say the blessing, not believing that I am in some way calling down God’s blessing upon these people, but witnessing to a certainty that God’s blessing does indeed rest upon each of these people. By my own experiences of God’s grace and by the experiences that have been shared with me, I am convinced that God is present and working through me and many other agents of grace to be present in their lives. Therefore, I can call upon God with the authority of that faith.

You mention the authority of our baptism— if baptism is in one sense a celebration of God’s claim upon our lives, then what we need is to acknowledge that claim, that knowledge that we belong to God, in order to accept that authority. Our own sense of inadequacy works against us there—it’s difficult to admit that we belong to God when we aren’t accustomed to thinking of ourselves as valuable. It’s hard to believe that God could notice us, let alone love us and want us and have a purpose for us. For me, the knowledge that God loved me came very slowly, through the patient love of others who stood by me and loved me quietly and steadily when I was not easy to love. And the recognition of my own authority as a witness to God’s love came slowly also, through the patience of those who let me stumble through the beginning of ministry and through the occasional glimpses of the holy in those experiences.

I think, in a sense, that I am doing for others what was done for me. When I extend the blessing, I am reminding and assuring each of these people that he or she is God’s beloved child—the recipient of God’s blessing and care. I know all too well how badly we need to be told, again and again, that it is so.

I was not taught to physically extend the blessing. The closest I came to any formal teaching on the subject was a class on “worship” that included a brief discussion of the distinction between charge and blessing. I suppose I followed the example of what I’d grown up with. (I do have a distinct memory of the first time I tried to do so, and how very, very difficult it was to stretch my arms up—I think they didn’t make it very far, and it probably looked as tentative as it felt.)

Thanks for the opportunity to think this through. It’s good for us, I think, (at least it is for me) to take the time to reflect on what we do.

I’m wondering if the men you speak of are equally uncomfortable about other aspects of leading worship, or if there is something distinct about the blessing?

Sarah Keyser, Commissioned Lay Pastor
Presbyterian Church
Indianola, IA

As One With Authority

This book by Jackson Carroll was published in 1991. He was a professor of Religion at Duke University. Below you will find some reading notes from his book. What Carroll applies to the preacher, has similar application for everyone in a leadership position in the church, especially for elders.

“Authority is the right to exercise leadership in a particular group or institution based upon a combination of qualities, characteristics, or expertise that the leader has or that followers believe their leader has” (14).

Exercising authority: influencing, directing, coordinating or otherwise guiding the thought and behavior of persons and groups in ways that they consider legitimate (14).

“The point is that many clergy – and lay leaders as well – have serious questions about their authority to lead and have difficulty knowing how to do so” (18).

Because we have:

(1) Crisis of Biblical belief, both among ministers, elders, and the people in the pews. Some are living in the bind of *bad faith* (John Paul Sartre) where they do not really believe a word of it, but practice it anyway because it is so inherent to their identity.

(2) The church has moved to the periphery of society. Often it is irrelevant in its particulars. The church has no direct authority in society. It can impact the world only through persuasion.

(3) The Church is a volunteer association. The authority of ministers and elders is dependent upon their ability to persuade, to demonstrate effectiveness, and upon their personal piety (*habitus*). What this culture believes is that the autonomous individual is at the center. He/She can choose the roles they will play and the commitments that they will make (or unmake).

(4) Egalitarianism and Shared Ministry. We articulate the priesthood of all believers. The problem is that neither ministers nor the congregation are completely willing to practice it. Leadership is necessary, and we want someone who is an expert, and someone who is a symbolic presence of God. Shared ministry is essential to healthy biblical functioning, but leadership cannot be surrendered. “Many in the congregation still view themselves primarily as spectators rather than ones mutually called to share a ministry with others” (32).

The church as a family system, as a community, cannot function without leadership. Leadership requires authority. *Authority is relational*. A group legitimizes authority. The congregation makes the preacher or the elder, not the other way around. The

congregation calls the leaders into service and is willing, under certain conditions, to bestow authority.

What do you think those conditions are?

1. Authenticity
2. Competence
3. Directives that are consistent with the core values, beliefs, and purposes of the group
4. Care for the people

The Basis For Authority:

The Ultimate Basis: The Sacred – variously defined by the cultural context. God exists. His purposes can be discerned. Our teaching is authoritative because it can be shown to be based in God’s will as clearly revealed in Scripture.

The Penultimate Basis: Being Representative of the Sacred – When you meet a minister *or elder*, you have the expectation that you are in the presence of a divine ambassador. They represent the sacred. “For better or worse, clergy are the institutionalized representatives of the sacred in society” (46). There is a belief that some individuals have a special relationship with God. (*Seminaries are seed plots*) Is it right? No. The priesthood of all believers is available through the gospel.

Expertise – having the knowledge and skills that the church consider as important resources for the ministry and mission of the church. Skill in liturgy, in Bible, in preaching, in evangelism, in running programs, in managing the church, in equipping saints.

Spirituality. Personal authenticity counts. This is earned authority. It will take time for them to grant this authority until they *know* the minister. The elders, on the other hand does not become an elder unless he is known as a practitioner of the faith.

Since authority is really a democratic process, there is the danger of trying to please the people, *to tiptoe through the tithers*. We work hard to be sure that we do not become servants of the institution over and above being the servant of God.

What is authority supposed to accomplish in the church?

Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV)

¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some *pastors* and teachers, ¹² to *equip the saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, *to the measure of the full stature of Christ*. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must *grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*, ¹⁶ from whom

the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

"...and thus also the character and calling of its leaders – are defined by the story of Jesus Christ, by his life, ministry, death, and resurrection" (80).

We are a continuing incarnation of the Living Word.

The church functions as a community of meaning, belonging, and empowerment.

Authority and leadership is meant for empowerment: "Every Christian is called, by virtue of a common baptism, to use his or her distinctive gifts for the service of God in the world" (87).

Ministry is God acting through the people of God for the life of the world (87).

Thomas Gillespie, 1978: God's 'dwelling' upon earth is a people rather than a building, a holy people, set apart for God rather than from the world, a people mandated to mission rather than coddled in seclusion, a people called by God to the living of salvation in the matrix of everyday life rather than delivered from life's cares and responsibilities, a people who live before God at all times and in all places rather than lead double lives in segregated sacred and secular compartments (88).

This will happen...we can see this empowerment if the people in the pews will live up to their baptism, if professional staff will move over, or find their role as equippers for ministry, and if all of God's people are willing to move out...get busy serving as ambassadors of God for the life of the world. This is the function of the Shepherd's blessing.

What is the task of the people? Have we taught them to show up, sit up, pay up and shut up? Have we allowed people to become spectators because we have not called them to more?

Core Tasks of Leadership in the Church

1. Ensuring Christian Identity.

- A. Are we the *body of Christ*?
- B. What is our mission?
- C. Do we *embody* that mission in our organizational life?
- D. What are our distinctive values?

2. Community Formation

A. This church is a place to belong. We are called away from our loneliness and isolation into caring and supportive relationships with others who share a commitment to Jesus Christ.

- B. Telling the story helps to create community.

- C. Casting the vision for being Christlike in the world helps to form community.
- D. Our aim is to build up the body of Christ.
- E. Our celebrations of baptism and the Lord's Supper are community forming events. Baptism is the symbol of the radical reorientation of our lives. All who have this orientation are on the same side.

3. Empowering Public Ministry

A. Leadership animates action. They do not direct it. They do not tell people what to do.

B. It is the people from the pews who are daily inhabitants of the institutions of the public world and are called to exercise their ministries in those places. That is what salt and light do.

There is a sacramental presence of the minister and the elders. When the minister is present, there is a weight to that presence. That should also be the case for the real pastors of the church. They are a symbol of God's presence in the lives of the hopeful. In community gatherings, he is the symbol of God concern about social issues. He is given a trust. It is important that he be trustworthy.

Session 4– Discerning God's Mission

Sunday, October 9, 2005

We have spent time considering the power of words (week one).

We have seen God's commission to speak (week two).

We have reminded one another of the authority granted by God and by the church to speak an appropriate (performative) word to the congregation (week three).

You are reminding the people that the God who loves them and pursues them goes with them into the world for the sake of the world.

What does God want them to accomplish with their lives?

How do we go about answering that question?

How does this text send us and equip our witness?

How does this text read us and our world?

How does this text evangelize us with good news?

How does this text convert us in our personal and corporate lives?

How does this text orient us to the coming reign of God?

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 (NRSV)

¹ Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³ And even if our

gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture-- "I believed, and so I spoke"--we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

How do the following quotes from Jesus help clarify our mission as a church?

John 6:51 (NRSV) ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

John 20:21 (NRSV) ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

How does this Bible Study inform the purpose of the Shepherd's blessing?

Session 5-- Following the Models
 Sunday, October 16, 2005

We have spent time considering the power of words (week one).

We have seen God's commission to speak (week two).

We have reminded one another of the authority granted by God and by the church to speak an appropriate (performative) word to the congregation (week three).

You are reminding the people that the God who loves them and pursues them goes with them into the world for the sake of the world.

Last week we spent time in discerning God's mission (from 2 Cor 4).

This week begins the practice stage of this project.

Some things that the blessing is not:

1. It is not a reflection of significant events of the week.
2. It is not a glimpse of what is on your mind this week.
3. It is not a critique of the lesson.
4. It is not another lesson.

What is the blessing? It is a pronouncement of God's care over God's people. It is reminding the people that God is with them as they leave this assembly in such a way that God's purpose may be carried out in their lives and through their lives for the sake of the world.

Our intention is that the blessing be connected to the themes of the Scriptures used in worship for that day.

Examples:

The Benediction or Blessing

The benediction is one last chance you get to reach out to the congregation with some word of God, a means of reminding them that they are sent forth into God's care, a way to summarize the theme of the worship service, a means of reminding them who they are and whose they are.

The benedictions and blessings collected here follow the lectionary readings for Year B. I wrote the vast majority of them, but, when otherwise, I have tried to include the person and/or source if known. They also reflect something of the theme around which I developed the whole worship service. I pray they are helpful to you and will help give new life to this most important of liturgical acts.

Bass Mitchell

<http://www.homiliesbyemail.com>

May 2005

Charlottesville, Virginia

Benedictions for Year B

Advent 1B

What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake! Beware! Keep alert!

You do not know when the Messiah will return.
 So, everyone should do their work, the tasks that Christ has assigned you,
 so that all will be ready when the time has come.
 And the time will come.
 The Messiah will not fail you. Promises will be kept, for God is faithful.
 So, keep awake!
 You do not know when the time will come. Amen.

Advent 2B

May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13).

Advent 3B

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who has called you is faithful, and will do this.

Advent 4B

Send us home, O God, in the assurance that the power of the Most High will overshadow us as it did Mary. Then, when your surprises burst upon us, we shall greet them as Mary did hers, in the spirit of faithful surrender, saying, "Behold, we are the servants of the Lord; let it be to us according to your will."

Christmas

Let us rejoice with Mary in the Good News of her son.
 Let us look with Joseph to our future hopes.
 Let us give with the wise ones to Jesus who saves.
 Let us sing with the angels a new and glorious song.
 Go in peace, then, to love and serve the Lord in the name of Christ, and may the blessing of God....

Epiphany

Before us it is blessed, behind us it is blessed, below us it is blessed, above us it is blessed, around us it is blessed as we set out with Christ.
 Our speech is blessed as we set out for God.
 With beauty before us, with beauty behind us, with beauty below us, with beauty above us, with beauty around us, we set out for a holy place indeed. Amen.

Baptism of Our Lord

May God go with you as you depart into the desert, there to meet the temptations of the soul. May the Spirit lead you to an oasis where waters run deep and clouds rise high, and here the voice of heaven whispers in the cool of the trees.

Epiphany 2B

Jesus found Andrew and said to him, "Follow me."
 Andrew found Simon and told him about Jesus.
 Jesus found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."
 Philip found Nathaniel and told him about Jesus.
 And someone found you and told you about our Savior.
 Whom will you find, and what will you tell them about Jesus?
 May the Holy Spirit guide you to that person, may the love of Jesus win that person's
 heart, and may the grace of God draw that person into the kingdom. Amen.

Epiphany 3B

You came to worship together; Go now to serve.
 You have been given light; Go now to let it shine.
 You have been blessed with God's love; Go now to share that love.
 You are Christ's disciples; Go now to witness to all, in Christ's name.

Epiphany 4B

May the blessing of God, fountain of living water, flow within us as a river of life.
 May we drink deep of her wisdom.
 May we never thirst again.
 May we go through life refreshing many, as a sign of healing for all;
 through the One who is Life eternal. Amen.
 (MIRIAM THERESE WINTER, U.S.A., 20TH CENT.)

Epiphany 5B

Perhaps you have come here weary and weak,
 Go with strength and power.
 You have come with sickness and fear,
 Go with health and courage.
 You entered almost crawling on your hands and knees,
 Go on the wings of eagles!
 For the Lord your God is with you, always.

Epiphany 6B

Our world is filled with the untouchables, but Jesus sends us out into the world.
 Let us not be afraid to stretch out our hands to the unclean around us,
 To touch them with the love of Christ.
 And God can and will bring healing through our touching the untouchables.

Epiphany 7B

Go in peace, my friends.
 Let the past be the past.
 Forget the former things.
 Believe and hope for the new things.
 Go as pardoned and forgiven people.
 Go as God's people in the world, to love God and your neighbor each and every day.

Transfiguration B

Go and glow, for you have seen the transfigured Lord, and your life will never be the same. Go and glow with his love, peace, and love into a world that so very much needs his light.

Ash Wednesday

We have made a beginning, a new beginning, a fresh turning away from sin and toward God, opening our hearts anew to the abundant and eternal life God gives us in our risen Lord. Go, as God's forgiven, redeemed, and called people. Live in the joy of God's salvation and presence. Go, in the wondrous grace of Christ. Go, in the sure and mighty presence of the Spirit. Amen.

Lent 1B

Go out and look for the rainbows.

They are there, if you look.

Let them remind you that God is out there, everywhere.

Walk always under God's rainbows and in God's loving care.

Lent 2B

Walk in faith, my friends, knowing each step of the journey, the Lord walks with you.

Walk in love, knowing the Lord of love loves you. Walk in peace, knowing the Prince of Peace walks beside you. Walk in service, knowing the One who walked to the cross walks beside you to strengthen and lift you up.

Lent 3B

This week, open your home, your office, your heart to the presence of Christ, that he might come in and overturn tables, and do some much needed spring cleaning, making us more fit temples for the presence of the great Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lent 4B

By God's grace you have been saved. By God's grace you have been healed. By God's grace you have been made alive. By God's grace you have been raised with Christ Jesus – seated with him in heavenly places. Go now with the assurance of God's grace upon your life – at home, at school, at work, at play. May Jesus meet your every need. Amen.

Lent 5B

Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." May his dying bear fruit in your life, for the sake of our God and for the coming kingdom. Amen.

Lent 6B

Let every knee bow and every tongue confess - JESUS IS LORD! JESUS IS LORD! To

the glory of God! Amen!

Good Friday

Surely this One was the Son of God. So, arise and go out into the world with that vision and those words in your heart. Yours is a crucified Lord, a Lord who loves you so much that he died for you. So, go out and live for him each and every day.

Easter

Jesus is not in the tomb.
Therefore you need not fear death.
It no longer has any hold over you.
Jesus is going ahead of you.
He is preparing the way for you to follow him,
And, as you follow, you will see him.
Go and tell others what you have seen and heard.
You are witnesses of a miraculous gift from God.
Make others aware that God gives them life,
And gives it in glorious abundance!
AMEN and amen!

Easter 2B

Jesus said, "Peace be with you." As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Go, preach forgiveness. Go, in peace. Amen.

Easter 3B

We will not say goodbye. We will say, "See you in the morning, for he is risen!" So go in faith, in peace, in joy as alive people.

Easter 4B

The Lord's goodness and mercy have followed you all the days of your life. So go in the firm assurance that God's not about to leave you now.

Easter 5B

Go and grow for your Lord, that you might bear much fruit.
Go and show for your Lord, that others might see Christ in you.
Go and know that your Lord goes before, preparing the paths of service for you to follow.

Easter 6B

Jesus said, "I have called you friends
Because I have made known to you
Everything that I have heard from my Father.
You did not choose me,
But I chose you.
And I appointed you to go and bear fruit,

Fruit that will last,
 So that my Father
 Will give you whatever you ask in my name.”
 Amen.

Easter 7B
 Goodness is stronger than evil;
 Love is stronger than hate;
 Light is stronger than darkness;
 Life is stronger than death;
 Victory is ours through Jesus who loved us. (Desmond Tutu)

Pentecost
 And now to the God who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Adapted from Ephesians 3:20-21)

Trinity
 Here we are, Lord. Send us. Amen.

Pentecost 2B
 Serve your God with patience and passion.
 Be deliberate in enacting your faith.
 Be steadfast in celebrating the Spirit’s power.
 And may peace be your way in the world. Amen.
 (GLEN E. RAINSLEY, U.S.A., 20TH CENT.)

Pentecost 3B
 Jesus told the woman who had suffered for so long,
 “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”
 Now, you too go in peace, holding onto your faith which will also make you whole. And the God of peace will go with you. Amen.

Pentecost 4B
 As Jesus sent out his twelve disciples, I send you out. These are your instructions: Share God’s love with everyone you meet this week. Make friends with those who are lonely. Help those who need you. And stand up for God’s loving ways. For this mission, you do not need any fancy equipment or special training. Simply use what you have. It will be enough. It will be enough, because the loving God who is the Strength of the Universe will be with you, and will work through you with power that will surprise and amaze you. So go out in God’s name, and go in peace. (Carolyn Brown)

Pentecost 5B
 You came with joy, now go with joy.

You came with praise, now go with praise.
 You came dancing, go dancing into the world.
 Invite others to the dance.

Pentecost 6B

You have found here a quiet place for rest for your souls.
 You have found here a Shepherd who leads and feeds you.
 Now go out to the cities and villages, the towns and communities to those who need quiet rest and food for their souls, sharing with them what you have been given and where they might find more.

Pentecost 7B

Christ be with us, Christ before us, Christ behind us,
 Christ in us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us,
 Christ on our right, Christ on our left,
 Christ where we lay, Christ where we sit, Christ where we arise,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of us,
 Christ in every eye that sees us,
 Christ in every ear that hears us.
 Salvation is of the Lord,
 Salvation is of the Christ,
 May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.
 (SAINT PATRICK, IRELAND, 5TH CENT)

Pentecost 8B

Your journey has brought you here. Your Host has provided rest and bread, peace and drink, all your need for your journey. So, go and live lives worthy of your calling, refreshed and renewed. Amen.

Pentecost 9B

Go in peace.
 May Jesus Christ, who for our sake became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, keep you and strengthen you this day and forever. Amen.

Pentecost 10B

Now, you have been fed the Living Bread and Water. Go, filled with the Spirit, singing a song of praise always, and giving thanks to God at all times for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pentecost 11B

Even though the teaching of Jesus is difficult,
 You have not abandoned him. You stay and you believe.
 And because you trust, his words that give eternal life will come and dwell within you.
 Continue in faithfulness,

And know that you will be raised up to life everlasting on the last day. Amen.

Pentecost 12B

We came with dirty hands and unclean hearts. Let us leave this place with clean hands and clean hearts, vowing to serve the Lord with all our love and strength in every way and every day.

Pentecost 13B

Grant, O Lord, that what has been said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pentecost 14B

The school bell has rung. This class session is over. You have been given wisdom here. But the lessons are not over. Wisdom will still call to you, teach you; so listen, learn, and live out the wisdom God shares.

Pentecost 15B

Submit now yourselves fully to God each and everyday and in every way. Seek God and you will find that God is already seeking you. Amen.

Pentecost 16B

Go in peace, knowing that the Lord is your help.
Go in love, knowing that the Lord goes with you.
Go in joy, knowing that the Lord loves you. Amen.

Pentecost 17B

L: God, grant me
P: The serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
L: The courage to change the things I can,
P: And the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
ALL: Amen.

Pentecost 18B

God be with you until we meet again.
God's blessing fall upon you.
God's mercy surround you.
God be with you till we meet again. Amen.

Pentecost 19B

Teach us, good Lord,
To serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;

To fight and not to heed the wounds;
 To toil and not to seek for rest;
 To labor and not to ask for any reward,
 Except that of knowing that we do your will;
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

ALL: Amen.

(PRAYER OF IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA)

Pentecost 20B

Wherever you find yourself this week,
 Beside whatever city gate,
 With whatever your need,
 Know that Jesus passes by there.
 Know that he still hears and that he still heals.

Pentecost 21B

Go, and in every way, every day love the Lord
 With all your being, and love your neighbors as yourselves.

Pentecost 22B

The widow came and gave her all.
 Jesus went to the cross and gave his all.
 Now, go out into a world in need and give as the Lord has given to you.

Pentecost 23B

Beware that no one leads you astray.
 Some will come claiming special knowledge
 And saying scary things.
 Do not be alarmed. The end is not yet.
 Trust in the One who made you.
 Serve faithfully each day in every way you can.
 Let the future remain in God's hands.
 It is enough for us to know we are in God's hands too.

Pentecost 24B

Go from this place
 As those acknowledging Christ's kingship.
 Leave this place
 As those who live under his Lordship,
 In your homes, businesses, and pleasure,
 From this day forward.

Christ the King Sunday

Go from this place

As those acknowledging Christ's kingship.
 Leave this place
 As those who live under his Lordship,
 In your homes, businesses, and pleasure,
 From this day forward.

Assignments

Faithfulness -- *Deuteronomy 7:7-9 (NRSV)* ⁷ It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you--for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...

Gentleness -- *James 3:14-18 (NRSV)* ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, *willing to yield*, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Self Control -- *1 Peter 1:13-16 (NRSV)* ¹³ Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴ Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵ Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Generosity -- *2 Corinthians 8:1-7 (NRSV)* ¹ We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints-- ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶ so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷ Now as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you--so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Participation -- *Romans 12:3-8 (NRSV)* ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in

one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Gratitude -- *1 Timothy 1:12-17 (NRSV)* ¹²I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.¹⁵ The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost.¹⁶ But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Advent 1 - *Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV)* ¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--²“ as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.⁵ You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.⁷ There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Advent 2 - *Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)* ¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Session 6– Community Review of Written Blessings

Sunday, 22 October 2005

We have spent time considering the power of words (week one).

We have seen God’s commission to speak (week two).

We have reminded one another of the authority granted by God and by the church to speak an appropriate (performative) word to the congregation (week three).

You are reminding the people that the God who loves them and pursues them goes with them into the world for the sake of the world.

In week four, we spent time in discerning God’s mission (from 2 Cor 4).

Last week we began the practice stage of this project.

Some things that the blessing is not:

1. It is not a reflection of significant events of the week.
2. It is not a glimpse of what is on your mind this week.
3. It is not a critique of the lesson.
4. It is not another lesson.

What is the blessing? It is a pronouncement of God’s care over God’s people. It is reminding the people that God is with them as they leave this assembly in such a way that God’s purpose may be carried out in their lives and through their lives for the sake of the world.

Our intention is that the blessing be connected to the themes of the Scriptures used in worship for that day.

Today, in a community of discernment, in much the same way that we encountered 2 Cor 4 together, we engage your written blessings. We are open to constructive critique.

Review of Written Assignments

Faithfulness -- *Deuteronomy 7:7-9 (NRSV)*

Gentleness -- *James 3:14-18 (NRSV)*

Self Control -- *1 Peter 1:13-16 (NRSV)*

Generosity -- *2 Corinthians 8:1-7 (NRSV)*

Participation -- *Romans 12:3-8 (NRSV)*

Gratitude -- *1 Timothy 1:12-17 (NRSV)*

Advent 1 - *Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV)*

Advent 2 - *Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)*

Assignments for oral blessing

1. Isaiah 61:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Isaiah 62:1-3 (NIV) ¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. ² The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. ³ You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

2. Ephesians 1:2-14 (NIV) ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.

3. Isaiah 60:1-6 (NIV) ¹“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. ²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. ³Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴“Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. ⁵Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. ⁶Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

4. Mark 1:4-11 (NIV) ⁴And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

5. Psalms 139:1-6 (NIV) ¹O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. ²You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. ⁴Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. ⁵You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. *Psalms 139:13-18 (NIV)* ¹³For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, ¹⁶your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. ¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

6. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (NIV) ²⁹What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

7. 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (NIV) ¹Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²The man who thinks he

knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.³ But the man who loves God is known by God.⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”),⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.⁷ But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?¹¹ So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.¹² When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

8. Mark 1:29-39 (NIV)²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.³⁰ Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed.³³ The whole town gathered at the door,³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him,³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”³⁸ Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Elder Evaluation

14 November 2005

How did you come to learn how to be an elder?

Tell about the people who influenced you, and the words spoken that shaped your imagination for the task of ministry.

Tell about your on the job training, about words you have spoken that were taken seriously. Tell about your vision for the mission of this church. Where did that come from?

Feel free to tell stories in as much detail as you wish.

See this assignment as a tool that will be helpful to your own understanding, and would be an important addition to your biography. The more you write, the greater the blessing for you, and for me.

Thank you! If you could have this prepared by Sunday, November 20, 2005, that would be wonderful.

APPENDIX B

FIELD NOTES

Field Notes – Session 1– The Power of Words

18 September 2005

The group was gathered around a table in a large classroom. Refreshments were available. The room was well lit. The table was white plastic. The men were at ease as they entered. Elder 2 was the only elder unable to attend the session. The meeting was scheduled for 3:00. Elder 6 arrived at 3:43 pm. The facilitator (designated ‘F’ in the notes) introduced the conversation about the project. The elders knew that the project was about the Shepherd’s blessing.

3 As I think about the idea of blessing, I was thinking about Isaac blessing of Jacob rather than Esau. To Isaac this blessing was a huge deal: blessing son: deception of wife and son...turns out to be nothing. Kind of anti-climatic in the moment.

3:12 p.m:

F That blessing is important! It illustrates the point that we want to make, that the blessings that you speak over the people of this church change things. Let’s dig in to the story. What is this blessing about? Prayer and opening introduction and explanation of wanting everyone to be present.

5 We could be here and be absent.

F To kick off...the power of words...God...words are deeds. When is that true?

1 When you say something harsh to your mate or child is like a stab or slap to them. It is cruel.

7 A covenant you have to keep attached like “I do” or “I will pay for...” This creates action on our behalf.

F Sure—and with your signature, a word becomes a deed.

4 Leaders of countries make commitments.

5 God created the world.

1, 4 Agreed.

- F Genesis 1: Moses writes—once heard, the word is a deed— people learn how world works... and that changes how we behave.
- 3 Words can be revealer or reflection. Like in James: show me your faith....you say actions reveal faith, character revealed in your words...insight into you. Synonymous.
- F Context/family/ Elder one gave a negative sense—what else is there? Regards to words?
- 4 Encouragement, condemnation.
- 5 If you have character and say you'll do it, it is done.
- 1 Your responsibility makes it done or not.
- 4 My word is my bond.
- 7 Faith and trust of child in parent. If Daddy says there is no demon in the closet and you can safely go to sleep, you can safely go to sleep because of Dad—you know and trust his word.
- 3 Future tense words with children: may be time that you find yourself in a difficult situation. We will take care of them—our word is called into action.
- 3:20 p.m. Elder 8 arrives.
- F Words from my father that said, "I am proud of you," tell your wife "I love you."
- 3 My wife had a hard morning this morning, we needed to bring food here and all the other stuff going on. Well, after I brought the food, I went back home and she wondered what I was doing back so soon. All I could think of to say was, "my place is with you."
- F What about in the work place? What is the effect of words?
- 7 If you say 'I will,' you better.
- 4 If I say 'you will,' you better.
- 3 No word, 'try'.
- 4 Or excuses.
- F What about the words 'you are fired.' Are those just words? That is a stark deed.
- 4 Or 'you're hired.'
- 8 'Good job.'
- 4 'Attaboy.'
- F What does that change? What is the deed?
- 4 Respect.
- 5 They'll continue to work hard. Unless they have a lot of character and otherwise they'll do better with the encouragement you give.

3 Use words to indicate you are on the right path. I use those words to channel employees' behavior.

1 When Jesus chose the apostles and they were questioned, the apostles were able to say 'Yes, I am chosen' (Elder one smiling). I remember once hearing someone say, "nobody ever chose me."

7 Different way to say 'doing a good job.' I see it as a way of steering them—pushing them towards good behavior. I have an employee that threatening hasn't worked well with but if I can catch them behaving right and respond to it, they seem to take that correction better.

1 In that context, I try to think of the right words to say when I have the attention of the flock that will create a picture in their mind that "I get it." I have just a few words to choose to say in such a little time.

5 You could but we'd beat up on you (laughing).

8 By the way, I thought of you with the motorcycles passing by.

1 I caught the significance of the books.

F Think of your church family....your words are deeds. Where?

5 Life group at our house—works for us (laughing).

1 Words have consequences- like vacuuming for Life Group.

4 The blessing was great this week...you mean in our role as elders? Sometimes our word is accepted as final.

7 And they'll take our kidding words and people take them as serious.

3 Most powerful words....my words to E.S.—I spoke, but we gave an answer.

F All been in pastoral opportunities. You are in position of responsibility and authority. Words in pastoral care perhaps most important words.

8 Scary thought—because of title of elder—people think we know more than we do.

3 They think of "perfect" right after they think we know more than we do.

8 People call and once something is said, it must be right.

4 Yes, like from God.

8 But it may not be right.

F These people, who God has entrusted you with, will live into what you say.

8 We don't always have a close relationship – may only have known them a short period of time....they pick one of us...we may have a follow up conversation but it is not like we are best friends....our words are taken very seriously.

4 Long lasting.

3 Scary because of position we have accepted that our words become powerful.

- 8 Sobering thought of us being smarter than we are.
- F Speaking from the bishop's chair.
- 1 'From elder's chair' was on our stationery at one time.
- F Authorized speaker: wedding ceremony—if a 10 y/old is the preacher—what is the effect/outcome of the ceremony? Walking through a marina with a bottle of champagne and hit it against a random boat and give it a name. (laughter)
- 1 You've just made a mark on a guy's boat.
- 5 And if a member of the church saw you with a champagne bottle you'll get a phone call. (laughing)
- F Meeting with employee—performance appraisal...examples given: Considering JL Austin's criteria for performative speech. Consider the setting of a wedding. We need an authorized speaker, someone the community believes can speak the right words, the conventional procedure and a conventional circumstance. And the participants must be taking the words seriously. For example: two dachshunds getting married.
- 1 Or two guys.
- F Or if groom not serious, doesn't really mean it.
- 1 (arms crossed but facing, involved)
- 8 (shoes off, leaning back as 1, 4 explained their thoughts)
- 7 (leaning forward, head nodding in agreement)
- 4 (leaning forward, looking over notes)
- 5 (leaning back, legs crossed...as discussion shifted, leaned forward).
- F For elder 3's sake, I have a joke... "The Blessing of My Alfa Romeo" read. (all laughed)
- 7 (leaning forward but right shoulder to speaker, looking over shoulder instead of facing speaker)
- F How did shepherd's blessing begin?
- 4 Got assigned.
- 7 Change—what was before?
- 8 Nothing—just a song and a prayer.
- 3 May have come about because of having no one to lead a closing prayer.
- 5 I thought it was your fault (to 1).
- 1 No, I heard it called "closing prayer" and then sometimes "shepherd's blessing" added to it.
- 3 I don't remember Edd Davis doing a shepherd's blessing.

- 8 Bill Aven—he left as we came in, I don't remember him doing it.
- 3 After Doug.
- 4 No.
- 8 Happened while Sean Jones was here.
- 1 Elder 4, you should know, you're the oldest stinking elder here.
- 8 Thought you (1) did it.
- 3 Predates us.
- F Since we have high view of Scripture...Genesis 1...Let there be light....referring back to what elder 3 said earlier.
- 5 It was elder 5 who said that.
- F God speaks to Adam, Moses...Do words make worlds? God's do. For some people your words do shape their world.
- 3 (gets up to get coke)
- 1 It's that old saying, if the tree falls and no one is there to hear/see it, did it fall?
- 3 Who is He speaking to?
- F Jesus? God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The heavenly council. The heavenly host.
- 7 John 1—I'm not a Hebrew scholar but "light—light" the word was spoken and in the next moment there was light!
- 3 v. 7 and 27—"so" let there be expanse "so" it is like this "so" that—not spoken and then might happen.
- 4 He wasn't passing an order along.
- 3 It was a given. Matter of fact.
- F Stunning.
- 1 You bet!
- 3 Who do you know that puts a "so" after that?
- 3 We'll make money.
- 3:43 p.m. Elder 6 arrives
- 3 No time or thought. It is done.
- 4 Only possible outcome.
- F John 1—in the beginning was the word. THE word.
- 1 Powerful word.
- F Word that is a deed. How important that 60-90 seconds is for the blessing. If God empowers these words and you are authorized speaker...and you have honorable

participants...do something. Heb. 1—spoke by son....Matt –brood of vipers – the text indicated that we will be judged by our words. Judgment or acquittal.

8 There are cases when God said something when something didn't happen.

3 Every time He moved, something happened.

8 Moses asked God not to do .

3 City of Nineveh was not destroyed.

1 He can be reasoned with, we can talk God out of something.

4 Genesis—let there be light.

8 Can call one of God's attributes into power and He can push another back—His justice attribute and Moses called on His mercy—I'd be scared to negotiate with God.

4 I'll give you a year for this...

F For 50? For 10? Audacious to do.

1 It did happen.

8 Not every time God said, did it happen that way.

F Not irrevocable.

3 I Tim? When says—series of things...creedal...He will remain faithful to Himself.

1 Not like King who couldn't back out. God never had that restriction on Himself.

F 2 Tim 2:12-13.

3 (read above)

5 I don't want to be the one to negotiate.

8 Ask God. Not ask you to change your plan.

3 I have a son who would be willing to ask God to change his plan.

F Moses said, "You go talk to God". Matt 12: vipers...by words justified and condemned...high view of words...encourage you how important blessing is. What is your reaction?

8 Have we asked the congregation what they think? How they view...as if the congregation is just sitting on the edge of their chairs.... (questioning the importance of blessings as they currently are)

4 You are dismissed (acknowledging that the congregations listens for dismissal).

3 If we come to the conclusion that we do this, may not can be done at the same time as we are doing it now.

F Let's say at end you are convinced we are not really blessing them....What I hope is that they will say worship is great, song service great, but that they are waiting to be

commissioned, sent out, by their elders.

7 I don't think it is that level but I have had people say "I appreciate your words".

F I felt that today with elder one's message.

1 I had several tell me today and it helps to hear negative sometimes so I can be cautious.

3 They want to hear the next joke you'll tell. (said in fun)

5 I like it at the end so I can tell them to do something.

1 Did you have complaints about you or me?

3 Someone couldn't figure if I like Michael or not. I took it to heart and I won't let it happen again.

F You'll have clearer picture of what I have in mind...

1 Frivolity doesn't have a place in the shepherd's blessing.

8 Today wasn't frivolous, it was a parable.

F There is a place for humor.

1 That's what I meant, use humor.

6 Use as little as anyone.

F You've heard me teach on blessing. What do you think it means to be blessed?

7 God's favor called down on you.

4 Yes, affirmation.

1 Warm fuzzy blanket to be on you when you are cold.

5 That is a heart answer not a head answer.

8 Did he pass a will or just word? What in OT did conveyance of blessing mean? Like with Isaac?

3 Why couldn't it be taken back?

F Gen. 27.

8 So what happened?

7 They believed that his speaking that it went back to God saying that.

1 Yes, from God.

3 Something's outside of God's control. One in control – you be Lord over your brother.

7 And he repeats it.

3 Like he repeats it. You are administrator. Irrevocable. Could say to Esau, too. All else is "may", this is "be."

7 I have made him Lord over you.

8 That sounds powerful. I don't have that kind of power. (can hear his skepticism)

F True, agree. But your words are powerful because they shape imagination of people...implication is, God be with you. You are announcing to them a reality. They are just not leaving alone. Not sure how long the glow of church lasts. I am to be blessing, too.

7 Richard Rogers...parenting...when daughter went on date "remember whose child you are." I should act like the daughter of Christ.

F That changes their world.

7 Saying that had effect on both.

1 That's what I try to do—we invoke that.

F Numbers passage. (All turned to in their Bibles) Describe your task. Put name of God on His people. If lesson is about joy, you are talking to them about that: He's walking with you—you have every reason to be joyful!

4:04 p.m

1 It won't affect everyone but it will affect some.

F More we do on point, more affect it will have. If your words follow the theme and the Scripture of the day. It is power, but not like ruler or dominance. Argument about gestures—Leviticus—Who do I think I am?

8 Only Moses did that and he had to have help.

4 Hope we don't get into battle like he was.

F Reaching out—make sense of this? Lift up hands?

7 Same when have something important. I might put my hand on his shoulder.

4 This is for all of you (type of gesture).

1 Something is created in the mind if I hold hands up. Energy flowing from my hands.

8 I have hard time thinking as power coming from my hands. (said skeptically)

5 Attention getter. He was in front of 1,000's.

3 Like a 'wave' offering.

(laughs)

F Something about extension of your heart. Not power. Not magical. Not grace imparting. But gesture has meaning. Fatherly thing to do.

8 In public speaking—open, palms up in front is inviting. Hands up higher, more like 'Listen up'.

7 This back to you seems like "stop".

- 8 Like 'channel' (resistant to the gesture).
- 1 I believe something does flow when sick, hands on that person, I pay attention if lay hands on a person. But in the congregation...
- 4 Can't lay hands on everyone.
- 5 So run through and put hands on all (grinning).
- 8 Almost like I am reaching up to God—not to people. As opposed to impart. I am reaching up to get.
- F Vessels of blessing.
- 6 Connotation I get from raised hands is of TV preachers who want something.
- 8 That may be why we don't do it.
- 5 If it is not real.
- 3 That is not how I communicate-If I'm not comfortable you'll be able to tell it.
- 1 I have been known to give a symbolic hug to the congregation.
- 5 It is okay, [Elder one].
- 8 But don't hug me. (consistent with his nature)
- F 1 Corinth...having trouble with search engine...
- 3 Read 1 Corinth.
- F Essential is, God be with you.
- 8 It is at the end of a lot of Paul's books.
- F Like Trinity.
- 1 Good morning...wish is not a weather report.
- F Text that inspired me...end of p.1.
- 4:18 p.m.
- Willimon being read, most leaning forward except elder 1, 8 and 7 who are leaning back. Elder 5 is not following along with the reading at all but sitting with legs crossed and hand in front of mouth, looking at speaker/reader (1). A-dios. A-Dieu. Good-bye.
- 8 All mean 'to God.'
- 1 In Catholic, Lutheran...all include that greeting.
- F Yes, to God. Part of challenge is to not 'teach another lesson. I'm trying to narrow my focus.
- 4, 3 I've noticed that. Me, too.
- 5 laughed
- 8 And they'll get that one thing.

- F We're sending them with one message. Vessel of reminding of what already exists.
- 5 We are asking God to bless them. It flies in my face that the writer is the one blessing.
- 8 How do you think our people will react? With our hands in the air?
- 5 I don't think it matters.
- 4 Elder 2 does it.
- F He has a microphone in one hand.
- 8 Maybe old guys can do it. (Only half funny.)
- F Fatherly.
- 8 Gray hair brings an aura of respect.
- F Used to lift during baptism—hands raised—we're not used to gestures.
- 5 Too charismatic
- 1 Some conservatives equate with raising hands. Some offended, some just natural.
- 7 Can they accept us doing this? Like Jimmy did with the song service—we educated the congregation over time.
- 8 Linda K. does it—I know she is serious.
- F My opinion. For some barely older than I...If through this process—serious and fun-non-anxious. I can fail, but you can't. To give it a shot and wonder if young men did it—they would notice it—they would take it as a sign of seriousness if it is not hokey.
- 8 Won't raise hands and say grasshoppers—responsive to someone coming forward. A song touches the heart and hands go up, for example.
- F Prophet works through words...metaphors and gestures...you are delivering the goods. Why I believe the blessing should be a highlight...words spoken last should be yours.
- 5 Today they were sent out confused because of the singing after the blessing.
- 7 Yes, the singing.
- 5 They didn't know when to leave or what to do.
- 1 I said God bless you... what else could I have said?
- F It wasn't your fault.
- 7 Did this (the project) come because of our not doing it?
- F No, out of the fact that you are doing it.
- 8 Maybe it began with Sean.
- 6 Started out with prayer and Scripture reading.

8 Never remember seeing Don Rxxxxx or Bill Axxx.

6 Elders doing closing prayer and label changed to shepherd's blessing. I have a note here in my Bible, in Mark Sxxx's handwriting for me to do the shepherd's blessing.

Next agreed meeting time:

Monday, 20 September, 7 p.m.

Field Notes - Session 2- God's Agents in the World

20 September 2005

Seated around a conference table. Michael at one end of the oblong table. Elder 2 is also absent for session 2. Note taker seated on a stool across the table from participant 1 and 8.

F If we are reluctant to speak on God's behalf, why? We know from last time that words are important. Why might we be reluctant to speak on God's behalf?

1 It seems presumptuous.

8 What do you mean by "Speaking on God's behalf?"

5 Sometimes you make a judgment on God's behalf.

8 Like Moses – he shined as he spoke for God. I don't feel this group of men speaks in the same way as Moses, telling the people directly from God that they should shape up.

5 We have God's word.

3 We are definitely called to be ambassadors.

1 You can find Scriptures to say anything you want to say.

F The example of the calling of Moses in Exodus 4... (Then read Ex 4:10-16 aloud.) How far are you from Moses? Draw some parallels or some contrasts. What is your calling and commission?

6 A long way from it, because God spoke directly to him. Now he speaks through the Word, not directly responding to the moment.

1 If we had been there, could we have heard it, too? I think so.

7 Moses was given a direct word. We have to have discernment from study and make decisions. Scarier now because God spoke right in his ear, and then Moses spoke to the people. However, we do have guidance.

8 Moses probably had one hour total conversation time with God and then had to operate most of the time in the same way that we do, making application based on his conversations with God.

5 He was meeting with the people daily, but the record does not show that God was

guiding every word.

8 Maybe Michel is trying to tell us that we are more like Moses than we know.

3 Does God speak today? I think he does, But not like Moses.

4 Not in audible or tangible ways.

3 We had a study... "Ordinary Life" where we heard some principles where God was using ordinary folks for his purposes. I will confess that I have had a string of extra ordinary coincidences in my life.

F Is there a difference between you and your role as an elder and the role of the average member?

3 Who gives them sight? Who does these things? We either believe God has spoken to us, or given us these abilities. (You can see his mind turning this over.)

F Someone has to speak to the people.

1 I remember being asked by the elders to teach a class called Singles Again. I did not want to do it. I did not feel equipped to do it. At that time, before I was an elder, I was of a mind to do whatever the elders asked me to do. I thought, "They must see something in me, to give them confidence. Maybe this is God at work." Of course, now that I have served as an elder, I know better. They were looking to cover the bases! (group laughed)

5 Now you know they were stupid (group still laughing).

1 These single parents were having difficulty. They wanted to know how a person could know if God was guiding them when they prayed for guidance. My conclusion for them was that if they prayed for guidance and wisdom, and would try to take out their personal like and dislikes, they could then take action. God can work it out either way you go. You submit yourself to God's authority and he will work it out.

4 There are ways to discern. You may be hearing what you want to hear and think that it is from God. You have to be honest about your perceptions of God's will.

F You have heard me talk about communities of discernment. If we had a group of people, practitioners of the faith, like you me, that we could submit to, then we could unearth our selfish motives.

Consider this passage from Acts 20:28-37 "The Holy Spirit has made you overseers." What do you make of that?

7 The last part of that verse – people will be distorting the truth – it is presumptuousness because there are people who do not speak the truth. We have to keep the focus on the Holy Spirit, and look for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Struggles will come. We won't always have the permits of popularity.

3 Verse 30 is a sharp warning for me – I need to be careful deciding truthful matters. I don't know what we could do that would be worse than that.

F Point this back to Moses. How is this similar to Moses' responsibility as a

shepherd of God's flock?

7 Several of the people at Sinai had to be brought back into line.

6 We're all married.

4 While he was receiving the commandments the people were making idols and other plans.

5 Reminds me of Sun Valley. The elders told the members about the merger with Southeast, and then went out to get out of duty members to come and ratify their choice of a merger.

4 Charter said 2/3rds vote, and it was 65%.

3 We were stranded at O'Hare – it was close.

8 I don't know. It was a failure to lead. Congregations should never vote. Shepherds lead or get out of the way.

F God has laid the responsibility for the flock on the elders, especially as we see this Acts passage.

3 I see it as – may not appear that we have danger in violating Scripture. We talk jokingly about the slippery slope. We need to make sure that we are not going down a trend where a minister or ministry leader may not grasp the whole picture.

F My interest is to be sure you feel empowered by God to make a statement to his people.

3 But there is a foundation you have to have authority to do it.

8 Moses had it. We have it.

F Yes. My point. The congregation called you group of men. This group of people trusts you and has been entrusted to you.

4 Why not like Moses, is it a matter of degree?

3 Moses (Elder 3 reads Scripture) established other sub-judges, and they took the role of deciding God's will.

1 It is difficult to delegate the responsibility.

F It could be scary to relinquish the responsibility to seventy other guys.

5 Sometimes we have the responsibility to speak. Sometimes we are more apt to want to ignore the problems instead of speak to them, instead of addressing the issue.

7 In verse 32 (Acts 20) what does this mean to commend the men to God and to this message of grace. Is this a recommendation? Could we recommend men to God?

F This is in fact a good example of a blessing. To commend is to turn the Ephesian elders over to the care of God as Paul departs from their presence. He is announcing something that is a reality because God is watching over them. He is calling that watch-care into their imagination.

- 7 The message of Grace is the one they were to carry.
- F The very same message we carry. This is the essence of the blessing that you will speak to this church, with energy!
- 6 To define commend as representing you as a worthy person?
- 1 Commend means ‘to give’ not bragging on.
- 5 I now place you in God’s care.
- F That’s what people need to be reminded of.
- 8 Wait. I struggle with that. For me to say, “I now turn you over to God’s care” implies that they have been in my care.
- 4 Paul has been teaching them for three years. They have been under his care.
- 8 So now...we say to them, “You have been taught, and now we want you to go out into the world as you speak for him.” It sounds as if these men (elders) are taking on a flavor, or an idea of our position we’ve never taken before. The people have come and been cared for, taught, encouraged and we have supplied all of that through the building, through the staff, through the worship, and now we are releasing them under the care of God to carry on with their Christian lives.
- 4 Exactly. That is our commission.
- 7 Are we hesitant about that? We have taught them the priesthood of believers. We are in a position of responsibility. Maybe we are in a position to do this.
- 8 Don’t hear me arguing about that. I am just getting my head around this idea that we have brought them here, we through Michael are teaching them, through hospitality, teachers and more, through what we speak, and what we teach in Bible classes, have spoken to you, and the elders want you to take that into the world.
- 1 We have no choice really. We are to turn them over to God.
- F You are announcing a reality that already exists.
- 8 They may think that we have not really done this. Are they aware that we are providing these services for them?
- 3 Elder 8—you are saying this has already existed—‘now I commend you’ making public now and this is what we are already responsible for. I think what elder 8 is saying is that we have just not been clear to the congregation that this is our role.
- 8 Does the congregation have this in mind (speaking to Michael and the group). If we were handing a person \$10K and said, make sure you use this as I have taught you, as if you were my own son, they would be clear about that, but does the congregation have the idea that they have been given something like that and that we expect them to make use of what they have been given? I think we are doing the same thing as handing them \$10K. We expect them to put into use what they have been given.
- 3 We’ve been doing that for good and bad. I think they understand that we are

responsible for what they get because of those who come and complain (about getting orange juice in hospitality).

8 Thinking at a higher level than those kinds of complaints. If you were encouraged, uplifted, it is because this group of men provided that.

F So as you speak the Shepherd's blessing in this way, I think they will come to see that more clearly.

4 I think they will get it and we should do this.

F I want you to see a couple of sub-agenda items in this Shepherd's blessing project. You remember our NCD material? We had two weaknesses. The first was Passionate Spirituality. If our people see your faith in the God who commissions you to send them into the world, I think our sense of passionate spirituality will be addressed. I also think that as they go into the world to pass on the essential blessing, as they live under the care of God, that they will practice a natural form of evangelism.

8 I would like to suggest you preach a lesson on "Who Are These Guys?"

6 Like someone expects something magical from your eldership.

3 5 year plan?

8 What do you think the elders do? What/who are we?

1 Board of deacons.

8 Write checks and pay bills.

F Not about seeing you as the pastors of the church.

3 That's why we should not write checks.

4 They will come and ask us about the most mundane things (like manage the orange juice for hospitality). "They"...what are 'they' going to do?

8 I can tell you boards of directors do not set spiritual guidelines.

F But they do set the culture. Some are aware that you are supposed to be the pastors of the church.

1 A lot could be accomplished if they knew who and what we are...instead of thinking that we only decide to pave parking lots.

4 And you never get to leave the eldership. People will always ask you the questions.

F Notice Ezekiel 34:4 (read) God appointed shepherds and they failed to do these specific things, like binding up the wounded and seeking the lost. He says that he is going to appoint a new shepherd (Jesus). And you are in that line and these are your responsibilities.

8 When you see that verse, does the congregation think that this refers to us? If you put out those criteria on a check list, would the congregation check that as being true

about us?

F To the congregation, I look like the pastor and teacher.

4 They come to you with questions that should come to us.

3 In your lessons you need to emphasize that we have commissioned you.

1 I am sure that some folks don't understand the pecking order. They presume that the preacher is the one who decided what happens.

8 (Speaking of Lorraine who is converting from RC) In her tradition, one man decided what would happen.

F To read the lesson "Our Ministry of Blessing" by Fred Kane.

6 Keep your words small and short (light tone).

3 (Still light) keep the apples coming – we're just guinea pigs.

F Earlier this summer through e-mail I asked a group of a thousand ministers about speaking blessing over their congregation. I asked them, "How were you equipped to offer a blessing?" What I found was that there was not formal equipping going on. There was no class or book on the subject. Traditions were handed down.

1 Like generation to generation, direct?

F In light of that lack of specific training this project could lead to a book project, and your names will be in it.

8 I might get the big head. (light hearted)

F (reading the Kane narrative) What are your reactions?

1 The military distance resonates with me with the discomfort of not knowing the limits in handling a situation. For example we had a young enlisted man who would eventually become the chief chaplain for the Navy.

8 I feel sometimes as Kane felt...just drew a blank. (thinking of a name)

1 Cyndi Exxxx?

8 Angela Cxxxx, Linda Rxxx's daughter. Elder 1 even had anointing oil. Who does she think we are, and what does she think we can do? I am too practical. God is not going to channel some power through our hands, is he?

1 Not true.

5 Not exactly.

3 When we were struggling with fertility (referring to his own experiences) we asked the elders to come – Bill Axxx, Bill Mxxxx, others, and asked them to pray over us...but not with oil.

F Sometimes we do these things because the Scriptures say to do them, not because we believe that God's power can really be mediated through our hands. That kind of

power makes us anxious.

1 God has given us a sort of power and some authority. I heard someone say (at Angela's) "What if nothing happens?" I was not thinking that she would be miraculously healed.

8 I wonder what Linda was thinking would happen?

1 She was showing her faith in God, and in what the Scriptures say, and in us, to ask us to come.

F And you are asking the question, "Who am I that God would work through me?"

1 I am an elder in God's church. I will assume he means something by that.

6 Have to feel for this fellow (Kane) who is like a beginner.

5 Anxiety gets bigger as people begin asking for a blessing.

1 Like at the hospital, praying for folks, and in a way laying hands on them, and sometimes they are deeply comforted and they get better.

8 And the baby blessings, putting hands on the baby. (zzzz – a snoring sound – he is unimpressed with the significance).

3 It is just a connection – if we had would be powerful (joking).

1 It is powerful and important to the parents, and I think it has impact on the child, and to you, too.

F To you too!

1 (Leaning toward elder 4 with both hands in a blessing action – to touch him)

4 (laughing) Don't touch me!

5 I visited a Catholic man with his family in the hospital. I gave a blessing on him and the family. He died. The blessing is for the family. I wasn't worried about their expectations. I was just myself. With practice I think we grow more comfortable in pastoral role.

7 Dif (?) moment of blessing. We get cards at work and we sign them because someone is sick or bereaved. He knew my dad had just died...from my comments and another man's comments, he came to me about my words, and how powerful they were for him, like a blessing.

1 Certain words have tremendous impact. There is one that lodges in my mind. It was a card sent by Margaret Bxxx. "The great physician is working on you personally."

3 The prayers of a righteous man avail much.

1 We fit that bill.

3 We're okay with that because Paul said go to the elders and have them pray for you.

- 1 James did.
- 8 That's what Linda Rxxxxx said.
- 3 Is that because of an exalted place for elders?
- F You are exemplars of the faith who have had more practice. You are not different from other Christians, but you have spent more time. You are experienced practitioners of the faith. That is what makes you a leader. You are out front.
- 5 It is possible for the blessing to end up not being a blessing at all.
- F That which gives you authority is the practice of life with God.
- 5 Yes.
- 1 Some folks will comment on the blessing that you offer. You can tell if your words have been a blessing to them.
- 4 And you were blessed too, (as in Ezekiel), when you are strengthening the weak.
- 8 The last part of James 5 ... if you have faith, they will be healed...prayer of an innocent person...but what I want to pause at is this comment about Elijah....who was just a human being as we are....I think that helps me.
- 1 He was God's man.
- 5 If you taught preschool, you would know this lesson.
- F Moses and Elijah are in the same position...human beings like you.
- 1 Jesus, too.
- 8 For 3 ½ years his prayers kept the rain from falling. That is a powerful thing.
- 5 That's why we pray that the rain goes somewhere else (hurricane Rita).
- F Your prayers can change the world, your prayers, your blessing, as it sparks their imagination.
- 8 I just wonder if...
- 1 Words are very important.
- 8 Elijah's words mean more to me.
- 6 Mean more to me, too.
- 1 Words, however in a human sense... the first time a girl says, "I love you."
- 8 You are trapped! (laughing)
- 5 Make sure you put elder 8's name by that comment! (joking)
- 1 I am a romantic.
- F What I hope to do is spark your imagination. For you to see that the words you say have great power. You have been given a commission to speak to God's people.

4 Like Moses and Elijah.

5 Slow to speak.

1 If not us, who else?

(Next Tuesday – Session 3).

Field Notes – Session 3– Moral Authority

2 October 2005

Seated around a conference table. Michael at one end of the oblong table. Note taker seated on a stool across the table near positions 6 and 7.

F Thank you for being spot – on and as congregation begins to expect that from you...talked to Brent that shepherd's blessing is the end.

8 Scott and Brent had it to sing a song but it wasn't on worship guide, added after guide printed.

F My intention is that you send into the world with whatever you had in mind...the question is would we be reluctant to speak on God's behalf...God's commission for you to speak...Today, the moral authority for blessing...how to come by intrinsic—speaking a blessing has not been a part of our tradition. Something new. What would keep you doing it? What would be the motivator to continue for you?

1 Our tradition has been that we would have a closing prayer...Paul did give a blessing in his closing, something that made the people feel good. That was noticed from Paul's writing.

4 If done properly it would give the motivation.

7 Empowers with whatever the message contains.

2 I think it is really important for the church to hear from the elders and I think that folks are really starving to hear God's blessing, that God is blessing us to go into the world. I was reading an article about women's role in the church. How did mission in the early church develop? It became clear that the elder's took the central role in the mission of the church. It was much more casual, at least I think it was. That is what the author was trying to say. That the elders were the leaders/pastors were the ones who took charge and ran things. Anything else...even though women were involved in the mission the elders were the key. We have thought of the elders being in the background making decisions instead of the forefront.

F I would remind you that the elders of the first century church were the preachers/teachers, the daily feeders of the folk. Our people need to see your heart and feel commissioned by you.

2 uh-uh.

1 I have observed that the brain recycles on the last thing you hear.

5 That's why you hear KSBJ radio.

2 What kind of a day would a kid have if he focused on this powerful thing.

F Elder 7, any reaction to your blessing first service on Sunday?

7 Dusty came to me and had several things to say. I took the blessing given by God to Aaron, the one in Numbers 6, the one we have heard, 'may the Lord bless you and keep you'. I turned it around, 'the lord said to the elders of Southeast church of Christ' and I put in peoples names/southeast's members. Several people talked to me.

F Elder 7 said I want you to take this personally... Very personal, very direct. Sometimes the closing prayer idea is the routine 'guide, guard, direct.'

2 Perfunctory.

F Right, but it blesses them when it isn't, in a way that changes the world. The same way we ask how will the people respond to us? I hope that they will go out and bless.

2 (shaking head in affirmation)

F I said to Linda K. 'the lord be with you, sweetheart' and she said, 'I am supposed to say something back, right?' Any other reactions?

4 I think people pay closer attention to my words than I thought. Two people asked me today what the Scripture reference was that I used today.

F Maybe you already have a good sense of this, you tell me when we're done. When I show up in a hospital room, the people think that I am showing up for God. What I want to convince you of is that you carry that same weightiness.

(2 and 7 shake heads affirmatively)

1 It is not in an ordinary visit.

8 Maybe we need a red hat (cardinal's hat).

4 If you have your parking permit (laughing) then you have your clergy credentials.

F Do we resist that position of authority?

3 In that situation, it can be a number of people.

8 I've known you a number of years and I know that you don't really bring anything special to the table (teasing). I don't think we think we come in any special power. I am not sure that the congregation has a different view. Maybe people are not as mature as we might give them credit for. If someone says that I am an elder, that must mean something. You know what I mean?

F I think you are right. Edd Dxxxx, Don Bxxxx, if they walk in, if their best friend comes in and leads a prayer (at the hospital), as if they do (maturity?).

1 It is because of the position we have. I had a nun sit with me and that was more meaningful to me than having the nurses sit with me.

2 Anointing of oil, however to have elders announce blessing over a sick person, it has special power.

8 You are supposed to put olive oil in there to keep the smell down...

(general consensus of funniness.)

F We are not comfortable with our role, don't want to feel as if I am tooting my own horn.

1 That's right, we don't.

F You've been given, by divine commission, you were called to be the wise old men, that is the difference between you and Bill Axxx who has walked the faith, he laid the mantle down and you still hold that responsibility.

1 Like I said this morning it is either true or it ain't.

3 I am trying to say that not limiting the power of other people. Collectively we as a group ...it is more than one guy, it is a bunch. So not trying to negate those obligations.

1 God said he made us righteous.

F Reading the handout by Sarah Keyser... I didn't pick a female on purpose but I thought that she said some things I thought were important. What do you react to out of that?

1 She writes well.

8 She thinks well, this is like the article that I read. I gathered in the early church that there was so much ministry out there to do that the idea of a formal one of someone talking in front, we are really taking this to the next level. It isn't really male/female issue. The issue is that ultimately the elders are above...in God's organization, the top ones. In a lot of ways we have misunderstood that.

5 I appreciate her honesty that she grew into this. You don't really feel magically empowered but you grow into your sense of authority.

F I think that we have a people who have so many uncertain things in their lives and so one more voice, especially the elders, put an exclamation on it for the blessing. Also there is a difference if Brent says it or if one of you says it.

3 What percentage of the congregation are we talking about?

4 That's right, it depends upon who it is.

F I think it depends upon your flock.

2 Don't they see our walk?

1 I think that what elder 8 has been saying, can we really call down God's blessing? God is going to bless who He is going to bless.

8 They are God's children so why wouldn't he bless them?

1 The other thing that impacted me was that as she struggled through it, she had occasional but glimpses of holy. I think we will get those glimpses more, whether in Lynn's book, *They Smell Like Sheep*, those would be more influenced by those they have walked with more.

8 That's what I meant, too.

5 I know all too well that we need to be told again and again. Your child, spouse need to be reminded that you love them.

8 I like what you (Elder 5 in his blessing) said this morning that you don't have to worry about time and then you feel guilty. I think we have not learned what God's real grace can do for us. If we can get to that point where we are encouraging people to live God's way and not worry about guilt.

F Can you imagine a blessing that you might give, saying that there is no reason for you to walk out of here today with a burden of guilt?

2 Amen. It is so interesting, we are studying in Corinthians, they have this freedom but they are misusing it, Paul says do I sin more so I can have more grace? Because of our misunderstanding, we feel guilty. We don't need to feel that way.

4 Some probably felt that way. I didn't feel that way and I didn't grow up in the church. The first time we missed communion she felt really badly about that. People feel guilty about things they don't have to feel guilty about.

3 I think as leaders we can help people with that. Like your mom (points to elder 8) if she doesn't come to church it is bad. Coming to church in a flood...I just don't want to go....as long as you don't make a habit of it. As long as you send your check in....

(laughing)

F As with anything else, preaching, leading prayer, we will feel more uncomfortable until we get used to it. How about this gesture? (arms outstretched)

2 I only did it with one hand.

3 Only half the congregation got blessed!

F You guys are able to do this however you want. In our rehearsal, we have some weeks of rehearsal coming up - in the safety of this group to give it a try. Like she (S. Keyser) felt uncomfortable...has mystical feel. Looks presumptuous.

3 Not unusual in Old Testament settings, but then maybe they did it in New Testament, too.

4 They probably did.

F Maybe it doesn't apply today but it will get the congregation's attention. I see elder 3 with his hands up, and ask, what is going on?

1 Maybe uncomfortable with our kids in the audience.

8 Those are not in our nature, we are more calm.

- 3 Not only that, it isn't in my nature outside. We also read that they prostrated themselves in prayer.
- F That will be the next thing...
- 6 Your next thesis...
- F I am not uncomfortable lifting my hands before the congregation. I am not doing a magic spell over the church, but I am very comfortable with use of body language. Some say that body language carries more than your words. Tone and gestures matter.
- 3 What you do with your feet, too.
- 2 It must be genuine.
- 5 What are you doing looking at your watch? Didn't you hear your sermon this morning? (speaking to Michael)
- 3 I think I use my hands and I use eye contact, but not only is it not my norm, I can't see the purpose of raising my hands in that outward gesture. I can see an immediate effect and one time type of effect, day in and day out...opening it up...I can't see the longer term purposes of it. To make it a part of your repertoire...
- F You might be right.
- 3 One may elect to do it, and others may not.
- F To be less than genuine, to not be who you are, would be wrong. But I want to push through your initial discomfort.
- 8 Our congregation doesn't know us as that. This tells the congregation that we are changing in some dramatic way. They will say, in my forty years I have never seen Bob do that. Is he coming unglued?
- F Maybe it will signal that they (you) are putting more importance on it.
- 2 With almost half of our people being new we have an opportunity to do something new.
- F It used to be when you baptized someone you raised your hand. I believe that there is a cultural pressure to individuation. Keep it inside yourself.
- 1 I present you the blessing of God (hands lowered, not outstretched), as if presenting a medicine bottle.
- 8 It looks like the Astros won. Middle of the ninth.
- 7 I really think that some of the things at Southeast, we have fallen, no not fallen but broken away from traditional stuff. I think they like it that we are not following the one two three way of looking at things. I like the variety. Whatever elder 5 wants to do is fine. We may get more comfortable with it. I really think it is important for the elders to speak.
- 1 If we all did it the same way it would be hokey.

F I want to argue some about the crisis and call to authority. As elder 3 was pointing out, others, too, have been called out by God. You have been called out and I want to argue for your role as leaders. A lot of people in the pew are there because they are in the middle of a faith crisis.

2 Momma goes.

F It is just what we do, I am in the habit of going to church. That is a crisis of authority.

(Elder 4 out for several minutes)

F The question is, is God involved or not? Used to be that what happened at church was important to the rest of the world. It doesn't anymore. Vestiges of it, maybe. There is no direct authority. We are not making announcements to the world, we don't have that kind of clout.

4 Blue laws.

7 Used to be in the south that they didn't play Wednesday night.

F Some of Karen Gxxxx's doctoral classes were on Sunday morning...people will vote with their feet or checkbook.

2 Authority of eldership is the people's authority granted to the elders.

8 Because they recognize it is God's plan, and that is why it works.

3 And if you wholly put it on that side, you take God out of the picture.

7 The difference between the generations. Did you have your wife say (speaking to Elder one), an elder asked you to do something, shouldn't you do it? That was that generation.

2 But you will get more results if an elder asks.

F Back to reading...leadership is necessary. A lot of people still view themselves as consumers instead of mutually called ministers.

2 Authority of God that holds us together. When controversy happens then people will choose their own route.

F Until they disagree with you.

1 Priests, but the congregation must recognize this.

F Baptized and Jesus is Lord...some of our people have that thought that baptism was a get out of hell free card instead of ordination for ministry...real authority is relational authority. Those you have helped, been to weddings and funerals, been in sacred space with them. Part of why God wants elders is that you have walked with them and been with them in sacred spaces.

2 I approach it like you have seen a cycle, maybe two or three. Like cycle of raising kids until the time they are no longer under your authority...

3 Twice in the last week, about this authority deal. Twenty of us at my brother's house. My wife's brother's wife made a comment that Wesley and I appreciate your taking the leadership role in this family. Danielle's dad's health is failing and he is very authoritarian. What it showed me was they were looking to me. It really humbled me and I had no idea that that was going on. Same here—they had already submitted to that but they didn't have a clue what was going on.

F Usurping authority, positional versus relational authority...

1 Asking the most senior guy, if he can answer the questions he becomes the leader.

F I was at hospital, with George Gxxxxx, who designs plants for Bechtel. He is not the senior guy, but he is the one who has the good data. He knows how it works. He said, "The important people come to me because I have the data, I am the unofficial expert." This is a type of relational authority that trumps positional authority.

2 I think that happens in the church. We each have a different set of skills and life experiences. Each of us will be zeroed in on by them. We don't end up having a 'top' elder and if you did you would be hurting bad.

7 (shaking head in affirmation)

F This can create conflict if the preacher has relational authority and the elders feel threatened by that. This is avoided if the elders create and maintain relational authority. This line 'the congregation makes the preacher or elder' you could not just say I have the authority to lead. Probably means you don't. If have to claim it, probably don't have it. What do you think the conditions are?

7 I think longevity in the group. That is why you don't get a new person. Time in the trenches together.

F Prove yourself reliable that is what elder 3 has done in his family.

3 I'm not sure I understand the 'willing to bestow authority' because sounds like I will give you authority to make a decision for us instead of congregation submitting to their authority.

F I am saying that they chose you to create it.

8 That is partly turning their back on God's authority. God made the plan that this position would have some authority. People can choose not to follow the authority but then they are choosing not to follow God's authority.

6 To accept the authority might be a better wording.

F If you have been through a death of a congregation, the people withdrew the privilege of authority.

8 Also, you are talking about groups of people not individuals.

2 This happens a lot when the younger people want a younger approach. Younger preacher, this happens real often, and the leaders don't do it. They hire a 72 year-old preacher then any authority that this group had is gone.

F You get to shape those core values and there are other voices out there shaping, too.

3 The first split I went through, I think there were 4 elders at the time. 1976 I think that they netted 176,000 dollars and there was stark disagreement from the elders. One elder had a different view and he had the relational authority. It was just...very heated, very painful, but the people that made the decisions did not submit their authority to the elders. They went with the one guy.

7 Then on the other side, you have this saint, Fairy Pxxxx, who said that she would go on the side of the elders. To have someone like her say that.

1 You either put yourself on the side of the elders or you don't. Like Fred Oxxxx, and you leave.

3 Didn't have that additional pastor, that third.

F Basis for authority, sacred, relies on God. How are God's purposes discerned?

7, 4 Scripture, for one.

3 The multiple ability of all of us we have the power/ability to discern...

F Discernment is communal, is what I hear elder 3 saying.

3 Right.

F Our teaching is authoritative because we can prove by Scripture. We are all supposed to be ambassadors for God. Long term practitioners. Back to reading...matter of competence. Feeding the flock. Earned authority.

2 Why are preachers so afraid of elders?

F Because many are hirelings.

2 Does that exist in many churches?

F If you have been in a church where one or two elders are autocratic....

1 Can be a man of God and fire Mike Axxxxx. How could that happen?

2 Always be people who will dislike you.

F Preachers are scared, if leaders are capricious.

3 I've seen when someone's values don't mesh with your values and the elder card gets played. What is the real problem? I am not acting in the way you think is right. The elder card comes down quick. Wait. I have to act in a way that all of you might say I should be.

2 We are really fortunate. Perhaps because of balanced teaching.

F Often battle is over this topic of authority. I hope you hear me saying that you guys have the positional authority and that I would like to facilitate the development of your relational authority. If our people come to know you as those who are authorized to

2 speak a blessing over them, I think they will seek you out for more words that will shape their world.

2 The idea of having ability to be a problem solver, because of my background expertise you have to learn to be patient and let everyone have time to get there. If we can't solve the problem as a group as opposed to one of us jumping out. If there is anything we need to be cautious of, we need to. I feel that we can come out with a decision together. One person could say he wanted it his way because of his authority.

4 Elder 2 and I were in an eldership where that was true. It wasn't fun.

F What is authority supposed to accomplish? Back to reading...Eph. 4 passage. About the shepherd's blessing. That you are able to answer in your own heart 'who am I' to be able to give this blessing? I hear elder 8's question, do the people really believe that? Half of the congregation expect you to be their leader, the other ½ as they come to see you exercise your leadership orally (gesture if you can get it) to persuade the people that they are under God's care and that you have the authority to bless them. Do you believe that?

3 I go back to S. Keyser, where she comments that she has no problem in calling upon what God has promised upon us. I have no problem doing that.

2 Nothing but good will come from that.

F What I also hope is that you will see that you are sending them out to do what you are calling them/blessing them to do....Gillespie's words read (a people called to mission, rather than a people coddled in seclusion)...the world is too big, the mission too important.

2 I think that we have seen with the storm that people move out of their comfort zone. To mean something rather than just have a social group, go to baseball, play golf.

F My goal is to say you have the moral authority to speak a blessing to the people.

2 I hope you can help us move out of our comfort zones , we don't grow if we don't push a little bit.

F When can we gather? A week from today?

Field Notes – Session 4– Discerning God's Mission

9 October 2005

Seated around a conference table. The facilitator was at one end of the oblong table. Note taker seated on a stool across the table.

Elders 4, 8,6, and 3 were unable to attend this session.

Begin at 3:06 pm

F Recap-what we've done together, Elder 2 I need to get some things to

you...considering the power of words, commission to speak, authority. Words you say make a difference. They do something, that people are listening to you.

2 Talking about raising of hands, Debbie Lxxxx and I talked about it this week and she told me that she and some friends like that.

1 And you did it today and I looked at you.

F Seize the day and exercise kindness.

F Question for the day—what does God want them to accomplish with their lives and how to accomplish this?

2 Are we supposed to answer something? Them, are you talking about the flock? Keep them faithful. The tendency we have had in church is that we come to church and we have a time together and then we don't think about it anymore instead of saying...an interesting thing happened the other day. I waved someone into a long line of traffic—you know what? I didn't catch a light this whole trip. Tommie told me that it was because I let someone in. A problem I personally have is that sometimes something is said and it hits my button and I will say things that...not bad words, but I get irritated by it. Something. Maybe say something I shouldn't. Now you really have to think ahead in allowing that to happen and it was kind of like the other day and we were on the orange juice problem. Someone asked me how many elders will I have to get to before I can get this straightened out.

F I am the only one you get to get to.

2 That is what I told him.

1 Someone will always focus on the little thing and not be able to grasp the big picture. The orange juice was what he focused on.

F How do you turn that from a defensive statement to a proactive statement to be faithful?

5 Sounds inward and selfish.

F What does God want them to accomplish with their lives?

7 Today in class we are studying Luke and if we had had a discussion about each exhortation we would have missed the main idea. It is about going out and having the right attitude and depend on Him and live with Him and to see and let it happen. Don't worry.

5 Uh-huh. You can't go out and bring others to Christ if you don't get involved in their lives.

1 Probably a lesson in there. Someone could come in here and say that it smells like sheep. Thank you. We are supposed to be involved in their lives.

2 You get the feeling sometimes of being unworthy--just go help someone. Go to a hospital and visit. Take food to someone. Write a card, send e-mail. Those kinds of things where people will know you care.

- F Why is that important? What is Christ up to?
- 2 He wants changes because you can accomplish more with this Christlike approach.
- 2 Like getting people to understand what Christ is all about.
- 7 You are supposed to be His aroma so that others can pick up His aroma with this sheep thing.
- F Discerning God's mission. The reason I am pushing is that you are sending people out into the world and what are they supposed to do out there?
- 1 God can use imperfect servants to serve the world.
- F Servants to do what? What is God doing? You already know the answer, look at the algebra equation.
- 7 God is showing himself to the world because he wants to attract us to him.
- 1 Because he loves us.
- F How did you learn that?
- 1 It wasn't easy.
- F Some of our people think it is about being saved. God has a mission. How did you find that out?
- 1 It was a long time coming the realization that he wanted me to be involved , gave me a toolkit, our talents, learned that by doing whatever I was asked to do. Always asked me to teach a class.
- F Sounds like a story you know in Scripture. The answer found in the story of God. We can experience it apart from the story but I think if we were going to discern God's mission, we'd have our Bibles open.
- 7 Nodding head affirming, yes.
- F Lots of people don't have their Bibles open. For the next hour I want us to practice doing that. Trying to discern God's mission out of a particular text. The goal is for you to see clearly what you are sending these people out in the world to do.
- 1 The Old Testament is full of God trying to get the people to do what he hoped for but the people kept wanting to go back.
- F I believe that is what the blessing is all about, that the people are not alone. It would have changed their behavior and they would have been in the promised land in a couple of weeks instead of 40 years. You are Moses. Here is Israel. You are Moses.
- 1 And it isn't that far.
- F You're right---it isn't rocket science. Not that difficult. Don't have to work out the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.
- 2 If you are talking about it you are probably not going to commit it.

F What I would like to do is for the four of you to read it. We will read this chapter five times aloud. Each time we will ask a different question.

5 Hard. I am usually sleeping at this time.

2 I probably can't lead singing later if I have to think now.

F How does this text send us and equip our witness? Brought pens because along the way you might want to mark it. Who wants to read?

Several volunteer. Elder 1 wins.

1 Reads. Elder 2 underlines as v. 4 is read. Michael highlighting. Elder 2 (let light shine out of darkness), Elder 2 (death of Jesus), all turn over at same time, all seem to be following along, elder 7 and elder 2 holding paper up slightly, elder 1 holds his paper up, too.

F How does this text send us and equip our witness, this is a practice of discernment?

7 It reminds us, first sentence, by His mercy, that we are engaged in ministry, that is our motivation.

F What a splendid notion, that ministry emerges out of mercy and He calls us to it.

1 If anyone around who had occasion to lose heart, beatings, imprisonment, Paul did, and he says that God has been good enough to let us do this.

2 Goes straight to the issue, Jesus, God is revealed through Jesus, I don't think many people understand that. When Jesus talks, God speaks. I can't understand why so many of our people are adverse to Max Lucado because all he tries to do, quite simply in his books, to get people closer to Jesus. If they understand Jesus then substantial change occurs. I guess what we are talking about here is that we have sat back and listened to rules and we have missed out on what it means to be Jesus.

1 People don't need a check off list.

F Jesus is made visible in our mortal flesh.

1 You may be the only sermon anyone ever hears.

2 This Katrina thing affected a lot of people and we have to look at how our people were affected. We sometimes think that our people are not as mature but many people gave and physically helped others. We don't think about those things being God's mission but that is what it is about.

1 People are not good starters. If we had been more organized, those things don't just happen automatically.

2 We learn too, as elders, that it is not very difficult, kind of interesting. So much criticism for slow reaction but quite frankly very difficult to think of things immediately. Slow is better, Michael, you said that. And with time we were able to do what our church family could do. And what we did got us involved in the lives of others.

- 5 And it helps people to be effective in their help.
- 1 Welfare, but if on the dole, shouldn't have been playing lottery.
- F Verse 14 intrigues me...that we are equipped and sent. How does that equip us?
- 7 This is not the reward.
- F This is not all there is. Message is you don't have to worry about today. And the fundamental message of the mission is that you will be brought into his presence. What is God up to? It is to have His people in His presence. What are you sending people out to do?
- 1 To let people know that.
- F It isn't as scary as some people think. Evangelism is a turn off because it is misunderstood.
- 7 In first paragraph and down to the treasure in clay jars is so equipping because you recognize that you are clay jars and that His power shines through that and that we can accomplish through him.
- F For all the average, for the people on the fringes of church--who say I am not equipped to be a missionary.
- 2 You are the best one, who won't listen to a professional but listen to someone involved in their lives.
- F Verse 6, if they are manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives, the question is, can they see Jesus in them?
- 1 That may be part of it, too.
- 2 So this going out and witnessing and going on behalf of God. Is a treasure.
- F That is the treasure.
- 2 The mystery. Is that the same thing, Michael? It is a mystery that...
- F God loves the Gentiles.
- 7 God has this plan that applies to anybody. When you understand that God loves you and grace through His plan. We have it mixed up. We try to get people to understand our rules. And try to refute what people believe. Instead of saying that this plan is for everyone.
- F Not to confuse means and ends. Rules are ends. Presence of God. Have communion each week to usher into presence of God.
- 2 A man in our Sunday school class, Grady Fxxxx, has been writing someone. He was covered thinly, he would go out and talk to someone every night and he is wondering about doing the Lord's Supper. Grady tried to explain our tradition and then read the Scripture that we become all things to all people. So I got to thinking what would be wrong with someone taking the Lord's Supper on a Monday night.

- 1 What night did God ask him to do it?
- 2 Grady was excited to study more about that. I Cor 9, where Paul says that he doesn't do things because of his freedom. I do it because I want to bring people to Christ.
- F Not trying to please himself.
- 2 Tom Delay not doing for personal but for party gain.
- F For personal power! (laugh)
- 2 Do I do it voluntarily? Or because I am getting money? I hope voluntarily, not motive. What is the motive?
- F Paul's critics are saying he is a clay vessel. Those are no credentials.
- 1 We wouldn't let him preach here.
- F Talk about bad karma, look at Job, so Paul is saying, here is what God is up to.
- 2 And it isn't me.
- F This is for your sake and for the sake of the world.
- 2 What is the symbolism of the clay jars?
- F Less than noble.
- 1 Like a paper sack, common. Ought to have treasure in an engraved box. But Paul is a paper sack.
- 2 This mission is not about Paul but about the treasure.
- F Let's read it again and answer the question about how the text reads us and the world. What does the Bible say about us?
- 5 Elder 5 reads next... Elder 1 holding up text. Michael underlining. Elder 2 holding up, leaning back in chair. Elder 7 leaning forward and over his text, flat on the table top. Elder 5 uses pointer finger as he reads text aloud.
- F Where do you find touch points where this reads us and our world?
- 7 So in defining that question, how does it compare to us?
- F Yes.
- Several seconds of silence. All reading.
- 5 I am always telling people that life is short. You can make it. Life is short as compared to eternity. Slight and momentary affliction, so don't let life drag you down.
- F We know something about affliction?
- 5 We don't live in chains, not in prison.
- 1 We don't live in fear of our lives.
- F Perplexed? We see capriciousness out there because fallenness doesn't fall on everyone the same.

2 I am such a simpleton. I have a glimmer of an understanding. I am still trying to understand why it has taken so long. Kind of like elder 1 said this morning. We have been trained, year after year, took a lot of time to get us out of it. Once out of it, we have missed the grace of God in our people. So this sort of tells on us because this says, it isn't us doing this. Remember in the first book he said, the fact that you learned the gospel from me. That came from me, I taught you this. That is a testament and my apostleship. But the whole idea is that they were not understanding grace. Maybe over-understood. With grace came too much freedom.

F Anything goes, ungodly grace...

1 I think some of the great old preachers of the church had little appreciation for grace. If they touched on it, it was from a place of being eligible for it.

2 This is how the world would look at us, I think.

F We do not proclaim ourselves, rather that Jesus is Lord, not proclaiming SE c of C. but Jesus Christ as Lord, keeping main thing the main thing. The gospel that is veiled...how does that read us?

2 I think he is just saying that there are some people who will not get it.

F Yes. Some people will not get it.

2 Mostly they are in the world too much.

1 Looking for health and wealth prosperity gospel, God wants you to get your Cadillac like I got mine. Some show they wore a Rolex....

5 Time is not important. (laughed)

7 God of this world has more tools, it goes further faster, touches more people and yet Christ's glory still has an impact. Can still change lives.

F The god of this world cannot outshine the Son.

1 Solomon says I looked here and there and finally understood that only loving God and keeping his commandments made a difference.

F This whole chapter is about not losing heart. Do we have to work hard to make that relevant?

1 Some people have to work at that very hard.

2 When a person realizes that control isn't in his hands but somewhere else that I have to submit myself to God that they get to understanding. Almost like we are drunk with this world. Drunk on the ways of the world and unless we are willing to submit ourselves to a higher power we cannot submit ourselves.

F Verse 1 - I think about the Sxxxxx family as they manage Marcus' situation, Beth and Jim who stay in the fight, Cyndi Exxx who made a great sacrifice to be here today. If you had an eternal perspective, how might that read us and our world? If we believe that the blessing of God is that we won't die in the flesh, we don't understand.

- 1 Xxxxx has done this as he has been diagnosed with cancer.
- 2 Many people are not interested because church people are hypocritical. I do know that Jesus died for you and because of Him you have access to God.
- F He loves you anyway.
- 1 I wouldn't want to let a hypocrite get closer to me than God.
- F I am the hypocrite if I am saying everything is fine and I am not a sinner. The only thing that keeps me from being a hypocrite is my being able to confess that I am falling short.
- 1 Harder to maintain that in my life than in small group, it finally comes through.
- 5 I think also the world says that they don't want it, they don't know what they are saying.
- F They see too much false advertising. It is not that you won't suffer. It isn't the truth.
- 2 We talked about that this morning in class. About the natural occurrences that God doesn't decide that New Orleans is bad and so I want to destroy it. He sets in motion nature that works a certain way and people who get in the way get hurt or killed. Most people think that there is some superior being that controls all of this. Remember the town that was completely destroyed. I had a friend who said that I don't want to believe in a God who would do that.
- F The whole creation groans. How do you bear the challenge in the here and now? Not whether it is going to occur but how will you bear it when it does happen?
- 1 True verse--in your world you will have trouble.
- F Okay, let's read it again asking, how does this text evangelize us with good news. We need to be re-evangelized. Important announcement that the gospel is for the church not just the world.
- 2 Elder 2 reads... Both elder 5 and elder one leaning back in chairs, with reading in their laps, following along. Elder 7 continues to lean forward over his reading which continues to be flat on the table. Elder 2 reads leaning back in chair, holding reading up. Elder 5 wiped brow as if hot. Had fanned paper earlier in meeting towards his face.
- F Where is the gospel? How are we evangelized with the good news? What is the good news for you?
- Several seconds of silence.
- 2 I think it is v. 11, why we live, we are always given up to death for Jesus' sake. We are running our lives in a way that is not for us but for Jesus' sake, for the gospel's sake. In I Cor, Paul is saying he has the right but he gives them up because I want you to know that you are getting the gospel of Jesus Christ and just attach what you heard from me. I received the message of God to preach the gospel without pay.

7 We know that the one who raised Jesus. He has proven that he can do it. The end game.

F If the good news is just in the future.

5 Not the end but more now. Shouldn't be living any differently now than then. There shouldn't be a difference.

1 It is easier if you know the reward.

5 For me the reward is here, too.

F Talk about the reward.

5 Joy and peace. Comes from the knowledge of God that you are his child, part of the family, and we will get over the difficulties.

F Verse 14 does not have to wait. I believe it will happen more fully and isn't it manifest now, too? Unless you don't feel loved. It seems you get a foretaste now. The good news is God wants you to be in his presence. That he accepts you. You are useful.

5 Yes.

7 (shaking head affirming)

2 Have a false concept that the more talented are able to do things and get a lot of recognition. Always had a problem with the recognition. Some people do probably. I have always said that you do things and no one sees it or knows it and you don't have to have this (sign of maturity) idea of someone saying you did a good job.

F Praise comes from God not me. Slaves for Jesus' sake. Can we proclaim ourselves your slaves? As elders, the answer is yes.

2 You went back to: are we being renewed? Verse 15 says that--everything for your sake so that grace...it seems to me as we have influence over more and more people there is an internal renewal.

F Evangelization of the church. Bottom line, God wins. Evangel--good news. The king has won a great victory. How might the church be different if we were able to say you don't have to fret? Yes, you are still striving.

2 Big issue been solved because Jesus has taken sin out of the picture.

F Now we are wrestling with our behavior, how much damage we do?

5 And how much good are we going to do?

F You are welcomed into God's presence. That is where the blessing has some mystical power. If you are aware of that you can then tell the people.

2 You are carrying your attitude, your body, the way you talk and act to husband, children, in your sphere.

5 That often has to be done one on one, we can do it in front of however many hundreds of people we have.

F Or perhaps in your life groups.

2 Or in your Bible classes. In the last several series of lessons to the older group is that I needed to get them to understand that God is already, they are part of God's plan and they do not have to come to church on Sunday night to get validated. I haven't come out and said that. To hear Joyce Exxxxx who has difficulty making that shift for her to say that is God's grace. Ferris asked where is the rule book?

1 Several of them, check the Bible.

(General laughter)

2 Only because we think that we know this because of our fellowship but also because of modern Christianity. The Catholic Church, indulgences, go to priest, etc.

F We have to have rules, frankly. All sorts of rules, out there. How many cups of juice do you take? But what if those rules became sin? What if someone wanted to sing just whenever they wanted to? There are rules that are necessary.

1 No more far fetched than the one cupper movement.

2 I said all that to say that this is teaching our people.

F Evangelizing our own people.

2 Hermeneutics and cannot really understand without interpreting Scripture and they think someone else could be wrong.

F Elder 7 would you read this again? How does this text convert us in our corporate lives?

7 Elder 7 reads. Elder 5 picks up pen and underlines for the first time the notetaker witnessed. Elder 5 and Elder 1 still leaning back in chairs, with reading in their laps. Elder 7 reading aloud still sitting and leaning forward, holding up text to read it. Elder 2 leaning back in chair and holding text up as he reads.

F Where do you find points of conversion in our personal and corporate lives?

5 We refuse to falsify, cunning, we refuse to do things that are wrong even if that is what our boss wants us to do. Also, the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So while we are working in our work or personal, Jesus is made visible.

F I think we have to do that at SE too. Renounce shameful things. Let the word of God speak. We don't have to dance around it.

5 God hates homosexuality. We are not going to say it is okay, come on over.

2 Interesting in the catholic church now are wrestling with if homosexuals are celibate.

5 Alcoholics.

1 If I have a tendency to steal things but if I don't ever do it.

2 Keep my life under control, buffet my body.

F So that we might demonstrate God's endurance...let's focus in on v. 18. for what can be seen is temporary. Sometimes we see this as two different realms. What can be seen is today and what cannot be seen is tomorrow. Not that there is some spiritual realm that is permanent.

1 I want to say that is not true.

F Paul says, don't be saying this body doesn't matter. What can be seen is that he has been afflicted in every way. Today, temporary. What cannot be seen is eternal. Hope and tomorrow which are in the hands of God.

7 Life is short.

F The other two verses: for the sake of the world...our mission is to participate in God's mission. If God loves the world, we love the world. ..the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. The ambition of God is humanity. Our mission is not to park inside the building, but to live for the sake of the world. Our neighborhood. If we don't send our people out and grow strong, we will have been unfaithful.

2 We have always had problems with: what does going out look like? And I really think that we have hit on some of the things so we can go out. We are doing more than just sitting in the building. To be encouraged so that we can stand when we go out. To not become worldly so that we can influence the world.

F In light of today's lesson, the commission would be to go out and practice kindness.

2 It is real living, not go out and knock on doors, bus ministry...

F In the past we have said that evangelism is about argument.

1 Our purpose in life is not to win arguments. but to win souls.

2 Get to know people, jazzercise, softball, ladies work, men's activities... people get connected. Once connected they go through and understand grace....

1 You said something a few minutes ago that people with shallow knowledge and shallow purposes: the Bible says not to love the world and this is not a contradiction.

5 The world is where we have to live.

F The god of this world has blinded the mind of the unbelievers.

2 This is not easy stuff. Trying to relate this to 1 Cor. And what he is talking about is how the Greeks lived--the temple feast, thinking okay to go to prostitute.

1 To marry your mother....

F Gentlemen, thank you. Thank you for thinking. Thank you for thinking and loving Scripture.

1 And we love you.

(All affirm.)

5 And we love Sandra, too.

2 It is more than just a blessing....

F I am wanting you to have animation....for you to see having the last words of the assembly to be an honor, a privilege, not an obligation, it is that you get to speak a blessing over His people.

5 It used to be something that you just did but now hopefully we are thinking of what the congregation needs at this time. We have more passion for it.

Next Sunday, to meet again.

6 D-Min (demon) possessed :0)

Field Notes – Session 5– Following the Models

16 October 2005

F Our next gathering it is important that no one is left out. Elder 7 and elder 8 are not with us today. Two in a row for elder 4. He has family obligations on Sunday. The next meeting will make it work for eight. Now I want us to turn to practicum. So begin with second paragraph on first page. Some things the blessing is not. Elder 6, thank you for your thoughts.

6 I thought I had a song but I couldn't remember it.

F When you look through here and it says advent, the lectionary is three years of the OT, Psalms, gospel teaching lessons. The goal of lectionary was to keep preachers from just preaching what they like and just their own preferred Scriptures. In the Methodist church, you would be choosing from four texts.

2 So they are all doing the same thing.

F Yes, any churches should do this with some profit.

3 And in the last advent they unite? (light hearted)

F It is year B, what Bass Mitchell did is take the text he was going to preach and wrote a blessing based upon the text he was going to use. I was excited that he did this in response to my e-mails. His Homilies by e-mail is a service for those who need help with the preaching task.

6 Advent 1b question. What is the Scripture cited here?

2 It is the text for the lesson.

F Then what follows that is the blessing he wrote for the lesson.

3 Confusing because it is backwards. (the blessing is before the text)

F My fault, I put in the text. If you were to give the blessing you'd read or say as it

is given.

2 It seems like to make it as, certain amount of what we say is spontaneous but it also shouldn't be just read aloud. If you know it is coming from one of your shepherds you know it is meaningful.

1 And if you were listening to the message then it helps them to know that they got the same message.

5 We don't need a word for word quotation for our people.

F When speaking the blessing, I have read Scripture, too.

5 From the heart is good.

2 It is a bit unnatural. God has really commissioned for you to do this. We can speak with confidence.

5 You should know what you are going to say. Sometimes based upon the lesson I will throw out what I had but I always have something planned.

2 I do best when I write it down I may not read it all.

1 Make sure it is on point. The lesson is sent to you every week.

5 I am not getting the e-mails. (referring to the lesson notes e-mailed on Thursdays)

6 Neither am I.

2 I have six addresses for you.

5 I cannot get on line during work so it has to be on line where I am at.

6 I feel better using Scripture.

F What I like about what elder 5 has said is that it is Scripture that you have integrated. It is a translation.

6 I don't have a problem reading Scripture and making application.

2 It is like you could read this all week and boil it down to what you think.

3 I was prepared this morning. But I don't do it until I hear your message that morning. Mine this morning would have been may God walk with you as He is in the light. I like what Elder 1 said. I don't know how it hurts to correlate.

1 This is a reminder for everybody.

F I hope that the lesson is worth carrying outside and that the church is going to make a difference out there. That their religion is not inside the walls, but out there. We are here getting oriented.

2 Probably needs to be some teaching so that people don't wrap their Christianity 'that I have come to church Sunday morning' that it is to get me pumped up and ready to combat the world and do what it takes to be in the world but not of the world.

F Absolutely.

2 Our people have it so ingrained in the way we think. I have been critical about the past.

3 Maybe not on point but so much of what Michael has been doing in the lessons has been given many things to think about. My focus is to bring out one of those things to focus on. With eight of us we all have different things that we look at. I want to disagree with you a bit this morning when people do need to get something out of coming this morning just to survive. Whether it be health or financial or ...and since there are eight of us with different perspectives then we are rolling out different ideas.

2 My whole thought is that our religion is wrapped up in what we 'do' as opposed to what we can get to boost us up or send out. For example, I was talking to Buck and Madeline and they were worried about not getting to come to class.

3 But there is 'x' amount of people is that what they need and in an undetermined way leave and give to others. Like Cyndi Exxx, she is coming to survive. She doesn't have to carry a message.

F Both/and. I want to turn past some of the long Scripture passages. Turn to page six.

1 I like page three , 'when your surprises burst on us we should greet them'...that is the way to take the stuff that comes to you.

5 And if that was me, I would have to simplify it.

F The angel came. The angel called. And... It is through the eternal call.

1 If they were all written out it would sound like him (Mitchell).

5 To me it is just words. I go to the Methodist Church and hear these words and they are just words to me.

F That is not how you are being equipped.

3 So on the last advent we do unite. (attempted humor – to lighten the moment)

F What I hope for you to see are templates. Page six, Epiphany 6b. Read aloud. From Ash Wednesday to Mardi Gras.

1 They are all drunk, they didn't hear any of this.

3 Do the Methodists practice Ash Wednesday?

5 I don't know, never been there on that day.

F Ash Wednesday can be powerful depending upon how you are wired. Occasionally to take up some of the tradition as a formative practice. When you don't have to it can be liberating.

1 If you have wine and good videos. (lighthearted)

F I'd like to have a Good Friday service.

2 Our tradition has been to run away from anything they do. (speaking of formal

liturgy)

Computer froze. Prompted break to be taken.

3:44 p.m. Elder 4 arrives.

F Now on page 9 with really short blessings, that was the mice and me comment from Elder 2. Now, you too, go in peace...

6 I don't think I could do this.

F This is what the Methodists do.

5 And the church has no say so over who the minister is in the Methodist church.

F You have all this with you. Some of them could be like that where you are borrowing someone else's words. The best blessings come from you and are your words as they are formed by Scriptures and the theme of the day and by God.

3 Elder 1, I see you in 14b. I am serious. "Wisdom will still call you, teach you; so listen, learn, and live out the wisdom God shares."

6 Where is 725b?

3 No, you can't see you saying that?

1 Yes, I can see me saying that.

F And 15b, submit yourselves to God. It could be a song lyric from the day. If there is song lyric that has been part of the worship assembly, that is one of the things that stick in people's heads. What made me think of that 18b. (God be with you 'till we meet again.)

2 What is going to happen is what elder 3 said is that the blessing you give that day is going to hit a certain percentage of people and some it will go over their heads. Hopefully the more we do this, some will think, we're through. That is human nature. But there will be those who say...Elder 3 I really got what you said.

5 And may hear one of us more or better than another.

F If you take it seriously and it enhances the opportunity for the word to be heard and responded to. That it is not a ...it is a task that you care about.

2 Whatever the elders say and if it is genuine, the people want to hear it. The old tradition about elders in the churches of Christ, they sit in a room and make decisions. Now, hopefully we can get our members out of that mode. Because what we say they can do something about that. We are seeing a bit of that. Glenn Bxxxxxx who wants to do this special Friday. And no elder said, no. People are accepting that they can be empowered by God's word or a message from you or one of us. To me it is the meals that the ladies fix and carry over, the visits that we each do. No one of us can do it all. I am impressed with the people who go to visit. There was a room full of people visiting Reba. Once people get to understanding that just going to visit is important. Lillie called

and talked to Glenda and calls me Mr. Xxxxx She wanted us to pray for her. We went to the hospital that afternoon. That is the kind of thing that you have to latch on to.

F Have you had words with Linda Rxxxxx lately? She says that Angela doesn't have Crohn's anymore.

3 We shouldn't be surprised when it does happen. Not think that there must be some mistake.

6 On 17b, is that leader and participant?

F Yes, both. And could be on an overhead or a slide.

3 It is in the context, why would he use the phrase grant 'me' shouldn't he have used God grant 'us' or 'you'?

F Yes, that should be communal. Two are out today.

4 They didn't kick off til 3:45.

F This is the next eight topics. The stewardship lessons are numbers 4 and 5 and 6. This assignment will be for our next gathering. If Sunday isn't going to work, I'll work hard to negotiate the time together. This time, you write a blessing based upon that theme or that text.

1 Based on one of these?

F Yes, each of you will get one. And next week we will do what elder 3 did a while ago and that is constructive critique.

3 I didn't know that I ever did that. (Joking about being constructive.)

F Let's read through these texts and talk about what we see happening in the texts and around the themes. Next Sunday is about faithfulness. The question is why would God choose to work through Israel? Why would God pick Abraham? Hagar. Ishmael. Isaac. Isaac marries Rebekah. Scheme. God picks these people and He keeps blessing them.

1 He sees things we don't see.

5 He loves us all like that, though.

F Jacob had 12 sons. All good boys—what an interesting lot of people. Reading: "it is not because you were numerous..." we live in a throw away world.

6 My dad has a 75 Buick.

F The contrast is that God is steadfast and faithful not because we deserve.

3 I would jump to 2 Tim 2 to see if it would fit. That no matter what we do God is faithful.

F But remember that we want to send the people out to practice, not give them more data.

1 But God wants us to be faithful.

F Parents, workers, be faithful to the task, by the power of God, amen.

3 Another verse that jumped is the woman caught in adultery and how she was chosen, special, not because of things she had done. Verses 7 and 8 jumped at me that way and here this lady was chosen to be special and some people took this several years later and perhaps she was the one who washed Jesus' feet. Because she was chosen even with the imperfections.

1 He could have chosen any way. Why did he choose us? I don't know.

3 I would jump to the side of saying that we may come and not feel worthy or that we are worth something to God and I would jump to that side. That is where I would be coming from.

F That is right on target!

2 From Hebrews he says that they did remain faithful to some degree. You look at the good in people and not the weakness. But God allowed his message to flow through this cloud of witnesses and we can, too. I am so amazed that...tell you this story. Some of you don't know who Penny and Bill Nxxx, very irregular attenders for quite a long time, five or six years or maybe ten years. We just kept on. Do you know that they have gotten so interested in being a part of the Life Group that they are just as regular and they returned from a trip to bring dessert...all I am saying is that this might be God's timetable. We tend to write them off. Something turned them on. I gather it is this non-judgmental spirit that we have here. Because that flows to other people.

4 Welcome.

2 There are people out there on the fringes and God can take them. God takes people and make something out of them.

1 It is a loaded passage.

3 That is why this is good. We are all coming from different places.

2 I didn't see that she was healed but that she was faithful. That is what I would have said. To me that would be a good shepherds blessing is to put yourself in the pathway of God.

5 God is faithful, put Him first in your decisions this week.

F Yes! Go with God. Number 2: if you have bitter....reading aloud...What do you see there?

3 They come to me very quickly. Eph 5 or first of six, make your speech wholesome.

2 I see this gentleness as something that elders have to learn because there will be many people that will come with one thing or another. Want someone to talk to.

5 Full of emotion.

4 May have a burr under their saddle.

- 1 Pulp or no pulp...how many do I have to talk to?
- 2 I am saying that they need to see us as gentle if my blessing is going to be gentle. Also, if I know your life, I know you may have a flare up, and he wants to send off a two page e-mail. That gets the steam out of you.
- 5 You are supposed to write those two pagers and then hit delete. (laugh)
- 2 We have to be gentle. Think about that ahead of time. And you can be gentle. It can cause people to change the way they walk and be gentle because Jesus was gentle. Any of that type of thing. Gentleness they can see.
- F Phil 4:5 let God's gentleness .. be evident to all. That would be enough.
- 6 I am afraid that many do not see gentleness in God. Many see the harsh side of God. That if you don't do right you will get zapped.
- F But God is slow, is patient.
- 5 Think before you speak. That is the one that gets us in trouble.
- 1 Probably gave two ears and one mouth for a reason. Better to be silent than to speak and remove all doubt.
- F Let's do one more and then let you claim your territory. Self control will be to let God reign and self-control. Not like God would need to be controlled but God does show restraint. That is what I am thinking about in the I Peter passage...reading passage...manage yourselves.
- 1 Reflect God as He is holy.
- 3 That is the easy one. I don't like to do things that way.
- 5 Our society is full of a bunch of garbage and we have to control ourselves, even just watching a t.v. show. I just can't understand what some people watch and proclaim that they are Christians. And bring your children?
- 1 Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh.
- 4 I always wondered how people knew about Christina Aguilera's video—had they watched it?
- 2 A certain level of maturity—that some things won't impact you. Of the world and not part of the world.
- F We are not of the world but in the world. And self-control or restraint would allow me to delete those e-mails.
- 2 I have done that before, too. I am glad that I didn't send them.
- 1 In Ecclesiastes, There is nothing I withheld from life and it was a waste a time. I tried it. So I can tell you that if you try it, you'll find it to be a waste of time.
- F We are slow learners.
- 1 We are sick of this manna. Manna in the morning...

- F Choose your poison, gentlemen.
- 5 Can be prepared now for later.
- 3 How is the best way to present this? I use my driving time for this.
- F In two or three sentences.
- 2 It has to be repetitive.
- F Any territory that they want to claim?
- 1 Just assign us.
- F Ok: Elder 2, 1. Elder 5, 2. Elder 6, 3. Elder 1, 4. Elder 3, 5. Elder 4, 6. Elder 8, 7. Elder 7, 8. Thank you gentlemen.
- 3 Next time we meet we are going to do this?
- 5 So you can criticize us.
- 3 Constructively.
- F And then next time you will prepare a blessing that will be prepared by you and it will be video taped. We are closing in on the conclusion of this equipping exercise.

Session 6– Communal Critique of Written Blessings

22 October 2005

8:12 a.m.

F Going over handout...we want the church to be the kind of church where Sunday is a time of healing, blessing. Your blessing is designed to be the last thing we do in the assembly and you the pastors are sending them out to be the church. Theme for worship for the day. All Scripture intensive. Today in a community of discernment...you don't get to lead unless the community has discerned that you can do it. I don't get to preach unless this community says that this is acceptable. Constructive and positive way, as we are learning to send the church in the world, we are taking a stab at this. In all kindness and constructive ways we want to share your work. We'll take in number order and begin with elder 2.

Here's Elder 2's. Two stabs at it. Assignment on faithfulness Deut. 7 passage.

We often ask the question...I must believe that God will say what he says he will do. It is my encouragement that you go out this week and be faithful...God is faithful, let's also be faithful.

- 5 For Elder 2 it is a little long. (laughing)
- 2 Uh-oh!
- 5 Elder 8 is a visual person.

- 3 Is that a blessing?
- F That is what works for some people with arms up and outstretched.
- 3 Sounds like an admonishment not a blessing.
- 1 I'm not fussing at you, I consider it a blessing to 'get after it,' 'go get 'em.'
- F One of the essentials: a blessing is a pronouncement of God's blessing over God's people, that God is with you, so every Sunday in some way or another that is what you are saying to the church. Difference between admonishment and blessing is that God is in you, loving you, choosing you, go and hold on, be faithful as God is faithful.
- 5 Choose Him.
- 1 Could change it to "God is with you. Go with God."
- F You are called to admonish but we want the blessing to be a blessing.
- 1 There are times to rap people on the knuckles but this isn't it.
- F Let's read Elder 2's second blessing.
- 4 Elder 4 reading second blessing...
- F You know you would have to read those words. Hard to just speak it.
- 3 I feel that it is a little closer to the blessing side. What is next to last sentence?
- 4 Read last sentence.
- 3 So in a way he is calling down the blessings that...well, he is not asking for God to bless he is saying if you do this, God will bless.
- F Which is true.
- 3 Yes.
- F But it is kind of like waiting for the blessing instead of letting it be delivered.
- 3 Certainly not taking responsibility for it. If no blessing comes, you tried.
- 4 Yes, you tried.
- F It rains on the just and unjust and God watches over his children.
- 1 You could do that with a gesture, hands to chest, 'just', hands to audience 'unjust.' (laughter)
- 8 The blessing is not a teaching tool.
- F You are just setting in their imagination that they are not walking out the door by themselves. You are really changing the world for them. They are being reminded that the power of God is leaving with them. When I write chapter 5: implications, I would like to put some of this to the test with our congregation.
- 1 They would no more notice that than they would notice that I have put new tires on my car.

F But that would fit our enterprise here.

4 It made us late...

8 I am not sure that most of the church thinks of us any more than that we are good guys...not just some smoke thing on stage and we are famous. Moses was more than that. If Moses were to come and bless you it would be a big deal.

5 He was one of millions.

3 I don't know that the congregation would know us for who we are.

5 Have three groups: 1 that know who we are, 2nd that don't know what elders are, 3rd that have come from other congregations and are making comparisons.

1 Elder 3 is at a disadvantage because he was here as a kid.

4 None of us have been here less than 18/19 years.

8 Everyone here knows us as people...I don't know if they noticed unless we did something very different.

5 That is human nature.

F That is really good...yes, they could say 'look what God is doing.' You have to know that being an elder has changed you.

8 I don't know if the congregation sees that.

5 For myself, a whole greater appreciation for the broad based, not just zeroing in on one focus, whereas we see ministry leaders, deacons, staff, members are more singular in focus.

4 Elders are looked at differently.

F There is a presumption that there is spiritual insight, being able to see with a broad focus...I would think it makes your prayer life more desperate in a positive sense.

5 It is a huge responsibility.

F Let's move on to elder 5.

5 I don't know if I want to go now...laughing....

5 God gives us his blessing to be gentle and yielding and so this week when you are in Wal-mart in the express lane with 20 items, and the person behind you has 2, yield. Embrace God's blessing....

F I love that!

1 We don't have your sermon. You underlined yielding so I made sure that I put that in there. That is what I read there.

4 That's the best blessing ever ... laughing

5 I probably wrote that six times. I didn't have embrace it at the bottom. I said 'don't reject God's wisdom, I added 'embrace it.'

F How was your process?

5 My process was trying to figure out what you were going to do with that Scripture! I know you could be yielding to God but yielding to people is also yielding to God.

F How is God willing to yield?

5 Lots of times he doesn't destroy us.

F Back to Moses...Moses pleads for the people. Where else?

5 See it when Elijah was in the cave and God wasn't in the strong wind but in the soft voice...that is gentle. I want to say when I first did this, I talked about traffic and someone pulling up in the front of the line and let them in. I am talking there about 'bad' people and letting them in. At the grocery store, though, I don't know anything about a person's actions.

4 And you made it more personal and real instead of traffic.

5 I wanted to make it real, not just theology.

F If gentleness is a characteristic of God there is so much we can see.

5 Also I first said God gives us wisdom, it is God's wisdom he is giving, not just ours.

3 I don't know, but I give a standing 'o.'

1 I give a 'round' of applause.

F Next to elder 6...brief break...several up getting coffee, answering cell phone...reading self-control part...set all your hope...

6 I did not use the text here, I assumed this was the preaching text.

F Correct. This was used to give thematic guidance. But you can also use the text, too. Elder 5 saying you have to make it concrete and real...

F Elder one got generosity....he got stereotyped.

1 Somehow it always get around to money...generosity. Well, probably the most familiar and quoted verse in the Bible, you could ask 10 people--give me a verse, judge not and you shall not be judged...but the very next verses says 'give and it shall be given to you....' For with the same measure you give...I love that picture and it is either true or it is not. It is absolutely true and reliable. Try him and you will know it.

F Very good admonishment. How to turn it just a tad so that we put it on the people?

3 My comments will be a test about whether mine will be okay or not...laughing...business / trial/ close. Personalize it a bit and said and 'have you been blessed?' And ask God blessed as you have been blessed.

5 We are all blessed...examine your life and you can see how God has blessed you.

F God is working with you for your blessing. Would you allow it? Cooperate with Him so that he can press down and heap blessing on you? Would you allow it? We are saying that you are reminding them that God is with them...on the heels of gentleness you could brush Him away and not receive the fullness. But you want to say that God is so near....

5 Allow Him to bless you.

F As you are generous in your words and in your giving, the world changes.

5 But it wasn't too long, elder 1. You were more brief than usual!

1 I can't get up there and say a one sentence thing.

3 Whenever you talk about generosity, you are so successful in getting people to give.

5 Because you are real.

1 Thank you. I just want people to know how much is out there and is available to them and not *quid pro quo* and yet God kind of says it will.

F That is because God is near us.

1 It may not be what you asked for, but you will get blessings. You get them anyway if you just look around. You are here this morning...no walkers--ain't it great to be able to come in here and worship here? God is blessing you already...

5 You have to be careful with specifics about blindness and walkers...

F I was wondering about what I heard on KSBJ and blessed by having a spot removed, cancer...I don't what to steal your praise but what about those who are not healed?

3 I think we all need to have gone through something that we have prayed for in our life that we haven't received...so that we have joy, empathy...and not everyone has done that.....not 'need' but we are better equipped when we have been in that place.

F That is why elders are elders...experience living this way.

5 Sometimes we say things that we haven't thought about and we get ourselves out of it.

1 Have to be so 'kid glovey' today...there is some city that is going to perform Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, but instead they are the 'guardians of the forest'...

3 Maybe have to take out the word white and put in a person of light complexion (laughing).

5 They do that on a TV show and put it in cultural correct terms.

3 At the age of 15, I wanted a motorcycle really really bad. I walked home from school that day visualizing a motorcycle in my driveway. When I couldn't see it in my driveway I thought maybe it was in my garage. That was a good gift that my dad had an opportunity to give me that he did not. But what dad did give me was the gift of

encouragement, presence in speaking, but because of other things that God has given me I am able to stand before you with confidence. Who among you....I pray that you will have the knowledge and understanding of using your blessings.

1 I am relieved that his is longer than mine.

3 My theme song at my work seminar is that we can work it out.

8 I envision: may God bless/keep or do something--isn't that the first three or four words in a blessing?

5 I don't think you have to say it.

4 No...I don't think so either.

F I think it can go either way. The Lord bless you and keep you...

5 And we put it on the screen to tell them what we are doing.

F Elder 3, I think your gift of generating imagination is very good. I wonder about announcing the fact that God has already equipped the people...it is already in the garage...

3 So you are saying that I should say the gift is in the garage....or not?

F Yes....

8 But that wasn't your point...yours was God is giving you gifts, use them.

5 It might not be what you are looking for.

3 What you are saying is drive that further to the action side.

F Because we are asking them to be the church for the sake of the world. Push to next level to say 'as the gifts God has given you...'

3 That is what I thought I was implying...was that God has blessed me with those gifts...I am using them and that is why I am standing in front of you...

F Holding on to your metaphor...what I recognize is that when I get into church speak...but your gift of imagination...close with that metaphor. What is in your garage? May not know what is in there.

4 It might be in there.

1 I would have to move so much stuff to get to it....laughing.

5 Matthew (his son) just moved his stuff back into the garage from the apartment.

3 What I'd like to do is to back up, read what I said.

F Add or say that God's presence with you has given you gifts...you are empowered...maybe they are in your garage...you are closing parenthesis. Brother [elder 4]--gratitude...

4 Thank you Lord, is to be our attitude. An attitude of gratitude. If it isn't quite good, praise God becauseshare your joy in thankfulness...you have been blessed by

God.

5 Best one you've ever done, elder 4.

4 Just wait until next week!

3 Read the next to last sentence again.

4 Be joyful do not put out the spirit that is God's will for you. Go out and share your joy with those you come in contact with. Go and share your joy as you have been blessed by God.

F That changes their world. You have every reason to have joy.

5 Don't hold it in.

1 All have things not of joy in their life. Say a bumper sticker that says 'alleluia anyway.'

4 Richard Rogers had a book titled that.

F Christians with a defiant 'Nevertheless!' I think that works really well, elder 4.

1 Way to go, elder 4!

5 Very good!

F Elder 7 is not here. As we are gearing up towards Christmas?...Jesus is coming. Whole tenor is anticipation. God is about to do something. And here we are in the waiting. Didn't give clues about what themes were. Advent 2.

8 I would read some of this...refresh Mark 1: See I am sending my messenger ahead of you...prepare the way of the Lord. Just as God used John the Baptist to lead the way for Jesus....it leads to a glorious eternity with God. Leads to a glorious road map. May we hear God calling this week expressing his wonderful call for us as we help others show eternity with God.

4 When you said 'may' you hope this would happen. Say 'will' you have it....

F The lesson insight...appeared in the wilderness. Here is John and the picture is wandering ...right on target with the pathway. John is the image of Moses. Wandering--across the water--and journeying home. I think that is right on target with prepare the way. We now see the way. You are not alone as you are walking. We will walk with you. And we will make it home.

8 The point of mine was that God would walk with us. May we hear God calling us this week hearing his wonderful plan for us. I could add God is walking with you and so am I.

F Spirit of God with us. Whole anticipation thing. Part of lesson. Waiting for Jesus to come.

3 What is the most important thing, elder 8, that you wanted people to get out of it?

8 I wanted people to be able to vision that God is calling them to stay on the

path...the calling (hey, I am over here) so may we hear God calling this week expressing his wonderful plan for us.

3 That's not what I heard. I heard two separate ideas but you are saying they are connected.

8 When you hear God calling, it is to keep us on the path.

F Even turn into direct statement that says God is calling you. Hear him. He is calling you to the straight paths that lead home.

5 Stay on the straight path.

F And call on others out there where you work and live. You can help them, lead them. God is calling them through you!

5 Help your brother get back on path, depending upon the sermon.

3 It is the last advent that we unite...joke.

1 And He wants nothing more than for you to make progress on the path.

F All very encouraging...

3 So how would you summarize what you've heard today versus what you've heard in the past few months. Do you see movement?

F I think this is a quantum leap. It is a shaping, difference between sawed off shotgun, or outright misfire. Sometimes the Shepherd's blessing wasn't something we knew what to do with, sometimes it has been another lesson...or could have been a comment on the sermon...sometimes on point, sometimes not.

5 Not my fault, I wasn't getting the sermons then.

8 Sometimes it would be just something that was on my mind...not attached to the lesson.

4 Which I think is good...sometimes if it is on your mind, you have something to say.

F It is not just to go and be warmed and filled. If I think I have packed them to the gills and you give one more thing...then I think what I told them will leak out!

8 There is a limited amount of what people can take in.

3 Don't get a take home box with leftovers. Go off and leave it.

8 You could give two or three points if you do it in a very meaningful way.

5 Hopefully the point is also the point that we leave them with.

8 Almost would think that your closing five sentences and the blessings two or three sentences are very close together.

4 Unless you get up there and say what he really meant.....

8 Forget everything you just heard....laughing

- 5 What he meant to say...laughing.
- 3 Easier to tie with comment...
- 8 Have your last 3-5 sentences with your 'wishing' of what we could have a blessing about. Conclude lesson with that point and blessing be that point, too..
- F Good idea and blessing.

Break and assignments for next time

9:15 a.m.

- 8 Should we keep these?
- 3 Could we coordinate with Sarah that we have the shepherd's blessing on the one we've already done?
- 8 We could copy it...elder 2 said...if you don't like it talk to elder 2.
- 3 I gave my boss's presentation at a seminar about a year ago. I am speaking on behalf of Dave and turned to board and I promise I will never be late again...laughing...
- F Bottom of page three are the assignments for oral blessing...open choosing for now...assign the remaining...
- 8 Want to do same numbers?
- 5 We have to do whatever is there...so.
- 8 No I want to...
- F Okay just take same number...laughing...
- 5 What is the difference between oral and written?
- F We are going to do this in worship center...and video tape.
- 8 Not going to giving this to the congregation or our wife or kids?
- F Essence is practice of doing.
- 1 Also to show that you didn't make this up!
- 8 I'm going to wear tank top and shorts.
- 4 Look at the one I have....the time we have is short....wow. (laughing)
- 1 So did we get these assigned?
- F You have number 4.
- 8 We just need to have it written?
- 5 That is why mine are always short...I can't remember much.
- 8 Still trying to figure out difference between oral and written. Are you trying to critique our physical gestures?

- F Well, mostly words...but also gestures.
- 8 That is what I was afraid of...
- F It is an opportunity to practice doing that. You have to try something on.
- 1 Should be able to deliver without something in hand.
- 5 With a sign...please release us, let us go, give him his degree.
- 4 Michael is my mentor ... (laughing)
- F It is the next step in practice.
- 8 The mannerisms ... I am afraid that I will have a problem with that. (Thinking about raising his hands, and us raising our hands.)
- F It would be a distraction?
- 8 What has Elder 1 got in that bottle of water? Some people raise their hands. But I know that people look at them and wonder 'what is that?' If we stood up and did that, I think that it would cause an uproar...
- 4 If it is natural for someone...even us, it is okay.
- 3 I don't feel scripturally restrained.
- 5 It is our environment. And environment changes over time.
- F I think I could do that easily (lift my hands toward to people).
- 8 Your hands are moving in your sermons, but that is not how they know us.
- F The success of this project has nothing to do with gestures.
- 5 I am trying to make it a point to have eye contact with the whole audience.
- F You can close with prayer if you want but what you are really doing is looking at these people and having a direct conversation with them. Thank you for giving of your Saturday morning....

Field Notes – Session 7– Elder Feedback on Video Presentations

14 November 2005

This meeting was in the conference room on Monday evening. The scheduled meeting time was 6:30 pm. Elder 2 was running late. Elder 6 was the only one unable to attend this session.

F We will go one at a time. All are very good.

8 Everyone in this room is perfect.

The tape is going at 6:52 p.m.

F Michael's blessing is played.

1 Elder 1's blessing played.

1 Elder 1's response: I would probably have been smoother if I had prepared it more. I was told to come on over now and do it. We were going to be out of town and so I came on over. That was with very little preparation. Typically I will put in more time than five minutes like I did on that one. I don't make apologies for the content.

8 Elder 1 is always so genuine when he is up there. He didn't raise his hand and go 'unnnn.'

4 He did have his Bible up.

1 I could have held my hands up but I held my Bible.

F What made this challenging?

1 Challenge to be upbeat and give them something they can take away. I always feel good when someone puffs me up and it gives me opportunity to change a life and keep it going for a week. Always a challenge to motivate, in sales, in gospel. We went yesterday and talked with Linda Kxxxx and Mike and I think that if I could get him alone for five or ten minutes I bet I could get Mike to come to church. He loves her. She loves him. He would be thrilled to please her. Even if you don't believe it, come anyway, because you love Linda. And we are thrilled that they are both here.

4 You probably would say it.

F Reflect more, good things...how is it a blessing

2 That is my question. Elder 1 is the most genuine appearing as well of all of us. He is the most demonstrative of all of us, too.

8 The word demon is in there....

3 It is definitely to make one feel good. I am questioning. Is that part of the deal of what we are to accomplish? What I didn't hear was a charge. You could walk away and feel really good.

7 What I heard was that I was to live as a child of the king. During that week if I remember that challenge that would be where the blessing would lay. That you go from here and behave in this way.

5 I can't say anything bad about it, Elder 1, because I said the same thing on mine.

1 I heard a guy ask what if you got a phone call in the morning and were told that 'I just love you and glad to know you and I hope that this is the best day you ever had', now what kind of day would you have if you knew someone was rooting for you?

3 I am envious and covetous of the way that you portrayed yourself.

1 I sell an emotional product (insurance).

3 No, you are not a product, you are real.

1 I couldn't have done it better if I had done it on purpose.

F One of the things that I hear you saying that I want to affirm is that you are shaping the imagination of the congregation just before you leave. That is exactly the blessing. You are a child of the king. God is with you. And don't forget who you are. And it shapes their imagination for the events taking place.

2 I will either resign or be put on a rack.

F I like the personal story because people relate to that. And I would wonder you had three elements and maybe three is too many. Personal story, Romans, go out and remember you are a child of God. You might want to consider one less for effectiveness sake to hold them and deliver the goods.

1 If I'd had more time I would have paraphrased more.

F I want to support that, too. This is worth preparing for.

1 If I am off the hot seat, yes, I am ready to go on.

7 Would it be easier if we knew the text they are working off of?

F On to elder 8's--Jesus heals many people...(listening and watching elder 8's blessing)

2 Hmmm, it's good.

8 I don't remember it (laughing). I like elder 1's better.

4 I think he kept looking at one side. More effective to scan the audience.

8 You really need to memorize so that you can look right at them.

3 It's hard to get up for practice.

F I really think people would listen. For elder 8 to get up and say that the power of God's healing is available to you, people would listen.

3 Elder 8 has a natural charismatic way, who you are and your voice and it does carry a lot of weight. You and E. F. Hutton speak....

8 I could ask for money.

3 Difference in the 2 of you and elder 1.

5 Elder 1 is more on the emotional side and you are more on the fact side.

3 If you were explaining why we needed money people would listen, I really liked how you began several sentences with the word 'embrace' and I felt that helped to bring the message home. Clear message that you go with.

1 The ability to help people be healed, to help them have the right mind-set is inherent in each of them is in elder 8's ability. I had a whole stack of cards last year, and one card that I think of frequently was from Margaret Bxxxx who said that the great physician is handling your case personally and I consult with him frequently. The power was in Margaret Bxxxx who had the touch as well as we do.

F That was exactly what elder 8 was encouraging them to embrace.

3 (Speaking to elder 8) I don't know if I see a big difference in elder 1's blessings from before but I do see a bigger difference in your focus.

8 When I watch elder 1, that is the elder 1 that I know. When I watch the other ones, that is not how I know the people. When I try to really drive something home, I wonder if the church wonders, 'who is that guy?'

F I think that there is much power in that, it is exhilarating.

8 I know that when I go, boom, boom, boom, I think they wonder if they think I am out of character. It is what I felt ought to be said at that time.

5 If that is what you thought should be said then it is you. I couldn't do that because it is too long. If you can memorize that much, great.

F The next one is elder 6's...

8 I am glad that is over. That was painful. Waiting for the thud.

1 Like reading my fitness report.

Elder 6's is played. (listening and watching elder 6's blessing)

8 That was good.

3 That was probably the best he'd ever done.

8 Retired guys have time to memorize.

1 He seemed uncomfortable, was nervous.

5 When I do things, I like things to be the same. It was all different, bright light, the lectern in a different place, gives me discomfort.

3 What a marked difference from what it was before, right length.

8 He had it memorized....

F I wondered about that beginning phrase, we have a lot to be happy about, he didn't look happy.

7 He took us a great distance in a short amount of time.

F This is elder 7 next. (Listening and watching elder 7's blessing.)

7 Eating meat sacrificed to idols, get it all in there, laughing.

4 That is not fair, because he has been to preaching school.

3 If you didn't know the text, we'd wonder what he was talking about.

2 The audience is ready and probably don't pay attention to the text as we do.

F If the preaching text and blessing are following suit, it will be great. I appreciate the gesture...laughing...

1 Where I went to church last Sunday, the Presbyterian minister looked as if he

might make someone disappear.... (waving his hands).

F The only one I have seen do the hands outstretched is Randy Harris. Gifted, great speaker. He offered the blessing at Highland in Abilene.

F This is elder 5 from Ephesians 1. (Listening and watching elder 5's.)

4 Hey that is great!

8 That is not the elder 5 I know.

F That is because he usually gives another lesson.

8 My concern is that it doesn't sound like elder 5.

5 He is telling me I am shallow.

7 Elder 5 is conversational and that wasn't conversational.

5 One thing is that when we have been doing the elder's blessing, you prepare for two or three days to say two or three lines. It is different but it is still me. When I do it I have to say it fifty times before I can get up there and say. I will start out and look at what I am saying and think, no, and I will change it four or five times before I am ready. I realize that I don't want to go there.

F What you are describing is the power of your words. You are wanting to be intentional about how you shape their imagination.

3 I have heard that about elder 5, that you will check and double check that you are wanting to be sensitive to the listeners.

5 I actually thought about saying that you were adopted before you were born and I realized that I didn't want to go there.

7 Elder 5 is normally conversational and maybe the congregation will see that preparation was involved and therefore take it more seriously.

8 If the congregation begins to understand that fact and they will begin to understand that it is deeper than that.

F My goal is twofold....one is that it has everything to do with evangelism....second is about passionate spirituality. According to the NCD stuff---instead of evangelism as a program, the natural part is to send our people out and I think that changes the world.

1 I think that elder 5 had a great message that needs to be hammered out and we all know or those who have done it... adopting is a big process, production. And if we are adopted by God is wasn't by accident. It was and is expensive.

3 Sparky Bxxxx said to me, the week we adopted James, now you will have a whole deeper appreciation of Romans.

F Reading passage from I Corinthians for elder 4. (Listening and watching elder 4's blessing)

4 He spent too much time reading up for it and not preparing the text. (Speaking

about himself.) He had to read it and his nervousness being in front of people was noticed.

3 I thought it was two good blessings. You could have stopped in the middle and both were very good. Pick one and go with it.

F I would encourage more sending language. The unpacking of the content was right on the money.

3 When you said greet everyone as if it was the last time you saw them, that was a powerful place to stop and leave everyone with that. If we could do that.

4 Being an introvert, I was terrified.

2 If the camera wasn't on, you wouldn't have been nervous.

F I thought it was very good.

F Now for elder 3...

3 I prepared this on the way, by the way. (Listening and watching elder 3's blessing.)

1 There you go! Who said he couldn't do it? (joking)

3 They don't come across like you, Elder 1.

F All of you, each of you is very distinct.

1 I have great feelings of inadequacy in this group. You have experts in money, in...

8 You say this after elder 3 talks?

F It is a remarkable blend of talented people.

2 (Speaking to Elder 1) Your humility is obvious.

1 (Elder 1 answers) ...and well deserved. (Laughter)

1 He wasn't looking at the camera.

4 He wasn't over-prepared.

8 The shorter ones seem to keep the power of thought. Elder 5's was real crisp. Elder 4's was a bit long.

3 I thought it was lengthy because I had two, so I paraphrased.

4 Is self-effacing humor okay?

F From this point on it matters not what I want to accomplish---you remind the people that God is wanting to have particular things accomplished.

3 Which verse would you have used, Michael?

5 One problem we had was that we didn't have the sermon. It is helpful once having read the sermon.

3 Given what we had...

F For you knit me together in my mother's womb....that uplifting...listen you are important.

8 Every one of those had a short phrase and said it a couple of times and stopped. You are adopted. You are a child of the king. You take a ten word sentence and drive that home, putting a bunch of stuff begins to sound like another sermon and people get out of sink with you.

F Three sentences and the blessing can get better. This is the finale....Elder 2. (listening and watching Elder 2's blessing)

2 Be bold was my nugget.

F Like hold your head up.

2 I kind of used that Sunday. My original thought was that God's people were a blessed people and we are a blessed people.

1 Who moved my cheese? One of the pictures asks a simple question: what would you do if you weren't afraid? Not scared of anything if God is behind me.

F We are trying to hit a target and the target is God's mission in the world. You are leading them somewhere--the mission of God for the sake of the world. I hope that you will continue to bless...with a clarion call.

8 I noticed one thing. If we ever had to deliver a stern message, Elder 2 would carry that aura, people are paying attention. Some of us are younger and maybe we are good speakers but when you speak people say this is Elder 2, it is important to listen.

4 He is the guy.

1 I agree with that.

8 If we have a difficult message to convey, Elder 2 is the one to carry the message to the congregation.

F I need to turn you guys loose....here is the assignment...this is the science of the project. Three prongs: One is the notes that Sandra has taken. I will take those notes and recount what we've done in the ten hours we've been together. That is just my point of view. Second prong is Fred Kane, he will write a detailed critique. The third element is your opinion. My intention is to be oblique, indirect, I am to ask a question---

8 I am not connecting the dots here. I am running on low gear tonight.

F If I ask you directly, then the thinking is that you are helping elder 8 to get his doctorate. To avoid that I am to ask you an indirect question and you answer the best you can. I will then decipher your metaphors. The title of this project is 'equipping elders' so that is what I have hoped to do.

Whatever you write and turn in will be good.

APPENDIX C

ELDER NARRATIVES

Elder Evaluation—Elder 1

The discussion questions you posed are really open ended so I guess I could write a couple of brief paragraphs or a few pages and still not be fully satisfied that I had been responsive.

How did you come to learn how to become an elder? Wow! This is like the question that was posed from my youth, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” That question has been reverberating in my mind for over half a century and, in fact still does from time to time. I have never actually been placed in a job for which I had been properly trained – and the role of elder is no exception. Our fellowship presents both an advantage and a handicap by our congregational autonomy. This can be an advantage, if you get it right. You just sort of learn the job as you go, and that is okay if it works; but it’s like learning to fly an airplane as you go. We are in a position to do some damage by our clumsy efforts. The handicap, of course, is that since we have no national headquarters and governing authority, we have no required curriculum to negotiate while going through a certification process. Sometimes I wish I had something to rely on except a little plaque which essentially says, “You’re it!”

The process of becoming an elder reminds me of a remark I heard during a presidential campaign: “If a guy seeks the presidency, you have to wonder if he has enough sense to do the job.” There are those well-organized individuals who methodically prepare themselves for the role of elder and then, when they are asked, step right in with little trepidation. That was not my case. I am not well-organized and I recognize it. I married a librarian to try to bring some order into my life, but the task was too great for her. Fortunately, there are others in our group who have that talent in abundance. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the body is made up of many parts, and he considered that an advantage. So, I won’t complain if I don’t have someone else’s gift. But my confession of feelings of inadequacy in our group Monday evening was genuine. We have some really skilled members in our groups and I am blessed by my association with them.

The journey to being a qualified and effective elder is a process and not a destination. If I ever feel that I am qualified for the role, I should probably resign and seek forgiveness for vanity.

I have not been influenced as much by the words as by the lives of some godly men. Don Bachle and Bob Deason are two that come to mind. These saintly men set a high standard for me to aspire to. And I have been privileged to call Jule and Judy Miller, Elaine Ebersole and Fairy Parker my friends. Their examples of faithfulness have given me strength.

The ascension, as it were, to the eldership has brought on a whole new experience of imputed wisdom and authority. Just because I am an elder, some people assume I

know what I am talking about. I am not vain enough to believe them. I am aware of the need to be careful with the words I speak, lest someone be misled by something I might say in jest (e.g. the color of the choir robes have to be coordinated with the paint tones and upholstery in the auditorium).

I have always had respect for my elders and have always agreed to anything they asked me to do, assuming that they saw talents in me that had escaped my notice. Thus, when I was asked to teach a class about twenty years ago entitled “Singles Again,” I agreed to do so, but my heart trembled at the thought. As it turned out, it was one of the best experiences I have ever had in a teaching assignment in the church. Maybe the elders really did know what they were doing! In my own walk in the task of serving as an elder, I am tempted to think of myself more highly than I ought. One of the elder groups in years past even had official stationery prepared with the letterhead proclaiming “From the Elder’s Chair.” I recall my shock when I saw it and remarked to my wife, “Don’t they realize that is *ex cathedra* in Latin? Lord, please keep us from such arrogance.

My vision for the mission of this church is that I want us to be a church where people look forward to coming. None of our ministers or the elders alone can make that happen, but I am thrilled by some of the things I see going on at Southeast. Our ministers each have a gift that contributes to making this a great church. Since I have lived in many places including foreign countries, I might have more of a heart for mission work than some of the others. We have been involved in World Bible School for thirty years or so and that ministry and that ministry could be used so much more extensively here than it is. It is the single most cost-effective method of evangelism in the world today, but most of the people it reaches don’t even have a checkbook. But Jesus told John’s disciples to go back to John and report what they see and hear which included “the gospel is preached to the poor.” That surely is what WBS is all about. Unfortunately, that ministry is not a high-visibility, splashy effort and is purely a financial drain in the local sense. Ah, but we are told that there are more members of the Lord’s church in Africa today than in the United States. Someday they might be sending missionaries here to help rescue us!

Another vision I have for the church is that we will all recognize that we are blessed far beyond any other nation on the earth. If people are committed to Christ and surrender themselves to let Him reign in their lives, we won’t have to wonder how to pay off our church credit cards or do any of the other things we need to do. People don’t know this automatically. Too long we have said tithing is an Old Testament practice and we don’t have to do that. I was pleased last Sunday to hear you use the ‘T’ word and say that it should be at least ten percent of our gross income. I will testify that it works, because we have practiced it throughout our married lives and the Lord blessed us more than I could have ever imagined. My idea is that most people who say they can’t afford it, just haven’t tried it. Please don’t take offense at this, because I know some folks like Rxx and Gxxxx have had astronomical medical bills. God only expects us to use what we have.

You asked where my vision came from. Sometimes we have a clearer vision if we consider what we don’t want to be. We know of congregations where fire and zeal are quenched by a dogged hanging on to traditions. There is a self-satisfied atmosphere there which reminds me of the steward who only got one talent and kept it safe for the master

by hiding it in the ground. Some of our traditions do not really contribute to a vibrant, militant, evangelistic church. And some of those traditions have little basis in Scripture. They are ideas that have been handed down and after a generation or two, become doctrine. Sometimes we have built an entire doctrine on a fragment of a verse. I heard something in recent times concerning a fascination with preserving the orthodoxy of the church. You've probably heard me say it: "You can't get right enough to deserve heaven." I believe that, and consequently, have drawn my circles increasingly larger over the years.

Without specific guidelines as to length, I have rambled on for a while. I hope that any wisdom you might glean from this is not obfuscated by the chaff. This is proof, once again, of another of my favorite quotes which you have heard often: "There are no solutions; only trade-offs." If you don't give us a 'in one hundred words or less...' stipulation, you gotta expect that some of us will wander around, muttering while we are at it.

God bless you as you better equip yourself to serve him.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 2

I grew up in Churches of Christ. My mother was a great influence on me as a young person as she demanded honesty and truthfulness in all of her children. I am a first child and as a result accrued a certain amount of leadership responsibility. My father was an alcoholic, but was a good man and always provided well for the family. After I left home he became a Christian and attended church and supported the family well.

In my early church life I was greatly influenced by one of the regular preachers at the Church in Texas City, Texas. His name was Paul Rogers. He taught me and another church friend to lead singing and be leaders in our young peoples group. He was a genuine person, and like my mother he taught excellence in all of his teachings. This all began when I was about 16 years old. Paul Rogers was a very caring person and since he knew the influence of a Christian education he encouraged my close friend, Bobby Medford and I to consider going to Abilene Christian. We both attended and both graduated after completing our service obligation in the U. S. Army.

I was married after my freshman year in college to my high school sweetheart. We began our journey together not knowing what the future held for us. We fell in love and grew up together being married when I was 18 and Glenda was 17. Glenda has always been the true help mate and has supported me faithfully. At first I thought I wanted to go into ministry. I had no background for such a career and became dismayed about what I wanted to do in life. I thought that army service would give me a chance to make up my mind. Out of some frustration and because of a friend in Texas City, I chose a business career in accounting with the thought of being a leader in the church (not necessarily an elder at that time). Because of my training at ACU, it seemed that wherever we were, there was a need for youth leaders, teachers, song leaders and the like. I learned most of my skills by on the job training. ACU had given me much more

than I had realized. They gave me the basics, both spiritual and physical, and I just naturally applied them where ever we traveled.

One of the opportunities to serve was while I was in the Army. We were in Monterey, California attending army language school and I taught a bible class and led some singing at the church in Pacific Grove. The only song leader they had was one lady who would sit and begin each song. I remember this and because of my training in Texas City I was able to handle the song leading. I taught a class with a number of service men and their wives. This was a great experience and I still remember many of the people who attended that church. In addition, my army career took me to Germany. I was able to be around a number of well known missionaries. Otis Gatewood, Harvie Pruitt, Hugh Mingle, and several German missionaries were among this group. I led singing, taught adult classes and generally helped with the service people who were in Frankfurt. I really didn't realize the great experience I was getting. One of the missionaries, J. R. Smith asked me to stay in Frankfurt after my service obligation and work with the church. He even volunteered to help raise funds for me.

However, my aim was to finish my education at ACU, which I did in 1960. Actually, we returned to Abilene in 1961 after a short stint with the Government (GAO) and worked there for awhile. We attended at old Graham Street Church, now Minter Lane. I led singing and also served as treasurer for awhile. Still more good experience in serving the church. We had several teachers from ACU, Frank Pack and Paul Faulkner were there when we attended. These men preached and we were socially together with them in fellowship situations. Glenda was Paul Faulkner's secretary for a while. He was Dean of Men at ACU at this time.

After the short stay in Abilene, we moved to Arlington, Texas and attended church at the Abram Street church, later to become Randall Mill, and now North Davis where Doug Peters preaches. One of our good experiences was to begin an official young people's group there. I taught both youth and adults while there. This was a strong church with several elders. Hugh Hale and I went to the elders and discussed the need for some to help with the young people and they gave us the job. We learned a lot in dealing with parents and high school kids. This was a hard time for us personally as we had just adopted three children and didn't understand that you were supposed to slow down and spend time with your children. We just did the best we could with job responsibilities, church activities and family. We did not slow down and as a result Glenda almost had a break down. This was when we decided to move to Houston.

I was a CPA with Arthur Andersen at the time and served as a deacon at the Sun Valley church. I was in charge of education, led singing, did the treasurers job and taught adult classes. We went through a building program, and generally the church did very well. I was asked to be an elder, but declined because our daughter, Shelly was young and had not been baptized. Bill Aven counseled with me on this and we probably made the right decision. For the most part I had assumed elder duties as I worked closely with the elders during this period. These men included Bill Aven, Bill McCurdy, John Cliver, Brother Priestly, Lin Brown and Charlie Havens. This was another time of growth and gaining valuable experience.

As a practical matter, the Sun Valley church merged with Southeast Church of Christ but it was a messy situation as a group of dissidents wanted to remain at the old location. They did, and that church died after a few years. For the most part the people that moved to Southeast were the leadership group, teachers and workers. This type of thing is always sad and troublesome because of misunderstandings and hurt feelings. We have survived well. By this time in my church life, I had a massive amount of experience in several areas and continued to teach and help with the education program. Elder 8 and I served on a “planning for the future” committee. We worked hard on this and some of this work planted the seeds that started the elders to think about new approaches for the church and the things necessary to promote growth.

In 1990, I was asked to serve as an elder at Southeast. At this time I felt that I was well prepared to deal with the type of issues elders are faced with and be a servant leader. You learn over time that with each new challenge you call upon your life’s experiences to assist you. God had blessed me and my wife richly with a life time of experience. We had seen almost two cycles of life in our church work. We have taught children and seen them graduate from High School and College and then observed how they have handled life’s demands. You see what is important. Children must have Godly training from the earliest age. They must see stability and honesty in their parents and church leaders and when they do, most of the time the outcome is positive. These are some of the things that elders must be able to see and be a positive influence on the church, as individuals and the church as a whole.

My first experience at being an elder was how to deal with elders who wanted to control every cent that the church spent. I am a financial person and this drove me up the wall. One of our elders wanted to bring up \$100 items at every elders meeting. It wasn’t easy, but this was stopped. This elder later resigned. Several elders were appointed at the same time and it took about two years to learn how to work together as a group; how to get things done with a large number elders (there were 12 or 13 at the time). I worked for several years as a paid administrative elder. This was a great thing and helped free up the other elders for pastoral care and more important matters. This was really a learning experience.

I have continued to grow over the years and have learned a lot about being an elder. I know that the members, the flock, want leadership and care from their elders. They want stability and trust and to know that we are not going down a wrong path. We are working diligently to let the members know that we are genuine and not just a group of leaders sending out pronouncements. Our current minister has encouraged all of the current elders to be more communicative with the church as a whole. We have begun to do this and results seem to be satisfactory to the members and the elders as a whole. We have had a number of crises at Southeast and because of our experienced leadership we have overcome these things without any significant effect on the church as a whole. We are attempting to keep our meeting time down and spend more time in prayer and be more in touch with our members. I personally feel that the encouragement and support given the elders by our minister over the past several months has helped us rethink our roles as elders and be Godly men participating with God and his mission.

I have taken the approach that to be an elder you really do have to be engaged with the people. I believe that I have learned this both from my experience and our ministers efforts to help us think more clearly about our relationship to members and the church as a whole. We must be outward focused in teaching the gospel and totally focused on God and his mission at all times. Even with my breadth of experience I can still learn and help others in their walk with God. I thank God for the opportunities He has given me.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 3

I came to be an elder by nomination of the congregation where we attend. I believe what brought me that was my being a bible class teacher for 15 years at the same congregation. Through that time, I'd come in contact with many different age groups, either by directly teaching them, teaching their children or in some cases teaching their grandchildren. Words spoken that influenced my approach to this ministry were primarily what I observed, not what was spoken to me. My wife's father had been an elder since the day we started dating. Many a Sunday afternoon meal, I experienced first hand some of his thoughts, struggles and workload required for fulfilling his role. It's a wonder I even signed up. In that period, there was a nasty split of the congregation which left many unable to speak to each other. The arguments carried over to the meal table.

Since taking on this role, the most powerful words I think I spoke were directed at one who felt her own salvation was jeopardized because of the dissolution of her marriage. I could sense the comfort that came over her as we, even though it was me speaking, comforted her. I think the time that I was one singular vote on a particular issue, was a powerful time. I had a couple of elders come to me afterward and tell me, they were glad I did speak up, because they were unable. That shaped my willingness to speak my own opinion with some confidence. It also showed me that because of that statement; plans were lessened that ultimately eased the financial situation we find ourselves in today. So, even though the answer was a no, it shifted the decision.

My vision for the church is to generate a place that provides a place of worship that is so fulfilling to those that come, that they can't help but let it shine through their lives that encourage others to attend. This could be by direct invitation or example. However, my vision is balanced by being careful about what we convert people to. If we convert them to feeling good, doing what they think is right, that everything is OK, then that's what we've converted them to. We can use those tools, but we need to convert them to Christ. And while I may be singular in these thoughts, I believe them to be true. This is not to be interpreted that we have to follow the traditions of the past, but, if the tradition of the past is by applying Scripture to shape and mold the body, then it does apply. I'm concerned about a growing thought that "as long as you believe in God it's OK, and everything will be OK". That's oversimplified, but to me the trend is there in our society, and if it's in our society it resides in some of our people as well.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 4

The question is asked: “How did you come to learn how to be an elder?” My answer is that it is still a work in progress. My original tutoring in this was to observe men whom I considered good elders. The qualities that I saw in them were gentleness (or perhaps gentleman-ness), courage, Bible knowledge and LOVE. Not having grown up in the church, the concept of elders was not familiar to me.

Some of the men who have influenced me have been: Bob Deason, Jack Morgan, and Paul Durham at the old Broadway congregation over 40 years ago. Other influences have been Ron Ledgerwood and Edd Davis. Ron was influential, because he is a close friend, a good elder, and somewhat of a mentor. Ron and Edd served as elders at Southeast and are great encouragers of the members. These men exhibited compassion and care for others, were good leaders, etc.

There have been negative influences, too. Don Xxxx was an elder who was sarcastic and down-right ugly to people who did not agree with him. After observing him put-down people in meetings, I vowed I would never do that, nor would I allow it to go unchallenged when I was present. I have also seen men with colossal egos who demanded their way or that their ideas be accepted. They usually did not get it, but they would upset a meeting quickly and the mood would linger. There is no room for large egos and insistence on always having your way.

I have grown through study sessions and retreats. Probably some of the best training and/or learning experiences have been when elders went on retreats and talked long and deeply about subjects or problems. Studying particular subjects with a minister or visiting teacher have been an incredible tool. In these sessions, you can speak your mind freely and it will remain within the group.

Reading has been a primary tool for training. The reading has been from our tradition and well beyond. Authors such as C. S. Lewis, F. F. Bruce, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have shaped my thinking. Reading the Bible, theology, and history are good for your leadership soul.

Crisis is also a helpful teacher leading to the maturity of an elder. Vote the way you think something should be resolved, even if you are in the minority (6 to 1) as I have been. Go forward after the decision is made as if the will of the majority is exactly what you wanted.

I have a dream for this church that it become the type of church where our children will return after going off to college. I want them to be proud of this church, willing to say, “That is my church.” It is of course, Christ’s church, but you know what I mean. To accomplish this, I want us to be progressive in our thinking and critical of things based purely on tradition. I hope we will remain a friendly people, that we will seek our new people during hospitality (not just the ‘beautiful,’ but everyone). I hope we will select elders not just on how successful they have been in business, but because of their love and care for others, their compassion, their knowledge and their love of God. I hope we will be leaders who listen to all, not only to the young and not only to the older

long established members.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 5

I have learned to be and continue to learn to be an elder through the following venues:

Personal Bible Study: I try to envision and pattern my life on how the good shepherd ministered to his sheep by reading his word.

Mentoring: I had a mentor while serving as a deacon of education for many years. Elder 2 was always available to me and to those in the education ministry. He made sure that he understood our needs and had the resources that we needed. I have been mentored by my fellow elders who have served longer than myself. I learned that a quick decision wasn't possible unless you wanted an answer of no. Although I consider myself a patient person I learned to be even more patient. Decisions need time and prayer. I have seen shepherding in action and have learned from that.

Shepherding: I learn best by doing. I reached out to the college class when they didn't have their own Bible class and weren't assigned an elder. The elders were assigned to their families even though they were out on their own. I attend weddings, make hospital visits, make home visits and attend funerals for these young people and their relatives. I teach their class and get involved in their lives. They know my voice. I have the gift of attracting those who are hurting and misunderstood. They may not be assigned to my shepherding group but I am their shepherd. They tend to be more emotional and explanations need to be direct and clear. They need a good listener and someone that believes them.

Group Study: I attend group sessions to learn to be a better shepherd: Elder Link, guest speakers and most recently an intense study on the shepherds blessing. The study helped me to go from reading Scriptures that I thought were relevant, to giving true blessings that are in sync with the lessons and encouraging to the sheep. As Peter's uncle told him in the movie Spiderman, "With great power comes great responsibility". We as elders have been empowered by our members and our God. We must take seriously our responsibility to lead our sheep. Our words and actions can be a great blessing or can cause much damage to the cause of Christ.

You asked me to tell about my vision for the mission of the church. Where did that come from? My vision for the church is for us to reach out to the community that is lost while taking care of the members both physically and spiritually. The vision is a vision of love. My vision comes from what I have experienced and from what I have learned as I have grown closer to Christ. Christ is enough!

Elder Evaluation—Elder 6

In learning how to be an elder in my case was much like learning how to be a parent. We observe how our parents did parenting and by what they said was good or bad examples by other parents. Plus we saw what was working and not working on our own.

In learning how to be an elder in my situation, it was hearing what my dad and other men said when talking about other men's qualifications as well as their own qualifications, quoting this Scripture and that Scripture. Then when my Dad became an elder, I was able to see firsthand how an elder should conduct himself. Obviously, most of inter-elder discussions were not said in my presence. Again, I observed different elders in the performance of their duties and interaction with other people, both inside and outside the church.

The people who influenced me would obviously begin with my parents, whose sense of right and wrong, their honesty in dealing with other people, their visits to those in need, their compassion for those less fortunate, their hard work in their daily living and their standards for me to do likewise were very strong.

Other men who influenced me were strong biblically and spiritually, mostly elders and deacons. Being able to go visit the spiritually weak and physically sick with a very mature elder was real on the job training and made me painfully aware of my lack of ability to draw up biblical knowledge with book, chapter and verse. How a spiritually mature elder could do well in almost any situation was certainly a great example of a good leader.

As to what words I have spoken that have been taken seriously, I really don't know. I would nearly have to poll a cross section of people who have heard me talk. Since I don't talk a lot in meetings, I have noticed others seem to be attentive when I do say something.

My vision for the mission of this church is what the elders had decided would be the mission - "Living Christ and Sharing Christ." We believe God has called us to be a growing family of believers progressing in healthy spiritual relationships with the Lord, each other, our community, and the world.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 7

Here are my rambling thoughts to the questions that you have posed. Thank you for strengthening me during this process.

I was not raised among the churches of Christ. Coming from a Methodist background I did not have an understanding of who an elder is, what he does, or how he should go about the task of being an elder. During my initial lessons that brought me into the church I was given information about church government, but it was through practical lessons I really learned about the role of elders. I must admit that these early lessons placed in me the desire to become an elder while I had little confidence that I could ever grow to a place in life where I would be asked to take on this awesome task. I now realize that I was being 'trained up in the way I should go' during these early, and late, life lessons.

The first person to have a real effect on my training to be an elder was my wife, Debbie. A few months after I had been baptized I was approached to participate in

serving the Lord's Supper on a Sunday morning. I declined, not feeling worthy or knowledgeable about the activities and, really, probably not wanting to get up in front of everyone and make some dumb mistake. Debbie quickly informed me that the elders had given the man asking me that job and therefore the elders themselves were asking me to participate. Then she told me that I should not tell the elders 'no' when they asked me to do something. By telling me this she was telling me that their words and requests carried an extra weight over those of the regular member. That there needed to be a thoughtful consideration to the elder's requests. That their words were important.

During our early years as a married couple we were welcomed into the activities at the church. But, we were also included into the social activities that were not part of the planned work at the church. We were invited to gatherings where an 'older' crowd wanted us in their homes. We rubbed shoulders with a surgeon, a physicist, a college professor, bankers, and others that I felt were way above me in my job as a helper at Houston Lighting & Power Company and later as an apprentice electrician. We were invited into the homes and lives of elders, preachers, and even Jule and Judy Miller. These people showed interest in who I am. As they learned who I was they later were all instrumental in guiding me into active ministry. In the early days we had a bus ministry. After spending time with Rick and Sherri Mann and seeing their excitement for this work I was open to their request to join their team as a bus driver. They had learned that I held a commercial drivers license for my duties at work. But, it was the discussions with Rick & Sherri about the joys of working with the kids that gave me a desire to join the work that had them so excited.

During the years that followed different elders were involved in my life. They came to take me to lunch, taught classes I attended, later taught classes with me, asked me to attend extra study, and went to activities like the Tulsa workshop. But, one or two seemed to take an extra interest in me. Don Bachle is probably the elder that spent the most time with me. I learned a great deal about his love for God and his love for me. When Debbie and I had a family crisis he was the first person I ran to. He listened to me and then spoke healing words of comfort and encouragement. He confirmed to me my worth to God and helped me see a course to a future with hope. Elder 2 also spent time taking me to lunch and encouraging me. Later I came to realize that during the conversations with Elder 2 he would always find a way to compliment me on something I was doing. I would come away from those times feeling better both for the acceptance of me and the pride in me he exhibited.

A side story on the way to becoming an elder involves Bobbie Perry. The Sunday morning service when I was first being inducted as a deacon at Southeast the inductees were asked to stand before the congregation and speak a few words. I don't remember one word that I spoke that morning or any of the words spoken by the elders or the preacher. But I remember Bobbie's comment afterwards. She told me that I had done a good job of speaking and that she thought I ought to consider preaching. That blew me away! I knew Bobbie well enough to know that she wouldn't suggest that if she didn't think I had the character & spirit to go along with the speaking ability. At that time Bobby Deason had just come back to Southeast from the mission field in Africa. The way we

saw him live his life as a minister gave fire to Bobbie Perry's words. I wanted to become like Bobby and have my words and life have an impact for God in people's lives.

I feel like I am a young elder in training at this point in my fulfilling this task. I know that many events in my life have been God preparing me for this time in my life. But, without formal training I am still formulating a vision about the job of an elder. I know that I need the thoughts of others who have spent time considering who an elder is. Lynn Anderson's book, "They Smell Like Sheep", has helped me understand the importance of focusing on relations over focusing the administrative side of the elder's task. The lessons of the last few weeks as we have studied the Shepherd's blessing have brought out the importance of my words to the flock over which I am given responsibility.

I have not had many people come to me with complaints about any activities at Southeast. But, several times I have had people come to me with the phrase, "As an elder..". The first time this happened the bottom of my stomach dropped to the floor in anticipation of what this person expected me to know or say. I felt like a faker! I started looking around for eldership reinforcements in case I needed them. The most memorable of these situations was when Jeanette Whiteside came with a grave concern about something that we were doing. She's my age! Didn't she want to go to one of the older guys? She had a serious concern over something and it was my words of explanation that she wanted. We were neighbors in Lubbock, TX., during the late 70's and early 80's. She knew me a long time before she knew anyone else at Southeast church of Christ. I have probably eaten more meals at her table over the years than any other member of Southeast. She wanted me to explain what we were doing and it was my words she wanted to hear.

I guess the other most memorable event was working with a member who confronted our preacher with a threatening verbal attack in front of the congregation during the invitation to respond to God's call at the end of the worship service. How do you redeem such a situation to God's glory? What do you say to the congregation? What do you say to the preacher's wife who heard her husband verbally attacked and physically threatened? How do you make your preacher feel safe? And most of all, how do you redeem a member from his anger and public display? The first thing you do when the actual event is over is to pray. The only way to go from that point is to actively involve God in all that you do or say. It works. I know that God gave us healing words to say to each of the people involved. We meet as elders and prayed. We first exposed our own feelings and emotions to each other. We then considered what course of action would make the congregation feel secure with the return of this member into their midst. We considered what words, what message, might bring redemption in the life of this member. Two of us who had the closest relationship with this member went to speak to him. We had been in closer relationship with him because we spent time in a small group setting with this member for several years. The outcome was changed hearts. I think God wanted that. Some might think the first response would be the ouster of the member from fellowship for the safety of all. But, I think God wants him in fellowship with us. We know him best and I hope we can make the biggest impact in his life. 'In fellowship' is

where we can help each other to grow and overcome our mistakes. We can lead by example and we can speak words that matter.

It is because of the intimacy of fellowship that my words as an elder have impact. My authority in these people's lives comes from God. But, their acceptance of my authority is solely because they know me and they have chosen to yield that authority to me. Since we have been studying the shepherd's blessing I have felt a growth in what it is I say during my blessings. I never before had the idea that I have the authority to actually speak God's blessing on the people and that it might make a difference in their lives. After my last few blessings people are actually coming up to me to thank me for the encouragement of the blessing. This is about the coolest part of being an elder at Southeast for me right now.

Elder Evaluation—Elder 8

The desire, ability, experience and willingness for the eldership I believe comes from observing Godly men who over years demonstrate the love for the church, the consistency and determination in all circumstances, and the wisdom in leadership that points people to the Christian life and to some, points them in the direction of leadership.

For me, it was several men who, with different gifts, all demonstrated the above characteristics. My dad, never one for public display or speech, never given to teach, never in the spotlight, but was always the constant servant. He is always willing to serve, always there when someone needed him, never complained, never had a bad word for anyone, consistent in service over the decades. [Elder 2] and Bill Aven have both been examples for me as men who were solid in their leadership of the Lord's church, wise in their decisions and stuck to their faith through the good times and bad. They are intelligent men that people respected and were models of faith for many. These men have influenced me in many respects, when I did right, they built me up and made me feel special, when I did wrong they were quick to correct.

Finally, there were those who invested time in me, as well as others, and helped me stay close to the church and the influence of Godly people. My mom, who saw the church as very important to the point that her husband and three sons are all Christians today. Tom Richter, youth deacon at Sun Valley, who spent untold thousands of hours with the youth when Sun Valley had the most dynamic youth program in the city. Ron Hill, minister at Sun Valley for years, who spent much time with the youth especially during the summer.

The influence of these Christians seem to build up a long term vision of how the church should be an influence and touch peoples lives over many years. I think my vision for the church builds on this theme – to be a place where people are encouraged to lead a Godly life by seeing examples of people who are consistent in their Christianity in both good times and bad and by experiencing first hand the servant nature of Christians. Through this consistent servant philosophy, I believe people come into contact with Christ and an understanding of the will of God. I feel sometimes this vision is at risk as

people feel so pressured to gain “things” that the schedule becomes full of “thing gathering” and self fulfillment activities to the exclusion of Christian servant activities resulting in people being undependable and less than focused on God’s kingdom. However, God is good and he will work out his plan in spite of our failures and his church will endure through the ages.

APPENDIX D

INDEPENDENT EXPERT ANALYSIS DATA

Blessings: A Review of Oral Presentations, by Fredrick C. Kane

Introduction

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart may be best known for a quotation, or a fragment thereof, from his opinion in the obscenity case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964). Stewart wrote in his short concurrence that “hard-core pornography” was hard to define, but that, “I know it when I see it.”

What constitutes a “blessing” in a service of worship? Surely, most all of us have experienced moments in worship that we would describe as blessings. We feel blessed somehow, although we might not fully understand it. Those moments of blessedness are often serendipitous. They come to us as unsought gifts. They come through a song or a hymn, a story in a sermon or a prayer, and even in the look of compassion on the face of a sister or brother. That is our subjective, personal experience.

The blessings that I have been called to comment upon are those designed to conclude the service of worship. They are words of blessing and they are an objective act that seek to become subjective fruit in the lives of others. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once wrote that, “. . . some words can, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.” A blessing too, in moments of grace, can touch us more powerfully than any deed.

Before sharing my thoughts about each blessing, I have two general comments. First, I wonder at the continual use of the phrase, “You are dismissed.” It is not one that I have heard before so I confess that my wonder springs, in part, from its unfamiliarity. But, upon hearing that phrase repeated in each blessing, my most immediate response was to remember being a young student and hearing, “Class dismissed.” So an initial question that I raise would be to consider if, “You are dismissed,” is compatible with a spoken blessing concluding a service of worship? Does that phrase create a world for the worshiper that is meaningful and blessed? Second, it quickly became clear to me that each one of the participants would be wise to consider that their blessing is conveyed, not only through words, but through their actions in sharing it. In other words, nonverbal body language can hinder or help a blessing. I think that there is good reason why through much of Christian history the one giving a blessing to end worship raises their arms, extends them outward and opens their hands. There is power in that gesture. Not that there is anything “magical” in it. There is no more magic in it than there is magic in the waters of the River Jordan, as elder one reminds us in his blessing. But, there is power in it or there can be power in it for the one being blessed. The gesture may evoke a response

of blessedness. It suggests in its body language that there is a kind of power in blessing that can be transmitted from one person to another. But, there is another message in the gesture and that is the sense of being embraced by God as represented in the one sharing the blessing. That can lead to a sense of acceptance and inclusion. So, I would counsel all of the participants to consider their body language more carefully.

Analysis

Elder 1 – Mark 1:4-11

“A few years ago we took a trip, a number of us here in the congregation to Israel. And when we got to the place somewhere on the river Jordan, I don’t know whether it was the right place or not, but it was a place and it was the river Jordan. We went down and baptized each other, about a half dozen of us went down here and all of us baptized each other at the same time and it was the coolest thing, just the coolest thing.

There was no voice, I can tell you that there is no magic in that river. There was no voice that came out of heaven.

However, and here’s the good news, it says over in Romans the sixth chapter, it says, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...”

We have been united with Christ and you have, too. Right over here in this water or water somewhere you were joined to him and you are now my beloved son, as God would say, in whom I am well pleased. You need to act this week and I encourage you to act this week like you’re the child of a king and the offspring of the God of the universe.”

Theological Content

Elder 1’s blessing draws my lengthiest response because it was the lengthiest blessing. It was actually a mini-sermon!

Elder 1’s blessing immediately raises an important question: can a blessing challenge us or provoke us to a change in our behavior, or at least prod us to be more cognizant of our behavior in the coming week?

Elder 1 considers Mark 1:4-11 by reflecting on a personal story about his own baptism in the River Jordan. That event may have been “the coolest thing” but it is, admits elder 1, not a transforming event for him. So, he turns to Romans 6 and opens us to Paul’s reflection on the meaning of our own baptism. He concludes from that reflection that we who are baptized into Christ need to act like we are, “the child of a king and the offspring of the God of the universe.”

The irony here is that elder 1’s experience of his baptism in the Jordan has, in fact, led to his hearing a “voice that came out of heaven.” Only he hears that Word through Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome. He does not hear it at the time of his baptism, but he hears it later when he reflects upon that experience and shares his blessing.

But, the immediate question here is to consider if a blessing can take the form of an imperative. “You need to act this week...” Not everyone in worship will always

respond well to such an imperative. So I appreciated that elder 1 followed this with, “and I encourage you to act...” That feels effective to me, “You need” and “I encourage you to.” Elder 1 gives us all a challenge. Will we act like a child of a king? Will we behave like we are the offspring of the God of the universe? Elder 1 raises the bar for us as we prepare to leave worship. Can that be a blessing? I think so, especially as he adds his personal encouragement.

Is it a blessing?

We would probably all be blessed at some time in our life if someone has challenged us to act with more integrity. So, am I blessed by elder 1’s “blessing?” Yes, I am. But, I had to “stick with it” until the end to gain that blessing. Even then it is interesting that the word “blessing” was never used.

“Hear-ability”

When I first listened to the blessing I had two reactions: First, I wondered where the “travelogue” was going. Second, I was caught off-guard when elder 1 read the passage from Romans 6. I wondered if the blessing was based on Mark 1 or on Romans 6. It was perhaps a little too long and some might wander during the retelling of the story of the visit to the Jordan. Following this with a lengthy Scripture text only adds to this possibility of losing the attention of the audience. But, the blessing was a little too long, I think.

Voice

Elder 1 was easy to listen to. But, regardless of the words and the concepts they convey, do I feel blessed by the voice alone? It conveyed genuine sincerity to me and a personable approach.

Nonverbal

No manuscript or notes and that caught my attention. I felt that elder 1 was speaking directly to me. Hands in the pockets at the beginning felt a little too casual. But, the blessing touched me deeply, partly because the “no notes” approach helped shape my perception of the vocal act as sincere and heart-felt.

Elder 8—Mark 1:29-39

“I want you to leave here today knowing that your Heavenly Father is the source of all good things. You can go through this week with the knowledge that God, made possible through his son Jesus Christ, is the great healer. The challenge you face this week, the answers you are searching for or the healing that you need, are all found in the awesome power of God Almighty. Embrace God’s word, embrace the love that he has shown for you, embrace the peace that comes from an Almighty Father, you have access

to the healing power of God, accept God's love, and be blessed and go from here and bless others."

Theological Content

Elder 8's blessing was solid, but complex and weighty—perhaps too complex for a blessing. I am to leave "knowing" certain propositions about God the healer and therefore moved to "embrace" God's Word, God's love, God's peace. Will that "work"? I am not sure. But, in contrast to elder 1's blessing, elder 8 says, "be blessed." He invites me into the blessing by calling it forth.

When I hear, "be blessed" I ask myself, what is going to cause me to feel blessed? Is a blessing an imperative? Can it be an imperative? Can it be commanded? But, most importantly, "...accept God's love, and be blessed..." raises a question. Must I accept God's love in order to be blessed or does God bless us in spite of our lack of response?

Is it a blessing?

Perhaps more than any of the blessings, elder 8's caused me to reflect theologically. I pondered the words and the ideas and I suspect that in doing so I lost the feeling of being blessed. That doesn't make it bad or not a blessing. It can be a blessing to be challenged to think. Perhaps that is where God and I were meant to meet this week.

"Hear-ability"

Too many concepts! I got a little lost along the way.

Voice

Elder 8 was easy to listen to, but I felt that it was read and not as personal as it could have been if done without notes.

Nonverbal

Eyes up and look at people and the message will be conveyed more effectively.

Elder 6—Isaiah 60:1-6

"There are many reasons for us to be happy. Just think of the spiritual darkness that covered the minds of mankind before Christ, the true light, came to this world. Just as He brought light to everyone everywhere, so you too are to go forth and be a blessing and bring light to those you meet."

Theological Content

You are to “be” a blessing! It contrasts with the preceding blessing by elder 8 where I am told “be blessed” and by elder 1’s blessing where I am encouraged to act in certain ways, but in which I am not the object of being directly “blessed.”

Is it a blessing?

There is something mysterious about elder 6’s voice that mesmerized me and I was drawn in and almost entranced by it in such a short time. I felt blessed.

“Hear-ability”

I was drawn into this blessing with the opening line. It caused me to consider the reasons why I am happy and I wondered where it was going.

Voice

Elder 6’s voice is warm and caring and easy to listen to.

Nonverbal

No notes helped add to the personal nature of the blessing. But, it sounded memorized and if I was not sighted (was blind), I would have told you that I was sure elder 6 was reading this blessing.

Elder 7—1 Corinthians 8:1-13

“Go from here loving God. All things are from God. Use everything for God. For the benefit of yourself and for your brother and you sisters, go from here loving God.”

Theological Content

Perhaps as much as any of the blessings, elder 7’s raised theological questions for me to consider even though it was the shortest one. I wondered about going out loving others as well as loving God? But, I suspect that elder 7 might believe that if I go, loving God, then I will love others as well. I certainly agree with that, but I needed to hear it stated. Not everyone would think that one through.

Is it a blessing?

Like elder 1’s blessing, elder 7 does not use the word “blessing.” I am to go out and use everything for God and to love God. Is this more of a charge or an instruction or a blessing? Can it be both?

“Hear-ability”

I heard this blessing and because of the good body language and no notes approach it spoke to me.

Voice

Easy to hear and clear.

Nonverbal

No notes and a personal approach looking me in the eye. Hands slightly lifted in the traditional manner of blessing.

Elder 5—Ephesians 1:2-14

“You are not forgotten. God knows your name. He not only knows your name, He has adopted you through Jesus. You are sons and daughters of the kings of kings so hold your head up. You are his child.”

Theological Content

Elder 5’s blessing is filled with rich theological content that speaks to some of the most basic wants and needs of any person – to not be forgotten and to be known by name. But, more than that there is the news that I am adopted and so I can live proudly with my head held up. This image of holding my head up is particularly powerful and effective. If I had to pick one of the blessings that especially touched me it is elder 5’s blessing, short as it is, because he gives me a reminder for my journey this week that is visceral and powerful - to, “hold your head up” because, “You are His child!”

Is it a blessing?

I was touched by elder 5’s words and felt blessed.

“Hear-ability”

It was quite hearable and easy to follow because the structure is simple.

Voice

Elder 5 was easy to listen to.

Nonverbal

At first elder 5 seemed to have a plan to hold his hands behind his back, but then he seemed swept up in the power of what he was saying and his right hand touched down

accompanying the cadence of his speech for emphasis on each point. It was subtle, but emphatic and it drove the point home for me that I am a child of God.

Elder 4—1 Corinthians 7:29-31

“Go now into the world that is always passing away, always changing, always moving, always drawing us off course, off center, and seeming to leave us Christians with little time to do what we know we must do. Therefore, love each one as you meet as if this moment is the last one that you will have, knowing that God’s love for you never passes away, never changes, never ends. Why, because we know the end. We know that Christ has claimed us. We know that nothing else is important because Christ has blessed us.”

Theological Content

I should love elder 4’s blessing because he drew from some of my own words for his blessing. I wasn’t sure though what elder 4 meant when he said, “We know that nothing else is important.” What is the “else” that is so important? Is it that Christ has claimed us? Is it that we know the end? Or is it that Christ has blessed us? I wasn’t sure.

It is the only blessing that places the word blessing in the context of the past tense. That is, “Christ has blessed us.” It caused me to reflect and consider what that might mean and I wondered if it was a kind of, once-blessed/always-blessed understanding?

Is it a blessing?

Yes, but to be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure if elder 4 meant all of what he was saying because I knew that the first half of his blessing was a version of my own words. So that was somewhat of a distraction for me as I felt flattered and then somewhat embarrassed that anyone would choose some of my words in a blessing.

“Hear-ability”

Elder 4’s blessing was somewhat hard to hear because it was read and read with some apparent discomfort.

Voice

Elder 4 may have needed more preparation and practice because he sounded nervous and his voice was somewhat halting and broken.

Nonverbal

Hands on the lectern kept them from being distracting, but they didn’t add to the blessing as they could have.

Elder 3—Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18

“Thank you Michael for such a great lesson... You know we see so many things in nature that God took such great pains to create the things that he did, to be able, to be able to create the balance in nature that he did and so much more attention he applied to us. Scripture tells us that God created man in his own image and Scripture tells us that for God so loved you that he gave us a son to die on a cross for our sins. As you leave here today I want you to leave with a couple of things. May God fill your heart with the knowledge that you are important and may he grant you the warmth that comes from that.”

Theological Content

I was somewhat overwhelmed by the numerous concepts in elder 3’s blessing. As in elder 8’s blessing there were several concepts for me to grasp and not enough time to consider them all. A blessing goes by quickly and if there are too many concepts then I may tune it all out.

But, my question for elder 3 would be to consider how the introductory remarks about God’s creation of the balance of nature connected to the conclusion. Do the wonder of nature and its balance lead to the knowledge that I am important and that there is warmth that comes from that knowing? I can see the connection, but I am not sure how many people can move from the balance of nature and the wonder of our creation to feeling important and warm.

Is it a blessing?

I felt blessed, but I had to think about it and consider the complex ideas before the feeling came. I wonder if those in attendance might not take the time that some of them might need to consider the connection between the first half and the second?

“Hear-ability”

The “tie” to Michael’s sermon was helpful and for those in attendance that is a wise tie because it connects the blessing with the rest of the service.

Voice

The conversational tone was effective and drew me into the blessing. I felt that elder 3 was speaking to me. His tone was warm and encouraging.

Nonverbal

Elder 3 speaks with confidence and that is assuring and his body language conveyed that, but I would advise moving his eyes and head more slowly in scanning the congregation. I felt rushed as elder 3 looked around.

Elder 2—Isaiah 61:10-11; Isaiah 62:1-3

“Good morning everyone, I hope your worship experience was good today. One of the things that I want to encourage you to do is, as a Christian people, we been given salvation, unmerited salvation. God, because of this, God wants us to be a bold people and he wants us to let our light shine before the world and what I want to do today is to have you to go out and be a bold people. We have been greatly blessed by God and we have received great blessings from him and He will bless you as your light shines to the world.”

Theological Content

Are we blessed as our “light shines to the world”? That is, does blessing come to us or are we a blessing because of something that we do? Those questions are appropriate for Elder 2’s blessing, but they apply to all of the blessings in some way as primary questions with which to struggle and consider. Is blessedness something that we gain or earn or obtain because of our actions or is blessedness a gift of God? Is it “unmerited” as Elder 2 speaks claims about our salvation or is it a consequence of our choices or is it both together? Could it be that blessing can be both at once?

Is it a blessing?

“Hear-ability”

The pace was good, but at times I felt that Elder 2 was reaching for words, searching for the right one and that kept me slightly off balance in listening.

Voice

Elder 2’s conversational tone was good.

Nonverbal

Elder 2 looked at people, but his hands remained locked together and I was longing for a gesture, a movement of those hands to embrace me.

VITA

Michael Harbour was born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma on 11 January 1959. He attended public schools in Dewey, Oklahoma, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, graduating from Tulsa Memorial High School in 1977. He was selected as a University Scholar at the University of Oklahoma and worked for Crystal's Pizza and Spaghetti. He pursued a career as a restaurant manager, but after becoming a Christian in 1981 in Abilene, he chose to pursue a life in ministry. He graduated from Preston Road School of Preaching in Dallas in 1986. He graduated *Summa Cum Laude* from Stephen F. Austin State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and English in 1991. He earned a Master of Science degree from Abilene Christian University in 1999. He did his Master of Divinity equivalency at Abilene Christian and entered the Doctor of Ministry program in 2003. Michael served the North Street Church of Christ in Nacogdoches, Texas, as their youth minister from 1986 to 1991. He served the San Benito, Texas, Church of Christ as their preaching minister from 1991 to 1996. He preached for the Loop Eleven Church of Christ in Wichita Falls, Texas, from 1996 to 2001. He currently serves the Southeast Church of Christ in suburban Houston, Texas, as their preaching minister. He is married to Sandra Anderson, a 1982 Abilene Christian graduate. They have two children; Jacob who currently attends Abilene Christian studying musical theater, and Jacquie who is a junior at Clear Brook High School in Friendswood, Texas.

