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Challenging Students at Fort Worth Christian School to Engage the Economically Disadvantaged in Their Community

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ABSTRACT

This doctor of ministry thesis presents a project in which I led a group of students at Fort Worth Christian School in experiences that challenged them to be more engaged with the economically disadvantaged in their community. The problem I identified at the outset of the project was a lack of such experiences along with troubling attitudes about poverty. Many students initially demonstrated ambivalence or even outright hostility toward the notion of helping people who live in poverty. I found such attitudes to be contrary to the teachings of Jesus and to my central beliefs as a Christian. I believed that this problem was partly due to the fact that I had not adequately facilitated the spiritual formation of students by sharing experiences that challenged these ideas.

In order to respond to this problem, I and two other Fort Worth Christian School teachers led a group of high school students in a 48-hour experience with an urban ministry to the homeless in Dallas, Texas. During this time we participated in a poverty simulation, which involved making meals on meager resources, sleeping in shelter-like environments, volunteering at various ministries, and meeting people who live in poverty and homelessness. I evaluated the efficacy of this project by triangulating the findings of field notes, informal interviews, and the assessment of an independent expert. I concluded that the experience was an effective first step in responding to the problem, but that more needed to be done. The experience did seem to meaningfully challenge the students who participated, but it remained unclear how long-term the effects would be. It also did not have a clear impact on the rest of the student body that did not participate in
the experience. Nevertheless, it was an effective move toward more faithfully living out the Christian value of caring for the poor.
Challenging Students at Fort Worth Christian School to Engage the Economically Disadvantaged in Their Community

A 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
James Hensley
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

This project addressed the need for experiences that challenge Fort Worth Christian School students to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. Chapter 1 will introduce the project with a description of its ministry context along with the problem, purpose, basic assumptions, definitions, delimitations, and limitations for this project. Chapter 2 will articulate the theological and theoretical framework for the project intervention. Chapter 3 will develop the methodology for the intervention and outline the elements of the intervention itself. Chapter 4 will analyze the intervention, and chapter 5 will provide concluding thoughts on the outcome and its implications.

Ministry Context

Fort Worth Christian School (hereinafter FWC) is a private, parochial academy located in a suburb of Fort Worth, Texas. Over 800 students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade are enrolled at the school, including approximately 300 elementary school students, 200 middle school students, and 350 high school students. These students come from Fort Worth as well as many suburbs in and around the northeast part of Tarrant County. The school employs over 90 full-time faculty and staff members.¹ FWC was founded in 1958 and was for many years primarily a community college. Since 1972, when the college program closed, it has been a college preparatory school. Regarding

social demographics, the students are predominantly affluent and white. There is a small but significant portion of the student body from South Korea and from various parts of Asia, due to partnerships with certain schools and religious organizations there. The school’s denominational heritage is with the Church of Christ, though it is not exclusively so. The student body, as it stands now, is significantly more denominationally diverse than it once was. The school publishes a statement of faith on its website, but students are not required to sign on to it to attend. As a result, there is a surprising variety of theological backgrounds represented at the school.

The theological orientation of the school has historically been very conservative. However, there are indications that this might be less pronounced now than it was in the past. For the past three years, a weekly chapel has included a student-led praise band. This is something of a departure from the a cappella heritage of the Churches of Christ. There has also been a greater opportunity for women to participate in leading these chapel services. This too is a departure from a tradition that has not historically been gender-inclusive.

In recent years, the high school has experienced a period of growth, which has led to a number of changes. Most noticeably, significant renovation and construction is taking place on the school’s forty-acre campus. Four years ago, the school completed an addition of four new high school classrooms, new high school offices, and the addition of a campus administration building. Construction of a badly needed fine arts center is underway, which will alleviate the overcrowding of the high school chapel. A great emphasis has been placed on technology at FWC. A new Center for Science and
Technology facility was completed in 2008. In partnership with Apple Computers, every student is provided with a MacBook computer at the middle and high school.

Mission and outreach have also been important emphases at FWC. The elementary school has partnered with an orphanage in Nigeria, and middle school students participate in regular local service projects. At the high school level, short-term mission trips take place each year to Thailand, Peru, Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica. These trips usually consist of approximately twenty students and four to six faculty members. Students on these trips participate in humanitarian projects as well as various service-oriented activities with local churches in those countries. These activities often involve manual labor. For example, a few years ago students helped a Thai farmer plant papayas and build a chicken coop out of bamboo. Others involve spending time with people in those countries. For example, the students who go to Peru typically spend most of their time at an orphanage in Cusco.

My role at FWC since I joined the faculty at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year has been as a full-time high school Bible teacher. I typically have anywhere from 80 to 120 students. Their ages have varied from year to year, though most recently I have taught classes made up of both sophomores and juniors. The content of my classes has also varied significantly over this period. I have taught courses surveying the Old Testament, New Testament, the life of Christ, theology, ethics, and apologetics. Although I am not able to choose which of these subjects I teach, I do have the freedom to structure the course within these subjects as I see fit. The curriculum is entirely teacher-generated.

I approach my classes with the goal of facilitating spiritual formation. I aim to teach students how to read and interpret Scripture responsibly and thoughtfully, and I try
to help them learn how to think theologically. I also try to foster spiritual growth through service. I participate in the school’s mission trips as often as I am able, though my greatest influence on students is probably in the classroom setting. I try very hard to effectively balance the spiritual and academic facets of my classroom instruction.

In a 2013 study for a doctor of ministry course, I completed an ethnographic research project that aimed to understand my ministry context and identify any areas of concern. The program of research outlined in Mary Clark Moschella’s *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* generally guided my research. Because of my emphasis on spiritual formation, this topic seemed like a logical starting point for ethnographic research. I began by considering these basic questions:

1. In what particular ways has spiritual formation effectively taken place among our students?

2. In what areas have we been particularly ineffective in facilitating the spiritual formation of our students?

These questions appealed to me for two reasons. First, they concern the primary goal of my ministry and speak to the very core of what I am trying to do. Second, they are broad enough to allow unexpected results. To the extent that it is possible, I wanted to avoid shaping the direction of the research and remain as open-minded as I could in order to let the results of the research guide this project. On the other hand, these questions alone still

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seemed as if they might be too broad. As a result, it seemed appropriate to choose a particular area or aspect of spiritual formation on which to focus.

The topic that presented itself to me upon reflection was social justice. I have observed that the culture of our school is such that we give a lot of attention to mission and service, but we do so only in very particular ways (namely, international short-term missions and occasional *ad hoc* fundraising) to the neglect of others. I have, primarily through the anecdotal evidence of informal conversations and classroom discussions, observed a troubling attitude toward poverty among some students. I have noticed that whenever I give a biblical lesson related to social justice, students often react with resistance and suspicion. I realized that this might be merely a few outspoken students and therefore not representative of the school as a whole, but it seemed worthy of further inquiry. Consequently, I added these two research questions to the two above:

3. What do our students believe about mission and social justice?

4. How are we effectively or ineffectively facilitating growth in these specific areas?

These basic questions shaped my inquiry. I sought to observe and evaluate what beliefs and practices were taking place relative to these issues and how they were shaping us as a faith community.

Theologically, these two areas (spiritual formation and social justice) are very important to me. At the outset of each Bible class I teach, I tell my students and their parents that my primary goal for the course, regardless of the specific biblical book or

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4. This method is known as grounded theory research, a strategy that Osmer describes as a “zigzag approach,” which moves between research and analysis, redefining and adding to the research questions based on the new information that is gained. Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52.
theological topic being studied, is spiritual formation. Consequently, the degree to which this is effectively taking place, particularly in Bible classes, is of personal and professional significance for me. Alongside this, social justice is also one of my core values. My understanding of Christianity places loving others, particularly those in need, near the center of Christian living. This is of great significance to me, both personally and pedagogically.

Methodologically, I focused my research in two arenas. I decided first to interview faculty in leadership positions at the school, especially those at the high school who have some direct connection to the school’s spiritual activities. This led me to ask for interviews with the high school Bible department chair, the school’s director of spiritual life, and the high school principal. In these interviews my aim was to let the questions above guide an in-depth conversation with these individuals. Secondly, I wanted to gather information directly from students. I began with a significant amount of information gleaned from informal conversations with students, but I wanted more concrete data. I decided to survey at least 100 students with two types of questionnaires. The first comprised a series of open-ended questions (e.g., “What impact have FWC Bible classes had on you personally?”) regarding spiritual formation in general and social justice in particular. The second survey had several declarative statements (e.g., “Christians should give generously to the needy.”) on these topics, and students would then indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed.

Through these interviews and surveys I hoped to be able to discern a more accurate and more detailed ethnographic portrait of the school. It seemed likely that only focusing on the adult perspective or only listening to the students’ answers would skew
the results. Instead, I wanted to balance these two perspectives. My expectations were that I would find a number of areas that we might label strengths and a number of areas for growth. I also expected a significant diversity among the results. It has been my observation that some students have a very positive outlook regarding spiritual practices and activities at FWC, while many others have a very negative attitude. Likewise, again based only on very informal and anecdotal evidence, I have observed a variety of attitudes among students regarding the poor and related issues of Christian mission.

Moschella places significant emphasis on the ethics of ethnography, and rightly so. In order to maintain a proper ethical standard, I tried to very clearly communicate verbally what exactly I was doing and how I would use the information. I emphasized that all data would be anonymous and no identifying information would be collected. I also emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and would in no way affect students’ grades. With the approval of my superiors at the school and with the verbal consent of the students, I thought that I had met an appropriate ethical standard.

While the vast majority of my students were more than willing to participate, I encountered a significant roadblock in attempting to interview faculty members. Whether because of time constraints or some other reason, some people were reluctant or unwilling to help. Because of the importance of balancing student perspectives with adult perspectives, I worried that this might endanger the quality of my research. In the end, I was only able to do interviews with two faculty members, but these conversations were of sufficient quality and depth that I decided I could effectively move forward with that information. Alongside those two in-depth interviews, I had over 100 student responses to both surveys.

The first and perhaps most significant result that stands out from the results, particularly from the students, is the diversity of opinion. For nearly every student opinion I cite below, there was at least one who said the exact opposite. Some said our daily chapel services and Bible classes are our greatest strength, while others indicated that these are useless charades. Some said our school places great emphasis on mission and care for the needy, while others absolutely disagreed. I expected that there would be some significant difference of opinion, but I was surprised by the degree to which I saw it in the results. Because of this diversity of opinion, it will be difficult to make any absolute conclusions from this research. Nevertheless, certain trends did emerge.

In response to questions about the way the school influences students spiritually, many students, perhaps not surprisingly, cited the importance of daily chapel services and Bible classes. Regarding chapel, a bit of context may be helpful. As mentioned earlier, our school is badly in need of a new chapel venue. For many years, we have held chapel in our high school foyer, with students sitting on the tile floor. Space became so cramped that we eventually switched to a two-chapel format, with approximately half the school holding chapel at 9:45 a.m. and the other half at 10:40. Because of the school’s recent growth, it has again become overcrowded. Until the completion of the new building’s construction, space will continue to be a significant obstacle.

In the years that I have worked at FWC, two people have taken the role of planning chapel. Both of them have done an admirable job with a very difficult task. Even setting aside the issues of space and format, simply conducting daily high school chapel is difficult to do effectively. Chapel attendance is mandatory, and many students would not be there if they had the choice. Furthermore, the fact that it occurs every single
day probably dilutes its quality and impact. In one interview, the high school principal described the impact of chapel as “minimal.” He indicated that we have to do it since it is a generally expected part of Christian education, but it is not a particularly effective way to promote spiritual growth. His explanation was that chapel is simply not a meaningful part of students’ lives.

The opinions I gathered from students might seem to support that, depending on how the data are interpreted. When asked what the most spiritually influential activity at school was, a majority of students simply wrote “chapel.” However, among those that wrote more than one-word answers (which likely indicates a more thoughtful response), the majority said that chapel was not a major influence, was not done effectively, or otherwise communicated some negative opinion about the value of chapel. My belief is that this is more a function of the overall nature of the activity itself, including issues such as the venue and the timing of it, than it is due to the speaker or the quality of the presentation.

Students had similar responses regarding Bible classes. A surprising number of students said that Bible classes have no impact spiritually. On the one hand, this might be an encouraging measure of the quality of responses I received—the fact that they were comfortable informing their Bible teacher that they saw no value in Bible class indicates that they are willing to be honest. On the other hand, this is obviously discouraging from my perspective as a Bible teacher. Still, not all the responses were negative. In fact, there was not a clear majority either way on this issue. Several students described how Bible classes have been personally important and impactful to them. Multiple students said that it depended on the Bible teacher. Some teachers were important and influential, while
others were not. Many others contrasted the intellectual and academic side of Bible classes with the spiritual side. Bible class was informative, according to these students, but it did not significantly affect their relationship with God.

This shows that there may be a disconnection between our academic activities in class and my stated goals. However, in the second survey I conducted, only 35 percent of students said that Bible classes do not make a significant impact in students’ lives, while the other 65 percent said that they do. In an interview, the school’s director of spiritual life indicated that he believes education does play a role in spiritual growth. His belief is that we have a large number of “biblically illiterate” students at the school. Based on my personal observation, I would tend to agree with this sentiment. This is particularly troubling in cases where the students have been at our school for several years. In these cases, it is often difficult to see if we are making any lasting spiritual impact.

In the same interview, he also said that the most important and effective ways that we impact the spiritual lives of our students are outside the classroom. He believes that the less programmatic and more relational, informal elements are far more important. If this is true, it raises significant questions about the nature of my role as a minister teaching the Bible to students. At the very least, it causes me to consider reorienting my approach to students’ spiritual journeys. If my impact is more on the relationships I build with students and less about the classroom instruction, then perhaps I should spend less time struggling with how to be a more effective teacher and more time building relationships with students. The spiritual life director also emphasized that having Christian teachers with Christian mindsets and lifestyles is perhaps more important than
the particular content of Bible classes or even the daily chapel services that he leads himself.

The high school principal echoed these sentiments in his interview. He believes that the character of the teacher is far more important than the content of the course. He hopes that teachers—all of the teachers at our school, not just Bible teachers—will discuss their spiritual journeys with students. Individually, he said the impact of these kinds of discussions might appear minimal, but collectively they could become very impactful. He likened it to being a child in a family that is financially struggling. He indicated that his parents never let him see or hear conversations about family finances, but looking back he thinks it would have been helpful to see them deal with these issues. Likewise, if students see our spiritual journeys, they might learn from them. We often cannot see the lasting impact of our corporate teaching, but these kinds of conversations can have a powerful effect.

Students also seemed to agree with many of these ideas. Several students indicated that having Christian teachers was for them the most spiritually influential element of being at FWC. However, some students cited problems associated with this aspect of life at FWC. They said that sometimes Christianity at our school seems “forced.” This is literally true in the sense that they are required to attend daily chapel and Bible classes. This has always struck me as a problem. We should not be forcing a religious experience on anyone. One might argue in response that these students, or more likely their parents, have chosen to attend a Christian school. Nevertheless, many of them feel that this forcing of Christianity on them is not a good thing. Personally, I can relate to this perspective. In college I attended a Christian school where daily chapel was a
requirement. Even though I was a Christian, a Bible major, and generally liked chapel, I often had a cynical attitude about it simply because I was required to be there. It seems plausible that something similar may occur here.

Other students mentioned similar problems. One said that the school might have a negative impact in the sense that people “take for granted” Christianity here, creating a culture of hypocrisy. If everyone assumes that everyone else here is Christian, and if many people behave in very unchristian ways, then it is not surprising that some people would come away with a negative opinion. Christianity is then reduced to merely a mask people wear rather than something that influences their behavior elsewhere. Likewise, a few students said that being at a Christian school reduces Christianity to “just another class.” Of course, Christianity should be far more than just another class, and a Christian school should be distinctively Christian in deeper ways than just having a daily chapel or Bible class. In fact, one question that emerged both from the students’ surveys and from the faculty interviews was “What exactly does it mean for an organization to be Christian?”

FWC’s director of spiritual life reflected on this when I asked him what weaknesses came to mind regarding our efforts toward the spiritual formation of our students. He pointed out that, in a way, our ministry takes place in a vacuum. What he meant was that what we do often is completely separate from the local church. As a result, the school becomes the church or a pseudo-church environment. In fact, for many of our students, this is the only church or church-like community that they are a part of. He believes that this is a serious theological problem because FWC is not a church, nor should it be. I am not sure that I see this as a problem to the same degree that he does. It
seems to me that what we do can take place alongside the work of the local churches, even if there is not a direct partnership. Realistically, a direct partnership may often be impossible because so many different congregations and even denominations are represented both by the adults who work at the school and the students who attend. Still, the question regarding the nature of the Christian school or organization remains.

One aspect that ought to be distinctive about a Christian school is its social environment. Bullying, for example, should have no place at a Christian school. Nevertheless, some students specifically mentioned bullying as an explanation for why they thought the school was a negative spiritual influence. However, many students cited the social environment as a positive. For them, the school has a distinct “Christian environment” that they found to be supportive and encouraging. Still, others seemed to feel that to whatever extent the environment was Christian, it was little more than a few pre-packaged clichés masking the same environment one would find elsewhere.

In the second half of the surveys and interviews, I focused on issues related to mission and social justice. While over 90 percent of students agreed that Christians ought to give generously to the needy, fewer than 80 percent considered this a core value. Furthermore, over 60 percent indicated that they would be reluctant to give money to a poor person for fear that it would be used on drugs or alcohol. Many of them seem to believe that poor people are typically poor because of their own bad choices. The result of this assumption is that they see less of a moral burden on the rich. Half of students surveyed agreed with the statement “God helps those who help themselves.” I asked them to react to this statement because it is indicative of an exaggerated sense of individual responsibility that leads to prejudice against the poor. After reflection, I suspect that
because of the way I asked certain questions such as this one, it is likely that my individual bias affected the results. Because I expected to see certain attitudes regarding poverty, I may have inadvertently shaped the outcome by the questions I asked.

What begins to emerge from these results is a very conflicted attitude regarding the Christian moral vision of the poor. Students seem to acknowledge that charity and generosity are important Christian values, but not all agree on how important they are or how exactly Christians should reach out to the needy. Furthermore, there is among many students a set of presuppositions about the nature of poverty that have a profound effect on how they look at the poor. Some of this is likely due to the political climate and the demographics of the students. At a predominantly white, upper-class school in suburban Texas, the overwhelming majority of families are politically conservative. Because contemporary conservative politics in the United States has become so suspicious of the poor, and because of the perceived liberal agenda regarding the poor, it comes as no surprise that this attitude might spill over into the spiritual lives of students. However, for most students, these ideas are not fully formed and have not been thought through; students have merely absorbed a libertarian mindset from family and the surrounding culture. The majority of these students believe that being successful is generally a result of hard work and good choices while poverty is generally a result of laziness and bad choices. With these assumptions, it follows naturally to be somewhat reluctant to reach out to such people. Theologically, this is very problematic, as I will explore in chapter 2.

Perhaps the most troubling survey response was the students’ reaction to the statement “You cannot follow Jesus without caring for the needy.” I anticipated that despite the attitudes about poverty I mentioned above, most students would not object to
this statement. In particular, I thought the phrase “caring for” was generic enough that it might be interpreted as merely “love” and would therefore be less problematic for them. However, over two-thirds of the students surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. It was at this point in processing the results that I felt my initial impressions that this might be an area of concern were in fact justified. It seems to me that although Christians have different political orientations, different ideas about methodology, and even somewhat different theological values, the mere fact that Christians must care for the needy ought not to be disputed. While we might quibble over which groups constitute “the needy” or how best we ought to be “caring for” them, it is staggering that so many did not consider this an essential element of Christian living.

Nevertheless, it is important here to be careful not to overstate this problem. Even though these results are troubling, many students did not share the majority viewpoint. Nearly one-third of students surveyed indicated that caring for the needy was an essential part of Christian life. Likewise, with the other questions mentioned above, many students disagreed with the majority view. One student even indicated in the written response portion of the survey that his or her Bible classes had “changed the way I view the poor.” Others rejected the premise of the question. One student said that FWC cannot make this happen, but it is just about the individual person and her or his family of origin. A few students commented on the school’s demographics and how they might influence this issue for better or worse. When asked whether they thought students here were more likely than, less likely than, or equally likely as students at other schools to participate in charities, three students cited the wealth of families at the school, though they drew different conclusions. One indicated that this wealth might make them less likely to
participate, while the other two believed that it would make them more likely to be involved.

Some responses indicated either a lack of maturity, or perhaps just that some of our students live very sheltered lives, isolated from people who are different from themselves. One memorable example of this was a student’s response to a question about whether he or she would be likely to participate if FWC were to offer more opportunities for service to the poor. This particular student responded that he or she might try, but would be “grossed out” and would need to “take a shower” afterward. Again, this might be simply a case of immaturity, or it might be indicative of a very sheltered family life. The high school principal commented on this in his interview, referring to a private school “bubble” that many of our students grow up in and never leave until college. He mentioned that he had taught in the past at a school where white students were a minority and that teaching at this school was a much different experience. He also indicated that our students are probably somewhat naïve regarding issues related to race and class. They very rarely, if ever, have directly encountered people not like them.

Perhaps this is why many students indicate that the school’s mission trips are such meaningful experiences for them. In the same interview, the principal said that he felt our mission trips were probably one of the most important and effective ways in which we facilitate spiritual formation. He believes that these trips have a huge and lasting impact on the lives of our students. This is probably particularly true of students who are not members of a local church but who still consider themselves Christians. For some of these, because the school’s activities are the entirety of their experience of Christianity and Christian community, experiences such as these can be exceptionally formative.
In my interview with the school’s director of spiritual life, we discussed similar issues. He commented on the fact that our school is somewhat unusual among parochial schools because we do not require students to sign a statement of faith in order to attend here. One does not have to be a Christian to be a student at FWC. In fact, I have in the past taught atheist, agnostic, Jewish, and Muslim students. Despite the school’s heritage in the Churches of Christ, I have also taught Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian students. In our interview, we discussed how this theological diversity means that activities such as these mission trips form and unify us as a community in unique ways. On the other hand, we should not act as if any student, even one who is from a Christian, churchgoing family, does not need discipleship. In some cases, these students require even more discipleship because we often have to deconstruct a poorly formed theology (some of which has its root in our school itself), while the students who are not from a churchgoing home sometimes begin with something of a clean slate.

We also discussed some problems with the school’s focus on missions. First, these short-term mission trips are often misunderstood. Although we ostensibly go overseas to do humanitarian work, if this is our primary goal, then it is an extremely inefficient way to accomplish anything. If we took the funds we spend on airfare alone and put them to good use, we might be able to accomplish far more in the lives of people there than we could by a few days of unskilled, manual labor. The real value of these trips seems to be in the impact they have on our students. They teach students about how values of social justice and loving others can be lived out. Unfortunately, we have often found that this does not translate to substantive change after the end of the trip. Students
learn the value of loving people “over there” but do not know how to then love people “here.” While I see a great value in these short-term international mission trips, it sheds light on an almost total lack of local mission focus. We ought to strive to create a culture at our school that loves the fringes of society here, not just in northern Thailand or central Nicaragua. Once again, this speaks to the problem of the private school bubble and the pseudo-church “in a vacuum” discussed earlier. Our lack of direct connection to local churches makes it difficult to act as a Christian community beyond the school day.

Overall, my first reaction to all of this was to be somewhat overwhelmed by the diversity of opinions. It is very difficult to draw so many ideas into a coherent narrative that builds toward a meaningful conclusion. I was pleased to see that many students had positive attitudes and perspectives about our school and its ministries. I was not particularly surprised that some students had more negative responses or that some had negative attitudes regarding the poor. I did not expect, however, to see such high percentages of the students answer that way on some of the questions.

Moschella recommends an exploration of both power dynamics and reflexivity as an important step in ethnography, and that seems especially relevant here.⁶ Power dynamics are very noticeable in both the faculty interviews and the student surveys. In the interview with the principal, I was interviewing my direct superior. I do not think that this significantly shaped his answers, though it probably influenced the overall course of the conversation in subtle ways. In the student surveys and interviews, the power dynamic is reversed. I am their teacher, and as such they are required to do what I say. I was initially worried that this could taint the results. In order to mitigate this, I explained and repeatedly emphasized that it was entirely voluntary and had absolutely no impact on

their grade. After reading their responses, I believe I communicated this effectively. If they were merely answering with what they thought I wanted to hear, then their answers would have probably been substantially different.

Having said that, it is also clear that I shaped the outcome of the results in other ways. This was not a truly objective study because I am very much a part of the system being studied. Furthermore, there were several leading questions on the student survey that might have had different responses if they had been asked in a more neutral way. I created this study out of my own experience and my own questions. Because of this, all of the results are likely biased. Nevertheless, I think the trends that emerged provide a valuable window both into the mindset of our students and to my function within that system.

The primary issue that emerges here is that of social justice, particularly as it relates to spiritual formation in the context of Christian education. Social justice, in particular care for the poor, is a central theological value of the Christian faith. However, we have failed to challenge our students to grow in this area. As I considered this problem, I wanted to look deeper into the roots of the issue. Where might these attitudes come from? In a 2015 follow-up study, I used Mary Douglas’s social game theory as another way to consider these issues. This paradigm analyzes communities according to two dimensions: “grid” and “group.” Grid represents the degree to which various roles are differentiated and formalized. A low-grid community would be generally homogeneous, while a high-grid community would have more specialization. Group

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refers to how communal or individual a community is. These two spectrums then form two axes, with grid as a vertical axis and group as a horizontal one. These two axes create four distinct quadrants. The top-left quadrant (high grid, low group) is authoritarian, the top-right quadrant (high grid, high group) is hierarchical, the bottom left quadrant (low grid, low group) is individualistic, and the bottom right quadrant (low grid, high group) is egalitarian.

I interviewed eight students, asking questions about their lives at home, at school, and at church. Within each of these arenas, I asked a series of questions aimed at identifying a location on the grid axis and a series for the group axis. I hypothesized that my students might show tendencies toward individualism because I thought that orientation might fit with some of their attitudes about poverty and charity. Each survey answer yielded a numerical value on a scale of one to ten. I then averaged these values for each student in each of the three categories (home, school, church). From there, I averaged all students’ individual averages to arrive at an overall value for each category. The average values of all responses in each of the three categories indicate that students perceive different games being played in each arena. The average for home life is located in the individualist quadrant, the average for school life is in the authoritarian quadrant, and the average for church is in the hierarchical quadrant. The least surprising of these results is the school average because the rigid roles and structures of school environments would tend to lead to such results. The most surprising is the almost total lack of any values in the egalitarian quadrant. The most interesting for the purposes of this analysis, however, may be the home average in the individualistic quadrant.
The trend among home values was toward individualism. Of the eight respondents, six landed in the individualist quadrant. This may, to an extent, support my previous hypothesis that I would find individualistic trends among my students. I suspect that, of the three categories, students’ home life could provide the most important insight into the students’ worldviews and cultural paradigms. It stands to reason that one’s family of origin could have greater impact than one’s school or church. This individualism does not explain the situation completely, but it does offer an important dimension to consider.

Putting all of this together, I begin to see a coherent picture emerging and a central problem becoming clear. FWC students lacked experiences that challenged them toward greater community engagement. As a Bible teacher at FWC, I may be uniquely situated to address this challenge. Through this project, I hoped to do so in a way that
would offer new challenges to students that would ultimately lead to deeper spiritual formation among FWC students.

**Problem and Purpose Statements**

The problem of this project was the absence of experiences that challenged students at FWC to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. The attitudes described above demonstrate troubling assumptions about poverty, especially as it relates to Christian ministry and mission. This does not necessarily reflect poorly on the students themselves, but may reflect more on me as a spiritual leader. It is possible that I, along with the larger context of FWC chapels, classes, and other activities, have failed to positively lead these students in this way. Without experiences that challenge students’ presuppositions and motivate them toward greater community engagement, it is not surprising that this problem exists.

In order to address this problem, I attempted to provide experiences that challenged students in this way. The purpose of this project was to share experiences that challenge students at FWC to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. The intervention strategy involved partnering with a local organization that works with the poor. CitySquare, a homeless ministry in Dallas, Texas, was an ideal choice for this. I planned to bring a small group of students there to volunteer, with the hope of eventually establishing a longer-term working relationship. The activities students participate in were intended to give them opportunities to build relationships with economically disadvantaged individuals whom they would not normally encounter.
Assumptions, Definitions, Delimitations, and Limitations

This project proceeded with several basic assumptions and limitations. First, there were some logistical limitations necessitated by the context of FWC. School procedures and policies had to be adhered to, even if they inconvenienced this project. The plan had to adapt according to a number of factors including the availability of faculty sponsors, transportation, and the willingness of student volunteers. I anticipated that the willingness and availability of student participants would probably be the greatest variable here. No student would be forced to participate. Those who held the attitudes described in the statement of the problem above may have chosen not to participate (perhaps because of those very attitudes). However, the purpose of this project was not to force individuals to change, but rather it was to create an environment that facilitates change by sharing a particular set of experiences. Because this project depended on student volunteers, there was too much uncertainty to draw generalized conclusions and apply them to the student body as a whole. Instead, I focused narrowly on how these experiences shaped those who participated.

I also began with certain presuppositions regarding students—namely, that most students have generally good intentions and desire to live out the Christian faith as best they could. I assumed that the troubling attitudes regarding poverty that I had observed were mostly a result of growing up in a privileged environment. Furthermore, I assumed that if these attitudes were mostly due to ignorance, then experiences that introduced students to poverty could disarm some of the biases and negative attitudes students exhibit about this, opening the door for greater Christian spiritual formation. Therefore, I used the word “challenge” in the problem and purpose statements. By this I meant that
students’ thinking could have been reoriented in such a way that they could become motivated to act differently toward the economically disadvantaged, preferably in ways that correspond to the mission and ministry of Jesus.

This research and these intervention strategies focused narrowly on this particular situation at FWC and were not meant to encapsulate the broader social issues connected to the problem. An exploration of these issues would undoubtedly be fruitful and informative for many of the presenting issues, but they are too large and numerous to adequately examine here. Instead, I narrowed the scope to this particular time and place. As such, the conclusions reached and their implications might not be transferable to other contexts, especially to contexts other than parochial schools.

Having articulated the problem and purpose of this project, I will now turn to its theological framework. I have referred above to a theological orientation that values social justice and sees ministries to the economically disadvantaged as natural and necessary outgrowths of Christian beliefs and values. I will explore the theological and theoretical rationale for this in the following chapter. Working from the Gospel of Luke, especially 4:16-21, I will argue that care for the economically disadvantaged formed a central aspect of Jesus’s ministry and should do likewise for contemporary Christianity.
CHAPTER II
THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Each of the four canonical Gospels presents a different perspective on Jesus and his mission. For Luke, one dominant motif shows Jesus as a liberator who brings justice to society. This theme is shown most clearly in the sermon of Jesus in Nazareth in Luke 4:16-21. This passage, especially 4:18-19, constitutes a mission statement for the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and should also form a central part of Christian ministry. Richard Hays contends that in these verses Jesus presents “nothing less than a public announcement of his messianic vocation.”¹ It has similarly been described as the “foundation stone” for Luke and “likely the most important passage in Luke-Acts.”² I will explore this passage, how some of the ideas in it emerge elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel, how they share continuity with the broader canon of Scripture, and how they might shape the contemporary practices of Christian communities.

The key verses in this passage are 4:18-19, which the NRSV renders as follows:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind.


To let the oppressed go free,
And to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The idea of social justice stands out clearly here. The poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed represent social injustices that the mission of Jesus will seek to put right. By following this immediately with the statement “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” in 4:21, Luke indicates that these verses, which are a modified quotation of Isaiah, will shape and define the story of Jesus’s ministry that he is about to tell. This programmatic statement is further reinforced by the answer Jesus gives to the disciples sent from John the Baptist in Luke 7:18-23. When asked if Jesus was “the one who is to come,” his response in 7:22 echoes Luke 4: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” Here Jesus gives these examples as a defense of his identity and ministry, with the implication that these should show clearly who he is and what he is about.

Before proceeding further, a more precise definition of the idea of “social justice” is in order. Joseph A. Grassi defines social justice as “the equal and just distribution of economic, social, and cultural resources to all people without discrimination of any kind.” Activities such as bringing good news to the poor and liberating the captives and the oppressed are then understood as efforts to promote or restore social justice. It is a simple way of referring to the broad category of social liberation and the activities that aim for this goal. My contention is that the principle of social justice, particularly as

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formulated in Luke 4:18-19, is foundational for Luke and for Christian theology in general. Nevertheless, because Luke did not use anything like the phrase “social justice,” I will primarily opt instead to use the phrase “caring for the poor,” with the understanding that this value is connected to a larger body of values and actions. This is a narrower focus, but it is consistent both with Luke’s theological vision and with the larger Christian ethical and theological framework. As James H. Cone puts it, “Theology is language about God. Christian theology is language about God’s liberating activity in the world on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Any talk about God that fails to make God’s liberation of the poor its starting point is not Christian.” While Cone may have overstated or perhaps oversimplified this point, he is nevertheless correct that liberation of the poor must be a core Christian value.

Another preliminary question to answer is what one means by the term “poor.” Generally, the word poor in Luke is a translation of the Greek term *ptokos.* This term can refer to economic disadvantage or marginalization, an absence of spiritual worth, or even a more general lacking in quality as a whole. In Luke, the first definition may generally be assumed. Even so, the notion of economic disadvantage must be understood within the social context of first-century Israel. In particular, the people of first-century Israel

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5. James H. Cone, “Theology, the Bible, and the Poor,” in *Standing with the Poor: Theological Reflections on Economic Reality,* ed. Paul Plenge Parker and Brian Bakke (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1992), 82.


generally understood the world with a “perception of the limited good.” This idea means that everything one might have wanted in life existed in scarcity, with only so much to go around. Such an understanding would necessarily lead one to conclude that having a great amount of wealth was unjust, because it amounted to having more than one’s share of a limited pie. This injustice would have been particularly problematic because of its antisocial nature. Individuals may have wanted to avoid upsetting the social order by greedily taking more than their share.

Halvor Moxnes describes the situation as an economy “viewed from below,” with the poor looking up at the rich with disdain for their dishonor and injustice. Furthermore, the problem is not merely that the poor lack the material means to provide for themselves but that they lack social capital. Calls for caring for the poor, then, are not only calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth but also calls for a more fair and egalitarian social dynamic. The definition of social justice above thus appropriately places cultural and social resources alongside economic ones.

The theme of caring for the poor emerges throughout the Gospel of Luke, often exemplified through hospitality and charity. As I will argue below, Jesus identifies with the poor and shows solidarity with them. As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, Jesus does not

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speak to the poor from a position of wealth and privilege but as one of the poor himself.\textsuperscript{14}

Jesus’s ministry is supported by the charity of others, according to Luke 8:1-3, and in 9:58 he describes himself as having “nowhere to lay his head.” This kind of identification with the poor stands out particularly when one considers the culture in which these teachings and stories are set.

Kyoung-Jin Kim argues in \textit{Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke’s Theology} that the kind of generosity and hospitality advocated in Luke was quite different from the norms of the day.\textsuperscript{15} Although almsgiving was not entirely absent, it was based on a principle of reciprocity rather than genuine concern for others. Luke’s ethic seems quite radical when juxtaposed with one that is self-serving and only interested in charity if it benefits the almsgiver. Luke 14:12-14, for example, has Jesus criticizing hospitality that is done merely for the sake of repayment. Here he calls instead for banquet invitations to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” who are unable to repay anyone for the invitations. Such charity subverts the social norms of the day, looking at the poor as friends instead of merely clients.\textsuperscript{16} If one of the chief problems of poverty in this context is a lack of social relationships, this new way of almsgiving is a corrective to that problem. By not only donating money from afar but also actually befriending the poor, 

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} James A. Metzger, \textit{Consumption and Wealth in Luke’s Travel Narrative} (Boston: Brill Academic, 2007), 8.
\end{itemize}
the rich begin to level out the injustice. It is both a rebuke of the antisocial behavior of people like the Pharisees and a move toward solidarity with the marginalized.\(^{17}\)

In Luke’s parallel of the Beatitudes of Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor.” This statement noticeably lacks the “in spirit” present in Matthew’s Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-11). While the meaning of Matthew’s “poor in spirit” might be ambiguous and debatable, Luke leaves little doubt that he means the materially (and perhaps socially, as argued above) poor.\(^{18}\) He goes on to refer to those who are hungry and those who weep (6:21), which is then contrasted with those who are rich, full, and laughing (6:24-25). In Matthew the Beatitudes seem to be about attitude and behavior, whereas Luke seems to frame the entire passage around material poverty and wealth, at least to the extent that the hungry and the weeping correspond to the poor.\(^{19}\)

The Parable of the Rich Fool in 12:13-21 and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31 further illustrate Jesus’s identification with the poor against the rich. In the parable of the rich fool, the rich man is condemned for nothing more than storing up wealth for himself. The man seeks to build larger and larger barns, and Luke implies that this lifestyle prevents him from being “rich toward God” (12:21). Here, richness toward God seems to stand for righteousness and contrast with wealth and materialism. It stands alongside “treasure in heaven,” a phrase that appears again in 18:22. In 16:19-31, the judgment of the nameless rich man is contrasted with that of the poor man, Lazarus. The fact that Lazarus’s name is given while the rich man’s identity remains unknown

\(^{17}\) Moxnes, *Economy of the Kingdom*, 120, 123.


\(^{19}\) Hays contends, “That Luke rejects the spiritualizing interpretation of these Beatitudes is shown unmistakably by the accompanying pronouncement of prophetic woes.” Hays, *Moral Vision*, 124.
could be merely an incidental detail of no consequence, but it could also indicate that Luke identifies with and highlights the poor character over the rich. The reversal of fortunes here, with the rich man condemned and the poor Lazarus with Abraham, exemplifies Luke’s theology of caring for the poor.

Even texts in Luke’s Gospel that do not set the poor against the rich in such stark terms still often carry the same theological implications. The Parable of the Good Samaritan shows this theme through the charity and mercy of the Samaritan (10:25-37). The compassion of the Samaritan is contrasted with the indifference of the priest and the Levite. Here again Luke reverses expectations by identifying not with the pillars of Israelite religious life, priests and Levites, but with the marginalized—in this case in the form of the cultural and ethnic outsider, the despised Samaritan.  

Luke’s value of caring for the poor is shown through the compassion of Jesus not only in his teachings but also in his actions. For example, in Luke 18:35-43 Jesus heals a blind beggar. It is worth noting that the recipient of healing here is not a person of wealth or privilege but rather occupies one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder of ancient Israel as a blind beggar. Furthermore, he is presented as faithful, both in his identification of Jesus as the Son of David and in Jesus’s explanation that he was healed because of his faith (18:38, 42). This faithfulness contrasts with the story shortly before this one, in which a rich man encounters Jesus and responds negatively, or at least ambiguously.

In 18:18-30, “a certain ruler” approaches Jesus to ask him what he needs to do for eternal life. After a discussion of the commandments, Jesus concludes that all he lacks is giving up all his possessions to the poor. The narrative irony here is that the rich ruler does not receive the kingdom of God, but the blind beggar does. Similarly, in Luke

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Jesus praises the prayer of the humble tax collector but condemns the pride of the Pharisee. This example further illustrates the irony and reversal typical to Luke’s Gospel. The theology of reversal also shows up in Mary’s song, the Magnificat. Mary says, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:52-53).

Luke’s interest in caring for the poor is further illustrated in Jesus’s hospitality. The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1-9) serves as a prime example. At a glance, one might think this story is an odd choice in support of this argument, because Zacchaeus is presented favorably despite being clearly identified as a rich person. However, these themes are reinforced rather than undermined by this example. First, Luke shows the same reversal of expectations here as Jesus shows hospitality to Zacchaeus by acknowledging him despite the opinion of the crowd, and Jesus also receives hospitality from Zacchaeus by staying at his house even though Zacchaeus is a tax collector and a “sinner.” Second, Zacchaeus separates himself from the archetype of “the rich” in Luke because he gives half his wealth to the poor and to anyone whom he had defrauded.

Luke’s theology of caring for the poor also has eschatological implications. This theology has already emerged in the story of the rich ruler, where the question that frames the entire passage involves requirements for eternal life, and in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, where the scene has both Lazarus and the rich man experiencing the consequences of judgment. According to Hays, “Luke places increased emphasis on the


22. From this story, it becomes clear that Jesus may not be as categorically against the rich as it might first appear from some of the other examples. What, precisely, Jesus expects of the rich is an important consideration and one that I will explore further below.
The theme of eschatological judgment as a warrant for moral behavior in the present time.”

The idea that moral behavior, particularly with regard to treatment of the poor, has eschatological consequences is not unique to Luke in the canon of scripture. In fact, it is not even unique among the Gospels. Matthew 25:31-46 is the most poignant echo of this idea in the other three Gospels. Here Matthew shows Jesus not only directly attributing one’s divine judgment to one’s treatment of the poor and needy, but Jesus also identifies himself with the poor, saying, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt 25:45, cf. 25:40). More broadly, the eschatological framework of pleas to care for the poor involves the conviction that justice for the poor will finally be achieved by “the coming eschatological reversal.” By working toward that goal now, followers of Jesus can lean into that kingdom and live under God’s sovereignty “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

This theology shares continuity with not only the other Gospels but also the Hebrew Bible. As Hays puts it, “the constancy of God’s purpose is to be discerned above all in the deep correspondences between the Old Testament and Luke’s Gospel story.” Luke is not introducing something wholly new with this emphasis on caring for the poor but is echoing a major theme of the Torah and the prophets. “Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land,” says Deuteronomy 15:11. Likewise, Exodus 22:21-27 sets forth laws concerning the treatment of immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor. Israelites were not to take interest on loans given to the poor, and oppression or abuse of other

24. Pilgrim, Good News, 161
socially marginalized groups was forbidden. Leviticus 25 sets further social safeguards and provisions for the poor and marginalized. The year of jubilee would mean liberty both from slavery and from debt.

Moses, as one of the central figures in Old Testament theology, can himself be described as a liberator. In addition to being a law-giver, Moses in the Exodus story is one who brings freedom from oppression and enslavement. This motif fits squarely within the Lucan framework of caring for the poor, especially to the extent that it connects with the larger framework of justice. In fact, Luke may be intentionally connecting Jesus to the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy 18:15-19. In this framework, Jesus’s focus on justice in Luke is not a rejection of or correction to the Torah but rather a fulfillment of it. This emphasis is even more evident in the Hebrew prophets.

Examples of themes related to caring for the poor in the prophets are too numerous to explore fully here, so a few of the more poignant ones will suffice to demonstrate the general tone and message of the Old Testament prophets on the subject. The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard in Isaiah 5 tells of a vineyard that was destroyed because of the bad fruit it produced. Isaiah then identifies the vineyard as Israel and Judah and the bad fruit as injustice and violence (5:7). The prophet criticizes “you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you” (5:8).

26. Ibid., 117.

27. Cf. Luke. 9:31, where Hays suggests “departure” (Gk. exodos) may be an allusion to the Exodus. Echoes of Moses are also seen elsewhere in Luke, such as in 6:17-42 and 9:28-37


This indictment of the abuse and injustice of the wealthy and powerful in ancient Israel characterizes a major theme of Isaiah and other biblical prophets.

Those who use their wealth and power to exploit the poor and marginalized receive some of the harshest criticism in the Old Testament prophetic books. Jeremiah 22 echoes these sentiments. Here the prophet equates justice and righteousness with good treatment of the alien, the orphan, and the widow (22:3). As in Isaiah 5, those who acquire wealth by injustice and oppression and those who use power to exploit and abuse the weak are condemned. The most impactful language against injustice may be found in Amos 5:11-12, where the prophet says:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

Amos goes on to describe the “day of the Lord” as a time of ultimate retribution for these evils. As in the New Testament, the use (or misuse) of wealth and power, particularly as it relates to the poor and marginalized of society, constitutes a central element in God’s judgment of humanity.

With all of these, along with numerous other examples on this subject, one must consider why, in Luke 4, Jesus uses the particular texts that he does. Kimball argues that Luke’s use of the Greek euren may indicate that Jesus deliberately chose this text instead of following an assigned reading.30 Kimball says of the quotation from Isaiah, “This citation represents one of the most difficult and complex text forms of all the OT

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quotations in the NT." In particular, the sandwiching of Isaiah 58:6 between Isaiah 61:1 and 2 is the main source of the difficulty. Sanders contends that this constitutes Jesus’s use of “comparative midrash,” rather than a source-critical problem of later editing by Luke or others. Kimball, on the other hand, explores several possibilities that might explain the conflation of the two texts in Isaiah: that it was a mistake of Luke, that there was simply no reason, that the inclusion of 61:1 was done deliberately for chiastic purposes, that it was an inaccurate adaptation by early Christians, or that the text was used for early Christian testimony. He goes on to conclude that perhaps Jesus did it deliberately so as to cast his ministry in terms of prophecy and fulfillment in accordance with these texts.

Isaiah 58 constitutes a command to serve the poor and a reframing of religious life in terms of ministry to the poor (i.e., “Is this not the fast that I choose,” Isa. 58:6). Isaiah 61, on the other hand, promises a day of ultimate restoration for Israel, announcing “the year of the LORD’s favor” (61:2). By stitching these two texts together in Luke 4, Jesus advocates a vision of Israel’s deliverance that involves justice and mercy on the poor and the marginalized. Richard Hays contends that Jesus’s use of Isaiah “places Jesus squarely in line with Israel’s prophetic tradition.” Furthermore, Hays argues that, in appealing to this tradition and identifying himself as a fulfillment of it, Jesus takes on the role of

31. Kimball shows that Luke’s quotation differs from both the MT and the LXX in three places, agrees with the MT but not the LXX in one place, and agrees with the LXX but not the MT in four places. Ibid., 99-100, 105.


34. Ibid., 110.

God’s servant portrayed throughout the book of Isaiah. In doing so, Jesus not only conceives of the ministry of God and the ultimate deliverance of Israel as a ministry to the poor and the outcast, but he even defines himself and his own ministry in terms of poverty and social justice. When Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke. 4:21), he announces his character and mission. Furthermore, this statement can also characterize the work of the Spirit, as Jesus begins with “The Spirit of the Lord is on me.” Thus the work of the Spirit, too, involves the poor.

The term “release” (aphesis) is a technical term for the jubilee.\textsuperscript{36} The jubilee motif resonates strongly not only with the quoted Isaiah texts but also with the motifs of Luke discussed above. Even though there is no evidence to indicate that the jubilee ordinance was ever actually practiced by ancient Israel, it nevertheless remained an important part of their notion of social justice.\textsuperscript{37} By appealing to this tradition, Jesus presents himself as the herald of the jubilee. The examples above in Luke’s Gospel are then the beginning of realizing this jubilee.

Thus far I have argued that caring for the poor specifically and social justice in general play a major role in the broad canon of Scripture, especially in Luke’s Gospel, as shown in 4:16-21. I have not yet asked the more important question of how these ideas should be applied to contemporary Christian life. In other words, how might the faith communities that follow Jesus better practice the kind of jubilee that Jesus proclaims in Luke 4? It is one thing to say that the idea of justice for the poor is an important theme in Scripture, but it is quite another thing to identify a set of practices that live out this value.


\textsuperscript{37} Kimball, “Jesus’s Exposition,” 103-4.
Furthermore, there are difficult questions about what exactly this jubilee ought to look like. Should all Christians be required to give up their possessions as Jesus asks the rich young ruler to do in Luke 18? Or should Zacchaeus’s response of giving up half his possessions and repaying those he defrauded be considered normative? It is far easier to talk of these issues in general terms than it is to set forth a specific code of conduct.

One way to look at this problem is to ask what precisely the transgressions of the rich are. Is wealth itself condemned, or perhaps just overconsumption? The story of the rich young ruler would seem to indicate the former, while the story of the wealthy landowner in Luke 12 would suggest the latter. Or, as Shottroff contends, is Luke simply advocating some kind of socialist utopia? More likely, Luke is simply calling for a different perspective toward wealth. Luke 8:1-3 suggests that Jesus depended on the rich to provide for his needs. The rich are not universally condemned, but more may be required of them than of others (Luke 12:48). Pilgrim frames Luke’s message as a call for the rich toward “a new evaluation of possessions and their place in the Christian life and Christian community.” In this view, wealth is not wholly rejected, but it is radically shared with the needy. Similarly, Metzger characterizes Luke’s ethic not as a complete...


39. Ibid., 116-17.

40. Pilgrim, Good News, 164.

41. Ibid., 165. He goes on to say that Christians ought to “adopt the Zacchaeus principle for sharing wealth … simplify the way we live … become advocates for the poor … and oppose systems that perpetuate social injustices and inequalities.” Ibid., 172-75.
renunciation of wealth but as a call for generous charity without expectation of repayment.\textsuperscript{42}

Luke Timothy Johnson argues in \textit{Sharing Possessions} that these texts are less about a specific set of rules than about an “orientation to the world” that should shape what it means to be Christian.\textsuperscript{43} Johnson argues convincingly that the sharing of possessions is indeed a “mandate of faith,” but the particular way in which that mandate is put into practice will vary widely according to the situation.\textsuperscript{44} As such, there can be no specific litmus test of social justice to indicate if a community or an individual passes or fails on this issue. Instead, the sharing of possessions is, according to Johnson, a “symbol” of the proper response to God and of the Christian life. Luke brings up questions that followers of Jesus should be asking, but he does not offer universal answers.

The early church embodied these values. In Acts, Luke describes the church in Jerusalem as a community that shared wealth and possessions “as any had need” (2:44-45).\textsuperscript{45} A significant theme in Paul’s epistles is the taking up of a collection for the poor (e.g., 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15). During the Patristic period, practices of justice and hospitality are so ubiquitous that, according to Amy Oden, “one encounters it at every turn, under

\textsuperscript{42} Metzger also emphasizes the distinctions between the lessons of the various stories in Luke. He argues that there is no way to arrive at a single perspective without conflating these messages, so the distinct voices should be preserved. Metzger, \textit{Consumption and Wealth}, 189.


\textsuperscript{44} Johnson, \textit{Sharing Possessions}, 138.

\textsuperscript{45} Although the text does not specify how exactly this sharing took place, it demonstrates that sharing with the needy was a central feature of the identity and character of the early Christian community.
every rock, around every corner.\textsuperscript{46} Oden makes a convincing case that such practices were not only present in early Christianity, but they were the norm. Likewise, Everett Ferguson identifies eleven distinct examples in early Christian writings that convey the value of what he labels “acts of mercy.”\textsuperscript{47} Ferguson characterizes these efforts as a part of Christian worship. Early Christian communities saw practices of mercy, justice, and hospitality as a moral imperative.\textsuperscript{48} Promoting justice in society at large was not seen as peripheral to Christianity but was instead an essential part of living out its core values.\textsuperscript{49}

Based on these biblical and historical precedents, the contemporary church should also embody principles of social justice and caring for the poor through acts of hospitality, mercy, and charity. However, it has often failed to do so. Luke Timothy Johnson asks why the church seems to only conceive of sin as “weaknesses of the flesh” and ignores economic injustices.\textsuperscript{50} If economic justice is, as I have argued, such a central biblical ethic, then why does it seem to sit on the periphery of Christian theology and praxis? Johnson also points out the church has historically been an institution of wealth and power far more than it has been one of weakness and poverty. If the church takes seriously Jesus’s statement that it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24), then perhaps the wealthy should be pitied instead of admired. Perhaps this

\textsuperscript{46} Amy G. Oden, ed., \textit{And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity} (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), Kindle loc. 123.

\textsuperscript{47} Everett Ferguson, \textit{Early Christians Speak}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 203-211.

\textsuperscript{48} Oden, \textit{And You Welcomed Me}, Kindle loc. 178-200.

\textsuperscript{49} Robert Louis Wilken notes that, at least by the time of Augustine, it was not viable for Christians to consider social justice “someone else’s responsibility.” Wilken writes that, for Augustine, true worship is not possible without justice. Robert Louis Wilken, \textit{The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 186-211.

\textsuperscript{50} Johnson, \textit{Prophetic Jesus}, 95.
is counterintuitive to typical American thinking because the philosophy of individualism and the values of capitalism have shaped the life of the church in the United States far more than people might realize.

William T. Cavanaugh raises important questions about these values in Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire. Cavanaugh argues that economics and Christian theology are actually very closely linked topics. He asks how the free market system fits with a Christian notion of social justice. Indeed, he even questions what people really mean by “free” when they speak of free markets. Cavanaugh disarms the arguments people often make that appeal to the free market, unpacking the moral aspects of economic exchanges as they relate to power. The problem with appealing to the free market as a fair and moral economic arbiter, according to Cavanaugh, is that “it pretends to be blind to the real disparity at work here while simultaneously stripping away the ability to judge an exchange on the basis of anything but sheer power.” The free market really only feels free to those who hold all the wealth and power. The Christian value of social justice demands a rejection of that kind of false paradigm.

Likewise, Joerg Rieger contends that the individualistic ideals that undergird so much of the way people tend to think about wealth are actually quite flawed. He raises questions of empire and power and points out that much of the way we think about free-market individualism has a mythical character. “Individualism is the myth of the privileged and the powerful, who tend to see themselves as independent and autonomous,

52. Ibid., 24
and who need to convince themselves and others that their wealth and their success are self-made.” This notion explains why a theology that calls for a mission for the poor often sounds threatening to some people. To acknowledge the injustice of poverty necessarily also acknowledges the injustice of wealth. The call for social justice always carries with it the rejection of injustices and a rebuke of the powerful and the wealthy. This idea was true in the stories of Jesus explored above, and it remains the case today.

A big part of the problem is that the church has failed to offer a prophetic alternative to these modes of thought. Rieger calls for Christians to present an alternate reality because “most people are unaware that there are alternative visions and realities that exist both in religion and economics.” The church must find ways to challenge the cultural norms of individualism through practices of mercy and hospitality. But, again, what might that look like in contemporary Christian life?

Hays demonstrates that it may be done through the practice of corporate sharing of wealth and possessions. The communal dimension is important because the biblical witness on this seems to be more focused on the identity of the people of God than it is on any individual’s success or failure to meet a standard of behavior. The people of God should share with one another communally so that their identity and character is one of justice. The specific method of this sharing must adapt to the various contexts in which Christian communities exist. Hays uses the word “sharing” to describe this practice because he contends that a radical abandonment of wealth and possessions is not always called for. Sharing also reflects the Christian notion that wealth and possessions should

54. Rieger, No Rising Tide, 23.

be thought of in terms of stewardship rather than ownership. Again, there is no one rule for how this should be done. Instead, each Christian community must “respond in imaginative freedom,” creatively living out these values in a way that makes sense in their particular context.

Because this understanding of Luke avoids specific prescriptions, perhaps it is better understood as a direction in which to aim than as a roadmap for how to get there. Luke does not command a specific set of actions or behaviors but a more general reorientation regarding poverty and possessions. In the context of my ministry at FWC, I might similarly focus my efforts toward a broad change in direction rather than a specific destination. In order to do this, I needed to find ways to cultivate in my students the desire to help those living in poverty. Merely informing my students that this is a biblical priority or instructing my students to take certain actions would not have achieved the desired change. Instead, I needed to find ways to catalyze the kind of contemplation that leads to such a change in perspective, much as Luke does through his presentation of Jesus’s ministry. Instead of merely asking students to engage in certain kinds of behaviors, I wanted find ways to foster in students the desire to do so.

In order to begin to make progress in this arena I needed to find ways to immerse students in contexts of poverty in ways that they had not had the opportunity to experience before. Most FWC students have little experience with poverty. Experiences that lead them to confront the realities of poverty might function in a similar way to Luke’s presentation of the parables and narratives of Jesus. Just as the parables and narratives of Jesus are intended to be thought of in terms of stewardship rather than ownership. Again, there is no one rule for how this should be done. Instead, each Christian community must “respond in imaginative freedom,” creatively living out these values in a way that makes sense in their particular context.

57. Hays, Moral Vision, 469.
narratives about Jesus lead readers to question their own values and desires, perhaps I might challenge my students to do the same. I attempted to do this by immersing students in a context in which they might see positive examples of Christian ministry to the economically disadvantaged and encounter people living in poverty who do not conform to some of the students’ preconceived notions about such people. I hoped that if students engaged in this kind of experience and if sufficient reflection occurred during and after the experience, the change in direction I hoped for might begin to occur. In chapter 3 I will explain the methodology for this intervention.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This project employed the method of qualitative research. While quantitative research generally follows a numerical or statistical methodology, qualitative research has a much broader range of exploration. Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research this way:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. … Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.¹

This does not, however, mean that qualitative research is necessarily unscientific or unreliable.² It means that qualitative research data are usually rooted in the fieldwork of observing and interviewing people in a particular social context.³ Qualitative research is more subjective than quantitative research tends to be, but it allows the researcher to answer a different kind of question. In this case, for instance, the issue was how I would challenge my students toward a greater engagement with people in the community who experience poverty. Quantifiable data and related methods would not be able to fully grasp that problem and the related questions in the way that qualitative research allows.


The qualitative method can open up windows into understanding both this context and the impact of this project in ways that other methods would likely not.

Under the umbrella of qualitative research, this project engaged in participatory action research. This form of qualitative research seeks not only to understand the researcher’s particular context, but also to work toward improving it with regard to a particular problem or set of problems. Greenwood and Levin define action research as “social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation.” Participatory action research involves actually applying research to solve a problem, with the group being studied “actively engaged” in the process. This kind of intervention is done from within and with the full knowledge and consent of the participants. This method does not involve an outsider intruding into a context in order to “fix” it, which would be ethically dubious and would be reminiscent of colonialism along with all of its pitfalls. Instead, this process typically involves researchers who identify a problem in their context, learn about it, take action, and then interpret and evaluate what happened and what was learned. I followed that basic schema for this project.


5. Ibid., 4.


Description of the Project Intervention and Participants

The project intervention sought to challenge students to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. In order to do this, I chose to pursue experiences that could be shared with students and could lead to change not only in their thinking about poverty but also in their level of participation in related ministries. This intervention took a group of FWC students to CitySquare, a homeless ministry in Dallas, Texas, in the fall of 2015. My hope was that the experiences students had on this trip would call into question some of the negative presuppositions about poverty that I described in chapter 1. Furthermore, I hoped that those attitudes and beliefs that I saw as conflicting with Christian values would begin to be replaced by a better-founded theological framework, which could then be lived out in various ways in students’ lives. Of course, not all of this could be completely achieved through a school field trip, which is why the stated purpose of this project was merely to “challenge” students toward greater engagement, not to completely resolve all related issues. What this trip could be was a step in the right direction.

In any study, a viable sample has to be gathered that the researcher can study. In this case, the sample consisted of a group of FWC students. Various methods of sampling exist for different types of research. The ideal sampling method for this project would be maximum variation sampling. This method attempts to use a wide variety of participants according to various criteria. In the context of FWC, this would mean including participants of different genders, ethnicities, grade levels, socio-economic statuses, and church backgrounds. The value of this is that it gives a broader picture of the efficacy of the intervention because it enables the researcher to see the impact on a wide variety of
individuals.\textsuperscript{8} Whereas other methods seek to intentionally build the participant group in particular ways in order to gain a particularly useful data set, maximum variation sampling simply tries to get the maximum amount of information possible.\textsuperscript{9} Because variation is maximized, any trends or patterns that emerge are potentially much more meaningful than they would be in a homogenous group.\textsuperscript{10}

Unfortunately, this sampling method was somewhat limited by the context of my ministry at FWC. Because I was entirely dependent on student volunteers, I had to simply take whichever students chose to participate. This situation would have less in common with maximum variation sampling and more with opportunistic sampling. Opportunistic sampling just goes with what is available and “takes advantage of whatever unfolds as it unfolds.”\textsuperscript{11} However, I prepared for the possibility that more students might have volunteered than I had the space to take, in which case I would have attempted to choose a wide variety of students. Similarly, if too few students initially volunteered, I intended to personally invite a variety of individuals. Consequently, the method I selected to use was maximum variation sampling, with the caveat that circumstances could significantly limit the maximum available variation. As it turned out, the number of students who committed to go was the exact number I was able to take.

\textsuperscript{8} Patton says, “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program.” Patton, \textit{Qualitative Evaluation}, 172.


\textsuperscript{10} Patton, \textit{Qualitative Evaluation}, 172.

\textsuperscript{11} The problem with such a strategy is that, although convenient, it lacks purpose and strategy. Ibid., 179.
I invited the student body to participate during a high school chapel presentation. This presentation began with a condensed and simplified version of the theology presented in chapter 2 of this thesis.\textsuperscript{12} Using the Gospel of Luke, I demonstrated that engaging the marginalized in the community was a major part of Jesus’s life and so should also be a major part in the lives of Christians today. I then shared my personal experience at FWC and explained why I believed there was a significant opportunity for growth in this area at FWC. My hope was that at least seven students and perhaps as many as fifteen to twenty students would volunteer. If fewer than seven students volunteered, I intended to personally invite individual students and, if they were willing, ask them to invite a friend. I arranged to bring two additional faculty members along with me to help supervise. More than thirty students initially expressed interest in participating, and twenty of these eventually committed to go. An FWC English teacher and the high school counselor agreed to join me as adult sponsors.

The chapel presentation took place in September 2015, and the trip to CitySquare took place on October 5-7, 2015. CitySquare offers what it calls a “poverty simulation,” which is a 45-hour experience for groups such as FWC. The organization’s goal in creating this program was for people who experience it to walk away with a changed view of the homeless and those who live in poverty. As such, it fit very well with the goals of this project. CitySquare’s poverty simulation costs $100 per person with a minimum of ten people. Thus I set the minimum number of students at seven, with three supervising faculty members. Most of the $100 fee was used to pay for on-site security both nights that we stayed there. Students who volunteered were asked to pay this fee,

\textsuperscript{12} For an outline of this presentation, see appendix B.
and my hope was that this cost would not be prohibitive for anyone. Each participant’s parent or guardian signed consent forms from both CitySquare and FWC.

On the first day of the trip we arranged to meet at FWC on a Monday afternoon and travel in FWC vehicles to Dallas. We checked in at the Opportunity Center around 4 p.m. After this, CitySquare personnel gave a brief overview of the simulation and led an exercise to help students to begin thinking about what it is like to live in poverty. After this exercise, we took public transportation to a grocery store in order to buy food for the remainder of our time at CitySquare. Each participant was given only $5, which necessitated creatively working together with limited resources. Following this, we returned to CitySquare, ate dinner, discussed the experience and our expectations for the remainder of the experience, and went to sleep. The group then slept inside a multipurpose room on the floor, which was CitySquare’s attempt at simulating the experience of spending a night in a homeless shelter.

On the following morning, students ate breakfast (if they had it) and split into three groups, with one FWC faculty member accompanying each group for the day. The three groups then rotated through three separate activities. Each of these groups stayed together, and students were not be permitted to leave their faculty sponsor. The first activity was the “homeless experience.” This portion took approximately four hours. We spent the first hour with CitySquare’s resident neighbor specialist. He walked the group through what they call “tent city” and allowed the students to see what it is like to be homeless. The following three hours were then spent doing nothing, which, according to CitySquare, is typical of a homeless neighbor. This time was intended to help students

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13. This amount was chosen to approximate the value of four meals using only funds from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps).
imagine what it might feel like to have nowhere to go and nothing to do. The second activity was the “living in poverty experience,” which lasted approximately three hours. This experience included touring the Opportunity Center and hearing an explanation of the programs available to those who are working but live in poverty. The group also toured CityWalk@Akard, which is CitySquare’s vertical resident community, with units reserved for the formerly homeless and the working poor. The third activity was the “working experience,” which involved volunteering for three hours at CitySquare’s thrift store and food pantry. This activity was intended to allow students to reflect on how productive a person can actually be after taking public transportation, having a difficult night’s sleep in a shelter, and possibly not having sufficient food. After these three activities, the groups then reconvened at the Opportunity Center for dinner and a time for reflecting on everyone’s experiences of the day. That night, the group experienced a simulation of homelessness by sleeping in the outdoor courtyard of the Opportunity Center. This area was gated and locked and was monitored by security. The following morning, CitySquare provided a group breakfast and offer a few hours of discussion and reflection before concluding around 11 a.m. on Wednesday.

The drive between FWC and CitySquare took approximately one hour each way. In order to make good use of this time, I used the following talking points with students in order to hopefully catalyze deeper and more thoughtful engagement with the activities. First, I asked students what had motivated them to come and what they anticipated experiencing or learning. Second, I explained why I was excited to do this and how it came out of my understanding of the gospel. I chose to order these questions in this way, rather than the reverse, so that my own thought process and rationale would not truncate
their own. If I first explained my thinking and then asked for theirs, I might have received only my own explanation parroted back. By asking for students’ thoughts first, however, I hoped students might think more deeply about what they expected and why they came. On the drive back, I planned to ask how our experiences intersected with the theology we discussed before arriving, both in the chapel presentation and on the drive to CitySquare. The rationale for these questions was that it might enhance the experience and lead to more intentional reflection. Between these conversations and the times CitySquare had already built into the experience, there was ample opportunity for reflection.

**Evaluation Methodology**

In order to reach valid and credible conclusions, it is important to look at the project from several different perspectives. I prepared to collect data from three different points of view: my own field notes, interviews with students who participated, and the assessment of an independent expert. These three provide a researcher angle, an insider angle, and an outsider angle.\(^{14}\) This method is known as data triangulation.\(^{15}\) The primary advantage of this approach is that it prevents the researcher from making unsound conclusions due to having a limited vantage point. By gathering different types of data, the researcher can get a much more robust understanding of the efficacy of the project. The information from these three angles might intersect and thus give the researcher greater confidence in whatever conclusions are reached, or the data might conflict and prevent the researcher from jumping to unreliable conclusions.\(^{16}\)

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The first of these three, the researcher angle, consists of field notes from the time spent at CitySquare. These field notes catalogue my observations, impressions, and initial analyses shortly after the event.\textsuperscript{17} I anticipated that actually taking notes during the event would likely be cumbersome and awkward, so I planned to record my notes before going to sleep each day of the event. The protocol was to use two columns, with my observations and impressions on the left column and my initial analysis and interpretations on the right column. In the left column I wrote the following two prompts for my observations:

1. What do I notice nonverbally (including demeanor, physical posture, proximity, etc.) among students that might indicate what they are feeling or thinking?
2. What spoken comments demonstrate learning, growth, or the lack of these among students?

Beyond these two questions I also left room for other unanticipated observations that might take place. This would also be where I would note any comments or observations from the other adult faculty members who were helping or from CitySquare personnel.

The second angle, the insider angle, consisted of data from informal interviews with students. Informal interviews are often more like conversations, with the participants often not realizing that they are actually being interviewed.\textsuperscript{18} I expected these interviews to be unstructured and might take place in the school hallway, after class, at lunch, or


\textsuperscript{18} “The strength of the informal conversational approach is that it allows the interviewer/evaluator to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes.” Patton, \textit{Qualitative Evaluation}, 281-82.
whenever students were available for a conversation. This strategy was preferable because students might not be available for more formal, in-depth interviewing. Although I did not plan to follow a formal structure for these interviews, I intended to try to work into the conversations something along the lines of these questions:

1. What surprised you about the experience? Why?
2. How did the experience change or affirm the way you think about God, Christian mission, or poverty?
3. Are you more likely to pursue similar activities in the future? Why or why not? If not, what are you more likely to do instead as a result of this experience?

These questions aimed at assessing whether students had been challenged in the way that the project sought to challenge them. The number of students to be interviewed was dependent on the number of students who participated. If only ten students participated, for example, I could have conceivably interviewed most or all of them. If the number was larger, then I would randomly select eight to ten students to interview. I then planned to take notes on these conversations soon after they took place. The protocol for these notes was to simply write down each question I asked and my recollection of the students’ answers.

For the outsider angle, I arranged to ask an independent expert to assess the project’s impact. The value of an outsider’s perspective is significant because he or she can look at the context and the intervention without many of the biases that might limit the researcher or insiders. Furthermore, the outsider may have expertise that enables a

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more accurate evaluation the project. In this case, I arranged for Dr. Michael Harbour to
serve in this role. Dr. Harbour has experience with similar volunteer groups and is on
staff at CitySquare, making him uniquely situated to perform this function. After the trip,
I scheduled him to come to FWC and lead a conversation with the students. I then invited
students to come to my classroom at lunch, but this was again dependent on which
students chose to participate. After this, Dr. Harbour wrote a brief summary of his
analysis. This summary was the third data set for triangulation.

Qualitative research data can often be difficult to analyze and evaluate in
meaningful ways.\textsuperscript{20} Coding the data provides a way of overcoming this hurdle. A code,
according to Saldaña, is “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a
summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of
language-based or visual data.”\textsuperscript{21} Coding offers a way to find patterns and filter the data
according to particular descriptive or interpretive themes.\textsuperscript{22} I coded the data according to
the following four categories:

1. Indications that students’ thinking about poverty, especially as it relates to

   Christian ministry, has been challenged

2. Indications of a desire or intention to have future experiences that engage with the
economically disadvantaged in the community

3. Statements that implicitly or explicitly communicate some form of engagement

   with the theological values presented in chapter 2 of this thesis

\textsuperscript{20} Miles and Huberman, \textit{Qualitative Data Analysis}, 55.


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 4-6; Miles and Huberman, \textit{Qualitative Data Analysis}, 56-57.
4. Indications of a lack of growth or challenge regarding the stated objectives of the intervention

I then used these categories with the triangulated researcher, insider, and outsider perspectives to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention. By putting the coded data from these three sources into dialogue with one another and with the objectives of the project, I arrived at a reasonably sound assessment of the value of the intervention.

This methodology allowed me to assess the efficacy of the intervention with regard to the goals of the project. The problem I initially identified was that students had troubling attitudes regarding poverty and lacked experiences that challenged them toward greater engagement with those in the community who live in poverty. This intervention attempted to address this problem by sharing experiences with students that might begin to challenge their thinking in this area. The method described above assesses the extent to which this intervention effectively achieved this goal.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

From the moment of arrival at CitySquare, it was evident that this experience would take students outside their comfort zones and challenge them, perhaps even in ways they had not experienced before. As soon as the bus exited in CitySquare’s South Dallas neighborhood, the mood on the bus immediately quieted as students looked around and saw tents beneath the overpass and homeless people sitting on the sidewalk. Conversation immediately stopped as students somberly and pensively surveyed the neighborhood. However, the mere fact the students experienced moments of discomfort or unease does not in itself demonstrate that they were challenged in the ways that this project aims to challenge them. In order to determine the efficacy of this project, I will evaluate the experience through three lenses: my own field notes, informal interviews I conducted with students, and the evaluation of an independent expert. After exploring these three angles, I will identify points of tension or cohesion and draw appropriate conclusions.

Field Notes

As delineated in chapter 3, I coded my field notes according to four categories: indications that students were challenged to think differently about poverty, indications of a desire to engage the economically disadvantaged in the future, indications of engagement with the relevant theological issues, and indications of a lack of growth in these areas. I will begin by discussing the field notes according to these four categories.
The first of these categories is of particular interest because it relates most directly to the stated purpose of the project.

On the first night of the experience, CitySquare staff members led us in a discussion of poverty. The CitySquare volunteer who led this exercise began with a personal narrative in which she explained her background, which was similar to the backgrounds of most of our students. This was helpful because it allowed students to identify with her and perhaps even see themselves in her story. After she spoke about her experiences, she led us in a budgeting exercise that forced students to face the harsh realities of poverty. At the end of this exercise, students were asked to come up with ideas and solutions for the person in the scenario. After discussing these ideas, one student characterized our answers by saying, “All our best ideas were bad ideas.”

Asked to reflect on how they felt about this, one student summed up the emotions of the group effectively with one word: “Ugh.” During this conversation, several comments showed that students’ assumptions were being challenged. One commented that poverty is more complex than she realized and involved many different factors. Another said, “I always thought that getting out of poverty would be easy, but it’s actually not.” In response to our discussion of the budgeting scenario, several students wondered how long a person could possibly keep up the cycle of income and expenses, even with all our ideas of how to make the situation better. One student noticed that “there’s no way to win,” and another observed that “there’s no way out, at best you’re just getting by.” Some students even explicitly connected this scenario to the larger narrative they had heard about poverty. One said, “We usually think it’s about laziness, but she [the person in the scenario] is actually working really hard and just doesn’t have
enough money.” Others said, “It’s a lot more complex than I thought,” and, “There’s no easy answer to poverty, so we shouldn’t pass judgment.”

Following this, students were each given five dollars and two bus passes, which constituted the entirety of their resources for food and transportation for the remainder of the experience. The nineteen students and three FWC sponsors who participated were divided into three groups. In each group, one student received no money and no bus passes. These students had to rely on other members of their groups for food and transportation. This immediately presented a problem because CitySquare’s neighborhood is a food desert. Grocery stores are few and far between in such neighborhoods. Because not everyone in the group had a bus pass, everyone chose to walk two miles to the nearest grocery store. Upon arrival, the three groups pooled their resources and planned meals for the rest of the experience. Without prompting, several students noticed that this situation would actually be harder in reality than it was for our group. They observed that we could rely on our group and pool our money, but not everyone would have that opportunity in reality. They even began to discuss how it would be different and to calculate what they could do with their money if they could not rely on the group. One student said of the experience, “It was different to look at prices and have to think about the value of a dollar. Going to the cash register and being nervous about calculations, instead of paying and just letting it be a surprise, was nerve-wracking.”

1. We had planned to take twenty students, but one had to cancel because of illness.

After returning to CitySquare, I led the students in a conversation about their impressions so far from the experience. Some comments at this point further illustrated that participants were beginning to pull back on previous assumptions about poverty. For example, one student said, “Poverty isn’t as black and white as I thought. I used to think they were doing something wrong.” Another said, “I’m starting to think about them [people in poverty and homelessness] more as people.” After this conversation, one of the other FWC sponsors said she was surprised at students’ responses at this point, given how little we had experienced. She wondered if they had truly been challenged or if they just knew what to say. She suspected that maybe students were simply able to anticipate what responses we were looking for and gave the “right” answers, even if they had not genuinely arrived at those answers because of their experiences.

That night, we slept on a cold concrete floor. Blankets and pillows were not available, except for those students who had chosen to bring them in their backpacks. Most did not, because they knew they had to carry their backpacks with them for the entirety of the trip. Very few participants slept very well or very long. Any complaining was cut short, however, when we walked a block from CitySquare the following morning and saw homeless people sleeping on the ground. At this point some students made comments that showed they were internalizing the experience and imagining what it might be like to actually live in poverty. I heard one student ask another, “Can you imagine what it would be like to have to go to school after sleeping like that every night?”

On the second day, the three groups rotated through three experiences. One involved walking around the neighborhood meeting homeless people. During this time
the group was not allowed to stay at CitySquare. We had to wander around the neighborhood for approximately three hours, which was meant to simulate the homeless experience of being bored and having nowhere to go. During this time, as the group stopped to rest for a moment, one student reflected on how this experience felt different from previous mission trips she had participated in because it was local. She said, “being this close to home and seeing all this makes me really uncomfortable.” She went on to use the word “fearful,” though she did not clarify what it was that made her afraid. Another student seemed to agree with this sentiment and said, “It’s easier to brush off when it’s far away. This hits closer to home.” A third student nodded and asked, “How many bridges have I gone over not knowing that there were people living underneath?”

In one of the other groups, at one point the FWC sponsor asked them if they thought students’ reactions would be similar if this type of experience had been mandatory for all students. A student answered, “No way. The people who signed up for this trip already had their eyes open to see what we’re seeing. The people who really need to go would stand in the corner and make fun of people.” She paused before saying, “But I think that’s just how they deal with things like this. They don’t know what to do, so they just make fun of stuff.” Several other students agreed with this comment. This was particularly interesting to me because I was aware that one of the limitations of this project was that it was based on voluntary participation. The students who would volunteer would likely already be somewhat open to learning about poverty, while those who most needed to have their thinking challenged would likely not volunteer.

In the same group, the sponsor identified the experience of riding the bus downtown as one of the more meaningful experiences for her group. The bus was over
thirty minutes late, and once they finally got on the bus there was a passenger who appeared to be suffering from mental illness. When they got off the bus, several students expressed relief that they were not “captive” to the bus any more, especially with someone they did not trust on board. One student commented that it was strange how no one on the bus even acknowledged the apparently mentally ill passenger with eye contact. This led to a conversation about how often we ignore people who make us uncomfortable, including those who are homeless. This sponsor told me that at this point the students had made a connection between poverty and public transportation, seeing it not as just a fun, touristy thing to do but as a fact of life in poverty, and one that is often not pleasant.

The reason groups took a bus downtown was that one of the three experiences involved a tour of CityWalk@Akard, which is one of CitySquare’s resident communities for people living in poverty and for the formerly homeless. According to student reactions, two aspects of this were particularly important. One was that here they heard stories about not just adults who were living in poverty but children who had lived in poverty their entire lives. This challenged the narrative that people who are poor are poor because of bad choices they have made. One might imagine that as being true for an adult, but it would be much more difficult to dismiss the injustice of a child’s having to grow up in poverty from birth. A second aspect of this experience to which several students reacted strongly involved a large, prominent downtown church that sat adjacent to this building. We learned that this church, after its leaders found out that CitySquare would be housing the homeless, removed some of the public benches in front of the
building and put armrests in the middle of others to discourage people from sleeping or loitering in front of their church. Several students expressed indignation at this decision.

The third experience on the second day was the experience of working in poverty. Two of the groups went to a thrift store and helped clean and sort various items there. The other group worked at CitySquare’s food pantry. Student comments indicated that the work at the food pantry was much more meaningful to participants. Here students spent approximately one hour packing up “snack packs,” which CitySquare gives to homeless individuals who have no food. A second hour was spent helping CitySquare’s neighbors shop at the food pantry. This part of the experience was particularly meaningful because it put participants in a situation where they had to have one-on-one conversations with people living in poverty.3

On the second evening, I led another discussion with students about their experiences. I began by asking participants what they had learned. One student said, “It is a lot harder to be poor than I thought.” Another agreed and added, “It is hard to focus on anything when you’re so tired and hungry.” The first student then clarified by saying that the experience was actually easier for us “because we know it’s going to end and we have support, but that’s not the case when this is your life.” I followed this by asking what surprised students about their experience. One student answered that he was surprised by “how ‘out to get’ the homeless the city is.” This was in response to a conversation we had with CitySquare staff about the city’s plans to remove the “tent city” under the I-45 overpass, where approximately eighty to one hundred homeless people live. These plans were, according to CitySquare staff, a response to complaints by middle- and upper-class

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3. CitySquare staff consistently used the word “neighbors” rather than “clients” or “customers” to describe the economically disadvantaged people they served and worked with. They did this because “neighbor” is more respectful and humanizing than some of the alternatives.
people who did not like seeing homeless people there or having to drive by them.

Students’ comments indicated that they objected to this “not in my backyard” mentality. Reflecting on the experience of working at the thrift store, one student commented, “It was weird to see people looking through the thrift store and not looking for something they actually like but just for something that they could afford.” Regarding the food pantry, another student said, “I’ve always felt disconnected working at food pantries or doing food drives but being here and seeing the math of how it can help a family with just some cans of food and then picturing my pantry at home … that really makes you see it differently.”

The second night we slept outside in the courtyard of the Opportunity Center at CitySquare. The following morning, CitySquare staff led a final discussion about the experience. Some student comments at this point showed that they were thinking about broader issues than just their experiences on this trip. For example, one student said, “White privilege does exist and we need to be more aware of it.” We did not say much about a relationship between race and poverty, but this comment suggests that it was nevertheless on the mind of at least one student. Other comments demonstrated a newfound empathy and understanding. For example, one student spoke about a man he had met and pointed out that “everyone has a story.” He seemed genuinely moved by hearing this man’s account of how he had fallen on hard times. Another noted, “They have hopes and dreams too. I think I usually just dismiss them, as if only certain privileged people get to pursue their dreams.”

Some students spoke about how their presumptions had been challenged and connected this to a larger sense of injustice. One said, “The hardest part was realizing
how poorly people are treated and how unfair the typical narrative about them is. It’s disgusting and appalling.” One aspect of this realization was apparently the understanding that some people grow up completely differently from the way our students do. Several students commented about how the backgrounds of the people they met were so different from the students’ own stories. These kinds of realizations, according to one student, “broke down walls. Before, it always seemed like there was a wall between them and me. It is comfortable. This trip broke down that wall, and it is scary to think about living like that.” One comment that characterized the sentiment of several others was “It’s harder to be poor than I thought. It’s exhausting.” At the end of the discussion on the final morning, CitySquare staff asked students to answer two final questions. They were asked to complete the sentences “Poverty is …” or “I will fight poverty because …” Students’ responses are included in the Table 1.
The second coded category in my field notes involved comments that showed students’ desire to engage in future activities that engage the economically disadvantaged in the community. Here there were several comments, but many of them lacked specificity. Although students demonstrated a desire to do something in response to poverty and homelessness, they lacked a clear notion of what they ought to do. For example, one student said, “I really think this was an awesome experience and God has stirred our hearts to do things,” but he did not offer any specific idea about what “things” might be involved.

Some did offer more specific ideas, however. One student observed that CitySquare employed many different people in different types of jobs and that these

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Poverty is …”</th>
<th>I will fight poverty because …”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Complicated</td>
<td>• Everyone should be seen as equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A struggle</td>
<td>• Everyone deserves a chance to improve their lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not a choice</td>
<td>• If I won’t, who will?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A person, not an object or number</td>
<td>• That’s what Jesus calls us to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fed by evil</td>
<td>• There are so many opportunities to make a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reversible</td>
<td>• The system isn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exhausting</td>
<td>• Everyone deserves hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Non-discriminatory</td>
<td>• It’s the mission of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not the fault of the poor</td>
<td>• God calls me to be a light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Something that breaks the heart of God</td>
<td>• All of our neighbors are our brothers and sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Something God experienced</td>
<td>• We are all made in God’s image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• People don’t deserve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being like Jesus gives them a glimpse of heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No one deserves to live in such terrible conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It could be me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poverty shouldn’t exist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Students’ responses to “Poverty is …” and “I will fight poverty because …”
individuals were using their skills and training to serve the community in their own ways. She noted that virtually anyone could find a way to do this. In addition, several students spoke about food drives and similar activities. They said that they would be more motivated in the future to participate in these kinds of things. One student said, “I used to think those things were lame, but now they seem important. Why would you not help when it could be all someone has?” Another said, “I used to make excuses and not participate because I didn’t know where that food or money would go or that it wouldn’t make any difference. But I was just justifying it. It really does matter.” One said, “I just want to make eye contact with people and remember that they are people too, even if they are homeless.” Two students mentioned specific opportunities that they were aware of in Fort Worth and expressed interest in participating.

Other comments students made demonstrated implicit or explicit engagement with the theological foundations described in chapter 2. These themes were a part of our conversation beginning with the chapel presentation during which I invited students to volunteer for this experience and continuing throughout the experience. For example, on the first night, we ended our discussion with readings from Matthew 25 and Luke 4. While students did not cite these specific verses, they did make comments that alluded to them indirectly. One of the most poignant comments came on the morning of the third day, when one student said, “We have these ideas about our rights, but yesterday, when I looked at those people, I realized that God thinks about them the same way he thinks about me. Once you understand that, the other stuff does not matter.” Similarly, another student said, “We are all made in the image of God, so we need to put compassion above our desire to be right.” This theme was also present in other comments, such as when one
student said, “We need to understand that the homeless have gifts and have a purpose. God isn’t finished,” and later said, “We need to accept people as they are without conditions.” One student even articulated one of the major points argued in chapter 2 by saying, “Our money isn’t ours to have and hoard.”

After reflecting on the downtown church that removed the benches in front of its building to discourage the homeless from loitering there, one student said, “Thinking about how they treated these people, it’s crazy. That’s what Jesus talked about!” Here he seemed to be connecting what he had observed with what we had read and discussed. Others also referred to Jesus as a moral example with regard to issues of poverty and justice. One commented, “I appreciate that CitySquare is thinking outside the box to try to love others like Jesus did.”

Not all comments were positive, however. Immediately before our time walking around the neighborhood, we spent approximately one hour listening to a CitySquare staff member tell us about the “housing first” initiative, which offers housing to the homeless without any preconditions, even if they have addictions or other problems. One student strongly disagreed with this idea. She asked, “How does that really help people? It encourages them to just keep living a homeless lifestyle just inside a house instead of on the streets.” I found this to be a troubling example of precisely the kinds of judgments and attitudes I had hoped this experience would challenge.4 Several other members of the group responded to this student with comments about how access to housing might actually go a long way toward encouraging people to straighten out their lives. The student who initially objected again asked, “But how is just having a house going to do

4. On the other hand, one could argue that this comment does not reflect a callous disregard for the poor, but simply a disagreement over how best to fight poverty and homelessness. One does not need to agree with the methods of the “housing first” initiative in order to care about these issues.
that?” There were also some negative comments from students about their own impressions of how these experiences might impact them. When asked what they might do differently because of this experience, one student said, “Honestly, we’ll probably think about this for a while but then just go back to our normal lives and not change anything.” The general lack of specificity in students’ discussion of what they might do might substantiate this student’s comment.

Informal Interviews

I conducted a series of informal interviews with twelve of the nineteen participants. These were brief, informal conversations in which I asked them about what surprised them in the experience, to what extent it changed their thinking theologically or their thinking about poverty, and to what extent it impacted the likelihood that they might participate in related activities in the future. I coded these answers in the same way that I did the field notes above.

Three students’ answers indicated that their experience had changed the way they thought about their money and possessions. One expressed compassion for people living in poverty, and said, “when I see someone now I have more, I don’t want to use the word empathy because I can’t pretend to know what it’s actually like, but I think more about what life would be like in their situation.” Another said, “I can’t comprehend that life. I feel bad about all the things I have going on. I buy unnecessary things like new outfits on a whim.” Similarly, a third student said, “I spend so much money on stupid apps or even food that I don’t need and then I think about how we got four meals on five dollars, and it makes me just hate myself.” The last part, about self-hatred, was said somewhat jokingly. Nevertheless, it perhaps expressed a genuine dissatisfaction with their usual lifestyles.
Seven of the students I interviewed expressed a strong desire to seek out opportunities to engage the economically disadvantaged in the future. One teacher who was not involved, after he spoke with one of the students who went, told me, “If what he told me was true for everyone on the trip, then that was more valuable than a year’s worth of chapels.” A student told me that he was thinking about ideas for food drives or fundraising opportunities that we might set up later this year. Another said that he had convinced his parents to donate money to CitySquare.

The day we returned I received an email from a parent who was thrilled with the experience and said that her daughter was already talking about volunteering in the near future. Another parent emailed me the following day, saying “She learned so much and taught me so much; the love and respect I heard; she never felt scared or uncomfortable, just compassion and empathy.” This suggests that the experience led at least some students to have conversations with their families about what they had learned. Three other FWC faculty members who were not involved told me separately that they were hearing a lot of discussions among students around the school about the experience. Those who did not go on the trip were asking whether it would be available next year, and those who did go were talking about opportunities to take action.

One example of this, which was entirely student-initiated, involved attending a church service at CitySquare two weeks after the poverty simulation. During our initial visit, we learned that one of the CitySquare employees had recently started a weekly worship service on Sunday mornings for CitySquare’s homeless neighbors. At the time, one student expressed interest in going, and four or five others seemed interested as well. A week after the poverty simulation, that student asked me and the other sponsors if we
would drive a van to take students to that service if there were enough interested. We agreed, and twelve students went. Afterward, several students commented on how church felt “more genuine” there. They said that it put everyone on the same level and removed pretenses. One said, “It was a great picture of what Jesus would have wanted church to look like.”

In the informal interviews, there were also several answers that demonstrated theological reflection. One student said, “I think about that Scripture where the rich man is told by Jesus to give up everything and he has such a hard time. I think these people might be closer to God than we are.” Others returned to the theme mentioned in the field notes about seeing people living in poverty asbearers of the image of God. One said, “Now I see homeless people more just as people.” Another commented, “I’ve always been slow to give money, but now I view them as people. They might do bad things with that money but their intentions are not for me to judge.”

The interviews yielded only three answers that suggest a lack of growth or challenge. In response to a question about whether these experiences would make it more likely that participants would engage with poverty and related issues, two students separately answered with hesitant, non-committal answers that sounded like polite ways of saying “No.” A third student, when asked if the experience challenged his thinking about God or Christian mission, said, “It didn’t really make me think differently theologically, no. But it did make me realize how often the church gets it wrong.” Other than these three, the answers were overwhelmingly positive, as demonstrated in the previous examples.
Independent Expert

For the third angle of evaluation, I asked Dr. Michael Harbour to lead a conversation with my students over lunch. Dr. Harbour has extensive experience as an instructor working with students to challenge them in the ways this project aimed to do. He also has experience with CitySquare as a staff member working with the communities of South Dallas. Dr. Harbour asked students to describe what they did and what they learned. After a brief overview of what we did, most of the conversation was about what they thought about the experience and what the impact was. Students spoke a lot about how stereotypes were challenged and why they were now more reluctant to pass judgment. They also spoke about treating everyone with respect and dignity, and we had a brief conversation about “housing first” initiatives in Dallas. After this conversation, Dr. Harbour wrote a brief summary of the conversation along with his evaluation. What follows is the conclusion of his assessment:

The students were keenly attentive. They were intellectually and emotionally present. In their conversation, it was clear that they were experiencing a transformation. One student said that before the experience, she was excited for the adventure. Afterward, she said, that she now could not say that she enjoyed the experience, rather, she would say that this was an important experience. The students, in my estimation, understand that the problems of poverty are complex. They understand that poverty can happen to a whole host of vulnerable people and that poverty is not always directly linked to bad choices by the individual. They appear to be emotionally involved in the reality of poverty.

Dr. Harbour’s analysis was unfortunately limited by the allotted timeframe for the conversation. Because students were only available for the half-hour lunch period, we could not explore all avenues that he might have wanted to cover. He expressed disappointment that we did not have a longer time to discuss this with students. Still, we
were able to have a substantive conversation that was informative and provides a third angle from which to consider the efficacy of the project.

**Evaluation Conclusions**

The triangulation of the three evaluations above allows for a more robust analysis of the project intervention than any of them could accomplish alone. Conclusions that have support in two or even three of the above will be more certain than those that are evident only from one of the above. I will analyze these results by exploring where there is agreement and where there are points of tension.

It is clear from the field notes, the informal interviews, and the independent expert that students were challenged by what they experienced. More specifically, they were challenged to think differently about poverty. They have a deeper appreciation for the complexities of poverty and they understand the problems with the stereotypes and presumptions about poverty that they had previously held. Furthermore, it is clear from the field notes and the interviews that students have made a connection between what they learned about poverty and what the Bible teaches on the subject. They now acknowledge the humanity and dignity of the economically disadvantaged and they see caring and acting on this as a Christian obligation.

What specific, concrete changes this will lead to in the lives of students is less clear. This experience motivated several of the participants toward action. They worshipped and fellowshipped with the homeless without being prompted by me or the other sponsors, and they are having ongoing conversations about ways they could volunteer or contribute. Nevertheless, some of them expressed hesitation about the long-term impact of these events. Nothing in any of the three evaluations offers any firm
evidence that a long-term impact has been achieved. On the other hand, there really is no way to assess that without talking with these students several years later.

From the data presented above, I can reasonably conclude that this intervention was effective in challenging FWC students to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. I heard among these students some of the very same troubling assumptions and attitudes that prompted this project, and the experience transformed those assumptions and attitudes. Students demonstrated a profound level of theological reflection and expressed a deep concern for social justice. The quality of the conversations we had during and after the trip was wholly different from those I had in the ethnographic interviews and conversations described in chapter 1. Nevertheless, this problem is far from solved.

This intervention was an effective first step, but only a first step. In order to fully address the challenges outlined in chapter 1, this experience will need to be followed with other ongoing experiences that reinforce what was learned and offer opportunities to take action to fight poverty. Furthermore, the impact is limited by the fact that only nineteen students participated. Even if this experience were perfectly effective for those who participated, it would have little effect on the more than three hundred other high school students at FWC. In order to fully address the problem, it will need to be sustained and broadened. I will explore the implications of this, along with potential next steps, in chapter 5.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The concern I identified at the outset of this project was that FWC students lacked experiences that challenged them to engage the economically disadvantaged in their community. I understood this lack to be symptomatic of gaps in the spiritual formation of these students. Because care for the poor is a mandate of Christian faith, as argued in chapter 2, students’ evident ambivalence demonstrated a failure (of mine and of other FWC Bible teachers) to adequately facilitate spiritual formation among FWC students. Although we provided certain experiences that exposed students to poverty, these were isolated and insufficient. The CitySquare poverty simulation was meant as a first step toward remedying the problem. Based on the evaluation above, I concluded that the experience was an effective response to the stated problems. However, that conclusion must be considered in the context of certain limitations. Below I will discuss these limitations, including applicability, dependability, credibility, reflexivity, and sustainability. I will then conclude with some considerations of the personal and ecclesial significance of this project along with a brief exploration of unanswered questions that may warrant further research.

**Applicability**

The conclusions of this study apply primarily to the nineteen students who participated. Even among those nineteen students, there is no way to know from this study what the long-term impact of these experiences might be. Although I concluded
that it was effective in challenging them in a particular time and place, I cannot apply those conclusions to predict their attitude or behavior later in life. Nor can I apply these conclusions with complete certainty to the larger student body at FWC or to other similar contexts. Despite this uncertainty, this project offers some meaningful insights for these broader contexts. I learned that we can substantively impact students’ thinking by sharing experiences such as those we had at CitySquare. I also learned that the context described in chapter 1, in which I characterized students as somewhat resistant to conversations about poverty and social justice, does not create insurmountable obstacles to growth. Although I do not know for certain that other groups of students at FWC or elsewhere would react in the same way as this group did, I can say that it is at least plausible that they might.

The conclusions of this project are also applicable only to the extent that they speak to the stated aims. I framed this project as challenging students to be more engaged in the community. The language of “challenge” does not mean that the experiences at CitySquare provide a complete roadmap for students to follow. Instead, I aimed to undermine the inadequate theology and troubling attitudes that I observed while also opening the eyes of students to possible ways they might engage the economically disadvantaged in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Furthermore, I deliberately framed the evaluation of the project in terms of efficacy rather than success or failure. Terms such as success and failure imply a binary situation in which the project either worked or did not work. This framework might lead to unrealistic expectations. I doubt that there are any experiences I could offer to students that would be completely successful in resolving the stated problems. Nor is it likely that such experiences would wholly fail and have no
positive impact. Consequently, I concluded that the experience was an effective first step toward a solution, even though it was not “successful” in completely fixing the problem.

**Dependability, Credibility, and Reflexivity**

The triangulated evaluation method I used does to some extent insulate the conclusions from problems that might arise if I had only looked at the experience through one data set. My own field notes are limited by my experiences and my point of view. The informal interviews are similarly limited, and the independent expert’s evaluation is limited by the short time he had to evaluate the experience as well as his own personal perspective. All three of these together, however, lend the conclusions a greater credibility. Nevertheless, these conclusions are only completely dependable for this one group of people in this particular context at one place and time. Considerations of other applications of this study are subject to greater uncertainty.

One particular area of concern was alluded to in chapter 4 and remains unresolved. I and the other FWC sponsors on the trip suspected that students might be simply saying what we wanted to hear rather than honestly expressing their opinions. This might, to an extent, question the validity of all three angles of the evaluation process. The field notes, the informal interviews, and the independent expert all depend primarily on what students said. If their statements do not reflect their actual thoughts and attitudes, then the conclusions may be unreliable. Although this possibility must be acknowledged, it does not significantly undermine the credibility of the project’s conclusions. It is plausible that some students at some times were less than completely honest about their opinions. However, this does not mean that none of the statements students made accurately reflect their thoughts and opinions. If students were not
impacted, then it is unlikely that they would still be proactively seeking further experiences such as attending church at CitySquare and volunteering at the food pantry, as indeed they have.

Another area of concern regarding the credibility of the project and its conclusions involves the issue of reflexivity. My own biases undoubtedly affected the project from its outset. My personal perspective shaped even the ethnographic research that first identified the problems the project attempted to address. The way I asked the questions to students and the way I interpreted the data must be considered with the understanding that I am a part of the very context I am evaluating. Similarly, the field notes and informal interviews were filtered through my own biases and my own perspective. Despite this, the methodology I used attempts to shield the project from these biases as much as is reasonably possible.

**Sustainability**

The nature of the experience of the CitySquare poverty simulation is such that it is not meant to be repeated for the same individuals. Going through the exact same process again would likely produce significantly diminishing returns for students. Consequently, this is not a sustainable experience for the nineteen students who participated, and it was not meant to be. Instead, it was meant to be a catalyst for other experiences that students might engage in. This means that I and other leaders at FWC need to continue to seek out opportunities for students to engage the economically disadvantaged in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. We also need to be responsive to students who are interested in setting up further opportunities, such as those described above who wanted to attend church at CitySquare and volunteer at the food pantry.
A better question is to what extent this activity might be sustainable for FWC as a whole. CitySquare is open to receiving future FWC groups, so there are no obstacles on their end of the relationship. There are no institutional obstacles to repeating this experience next year from the perspective of the FWC administration, but finding FWC teachers to serve as sponsors might be challenging. The experience was so physically demanding that not many FWC teachers will likely want to join in the future. Personally, I found myself as exhausted and uncomfortable as I had been on any of our international mission trips and perhaps more so. One of the teachers who participated this time told me that she was glad she came but would not be able to do so again in the future. The student body, however, seems open to future experiences like this one. Several students who did not participate have asked if there will be another opportunity next year. However, this will always be limited by student interest. No students would ever be required to go, so the experience can only be sustained as long as there are enough students who want to go. There is no way to predict how long that interest might be sustained. For example, we had for many years seen overwhelming interest in our international mission trips, to such a degree that far more wanted to go than we could actually take. In 2015, however, so few signed up that we had to cancel some trips entirely. The consensus among both the teachers and the students whom I have asked about this is that it is simply a result of student apathy. That same apathy could prevent this intervention from being sustainable from year to year. Because of this, along with the other limitations discussed above, it is important that the poverty simulation be only one part of a larger effort in Bible classes, in chapel, and in other contexts as well.
Personal and Ecclesial Significance

This experience was personally significant for me in several ways. The process of researching and writing this thesis has instilled in me a deeper appetite for social justice and has caused me to look for further opportunities to do what I hope my students will do in their communities. Considering the theological foundations as I wrote chapter 2, in particular, has solidified in me a commitment to charity, mercy, and hospitality. Prior to this project I had similar beliefs and commitments, but the process of articulating them as I have here has solidified and deepened them. I believe that my passion for the values articulated here will permanently and profoundly shape my spiritual life. The experience of the poverty simulation itself was also personally meaningful to me. Seeing people in my own community who were suffering from poverty opened my eyes to the opportunities I have to participate in God’s mission here. I shared many of the sentiments expressed by students. In the same way the experience taught them about the reality about poverty, it taught me as well. I also benefited from simply walking alongside these students throughout this process. I was very encouraged to see the compassion and love these students had and to watch them grow in spiritual maturity.

The poverty simulation experience was also meaningful for FWC in general. Experiences such as this, even though only nineteen students participated, can begin to affect the character and atmosphere of the broader group. This project has begun a bigger conversation about how we might more fully live up to our calling as a faith community in our context. This may have an even broader impact as these students continue that conversation in their families and churches. Because the participants come from diverse ecclesial backgrounds, it is difficult to assess with any certainty the ecclesial significance
of the project. Hopefully, these experiences will be seeds that grow in those various contexts with God’s guidance and providence.

With regard to my ministry at FWC, I hope to continue to seek further opportunities to challenge myself and my students toward greater community engagement. In addition to future trips like the poverty simulation and related experiences, I hope to seek creative ways to incorporate the values articulated in chapter 2 in my classroom instruction. In the 2015-2016 school year, I have attempted to do this by emphasizing spiritual disciplines and focusing them in deliberate ways. For example, I have set up regular habits of Scripture reading and prayer at the beginning of class. These readings have been primarily from the Gospel of Luke and have led to several conversations about what Jesus taught regarding wealth and poverty. I will continue to look for new ways to start such conversations.

Ministry leaders in other contexts who share similar values might choose to replicate these experiences in their own setting. Although the CitySquare poverty simulation is only available in Dallas, Texas, it would not be too difficult to set up a similar experience in other urban contexts. It is plausible that the problem this project attempts to address may also be a problem in other suburban private Christian schools and even in church youth groups. Each individual context would, of course, have its own unique eccentricities, but there is no reason some of the conclusions reached here might not also apply to other contexts.

**Unanswered Questions**

Some relevant questions remain that were not answered by this project. One of the biggest is how I might challenge those students who do not volunteer for experiences
such as the CitySquare poverty simulation. I initially stated that this project would be limited by the fact that I could take only students who chose to volunteer, and it might be that those who volunteered would be the ones who least needed the experience. Students who had the most antagonistic and problematic beliefs about poverty and those living in poverty would likely not volunteer. This was reinforced by comments that students made during the trip about how some of their peers might react if they had been required to come. Even if it were possible to make such students participate, I would not want to. The experience would not be the same if students were not personally committed and invested. Furthermore, I am uncomfortable with the idea of forcing spiritual growth. On the other hand, I have a responsibility as a leader and teacher of students to draw them toward maturity and growth. This forms a topic in need of further study. How might teachers at Christian schools such as FWC appropriately and effectively challenge their students toward spiritual growth when those students are resistant or ambivalent?

Another unanswered question is what long-term impact these experiences will have on the students who participated. It would be very interesting and helpful to know what students think about the impact of this poverty simulation several years after the experience. Will they still retain some of the ideas and opinions they shared during and after this experience, or will those all have been forgotten? Will these experiences have led them to live a different sort of life, or will they have no long-term impact on their attitudes and behaviors? Unfortunately, the scope and timeframe of this project does not allow me to explore these long-term questions.

This project has been richly meaningful for me and for many others who were involved. I have learned about my context at FWC, about my students, about urban
poverty and homelessness, and about the mission of God. I, along with my students, have been deeply challenged by the experience and will continue to look for opportunities to put what I have learned into practice in my ministry and in my own personal life. The intervention was an effective first step to address the problem I identified, but much remains to be done. I hope that this experience is followed by many more as I seek to more fully and faithfully lead students in spiritual formation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD 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 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-3985

September 21, 2015

Mr. James Hensley
Graduate School of Theology
ACU Box 29422
Abilene Christian University

Dear Mr. Hensley,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Sharing Experiences that Challenge Students at Fort Worth Christian School to Engage the Economically Disadvantaged in their Community" was approved on 09/21/2015 for a period of one year (IRB # 15-058). The expiration date for this study is 09/21/2016. If you intend to continue the study beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review Form at least 30 days, but no more than 45 days, prior to the expiration date. Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Cc: Dr. Carson Reed
I. Read Luke 4:16-21
   b. Summarize three examples of other texts on this theme in Luke
      i. The rich young ruler
      ii. The rich man and Lazarus
      iii. Zacchaeus
   c. Summarize this theme elsewhere in the Gospels and in the New Testament
      i. Matthew 25
      ii. James 1
   d. Compare this value to similar teachings in the Old Testament
      i. Old Testament law: Deuteronomy 15; Exodus 22; Leviticus 25
      ii. Old Testament prophets: Isaiah 5, 58; Jeremiah 22; Amos 5
   e. Conclusion from these texts: How we treat the poor is consistently presented as a core element of Godly life

II. So, what should we do?
   a. No consistent prescription, but a clear reorientation regarding wealth, justice, and hospitality
      i. The obstacles of ignorance and uncertainty
   b. Past and present attempts at FWC:
      i. Mission trips
      ii. Service projects
      iii. Problem: limited impact and often not local
   c. What’s next?
      i. We need to do more than just paint a wall
      ii. We need to learn more about poverty

III. Introduce CitySquare poverty simulation
   a. Discuss event details
   b. Present time, cost, and signup details
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Initial Analyses and Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I notice nonverbally that might indicate what students are feeling or thinking?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What spoken comments demonstrate learning, growth, or the lack of these?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous observations:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
BRIEF VITA

I was born in 1983 in Kansas City, Missouri. I received a bachelor of arts degree from Harding University in 2004 and a master of divinity degree from Abilene Christian University in 2008. I am currently employed as a Bible teacher at FWC.