

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 1

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2018

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### Recommended Citation

Cloer, Steve (2018) "Missional Partnership: Reframing the Concept of “Placing Membership”," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol4/iss1/1>

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## **Missional Partnership: Reframing the Concept of “Placing Membership”**

*Steve Cloer*

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**Abstract:** *This essay reframes the process of “placing membership” in a local church with the theological concept of missional partnership. A critical review is offered of the organizational procedure of “placing membership,” its underlying theoretical assumptions, and its deficient theological vision. Then, the practice of joining a local Christian community is reimagined in a missional ecclesiology focusing on the key theological strands of spiritual accountability and equipping for mission. The biblical metaphor of “partner in the gospel” is explored as an alternative to “membership” as a way to adequately communicate what joining, entering, and participating within a church on mission entails. Reflections are offered on the success and struggles of this paradigm shift within the local context of Southside Church of Christ.*

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In *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile suggest that, making an explicit connection between a missional ecclesiology and a missional polity represents new territory in the missional conversation.<sup>1</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile recognize that too often there is a disconnect between a congregation’s ecclesiology and their polity. Instead of letting their identity define their organization and practices, they adopt policies and procedures from the business world or other arenas of culture. While other fields can certainly be helpful to a congregation in thinking through organization, the starting point should always be the theological and missiological vision of the church found in the Scriptures. A great example of this dichotomy is the practice and procedure of “placing membership.”

One key issue that many churches deal with is how to get members involved. According to the Barna Research Group, only 22% of “born-again” believers are actually likely to volunteer to help at a church—a figure

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 95.

that has declined in the last twenty years.<sup>2</sup> That means that roughly one-fifth of people on a membership roll are open to church involvement, whereas four-fifths are generally not. Often this is perceived as an organizational problem. Church consultants point to the lack of high expectations for members, unorganized processes to get members involved, or a failure to motivate members as reasons why this problem exists. For example, Chuck Lawless researched this problem in his book, *Membership Matters*.<sup>3</sup> Lawless argues that a key remedy to the issue is providing a "New Member Class." This is a class in which new members are given a quick education on the beliefs of the church, expectations of members, and the structure of ministries. Lawless studied 150 "growing churches" and found 73% of them had such a class.<sup>4</sup> Then he collated several of these churches' efforts to produce a sort of "best practices" of membership classes. While the book is helpful in regards to its intent and Lawless' research is productive, it serves as a great example of approaching the problem of uninvolved members as an organizational problem. The message of Lawless' book is essentially to get the process right ("New Member Class") and the problem will go away.

However, in this paper, I would like to suggest that this problem—at its root—is a theological problem rather than an organizational one. The concepts of membership and involvement are derived from extra-biblical areas (e.g. clubs, civic groups, etc.) and thus are always going to be bothersome for a congregation seeking to live out God's mission found in Scripture. Instead, this process of "placing membership" needs to be reimaged from a missional perspective. Starting from the missional identity found within God's church, the idea of joining a congregation of God's people should be reframed with the theological concept of missional partnership. I present this idea in the following format. First, I look critically at the historical background of the "Placing Membership" process. Second, I look at why this process has struggled within my context at Southside Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas. Third, I establish a missional ecclesiology and work to reframe and reimagine this process with the theological concept of missional partnership. Finally, I offer some reflections on the journey at Southside of implementing this new, missional process.

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<sup>2</sup> "Barna Study of Religious Change since 1991 Shows Significant Changes by Faith Group," (2011), <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group>.

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

### Historical Background of “Placing Membership”

The process of “placing membership” seems to have grown out of three key ideas: religious freedom, free-church ecclesiology, and the voluntary association. As the United States of America began, the decision was made by its founders to create freedom of religion within the First Amendment. There would be no state church that would be tied to the government in any form; instead, there would be a separation of church and state. As religious groups began to migrate to America, this created a big shift. Religious bodies that had been defined as a “state-church” were now forced to re-define themselves in light of a new landscape of religious freedom.<sup>5</sup> Previously, people were members of a certain religious group based on heritage, ethnicity, or the country in which they were born. Churches were based on territories or on a parish system, and everyone held membership in a particular church based on the area in which they were located.<sup>6</sup> But in America, this is generally not the case anymore. Now a person is a member of a religious group based on their choice. Churches are based on the group of people who freely choose to be a part of this religious group.

At the same time this shift was taking place, free church ecclesiologies were starting to emerge. Many people and groups were starting to conceive the church as a local body of believers who had gathered in the name of Jesus, rather than seeing the church as a system of congregations gathered and organized through a national, hierarchical structure. This fit very nicely with the new, democratic ideal promoted within America.<sup>7</sup> Now the church (like the country) was being governed by the people and not by a royal hierarchy. Because of these new developments taking place, a new model was needed of how to conceive the foundation of a congregation. If one was now a member by choice rather than birth, and there were many local choices, how, then, does a local church body define itself? The result was the model of a voluntary association.

Historians suggest that the beginning of the idea of the church as a voluntary association was in the writings of John Locke (1632-1704). Locke claimed this about a church, “I take it to be a voluntary society of men joining themselves of their own accord in order to the public worshipping

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “An Ecclesiastical Geno-Project: Unpacking the DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism,” in *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 22.

<sup>6</sup> *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to Him . . . I say it is a free and voluntary society.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Locke argued that a church is created when like-minded people choose to join together to worship God as they see fit. The priority in this arrangement becomes an individual’s conscience or ability to rationally choose. Another term for this is social contract theory. Instead of society being based on the divine right of kings or other key leaders, the founders of the United States determined to base its society on an individual’s natural rights (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness). Thus, a group, an association, or a church is created by freely associating individuals who mutually agree to come together for a specific purpose.<sup>9</sup> Through the past three centuries, religious groups in America have envisaged themselves roughly in that way: a group of like-minded people who have freely decided to join together as a local, worshipping community.

However, this new model of conceiving church has created some problems. First, when the foundation of a community is the member’s individual right to choose, often the focus of the community becomes on keeping the members happy so they do not exercise their right to leave. After all, if members are not satisfied, they are free to change their membership to another group. In this environment, leaders are tempted to focus on the privileges and desires of the members and retool the organization to meet their needs.<sup>10</sup>

Second, this model creates a sense of competition among groups. They compete with each other to persuade “recruits” to make the choice to join their church or community. Sidney Mead highlights this problem. He suggests that competition is the result of free churches and that this competition between denominations, local congregations, and even within congregations impacts decisions on where resources are spent.<sup>11</sup> R. Laurence Moore tracks the phenomenon of church marketing that has developed because of church competition and free market capitalism. Moore also sees this trend arising out of the “voluntary association”/social contract model of church within America. He suggests that leaders now are forced to commodify religion into a product that they can sell in the

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<sup>8</sup> John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Sidney Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 84, 105.

“marketplace of culture.”<sup>12</sup> The idea is that by offering the best services for providing a good quality of life, people will choose to join their church. This is a cultural dynamic that Robert Putnam noticed as well in his statistical review of American religion. Putnam says, “Americans are inveterate shoppers and religion is no different.” Churches now have to engage in increasingly greater marketing efforts to attract and keep its members.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this development is that it forces church leaders to view members as consumers. They perform their ministry to provide services—hopefully better than the church down the street. Success is determined from a consumer model: new customers (membership), member satisfaction (attendance), and the bottom line (budget).

A third problem with this model of seeing church as a voluntary society is that the church’s identity becomes defined by activity. In order to attract new customers, a church must provide some motivation for them to join. Often that motivation becomes the achievements or accomplishments that could be attained by joining—both corporately and individually. This becomes the primary promotion, or slogan, that the church uses to encourage new members to join.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as Van Gelder argues, a church “exists as an organization with a purposive intent to accomplish something on behalf of God in the world.”<sup>15</sup> This creates an emphasis on polity and organization to try and get the objective done. While churches based on this identity might accomplish many good things, one has to question if that is the essence of the church—to accomplish something? Is “placing membership” simply about attracting people (better than any other church) in order to achieve their objectives? Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp offer a critique of the current conception of church as voluntary association:

The church is not a club where people with common hobbies meet. It is not a voluntary association, such as the American Medical Association, in which members guard and tend to their shared interests. Nor is it simply a helping organization, an Alcoholics Anonymous that people seek out after they

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<sup>12</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7-11, 268. Robert Bellah observed the sense that the religious landscape has become a “marketplace” as well. Robert Neelly Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 162.

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 169.

<sup>14</sup> Mead, 82. Mead goes on to suggest that church leaders become politicians who persuade people to join the cause.

<sup>15</sup> This is the definition that Van Gelder gives a kind of churches that have evolved which he refers to as the “denominational” church. Van Gelder, “An Ecclesiastical Geno-Project: Unpacking the DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism,” 18.

determine they have an unmanageable problem. People choose to join AA or a civic club, but in that sense, no one really "joins" the church. The members of the church are called, gathered, together by the God who showed himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Herein lies the ultimate problem of the process of "placing membership." It is based on an identity of the church that is not a biblical vision, but a secular social vision. This vision produces not a missional church, but a church built more like a health club.<sup>17</sup> This is the reason why truly dealing with membership issues cannot be solved simply through better organization or leadership. It must be re-cast based on a missional ecclesiology.

### **"Placing Membership" at Southside Church of Christ**

Besides the historical concerns previously mentioned about "placing membership," this process created increasing difficulty in my local context at Southside Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas. Particularly over the last 25 years, as Southside has experienced a missional transformation, the leadership has noticed the conflict between the current practice of "placing membership" and our missional identity. At present, a person can become a member at Southside through two ways: baptism or transfer. If a person wants to join Southside and they have not been baptized, typically through informal Bible study, it is explained that baptism is the entrance into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13), and the person is encouraged to put their faith in Christ and be baptized. This act puts the person within the larger body of Christ and with the local body at Southside. In effect, we would consider this the process of evangelism—sharing the message of Jesus to an unbeliever, who then decides to accept the message and be baptized. This person is then added to the larger church (Acts 2:47) and Southside specifically.

The second method is through the process of transfer. In most Churches of Christ, this is the method most thought of when discussing "placing membership." This is when someone desires to be a part of Southside, but they have already experienced baptism in another Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: The Power of the Worshiping Community in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Foss compares the contemporary membership model to being a member of a health club. See Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 15.

community. Often these are people who have moved in and are new to the area or simply switching from another congregation. The general process was that they filled out a contact card where they indicate their desire to place membership. After an initial phone call to double-check their background, they were announced to the congregation as new members. They were given a directory, added to the membership database, and had their picture displayed in our worship bulletin. The elders would try to meet with each new member and their family to introduce themselves, or one of the ministers would try have a brief conversation about the expectations at Southside.

As the leadership began to critique this practice, several problems surfaced. First, the language of membership is particularly bothersome. It is not biblical language,<sup>18</sup> which conflicts with our Restoration tradition. Churches of Christ have arisen out of a movement that seeks to restore the New Testament church and to “call Bible things by Bible names.”<sup>19</sup> The usage of the expression “membership” goes directly against this intent by using an organizational term to describe the entrance of a person into the local body of Christ.

Second, the membership idea creates a sense of passivity. There is no movement in the concept of “membership”; it is static and stagnant, much different than discipleship, which is a call to *follow* Jesus. Membership becomes more about “who’s in and who’s out,” rather than who is committed to participating in God’s mission. Darrell Guder emphasizes that membership creates a dichotomy between salvation and discipleship. If someone is saved (or baptized), then they are a member and safe.<sup>20</sup> The critical question becomes, “Is this person a member?” rather than “Is this person growing closer to Jesus?” So, like many other churches, Southside has a segment of its members that seem satisfied with simply having the status of “member.”

Third, the process creates a sense of being a part of a club, with certain rights and privileges. Many membership processes in churches are patterned after what takes place at a health club, or something similar.

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<sup>18</sup> The word “member” is used several times within 1 Cor 12. But current usage of the word is not consistent with Paul’s usage in this text. Nowhere in Scripture does it describe someone “placing membership.” See Guder’s discussion on this. Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 170.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Alexander Campbell, an early Restorationist, argued for “pure speech” to be restored, and opposed the speech of “Babylonia.” This meant only words or phrases from Scripture should be used, which is not the case with “membership” language. See Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things – Number IV,” *The Christian Baptist* 2 11 (1825): 159.

<sup>20</sup> Guder, 170.

Reggie McNeal refers to church directories, calendars, and committee lists as "club stuff."<sup>21</sup> It simply serves the purpose of congratulating the new member for being in the club and giving them the access to all the club services.<sup>22</sup> In fact, McNeal would argue that "member recruiting," "member involvement," and other such terms are simply based on a club framework. "We are training people to be good club members," says McNeal, when the call is to be equipped and sent as a part of God's mission. As Michael Foss points out, in Matt 28:19 Jesus does not say "make members," but "make disciples of all nations."<sup>23</sup> Often, though, when the membership process resembles a club, it seems that the main goal is building the club and adding members.

Fourth, as a result of the previous issues, a consumeristic atmosphere develops where the members believe that the church exists to serve them. Ministry becomes about maintenance to the members, rather than mission for the world. Anthony Robinson puts it this way, membership "cuts the nerve of mission and turns the church into an organization that exists to serve those who are already there."<sup>24</sup> Members believe they are entitled to certain privileges and prerogatives over those who are "non-members." This is the primary reason that Michael Foss argues for a change from a culture of membership to a culture of discipleship. In the membership model, the member becomes central and the preacher is considered successful if members are happy or satisfied.<sup>25</sup> They begin to complain when their needs are not being met, and a tension develops between external ministries and an internal focus.

Ultimately these problems have arisen because the membership model and process are simply incongruent with Southside's identity. Over the past 25 years, Southside has undergone a missional transformation to be a church that feels called and sent by God to participate in God's mission within south Fort Worth.<sup>26</sup> Our vision statement is to be a place of "mission, mercy, and transformation." Inherent within this vision is the sense that every person is called to participate in God's mission using their spiritual

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<sup>21</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 71-73.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, their privileges and access to club services is contingent on the person continuing to pay their membership fee, which in the church would be their "tithe."

<sup>23</sup> Foss, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Foss, 15-21.

<sup>26</sup> For a greater description and reflection about this missional transformation process at Southside, see Steve Cloer, "A Light to the City: The Missional Journey of Southside Church of Christ," *Missio Dei Journal* 3 2 (August 2012). <http://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-3-2/authors/md-3-2-cloer>

gifts. A key part of this participation is showing mercy. Following the path of Jesus Christ, we seek to show mercy to our neighbors and others in a holistic manner. We want to be a place where any person can come—despite their background—and be welcomed and loved. We seek transformation by God’s Spirit to take place within the life of each person. Given this vision and DNA, the idea or model of a person simply being a “member” of Southside just does not fit.

A great example of the incongruence is the sense of ambiguity that surrounds “placing membership” at Southside. For example, some (particularly younger) people at Southside struggle in understanding the point of “placing membership.” If they have been baptized and are committed to following God and participating in the mission of God, why should they “place membership” to simply join a church club? It simply does not make sense to the postmodern generation. To study this ambiguity, I gathered a diverse group of people from Southside to serve as a conversation team to help in discerning the situation.<sup>27</sup> One person on my conversation team highlighted this point, as she did not “check the box” on the contact card for several years, despite attending and functionally being a part of Southside. Her explanation was that it did not make sense to her.<sup>28</sup> On top of this, the leadership has felt the ambiguity in regards to the process. Questions surround how to handle different situations about membership. For instance, how do you handle a family that “places membership” when one member of the family is not baptized; is that a member or something else? What about those transferring their membership when we do not know their background; should they be welcomed in or not? What about those who are members, but they have never engaged in any meaningful spiritual involvement—are they really members? What is the proper method for assimilating a new member into the congregation? The questions go on and on, and typically these have been dealt with organizationally: developing policies, setting procedures, and starting programs. But I suggest that these questions are symptoms of a bigger problem for the church at large and Southside specifically. The model of membership is simply inconsistent with a missional ecclesiology. Darrell Guder agrees, “One of the immediate implications of a missional ecclesiology for North America is a critical rethinking of the meaning and

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<sup>27</sup> The conversation team consisted of seven people including myself. The group represented a cross-section of the church in age, ethnicity, and ministry involvement.

<sup>28</sup> DMin Conversation Team, Interview by author, Feb. 29, 2012.

practice of church membership."<sup>29</sup> The only solution is to reimagine the membership model and process from a missional perspective.

### **"Membership" within a Missional Ecclesiology**

There are two missional ecclesiological strands that stand behind the process of someone joining a local church community (either through baptism or transfer): equipping for mission and spiritual accountability. A key part of a missional ecclesiology is the idea that every person of the church community is called by God and sent to be a part of God's mission within the world. At Southside, this is what it means to be a church of mission: every person has a calling on his or her life to be a missionary. Lesslie Newbigin mentions that God elects people "for responsibility, not for privilege."<sup>30</sup> Often God's people have gotten these two ideas mixed up; in fact, this is a message of the prophets to Israel (cf. Amos 3:2). But God predestined the church to be the people of God, not simply to be recipients of the gospel but stewards of it. Each member is to take up the responsibility of being a minister and missionary in proclaiming and embodying the gospel. They are to be equipped to participate in the calling they have received from God. Reggie McNeal says the question that deserves reflection is "How do we turn members into missionaries?"<sup>31</sup> How can the process of joining a local church be a releasing and empowering of that person to be sent into God's mission?

Here is a moment where the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" becomes critical. Normally, this doctrine is applied to salvation (every person has access to God through Christ) or Scripture (every person has the opportunity to study, interpret, and apply Scripture). But here is an opportunity to apply this doctrine to mission. Every person is called and sent to be a part of what God is doing in the world. It is not just formal church leaders who are called, but every person. In the membership model, members are seen as simply contributors, pew-warmers, or passive recipients of religious goods and services. But in a missional model, every person represents the life-blood of God's mission in the world. They are the participants and actors. They are the missionaries individually and in their shared life together.

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<sup>29</sup> Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 245.

<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 32.

<sup>31</sup> McNeal, 45-49.

From a theoretical standpoint, this means shifting the lens by which one views the process of joining the local church community. Bohlman and Deal's work, *Reframing Organizations*, offer four different frames that leaders use in understanding organizations: structural, human relations, political, and symbolic. The traditional membership model views the process of joining a church community as structural.<sup>32</sup> The key points of the process are helping the new member to find their place within the structure or organization of the church. Membership processes help teach the structure, explain the structure and its benefits, and provide opportunities to fit in the structure. From a missional perspective, the lens shifts more to a human resources lens. The process of joining a local church community is about empowering new persons and helping them reach their missional potential. Church leaders do not become the guards of "who's in and who's out," as often happens within the membership model. Instead, they become the mentors, cultivators, and coaches who train, guide, and equip this new person or family into participating in God's mission with this worshipping community—a model more in line with Paul's description of leadership in Eph 4:7-13.<sup>33</sup> Guder encourages a model like this; "Every Christian community should see itself as a community of missionaries. Its responsibility to them is to guide them to identify God's calling, to recognize the gifts and opportunities they have, to provide them the biblical and theological training to incarnate the gospel in their particular fields, and then to commission them to their ministry."<sup>34</sup>

A second key strand of a missional ecclesiology is the sense of spiritual accountability. In the quest for living out God's calling as being sent into the world, there is a need for a community that can help keep a person or family focused on their missional vocation. Paul Hooker noticed this element in his description of a missional polity that he composed for the Presbyterian Church (USA). He says, "A missional polity encourages accountability on the part of its covenanted partners to one another."<sup>35</sup> As someone makes the decision to join the local church community, they are committing to hold and be held accountable to the calling that God has

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<sup>32</sup> For a description of these theoretical lenses, see Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 356.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Roxburgh advocates the language of mentor, cultivator, and coach for church leadership. See Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> Guder, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Hooker, "What Is Missional Ecclesiology?," (2009), [www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/missional-ecclesiology09.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/missional-ecclesiology09.pdf).

given. At Southside, this is part of being a church of transformation: transformation takes place as brothers and sisters in Christ speak words of encouragement and correction to one another as a part of spiritual accountability. In the discussion with the conversation team, this was an element that was mentioned.<sup>36</sup> One person on my conversation team talked about how his relationship with God is often up and down. Yet when he is away from God and his Southside community, he knows (and is reminded by others) that he is missed. That sense of accountability is critical for him to stay connected and to faithfully participate in God's mission. An elder who was on my conversation team shared that some kind of initiatory process for a new person joining the church does have value for the church community and for the new person because it demonstrates the commitment that both groups are making towards one another for their mutual spiritual growth as disciples following Christ.

Yet could this sense of accountability be strengthened by the Trinitarian metaphor of *perichoresis*?<sup>37</sup> The membership model focuses more on the sense of "oneness." In "placing membership," the key idea is that one has met the required criteria and fits within the club. As long as the new person continues to meet the requirements, they can stay within the club. This creates a feeling of the church being a "bounded set" where unity and membership are derived by the essential nature of each member: whether they have met and are continuing to meet the specified requirements.<sup>38</sup> Often, while members do feel a sense of accountability from this structure, it is based on essence and creates the feeling of an exclusive and, possibly, controlling club.

However, what if membership was about entering into the divine life found within the perichoretic relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Donald Fairburn describes.<sup>39</sup> The goal becomes not adhering to certain requirements, but growing deeper into the mutual relationship found within the Triune God. Accountability is still present, but is based on the desire of each person participating within the divine community (or

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<sup>36</sup> DMin Conversation Team.

<sup>37</sup> *Perichoresis* is a word first used by John of Damascus as a way to describe the relational view of Trinity. It describes how the Father, Son, and Spirit mutually indwell one another in self-sacrificial love. This produces a view of God sharing loving communion within the Godhead and the rest of the world. This metaphor is based on passages primarily in John 14-16. For more on this idea, see Jürgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in *Trinity, Community, and Power*, ed. M. D. Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 114-115.

<sup>38</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 110-11.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 202-07.

abiding in the vine, see Jn 15:1-11). Thus, to be a part of the church body involves dynamic movement, rather than stagnation. The church community then becomes more of a “centered set” where the emphasis is placed on discipleship, missional vocation, and Christian spirituality—all facets of the divine life. This does not mean there is no boundary to the community. As Guder advocates, the church community is a combination of being both a “bounded” set and “centered” set.<sup>40</sup> Every person must make a commitment to this local church body (either through baptism or transfer) to be a part of this community. But the spiritual accountability to help this person continue growing in Christ and remain active in God’s Mission is not based on rules, dogma, or fear, but on the love of one another, which encourages each person to grow deeper and move toward the divine love found within the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This leads to the question of how “placing membership” could be reimagined where these two theological strands—equipping for mission and spiritual accountability—could be intertwined? What biblical metaphor could be used to communicate to new people what is taking place when they join this local covenant community? What theological image could be used as a launching pad for membership processes to be started and put in place that would be congruent with the missional identity of Southside?

### **Missional Partnership**

According to H. Douglas Buckhalter, there are over 175 names, titles, and figures of speech used for Christians in the New Testament. Each name carries theological weight because each description in a special way tells what “God has done, is doing, and will do in and through” the people of God.<sup>41</sup> Our conversation team met to try and discern together what particular biblical description captured the sense of what God is doing within the members of Southside and could communicate what is happening theologically as someone joins this body of believers.<sup>42</sup> After discussing several names, the description “partner” came to the forefront for several reasons.

First, the word has a biblical and theological background. The word (*koinonos*) is used 10 times in the New Testament. It conveys the idea of “one

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<sup>40</sup> Guder imagines the local church community as a pilgrim people who are moving towards God’s Reign in Christ, rather than participating in the perichoretic community. But the key element is that there is movement while there also is a boundary. Guder and Barrett, 207-08.

<sup>41</sup> H. Douglas Buckhalter, “Christians, Names Of,” in *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 90.

<sup>42</sup> DMin Conversation Team, Interview by author, Mar. 4, 2012.

who takes part in something with someone" or "companion, sharer."<sup>43</sup> Paul uses this word to describe congregations or individuals who joined with him in his mission and ministry of proclaiming the gospel. For instance, in 2 Cor 8:23, he refers to Titus, as his "partner and fellow worker."<sup>44</sup> He, along with other co-workers of Paul, helped him in his quest to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, and also further the maturation of the congregations he planted.

Second, this description carries a sense of mission. In Phil 1:5, Paul refers to the Philippian church as sharing in the "participation (*koinonia*) of the gospel." Although the actual word "partner" is not used here (it is a derivative), the idea of partnership is definitely present. The Philippians had become a partner with Paul in helping him proclaim the gospel from the first day they met. Balz and Schneider mention, "This partnership is based on the mediation of the gospel by the apostle and in the common participation in the gospel and is expressed in common service for the gospel."<sup>45</sup> Paul and the Philippian church were partners because they shared in the common vision of proclaiming the gospel, which was manifested in various ways.

Third, the description emphasizes community. The word is a derivative of *koinonia*, which is the biblical word for fellowship, or Christian community based on covenant commitment. Partnership itself implies that I am a part of something bigger than myself. It bonds me to another person or group where I feel a strong connection. As a partner, I find comfort knowing that there is a community that I can walk with in missional discipleship and that I am not alone. Paul relates this idea in 2 Cor 1:7, where he suggests the Corinthians are "sharers (*koinonos*)" with him in his sufferings and his comfort. They are walking with him as he experiences the joy of serving the Lord and the hardships. Also, a part of community is the recognition that I individually have a role to play. Being a "partner" implies a sense of mutual equality within the relationship. It is not a one-sided relationship, but instead both parties are to bring spiritual gifts and resources to the community for "the common good" (1 Cor 12:4-11). Therefore, inherent within the word "partner" is the expectation that I have responsibility within the community to join with them and share with them as the church body seeks to live out the gospel.

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<sup>43</sup> Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 553.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Cor 9:23. *New American Standard Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). All Scripture references in this paper will be taken from the NASB.

<sup>45</sup> Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 303-04.

Fourth, the word carries with it spiritual accountability. Because the word implies community, there are certain expectations required of those who have become partners. A great biblical example is found in Phmn 17. Here Paul requests Philemon to take back the runaway slave Onesimus. In his asking of Philemon, he persuades him by saying, "If then you regard me a partner (*koinonos*), accept him as you would me." The fact that Philemon shared a connection with Paul meant something to Paul. His status of being his "partner" meant, in this case, that he should respond in mercy to the return of Onesimus. Also, Paul warns in 1 Cor 10:18-20 that the act of communion demonstrates the commitment in missional partnership that one is making with God. Therefore, if someone participates in a sacrifice to demons, that person becomes a "sharer (*koinonos*) in demons." Communion for Paul exhibited the partnership one has entered with God and one another; therefore, this partnership cannot be shared with any idol.

Finally, the description is theological and speaks to the perichoretic life of God in which each disciple seeks to participate. In 2 Pet 1:4, Peter mentions the blessings and promises that God has given the people of God through divine power. These blessings have been given, "so that by them you may become partakers (*koinonos*) of the divine nature." The nature of God has been opened, so that through God's power we might be a partner with God in the divine nature of God. God's nature is full of selfless love exhibited within the Trinity that God desires to share with the world through God's redemptive mission. Through partnership with God, we share in God's perichoretic love and join with God in sharing that redemptive love with the world.<sup>46</sup>

In the framework of missional partnership, joining the church community is not about "placing membership," but about accepting a calling;<sup>47</sup> accepting the call to "partner" with this local community of believers as we seek to live out God's mission in the world. One immediate recognition among the conversation team was the sense of purpose gained by utilizing the image of missional partnership for someone joining the church and the sense of joy found within the sense of partnership among a church family. As one person put it, "I now know that I'm not doing it by myself." Plus, in sitting down with a new person or family, the immediate

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<sup>46</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church*, 1st ed., Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 18-20. McNeal emphasizes the partnership with God in the sense of redemptive mission from Ex 19:5.

<sup>47</sup> This is the exact phrasing used by someone in my Conversation Team Meeting; it is not "placing membership" but accepting a calling. DMin Conversation Team.

entrance question could be, "How are you going to partner with us in God's mission?" Implied within the question is the idea that you are joining a missional community that has certain expectations. In committing to this community, it is expected that each person is a vital participant in God's mission here and will use their spiritual gifts for God's mission. This question opens up the missional imagination of how this new person or family could be used by God. Critical in this question is the phrase "God's mission." Often in membership processes, the push to get a new member involved often can seem self-serving for the church institution. But here, the question recognizes this person's partnership might not happen within the church building or even in existing church ministries. This partnership in God's mission may extend through their vocation or in other areas previously never imagined by the local church community. But this emphasizes the idea that every new person is commissioned to participate in God's Mission along with their new spiritual community. As Letty Russell says, "The call to ministry is not an option for some Christians. It is basic to the existence of all Christians as they seek to live together as *partners* in Christ's service."<sup>48</sup>

## Reflections

In the discussions within the conversation team about reimagining "placing membership," we realized that redefining this process theologically was more important than the actual organizational processes attached to it. Still, in order to help a new person or family commit to being a missional partner with Southside, we agreed that some kind of initiatory process was needed. The team decided that surrounding the process of committing to be a missional partner, intimate conversations needed to happen. First, there needs to be a conversation with the new person before they make the commitment to help them recognize the kind of commitment they are making. This conversation could consist of the explaining of the expectations of being a missional partner, including spiritual accountability, commitment to mission, and growth toward participation in the divine life. Then, after the decision is made to partner with the community of believers at Southside, another intimate conversation should be held in which discussion was given to how this new person or family could partner with Southside in God's Mission. This could consist of the new person plugging into one of our current local or global missions, or

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<sup>48</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 50.

discerning a new way to partner in God's Mission in our community or world. It could be a time of imagining how this new person can be equipped to witness through their current job. This conversation would be about missional brainstorming to help the new person find their place as a missional partner. Such questions that could be discussed are: How could your family partner in God's mission at Southside? What do you want to see God do within your family over the next year? What is God currently doing within your life? What are you passionate about and how could that be channeled towards God's redemptive mission?<sup>49</sup>

The Southside congregation has attempted this theological shift from "placing membership" to missional partnership for the past six years. From an organizational perspective, the biggest change within the congregation has occurred among the leadership. The elders and ministers agreed to this paradigm shift and relinquished the old, membership language for the new, biblical missional partnership language. One oddity in using the word "partner" instead of "member" is that, while the word has a rich biblical and theological background, in contemporary culture, it can convey a variety of meanings. For instance, one can have a "partnership" with an organization, while not being a committed member of the organization.<sup>50</sup> So while the biblical word "partner" conveys a sense of accountability and community, the contemporary usage does not always share the same intensity. This has been a concern of the elders and ministers in using this metaphor. The leadership has sought to explain the biblical metaphor regularly and use the word with other missional phrases ("partner in the gospel," "partner in God's mission at Southside," "partner in mission," etc.).<sup>51</sup>

But the biggest shift has been the leadership attempting to function more as equippers and life-coaches for those committing to join the body at Southside, instead of examiners who check qualifications. Traditionally, the elders and ministers at Southside have not been real "hands-on" with new

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<sup>49</sup> Reggie McNeal inspired some of these questions in his description of a shift from being program-driven to being people-centered. This shift is a part of moving from membership to missional partnership, too. See Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 124-26.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, the word "partner" can be defined as one "associated with another in an activity or sphere of common interest" or a "business partnership." These definitions do not attain the spiritual intimacy and commitment that take place in a missional partnership within the local church. Houghton Mifflin Company, *The American Heritage Concise Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 605.

<sup>51</sup> I might add here that while I am advocating missional partnership as the dominant terminology for understanding a new person committing to a local church body. I am aware that there are other biblical terms that could convey similar missional ideas (disciple, missionary, servant, fellow-worker, etc.) that could be used alongside this image to help in communicating missional expectations.

people. Often leaders attempt to greet and welcome new people but not do much more. The theological concept of missional partnership challenges the elders and ministers to become more intentional about having conversations with new people who are deciding to join the community: both encouraging and listening to them. This area has become a bigger priority, as it sets the tone for how new people understand the identity at Southside and how they fit within it. As the theological concept of missional partnership has become more ingrained within the culture of Southside, new processes and initiatory acts have been started to help in the commissioning process of a new missional partner.<sup>52</sup> Further reflection is needed on more ways that this concept could be integrated into worship assemblies, baptisms, and other continuing conversations that would further develop the identity of missional partnership among the church.

## **Conclusion**

Craig Van Gelder says, "Spirit-led congregations find it helpful to utilize some type of intentional welcoming and enfolding process that brings persons fully into the life and ethos of the congregation."<sup>53</sup> In this paper, I have examined our previous process at Southside Church of Christ and reimagined it with the theological concept of missional partnership. The current model of "placing membership" is unbiblical and derived because of historical changes throughout the past centuries in America. Today, this model corresponds with civic clubs, health clubs, and other exclusive organization, and often it develops passive Christians who focus more on the benefits of the gospel rather than being proclaimers of it. It creates a consumeristic culture where the concern is about keeping the members happy. I have experienced these issues and others associated with this model at Southside Church of Christ. Therefore, I have proposed that this model be reimagined with the theological concept of missional partnership. Inherent within this idea are two key ecclesiological strands: equipping for mission and spiritual accountability. As a partner in the gospel, one is expected to participate in God's mission using the spiritual gifts and vocation that God has granted in concert with his or her church community. Also, a missional partner is held accountable by other partners to stay focused on God, centered in God's mission, and growing deeper in God's divine life. The word "partner" is biblical and conveys theologically

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<sup>52</sup> Most recently, our ministers led a repeating two-part class called "First Steps" that was meant to introduce Southside's missional identity to those who were new at Southside and invite them into a conversation about how they could *partner* with us in participating in God's mission.

<sup>53</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 149.

what one would hope would happen when a new person commits to a covenant community within a missional ecclesiology. Therefore, the leadership at Southside has integrated this concept into the organizational process of adding new people—whether through baptism or transfer—as forming missional partners. The goal is, through intimate conversations, changing the language used, and adapting of leadership style, Southside would be a congregation where it is understood that our family is not made up of members, but of missional partners who have been called and sent to participate in God’s grand redemptive mission!

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