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Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ

Kevin Stewart

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ABSTRACT

This doctor of ministry thesis presents the results of a project in which I led a team to develop a plan to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality for small groups at West Houston Church of Christ. I used missional theology as a framework to give shape to the practice of hospitality. The project team met for nine weeks in the fall of 2014. The team practiced *lectio divina* focused on Luke 10, participated in theological reflection on missional hospitality, and fulfilled assignments to practice missional hospitality. These activities helped form the group spiritually and informed the development of a plan to foster the practice of missional hospitality in small groups.

Three strategic groups will be targeted by the plan once it is implemented. Small group leaders will be trained in Sunday morning classes for twenty-six weeks out of each year in the practice of missional hospitality. New members will be recruited by attending an eight-week discovery class, which will model missional hospitality and teach the vision of West Houston. These new members will be formed into a new small group. The entire church will have the opportunity to participate in a four-week sermon series and four-week Sunday school class with an emphasis on missional hospitality. The series will be accompanied by a challenge to the congregation to practice missional hospitality by inviting guests to a meal.

The theological focus of this project can be duplicated by other churches desiring to become more missionally focused through the practice of missional hospitality. In addition, the plan derived by the group could be easily adapted to other contexts.

Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality
for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ

A Project Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Kevin Stewart

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This 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

Thesis Committee

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I also want to thank Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister at West Houston, for working alongside me in this project and for the many ways he encourages me in my own walk as a disciple. Finally, my entire family encouraged me and stood behind me through this process; their support helped me keep the daily disciplines necessary to complete this thesis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This doctor of ministry thesis addresses a need for West Houston Church of Christ¹ to develop the intentional practice of missional hospitality in small groups. Missional hospitality is an essential practice of the Trinity as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other. The church body reflects this practice in its acceptance and love of each member. This life-giving practice is also extended to the world through the church. Incumbent on the church, as it lives out its own missional mandate from God, is to offer the divine life through the relational practice of missional hospitality. Thus missional hospitality extends to Christians and non-Christians alike. The lack of this practice at West Houston has hampered relationships within the church body and hindered the congregation's participation in God's mission of reconciliation to the surrounding community. The purpose of this project was to develop a plan to cultivate missional hospitality within small groups at West Houston. Thus the title of the project is "Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ." Chapter 1 introduces the project by describing the ministry context of West Houston, focusing on West Houston's early family-like atmosphere, its attractational outreach, and the eventual breakdown of the family-like atmosphere as described by the members after the congregation constructed a new building. Chapter 1 also addresses

¹ Hereinafter labeled West Houston.

West Houston's efforts at outreach into the community and its effectiveness. Chapter 2 addresses the importance of a theological understanding of mission and reflects on the practice of hospitality as viewed through the lens of missional theology. In chapter 3 I review the methodology used for the project, including a description of the team planning sessions, the process used to develop the plan, and the method by which the data were evaluated. Chapter 4 discusses the results from the project, and chapter 5 discusses implications for ministry at West Houston.

Description of Ministry Context

When I arrived in June of 2012 as West Houston's new executive minister, I spent four months interviewing over fifty church leaders. A recurring theme I heard was that West Houston had lost its sense of community and no longer felt like family. Some of the phrases I heard during the interviews included (1) "We are disconnected." (2) "We don't know each other anymore." (3) "We lost our community." (4) "We don't do things as a family like we used to." Members expressed a need to recapture the family-like atmosphere of the past. This sentiment was actually expressed again in an elders' meeting in March of 2014. One of the elders lamented the loss of family and suggested that recapturing that sense of family or community should be a priority for the elders. Over a period of thirty years, West Houston went from a small vibrant young church with a thriving family-like atmosphere to a large church that had lost its family connections and was struggling to find a new identity.

Beginning Life as a Family

Since the congregation's beginning in 1982, the family metaphor has featured prominently in the language of West Houston Church members. Several young marrieds

started West Houston and began meeting in Bear Creek Elementary School. Bear Creek was located in the rapidly expanding Copperfield subdivision in northwest Houston. Young couples were predominant in the area of the church plant and the church experienced rapid numerical growth. West Houston grew from just a few families to over two hundred in the first two years. In 1984 West Houston constructed its first facility and called it the Family Life Center. The church attracted many young and energetic families, most of whom were educated, white, and high achievers. These families quickly bonded and began “doing life” together as one extended family.

Early Practices of Family Life

Church picnics, work days, Easter egg hunts, fall festivals and pot luck fellowships formed the habitual lifeline events that were attended by the majority of members. West Houston put a wooden board on a wall at the front by the pulpit to serve as a visual reminder of the church’s family life. This board was handmade by Kurt Picker, who preached at West Houston for its first twenty years of existence. The church tracked family life events by placing symbols on the board. A cross signified a baptism, the image of a thermometer tracked when attendance records were broken, and spoons or forks were used to keep track of family gatherings such as pot-lucks. These symbols reflected West Houston’s practices, which were built around the family metaphor. West Houston continues to value the close and rich relationships that come through sharing life as a family.

Every long-time member I spoke with talked about the close family-like atmosphere that had been abundant in all their gatherings. West Houston children loved to attend these events and through them became very close to each other. Several

members said that they had raised their children together as one large family. West Houston Church activities were important family rituals, but they also became the way West Houston socialized new family members. Many times members told me that people who visited West Houston joined the church because they were drawn in by the loving family they had experienced. The sense of church as a loving family continues to be a strong and pervasive theological value at West Houston.

Compelled by Love

“Compelled by Love” was the theme that carried West Houston through the 1990s. The church put up banners with this slogan around the building and “Compelled by Love” was the header for church bulletins from 1986 to 2004. West Houston members viewed themselves as a family brimming with love. “Compelled by love” captured the church’s motivation for fellowshiping together and for including others in their growing family. Church members connected this slogan to their identity as a church family. The following exemplifies how ingrained this theme was in the minds of West Houston: On a Sunday morning in 2013 one of the elders, while talking about the ongoing vision process, reminded the congregation of the old vision. He said the word “compelled,” followed by a pause, and immediately a significant number in the worship center completed the phrase by saying out loud “by love.” The phrase was effective; it captured West Houston’s sense of identity and propelled members in their ministry. It was not just an identifier, but it was also the missional impetus for the congregation. West Houston continued to thrive and grow as a church family through offering loving fellowship to others.

Extending the Family

When I interviewed church members concerning past family practices, they reflected nostalgically on the days when attractional events such as VBS and church picnics were effective at reaching the lost for Christ. Members reported that attractional events brought the stranger within their midst and the strangers fell in love with the family at West Houston and subsequently fell in love with Jesus. Often they cited the story of the McKee family. David and Gina lived near the church and were invited to one of the church picnics by neighbors. The McKee's quickly became friends with some of the young couples and began attending church. David and Gina were living together out of wedlock. Graciously, no one in the church ever mentioned their living arrangement. David has stated that if someone had made an issue of their living together, they most certainly would have left. David and Gina were quickly welcomed as a part of the West Houston family, and over time they began to study God's word. Eventually, they both became Christians and then decided to get married. David is now a youth deacon at West Houston and the McKee family is very involved in the church's youth ministry. The McKee's have been interviewed on camera, given live testimonies, and are held up as a model for how the West Houston family is compelled by love to reach others. This story has taken on mythic proportions in the church body. West Houston sees family as the way that all aspects of a church's mission are carried out, including reaching the lost.

West Houston members perceive that the church was very effective in reaching into its community during its first seventeen years. Most of this is based on the fact that West Houston grew numerically during that time. Numerical growth was a constant from 1982 to 1999, growing from a few families to over seven hundred in attendance.

Although members believed the numerical growth was a sign of effective outreach, most of the numerical growth was due to members of the Churches of Christ who moved into the Copperfield area. However, there were enough “David McKee” stories to keep the congregation satisfied that God was also using West Houston to reach the lost.

Disrupting the Family-Like Atmosphere

Though the growth slowed down after the first ten years, the congregation still experienced a constant upsurge in its attendance into the early 2000s. In 2003 attendance began to regularly surpass eight hundred. The congregation took pride in this and saw this as a sign of God’s blessing. Difficult parking and crowded services seemed like a sure sign that God was calling West Houston to build a larger building so that it could continue its growth trajectory, which West Houston interpreted as continued local evangelism. West Houston decided to build a new building a few miles down the road on a piece of land that was surrounded by future housing development projects. In 2005 West Houston moved into a brand new thirteen million dollar facility with a worship center that could seat one thousand. The church expected that they would resume growing now that they were not limited by facility space. Instead, the church plateaued and the family ties that had effectively held them together for so long began to deteriorate.

Waning Family Gatherings

What changed? The move had unintended and unforeseen consequences. Previously the church members were also the janitors, the landscapers, the painters, and the repairmen. Work days and other projects are fondly remembered as key ways the family grew close and spent time together. On work days church members would add a

fresh coat of paint, change light bulbs, replace cabinet door hinges, and rehang doors. Each fall and spring the church planted flowers, mulched the beds, and trimmed trees. Members also arrived early on Sundays and Wednesdays to unlock the doors, set the thermostats, and prepare the building for services. Once West Houston arrived at its new location, it began hiring out all of its landscaping and building maintenance. In addition, all the exterior doors and thermostats were operated by computer so that it was unnecessary to have humans involved in these processes. One other factor is that many of the young families, who were formerly the core group that organized church events, were now empty-nesters and felt less need for large family gatherings. West Houston's empty nesters are often focused on travelling and visiting their adult children. There are new young couples being attracted to West Houston, but they seem more focused on their nuclear family than on church-wide gatherings. As a result, the church has lost a vital body-life practice. Losing key church-family practices has created anxiety among long-time members and led to an identity crisis at West Houston.

Changing Demographics

The transient nature of urban life has led to a large turnover at West Houston and adversely affected family-life practices. Many former core members have moved away and new members moving in tend to be Sunday morning only attendees, resulting in their not connecting with the church as a whole. For long-time members, this means they know a smaller percentage of those attending the church. This has naturally resulted in disorientation. In addition, the new members at West Houston are much more diverse. There is a growing African American and Latino population. Previously, it was very easy to have a strong sense of family when the church was homogenous. All twelve of the

West Houston elders are white. Out of the twenty-two deacons, there is one Latino deacon and one African American deacon. Attempts have been made to recruit African Americans to become deacons or ministry leaders, but they have not been very successful. After worship services it is noticeable that African Americans stand around and visit with each other separate and apart from those that are standing around visiting in white circles. A few of the church's small groups are beginning to reflect the diversity that we see in worship on Sunday mornings, but most of them are exclusively white. Integration has been difficult, and diversity has eroded the former familiar identity of the church.

Failure of Attractional Events

West Houston's previous outreach efforts have been primarily focused on attractional events. Attractional models seek to organize big events that draw large numbers of guests into the building or to a church activity with the hope that these guests, once exposed to the church, will be enticed to visit further. There are three major attractional events that West Houston has considered as outreach: (1) Vacation Bible School (VBS), (2) Celebrate Jesus, and (3) Upward Sports. VBS is well promoted in the community and attracts a large number of guests. Sometimes as many as five hundred children attend VBS, with most of them coming from outside of the church. Celebrate Jesus is a live dramatic reenactment of the life of Jesus. It is performed on the West Houston campus. Over two thousand people attend this event each Christmas season. Upward Sports is a community-based basketball league held at the church that seeks to influence those participating by having short devotionals at halftime and using members of the church to coach the teams. In the 2013 season over one hundred children ranging

from third to sixth grade enrolled in the league. Ninety percent of them were from the community. These three events attract a large number of outsiders and thus serve as reasonably effective attractional tools. These events are intended to be outreach opportunities for West Houston. It is possible that some of these guests have ended up attending West Houston and becoming members, but I have been unable to find evidence that supports it.² Though these attractional events draw large crowds, relationships are not being built with the attendees.

This attractional method worked very well in the early days of the church's history. Many of those that attended large events ended up becoming a part of the church. However, it is no longer effective in the church's new context. Instead, ramped up attractional events are requiring increasing numbers of volunteer hours and are burning out the core members. Upward Sports was canceled last January due to lack of volunteers. These events are not creating the type of authentic community that is needed to maintain West Houston's family values or to accomplish God's mission of reaching the lost.

West Houston Stalls

West Houston seems to have lost its sense of purpose and is floundering in the context of multiple transitions such as the move into a new building in 2005, the loss of large-group family gatherings, the ongoing change in demographic composition of the membership, and the ineffectiveness of attractional events. In April of 2013 the elders

² I interviewed the staff, looked at the data on new members, and talked to the elders and other key members, but I was unable to identify a single member that had come to West Houston through these attractional events in the last eight years. In addition, I could not find evidence of any friendships that had been started with community attendees to these events.

dismissed the church's senior minister, adding further anxiety into the system. Not surprisingly, the church experienced a numerical decline in attendance from around 900 per Sunday to around 825 per Sunday from 2002 to July of 2014. With the exception of a growing mission's budget, West Houston members expressed the frustration that they were being ineffective in most of their outreach efforts in the immediate community. Realizing the need for a fresh vision, the oversight elders³ began working toward that end in November of 2012.⁴

Seeking a Fresh Vision

Thirteen elders participated in interviewing over one hundred fifty members during November of 2012 through February of 2013. Key church leaders were personally invited to participate in these interviews, but the entire church was given an opportunity to sign up for an interview with a pair of elders. The interviews created a much needed "space" for honest speech.⁵ The sense among almost all those interviewed was that West Houston had been struggling for the last eight to ten years. Most of those interviewed expressed nostalgia and tended toward dissatisfaction, confirming the need for a new

³ West Houston is led by a group of five oversight elders. The executive minister and the preaching minister are non-voting members of this governance team. West Houston also has seven shepherding elders that focus on pastoral needs of the church.

⁴ West Houston overseers started a vision process behind closed doors in 2011 that culminated in a vision presentation to the elders, deacons, and ministers in February of 2012. However, the vision was poorly received. The overseers decided to wait on the arrival of their newly hired executive minister to continue the process. After reviewing the vision, the overseers determined that it was more of a contextual document than a vision. The contextual document was very valuable, but the overseers agreed there was a need to start the vision process over.

⁵ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 145.

dream or vision to reignite the congregation.⁶ The few exceptions to this were some relatively new members who were satisfied with their newly found congregation. While there was still hope for a turnaround evidenced among many, there were also stories told of former key leaders who in recent times had become discouraged at the lack of clear direction by the elders and thus left West Houston.

At the end of this long period of dialogue with the congregation and after much prayer, the overseers and I each wrote our own version of a new vision, an activity that came from the book *Vision: Lost and Found* by Tim Stevens.⁷ Stevens describes how his church stalled and lost its way, but was reenergized by a new vision. The writing of our visions was an imaginative and interpretive act that joined together dialogue with the congregation, West Houston's context, Scripture, and personal experience.⁸ We combined the six different visions into a narrative that describes what West Houston will look like ten years down the road and includes action items focused on the first twenty-four months.⁹

⁶ Robert D. Dale, *To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 16-18.

⁷ Tim Stevens, *Vision: Lost and Found* (Centerville, VA: Exponential Resources, 2012), 66.

⁸ Patrick Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation," in *Testing the Spirits: How Theology Informs the Study of Congregations*, ed. by Patrick Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

⁹ One of the oversight elders works as a consultant for Deloitte and Touche. He suggested the idea that the vision should be a strategic narrative that would shape the future of the church.

A New Narrative

This narrative vision reflects the concept that God both teaches us through story and calls us to live into his story. The vision is meant to be the next chapter in the story of God's work through West Houston.¹⁰ The vision was then refined during a two-month period through meetings with the shepherding elders. Finally, the vision was shared with the ministers, the deacons, and eight focus groups that formed a cross-section of the congregation. After including their input, the overseers presented the vision to the congregation on October 6, 2012.

The vision is summarized in the statement that West Houston Church of Christ desires to be known in the future as “disciples making disciples” in west Houston and around the world.¹¹ The new vision strongly emphasizes theological tenets such as discipleship and social justice. Appendix B contains the seven fundamental principles from the narrative vision. The full vision document also contains proposed action items for the next twenty-four month period. The principles are written in order of priority; the first two principles are the most important ones with the other five principles being a result of the first two. Principle 1 is “We will be more than students of Christ; we will be active followers of Him.” Principle 2 is “Our small groups will be mission-minded, disciple-building groups.”

¹⁰ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 4-5.

¹¹ *West Houston Vision: October 2013*, Houston: West Houston, http://www.westhoustonchurch.org/files/WEST_HOUSTON1/Images/WEST_HOUSTON_VisionPamphlet_reduced.pdf.

Importance of Small Groups

Formerly, small groups at West Houston have had the stated goal to “go deeper” into God’s word. Small groups were established in lieu of Sunday night worship in the early nineties to promote an environment for in-depth Bible study. Small groups have played a minor role in the minds of most members. When members were asked about the things that worked well historically at West Houston, not one person mentioned the subject of small groups. I found only one exception to this, which was a small group led by Chuck Cervas that started hosting lunches at the church building for new members. Otherwise, small groups have not been recognized as a central part of West Houston’s former strategy.

Large congregations cannot effectively teach and make disciples solely at the church building. Thus the new vision strongly emphasizes small groups. Jesus created disciples by walking alongside them and sharing life with them. West Houston leaders hope that small groups can recreate the discipleship process modeled by Jesus. They also desire to grow the church numerically through small groups. This means small groups must better understand their calling to participate in God’s mission to the northwest Houston area. In order to better communicate this, the adult discipleship minister changed the name of the small groups from “life groups” to “missional communities” shortly after the vision was unveiled.

It is difficult to form close bonds in a group of a thousand people; small groups are an effective means for addressing the need for authentic community. Authentic community includes the opportunity to enter into dialogue, eat together, fellowship, and break down relational barriers. West Houston recognizes that these sorts of activities are

not happening effectively in large-group activities. Small groups have been chosen as a method for achieving community and participating more fully in God's mission to include others. I have chosen to focus on the importance of the practice of missional hospitality in small groups as it relates to building community and sharing the gospel.

Stating the Problem

The problem is that there is a lack of the practice of missional hospitality among small groups at West Houston. Attractional events have led to large-group activities in which West Houston members are no longer connecting on a relational basis with each other or its community. God expresses his missionary character most fully as he relationally gives himself to humanity through the incarnation. There is a need for small groups to strengthen their internal relational connections and to fully participate in God's mission by connecting with others through the practice of missional hospitality.

West Houston's growing and diverse community is a very different context from the homogenous environment that gave birth to this church over thirty years ago. There is a need to rethink the church's mission for the present context.¹² People today are seeking authentic community in which they can form relational bonds.¹³ If missional communities are to offer authentic community, they will have to develop the practice of missional hospitality. Missional hospitality opens up small groups to relationship with each other and extends that relationship to others outside of their own circle.

¹² Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 2006), 22.

¹³ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

Most West Houston missional communities are inward oriented and lack a sense of mission. Many of the groups have been together for as long as fifteen years and are very close to each other, but are reluctant to pursue newcomers. Other groups have lost a sense of closeness in addition to being inward oriented. I attended one group for several months shortly after arriving at West Houston. The group was friendly enough, but the meetings were short, based on a Bible study, and inwardly focused. This particular group seemed to lack deep relationships with each other and showed no interest in offering hospitality to others outside of the group. Some of the group members confirmed my impression, stating that the group had been closer in the past, but had grown apart. After that experience and further investigation, I realized that most West Houston small groups are inward oriented. A few groups practice hospitality within them, but most groups have short meetings based on a Bible study. Very few of the groups are readily open to newcomers.¹⁴ The adult discipleship minister reports that the majority of new members are not joining small groups, and he has had difficulty getting small groups to show genuine interest in including new members in their midst. I have spoken with the oversight elders concerning this problem and they agree that West Houston small groups need to develop the practice of missional hospitality.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project was to develop an action plan for cultivating the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston. The method involved leading a diverse group of present and potential missional community leaders in the practice and reflection of missional hospitality. Theological discernment and the

¹⁴ Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, confirmed my impressions based on his work with the small-group leaders over the past five years.

experiences of missional hospitality informed the development of an action plan for the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.

Delimitations

This project was designed to focus on the unique context at West Houston. Project participants included one elder, two ministers, selected missional community leaders, and selected potential missional community leaders. The development of the plan was limited to the input gained from the project participants. The action plan was tailored to the small-group ministry at West Houston. This plan may or may not be transferable to different contexts.

Conclusion

West Houston needs to experience a cultural transformation if it is to effectively develop the practice of missional hospitality. There is a big difference between cultural and technical change. Technical change leads to new forms and systems. Cultural change seeks to transform values and attitudes. Small groups are making technical changes. The adult discipleship minister renamed them “missional communities.” He enrolled almost all of the small group leaders in a half-day training to emphasize the role of missional communities in West Houston’s new vision. However, it will take more than a new name and a new organizational plan for lasting changes to occur. If West Houston is to be successful in implementing the practice of missional hospitality, it will need to adopt new values and practices.¹⁵ Small groups will need to be less focused on their own selves and develop a passion to reach out relationally to others. This will require a cultural transformation. I believe that West Houston can be transformed through fresh theological

¹⁵ Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era*, 39.

reflection on God's missional nature, combined with actual practice of missional hospitality.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

My project is titled “Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ.” Missional hospitality is a fundamental practice of the triune God. In fact, hospitality is experienced among the Trinity as they accept, honor, and relate one to another. Thus missional hospitality initiates in the life of the Trinity and is an extension of the divine life to the world through the believing community. Hospitality welcomes others into divine community in a way that addresses deep human needs such as “physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.”¹ Using the word “missional” in relation to hospitality captures God’s initiative in sending God’s own self to offer hospitality directly to humanity. The Trinity seeks to reconcile and embrace all of humanity through the practice of missional hospitality. God forms Christian community and extends this community to others through missional hospitality. Likewise, the church must be deeply engaged in the practice of missional hospitality within its own body and in the surrounding community in order to facilitate reconciliation. The use of the word “missional” in relation to hospitality is an attempt to rethink the practice of hospitality in light of its missional

¹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.

character.² Missional hospitality is a necessary practice to reconcile the lost with God and to maintain relational cohesiveness in the church body.

North America is a mission field and churches need to recapture the practice of missional hospitality to actively seek out and reconcile the lost to God. The Christian church is accustomed to being at the center of American culture and to having people seek it out for answers. However, North America has become pluralistic and the church is no longer viewed as the primary social “chaplain to the culture.”³ In addition, there are a growing number of Americans that no longer affiliate with organized religion.⁴ All this indicates that North America is a growing mission field and that an increasing number will not seek answers to their life problems from the Christian community.⁵ Gallup polling also shows that confidence in organized religion is at an all-time low.⁶ Thus the

² While there has been much written concerning missional theology and hospitality individually, there is a need to more fully reflect on hospitality as a fundamental dimension of the missional Trinity. Studying hospitality on its own merit is valuable, but grounding it in the missionary character of the Trinity deepens and broadens one’s perspective of hospitality and potentially shapes the life of those seeking to reflect God to the world. My hope is that reflecting on missional hospitality will lead to a much needed revitalization of its practice in small groups at West Houston and in the extended Christian community.

³ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1444, Kindle.

⁴ Putnam’s research indicates that 17% of the United States’ population chose “none” when asked for their religious affiliation. This is now the third largest category after Evangelical Protestant and Catholic. See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 331, Kindle.

⁵ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 455-66, Kindle.

⁶ Lydia Saad, *US Confidence in Organized Religion at Low Point* (Princeton: Gallup, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155690/Confidence-Organized-Religion-Low-Point.aspx>.

lost are less likely to be attracted to the church. West Houston's model depends on the lost to seek out the church. If West Houston is going to reach the lost from its surrounding community in today's context, it will need to reclaim its missional identity and develop the practice of missional hospitality by going to the lost and offering them community.

Missional hospitality is also needed to maintain the cohesiveness of the church body at West Houston. I have discussed how the sense of family at West Houston has deteriorated and the body has lost relationality and traditional family practices in light of the changing demographics of the congregation. At West Houston new members join the church, but often fail to connect with others in a relational way. Though new members are attending Sunday morning services, they are not forming relationships in which they can meaningfully share all aspects of life in community. Authentic community facilitates the opportunity to address the deeper needs of humanity within a relational setting.⁷ New members and some long-time members are not easily finding authentic community at West Houston. West Houston promotes the existence of their missional communities by offering public invitations to join these groups. However, small groups cannot expect disconnected members to contact them. They must reach out relationally with personal invitations to members that are not in small groups. I am proposing missional hospitality

⁷ Newman lists the following as distortions of hospitality: 1) sentimental hospitality, 2) privatized hospitality, 3) hospitality as a mode of marketing, 4) hospitality as inclusivity, 5) homeless hospitality. Sentimental hospitality is sort of a "good-old-boys" hospitality. Privatized hospitality focuses on "beautiful homes, delicious dinners, and polite conversations." Hospitality as a mode of marketing appeals to a consumeristic mentality. Hospitality as inclusivity makes diversity "without expectations" to be the aim of hospitality. Homeless hospitality fails "to reflect the home or place of Christian hospitality." Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 19-40.

as a theological practice to help small groups at West Houston extend authentic Christian community to all of its members.

Why use the word “missional” in connection to hospitality? There is no such thing as a neutral hospitality. Hospitality is defined by those that practice it, the manner in which they practice it, and the purpose of the practice. “Missional” captures an essential purpose of the church that colors the practice of Christian hospitality. The church derives its missional nature from the missional character of God. God is a missionary, who creates humanity to be in relationship with God’s own self and then sends God’s self into the world to offer divine community to humanity. The use of the word missional places the practice of hospitality in the context of a community that is sent by God with the specific purpose of being a priest to all people. Hospitality is the way that the community relates to each other and embraces those to whom it is sent. Thus missional hospitality accomplishes God’s mission to reconcile humanity, is initiated by the faith community, and facilitates authentic community.

Christians must be willing to open up their lives to each other and the strangers around them. The living out and sharing of the gospel must be coupled with hospitality to authentically show God’s love for all. Christian love does not keep others at arm’s length; it welcomes them into the family life of the faith community. Christian communities should not expect that others will be interested in the gospel outside of a loving and relational connection. God’s missional hospitality is clearly seen in the sending of Jesus to love us while we were still sinners.⁸ The relational action of love precedes and accompanies the sharing of the gospel. I am proposing missional hospitality as a way to

⁸ John 3:16 and Romans 5:6-8.

reimagine and reenergize relational-building activities of small groups at West Houston in order to more fully participate in God’s work of building and extending Christian community.

Missional theology serves as the framework for missional hospitality. Missional theology captures the God-given missionary impetus for the church and I have endeavored to apply that to the practice of hospitality. There are several aspects of missional theology that give depth and meaning to the practice of hospitality. I will explore those aspects in the context of missional theology and apply them to hospitality, thus the term “missional hospitality.” Also, since missional theology is a relatively recent focus of certain church scholars, I begin with a broad overview of the contextual environment that gave birth to rethinking a theology of missions and review relatively recent theological discussions that are shaping “missional theology.”

Missional Theology

Missional theology seeks to reorient the church’s understanding of the Trinity based on “God’s character as a sending or missionary God.”⁹ The word “missional” functions as an adjectival form of the word mission. “Mission” is derived from the Latin word *missio*, which means “send.” Thus missional means “sending.” This sending is “a central biblical theme” that describes God’s missionary “action” to “restore and heal creation.”¹⁰

⁹ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 185.

¹⁰ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 176.

The biblical narrative describes how God creates humankind to live in a “faithful and just community.”¹¹ God creates a human community that partially reflects the communal nature of the Trinity. When humans fail to live up to this ideal and disrupt community, God works missionally to restore humanity, drawing it into community with itself and with God. The church serves as God’s missional “instrument,” sent to witness concerning God’s restorative mission.¹² Humanity sees a “tangible sign” of “God’s reign over all creation” through the church community.¹³ When the community does not reflect the righteous and communal nature of Trinitarian community, the witness of the church is hindered. The message of the church must match the life of its community. Thus the missional church’s identity lies in its “participation in the triune God’s mission in all creation,” and this mission is communal in nature.¹⁴

Often theologians have examined mission primarily in the context of ecclesiology or soteriology, but missional theology examines mission in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁵ In the context of the Trinity, mission can be described not only in the classical terms of the Father sending the Son, and the Son sending the church, but in terms of the Trinity sending the church into the world as a bearer of God’s mission.¹⁶

¹¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 7.

¹² Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 197.

¹³ Zscheile, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

¹⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

Rooting mission in the character of the Trinity removes it from being considered primarily as an ecclesiological activity. Focusing on ecclesiology often leads believers to consider mission as one of many programs or activities of the church. Such a truncated ecclesiological view of mission can then relieve individual responsibility for participating in God's mission outside of a formal church ministry.¹⁷ Considering mission from a Trinitarian perspective leads to understanding mission as an essential part of the God-given identity of each Christian and of the church. Thus each Christian and the church by nature are always on God's mission wherever God places them. A missional identity for the church leads to individual members being missional in their everyday walk. The church and its members operate missionally as they participate in God's missional activity to humanity in local contexts.

Missional theology makes the point that God is the one that initiates the mission. Barth was the most prominent modern theologian to argue that mission was an activity of God's own self.¹⁸ Karl Hartenstein shared similar convictions to Barth and he used the term *missio Dei* to refer to the church's participation in God's sending mission in a follow up report to the Willingen conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952. After that the phrase *missio Dei* came into vogue as a participation in the sending mission initiated by God.¹⁹ Historically, the church's emphasis on mission in soteriological or eschatological terms, ended up giving way to an understanding of

¹⁷ Considering mission solely from a soteriological perspective often leads to a narrow focus on "saving the soul" through instilling orthodox views and ignores other social and physical aspects of the kingdom.

¹⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

¹⁹ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 29.

mission as “one of several versions of the doctrine of grace.”²⁰ Understanding *missio Dei* as primarily God’s work opens up ways for the church to think about its own mission in kingdom terms that extend beyond salvation of the soul. *Missio Dei* firmly establishes that the church operates within the intention and purpose of God’s mission. Therefore, God’s mission defines the church; the church does not define God’s mission.²¹

God’s mission to reconcile creation is initiated by God, but revealed in a special way through his people. Thus God calls Abraham and sends him forth with the promise that God will bless all nations through him. Israel inherits this calling and is placed among the nations by God to be a light to the Gentiles. Jesus is the climatic expression of this mission as he is sent by the Father to bring the good news of healing and reconciliation. The sending character of God’s mission is further reinforced as Jesus sends out his disciples. Jesus spent much of his ministry preparing the disciples to go into the world with the message of the gospel (Matt. 28:16-20). The Spirit is then sent to empower the church to witness concerning God’s good news.²² The church can be characterized as being sent into a strange land as “aliens” to “declare the praises” of God to others.²³

We see evidence of this missional character in the early church. In Acts 1 Jesus tells the disciples that the work of the Spirit would empower them to witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the entire world. The rest of Acts begins to record this

²⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

²¹ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 218.

²² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

²³ 1 Pet. 2:9-11.

activity. Persecution broke out against the church in Acts 8 and Luke reports that “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”²⁴ Peter goes to Cornelius in Acts 9 as he is prompted by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 13 Luke records that the church in Antioch is moved by the Spirit to appoint Paul and Barnabas to be sent to the surrounding areas as missionaries. The church in the New Testament clearly carries out God’s mission to humanity.

Contextual Origins

The missional character of the early church was clear. However, the missional identity of the church became much more nebulous under the influence of a Christendom mindset in which entire nations were thought of as “Christian.” Missional theology developed as an antidote to the loss of a missional identity in the Western church. During Christendom, churches were inseparable from the political powers of their respective nations. Christendom refers to a “system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society” and the church was established as its “legally established institutional form.”²⁵

Among the most prominent and early forms of this Christendom arrangement was that which occurred under the Roman Emperor Constantine. The Roman Emperor Constantine believed he was a Christian; and as the head of a Christian empire, he thought it proper to favor and advance the interests of the church.²⁶ In the centuries to come partnerships between church and state dominated European cultures. This led

²⁴ Acts 8:4, all citations NIV.

²⁵ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 204.

²⁶ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 117.

national churches to believe that they lived in a Christian nation and that colonizing other countries would lead to an extension of national Christianity. One effect was that missions themselves were often corrupted as they became an extension of the state's interest in colonizing.²⁷ Additionally, those that lived in Christian nations often believed they did not need to evangelize their own nation.

During the modern period of Christendom, particularly in the Protestant church, the activity of missions became disconnected from the church. The thrust for missions often came from outside of the ecclesiological structure. Missionary conferences and societies dominated the landscape in missions.²⁸ Mission was increasingly done by parachurch organizations. Mission was viewed as an extension of ecclesiological activity that was often a commitment taken on by a diaspora of the church. The end result was that over time missions were removed from the core of Christian identity in many denominations and Christian fellowships.

Lesslie Newbigin is often cited as one of the first 20th century theologians in Northern Europe and North America that began to challenge the "Christendom" thinking

²⁷ During the course of the Enlightenment, mission efforts continued to be subverted by colonizing aims of Western culture. The growing technological and cultural divide between the West and the rest of the world led to a feeling of superiority and a belief within many in the church that the key to Western superiority was its Christian belief system. Newbigin says that this cultural influence led the Western church to think that the abundant life talked about in John 10 was actually "the abundance of the good things that modern education, healing, and agriculture would provide for the deprived peoples of the world." See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 92. Also read Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 291-313.

²⁸ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 110-11; also Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 20-22.

in regard to missions.²⁹ Newbigin joined the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland in 1935, and with the exception of a five-year stint, worked in India from 1936 until he retired in 1974.³⁰ When Newbigin returned, he was upset that churches were more interested in their “own growth and welfare” than God’s mission for the cities in which they were located.³¹ Newbigin realized that there was a need for new conversation around mission. Newbigin began challenging churches to refocus on the sending nature of a triune God as it applied to their own culture.

The U.S. may have removed the “legal structures” of Christendom, but in many ways it has maintained a “pattern of powerful traditions, attitudes, and social structures” that can be described as “functional Christendom.”³² Christians in the United States at times have been so absorbed “into citizenship” that they have difficulty differentiating between Christian culture and American culture.³³ Thus North American Christians have often believed that the role of the church was to send missionaries to foreign lands because these nations needed Christianity and Western civilization.³⁴

The Christendom mind-set sees itself as living in a Christian land and believes mission is something that others are sent to do elsewhere outside of their immediate “Christian” national context. This sort of attitude minimizes the importance of the local

²⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 27.

³⁰ Paul Weston, compiler and introducer, *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 132, Kindle.

³¹ Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 220-61.

³² Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 207-15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1443.

³⁴ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 212.

context as a mission field. Christendom tends to inculcate a “non-missionary” “self-consciousness” to the church.³⁵ Within its own context, the church has often been more concerned with maintenance of its own community than its missional role in the community. To some degree North American churches inherited a Christendom outlook, which in many cases has led to a church with a shriveled missional identity.³⁶

Other Influences

Two discussions are clearly influencing the developing field of missional theology: (1) eschatology and its focus on the “already” aspects of the kingdom and (2) God’s kingdom as expanded beyond the church.³⁷ These concepts add clarity to God’s mission and give focus to the mission of the church.

Eschatological focus on the terms “already” and “not yet” has brought to light the reality of the current presence of God’s reign through Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church.³⁸ Reflecting on the present reality of God’s reign as evidenced through the work of the Spirit led to the awareness that salvation extends beyond individual redemption to communal redemption, including the sphere of social justice. My conclusion is that the church cannot turn a blind eye to social injustice while claiming to save people’s souls. The mission of ushering in the present reality of God’s reign means the church should be involved in redeeming societal and systemic ills. Bosch states that “narrower concepts of gospel, such as viewing it in terms of individualized salvation focusing primarily on

³⁵ Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁷ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 30-41.

³⁸ Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 17-19, and Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 27-29.

securing eternal life,” are “inadequate to convey the fullness of the good news as announced by Jesus.”³⁹ God does not just care about my soul, but he cares about my existence on this earth, which cannot be separated out from my physical and social wellbeing. Thus when the church carries out God’s mission to the world, it involves ushering in the full scope of the kingdom, including a renewed social organization. This social organization should “already” be visible in Christian communities that are living out kingdom values. Missional hospitality reflects the “already” aspects of God’s kingdom.

Missional theology, recognizing that God is the initiator of mission and that mission is expanded to include a social revitalization, also acknowledges that God’s mission is not confined to the efforts of the church.⁴⁰ God operates through both the Church and the social, political, and cultural powers of the world. When civil forces bring an end to slavery, it is an advancement of God’s kingdom. When Mandela establishes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and offers an opportunity for both victims and oppressors to share their story and participate in the process of forgiveness, the kingdom of God advances. God gets the credit. Seeing God at work in the world reminds the church that it serves the purpose of God’s mission, which is not narrowed to the church.⁴¹ An enlarged concept of the reign of God is not meant to relativize or minimize the importance of the church. The church still plays a special role as priests that proclaim the gospel and offer reconciliation with God. It frees the church to point to kingdom

³⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 29.

⁴⁰ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 4.

⁴¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392.

developments outside of itself in ways that bring glory to God, and it allows the church to participate in activities God initiates. This broader view of God’s work allows the church to practice missional hospitality without arrogantly substituting itself for God.

Missional theology is influenced by discussions from the past century concerning the sending nature of a Triune God, *missio Dei*, and the nature of the kingdom of God.⁴²

Missional theology is grounded in the realization that the Trinity is a “sending, or missional, God. This becomes a starting point for reflecting on Trinitarian identity and then the identity of the church. Missional theology challenges the church to rethink its own identity in light of the identity of a Trinitarian God and the purposes of God’s reign.

Missional Hospitality

God sends God’s own self into the world and reaches out to humanity through the practice of missional hospitality. I view missional hospitality as a fundamental dimension of a missional God, not a secondary activity adjunct to some other purpose. Missional hospitality should be the practice of a church that is reflecting the sending nature of God and modeling God’s hospitality to the world.

God, through the person of Jesus, was sent onto the turf of those he wanted to reconcile. Jesus modeled missional (sent) hospitality with the purpose of reconciling humanity to God through himself. Jesus did not have a “place to lay his head,” but did

⁴² Alan Roxburgh in his forward to *The Missional Church in Perspective* makes the point that the word “missional” was rarely used in North American discussions on mission until after *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* was published in 1998. Darrell Guder, Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, George Hunsberger, Alan Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder were the authors. After that time the word became increasingly used, and now it is difficult not to find a new book out each month that uses the word “missional” in its title. Guder and Zscheile map out the historical and ongoing development of missional theology in *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*.

much of his “sent” ministry in the homes of others. Just as God sends the Son, the church is sent with the same purpose as that of Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20).⁴³ God chooses and sends the church into the world to relationally reconcile the world, first to the church through missional hospitality, and then to God in the process.

Missional hospitality is a mode of being in which the Christian community seeks to be “Christ to another and to receive the other as Christ, even when the other is hungry, thirsty, in prison, or naked (Matt. 25).”⁴⁴ This mode of being originates in the Trinity and is evidenced in the Christian community through the practice of hospitality as it relationally welcomes others into divine community in a way that addresses deep human needs such as “physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.”⁴⁵ Hospitality cannot be offered authentically at arms’ length, but instead invites the “other” into community where these significant needs can be met. Hospitality can be thought of as a “bridge that connects our theology with daily life and concerns.”⁴⁶ Jesus models missional hospitality by extending his ministry beyond teaching in the synagogue to walking in the streets and spending time in people’s homes. Conversation, acceptance, personal challenge, the meeting of physical needs, and the bestowal of self-worth characterize the missional hospitality of Jesus.

⁴³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*, ed. Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 160, iBooks.

⁴⁴ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 103.

⁴⁵ Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.

⁴⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 8.

I am reflecting on missional hospitality through the lens of missional theology. Just as missional theology has been influenced through reflection on mission as an essential character of the Trinity, I will first examine missional hospitality as it relates to Trinitarian relationality. Second, I will consider how missional hospitality “already” ushers in the inclusive and subversive aspects of the kingdom.

Trinitarian Relationality

Missional hospitality reflects a Trinitarian relationality. It is common to talk about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons. However, they are also one and the implication of this is relational. The way the three of them interact with each other forms the basis of this relationship. The term *perichōrēsis* is used to communicate the interrelatedness between each divine person.⁴⁷ Trinity should be understood not only in terms of common substance, but in the way the divine persons exist with each other relationally. In many ways “they are alive in one another and through” each other.⁴⁸ Thus the practice of missional hospitality proceeds out of the relationality of the Trinity.

The New Testament fleshes out this relationality in narrative form and makes clear that the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is also “open to the world.”⁴⁹ The New Testament narrative portrays Jesus as one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, while seeking to reconcile humanity into this relationship with the Trinity (John 17:20-23). I would argue that that the entire “focus of the doctrine of the Trinity is

⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 174.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 64.

the communion between God” and humanity.⁵⁰ Salvation cannot be separated from its goal of relational reconciliation with the Trinity.

Jesus’ “reception of hostile humanity” into Trinitarian community is a model for how Christian community should embrace others through hospitality.⁵¹ The purpose of missional hospitality moves beyond the indoctrination of a Christian belief system in others. God practices missional hospitality to forge relational community with humanity. The relationality of God will be at the center of all efforts to practice missional hospitality because this is God’s identity. God’s life within his people through the Holy Spirit similarly propels them into community to offer relationship with others through the practice of hospitality.

Establishes Community

The relationality of the Trinity is understood fully only in terms of community because there are three divine persons that form the triune God (John 10:38).⁵² Christianity cannot be isolated to individual salvation and experience because this is inconsistent with the Trinity. Church, reflecting the nature of God, should be understood in terms of community. Much like God, church is a dance between Christian, the divine, and the stranger. Thus salvation brings one into divinely established community, where relationality is experienced. Modernity’s emphasis on individualism encourages people to think of their salvation as an individual event. Such a notion might lead people to believe

⁵⁰ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 243.

⁵¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 100.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 128.

they can live out their salvation in isolation from others. However, community is the environment in which Trinitarian relationality lives. Salvation offered in Christianity cannot be separated out from the kingdom community or from the divine practice of hospitality that holds the community together.

Modern culture with its highly developed sense of the individual suggests that the secular world is distinct from the private world of religion, also implying that hospitality is a private affair rather than a communal affair.⁵³ Privatized hospitality may involve opening up one's home, but it is more likely to reflect one's own biases, include those from similar backgrounds, and focus less on spiritual conversations.⁵⁴ Even when private hospitality includes those from the margins, it lacks the staying power of the community to effect transformation in people's lives. Heuertz and Pohl report that to build the type of relationship that will be transformative in the lives of the poor requires living in community with them for years.⁵⁵ "New patterns of kinship and social relation" are not found in individual relations, but are formed and reinforced in the context of a committed community.⁵⁶ Transformative relationships are formed as individuals interrelate over a long period of time with each other within a group setting. These new social relations are not just an "implication" of salvation but are "precisely that which is offered as salvation."⁵⁷ Therefore, salvation and its benefits are fully experienced only within the

⁵³ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 28.

⁵⁶ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

newly found relations that are experienced within a community that reflects Trinitarian relationality.

Large churches have difficulty in creating the relationality necessary to constitute authentic community. Authentic community demands settings in which people can share life together. This does not easily happen during a formal worship in a large building. Even classroom settings do not foster the type of openness and sharing that typifies close community. When church communities extend beyond formal buildings into households, they create the type of hospitality and personal interaction that is necessary to create communal relationships that “transcend social differences.”⁵⁸ The goal of missional hospitality is to foster kingdom communities.

We cannot overestimate the role that the triune God plays in the forming of Christian community. Pohl reports from her research that there is a sense in these “guest/host relationships” that God is present.⁵⁹ God’s surprising work is revealed when Gentile and Jew, rich and poor, healthy and sick are brought together in one cruciform community (Eph. 3:6). Thus when those from diverse backgrounds are included in the community without distinction, the community reflects the divine communion of God and humanity (John 17:20-21).⁶⁰ Community is where one finds the fullest expression of God’s kingdom.

⁵⁸ Pohl, *Making Room*, 56.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁰ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274.

Seeks Solidarity

Solidarity is the way that missional hospitality accomplishes its goal of creating authentic relational community. Solidarity involves a sharing of life, suffering, and death with others. God takes on flesh and suffers with humanity to show his solidarity with creation (Phil. 2:6-8; Heb. 2:18; 4:14-15). The church seeks solidarity with its self and others by sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10). God's Spirit is at work in this process by bringing together a new group of people, who share each other's suffering in solidarity.⁶¹ In this "sharing" there is a new found closeness and appreciation for each other.

God does not seek solidarity from afar, but comes close. Thus missional hospitality enters into another's world and shares its joys and sorrows. Paul says it thus, "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). Everyday life is where people struggle to keep their marriage together, raise their children, keep their jobs, overcome prejudice, dispel doubt, and face countless other challenges. Thus missional hospitality cannot be confined to church buildings or homes, but must seek solidarity in the traffic patterns of everyday life. Solidarity is found when people eat together, work together, play together, are sad together, and learn together. Solidarity happens when life, in its rich and challenging diversity, is shared in community. Solidarity gives the depth necessary to authenticate relational connections within community. Without solidarity one cannot experience authentic community.

Solidarity is not easily accomplished programmatically. Solidarity occurs when people make room for relationships in their personal lives. Church programs, if they are

⁶¹ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 57.

to be helpful, must focus on the need for members to be transformed into the type of “social agents” or “selves” that Christians need to be in order to offer solidarity and community to another.⁶² Heuertz and Pohl report that “people are transformed when someone is willing to listen to their stories, to share a meal with them, and to find their insights and concerns important or interesting.”⁶³ Thus solidarity cannot be structured as much as it is sought by giving ourselves to others for the purpose of receiving them into “divine communion.”⁶⁴

Modern culture poses a challenge to the authentic giving of one’s self that leads to solidarity with another. Modernity’s emphasis on the individual tends to breed a self-centered pursuit of happiness.⁶⁵ Self-absorption, by definition, leaves little room for others. Christians are not to “claim the comfort of the Crucified while rejecting his way” of giving oneself to others.⁶⁶ Such a way of life advocates “not only cheap grace, but a deceitful ideology.”⁶⁷ Instead, God gives up his own self on the cross in order to make room for solidarity with others. Through baptism, Christians experience a dying of the self so that they can be “de-centered” away from self and “re-centered” on Christ (Rom.

⁶² Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20-21.

⁶³ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 80.

⁶⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 23.

⁶⁵ Welker talks about how the pursuit of individualism leads to self-focus and a fleeting attempt to find meaning within one’s self. This sort of narcissistic approach is contrasted with the self-emptying approach of the cross. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 35-37.

⁶⁶ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

6:1-7).⁶⁸ Dying to self creates the room necessary in one's life to seek solidarity with others. God models this "other-centered" life by giving up God's own self to seek solidarity with humanity (Phil. 2:5-8). Christians are transformed into social agents that practice self-giving through missional hospitality in order to forge authentic Christian community through solidarity with others.

Inclusive and Subversive Aspects of the Kingdom

Missional hospitality reflects Trinitarian purposes when it is both inclusive and subversive. Jesus describes the kingdom community as a "great banquet" and speaks of it in terms of an inclusive missional hospitality. When the ordinary guests refused the invitation to the feast, the host sent out his servant into the streets and instructed him to bring in "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:15-21). The host of the banquet then closed the doors to those that did not respond to the invitation and stated that they would not be privileged to receive a "taste" of the meal. In Jesus' kingdom all are included in the invitation and only those who refuse the invitation are excluded.

Jesus prefaces this story by instructing his host not to invite to his dinner friends, brothers, relatives, and the rich, who can return the favor. Instead, the kingdom invitation God extends has a special place reserved for those who live on the "margins of the community."⁶⁹ Thus Jesus portrays the kingdom community as reversing societal norms. People with social standing end up outside of the banquet hall doors and those that would normally be excluded are brought in to participate in the communal banquet.⁷⁰ Jesus'

⁶⁸ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 70.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁰ Volf lists elimination, assimilation, and abandonment as manifestations of exclusion. Elimination is overt, while assimilation forces others into our own image in

kingdom does not exclude by insisting that people are normalized, but instead the strange guests at this kingdom banquet challenge our assumptions about what it means to be normal.⁷¹ “Friendships forged in hospitality contradict contemporary messages about who is valuable.”⁷²

When those from the margins join the Christian community as full-fledged members, the community itself is changed. It is easy to ignore or abandon the poor when we do not include them in our community. Wesley commented in one of his sermons that one of the reasons the rich care so little for the poor is that they never bother to visit them and thus cannot relate to them.⁷³ Volf argues “that reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other.”⁷⁴ We can see these principles in action in the earliest New Testament communities. One of the things that characterized the early church was the inclusion of the poor. Not many of the early believers were “influential” or of “noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26-31). James warned the early church not to show favoritism to the wealthy, but instead to realize that God has a special place for the poor in the kingdom (James 2:1-7). When the poor were included in the early Jerusalem church, the community was transformed in various ways. One of those

order to be accepted. Abandonment is the ignoring of the needs and sufferings of others. See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 75.

⁷¹ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 177.

⁷² Pohl, *Making Room*, 10.

⁷³ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3: sermons III: 71-114, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 387-88.

⁷⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.

transformations was economic. Church communities redistributed individual wealth as needed to create greater equality and justice in the community. Luke describes this in

Acts 4:32-37:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it all at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Getting to know the poor on a personal level realigns a church's view on economics with kingdom values. Instead of seeing economics as a private or individual affair, economics becomes a communal affair that is guided by kingdom values, which subvert societies' norms. When missional hospitality is characterized by Trinitarian relationality and is truly inclusive, the faith community begins to fully reflect the kingdom values depicted by Jesus' parable in Luke 14.

Frequently Focused around Meals

Meals are often the location where the inclusive and subversive values of missional hospitality can be seen. Jesus' characterization of the kingdom in the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 is appropriately centered on a meal. Meals provide the opportunity for dialogue between hosts, guests, and strangers, which is a critical practice of missional hospitality. Meals also bring people together in a place where kingdom values can be experienced and lived out. This is why Jesus spent much of his missional ministry eating meals in the homes of others.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and through this practice was inclusive of all and subversive of Jewish beliefs, which excluded such people.⁷⁵ At inception, the church adopted Jesus' practice of communal meals (Acts 2:42-47). Meals in the early church aided the church community in overcoming its own prejudices and tendencies to exclude others. An example of this is seen in the tension surrounding the Eucharistic feast in Corinth. The rich were eating the love feast before the poor arrived and it was humiliating to those who had "nothing" (1 Cor. 11:17-23). The church was struggling with worldly values that exclude others based on social status. The unity and character of the community was at stake in Corinth. Paul exhorts them not to sin "against the body" by highlighting distinctions and creating communal divisions (1 Cor. 11:27). Eating together brings people close enough to challenge their own prejudices and assumptions of others. Communal meals offer the opportunity for Christians to subvert the worldly distinctions of class and race (Gal. 26-28). When Christians eat together in unity, without the cloak of worldly status, one sees a present foretaste of the kingdom of God that Jesus describes in Luke 14.⁷⁶

Meals are an excellent way to provide the setting needed for missional hospitality to occur. A location is required to bring community together to build the type of relationships needed to address the "physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence" that characterize missional hospitality.⁷⁷ Modern factors such as technology and suburban living make it much easier to live without the type of relationality

⁷⁵ For examples see Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:29-30, 7:36-37, 14:1-4.

⁷⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

necessary to build authentic community.⁷⁸ People have become too spread out and through the use of technology are able to navigate much of their life without the necessity of building deep relationships. The practice of missional hospitality cannot happen over “long distance,” but instead requires a place to “dwell in order to participate faithfully” in relationship building that is inclusive and subversive.⁷⁹ Large church gatherings bring people together, but often lack the informal and relaxed environment needed for a small group of people to experience authentic relationship. Meals provide the location necessary for the building of a relational community centered on kingdom values.

Communal meals, as exemplified by Jesus, continued to be a central practice during the early days of the church and through the patristic church. Church worship gatherings were in households and often included love feasts in which the bonds between socially and ethnically diverse members were reinforced. In Pohl’s research on the practice of hospitality, she reports that a “close look at contemporary communities and at their ancient counterparts reveals important commonalities. The practice of hospitality almost always includes eating meals together.”⁸⁰ However, during the reign of Constantine, the church became wealthy and the practice of hospitality began to change. Increased resources led to church buildings and the love feast was replaced by a more formalized and less relational partaking of the eucharistic meal. The Eucharist ceased to be a relational event. Instead it became a formal rite administered in a church building by the bishop. As church gatherings moved away from the household, meals became less

⁷⁸ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁰ Pohl, *Making Room*, 12.

frequent and the bond between the “provider and recipient” of hospitality became less personal.⁸¹ In other words, meals often are the venue for building deep relationships that cross social barriers. When those meals are removed, relationships break down.

My own practice of missional hospitality has confirmed the importance of meals. Over a year ago I formed a small group diverse in age, social class, and race that meets together regularly for a meal and to share God’s word. All the members in this group were strangers to each other and only recently began attending West Houston. Meetings typically lasted three hours and were characterized by a growing sense of community. Often group members would talk about how the small group was their “family.” The relationship we were building together transcended the social and racial diversity of the group. The group voted to cease meals and focus only on sharing the word. Meetings became shorter and before long the closeness that had been developing in the group began to wane. The group has now returned to its practice of sharing meals together at each meeting in order to regain that closeness. Wesley also knew the importance of meals in small groups. One of the reasons for the quick growth in Wesley’s followers was the authentic community that was built through small groups. A key component that facilitated the community was the practice of communal love feasts, which Wesley reinstated.⁸² Meals facilitate the type of interaction that is needed to build an inclusive community that challenges worldly values.

⁸¹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 54.

Based on Friendship

It may seem trite to have a section entitled friendship, but friendship is the basic relational building block that allows a community to be inclusive and supports the breaking down of social barriers. Friendship is also what makes relationships authentic. Friendship means a person actually cares for another. Jesus not only ate with tax collectors and sinners; he was scandalously accused of being their friends (Matt. 11:19). Jesus also calls his disciples “friends” and carefully distinguishes between “servants” and the closer relationship of friendship that he shares with his disciples.⁸³ The triune God’s “divine self-giving” through Jesus, is intended to facilitate receiving the godless into “divine communion through atonement.”⁸⁴ This divine communion is one of friendship. The cruciform giving and receiving of friendship is not just what God does, but who God is. True friendship always involves some form of sacrifice and giving of one’s self. Christian communities must sacrificially give of themselves to each other and outsiders in authentic ways in order to build an inclusive community. Offering and giving friendship is a central way in which the gospel includes all and subverts the exclusive tendencies of humanity.

Much can be learned about the nature of true friendship from those who have worked full time with the poor and outcasts of society. These organizations are inclusive and subversive of societal norms that value people based on their ability to produce in society. These organizations credit much of their success in working with poor and

⁸³ Luke 12:4 and John 15:14-15.

⁸⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 23.

outcasts to the friendships that they have built with the ones they are helping.⁸⁵ When people are afforded the opportunity to give to the poor from a distance, friendships are not formed, and the poor are further isolated and reduced to “objects of charity.”⁸⁶ In addition, the donors are able to create the illusion that they are giving without the sacrifice of giving directly of themselves. Giving at arms-length precludes developing the type of friendship needed to build inclusive communities.

Friendship includes others in our everyday lives. Friendship values all individuals based on their god-image rather than the standards of the world. Valuing others means listening to them, understanding their concerns, valuing their contributions in our own lives, and sharing our lives with them. This type of friendship bonds people to each other and forms the basis of an inclusive and subversive community. This is the reason that communities such as L’Arche have been effective at building an inclusive community in a very diverse environment. L’Arche brings together people with and without intellectual disabilities to live their everyday lives together.⁸⁷ Friendship sacrifices enough to bring others into our everyday life patterns. Even better, friendship sacrifices in order to enter into the everyday life patterns of others. Residents at L’Arche form surprisingly close bonds, regardless of their differences, because they “do” life together. Jesus did not offer hospitality on his own terms, but entered into the world of those he was sent to befriend. A friend of mine recently said that we can define the quality of our friendship by whether

⁸⁵ Jean Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor: The Story of L’Arche*, updated version (Toronto: Novalis, 2012), 119-20.

⁸⁶ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 26-27.

⁸⁷ Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 13.

or not we would go on vacation with them. Friendship in Christian community can be measured by how much life the community shares as friends together.

Friendship is based on equality. Jesus modeled a “sent” hospitality as he accepted invitations to eat in the homes of others. Entering the homes of others places the relationship on equal footing, and there cannot be true friendship without equality within the community. Equality means that each member of the community is recognized as a valuable contributor to the community. Thus friendship must be reciprocal. Both parties must give and receive in the relationship. Everyone cannot contribute the same thing, but all have a “manifestation of the spirit” that is “given for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Those who work regularly with the poor observe that when the poor are able to contribute to a shared “vision or purpose” along with the rest of the community, it creates the “mutuality” and “humility” that is necessary for true friendship to develop.⁸⁸ Humility means that individuals within the Christian community bring their needs along with their gifts. When we are willing to share our vulnerabilities with others and allow them to minister to us, friendships deepen. Both needs and gifts are valuable contributions to a friendship based on equality.⁸⁹

Friendship in the context of an inclusive and subversive community is transformative. What L’Arche and similar communities have found is that without the relationship of friendship “none can grow to a greater inner liberation and wholeness.”⁹⁰ In addition L’Arche discovered that transformation happened equally between those with

⁸⁸ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 78.

⁸⁹ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 68.

⁹⁰ Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 133.

intellectual disabilities and those without when they shared friendship in the context of community.⁹¹ One of the liberating insights that those with intellectual disabilities receive at L'Arche is that their friendship with those who are assisting them is life-giving to the assistants.⁹² The assistants receive every bit as much as they give. Friendship, when extended to others, transforms individuals in ways that bring them in line with kingdom values.

The truth is that most people in our modern society hunger for authentic relationships characterized by the giving and receiving of friendship.⁹³ The application to any church community is that missional hospitality should welcome others into a “church household” by bringing them into “functioning, living communities with reciprocal relations and commitments” that form the basis of friendship.⁹⁴ It requires us to enter in humility into the world of others and to offer ourselves as the basis of friendship, while receiving their friendship in return. Reciprocal and authentic friendship advances the inclusive and subversive goals of God’s kingdom.

Conclusion

Missional hospitality is a fundamental practice of the Trinity and thus a fundamental practice of the Christian community. The church builds a community modeled on Trinitarian relationality by practicing missional hospitality. Missional hospitality is an ongoing initiative of the church that builds authentic communal

⁹¹ Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 133.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹³ Pohl, *Making Room*, 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

relationships through standing in solidarity with each other and with the surrounding community. The community that is built through the practice of missional hospitality includes strangers and disrupts unjust societal norms, while reflecting kingdom values. The practice of missional hospitality is central to the identity of the church and is critical to maintaining a vibrant faith community.

Application of Theological Perspective to West Houston

Missional theology has arisen as a topic of conversation among some theologians because the church's view of mission no longer fits a post-Christendom context. I have used missional theology as a lens to bring into focus the practice of hospitality so that it can be applied in small groups at West Houston in light of its current context.⁹⁵ West Houston in many ways is still transitioning out of a "Christendom" mindset. The congregation has primarily thought of missions in terms of foreign missions. It has also thought of missions as something that the church sends others to do. Mission is not often talked about in terms of how to reach those within the church walls or reach the church's neighbors. Local mission, when talked about at West Houston, revolves around attracting members and guests to church events. West Houston is no longer experiencing the depth of community that it desires through these events. The congregation is in need of rediscovering its missional identity in regard to its context and in need of reenergizing itself through the practice of missional hospitality.

⁹⁵ Missional theology is being driven partly by the need to rethink mission in terms of a post-Christendom context. The application of missional theology at the level of local church is to reimagine mission in light of the local context. See Richard R. Osmer, "Formation in the Missional Church: Building Deep Connections between Ministries of Upbuilding and Sending," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 31.

The practice of missional hospitality by small groups will help West Houston recapture its lost sense of family. While there will still be large-group family events, small groups will become the primary location for family activities. Small groups will foster the type of authentic community that people need to feel connected. Missional hospitality will also help break down the barriers that are created by diverse racial and religious backgrounds within the church. In the future, small groups will be more diverse and will regularly invite newcomers into their midst. This should eventually lead to greater diversity in the leadership at West Houston. Long-time patterns that keep West Houston members locked into familiar social circles will not easily be broken. It is my hope that a focus on the missional character of God, coupled with intentional experiences of hospitality, will lead to practicing missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to develop an action plan for cultivating the practice of missional hospitality among small groups at West Houston Church of Christ. The endeavor was a qualitative research project. Qualitative research examines how organizations and their members perceive and form meaning.

“Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic meanings in individuals’ lives.”¹

I used qualitative research to study elements in the organization that fall outside of the realm of quantitative research. I looked at aspects such as the nature of church programs, patterns in the congregation’s activities and behaviors, and church members’ perceptions. In addition, I utilized a form of participatory action research, which occurs when those that are involved and affected by an issue come together to systematically gather information and make improvements.² I brought together individuals that are leading a small group or intend to lead a small group in the future. This group participated with me in the research process, and together we sought solutions to cultivating the practice of missional hospitality in small groups. One advantage of action research is that there is

¹ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 3-4.

² Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 6, EBSCO eBook.

greater ownership of the proposed solutions when those that will help implement it are involved in the research process.

As the researcher and leader of this action research project, I made observations and aided the group as a facilitator and teacher in order to guide the group toward new insights and the development of their plan. As a minister at West Houston with a vested interest in the outcome of this plan, I also participated in the planning group. Thus I became a learner along with the group as we sought to gain new understandings and develop solutions that best fit the context at West Houston. In order to more objectively assess my role in the process, I practiced “reflexive” ethnography.³ I kept notes on my own actions, words, and body language throughout the process in order to be more aware of my own influence on the process.

Project Format

The planning group met for a total of nine weeks on Sunday mornings from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. in the West Houston conference room. During the entire nine weeks, the group began the meeting by experiencing hospitality around a meal. The first four weeks the group studied the theological practice of missional hospitality. Additionally, I gave the participants assignments to practice missional hospitality during the week. Weeks 2 through 5 the group debriefed the results of the assignment given the week prior. During weeks 5 through 8, the group used its new theological insights and shared experiences of hospitality to develop a plan for cultivating missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston. The group evaluated this action plan during week 9.

³ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethic, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 7-8.

Description of Participants

The planning group included eleven present and future missional community leaders and the adult discipleship minister. I utilized Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, as a “key informant” to assist in selecting the most appropriate participants for the project.⁴ Chris was an important reservoir of knowledge critical to the project. Chris and I used the principle of “purposive sampling” in order to select a diverse group of participants that were interested in this project and in a position to help implement it.⁵ We included several stakeholders. Stakeholders are those “whose issues are the central focus of the research” and, in this case, have accrued power and influence in the small-group ministry.⁶ Stakeholders’ personal experience and involvement in issues being researched compliment the academic expertise of the researcher and increase ownership of the derived solutions. We selected group members who were actively participating in a missional community and willing to take on weekly missional hospitality assignments from this project. Included in the planning group were one elder, an adult education deacon, and two ministers. Four women and eight men comprised the planning group. Group members were asked to sign a commitment form that outlined expectations for their participation in the project.⁷

⁴ For more information on the use of key informants, see Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 13-14.

⁵ For an example of purposive sampling, see Stringer, *Action Research*, 235. For a description, see Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 83-84.

⁶ Stringer, *Action Research*, 127; and Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 13-14.

⁷ The planning group participation covenant is included in appendix C.

Description of Ministry Intervention

Developing Christian Practice

A number of factors such as “certain beliefs, virtues, and skills with certain behaviors, relationships, and symbols” cohere to form a “Christian practice.”⁸ In order to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality, I led the group in the following:

(1) studying missional hospitality, (2) experiencing relational connection with God through the word, (3) the actual practicing of hospitality among the planning group, and (4) the practicing of missional hospitality in small groups. These theological tasks were intended to work together toward cultivating the practice of missional hospitality in the lives of the project participants.

Sessions 1 through 4

Each session began with a simple breakfast that was provided by my wife and daughter. During this time participants engaged in spontaneous, unorganized fellowship. Breakfast was followed by the practice of *lectio divina*, based on a Benedictine practice that considers the word more than mere text. It regards it as the “living word” through which communion with God can be found.⁹ The group read the text out loud twice each week with a short period allowed for meditation after each reading. Then each participant shared how God’s word had spoken to them. All readings were taken from Luke 10. Missiological aspects of Luke 10 played a key role in the group’s discussion and discerning process related to the practice of missional hospitality. After we practiced

⁸ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18-19.

⁹ For a fuller description of this practice, read Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

lectio divina, I taught the group key theological concepts concerning missional hospitality as it relates to the context of West Houston.¹⁰ I also provided handouts for the first four sessions.¹¹ I facilitated discussion each week to check for group comprehension of the theological concepts. At the end of each session, group participants were given an assignment to be completed in their missional communities during the following week.

Session 1 gave the background of the emergence of missional theology and applied it to missional hospitality. The group briefly revisited West Houston's new vision as it relates to using missional communities as the mode for spiritual transformation and community outreach. Then I taught the group an overview of the basic tenets of missional hospitality. Participants agreed to practice *lectio divina*, discuss missional hospitality, and make a list of people they could reach through the practice of missional hospitality. I also asked the group to pray over the people on their list. In session 2 members shared the results of their homework from the week before. This session focused on Trinitarian relationality and its communal nature as it applies to missional hospitality. The group discussed the implication of the relationality of the Trinity for developing a strategy for missional hospitality. The group assignment for this week was to practice *lectio divina* and challenge their missional community to participate in a meaningful conversation with someone from their prayer list. Session 3 also began with sharing the results from the previous week's homework. This session discussed the inclusive and subversive nature of missional hospitality within God's kingdom. The group discussed how friendship is a way to include and transform diverse participants within a communal setting. Group

¹⁰ Lesson plans for the first four sessions are included in appendix D.

¹¹ Participant handouts are included in appendix E.

members were assigned to practice *lectio divina* in their missional community and to spend one hour in a friendship building activity with someone from a different race or socio-economic background during the next week. Session 4 began with a short sharing of how participants fared in their homework assignments. During the theological section, the group focused on how meals are often a central aspect of missional hospitality. Dialogue focused on the ministry of Jesus, the early table-focus of the church, and some of Pohl's writings. Members were assigned to practice *lectio divina* and to plan a meal where guests from their prayer list would be invited to participate. The goal was to conclude the meal within a two-week period.

Sessions 5 through 9

I used focused discussion and the technique of content mapping with a whiteboard and Post-it notes to help facilitate the development of an action plan. Content mapping takes key themes identified by the group and illustrates them on the board in diagram form so that the group can see the visual connections between the themes.¹² The process began by identifying as many elements as possible that were relevant to developing the action plan. Those elements were then placed in overarching categories, and those categories were then linked together on the board to show how they were interconnected.

Session 5 began with sharing the results of the meal that had been planned by participants. Then participants identified themes from the first four sessions that were most pertinent to developing a plan to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups. After session 5 I took pictures of the summaries on the board and the Post-it notes and emailed them to each participant. I also developed a summary page that took

¹² Stringer, *Action Research*, 112-14.

the key sections and put them in outline form. These were also emailed to each participant. Originally, I had intended to have the participants email a summary of what they believed should be included in the plan, but the group was not far enough along in their discussion after session 5 to move to that step. Session 6 focused on integrating the suggestions given by the participants into one rough draft plan. During this session, the group identified several areas related to the developing plan. Those areas were (1) alter the training of missional community leaders to include missional hospitality; (2) redevelop the church's membership class (West Houston 101) to model missional hospitality; (3) plan a congregational focus on missional hospitality that will include a sermon series, Sunday school series, and a practicum assigned to the congregation; and (4) develop a graphic representation of the maturing process of a small group. These four areas were assigned to four different members, who agreed to write up a plan based on our discussions and email it back to the group before the next meeting. Session 7 was used to discuss and refine the plans devised by these four members. During session 7, I took notes of all the suggestions made by the group and checked with the group verbally to make sure I had them down correctly. The group decided that the development of a graphic representation of the maturing of a small group was outside of the scope of missional hospitality and would not be included in the final version of the plan. Before session 8, I added the revisions from session 7 and put the plan in a format that could be easily read and understood by others. The plan was finalized in session 8. During session 9 the group evaluated the plan. I emailed the evaluative questions to each group member prior to the session. Some of the participants wrote out their answers to these questions.

Most participants answered these questions verbally during session 9. The questions used for the discussion and evaluation of the plan are in appendix F.

Evaluation

Triangulation

I evaluated the action plan devised by the group by analyzing multiple perspectives. This approach is known as triangulation. Triangulation seeks to cross check different interpretations of the same data in order to increase understanding.¹³ This approach was not the full picture, but these three different “angles of vision” enhanced “validity and reliability.”¹⁴ The three angles I considered were (1) my perspective, as recorded through detailed field notes, and aided by a participant observer; (2) the perspective of the planning group members, by interviewing the group in session 9; and (3) that of an outside expert, Dr. John Ogren.

Data Collection

Researcher

The first point of data I triangulated were my observations as aided by a participant observer. My daughter, Ashley Stewart,¹⁵ played the role of participant observer.¹⁶ She attended all ten planning group sessions and recorded pertinent

¹³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002), 560.

¹⁴ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 76.

¹⁵ Ashley is a university student, has a very high IQ, is a very effective interpersonal communicator, and is a good typist. She has won numerous awards in speech, theater, and video production. Ashley has an independent spirit and is very insightful.

¹⁶ Participant observation is best done with a “relatively low-key” approach, which allows the observers to “watch and takes notes but minimizes their influence on

conversations, body language, and specified characteristics in great detail. Ashley recorded approximately ten to fourteen single-spaced pages per meeting using a word processor. These notes included her initial interpretive observations of things such as body language, silences, participation levels, and reactions by participants.¹⁷ All field notes were recorded in Microsoft Word. Before the end of the day and after each planning group session, I read over Ashley's notes, added some of my own observations, and made some initial interpretive notes as the primary researcher.¹⁸ I found that Ashley's notes were very thorough. During each session, I made reflective notes concerning my impact on the group and its processes. I reviewed my reflective notes after each session and made additions to those. All collected data from the project were stored in electronic form and became a part of the project data set.

Planning Group

The planning group's evaluation of the plan was the second angle triangulated. I conducted a group interview in session 9 to collect those data.¹⁹ Group interviews can be challenging due to the difficulty in controlling various factors such as participants' interactions with each other or dominating behavior by one of the interviewees.²⁰ I

what is happening.” Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 26. Also see Stringer, *Action Research*, 10.

¹⁷ A protocol for recording field notes and initial interpretive observations guided Ashley's observations and is included in appendix G.

¹⁸ I used the comment feature in Microsoft Word to record my initial interpretations.

¹⁹ As previously stated, questions used for this evaluative interview are in appendix F.

²⁰ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 178-79.

facilitated the session in a way that encouraged proper behavior by the participants; I did not allow participants to dominate and kept the group organized around the agenda. The group worked together well and allowed the evaluative questions to guide their discussion. During the eight weeks of working together, the group had developed a noticeable rapport. This led to open interaction within the group and a healthy respect for each other.²¹ Open-ended survey questions allowed the participants to evaluate their experience of missional hospitality in their own small groups, assess the overall strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and give advice related to the possible future implementation of the plan.²² The group evaluation of the plan was an important angle in the data triangulation.

Outside Expert

John Ogren provided the final angle of data evaluation. Ogren has a D.Min. from ACU and is finishing his dissertation for a PhD in missional theology from Luther Seminary. His dissertation is related to missional activity by small groups in the North American context. Additionally, Ogren helped develop small groups called “communities of faith” during his ten-year tenure as a minister. His experience and expertise in this field, as an outside expert, provided a relevant and informed perspective that was helpful in the evaluation of the final research product.²³ I emailed Ogren a copy of the project

²¹ Good rapport is central to “gaining candid and valid information” in an interview. Gerald W. Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action: A Cultural Analysis Workbook*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 100.

²² Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 29.

²³ Sensing proposes the use of an outside expert as a viable and effective way to gain an additional perspective to triangulate the data. See Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 223.

prospectus and the action plan that was produced by the planning group. Ogren provided a written evaluation of the plan.

Data Analysis

I analyzed and coded all the data collected from the project. I considered the data literally, interpretatively, and reflexively. Literal readings focus on language, interpretive readings focus on “implied or inferred” meanings, and reflexive readings focus on my own “comments and influence” in the data.²⁴ In addition, I looked for incongruences in the data, sometimes called a “slippage,” and for “silences,” indicating things were omitted.²⁵ The analysis yielded themes, which I recorded and coded. I patterned my coding process after the one described in *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*.²⁶ I began the process through open coding, seeking as many relevant themes and categories as possible. I determined themes by what I found in the notes, but also included themes from chapter 2 related to small groups and their (1) missional identity, (2) relationality, (3) communal nature, (4) emotional solidarity between members, (5) inclusivity of others, (6) subverting of societal norms, (7) use of meals, and (8) quality of friendships. During this process, I wrote memos noting possible theories and interpretations of the data. At the end of the coding process, I selected the themes most relevant to this project for analysis and relooked at the data for focused coding. During focused coding, I reread only the data that related to the fields I identified as most relevant. I also used “integrative memos.” Integrative memos draw out analytic themes and clarify links

²⁴ Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, 172.

²⁵ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 197-201.

²⁶ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 170-99.

between different categories.²⁷ These memos assisted me in developing theories and in interpreting the data.

After completing the coding process, I compared the three different perspectives of the data. Areas of agreement emerged, which led to a “classification system for the data” and to “greater” confidence in the findings.²⁸ There were also areas of divergence, which I consider and explain in my findings. I analyzed and interpreted the data from these three different angles to form a whole picture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to develop a plan that would help cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston Church of Christ. I combined theological discernment with the practical experience of hospitality in order to stimulate imaginative thinking about the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston. The group participated wholeheartedly in the project and also committed to continuing to meet until a mechanism could be established to implement the plan.

²⁷ Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 172.

²⁸ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 198.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This project culminated in a plan to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.¹ There are four distinct areas of focus within the plan. First, missional community leaders will be trained in the theological practice of missional hospitality. Missional communities revolve around their leaders at West Houston. Training these leaders will be crucial to groups adopting the practice of missional hospitality. This will be accomplished through the already existing biannual trainings and enhanced with biweekly trainings that will be offered on a volunteer basis to missional community leaders. These trainings will model the same type of format experienced by the planning group through the sessions described in chapter 3. Second, new members will be inculcated into the practice of missional hospitality as a part of their initiation into membership. Presently, prospective members attend a two-hour class that involves a meal, but is primarily designed to disseminate information and obtain a membership commitment. In the future, those desiring to place membership will attend an eight-week course called “discovery group,” in which missional hospitality will be modeled in the context of a meal. The intent is to form a new missional community out of the prospective members. A leader for the new small group will be sought from the new members. However, a previously trained leader or shepherd may join the newly formed missional community as additional support. This goal intends to remediate the existing

¹ This plan is found in appendix H.

situation in which new members are not being assimilated by existing missional communities. The third part of the plan is to conduct a congregation-wide focus on missional hospitality through a simultaneous sermon and Sunday school class series. These lessons will be coupled with a challenge to the church to form teams within their missional communities to practice missional hospitality by inviting their neighbors to a meal. The planning group was keenly aware that a cultural change must be enacted in order for the practice of missional hospitality to become a regular praxis of small groups. The final part of the plan involved a commitment by the planning team to continue to meet together once a month for six months until the plan was either implemented or a team could be put together to implement the plan. The group expressed hope that the different parts of this plan would work together to begin the process of conversation and practice necessary for cultural change.

Three Angles of Evaluation

I triangulated three different points of view of the project data in order to minimize the likelihood that I would be biased in my evaluation of the results. The angles used were (1) my view as the researcher, (2) the group's view as insiders in the project, and (3) the independent expert's view as an outsider. This chapter contains the analytic themes arising from these three angles and the resulting interpretations.

Researcher

For each of the planning group sessions, Ashley Stewart kept extensive electronic field notes as a participant observer. After each session I reviewed these notes, contributing additional details and observations. In addition, I kept reflective notes concerning my own influence on the group process. Early on, the notes I kept helped me

realize I needed to relax more to facilitate an environment conducive to experiencing elements of missional hospitality within the planning group. One way I used the reflective notes was to remind to lead the group without dominating so that the group could creatively contribute to the process. I coded and categorized field notes by themes as described in chapter 3.² As I analyzed the data through open coding and subsequent identification of emerging themes, I developed a coding scheme by which I organized the data most relevant to the project.³ The data were used in my evaluation of the plan developed by the group. In evaluating the group project, I identified five distinct themes, which I compared to the other two angles of evaluation: (1) needing to transform culture, (2) practicing missional hospitality in natural life patterns, (3) being missional within the walls, (4) seeking solidarity through meals, and (5) seeing the person of peace.

Needing to Transform Culture

The need for a cultural change appeared many times in my field notes. The group expressed that a heart change needed to occur in the entire church. Cultural change happens in authentic relational settings, which also include dialogue, theological reflection, and a challenge to new ways of living.⁴ Challenges must be followed with opportunities to practice newly espoused behaviors if a cultural change is to take hold. The process described above is exactly what the planning team experienced. During the planning group sessions, the group began to see missional hospitality as a theological practice that is necessary and central to any Christian community. Assignments to

² See Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 43-49.

³ Appendix I contains the coding scheme I developed for the data.

⁴ Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation," 21.

practice missional hospitality contributed to the group's appreciation for missional hospitality. When asked, group members agreed that the process was personally transformative. Field notes included various comments that the entire congregation needed to hear and experience what the planning group was experiencing concerning missional hospitality. The group believed that a similar process would benefit small group leaders, the congregation as a whole, and new members while also creating a climate conducive to missional hospitality.

Practicing Missional Hospitality in Natural Life Patterns

Missional hospitality occurs in the natural traffic patterns of our lives, not in a classroom or in fulfillment of an assignment. This was confirmed by one of the assignments given the group. I asked the planning group to plan a meal in their respective missional community that would include inviting someone unchurched. I asked the group to choose a date and plan a formal event within their missional community to fulfil this assignment. Interestingly, only my missional community fulfilled the assignment in the way I envisioned it. My small group planned a meal at my house to which we invited several people we had met outside of the West Houston setting. However, others in the planning group found less programmatic ways of fulfilling the assignment. None of them set a date ahead of time and worked their way toward it. One of the team members invited a former unchurched neighbor to play at Topgolf with the men from his missional community. They had drinks together and were able to get to know each other. The neighbor talked about how his children are attending a Christian school and learning about God. Another group member invited a coworker, who was struggling to believe in God, to lunch. He and his coworker agreed to meet more regularly to discuss theological

matters. A third member met his neighbor, who is Nigerian, and invited him and his family to a barbecue at his house. He also invited the man's children to swim in his pool. In all three cases the extension of hospitality was a spontaneous opportunity seized upon by the group members, not a formal invitation to a missional community meeting. All agreed that their practice of missional hospitality was spurred by participation in the planning team sessions. However, the practice evidenced itself in the natural traffic patterns of their life, not as a preplanned event. The programmatic request for a missional community meal to reach the unchurched did not coincide well with the everyday context of life in which members found a person who was open to receiving hospitality. Even in the case of my own group's meal, the contacts that we invited were made in the context of an unexpected party my wife and I were invited to attend one week prior. At that party we met several unchurched couples whom we were able to invite to our meal. Otherwise, we were struggling to find an invitee to fulfill our pledge. The point is that missional hospitality happens in the natural traffic patterns of our lives and in God's timing as we open our eyes to people around us. At best, programs may spur us to be more aware of God's work in others' lives.

Being Missional within the Walls

One of the group members made the comment that if we became fully missional we would cease to exist as a church at our present location. A truly missional group would leave the church building and plant itself in the community. He followed up by saying that the church was only truly "missional for the first three hundred years" and after that time the church became attractional. He maintained that attractional has worked fairly well for the last seventeen hundred years. The planning group valued the concept of

missional, but also found worth in the benefits of a large church like West Houston. The group wanted to find ways to apply missional hospitality to an attractional church. One of those applications involved reaching the unchurched people God brings to West Houston on a weekly basis. The team felt strongly that West Houston has a responsibility to extend missional hospitality to all within its four walls.

The planning team noticed that it seemed easier to assimilate new members into groups where the new members were the majority than to integrate them into older groups. This fact is evidenced within three of the four missional communities represented in the planning team. The leaders of these three small groups impressed on the planning team that many unchurched people attend West Houston each Sunday, but few small groups are connecting with them. For example, my missional community is made up almost completely of people that have been attending West Houston less than one year. Several of my small group members have not become members of West Houston yet. I have met and recruited most of our small group members from within the West Houston church walls. However, most missional communities are not oriented toward assimilating newcomers.

New members are not connecting to existing small groups within West Houston, but they tend to be open and receptive to forming new relationships. Thus the team proposed forming new missional communities out of new members and providing these groups a strong leader or shepherd from the existing membership. This duplicates what has already worked well with the three groups on the planning team. These three missional communities have strong leaders that formed a nucleus to which the new members were attracted. The team exhibited more excitement over this idea than any

other idea presented. While the planning team still hopes to mold the existing small group culture into a more missional form, it also realizes that creating new groups alongside the old groups is an effective way to begin impacting the overall culture of the church. The consensus was that missional hospitality should inform the way we interact with guests within our worship center and the way we bring new members into the church body.

Concern was expressed by the group that the plan was not “missional” enough. After some discussion on this topic, one group member summarized by saying that “the ‘sent’ part is not met” well in this plan. My field notes revealed the group talked often about the need for a missional mindset in which West Houston offers hospitality in their work places, to their neighbors, and to other non-Christian friends. Missional theology served as a backdrop to everything the group considered. However, the primary emphasis the group kept coming back to was the need to reach those God is already bringing within our midst.

Seeking Solidarity through Meals

Solidarity happens only in the context of a thick relationship, which involves sharing emotional, physical, and spiritual needs. Meals were identified by the group as an indispensable part of developing solidarity with others through friendship. My field notes revealed instances in which planning team members related the importance of meals in their own relationships. One of the group members shared how a casual conversation concerning God at work led to a lunch appointment with a co-worker. At lunch the co-worker became vulnerable and admitted he was “angry” with God. He could not understand why God would create different races since that has led to so much prejudice. He was bothered by the corrupt morals displayed by Christians and certain characters

found in the Bible. The two covenanted to keep the conversation going over future lunches. Lunch was a catalyst that brought the two of them closer. Another team member mentioned that his “greatest memories growing up” were when the family got together to eat. He stated his belief that family meals brought the family closer together. This member also expressed that his missional community is more relaxed and connects better when they eat together. Meals provide a culturally accepted opportunity to stop the busyness of life, sit down, and converse with one another at a deeper level.

Meals are also a great way to create solidarity among a diverse group. My group is composed of 50% Latino, 30% African American, and 20% Caucasian. All in my group believe that the meals are a central catalyst to our closeness. I shared with the planning team that my missional community floundered when we focused on a Bible study alone and discontinued our meal time together. The meetings became more formal and we lost the intimacy that brings Christian solidarity to a small group. Recently, my missional community had our regular meal time followed by a short study of Romans. During the sharing time, one of our members shared that his own brothers and sisters rarely interacted with him because he is a Christian. With tears rolling down his face, he said that our group is “the only true family” he has. Meals have played an important role in bonding my diverse missional community into one close family. Another missional community represented in the team is 75% African American. The leader of this group is Caucasian, but he has been able to create a cohesive multicultural group around the table. In the early days of the group, they met at church and ate together as a regular part of their meeting. The leader believes that meals played an integral role in developing solidarity between the Caucasian and African American members. Sometime after the

first year, his group quit sharing meals together. Due to the planning team's focus on missional hospitality, this group leader shared that he realized his group had become less intimate due to discontinuing the meals. Sharing meals as a group appears to assist in breaking down barriers and forming bonds among diverse members.

In the context of discussing meals, the team identified individualism, discomfort of having others in one's home, and the fast pace of urban life as some of the obstacles to hosting meals. The group agreed that hosting meals was worth the sacrifice, but that it would not come naturally to many of the small groups. It was suggested that missional community leaders be trained in missional hospitality and meals be proffered as one of the best ways to create solidarity. The training itself should model hospitality around meals.

Seeing the Person of Peace

Each week the group practiced *lectio divina* focused on different portions of Luke 10. Before the nine weeks were completed, the group read through Luke 10 three different times. The conversations were rich and many of the field notes from those conversations directly related to the group's focus on missional hospitality. The concept of a "man of peace" impacted the group. The group defined a person of peace as one that was receptive to Christ and to the person bringing the gospel message. Since three of the missional communities represented in the planning team contain a large number of newcomers, the group was convinced that there is great receptivity in the community surrounding West Houston. Many of those walking into the church building each week evidence characteristics of a person of "peace." In addition, during the nine-week planning process, the group encountered neighbors, co-workers, and people at parties that

were open to God's hospitality. The conclusion was that there are many people of peace in the community, our own lives, and within the church building. As a community of faith, we must learn to open our eyes and see the people of peace that God has put in front of us. One of the planning team members made the comment that he wanted to learn to be "in tune" with God's heart. He wanted to be able to see how people felt when they walked into our church building or moved into his neighborhood. The team acknowledged that equipping groups to practice missional hospitality will also entail teaching them to identify people of peace by seeing others through God's eyes.

Planning Group

During week 9 of the project, the planning group evaluated the actual plan derived by the group. Questions were sent out to the group during the week prior so they would be prepared for the meeting.⁵ The questions served as a catalyst for the group's evaluation. I guided the group through an evaluative discussion, using the questions as a guideline to make sure the group stayed on track. The group naturally gravitated toward evaluating the plan each section at a time. The group focused more on the practical elements of the plan. At times I attempted to steer the group back toward evaluation from a theological lens, but they were bent on a more practical assessment. Once this session concluded, I used the same system identified previously to code the field notes into categories. The themes identified below are in the order discussed by the group: (1) assimilating new members through missional hospitality, (2) changing culture one group at a time, (3) extending missional hospitality to the church, and (4) resolving implementation concerns. Each theme relates to one of the four provisions of the plan.

⁵ Questions are in appendix F.

Assimilating New Members through Missional Hospitality

Finding ways to assimilate newcomers within West Houston was a primary concern of the planning group. Provision two of the plan creates a new eight-week process for inducting guests into membership. The group proposed inviting prospective members into a “discovery group” that will model missional hospitality, explain the West Houston vision, and attempt to form a new missional community out of those attending. The planning group believes this to be the strongest and most innovative feature of the plan. One member commented that the discovery group will make it “easier to influence new people” to develop the practice of missional hospitality and to become a member of a missional community. The planning team emphasized the value of having an extended period of time to ground the practice of missional hospitality rather than a two-hour class that teaches about the topic. One member offered that, by modelling missional hospitality in the discovery group, the practice of missional hospitality will become a standard group practice from its inception.

Discovery groups will also be excellent venues for new members to build relationships. Oftentimes, the planning group expressed the belief that new members without a Church of Christ background are less likely to make relational connections at West Houston. One group member made the point that this plan will be effective because of the increased “personal attention” given to newcomers seeking to join the church. Personal attention comes in the form of the hospitality offered over an eight-week period during the discovery group process. This hospitality will facilitate the developing of authentic relationships that will help assimilate new members into West Houston.

Several concerns were surfaced by the group regarding discovery groups. The plan calls for pairing a shepherd or small-group leader with new missional communities being formed from the discovery group. It may be difficult to find and train enough leaders and shepherds to partner with each new group. Some in the planning team wondered if new members could actually be formed into a new missional community as called for in the plan. It was noted that at some time in the past, the adult discipleship minister had started a class out of a group that came through the two-hour West Houston 101 class. This class stayed together for over a year and did not want to break up. In addition, the adult discipleship minister visited with another church that is doing this successfully. These facts were offered as evidence that groups can be formed from new members. Another concern was that not all attending the discovery group will want to commit to forming a missional community with their fellow group members. Provisions will need to be made to help some in the discovery group find other missional communities to join. The plan does not address what to do with those who want to become members, but do not want to join a missional community. The group decided the elders and ministers would have to decide how that would be handled.

Changing Culture One Group at a Time

As mentioned in my evaluation above, the group often cited the need to change the culture at West Houston. This was behind the decision to strengthen the training for missional community leaders. Missional community leaders are seen by the planning team as a key to changing the small group culture at West Houston. Leader training was made optional because a culture change cannot be forced. The idea is to train a small group of committed missional community leaders who will then lead their group to plant

a new missional community within one to two years. Missional hospitality will be a key component of the training. The hope is that the number of groups that are committed to missional hospitality will grow exponentially from small beginnings. It is assumed that the beginnings will be small due to the high level of commitment required from leaders to participate in the training. One planning team member noted that starting with leaders who are “passionate about missional communities and being sent” is one of the strengths of the plan.

Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, said that for the training to be successful they needed to involve “prayer, clear vision, and regular accountability.” The hope is that regular and intentional training will provide this. Presently, missional community leader training is offered on a monthly basis, but few participate. The plan calls for leader training twice a month on Sunday mornings. During the evaluation, the group suggested that it might be better to have training four weeks in a row and then break for two months. Training might also be scheduled on Sunday mornings during class or during early service to facilitate attendance, since most of our leaders already reserve Sunday mornings for church activities.

The group wondered if it is possible to do both adult education and small groups excellently. Concern was expressed that West Houston may be asking too much of its leaders. Often adult education leaders are also small group leaders. If leaders are spread too thin, they will be ineffective. A suggestion was made to put less emphasis on adult education, but one team member responded by saying he has seen new members that “believe some crazy stuff” he would consider “heresy.” In his opinion adult education was just as important as small groups. The planning group suggested that adult education

be viewed as a tool to be used selectively by missional community members to become better disciples. For example, there is a need for classes for new Christians. Most class offerings at West Houston are aimed at mature members with a Church of Christ background. All agreed that adult education needed to work in concert with the plan being devised by the group. Since the adult discipleship minister is in charge of both the adult education and the small groups, coordination should not be difficult.

Overall, the group thought that training a few committed missional community leaders would be much more effective than trying to train all thirty small group leaders. This format allows a side-by-side approach in which existing groups that are not ready to change their culture can continue, while a culture of missional hospitality is being nurtured in pilot groups. Fostering a few strong groups will lead to a culture change that can be modeled and passed on to newly planted groups and existing groups that may become more interested as time goes on.

Extending Missional Hospitality to the Church

The major focus of the plan was to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups, but there was a realization that the entire church needed to be reached with this important theological teaching. The sermon series and Sunday school class focus on missional hospitality are part of the strategy for extending both the understanding and practice of missional hospitality beyond small groups. Only thirty percent of the congregation participates in small groups. Also, many of the small group members will not be exposed to missional hospitality if their leader does not participate in the voluntary training. Thus it was decided that the four-part sermon series would be titled (1) God as Missionary, (2) Relationality of a Trinitarian God, (3) Missional

Hospitality of Jesus' Ministry, and (4) Inclusive and Subversive Nature of the Kingdom. Concurrently, Sunday school classes will study missional hospitality as it relates to: (1) rekindling the missional identity of the church, (2) seeking solidarity, (3) being focused around meals, and (4) being based on friendship. This series will also involve a challenge to the church to invite their neighbors to a meal.

Although the group strongly supported the educational focus proposed above, the group also stated that it would take much more than a sermon series to change the culture at West Houston. The group believes this series needs to be followed by additional sermons and classes in the future to improve the chances of creating a culture of missional hospitality. Since this part of the plan seemed the easiest to implement, the group did not spend much time evaluating it. However, they did suggest that the church develop a communication plan to keep the practice of missional hospitality and the small-group program in front of the church. One team member suggested I consider blogging and other writing venues to promote missional hospitality in an ongoing fashion to the church.

Resolving Implementation Concerns

The planning group agreed to meet once a month for six months to either implement the plan or develop those who could implement different features of the plan. Several expressed concern that a lack of support among the elders could hamper the implementation of the plan. Another expressed a fear the elders might modify the plan to such an extent that it would become ineffective. One group member was an oversight elder, and he assured the group that there would be support for the plan. There was a slight cynicism the plan would not substantially change the church culture. For the most

part, the group was hopeful in their belief that this plan could have a positive impact on the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.

Outside Expert

John Ogren, a colleague and personal friend, evaluated the group plan, providing an outside perspective. Ogren and I worked together at South MacArthur Church of Christ in Irving, Texas, for six years (1995-2001) and have remained close friends. Ogren, as an adjunct professor for Abilene Christian University, taught the D. Min. course I attended on missional ecclesiology in January of 2014. Ogren is presently completing a PhD in congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. His dissertation is entitled “New Congregations, Neighbors, and the Mission of God: A Study of Theological Imagination in Local Discernment.” While at South MacArthur, John worked with small groups called “Communities of Faith” and provided leadership and consulting to the congregational leaders in a church planting project. Ogren’s experience as a minister, combined with his educational training at Luther Seminary, gives him the expertise necessary to evaluate the project.

I emailed Ogren the prospectus and completed plan for his evaluation. Ogren submitted ten pages of single-spaced writing in his evaluation of the plan and project.⁶ The evaluation was complex, thorough, insightful, and challenging. I will attempt to summarize the key components of the evaluation. Ogren outlined his evaluation under six headings: (1) background of the evaluator, (2) sources used for evaluation, (3) overview, (4) appreciation, (5) critique, and (6) summary. I will focus on the appreciation and critique sections because they contain his evaluation of the plan.

⁶ Ogren’s full evaluation is in appendix J.

Appreciation

Ogren appreciated the narrative history of the congregation based on the interviews I did with congregational leaders. Although he noted critical elements in the narrative, he states that the narrative “appears open to the discovery of a past that is ‘useable’ in relation to present challenges and possible futures.” Ogren noted that the theological framework provided a “historically contextualized approach to missional theology” in connection with a post-Christendom period. He complimented the “presentation of missional hospitality as a communal practice of meal-sharing and friendship that acts in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.” The interaction of missional hospitality with Volf’s work on solidarity in chapter 2 caught Ogren’s attention as a topic that could be further explored. Ogren says that my “articulation of missional hospitality makes a valuable contribution to missional ecclesiology, particularly as it sets an agenda for small groups.” The methodology used in the project is lauded for its simultaneous use of action and reflection. Ogren notes an “admirable integration of theory and practice” through teaching, *lectio divina*, and the commitment of key small-group leaders. He also liked the way the intervention immediately leveraged the formation of small-group leaders during the process to use in the “formation of the groups they are leading.” Ogren calls the resulting plan “complex and differentiated.” He appreciated the “strategic linkages” between the leaders of missional communities, potential members, and the congregation as a whole. He also agreed with the prospectus that cultural transformation would be necessary for a real change in the practice of missional hospitality at West Houston. Ogren described the plan as realistic and incremental in nature. The plan leverages small groups “within structures and moments

already given” in order to begin changing the culture at West Houston according to Ogren. The voluntary nature of the change coupled with an open invitation to all to “live more fully into the identity” indicated by the terms “missional community” and “missional hospitality” was another strength listed.

Critique

Ogren points out that there is not a query posed by the prospectus or the group concerning God’s activity in the history, present context, or future of the West Houston story. Specifically, Ogren asks what God is up to concerning the disorientation caused by the loss of members and the increased diversity in the congregation. He suggests the planning group seek to discern God’s activity and “advent” in these difficult circumstances. Ogren expresses concern that the full impact of the “attractional ethos” of West Houston is not reckoned with seriously by the planning group. He suggests that the group might examine the “congregation’s myth of family” and consider how Christ fractures and recreates family through the gospel as a way to reshape the attractional ethos. The notion that missional hospitality can “repair the cohesiveness of the church body” is challenged. Instead, he points out missional hospitality may further disrupt the cohesiveness of West Houston.

Ogren observes the link between missional theology and missional hospitality could be clearer. He argues missional theology is based on the premise of *missio Dei* while missional hospitality is based on *communio Dei*. He does acknowledge the connection between missional theology and hospitality in “Jesus’ ministry and practice of missional hospitality— where the character of his sending is shaped by his (cruciform) dependence on others and his welcome by others in their homes and on their turf.” Ogren

points to the openness of the Triune God talked about in the prospectus as the model for Christian community to receive others through hospitality. The prospectus describes this openness as occurring through the “sharing of life, suffering, and death with others.”⁷

Ogren liked the description above as indicative of authentic relational community.

Ogren expressed concern that the planning group is considered “intact before its outreach to neighbors or acts of solidarity.” I interpret this to mean that he thought the group needed to reach out to neighbors before being able to properly discuss and understand missional hospitality. Also, he was disappointed the issue of racial diversity was not more explicitly dealt with as a part of the methodology of the paper. He called it “an odd silence” that little is said concerning the racial makeup of the planning group.

However, he was sympathetic to the notion that missional theology and missional hospitality “might help a congregation indwell more completely its gift of racial and ethnic diversity.”

Ogren expressed some concern that the plan could be diverted from a practice of missional hospitality as expressed in this paper to become a method for disrupting the “inwardness” of the missional communities and as “assimilation and growth vehicles for the congregation.” Ogren lamented that there was not more detail concerning how missional hospitality would be taught to the small-group leaders. He did appreciate that the entire congregation would be involved during the teaching time so that missional hospitality would not be “for some dedicated elite, but for the whole church.”

Ogren commended the planning team’s commitment to monitor the implementation of the plan for the next six months. He finishes by saying that “the

⁷ See page 37 above.

practice of missional hospitality that the intervention argues and begins cautiously to enact is certainly a provocative way to promote active buy-in to the congregation's new vision statement that small groups will become 'mission minded' and 'disciple building.'”

Critical Lessons from the Evaluations

After examining the analytic themes from each of the viewpoints above, I evaluated the plan in light of the data triangulation. It is worth noting that I considered the order of the data analysis to be important. I first studied the field notes from sessions 1 through 8 and identified themes from those. Then I wrote my evaluation of the plan based on the first eight sessions. Only after that process was over did I begin coding the field notes from session 9, in which the group evaluated the plan. Finally, after having written my conclusions on those two angles of interpretation, I read the written evaluation by Ogren, the outside expert. The intent was to clearly demarcate the three angles of interpretation in my own mind. Thus when I began to compare the three different angles of interpretation, I did so with the anticipation of learning something important. The following paragraphs are not a summary of the themes above, but instead contain critical results I arrived at from comparison analysis. I focused on critical results because I felt those would be beneficial in improving the plan before it is implemented and in helping others that might replicate this project in the future. The group and I had similar evaluations of the plan. The outside perspective by Ogren was especially helpful in identifying some of the plan's weaknesses. Two issues came to the forefront during this process.

Improving the Process for Changing Culture

All three points of view acknowledged the importance of cultural change for the plan to be successful. In my evaluation I talk about how the group was transformed through the nine-week focus on missional hospitality and how the entire congregation needed an opportunity to go through the same process. The group and Ogren both agree that the incremental nature of the plan is a strong point. The plan starts with voluntary participation of the missional community leaders and the new members. It also includes the congregation as a whole.

Ogren's evaluation raises two important questions concerning the desired cultural change. Ogren observes that there is a connection between the past narrative of the congregation and a future practice of missional hospitality. However, that connection is not explicitly made in the prospectus or in the evaluations by the group or me. There is a need to more explicitly connect those two in order to help the congregation live into a changed future.⁸ Second, Ogren challenges that the group has not fully explored the difference between its historically attractational ethos and the newly desired missional focus. Ogren suggests that the congregation ask itself hard questions concerning what God is doing in the church and in the community. Keifert says that cultural transformation requires asking questions such as (1) "What is God up to in this community?" (2) "What is the useable future in our past?" (3) "What is God calling us to do?" (4) "What part of God's mission in this community is God calling us to do?"⁹

⁸ Branson talks about how building on positive themes from a congregation's past through dialogue is critical to moving a church forward into a positive vision of the future. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 77-112.

⁹ Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 43.

Keifert says that part of cultural change is discovering the “theological, spiritual, and cultural opportunities” for mission in the present situation.¹⁰

During the course of the project, the demographic changes of the community and the congregation are discussed along with the ineffectiveness of present programs. There are some implied answers concerning how God can work in the future to enact his kingdom in the present context. However, the group does not explicitly answer the questions above. Adding additional opportunities to discuss how the congregation’s past is flowing into the future and to discuss the questions posed by Keifert will strengthen the ability of the group plan to effect the cultural change needed to instill the practice of missional hospitality in small groups.

Focusing on Being Inclusive and Subversive

Changing demographics is one of the key contextual challenges and opportunities at West Houston. In my evaluation of the plan, I discuss how meals are important in creating solidarity in groups, especially in diverse groups. Two missional communities represented in the planning team are given as examples of interracial solidarity created through meal sharing. Implicitly, I assume that the practice of missional hospitality will be inclusive and subversive as the poor and minorities are included to experience solidarity around meals. Ogren summarizes my description of missional hospitality as “a communal practice of meal-sharing and friendship that acts in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.” The planning group’s evaluation of the plan neglects to mention the issue of racial and socio-economic diversity. The neglect of the planning group to mention this issue in their evaluation is partly due to the questions they were answering. I

¹⁰ Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 43.

designed the questions pragmatically and did a poor job of having the group evaluate the plan in light of the theology of missional hospitality. Obviously, the issue was discussed at length during previous sessions, as indicated in my own evaluation of the project that includes field notes from the first eight sessions. Although it is a personal goal of mine and of the planning group that small groups become more diverse, the plan did not have specific language including those goals. Considering the blind spot of the group and congregation in regard to racial and socio-economic inclusion, the goal of diversity needs to be made more specific in the plan itself. I will suggest to the group that additional narrative is added to the plan that frames some of the theological goals of the plan, including the desire to create small groups that are more diverse.

Ogren also expresses disappointment that little was said concerning the racial makeup of the group. The group was composed of five women and seven men. All of them were Caucasian. An African American, who has led a small group, was asked to join the planning team, but was unable. Also a Latino man, who is a prospective small-group leader, joined the group, but was unable to attend regularly and dropped out. Otherwise, there are no other African American or Latino leaders of small groups at West Houston. This emphasizes the need for cultural integration at the leadership level. The purposive sampling sought diversity among present and potentially future small-group leaders. This did not lead to great enough diversity among the group.

Another criticism by Ogren was that the group cannot be intact without first reaching out to its neighbors. In other words, the view point of the group lacks an important voice from those that it seeks to include. If I were to repeat this project, I would have group members interview someone that is unchurched and a member of the

church that is not in a missional community. Then I would have them share the results of the interviews with the group. I think this would have added important information that would have shaped the group's plan.

Conclusion

Comparing the three angles of evaluation will lead to needed corrections in the plan before implementation. The plan offers a promising way forward for small groups at West Houston as they live into the vision of the church. The practice of missional hospitality intends to help the small groups become more mission minded and to better build disciples as called for in the church's vision.¹¹ Missional hospitality will challenge the small groups to open their homes and lives to all in the community regardless of their racial or social standing. All three angles of evaluation agreed that training interested missional community leaders, reaching out to newcomers through missional hospitality, and that engaging the entire church in the dialogue and practice of missional hospitality was an effective way to begin the slow process of culture change at West Houston. There was also a consensus among the points of view that meals were an integral part of missional hospitality and that this needed to be conveyed and modeled to the church. I am encouraged by the fact that the planning team has agreed to meet monthly for the next six months to oversee implementation of the group plan.

The planning group has always been aware of the fact that missional hospitality is rooted in a heart transformed by the missional love of God. Thus the group realized that if there is to be a cultural change at West Houston, the church will need to prayerfully rely on God's help. The hope is that this plan will introduce people to the theological

¹¹ See principle two of West Houston's vision in appendix B.

concept of missional hospitality, create a dialogue concerning the practice, and encourage people to actually delve into the practice. It is the prayer of the group that God will work through this process to engender the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.

CHAPTER V

PROJECT IMPLICATIONS

Based on the triangulation of the data, I conclude that this thesis project succeeded in developing a plan that can effectively propagate the practice of missional hospitality among small groups at West Houston. The plan will require careful implementation and follow through to be successful. The implementation group will also need to adjust to evaluative feedback already received and continual feedback during the implementation process. This final chapter summarizes the project, discusses the ministry implications of the project plan for West Houston, evaluates matters of applicability and validity, and shares concluding thoughts concerning the future of missional hospitality at West Houston.

Project Summary

The planning team used missional theology as a framework for the development of a theological view of missional hospitality. Missional hospitality is the theological basis for the ministry intervention the planning team proposed. The planning team spent four sessions studying missional hospitality and discussing ways to integrate missional hospitality into the fabric of the participants' lives and West Houston's missional communities. In four additional sessions a plan was created to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston. During all eight sessions the group practiced *lectio divina* with a focus on Luke 10.

Project participants became convinced that the practice of missional hospitality will be one of the most important focus points of small groups at West Houston in the future. The participants were either missional community leaders or were planning to lead a group in the near future. I believe that other West Houston missional community leaders will have a like response if similarly exposed to the theological concept and practice of missional hospitality. Throughout the process participants engaged in the practice of missional hospitality as they participated in a dialogue concerning the theology. Most either shared a meal with an outsider or began laying the groundwork with guests in their lives to invite them to share a meal during the project. These practices were grounded in a missiological attempt to share the fullness of the gospel in solidarity. Oftentimes the participants remarked that it was important that the entire congregation have an opportunity to learn about and experience the practice of missional hospitality. The group's plan seeks to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston.

Implications for Ministry

In order to impart the practice of missional hospitality to the church, the group developed a plan to strategically address three groups through different methodologies: (1) intentional and regular training of small group leaders similar to the training experienced by the planning group; (2) recruitment of new members through the use of missional hospitality; and (3) preaching and teaching to the church at large, coupled with a challenge to practice missional hospitality with one's neighbors. In addition, the plan provides oversight of the plan implementation by the project team. I believe that this plan

will lead small groups and the church toward a greater practice of missional hospitality. There are five specific ministry implications I have identified from this plan.

Training Missional Community Leaders

Training missional community leaders in the practice of missional hospitality should result in the same type of response as noted within the planning team members. All missional community leaders will receive biannual training. I am doubtful that will be very impactful, although it will be a good introduction to the direction the church is headed in its small groups, including missional hospitality. Meeting twice a year is not enough to change a culture. However, the voluntary trainings that will occur on a more regular basis will have the frequency and focus necessary to duplicate much of what was experienced by the planning group.¹ Presently, there are monthly trainings that are voluntary. Those have lacked the intentionality that is being proposed by this plan. The monthly trainings are attended by around eight to ten group leaders. These group leaders are the most committed and the ones most likely to initially integrate the practice of missional hospitality in their groups. I believe regular voluntary meetings will provide the consistent and persistent training needed to begin changing the culture of some of the missional communities at West Houston. These will then become models for the rest of the missional communities. These small groups will also multiply and thus propagate new groups, which will also practice missional hospitality.

¹ After evaluating the plan, the adult discipleship minister has decided to make the voluntary training four consecutive weeks. The leaders will meet one month out of every three months, rather than twice a month as called for by the original group plan. He believes this will provide greater continuity, which will make the trainings more effective.

Recruiting New Members

Missional hospitality will also be modeled and taught as a part of the induction of new members at West Houston through a discovery class. As a part of modeling missional hospitality, the discovery class group will share a meal at each session. The eight-session discovery class, two hours per session, will be an excellent way to teach missional hospitality. New missional communities will be formed from the prospective members in the discovery class. The adult discipleship minister interviewed ministers at churches that have been successful with a similar practice of forming new groups out of new members. Thus I believe that it can be effective at West Houston. The plan allows for some flexibility by allowing potential members to join other groups if that is their preference. I predict that new members who have grown up in the Churches of Christ will be more likely to choose joining an already existing missional community. However, I believe that those without a background in Churches of Christ are more likely to bond with and join the newly forming group during the discovery class. Various topics will be taught in the discovery class, as identified in the plan, but the weekly modeling of missional hospitality will be an excellent venue for instilling the theological practice of missional hospitality as a core identity of the new groups that are forming.

Welcoming Diversity

Newly formed groups from the discovery class should reflect the diversity that is found within the community. The practice of missional hospitality in the discovery class will help bond diverse people into one unified small group. Although I believe these new missional communities will be more diverse, attention needs to be given on how to lead the existing small groups and the entire church toward welcoming greater diversity. This

is not addressed in the project. The assumption is made that the practice of missional hospitality will solve this problem. Two of the groups within the planning team are given as examples of how this has already occurred at West Houston. However, an issue as deeply seated as racial divide will need to be addressed in specific ways through theological reflection and intentional action if West Houston is to make greater progress in that area. In my concluding thoughts I address some proactive ways that I intend to address this issue more fully.

Teaching Missional Hospitality

Teaching the entire church through sermons and Bible classes will add a needed element to ensure that the culture of missional hospitality is raised to conscious awareness within the larger body at West Houston. Missional hospitality will be taught as a fundamental dimension of the Trinity by which life is extended to humanity. I will write the lessons that will be taught based on the theology I have articulated in chapter 2. My hope is that an approach that ties missional hospitality to the Trinity will be effective at spurring transformation in the Christian community at West Houston. Sermons and classes will be accompanied with challenges to the church to practice missional hospitality within small group settings. Training missional community leaders and recruiting new members through a discovery class will initially reach a small percentage of the church. Sermons will reach the entire congregation, and the Sunday school classes will reach additional core members that would otherwise not be involved in missional hospitality training. In addition to the teachings, practical assignments in worship and Bible class will challenge the church to move outside itself and to invite others into their lives through missional hospitality. Teachings combined with actual practice will begin

the slow process of culture transformation at West Houston. Communicating regularly and clearly will better prepare the entire body to live into the practice of missional hospitality over time.

Influencing Culture

Cultural transformation will need to occur if missional hospitality is to become a regular practice for small groups at West Houston. However, cultural transformation is a difficult goal to accomplish. It is dangerous to assume that a “top-down” program will change the existing culture of West Houston. In fact, it could cause more harm than good. Projects to effect organizational change often fail due to the lack of “sufficient knowledge of the nature or importance of organizational culture.”² The cultural construct at West Houston is based on thirty years of interpretive stories and practices. It is naïve to think that the entire culture can be easily changed.³ I do not believe the culture of a church can be completely changed, but the goal should be to influence the culture by building on past strengths that are compatible with the new direction of missional hospitality.⁴ It is important that the task of cultivating missional hospitality in small groups at West Houston be accompanied by an informed view of the culture at West Houston. This means that the church needs to build on the strengths it has exemplified through use of its family metaphor language to create new family groupings or extend existing family groupings through the practice of missional hospitality in small groups.

² Driskill and Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action*, 16.

³ While some researchers believe that information from culture can be used pragmatically to manipulate and change culture, other researchers question whether culture can be changed at all. Driskill and Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action*, 17.

⁴ See n. 8 in ch.4.

Influencing culture is challenging because much of it is hidden at a subconscious level. Culture is reinforced through storytelling and practice. “In other words, as humans, we actively participate in creating and re-creating the determinative power” of our culture through our communications and actions with each other.⁵ This means that both teaching and engaging in dialogue with small-group leaders, small-group members, and the congregation can provide a platform for influencing the small-group culture at West Houston. New conversations and practices over a long period of time can lead to new stories and a degree of cultural transformation. This is a laudable and achievable goal, but it must be carried out in an informed and incremental fashion to be successful.

Applicability and Validity

I define missional hospitality as a practice that is central to the identity of the triune God. Thus missional hospitality is a practice that is universally applicable to Christ’s church. This particular project was carried out in the context of an upper middle class, majority white congregation. In addition, the context at West Houston is one in which the congregation is becoming more racially diverse and attracting many new members from varied denominational backgrounds or from unchurched backgrounds. To that degree, the nature of the theological teaching, the assignments given, and the unique responses of the participants may be different than would be expected in other contexts. However, I believe the general nature of the project and the specific theological content would be applicable to any church that desires to express missional theology through the theological practice of missional hospitality. To this extent, this project could be

⁵ This process is called social constructionism. Driskill and Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action*, 19.

replicated in other churches, though the conclusions and actual plan that might be derived may be different due to the context.

The project itself was carried out as a qualitative study, which employed action research. Action research meant including the missional community leaders as a part of the research team to make improvements in the missional community program at West Houston.⁶ In accordance with qualitative research standards, detailed field notes were kept with the aid of a participant observer. Additionally, the final product of the project was evaluated from three different perspectives to maintain objectivity in regard to conclusions derived from the project. The triangulation of the data gives greater validity to the project results.⁷ In this case, the outside perspective turned out to be critically important to the future of the plan's success. Several blind spots were identified by the outside expert in regard to the plan's goal of creating solidarity among diverse members of the West Houston church and the community at large. These criticisms will inform adjustments in the plan prior to its implementation. At least one adjustment is already underway and will be addressed below.

Project members were chosen based on their involvement in missional communities as leaders or aspiring leaders. The team as a whole was responsible for the final product. I had a strong agenda, intending that the theological practice of missional hospitality drive the planning group process. I kept self-reflective notes throughout the process to monitor my influence on the group. I loosely kept the group on its agenda, but also allowed the group to follow lines of thought that were relevant to the project. My

⁶ Stringer, *Action Research*, 6.

⁷ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 76.

reflexive observations indicated that I was appropriately directive and permissive as each context demanded. The one thing I did learn early on from my observations concerning my own behavior was that I needed to relax a little more to better facilitate a hospitable environment. The gathered group was intelligent and capable. When the group began to assimilate the plan, three separate group members took responsibility for important portions of the plan. Documents were prepared by these members and emailed to the entire group. These group contributions were revised and became a part of the final plan. Thus the project and plan were very much based on the results of action research. In other words, the plan credibly brought together key small group stakeholders, who worked alongside me on this research project and developed the proposed solutions, which they will help implement.⁸

Conclusion

I chose this project because I believed that based on West Houston's vision, the practice of missional hospitality would propel small groups into the vision of being "mission-minded" and "disciple-building" groups. In addition, missional hospitality offers the possibility of drawing together people from different racial and social backgrounds into a group that experiences solidarity in God. It is encouraging that the project team has agreed to continue to meet in order to oversee the implementation of the plan.

I have little doubt that the plan itself will be implemented and experience some degree of success. There are several reasons informing this belief. First, Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, was on the planning team and is committed to following

⁸ Stringer, *Action Research*, 127, and Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 13-14.

through with the plan objectives. He has already begun developing curriculum ideas for the voluntary training that will be offered to interested missional community leaders. Pierson has also asked me to develop a curriculum on missional hospitality that could be taught in all the missional communities in the fall of 2015. Second, one of the group members has offered that his missional community could take the lead to transform West Houston's membership class into the eight-week discovery class envisioned by the group plan. I have great confidence in this group member's ability to organize and implement such a vision. Third, the preaching minister has agreed, in keeping with the promotion of West Houston's vision, to preach a four-part series on missional hospitality in the fall of 2015. This series will involve four sermons, four Sunday school classes, and four meetings in missional communities that will be focused around missional hospitality.⁹ Fourth, parts of this plan have already been shared with the oversight elders at West Houston and the entire ministry staff. It was well received and commitments were made by all involved to support and promote missional hospitality as a congregation-wide emphasis. Fifth, teaching the practice of missional hospitality will have a greater impact because it fits squarely in the context of West Houston's vision. During the month of November 2014, sermons focused on the importance of missional communities at West Houston. During the months of January through May, the congregation will be intentionally focused on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This focus will occur through sermons, Sunday school classes, and congregational activities related to discipleship. This will be followed in the fall by a focus on missional hospitality. The point here is that missional hospitality will not be dropped in on the church out of

⁹ The four missional community meetings is a revision to the group plan that was made after the evaluation meeting.

context. The practice of missional hospitality will be taught, reflected upon, and practiced in the context of a thick focus on discipleship. I contend that this will lead to a greater “stickiness factor.”¹⁰

One of the things that affected me personally during this project was the criticism given by Ogren that the plan does not specifically include how it will address racial and economic diversity. Ogren graciously acknowledges that my own group models diversity and speculates that I expect missional hospitality to lead to greater diversity among missional communities. This critique hit me hard because I firmly believe that missional communities at West Houston will need to be more diverse in the future if the church is to be sustainable in its present context over a long period of time. I believe that the composition of missional communities must reflect the demographics of the community surrounding West Houston to be faithful to God’s vision for the church. However, the issue of including the marginalized will require greater attention if missional communities are to succeed in becoming more diverse. I have already made contact with two African American men who have agreed to form a focus group with me to explore how to involve minorities in the leadership base of West Houston. This is a future project that is being birthed from this project on missional hospitality. The focus group on integrating minorities into West Houston leadership will begin in February of 2015. Thus this project on missional hospitality is not expected to be the final answer, but only a catalyst that will lead to continued theological learning, reflection, and practice.

¹⁰ The stickiness factor involves how effectively an idea remains in the minds of those that hear it. Our plan is to continue until we find something that sticks. Malcom Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, 2000), 131-32.

I intend to share the full plan and accompanying research conclusions from this project with the oversight elders, shepherding elders, and ministers. They have already expressed their support of this project, and I believe that they will be supportive of the plan that has been developed. West Houston prided itself in its early years on being a church family that was welcoming to newcomers. My intention is to frame this plan as a return to the former practice of hospitality, but this time with a focus on small groups and an emphasis on the “missional” aspect of hospitality. West Houston must see itself as “sent” rather than sit back and wait for others to “come” to them. I do not believe that congregational transformation happens quickly or in mass. Initially, my goal is for West Houston to use the proposed plan to train and send forth a small number of effective missional communities that practice missional hospitality. If this can be accomplished, then I believe over time the practice of missional hospitality in small groups can gain momentum and become transformative at a congregational level.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29163, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-676-2895



August 26, 2014

Mr. Kevin Stewart
Graduate School of Theology
ACU Box 29405
Abilene Christian University

Dear Mr. Stewart,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Cultivating the practice of missional hospitality for small groups at West Houston Church of Christ" has been approved for a period of one year (IRB # 14-073).

If this project is continued beyond a one-year period, you need to submit an additional request for review. Please notify this office when you have completed your study.

If any problems develop with the study, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs promptly.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Billingsley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mark Billingsley, M. A.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

cc: Dr. Jonathan Camp, Dr. Chris Flanders

APPENDIX B

VISION STATEMENT AND SEVEN PRINCIPLES

In the future, the West Houston Church of Christ will be known as the disciples who make disciples, in West Houston and around the world. By God's grace and with His favor, we describe this 10-year vision around 7 pillars.

1. We will be more than students of Christ; we will be active followers of Him.

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" Matthew 16:24 (NIV)

2. Our small groups will be mission-minded, disciple-building groups.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Hebrews 10:24 (NIV)

3. We will be closer to our neighbors and engage more deeply with them.

"But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ... complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'" Luke 5:30-31 (NIV)

4. Our compassion will be evident through our humanitarian efforts.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'" Matthew 25:34-36 (NIV)

5. We will have substantially more impact beyond our U.S. borders.

"And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8 (NIV)

6. We will possess a deeper, more comprehensive knowledge of God's word.

"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." Psalm 119:105 (NIV)

7. We will be enslaved to Christ, not to our traditions.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

APPENDIX C

PLANNING GROUP PARTICIPATION COVENANT

This project entails learning about missional hospitality, practicing assigned hospitality tasks in one's missional community, and developing a plan to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality for small groups at West Houston. Participation in this project is voluntary. If you choose to participate in this project you are asked to enter into a covenant with fellow planning team members based on the principles below.

Faithful Attendance - I will commit, to the best of my ability, to attending all nine group sessions. If an emergency arises, I will communicate that to the group at the earliest possible opportunity.

Respectful Participation - I will be respectful to others in the group by valuing their opinion as much as my own. I will participate in discussions, but will also be active in listening to, and understanding the opinions of others. I will use language that honors other participants and acknowledges their contributions to the group. I will also participate in all assigned missional hospitality practices. I understand that these will involve inviting a new friend to fellowship and to a missional community meal.

Honest Feedback - I understand that my participation is a key to the effectiveness of this project. I commit to giving honest feedback, though I understand I am free to refrain from sharing, if I think it is in the best interest of the group. I will seek to share both positive and constructive opinions in a peaceful and collaborative manner.

Commitment to Missional Communities - By participating in this group, I am affirming my commitment and interest in the West Houston missional communities. I am presently leading a missional community, or plan on leading one in the near future with the collaboration of my spouse, if married. I will also support the plan developed by the group.

Confidentiality - In order to free the group up to participate honestly, I agree to maintain a covenant of confidentiality. I will not share with others what is said or heard in the group, except for those things the group agrees to make public such as the plan.

By signing this document I commit to the above principles during the planning group sessions.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

PLANNING GROUP LESSON PLANS

Missional Hospitality Planning Group
Session 1 Lesson Plan
September 7, 2014
8:30 am

1. Welcome
 - a. Informed Consent
 - b. Participation Covenant
2. Participant Observer
 - a. Ashley Stewart - her role
 - b. Anonymity will be ensured in the publication of data.
3. Breakfast Time
 - a. Getting to know your neighbor
 - b. *Lectio Divina* - Luke 10
4. Project Purpose
 - a. Cultivate the practice of missional hospitality for small groups.
 - b. Defining Hospitality
 - i. Practice of the triune God
 - ii. Extended to humanity
5. West Houston Context
 - a. Early Family Life
 - b. Natural Church Growth
 - c. Attractional Church
 - d. Changing Context and Demographics
 - e. A New Vision.
6. Importance of Small Groups
 - a. Recapturing the sense of family.
 - b. Recapturing a sense of mission.
7. Missional Theology
 - a. Lesslie Newbigin Story
 - b. Impact of Christendom
 - c. Loss of Mission
 - d. Defining Missional Theology
 - e. North America as a mission field.
8. Defining Missional Hospitality
 - a. Impact on the church body.
 - b. Impact on reaching the lost in our community.

9. Homework:
 - a. Make a list of people you can offer hospitality to, and pray for them.
 - b. Make plans for a communal dinner after the fourth planning session.

Missional Hospitality Planning Group
 Session 2 Lesson Plan
 September 14, 2014
 8:30 am

1. Breakfast: visit with someone new and then introduce them.
2. *Lectio Divina* - Read Luke 10:1-16
3. Discuss last week's homework.
4. Missional Hospitality: Hospitality is a mode of being in which the Christian community actively seeks to be "Christ to another and to receive the other as Christ, even when the other is hungry, thirsty, in prison, or naked (Matt. 25)."¹ Thus, hospitality relationally welcomes others into divine community in a way that addresses deep human needs such as "physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships."²
 - a. Fundamental dimension of a missional God. (Emphasize "sending" nature.)
 - b. What is the purpose of missional hospitality?
 - c. How did Jesus practice missional hospitality?
5. Trinitarian Relationality: In many ways "they are alive in one another and through" each other.³ Thus, the practice of missional hospitality proceeds out of the relationality of the Trinity.
 - a. What are some things we learn about missional hospitality based on Trinitarian Relationality?
 - i. The New Testament fleshes out this relationality in narrative form, and makes clear that the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is also "open to the world."⁴
 - ii. One could argue that the entire "focus of the doctrine of the Trinity is the communion between God" and humanity.⁵
 - iii. Salvation cannot be separated from its goal of relational reconciliation with the Trinity.
 - iv. Jesus' "reception of hostile humanity" into Trinitarian community is a model for how Christian community should embrace others through hospitality.⁶

¹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 103.

² Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 243.

- b. Why should the Christian community practice missional hospitality?
6. *Is Communal*: The relationality of the Trinity is only understood fully in terms of community, because there are three divine persons that form the triune God (John 10:38).⁷ Christianity cannot be isolated to individual salvation and experience, because this is inconsistent with the Trinity.
 - a. In what ways does individualism defeat the purpose of hospitality?
 - b. What role does community play in salvation: New patterns of kinship and social relation” are not found in individual relations, but are formed and reinforced in the context of a committed community.⁸
 - c. What role does God play in establishing Christian community?
 - d. How can large churches encourage the practice of hospitality among their members?
7. Hospitality Homework: Plan an activity with a person that you do not know well.

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 100.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

⁸ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 78.

Missional Hospitality Planning Group
 Session 3 Lesson Plan
 September 21, 2014
 8:30 am

1. Breakfast: visit with someone new and then introduce them.
2. *Lectio Divina* - Read Luke 10:17-24
3. Discuss last week's homework.
4. Missional Hospitality is inclusive and subversive (Luke 14:12-23).
 - a. Jesus prefaces this story by instructing his host not to invite friends, brothers, relatives, and the rich to his dinner, who can return the favor.
 - b. When the ordinary guests refused the invitation to the feast, the host sent out his servant into the streets and instructed him to bring in "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:15-21).
 - c. The kingdom invitation God extends has a special place reserved for those who live on the "margins of the community."⁹
 - d. People with social standing end up outside of the banquet hall doors, and those that would normally be excluded are brought in to participate in the communal banquet.¹⁰
 - e. Jesus' kingdom does not exclude by insisting that people are normalized, but instead the strange guests at this kingdom banquet challenge our assumptions about what it means to be normal.¹¹
 - f. "Friendships forged in hospitality contradict contemporary messages about who is valuable."¹²
5. Community Transformation
 - a. Wesley commented in one of his sermons that one of the reasons the rich care so little for the poor is that they never bother to visit them and thus cannot relate to them.¹³
 - b. Volf argues "that reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other."¹⁴

⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 21.

¹⁰ Volf lists elimination, assimilation, and abandonment as manifestations of exclusion. Elimination is overt, while assimilation forces others into our own image in order to be accepted. Abandonment is the ignoring of the needs and sufferings of others. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 75.

¹¹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 177.

¹² Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 10.

¹³ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 3: sermons III:71-114, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 387-88.

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.

- c. Not many of the early believers were “influential” or of “noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26-31). James warned the early church not to show favoritism to the wealthy, but instead to realize that God has a special place for the poor in the kingdom (James 2:1-7).
 - d. Subversion: The economic transformation in Acts 4:32-37.
6. Based on Friendship: It may seem trite to have a section entitled friendship, but friendship is the basic relational building block that allows a community to be inclusive and supports the breaking down of social barriers. Friendship is also what makes relationships authentic.
- a. Jesus not only ate with tax collectors and sinners, he was scandalously accused of being their friends (Matt. 11:19).
 - b. Jesus calls his disciples “friends” and carefully distinguishes between “servants” and the closer relationship of friendship that he shares with his disciples (Luke 12:4, John 15:14-15).
 - c. The cruciform giving and receiving of friendship is not just what God does, but who God is. True friendship always involves some form of sacrifice and giving of one’s self.
 - d. Offering and giving friendship is a central way in which the gospel includes all and subverts the exclusive tendencies of humanity.
 - e. Giving at arms-length creates the illusion of giving without sacrifice or giving of one’s self.
 - f. Three important points: 1) Include in everyday life, 2) Based on equality, and 3) Reciprocal.
 - g. The application to any church community is that missional hospitality should welcome others into a “church household” by bringing them into “functioning, living communities with reciprocal relations and commitments” that form the basis of friendship.¹⁵
 - h. It requires us to enter in humility into the world of others and to offer ourselves as the basis of friendship, while receiving their friendship in return.
7. *Hospitality Homework: Plan an activity with a person that is on the margin of society.*

¹⁵ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 57.

Missional Hospitality Planning Group
 Session 4 Lesson Plan
 September 28, 2014
 8:30 am

1. Breakfast- visit with the person across the table from you
2. *Lectio Divina*- Read Luke 10:25-37
3. Discuss last week's homework.
4. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and through this practice was inclusive of all, and subversive of Jewish beliefs, which excluded such people.¹⁶
 - a. At inception, the church adopted Jesus' practice of communal meals (Acts 2:42-47). Meals in the early church, aided the church community in overcoming its own prejudices and tendencies to exclude others.
 - b. Paul exhorts them not to sin "against the body" by highlighting distinctions and creating communal divisions (1 Cor. 11:27). Eating together brings people close enough to challenge their own prejudices and assumptions of others.
 - c. When Christians eat together in unity, without the cloak of worldly status, one sees a present foretaste of the kingdom of God that Jesus describes in Luke 14.¹⁷
5. A location is required to bring community together to build the type of relationships needed to address the "physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence" that characterize missional hospitality.¹⁸
 - a. Modern factors such as technology and suburban living make it much easier to live without the type of relationality necessary to build authentic community.¹⁹
 - b. Large church gatherings bring people together, but often lack the informal and relaxed environment needed for a small group of people to experience authentic relationship.
 - c. Church worship gatherings were in households and often included love feasts in which the bonds between socially and ethnically diverse members were reinforced.
 - d. In Pohl's research on the practice of hospitality she reports that a "close look at contemporary communities and at their ancient counterparts reveals important commonalities. The practice of hospitality almost always includes eating meals together."²⁰

¹⁶ For examples see Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:29-30, 7:36-37, 14:1-4.

¹⁷ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 34.

²⁰ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 12.

- e. During the reign of Constantine, the Eucharist ceased to be a relational event. Instead it became formal rite administered in a church building by the bishop.
6. Hospitality Homework: plan a meal in your small group and invite newcomers into your midst.

APPENDIX E

PLANNING GROUP HANDOUTS, SESSIONS 1-4

Session 1 Handout

September 7, 2014

8:30 am

Lectio Divina- Luke 10:

Hospitality: relationally welcomes others into divine community in a way that addresses deep human needs such as “physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.”¹

Missional Theology

Lesslie Newbigin Story: Joined the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland in 1935, and with the exception of a five year stint worked in India from 1936 until he retired in 1974.

Impact of Christendom: Christendom refers to a “system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society” and the church was established as its “legally established institutional form.”²

Missional Theology Defined: Considering mission from a Trinitarian perspective leads to understanding mission as a part of the God-given identity of each Christian and of the church. Thus each Christian and the church, by nature, are always on God’s mission wherever God places them.

¹ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 6.

² Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 204, Kindle.

North America as a Mission Field

1. A growing number of Americans no longer affiliate with organized religion.³
2. Gallup polling also shows that confidence in organized religion is at an all-time low.⁴
3. North America has become pluralistic and the church is no longer viewed as the primary social “chaplain to the culture.”⁵
4. An increasing number will not seek answers to their life problems from the Christian community.⁶

Missional Hospitality:

Homework:

³ Putnam’s research indicates that 17% of the United States population chose “None” when asked for their religious affiliation. This is now the third largest category after “Evangelical Protestants” and “Catholic.” See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 331, Kindle.

⁴ Lydia Saad, *US Confidence in Organized Religion at Low Point*, (Princeton: Gallup, 2012), accessed July 25, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155690/Confidence-Organized-Religion-Low-Point.aspx>.

⁵ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1444, Kindle.

⁶ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 455-66, Kindle.

- b. What role does community play in salvation:

 - c. What role does God play in establishing Christian community?

 - d. How can large churches encourage the practice of hospitality among their members?
4. *Hospitality Homework*: Plan an activity with a person that you do not know well.

Missional Hospitality Planning Group
Session 4 Handout
September 28, 2014
8:30 am

1. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and through this practice was inclusive of all, and subversive of Jewish beliefs, which excluded such people.¹³
 - a. Practice of the early church:
 - b. What role should meals play in the practice of missional hospitality?
Are meals optional?

2. A location is required to bring community together to build the type of relationships needed to address the “physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence” that characterize missional hospitality.¹⁴
 - a. Lecture Notes

 - b. How did the changes in the church brought about by Constantine affect hospitality?

 - c. What challenges to the practice of missional hospitality does West Houston face?

3. Homework Assignment

¹³ For examples see Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:29-30, 7:36-37, 14:1-4.

¹⁴ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.

APPENDIX F

PLANNING GROUP EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

1. What do you perceive the strengths and weaknesses of the plan we have constructed to cultivate the practice of missional hospitality among missional communities at West Houston.
2. How do you anticipate missional communities will look differently if this plan is successful?
3. What do you anticipate will be the key challenges to this plan succeeding at West Houston?
4. What are the key ingredients to this plan's success?
5. Are there any additional ways that West Houston leadership can support the implementation of this plan?
6. How has your missional community benefited from the assigned missional community practices?

APPENDIX G

PARTICIPANT OBSERVER PROTOCOL

1. Instructions for Participant Observer:
 - a. Record brief notes in the “Field Notes” column. Use initials to abbreviate for participants.
 - b. Only capture the essence of what is said, not every word.
 - c. Think of yourself as an investigative reporter. What data is emerging here?
 - d. When relevant, be descriptive and deep.
 - e. Describe do not judge.
 - f. Listen for verbal communication and silences.
 - g. Watch for non-verbal communication.

2. Attention to the following matters:
 - a. Comments or attitudes (positive or negative) toward matters of hospitality, including newcomers in small groups, eating together, willingness to start new friendships, willingness to be vulnerable with others, and importance of a community.
 - b. How people are actually feeling concerning the homework assignments. Listen for words that express anxiety, resistance, fear, hope, and excitement
 - c. Record how people reacted to homework assignments.
 - d. Record other people’s opinions about the state of small groups at West Houston.
 - e. Record opinions about what needs to be done at West Houston in regard to small groups.

Any other observations you feel are noteworthy. Include these in the “Miscellaneous Notes” section.

APPENDIX H

GROUP PLAN

A PLAN FOR CULTIVATING MISSIONAL HOSPITALITY
FOR SMALL GROUPS AT WEST HOUSTON

Prepared November 2014

By Missional Hospitality Planning Group

Kelli John

Scott John

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Dee Dee Pierson

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Ashley Stewart

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Kyle Turney

Introduction

Kevin Stewart partnered with Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, to lead a group of active missional community leaders to consider how the practice of missional hospitality could be cultivated within small groups. Since West Houston is clearly an “attractional” church and will remain such, the plan partly uses the concept of missional hospitality to reshape attractional elements of the church’s small group program. In addition, the plan seeks ways to expose small groups and the church at large to both the theology and practice of missional hospitality. The planning group has agreed to help oversee the implementation of the plan

Recommendations

I. Training Missional Community Leaders in Missional Hospitality

1. Missional community leaders are encouraged to attend a training twice a year. In addition the elders are committed to meeting with each missional community leader twice a month. Chris Pierson, the adult discipleship minister, has meetings every other month with the elders to equip them for mentoring. In these meetings there are five spokes that are constantly reinforced as a focus for missional communities: 1) Word, 2) Caring, 3) Ministry, 4) Inviting, and 5) Multiplication.
2. It has been determined that an overarching narrative is needed to give fuller meaning to the five spokes. Three theological imperatives will be focused on in future trainings: 1) LIVE as *family*, 2) EXPERIENCE the *gospel*, and 3) PURSUE *missional hospitality*. These will partly be defined as follows:
 - i. FAMILY- Eat, share, play, and do life together through regular meals.
 - ii. GOSPEL- Explore and apply scripture together. This can be done all together as one large group or by dividing into smaller groups of men and women. This can also be done in Life Transformation Groups, which are single gender groups of three to four that meet weekly.
 - iii. MISSIONAL HOSPITALITY- Join God, as you are sent to embrace some people group or community. Gather together to serve at least once a month. Invite others to join.
3. Thus biannual training and monthly mentoring will include missional hospitality as a practice that is to be cultivated.
4. Chris Pierson will begin to meet twice a month with missional community leaders that are willing to pilot an enhanced practice of missional hospitality with their small group. This will be an ongoing effort that is expected to expand to include additional missional community leaders over time.
 - i. Leaders will make a commitment to the three foci listed above, which includes missional hospitality.
 - ii. Groups will also commit to send off a trained leader and support family to plant another missional community every one to two years.

II. Modification of West Houston 101 To Include Missional Hospitality

1. A Mission Team will be formed to facilitate the new West Houston 101 process. Possible tactics for this would include the following:
 - i. Have one or more missional communities adopt West Houston 101 as their mission and become the Mission Team.
 - ii. Recruit, train and develop a group whose focus is on supporting West Houston 101.
2. West Houston 101 is presently a two hour class designed to introduce guests to the core practices of the church and to give them the opportunity to become members. This course will be modified to be a one hour course that introduces guests to an eight week course called “Discovery Group” that prepares them for membership.
3. A new eight week course, called Discovery Group, will be developed that will become an onramp to membership at West Houston. Each meeting will be two hours long and include a meal. The following is a suggested curriculum for the eight week class:
 - i. West Houston Overview
 - ii. What is the gospel?
 - iii. Who is a disciple?
 - iv. West Houston Vision
 - v. West Houston Ministries
 - vi. The Centrality of Missional Communities
 - vii. Missional Community Testimonies
 - viii. MC Covenant Forming
4. A central focus at each meeting will be the practice of missional hospitality toward the guests, which will be designed to build relational connections among the group and to facilitate relational connection to the broader church family.
5. The Discovery Group will demonstrate and initiate new missional communities. The goal will be to form a new missional community out of the group attending. Missional hospitality will be modeled during the eight weeks and encouraged as the pattern for future missional community meetings.
 - i. There will likely be members of the group who connect in other missional communities. If so, they’ll be encouraged to stay in the Discovery Group through week six.
 - ii. Ideally, a leader from within the new group will be identified and trained. If not, the group will be led by someone from the mission team, a shepherd, or another identified leader who is ready to go.
 - iii. Newly formed missional communities will be invited to monthly family meetings with the mission team for the next two to three months to help them become stable.
 - iv. The leader of the newly formed missional community will participate in the biannual training, be assigned an elder to mentor them and be invited to the twice monthly trainings in which the pilot MC group leaders are participating. In summary, they would be launched as a new pilot missional community.

III. Congregational Focus and Practice of Missional Hospitality

1. A four week sermon series will be devised that will focus on missional hospitality as a fundamental characteristic of the triune God. Those sermons will focus on the following topics: 1) God as Missionary, 2) Relationality of a Trinitarian God, 3) Missional Hospitality of Jesus' Ministry, and 4) Inclusive and Subversive nature of the kingdom.
2. Adult classes will conjointly study the following topics as they relate to missional hospitality: 1) Missional Identity of the Church, 2) Seeking Solidarity, 3) Focused Around Meals, and 4) Based on Friendship.
3. A practicum will consist of encouraging the missional communities in the church to invite their neighbors to a meal. If a church member is not in a missional community, they will be encouraged to pair up with one or two other family units and invite their neighbors to a meal.
4. A web page will be developed where those that participate in the activity can share their stories. Some of those stories will be highlighted from the pulpit.

IV. Implementation Team

1. Four missional communities are represented in the missional hospitality planning team. The leaders of these groups will meet once a month for the next six months to implement the plan that was devised by the group.
2. This team will recruit leaders and devise role descriptions for their activities to ensure that the plan is implemented.

APPENDIX I

FIELD NOTES CODING SCHEME

1. **Missional Theology**
 - 1.1. Recapturing God's mission for the church
 - 1.1.1. Sent vs. attractional
 - 1.1.2. Planting and reproducing
 - 1.2. Joining God in his work
 - 1.2.1. Finding the person of "peace"
 - 1.2.2. Making room for God's work in our life
 - 1.2.3. Need for workers
 - 1.3. Changing a Culture
 - 1.3.1. Programmatic change vs. heart change
 - 1.3.2. Instruction, conversation and practice
 - 1.3.3. Meshing missional with attractional
 - 1.3.4. Training leaders
2. **Missional Hospitality and Trinitarian Relationality**
 - 2.1. Is Communal
 - 2.1.1. Relationship with the Trinity
 - 2.1.2. Calling people to community not institutional membership
 - 2.1.3. Characteristics of authentic community
 - 2.1.4. Characteristics of authentic relationship
 - 2.1.5. Need for a place
 - 2.1.6. Obstacle of individualism
 - 2.1.7. Relating communal to "sent"
 - 2.2. Seeks Solidarity
 - 2.2.1. Based on God's love
 - 2.2.2. Meeting emotional and social needs
 - 2.2.3. Telling our stories
 - 2.2.4. Life Transformation Groups
3. **Missional Hospitality is Inclusive and Subversive**
 - 3.1. Frequently focused around meals
 - 3.1.1. Building community around meal times
 - 3.1.2. Moving from affinity focused groups to diversity
 - 3.1.3. Inviting others to join us
 - 3.1.4. Making meals a reciprocal practice
 - 3.1.5. Missional hospitality as a natural rhythm in our life
 - 3.2. Based on friendship
 - 3.2.1. Sharing life together
 - 3.2.2. Requires time

- 3.2.3. Invests in others
- 3.2.4. Reciprocal
- 3.2.5. Healthy boundaries
- 3.2.6. Unconditional acceptance

APPENDIX J

EVALUATION BY OUTSIDE EXPERT

Evaluation of Ministry Intervention: ‘Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ’ by Kevin Stewart

Evaluator: John Ogren – Dallas, Texas

Outline:

- A. Background of Evaluator
- B. Sources Used for Evaluation
- C. Overview
- D. Appreciation
- E. Critique
- F. Summary

A. Background of Evaluator

I am a colleague and personal friend of the author whose work I evaluate. We worked together at the South MacArthur Church of Christ in Irving, Texas (now known as Christ Church Irving) for six years (1995-2001) and have remained in close contact since that time. The author was my student in the course Missional Ecclesiology, which I taught as an adjunct instructor for ACU’s D.Min. program in January 2014. As Communities of Faith Minister at South MacArthur (2001-2007) I gave leadership to the congregation’s adult bible fellowships, small groups, and church planting. Presently I am completing a Ph.D. in congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary with a dissertation entitled “New Congregations, Neighbors, and the Mission of God: A Study of Theological Imagination in Local Discernment.” Luther’s program in congregational leadership and mission was a joint effort of its systematic theology and leadership divisions.

B. Sources Used for Evaluation

My evaluation of this project is based on:

1. A revised prospectus for the project entitled, ‘Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ’ (hereafter, ‘Prospectus’)
2. Lesson plans and session handouts for the first four sessions of the ministry intervention
3. A document titled ‘A Plan for Cultivating Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston’ (hereafter, ‘Plan’)

Other than the final product, the plan, I had no access to data generated by the ministry intervention.

C. Overview

The ministry intervention was undertaken in a congregational context (the West Houston Church of Christ) interpreted as enacting a new vision in the midst of several key concerns: gradual decline in Sunday attendance; the failure of attractional events; increased racial and ethnic diversity in the congregation; a loss of an earlier sense (or myth) of *family*; the interruption—following construction of a new building—of a consistent growth pattern; and, as a consequence of the foregoing, anxiety in the system rising to the level of “identity crisis” (Prospectus, 7).

The ministry intervention responded to a congregationally discerned, elder-led vision statement prioritizing the commitment: “Our small groups will be mission-minded, disciple-building groups.” The author, executive minister since June 2012, collaborated with the adult discipleship minister and ten active and potential leaders of “missional communities” (the congregation’s new language for its small groups) to address “a lack of the practice of missional hospitality among small groups at West Houston” (Prospectus, 13) in a project “to develop an action plan for cultivating the practice of missional hospitality among small groups at West Houston Church of Christ” (Prospectus, 15).

The ministry intervention was informed by missional theological perspectives shaping a theory and proposed practice of “missional hospitality.” The intervention aimed to cultivate this practice through shared meals, group *lectio divina*, teaching on missional hospitality by the author, and practical applications of this teaching by the participants in their own small groups. The first four sessions in the process were devoted to eating together, group *lectio divina*, teaching on missional hospitality, and weekly hospitality homework. The next five sessions involved eating together, group *lectio divina*, and developing, composing, and refining iterations of a congregational plan, the end product of the process.

D. Appreciation

1. Congregational Context – The author bases his narrative description of the congregational ministry context on interviews with “over fifty church leaders” (Prospectus, 2). It is a rich narrative, sympathetic, but not without critical moments. The author does not explicitly connect his narrative of the congregation’s past and present with the theological rationale undergirding the narrative vision for the future discerned by the elders—“that God both teaches us through story and calls us to live into...[God’s] story...[even] the next chapter in the story of God’s work through West Houston.” Even so, there is an appreciative character in a narrative that appears open to the discovery of a past that is “useable” in relation to present challenges and possible futures. The author’s ministry intervention, it seems to me, is stronger because of his layered sense of the history shaping the congregation’s dilemmas and hopes.

2. Theological Framework – The central notion of *missional hospitality* is developed in a robust theological framework overall. Against essentializing tendencies present in some missional theology, the author provides a historically contextualized approach to missional theology, the occasion for which is constructed primarily in relation to legacies of post-Christendom. The key interlocutors here are predominantly missiologists, and most are directly connected with the discourse of missiological ecclesiology, or *missional church*. The author also builds the sense of *missional hospitality* in dialogue with historical and theological interpretations of Christian hospitality, and this is where the

discussion is the most interesting. The presentation of *Missional hospitality* as a communal practice of meal-sharing and friendship that acts in solidarity with the poor and marginalized toward the formation of inclusive and subversive kingdom communities offers a promising way of enacting ecclesially the *social* or *world* horizon of *missio Dei* theology.

The author's articulation of *missional hospitality* makes a valuable contribution to missional *ecclesiology*, particularly as it sets an agenda for small groups or "missional communities." I appreciated the way the author's discussion brought Volf's work on solidarity and suffering in *Exclusion and Embrace* into the frame of hospitality (there is probably an article to be written here—I was surprised to discover that the word *hospitality* appears not a single time in *Exclusion and Embrace*).

The author makes intelligent use of Scripture in constructing his argument.

3. Methodology – The ministry intervention itself moves toward a simultaneity of action and reflection so important for theological formation and theological practice. The process honors the inseparable relationship of theological and spiritual formation, theological and spiritual practice. There is an admirable integration of theory and practice in the joining of teaching with meal fellowship and listening to God through group *lectio divina* and also through the testing of key commitments of *missional hospitality* in connection with the leaders' own small groups.

I like the way the intervention immediately leverages the formation of the small group leaders for the formation of the groups they are leading. The participatory and creative aspects of the research are a significant strength. The way the process seeks the group's sense of what regarding *missional hospitality* is salient for the local context and the coauthoring role they have in a contextualized plan for cultivating this practice are both exemplary features of the ministry intervention, though there are surely constraining effects associated with these commitments.

The structure of the research sets up a rich process for generating data, functionally a *quadrangulation* of perspectives.

4. Leadership – The author's leadership in the ministry intervention is informed, collaborative, and appropriately assertive. The focus of his initiative appears to be apt in terms of timeliness, buy-in, and potential strategic impact.

5. Product – The plan itself is complex and differentiated, addressing three strategic audiences: leaders of missional communities; guests/potential members; and the congregation as a whole. The plan also clearly shows attention to the strategic linkages between these audiences; in this way the plan articulates an ongoing process that, over time, could contribute significantly to the "cultural transformation" the author acknowledges will be necessary "to effectively develop the practice of missional hospitality" at West Houston (Prospectus, 15). The specificity of the plan appears primarily in connection to training and instruction (the proposed curriculum for the new Discovery Group and the four-week congregational focus) and to the formation of new "missional communities." Practicums are anticipated features of these curricula.

Another strength of the plan is realism about the congregational context and incrementalism about cultural change. The leverage point for change in the system, that

is, small groups/missional communities, is exploited within structures and moments already given and with an anticipation of the freedom of voluntary participation. The plan makes opportunities available and equips people and groups to make the most of the opportunities. The plan distinguishes a leverage point within the leverage point, the formation of new “missional communities” while always offering the opportunity to all small groups to live more fully into the identity commended by the terms *missional community* and *missional hospitality*.

E. Critique

1. Congregational Context – What appears most lacking in the narrative description of the congregational context is a sense of God’s active or passive participation. What sense does the author have of God as an agent and/or patient of the West Houston congregational narrative? The author’s interviews are crucial for the construction of a narrative sense of *What happened?* and there are mentions of God here and there, usually in connection with something that feels like success—numerical growth or plans for a new building. In these interviews, did the author ask his subjects for their sense of God’s participation in the key moments of the narrative, whether viewed as positive or otherwise? *Especially* in the moments of challenge or disorientation—declining numbers, increasing diversity, heightened anxiety, etc.—it is vital to ask and to learn what people will confess about the presence, absence, action, inaction, or suffering of God. So, for example, does the congregation have the capacity to see *God* in the advent of the racially other in their midst even if their presence must truthfully be named under the heading *Disrupting the Family-Like Atmosphere*. Even when the fruits of its inquiry are merely supposed, ventured, or contingently and cautiously confessed, it is an irreplaceable feature of missional theology in, with, for, under, and over against congregations that it is always asking, in relation to whatever circumstances, *What is God up to here?* There is loss to the reconstruction of congregational narratives when this question is not kept at the heart of inquiry, interpretation, and authorship.

I wonder who is included or excluded by the focus of inquiry with “church leaders” (it seems that later on the interviewees may be called “members,” Prospectus, 12). Since the author emphasizes the importance of these interviews for his interpretive construction of a congregational context, he might offer (perhaps in a footnote or appendix) some particular information about the leaders he spoke with and what was the basic shape of his interviews.

The sense made of the congregational context in relation to the term *attractional* is shaped by an unduly narrow focus on special *events*. In any case, the plan resulting from the ministry intervention declares broadly that “West Houston is clearly an ‘attractional’ church and will remain such.” Indications of a more pervasive *attractional* ethos, besides those that appear in the plan itself, may be suggested by the congregation’s expectations surrounding the new building and by hopes for and understandings of *missional hospitality* that obtain prior to its theological articulation. My point here is not to argue attractional vs. missional. There is a real debate along these lines even though fruitful practices and promising horizons for congregations may be trustworthily discerned under each heading. My point is that what is at stake in the differences between a predominantly attractional ethos and one that is missional appears to operate massively in this context, and this is under-appreciated—with serious consequences for the intervention and plan. One possible way for grappling with this would be to more closely

examine the congregation's myth of family (reckoning with how an ideology of 'family' is fractured and remade by the gospel of Jesus Christ) in relation to "West Houston's attractional model" (Prospectus, 18).

The project intervenes with leaders of small groups/missional communities, but (except by way of observations on their lack of strategic importance) the groups tend to be assumed throughout. What can be said about the typical practices and rhythms of the groups? How many small groups/missional communities are there? How many West Houston members participate and what percentage of the congregation are these participants? What else can be said about who participates in the groups? On what basis were the groups formed in the early nineties and what efforts have there been to form new groups since the original initiative? Assessing the potential of the ministry intervention is made more difficult without a clearer picture of the point where the intervention occurs. Acknowledging that most small groups are "exclusively white" (Prospectus, 8) is highly significant, and the author returns on multiple occasions to the concern for racial and ethnic diversity. Has an important opportunity been missed when *missional hospitality* is articulated without addressing more fully the topic of race and ethnicity?

2. Theological Framework – The sense of *missional hospitality*, at the beginning of the theological discussion, appears already to be a bit over-contextualized in relation to concerns arising from the congregational narrative. This is particularly evident in the expectation that *missional hospitality* will "maintain [or repair!] the cohesiveness of the church body at West Houston" (Prospectus, 19). As the author's theological construction shows, *missional hospitality*, beginning with the Trinitarian Christ, is profoundly *disrupting* (to borrow the author's term, Prospectus, 6). This detour ought to *subvert* the idea that "[t]he practice of missional hospitality by small groups will help West Houston recapture its lost sense of family" (Prospectus, 48), but this is the confident expectation at the *end* of the theological argument. But the argument itself shows (and in other places anticipates) that *missional hospitality* on the model of Jesus Christ will *revolutionize* West Houston's "sense of family."

The author uses the term "authentic community" more than a dozen times. At points this term is disciplined by notions as challenging as "solidarity" and "the opportunity to...break down relational barriers" (Prospectus, 36, 13). Most often the term is a placeholder, useful for reconciling competing agendas. The extent to which *missional hospitality* is enrolled in service to "authentic community" may finally be the extent to which the subversive practice is itself subverted. *Missional hospitality* ought to *define* "authentic community," and if this is the author's intent some work remains to make this clear.

The author intends to make "missional theology...serve as the framework for missional hospitality," (Prospectus, 20) and the author develops his theological argument in two major sections under these headings. The connections between the *missional theology* proposed and the *missional hospitality* articulated, however, are not always clear. Missional theology is presented primarily in relation to the *missio Dei* concept and sending pictures of Trinity and the church. The reader may initially wonder how all the talk of 'sending' relates to the practice of hospitality. Relating *missio Dei* to the Kingdom of God, presumed to encompass systems of human sociality, allows for a view of mission

expansive enough to include “social revitalization” and praise for Mandela’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Missional hospitality, derived from different sources, appeals more often to the images and concepts of *communio Dei*—relationality, perichoresis, and so on. It is in this context that the author refers to Jesus’ ministry and practice of *missional hospitality*—where the character of his *sending* is shaped by his [cruciform!] dependence on others and his welcome by others in their homes and on their turf. Drawing Trinitarian implications (in dialogue with Moltmann and Volf) of Jesus’ *missional hospitality*, the author finally reckons with the openness of a Triune God to the *world* and with “Jesus’ ‘reception of hostile humanity’ into Trinitarian community...[as] a model for how Christian community should embrace others through hospitality” (Prospectus, 32). This is managed without mention of the cross, but the author returns to this terrain when he speaks of a “cruciform community” (Prospectus, 35) and insists on *solidarity*—“sharing of life, suffering, and death with others”—as “the way that missional hospitality accomplishes its goal of creating authentic relational community” (Prospectus, 35). Here are some of the boldest and most beautiful paragraphs in the paper.

Where the most profound theological meaning of *missional hospitality* is reached, the author also tempers with caution the most radical implications of its practice for the West Houston Church of Christ. While the author holds with Volf that “Christians are not to ‘claim the comfort of the Crucified while rejecting his way’ of giving themselves to others,” he also laments that “solidarity is not easily accomplished programmatically.” The shift from the language of *practice* to *programs* is pivotal for the claim that “Church programs, if they are to be helpful, must focus on the need for members to be transformed into the type of ‘social agents’ or ‘selves’ that Christians need to be *in order to* offer solidarity and community to another” (Prospectus, 36, emphasis added). The statement appears to suggest the possibility of a transformation *for* solidarity prior the actual sharing of solidarity, and it is uncertain whether this unlikely possibility is contradicted by the later assertion that “Christians are transformed into social agents that practice self-giving through missional hospitality *in order to* forge authentic Christian community through solidarity with others” (Prospectus, 37, emphasis added).

I scrutinize these passages because they may be the most important for understanding why the ministry intervention itself *postpones* the sharing of solidarity which has become inseparable from the author’s understandings of *authentic community* and *missional hospitality*, the inclusive practice which the intervention intends to cultivate.

If some notions of the *sending* of the Church permit the view of *missional hospitality* as “an extension of the divine life to the world *through* the believing community” (Prospectus, 17, emphasis added) or the sense that “churches need to recapture the practice of missional hospitality to actively seek out and reconcile the lost to God” (Prospectus, 18), other understandings of *missio Dei* (not to mention the sense of cruciform *communio Dei* on which the author also draws) recognize what Paul teaches, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” and distinguish this work of God—this openness of God to the world—from the “*message* of reconciliation” with which the Church is entrusted. If *God* reconciles the world to Godself through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the basis of the church’s solidarity with the world, including its most poor and wretched, is already established in the place where Jesus surrenders his life for all.

The Church's solidarity with the lost and the poor is no less "a part of the God-given identity of each Christian and of the church" than any other aspect of mission (Prospectus, 22). The gospel, when it is heard and comprehended, actually liberates the Church from any sense of itself as *prior* to the world, to sinners, or to the poor as it participates in the Reign of God and in the *missio Dei*. The author has at his disposal the resources for correcting the sense of *sending* that sets up and habitually reifies a sequence of God>church>world. Unfortunately, the group composed for "theological discernment" (Prospectus, 15) about *missional hospitality* is considered intact before its outreach to neighbors or acts of solidarity.

The author's theological construction of a practice of *missional hospitality* not only calls for inclusive and subversive solidarity with the poor (and the disabled—under the heading of friendship), but focuses on communal meals that bring "people close enough to challenge their own prejudices and assumptions of others" and "offer the opportunity for Christians to subvert the worldly distinctions of class and race." The reader is therefore not entirely surprised when the "application" of the theological argument to the West Houston Church of Christ anticipates that "missional hospitality will also help break down the barriers that are created by diverse racial... backgrounds in the church" and expects that "in the future small groups will be more diverse, and will regularly invite newcomers into their midst." What *is* surprising (and disappointing) is that the issue of racial diversity is not considered explicitly in the methodology of the ministry intervention.

3. Methodology – Because of my sympathy with the author's expectation that missional theology and missional hospitality might help a congregation indwell more completely its gift of racial and ethnic diversity, I was curious that this concern goes unmentioned when it came to the "purposive sampling" guiding the selection of "a diverse group of participants" (Prospectus, 51). Limiting the sense of "purposive sampling" to persons "interested in the project and in a position to help implement it" still seems to propose including racially diverse participants—since cultivating missional hospitality is expected to engender groups that are more diverse and produce more diverse leaders for the congregation (Prospectus, 48). If people of color were included in the planning group as a consideration of "purposive sampling," it is an odd silence that makes no mention of it. That a notion of *stakeholder* in the church based on power and influence suffers no missional critique or qualification seems strange given the theological argument on which the ministry intervention intends to build.

In the sources reviewed for this evaluation of the ministry intervention, very little is indicated about *how* the author planned to go about teaching the material on *missional hospitality*, though the lesson plans appear to be quite ambitious. Nor does the author characterize the discussions he planned to facilitate "to check for group comprehension of the theological concepts." This evaluator knows the author to be a dynamic and skillful teacher. Since the teaching (coordinated with meals, group *lectio divina*, and hospitality homework) is the substance of the intervention in a ministry led by a colleague and with a group shaped by this colleague's judgment, more particulars about how the teaching was approached should be included for readers of the final project-thesis.

The "Hospitality Homework" assignments take an assertive approach to hospitality. Where leaders "desire to grow the church numerically through small groups" it may be that small group leaders need to be able to meet new people, make plans to hang out with

people (even those “on the margin of society” Lesson Plan 3), and invite newcomers to share a meal with their group. One feels here the struggle to enact the vision of *missional hospitality* based on Jesus’ ministry, his dependence on others’ hospitality, and his constant *accepting* of invitations along with the challenge call to discipleship he also *offered*. Reading Luke 10 throughout the process ought to have challenged a sense of *missional hospitality* that only *offers* hospitality one’s own turf; so perhaps the assignments actually unfolded as *accepting* invitations as well as giving them, *receiving* hospitality as well as offering it.

The description of sessions 6-9 in the prospectus is sketchy at best. The character of the intervention at this stage is difficult to evaluate because so little of the process used is indicated. Again, readers of the project-thesis should have a detailed account of what was done in these sessions.

4. Leadership – I admired the author’s account of his leadership in his own small group at West Houston (Prospectus 42-43). That said, the enacting of the theological argument concerning *missional hospitality* in the ministry intervention seems less interested in radical congruence with Jesus’ practice of *missional hospitality* and more concerned about implementing a plan to disrupt the homogeneity and inwardness of the so-called “missional communities” at West Houston and re-purpose them as assimilation and growth vehicles for the congregation. The possibility comes into view that an initial impact of *missional hospitality* at West Houston might be to shift some energy from large-group attractional events at the building to small group events in homes. In any case, the author proposes a much more radical theological argument for *missional hospitality* than what he enacts in the ministry intervention as a way of cultivating the practice. Even so, it is hard to tell how much his collaborators in the process might do with the argument he makes or what else might unfold from the argument over time. Even if the planning team wasn’t eating their breakfast in the street with homeless neighbors, another leadership approach (and a more participatory form of action research) would have been to let the collaborators develop their own homework based on the teaching. The plan to cultivate the practice of *missional hospitality* in small groups at West Houston seems to be built into the planning process, rather than being susceptible to the surprises of more open-ended theological discernment.

5. Product – The first major section (“Training Missional Community Leaders in Missional Hospitality”) of the written plan resulting from the ministry intervention addresses a number of ongoing aspects of small group ministry at West Houston by proposing they include an emphasis on *missional hospitality* (the twice yearly trainings, and elder mentoring). What this will look like is not at all anticipated by the plan. Additionally, the adult discipleship minister will begin meeting regularly with small group leaders “willing to pilot an enhanced practice of *missional hospitality* with their small group[s]” (Plan, 1). These groups will be anticipated to multiply.

The wording of the plan’s recommendations in this section makes it a challenge to ascertain what is *new* that the plan proposes. So, for example, a careful reader of the plan might wonder whether the overarching narrative (intended to give fuller meaning to the extant five spokes of *missional community*) was decided on *before* the intervention or as a *result* of the intervention. Regardless, in light of the theological vision for the practice of *missional hospitality* offered by the author, it is disappointing that the narrative offered to shape “missional communities” prioritizes first the imperative “LIVE as *family*” and

subsequently “EXPERIENCE the *gospel*” and “PURSUE *missional hospitality*” (Plan, 1). There was much in the author’s narrative description of the congregational context and theological argument that would have supported exactly reversing this sequence. Communities that first of all committed to “pursue *missional hospitality*” would before long have a richer sense of what it means to “experience the *gospel*” than to “explore and apply scripture together” (Plan, 1). It is precisely the historic understanding at West Houston of what it means to “live as family” that needs to be disrupted by *missional hospitality* (as the author understands it) and by the new experiences of the *gospel* that the practice of *missional hospitality* would incite. In any case, without violence to the plan or the narrative these three imperatives could be presented (as they are used in future training) as a circular or (better) spiraling movement and not numerically sequenced as they are in the plan.

The second section of the plan (“Modification of West Houston 101 to Include *Missional Hospitality*”) appears more clearly to innovate the system. A team will be appointed or formed to support West Houston 101 (and presumably the Discovery Group it introduces?). This two-hour class will be made a one-hour introduction to an eight-week Discovery Group course aimed at membership at West Houston and participation in a *missional community*. The curriculum outlined for this course focuses primarily on West Houston and *missional communities* and shows little or no influence of the teaching on, or experiences of, *missional hospitality*.

What follows is the plan’s commitment that “A central focus at each meeting will be the practice of *missional hospitality* toward the guests, which will be designed to build relational connections among the group and to facilitate relational connection to the broader church family” (Plan, 2). Having familiarity with the author’s rich sense of *missional hospitality*, one almost has a sense of the term’s use here as something like throwing a hospital at a paper cut. Even so, the mission team supporting the West Houston 101/Discovery Group course ought to be ready to welcome and befriend *anyone* that enrolls—whether homeless, poor, disabled, or even racially or ethnically other than the congregation’s (and the small groups’) white majority. Knowing this, God may very well bless West Houston with this kind of participation. That said, the language here is unduly vague. There was enough in the ministry intervention to inform a more particular *practice of missional hospitality*, even given the constrained focus on the newcomers’ class. Absent any more specific commitments than this, it is hard not to feel the potential force of *missional hospitality* may be domesticated to the rhythms of assimilation and involvement in an “attractional church”—a mode of ecclesiality that the plan explicitly states is not subject to change (Plan, “Introduction,” 1).

The rest of the section deals with the anticipated formation of “*missional communities*” and training of leaders for these new groups. No direct influence of the intervention is discernible here except the commitment that: “*Missional hospitality* will be modeled during the eight weeks and encouraged as the pattern for *missional community meetings*.” The particulars of this pattern are, unfortunately, left unspecified.

The third section of the plan (“Congregational Focus and Practice of *Missional Hospitality*”) anticipates (without setting the dates) a four-week sermon series and concurrent study in the adult classes. The four topics are rich and aim at the practice of meal-sharing with neighbors and sharing the stories of these experiences. This ought to be encouraging to those who sign up to take on the practice of *missional hospitality* as a

regular aspect of their missional communities and to the new missional communities forming. The congregation-wide emphasis signals that *missional hospitality* and *missional communities* are not for some dedicated elite but for the whole church. This is significant not only for whatever occasion the series creates but for a future that the ongoing training in *missional hospitality* and the formation of new communities committed to *missional hospitality* may bring about—as leaders and groups discerningly and *daringly* participate in God’s mission.

The fourth and final section (“Implementation Team”) wisely provides for a group to monitor implementation of the plan over a six-month period. What I would have liked to see here is some anticipation that there would be ongoing discernment related to missional hospitality and missional community. The implementation of the plan seems like a first step toward the vision of missional hospitality and community held up in the intervention with select small group leaders.

F. Summary – The ministry intervention brings rich theological reflection to a strategic ministry for living into “the next chapter in the story of God’s work through West Houston.” The practice of *missional hospitality* that the intervention argues and begins (cautiously!) to enact is certainly a provocative way to promote active buy-in to the new vision statement’s commitment that “our small groups will be mission-minded, disciple-building groups.” *Missional hospitality* as imagined here may also provoke more daring ventures toward God’s work all around West Houston, as this congregation learns to meet and greet the newcomer, invite the neighbor, and step into solidarity with the world God so loves.

In a final word of reflection, I will acknowledge my (unavailing) efforts to bracket out my close friendship with “the author” by dropping the term. Kevin is someone for whom I have great affection and respect. He likes to tell me he is more a practitioner than a theologian, but I think his work here shows his outstanding ability in both roles and in their integrated practice. The criticism I offer of the work here, it should be said, is matched by my confidence that the son of Brazilian missionaries, the zealous evangelist, the profound thinker and strong leader that I know in Kevin Stewart is capable, by God’s grace, of leading this congregation further on in the revolution of its life proposed by the theological practice of missional hospitality he argues and models for them. May God richly bless the initiatives discerningly planned by his collaborators and the new prayers and dreams they may inspire.

BRIEF VITA

Kevin Stewart was born in Abilene, Texas on March 9, 1959. As the son of missionary parents, he lived in São Paulo, Brazil from 1961 to 1974. He graduated from Coronado High School in Lubbock, Texas, in 1977. Kevin received a master of science degree in biblical and related studies from Abilene Christian University in 2000. Kevin worked as a campus minister at the University of Arizona in Tucson on behalf of Mountain Avenue Church of Christ from 1987 to 1993. He then worked as the singles minister and the adult education minister for the South MacArthur Church of Christ in Irving, Texas from 1993 to 2001. South MacArthur Church has since relocated within Irving and is now called Christ Church. Kevin preached for the Muskogee Church of Christ from 2001 to 2012. Kevin was very involved in the Muskogee community, serving as the President of the Muskogee Ministerial Alliance (2005-2007), the President of Rotary (2006-2007), and the President of Monarch, a drug and alcohol rehab center for women (2009-2012). In May of 2012, Kevin joined West Houston Church of Christ as their executive minister. Kevin married his wife, Monica Stewart, in Tucson in 1988. They have three children: Ethan Stewart, Allyson Stewart, and Ashley Stewart.

