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Cultivating Virtue: Developing a Guiding Document for Youth Ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church

Adam Daniels
addaniels7@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to produce a guiding document of virtues that represented the type of Christ-like character qualities desired in youth at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. The six virtues chosen in the document represent a comprehensive vision for character growth over the course of students' time in the program. To provide a theological foundation for this project, I examined the idea that virtue has a narrative shape where words find their meaning in a story. For our purposes, this story is generally stated as the story of Jesus at first but is then seen as best articulated in the theology of Paul, specifically, Rom 12 and Phil 2:1-11. These two texts provide an understanding of how Paul wanted his churches to be communities of moral discernment. This purpose was finally achieved by leading a purposive sample of eight members of the congregation through eight sessions where ideas on virtue, character, and ministry were engaged and debated, culminating in the choosing and defining of six virtues. The outcomes of this project were then evaluated from a triangulation of perspectives: an outside expert, insider participants, and the participant researcher. Finally, the intervention was mined for possible contributions to the larger Christian community and ways it could add to the larger discussion on virtue and character growth.

Cultivating Virtue: Developing a Guiding Document for Youth
Ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Adam Daniels

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Adam Daniels, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

Donnie Snider

Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

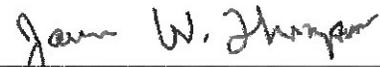
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Thesis Committee



Dr. Ronald K. Bruner, Chair



Dr. James W. Thompson



Dr. Carson E. Reed

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To my wife, who has supported, encouraged, and inspired me every step of this journey and never let me give up.

To my mother, who showed me what faith looked like in the worst of circumstances with the best of attitudes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Maturity is not popular. A cursory browsing of the types of characters that litter the entertainment landscape reveals a bias towards vice rather than virtue. That is not to say that virtuous examples are non-existent but rather, outnumbered. The discussion of what it means to be a good person is thus often buried until a truly horrific example of evil surfaces, leaving the public scrambling for words, slogans, or experts to make sense of an unfamiliar discourse. Additionally, institutions with supposed moral capital, such as churches, are now widely distrusted for a variety of reasons, not least of which is an inability to articulate a winsome account of what it means to be good. Indeed, churches often find themselves on the defensive in these conversations, feeling overwhelmed and misunderstood.

This lack of moral maturity is especially true of teenagers in American churches. Using Christian Smith's seminal findings about religion and the youth of America, Thomas Bergler says, "American teenagers are surprisingly inarticulate about their faith."¹ Specifically, Smith and his team found five areas where American society and the church at large are not preparing teens. Two areas of interest are the inability to discuss and reason about morality and a lack of higher life purpose that could lead to a nihilistic

1. Thomas Bergler, *From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 13.

understanding of life.²

Bergler argues that this problem can be traced to a misunderstanding of the gospel, particularly the idea that spiritual maturity is a dangerous thing to articulate in faith communities because those descriptions might lead to pride.³ Though his primary focus is on Lutheran theology and ethics, Joel Biermann argues that this misunderstanding of the gospel has led to a “flight from ethics” that brings about more confusion, especially “in the context of an increasingly amoral society that has been made incapable of doing any meaningful moral reflection.”⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre elucidated this cultural situation in his landmark work *After Virtue*, which remains at the heart of philosophical discussions on virtue since its publication in 1981.⁵

However, this cultural moment has also led to a reaffirmation of the discussion of virtues in general. James Davison Hunter sees this as part of an older guard’s way of stemming the tide of moral relativity. Hunter puts little hope in this project, even going so far as to say that “Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little. Its time has passed.”⁶ Yet virtue ethics as a field of Christian reflection has experienced a bit of a renaissance as of late. Scholars—including Stanley Hauerwas and N. T. Wright—have argued for the retrieval of such conversations as essential to the flourishing of the

2. Bergler, *From Here to Maturity*, 6.

3. Bergler, *From Here to Maturity*, 33.

4. Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 3.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed., 2007).

6. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3.

church.⁷ However, how to go about such a conversation is not clear.

Different approaches to virtue abound, varying with the geographic area or community in which people find themselves. As Hauerwas asserted, “The very plurality of different notions of virtue indicates that any account of the virtues is context-dependent.”⁸ The question then becomes how to have such a conversation in a way that brings about any clarity within specific communities. Is there a way to dialogue about virtue that is fluid enough to meet the needs of a location but rooted enough in commonalities to describe itself as “Christian?”

Title of Project

Consequently, the scope of this ministry intervention is to create a guiding document of virtues appropriate for the youth ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church in the context of a conversation with interested stakeholders of the church community. This guide will be the product of conversation and sustained reflection on what virtue is, can be, and should be in youth while also seeking to provide contextual virtues for the ministry. The title is thus “Cultivating Virtue: Developing a Guiding Document for Youth Ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church.”

7. Hauerwas and Samuel Wells argue that a discussion of Christian ethics must be particularly rooted in a discussion of practices, specifically, the practices that a church agrees upon as central to its identity (Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *Christian Ethics* [Malden: Blackwell, 2004], 37). This follows the suggested approach laid out by Alastair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Wright, on the other hand, roots his discussion of virtue squarely in eschatology, choosing instead to focus on the end, or telos, of the Christian journey, where Christians have become “truly human” (N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* [New York: Harper Collins, 2010], 25). Thus for Wright, virtues are those habits of character that bridge the gap between initial belief and ultimate transformation as seen in the resurrection and the new heaven and new earth.

8. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 112.

Ministry Context

This ministry intervention will take place in Cookeville, Tennessee. Located in the heart of middle Tennessee, Cookeville is a town of 30,000 people situated almost directly between the larger cities of Nashville and Knoxville. It is home to Tennessee Tech University, a four-year college with 10,500 students, noted nationally for its engineering and education programs. Cookeville is an idyllic Southern town surrounded by beautiful national parks and the gorgeous natural scenery of the Appalachian hills. Additionally, a low cost of living attracts people and families from all over the nation and the local economy is quite strong as compared to neighboring towns and cities. Steeped in tradition, it is a place that puts a great emphasis on “family values” and patriotism. Most of the city is registered as Republican, but there is some diversity (political and otherwise) because of the presence of the university. The university also provides an outlet for educational discussions and the arts, which are also of great importance at the local high school.

Cookeville First United Methodist Church is one of the oldest churches in the city, established in 1856 in the heart of downtown.⁹ Over the years it has grown and acquired many more properties around the original sanctuary, now owning five large buildings. Among these are two large education buildings (one of which includes the church offices), a gym, an old church building now converted into a worship space and food pantry, and the original sanctuary. There is even a columbarium where some church members have chosen to have their ashes inurned after their death. The building itself is a source of both great pride and stress as much of the budget goes to maintain both the

9. Cookeville First United Methodist Church, “Our History.” No Pages. 4 June 2017. Online: <http://www.cookevillefumc.org/welcome/our-history/>.

beauty of it and to keep the older structures functional and safe. All of this is part of a culture that seems to equate a measure of success and notoriety in having such structures to maintain.

There are two worship services every Sunday morning with a consistent combined attendance of over five hundred and no current worship gatherings on Sunday nights. The Sunday school classes meet between the two services and often function as relational small groups or times of socialization for adults instead of following a curriculum. Finding teachers for these classes is a continuous problem, and the burden usually falls to staff. The strongest and best funded ministry in the church is the music ministry, which attracts music students from the university and children to senior adults from all walks of life from within the church. The staff member in charge of this ministry is also the most tenured, having been with the church for nearly twenty years. In addition to the music ministry, several other ministries have corresponding staff as their head: children, youth, service, congregational care, and a daycare called “Jacob’s Ladder.” In addition to these staff members, there are two pastors, one senior and another associate.

The church has been through a time of great upheaval in the last ten years, losing multiple staff, eliminating a spiritual formation staff person, and adding a children’s ministry position. Some changes were due to the Methodist District office itself which moved staff to other churches, and some resulted from other life circumstances. Among these was a long-tenured youth minister who stayed through most of the changes, a total of seven years, but recently left as well. Many members struggled with her departure because she grew up in the church and was a product of its programming. These changes have caused palpable anxiety in the system as constant change has led to great fear of any

change. Having been at the congregation for two years now, I have seen this in a multiplicity of ways, even within the youth group. Fidelity to programming is paramount, with even the slightest of changes bringing anxiety and opposition.

I came to this congregation after seven years of campus ministry work at the University of Georgia. There, one of the constant themes was college students trying to come to grips with a faith of their own. More specifically, it seemed as if many of them, though they had attended a church and a youth group, had little idea what they believed and how to articulate it. Thus when I came to this job as a youth minister, one of the points of emphasis was to establish a program where youth group members left better prepared for college by learning to articulate their own faith and own it for themselves.

However, I quickly learned that there was no comprehensive plan for discipleship in the youth programming and that there was little in the larger church as well. Most of the educational thrust of the congregation seemed haphazard and disconnected from any sort of overall goal. Some of this randomness is no doubt related to staff turnover as staff historically have seemed to be the ones to articulate this vision. Some lack of direction was also due to relationships taking primacy over learning. This is, of course, not necessarily a bad thing but represents what the church culture currently values. I also found that biblical literacy was extremely low among the youth of the congregation. Seemingly obvious biblical references missed the mark and even stories as germane as The Prodigal Son¹⁰ seemed to be new information. In one telling incident, I asked a youth class what the point of Christianity was and received only silence. This is not odd in a class of teenagers, but the corresponding answer was, as it came from one of the

10. Luke 15:11-32.

leaders of the group, a senior in high school, “No one ever told us.” One wonders if this is true or if this is more the result of teens hearing something instead of being allowed to engage it.

I spent the better part of my first year seeking how to best teach this group. Then I stumbled upon the idea of discussing what it meant to be a “good person.” The group was profoundly interested in this discussion and especially interested in what kind of virtues a good person would exhibit. This ultimately became the genesis of this intervention as I began to ask how to have this discussion in a way that was rooted in gospel truth and not mere morality. This could also provide a vision for teaching and curriculum in the years to come. Essentially, what would a youth ministry look like if it programmed and made explicit the type of Christlike characteristics we wanted to see in our teens after their formative years with us? This is not a new idea but an ancient one. As Bergler asserts, “In antiquity, children were seen as undeveloped of character” and “needed a teacher who would form them through a process of moral and intellectual training.”¹¹ This, Bergler says, is what the New Testament writers, including the apostle Paul, had in mind when they spoke of growing to maturity in the faith. This concept, however, stands in almost direct confrontation with the assumed wisdom of American church culture that has “adapted the faith to adolescent tastes,”¹² adding to the moral confusion of youth instead of providing clarity.

11. Bergler, *From Here to Maturity*, 37.

12. Bergler, *From Here to Maturity*, 2.

Problem Statement

There is a lack of vision when it comes to the character formation of youth at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. The congregation needs a document by which a vision is articulated for teaching Christlike virtues and evaluating programming through this lens. Ideally, this would be a communal process that would empower the possibility of greater ownership within the youth group and in families asking these questions of themselves as well.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to develop a guiding document that fosters desired Christian virtues for the youth at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. I led a team of nine congregation members made up of a mix of parents and youth from the church. We met for eight weeks on Sunday mornings to develop the guiding document. Three participants were youth group members, three were parents of youth group members, and three were parents of children not yet graduated to the youth group.

This group created a list of virtues based on our conversations to guide youth group education and planning in the coming years. Each week the group participated in (1) an exercise called “Dwelling in the Word”¹³ that focused on Rom 12 or Phil 2: 1-11 to emphasize the importance on moral transformation, (2) a short time of teaching led by me; (3) discussion based on that week’s goal, (4) the assignment of relevant work outside the meeting times. At the end of this intervention, I used the guiding document as a lens through which to create, select, and evaluate curriculum and programming.

13. “Dwelling in the Word” is an exercise that this project will model after Patrick Keifert and Pat Taylor Ellison’s work for Church Innovations (P. T. Ellison and Patrick Keifert, and Church Innovations, *Dwelling in the Word* [St. Paul: 2011]).

Basic Assumptions

There are already several Christlike virtues present in the youth ministry, be they individual or group characteristics. These virtues, however, have not been discussed as part of planning or curriculum. This project revealed different virtues not specific to this location and illuminated ones that were. However, I did not assume that identifying something alone brings understanding. Therefore, significant disagreements between team members existed according to what they felt was most important and should be included in the document.

This intervention also assumed low biblical literacy for some of the participants.¹⁴ Thus some of the ideas were heard and discussed by some team members for the first time. This required patience for some as some stories and concepts required multiple explanations.

This intervention has potentially significant value for youth ministry at this congregation. Clear definition of valued virtues will empower ministry planning to cohere with our vision and clarify planning and evaluation. Beyond the valuable discussion in the group, these conversations may provide a significant jumping off point for family discussions as well.

14. Barna Group, "The Bible in America: 6-Year Trends." 16 Nov 2019. <https://www.barna.com/research/the-bible-in-america-6-year-trends/>. Barna notes, "Unless something dramatically changes among Millennials, however, Barna researchers expect reading frequency in the general population to trend downward in coming years as Elders become a smaller share of the total: Half of Elders read the Bible at least once a week (49%), compared to one-quarter of Millennials (24%)."

Definitions

I use the term *virtue* in the following manner: *Habits or elements of character that are deeply connected to and rooted in Christlikeness, specifically the theology of transformation as put forth in the letters of Paul.* The term *virtue* has polyvalent usage in ethical terminology, and I do not claim any universality in this definition but rather acknowledge that “there has been no satisfactory, unambiguous moral definition”¹⁵ of *virtue*. This definition makes use of multiple other understandings of *virtue* while attempting to connect Pauline theology to some of these descriptions.

Moreover, this definition as rooted in Pauline theology is a profoundly communal way of thinking and acting. The virtues as understood by Paul are embodied in community. This is not to say that individuals cannot have virtues but that communal virtues can best reflect the body of Christ because no one disciple can embody the virtues of Jesus alone. Thus as disciples submit their different gifts and stories into the community, they discover how they can best help the community to reflect the virtues of Jesus himself.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to the youth group and parents at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. As such, it is delimited by the socio-economic factors and minimal racial diversity that make up the church at large. Furthermore, this project uses only the letters of Paul and does not make extensive use of other biblical literature, whether in the New Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁶

15. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 112.

16. Some may prefer to use the terminology of “Old Testament” here, but I feel as if this carries unnecessarily negative overtones and limits the scope of usage to Christians only.

Limitations

This project is limited by the scope and experience of those chosen to participate. As representatives selected from the church, they can shape a narrative in a way that may not conform to another person's experience within the group or of the church or youth group at large. Furthermore, this project is not intended to initiate virtue formation. Rather, this project's goal is to clarify specific virtues to target in a youth ministry context, which could be a first step towards virtue formation for a group. Naming virtues does not automatically lead to intentional practices, but a vision of what is possible will help a community have a goal from which to shape their intentional practices.¹⁷ This is not to say that naming virtues and engaging in practices leading to their formation are separate but simply that developing those practices is beyond the scope of this project. Doubtless some virtues and practices will emerge in the course of this discussion, even among the participants, but selecting the key communal virtues is the first step in a lengthier process.

Conclusion

The youth ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church requires a vision for virtue formation that can help guide their programming choices and evaluation. The purpose of this project was to produce a document of specific virtues that will serve as guideposts for overall communal formation. These virtues were to be chosen and defined by interested stakeholders from within the congregation for this context. The question,

17. See Dallas Willard (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* [Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002], 85-91,) who argues that to be transformed, people need a vision for what they can be before they set out to define practices or means. For Willard this pattern of transformation is VIM (vision, intention, means). For the purposes of this project I am defining the vision and not the intention or the means.

however, was how to go about such a process that could facilitate meaningful theological reflection and conversation. Such a venture had to reckon with the lack of discussion around virtue in general in churches but also had to produce a cogent conversational framework from which to build clarity and not add to the confusion. A discussion for the theology of this conversation follows in chapter 2.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

Western cultures are currently a battleground for ethical and moral reflection, particularly when religious perspectives are involved. Daniel Harrington and James Keenan rightly point out the shortcomings of such a conversation and propose several reasons that some might be hesitant to engage in it.¹ Some question whether virtue ethics² (as traditionally understood) can provide a sufficiently effective platform to account for the relationality of human community, as virtue tends to be individualistic. Some worry that doctrine will be compromised. Others still are concerned about the ways political “right-wing organizations”³ tend to make appeals to the virtues to influence the voting public. Harrington and Keenan, however, are convinced these limitations carry little weight. There is a complexity to virtue ethics easily ignored because of its focus on the individual. How can one know if one is truly virtuous? Is being a good person merely a matter of listing classical virtues and following them to the best of one’s understanding? What if that understanding is wrong? Or dangerous? Or is there even such a thing as a wrong understanding of virtue?

1. Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 8-12.

2. A philosophical viewpoint that embraces both deontological and utilitarian ethics.

3. Harrington and Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics*, 8.

The Narrative Shape of Virtue

Brad Kellenberg, a modern advocate for a return to virtue ethics, asserts, “The first step in ethics, therefore, is to identify the telos of human life.”⁴ In philosophical and theological discourse, telos is a word that has to do with an aim or ultimate goal. This seems like a big question, maybe too big, to answer on the front end of such a project. Bryan Stone asserts that this is precisely why Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of modernity is so important. In his view, MacIntyre argues that modernity “is a story of fragmentation in which portions of the language of morality have survived from the past while the social context that would make such language intelligible has not.”⁵ Put another way, we have been handed words and concepts without any conversation about what they mean. Indeed, could it be that all words find meaning only in a story? But what if there is no story? As Stanley Hauerwas is prone to say, “The story of liberalism is the story that we have no story.”⁶ One does not have to be a political liberal to be affected by this, as “liberalism” here refers more to the intellectual journey of the west through Postmodern scholarship.

Thus for any account of virtue to have intelligibility, a story must be chosen. A story provides meaning and direction in deciding what is virtuous and what is not.⁷ More than that, story helps us define our own character. It is not just clever wordplay to say

4. Brad J Kellenberg, “Positioning MacIntyre in Christian Ethics,” in Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kellenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 52.

5. Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 29.

6. R. R. Reno, “Stanley Hauerwas,” in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 308.

7. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 37-38.

that character is both what we are and who we are in a story. Thus, acting “in character” or “with character” depends on how one acts in a chosen story. Stone explains, “To become a Christian is to join a story and to allow that story to begin to narrate our lives.”⁸ This then is the telos of the Christian, the aim, to be more fully a true character in the story of Jesus Christ. This, interestingly enough, is the meaning of the Greek word for virtue, *arête*, which so defined meant “that which causes a thing to perform its function well.”⁹ To that end, few theologians have been more helpful in this understanding of virtue than Stanley Hauerwas and N. T. Wright.

In Hauerwas’s landmark work *A Community of Character*, he asserts that liberalism, a term not without misunderstanding and a story of its own, contains the claim that society could be organized “without any narrative that is commonly held to be true.”¹⁰ This claim, he thinks, led to a culture where no adequate account of human existence is handed down.¹¹ But for Hauerwas there is a solution, especially for the Christian, that the church has somehow overlooked. Simply put, Jesus did not outline a social ethic; his story is a social ethic.¹² Thus Christology and ecclesiology, Christ and his church, are not to be separated. Consequently, Christian ethics cannot be based on words divorced from the story of Jesus. Love, justice, forbearance, and the like find their true meaning in his story. Dropped into another story, they may have completely different meanings. To the extent that Christians or communities embrace the telos of entering the

8. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 39.

9. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 111.

10. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 12.

11. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 10.

12. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 40.

story of Jesus, they will find clarity for ethical discourse. This is not to say that this conversation will produce easy answers or even the same answers from one community to the next, but it will bring a clarity not found in the story in which we have no story. As Hauerwas puts it,

What we need is not a principle or end but a narrative that charts a way for us to live coherently amid the diversity and conflicts that circumscribe and shape our moral existence. In summary, I am suggesting that descriptively the self is best understood as a narrative, and normatively we require a narrative that will provide the skills appropriate to the conflicting loyalties and roles we necessarily confront in our existence. The unity of self is therefore more like the unity that is exhibited in a good novel—namely with many subplots and characters that we at times do not closely relate to the primary dramatic action of the novel. But ironically without such subplots we cannot achieve the kind of unity necessary to claim our actions as our own.¹³

Therefore, Hauerwas suggests that fidelity to this story will require its being told again and again.¹⁴ In a world of competing stories, the church becomes the place where the story is heard over and over and in which the hearers can test their “character.” Here, lies are exposed and the world can be seen accurately. For the church is Jesus’s story organized¹⁵ and is the place of training for living in that story. This is not to say that there will not be laws or rules but that these boundaries find their meaning in the story of Jesus, which is the story of Israel come to full flower.¹⁶

This assumes, however, that each community will have a way to discern said

13. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 144.

14. Reno, *Stanley Hauerwas*, 308.

15. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 50.

16. It is interesting to note that the structure of Exodus very much follows a pattern of story/law/story/law.

boundaries. As Hauerwas would say, this process requires a back and forth of sorts where Christians are learning to live out the story through their actions and continually testing them for their coherence with the story of Jesus. Hauerwas continues,

Yet a narrative that provides the skill to let us claim our actions as our own is not the sort that I can simply ‘make mine’ through a decision. Substantive narratives that promise me a way to make my self my own require me to grow into the narrative by constantly challenging my past achievements. That is what I mean by saying that the narrative must provide skills of discernment and distancing. For it is certainly a skill to be able to describe my behavior appropriately and to know how to ‘step back’ from myself so that I might better understand what I am doing. The ability to step back cannot come by trying to discover a moral perspective abstracted from all my endeavors, but rather come through having a narrative that gives me critical purchase on my own projects.¹⁷

This, for Hauerwas, is Christian growth, or put another way, discipleship: to lean into the story of Jesus while leaning back out into the world full of different narratives. This is the “adventure”¹⁸ of the Christian life, to locate one’s self in the story and to take “responsibility for”¹⁹ one’s specific part in it.

Ultimately, the claims of Hauerwas are coherent with the perspective of N. T. Wright. But while the focus of Hauerwas appears to be mostly ecclesial, Wright concentrates more on the eschatological. In his view, the theological confusion around “eternal life” has led to great confusion about the meaning of the Christian life. This causes Christians experience a large gap in their vision when it comes to the point of Christian discipleship.

It’s as though they were standing on one side of a deep, wide river, looking across to the further bank. On this bank you declare your faith. On the opposite bank is

17. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 144.

18. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 148.

19. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 149.

the ultimate result—final salvation itself. But what are people supposed to do in the meantime?²⁰

For Wright, the prospect of transformation has been limited not just because of the infidelity to the Jesus story but also because of the neglect of the larger story of salvation. In this larger story, Christians acting “in character” find themselves acting in a way that is true to their “redeemed self”²¹ and not to a vague notion of self-discovery as taught by modern Western culture. If the ultimate goal is to be a true human who is in the shape of Jesus of Nazareth, then to act out that narrative now is to take one’s part in the story of redemption. For Wright, this is where Christian virtue specifically has much to offer the modern world because it “discovered both a totally different way of being human and a way which scooped up the best that ancient wisdom had to offer and placed it in a framework where it could, at last, make sense.”²² This framework thus takes the story of redemption as revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and provides a way for humans to envision not just the kinds of human beings they could be in this life but also the ones they will be when God brings heaven and earth together at last.

For Wright then, there is thus a battle between two natures. Using the apostle Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians as a guide, he sees the helpful metaphors daytime and nighttime as a ground for fruitful reflection on what it means to be a Christian, specifically a Christian who is growing in virtue. As he puts it, “Paul’s vision of Christian virtue, centered elsewhere on faith, hope, and love, is all about developing

20. Wright, *After You Believe*, 3.

21. Wright, *After You Believe*, 7.

22. Wright, *After You Believe*, 25.

the habits of the daytime heart in a world still full of darkness.”²³ This is thus the telos of the Christian life, to become like Christ was when he came into the world, a world of darkness that was not ready to receive him, and to reflect the light of Christ that represents the story of a “genuine humanity.”²⁴ This is perhaps where the battle is most fully joined for Wright. Whereas the broader culture might define the telos of humanity as happiness, the Christian testimony is apt to use words such as resurrection, new heavens and new earth, and ultimately “God himself.”²⁵ This then leads Wright to ask what such a framework would do to a discussion of virtue.

If the creator God is the goal, then what that means for human beings is not that they will be absorbed into God, losing their identity and individuality, but that they will come once more to reflect the divine image fully and completely—from God into the world, and from the world back to God. In other words: rulers and priests. This idea of being restored as genuine image-bearers is exactly what we find Paul exploring.²⁶

It would seem then, at least to Wright, that the battle over the role of the discussion of virtue in the church is no small one but may just be the thing that defines it the most as it lives between the now and the not yet of salvation.

In the end, both Wright and Hauerwas see the discussion of virtue not as a peripheral issue but one of great importance. The point is not, in the strictest sense, to be “right” in developing virtues consistent with the story of Jesus or the story of salvation

23. Wright, *After You Believe*, 137.

24. Wright, *After You Believe*, 137.

25. Wright, *After You Believe*, 139.

26. Wright, *After You Believe*, 139.

because that is a moving target in the broader culture. Rather, the aim is to be “formed by narratives faithful to the character of reality.”²⁷ Nevertheless, there is a direct effect on the broader culture in how the church goes about developing its people of virtue. These are not small issues. In a world full of violence, this is a moral project that “should not be lightly criticized or dismissed.”²⁸ As Hauerwas claims, “Our only escape from destructive histories consists in having the virtues trained by a truthful story, and that can come solely through participation in a society that claims our lives in a more fundamental fashion than any profession or state has a right to do.”²⁹ In truth, these would appear to be the kinds of communities that the apostle Paul set out to build.

The Church as Moral Community

There exists a strange disconnect between the thinking of theologians on Pauline theology and an understanding of the communities he was trying to build. The doctrine of justification by faith often takes center stage, squeezing out any other players who might have a part to perform. Thus there is often confusion about what Paul actually expected from the churches he planted and gave his life to build. James Thompson puts it this way, “Although the moral transformation of the churches is the most consistent feature of Paul’s catechetical instruction and letters, discovering the coherence of his theology and ethics remains a challenge.”³⁰ Thompson believes this is because the aforementioned doctrine of justification is overemphasized as Paul’s guiding star. On the contrary, Paul

27. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 116.

28. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 120.

29. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 127.

30. James Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 4.

seems most concerned that his churches be transformed and live “a new moral existence,”³¹ as every writing of his provides ethical instruction in light of the gospel. Yet Paul fails to mention ancient moralists,³² seems unconcerned with public matters of justice,³³ and seems to follow the same moral pattern of his day, even when creating lists of vices and virtues.³⁴ So even if Thompson is right that “Paul’s major goal for his communities is to ensure their moral formation,” he is also right in saying that Paul “provides few details on the shape of this life.”³⁵ Rather, Paul never communicates a universal, consistent ethic as one might find in classical Greek understanding.

Thompson is also quick to point out that “Paul’s instruction is based primarily on following the path of Jesus” because Paul “frequently bases his ethical advice on the example of Christ.”³⁶ This is interesting considering the wealth of philosophical knowledge that Paul possessed and his access to such thinking. While Paul typically interpreted ethical situations consistent with Torah,³⁷ he was able to move in and out of various traditions without compromising his gospel. Thompson sees this in action particularly in the latter chapters of Romans (chs. 12-15), drawing numerous parallels

31. James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 27.

32. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 5.

33. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 5.

34. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 90.

35. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 5.

36. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 13.

37. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 15.

between Paul’s thinking and a host of OT passages on how to live an ethical life.³⁸ In light of this, Thompson concludes that Scripture itself “plays a major role in ethical discernment.”³⁹ The result was not so much a comprehensive system that was passed on but rather a learned imagination that could be applied situationally, though this too was also often accompanied by “lists of vices and virtues, which were easily committed to memory.”⁴⁰ This two-fold strategy of imagination shaped by story and concrete lists of ethical behavior are key to Paul’s comprehensive vision of virtue formation. These lists were thus a part of Paul’s instruction but rooted in the story of the gospel of Jesus. This pedagogical move would also explain his reinterpretation of virtues such as love, always giving it a communal flavor,⁴¹ and humility, which was typically scorned in the Hellenistic world as a vice rather than a virtue.⁴² In truth, Paul uses the Greek word for virtue, *arête*, only once,⁴³ and leaves out many commonly assumed virtues of the day. Thus while Paul does access traditions and philosophies around him, he is aiming at something quite different.

Perhaps this one use of *arête* at the end of his letter to the Philippians is key to understanding his strategy for moral growth. There he encourages attributes that have “few parallels”⁴⁴ in his other letters by asking that the Philippians dedicate themselves to

38. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 121-24.

39. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 120.

40. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 17.

41. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 12.

42. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 11.

43. Phil 4:8.

44. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 107.

a type of thinking that considers what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, or commendable. Though this list has much in common with Greek morality⁴⁵ and even harkens back to the Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic Judaism,⁴⁶ one wonders if Paul was not fostering a type of meditation on morality rooted in the story of Jesus.

Allen Verhey argues for the veracity of such a claim when he says the church was and still should be today “a community of moral discourse and discernment.”⁴⁷ Drawing from Paul’s admonition at the end of his letter to the Romans where he asks the church there “to instruct one another,”⁴⁸ Verhey makes the case that early churches not only talked about morality but decided together what they should do or not do.⁴⁹ Moreover, Paul encouraged such a discourse as part of their discipleship. He appealed to his readers and their “deliberative judgement”⁵⁰ more often than he invoked his apostolic authority. More than that,

There was no wooden scheme for deliberation, no simple checklist for determining what should be done and what left undone, no fixed set of first principles to be applied deductively to questions of conduct. Reasons were given and heard in the community, but even the reasons had to be tested in the community—and *defended or discarded or qualified by their coherence with the gospel*.⁵¹

45. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 107.

46. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 108.

47. Allen Verhey, “Able to Instruct One Another: The Church as a Community of Moral Discourse,” in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 146.

48. Rom 15:14.

49. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 147.

50. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 150.

51. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 150.

Communal discernment that sought to do right in ways that fit with the character of the story of Jesus, however, looked different depending on where the conversation took place. The community that gathered around the Gospel of Matthew saw the law of Moses differently than the one gathered around the Gospel of Mark, and the Romans had blind spots the Philippians may have not.⁵² Ultimately, these communities “finally transfigured questions of conduct and character into questions of the deeds and dispositions fitting to that gospel. As a community of moral discernment they tested all the reasons given in deliberation (including appeals to Scripture) against the story of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁵³ This type of community has much in common with the theology and ethics we see from the apostle Paul, who was more interested in the transformation of his churches than the impartation of information.

Verhey, much in line with Hauerwas, goes on to suggest that the early churches were also communities focused on memory.⁵⁴ The greatest danger to their identity, ethical and otherwise, was forgetting who they were, not what they were supposed to do. One flowed into the other. And the tool for remembering was story, song, worship, and Eucharist. As Verhey says, “To remember the stories was to live them, not just to recall them.”⁵⁵ He sees this pattern as quite instructive to the modern church, especially when it comes to moral discourse. One could argue, however, that such a claim assumes a knowledge of the story that fewer and fewer church attendees have. There is little doubt

52. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 151.

53. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 152.

54. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 152.

55. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 155.

that forgetfulness has crept into the church as evidenced by our lack of moral discourse in general, but the question is, “What exactly have we forgotten?” Verhey suggests the symptoms of a type of forgetfulness are the dangers of “parochialism and provincialism and chauvinism”⁵⁶ as well as of nationalism, denominational division, and segregation of classes and races. He also rightly points out that our churches are full of goodness too: although we sin together, so we also have good among us. None of us can be completely like Jesus, but together we might approach a more complete picture of the Savior than alone.

Friends on the Way

Yet to say the Christian is by nature part of a community that is discerning how to live out the story of Jesus amid other competing stories can sound as if this is a project done *with others on behalf of self* and not *with others on behalf of others*. Moral discernment then can become a project for its own sake, or worse, one co-opted by individualism. In this way, participating in a community as so described would be just another means of insuring one’s personal salvation. Such a project, as Thompson warns, “ignores the corporate nature of Christian existence, offering an individualized understanding of justification by faith.”⁵⁷ This corporate nature is Paul’s pastoral ambition in that he desires to “build a community that will withstand the ultimate test.”⁵⁸ The key word is community. The community’s maturity in applying the story of Jesus is what will be judged in the end, or at least this appears to be Paul’s primary concern. This

56. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 166.

57. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 17.

58. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 15.

is not to say that individual moral growth is unimportant but that the growth of the individual serves the community and not vice versa.

The work of Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches on friendship⁵⁹ adds an important distinction to the idea that a Christian should be part of a community that practices moral discernment. Such a community without a proper understanding of friendship could devolve into mere moralizing about issues and end up being purveyors of legalism rather than grace. Hauerwas and Pinches, however, build off the ideas of Aristotle and bring them into conversation with Paul's theology to make the argument for humility as "an important starting point for understanding Christian friendship."⁶⁰ For them, Christian friendship is "rightly conceived" as a community where the participants "share happiness and virtue, and teach it to one another."⁶¹ This last affirmation is no small point, and assumes a stance of teachability. This then becomes a place where the strengths and weaknesses of the individual are offered up to the community for the betterment of the community. For there is no teaching without students. Christian friendship thus "must not only see friends as gifts to one another, they must see their friendship itself as a gift."⁶² This requires an understanding of the church as a moral community who lives a different story from one that would hide personal failure to one of raw vulnerability.

59. Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 31-51.

60. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 45.

61. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 47.

62. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 49.

Hauerwas and Pinches thus hang the viability of the entire project of Christian friendship on how well the participants “understand themselves to be actors within a story authored not by them but by God.”⁶³ But to merely switch authors is not enough. The content of the story must change. To say that one follows or is living into the story of God is general enough to facilitate as much or as little moral development as the speaker may prefer. On the other hand, where would one start getting specific? If Christian friendship and Christian discipleship more broadly are a book, where does the first chapter find its inspiration? Hauerwas and Pinches note that the character of Christian friendship is humble, as mentioned here, but also that it gives attention to those different from itself,⁶⁴ shares suffering,⁶⁵ encourages a similarity of virtue,⁶⁶ and requires the wisdom of the other.⁶⁷ Such a story would have to have imagination sufficient to contain the breadth of Paul’s theology and be memorable enough to have been applied in the first-century context. These qualities can be found generally in many areas of Paul’s thought, but are most evident in Phil 2:1-11. Hauerwas and Pinches themselves work from this text, among others, biblical and otherwise. There the picture of a community that practices discernment and friendship provides a moral imagination for Christians that could be the opening lines to the story referenced by Hauerwas and Pinches.

63. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 49.

64. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 49.

65. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 50.

66. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 50.

67. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 51.

Paul's Master Story

Having established that narrative is essential to discussions of virtue and that the early Christian churches were communities of moral transformation and moral discernment, I now move to the question of what type of story these communities (past and present) need to ground moral conversations. The world the apostle Paul inhabited and the world the Christian church finds itself in today are similar in many ways. Paul had to root his churches in some sort of primary or master story to help them navigate the numerous competing stories: empire, Rome, and philosophical schools. Moreover, the character of the story had to be one that encouraged a type of fellowship resistant to the legalism Paul often battled. Michael Gorman makes a strong case in *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* that, for Paul, this master story was Phil 2:6-11.

This short section at the beginning of the letter to the Philippians has come to be known as “the Christ hymn”⁶⁸ because of its lyrical character, which suggests it was sung often in the early church. This practice implies its content was important enough to be constantly before the minds and hearts of the church. It is this hymn that Gorman believes is not only central to Paul’s theology but is the sum and scope of all he taught. According to him, there is convincing evidence “that this text permeates all his letters, and so much so that Phil. 2:6-11 should be called not merely the centerpiece of Philippians but Paul’s master story.”⁶⁹ Gorman believes this to be true because the hymn summarizes the story of Israel, has a creedal and counter-imperial narrative, includes multiple Christological

68. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 104.

69. Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 12.

patterns, and provides a “generative power”⁷⁰ for his theology. It is this “generative power” that is of primary interest to this project.

In short, Gorman sees this hymn as reflective of a single soteriological model: one in which the Christian’s justification is a type of co-crucifixion that participates in Jesus’s story of covenant fulfillment.⁷¹ This leads to a type of resurrection within the Christian community brought about in the same way as in the story of Jesus. This justification, mentioned before as a sticking point in understanding Paul’s theological ethics, is both present and participatory,⁷² leading to transformation. In this way, the community of Jesus is meant to enter his story and become “a living exegesis.”⁷³ This is a narrative meant to be “performed”⁷⁴ as it encompasses the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Jesus. It was the center of conversion and the story Paul wanted his churches to convert to, leaving other false stories behind. Particularly, as Gorman notes in *Inhabiting*, the false stories and imperial claims of Roman divinity are exposed as untruthful narratives.⁷⁵

Moreover, this story becomes “the ultimate model for moral action,”⁷⁶ a place from which the characters launch out and come back to again and again, lest the plot be lost. Gorman asserts,

70. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 13.

71. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 40.

72. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 92.

73. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 104.

74. Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 116.

75. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 121-22.

76. Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 106.

We become what we practice. Our liturgical habits make it possible, or not, to live and tell the story faithfully, even naturally, over time—or not. Churches that dispense with the telling of the story, perhaps in the interest of sensitivity to ‘seekers,’ will eventually have nothing identifiably Christian to say, either to themselves or to those seekers. But since everyone, and every community, needs a master story, a new one will fill the void, and the new master story will carry with it a new, and most likely alien, way of being in the world.⁷⁷

Again, Gorman seems to be making the same point as Verhey about forgetfulness, but he is also making the claim that the Christian community rooting itself in this particular story will be living out the story of Jesus faithfully. This is key in a twenty-first century context where biblical literacy is low, and to tell someone to “live out the story of Jesus” without a reference point is an exercise in futility. Perhaps a community that wanted to be clear about its virtues could find purpose in this storied rootedness that calls for a type of imagining that enters the Christ hymn and emerges having seen the virtues of Christ in action, committing to participate with those virtues. Thus the Christ hymn is perhaps just the cipher for a discussion on virtue in a community of Christ-followers.

However, transformation is not just about imagination. Every good actor needs direction. Paul’s master story in Phil 2:1-11 thus provides the entryway into a new ethical world, but spends little time showing its readers around. Paul also had to write letters to his churches addressing ethical issues. As mentioned before, this project makes use of two different texts in the Pauline corpus, Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12. These two texts represent Paul’s two fold strategy for virtue formation: story shaped by imagination and lists of ethical demands. This approach applies both the abstract and the specific, and James Thompson shows in great detail how Rom 12 is Paul’s rendition of the type of “moral advice” reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom literature in *Moral Formation*

77. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 130.

*according to Paul.*⁷⁸ This wisdom is the story of Phil 2:1-11 laid out in specifics and is another way that Paul looked to form virtue in his churches.

The Story Lived

Some argue that the book of Romans is the most comprehensive picture of Paul's theology. This is partially true. Romans is a letter to a church "with which he has no prior relationship,"⁷⁹ so it does lend itself to such a theory. However, James Thompson argues persuasively in *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul* that Paul's motives are still more pastoral than theological. In that way, Romans provides a comprehensive view not of his theology but of "Christian existence."⁸⁰ For our purposes, Rom 12 comes into view as one of the places where Paul provides "guidelines for behavior that are founded on the Christ event."⁸¹ Here one can see parallels to the types of virtue seen in Phil 2:1-11 but in more detail. If the telos of the Christian life is transformation into the image of Christ, Rom 12 provides a brief window into what that might look like as a community. What follows is not a thorough exegesis but rather a short tour of how this chapter connects to the themes discussed thus far.

From the beginning of the chapter, Paul sets up a reality that is corporate⁸² in nature. He uses this to show how the implications of love among the community of faith play out in the world. Additionally, the very language of "appeal" in verse 1 mirrors other

78. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 120.

79. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 86.

80. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 87.

81. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 118.

82. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 169.

letters that key in on moral instruction. He calls them to self-sacrifice as an act of worship, admonishes them to resist the patterns (stories?) of the world and to go about the work of renewing their mind so they can discern the will of God.⁸³ This, of course, is the purpose of the community, to discern how to live out the story of Jesus together. Paul continues by encouraging them not to be arrogant, a theme resonant with Phil 2:5, but to realize how everyone depends on the other.⁸⁴ He also makes it clear that different gifts in the community not only exist but are present for the edification of all. This is reflective of Hauerwas and Pinches's work on friendship above. Next, Paul unpacks what sincere or "unhypocritical"⁸⁵ love looks like and offers a list of ways that happens in the community ranging from devotion to hospitality.⁸⁶ He then encourages the community to love those outside their fellowship by blessing those that curse them, to mourn and rejoice with those in these seasons of life, to be willing to make friends with those in stations lower than they, and to generally live out Jesus's command to love one's enemies.⁸⁷

These practical instructions almost all find parallels to the text in Phil 2:1-11. Rom 12 is thus one of the places one can see the practical outworking of Paul's master story. On the other hand, Phil 2:1-11 lays a foundation for the ethical instruction of Rom 12 that is aspirational. They need each other. This is not to say that they cannot stand alone, as they certainly can and do, but rather that Paul's overall approach to virtue formation included both the use of a story to cultivate imagination and practical listings

83. Rom 12:1-2.

84. Rom 12:3-8.

85. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 172.

86. Rom 12:9-13.

87. Rom 12:14-21.

of ethical instruction. Together, one can begin to see Paul's strategy. In that sense, virtue formation in Pauline theology asks the Christian community to discern the will of God in the land between these two texts. They both provide a window into how the church sees reality and name the virtues that best live out the story of Jesus in response to it.

Conclusion

If narrative is necessary for any intelligible account of ethics and the Christian community is a place where moral transformation and moral discernment was the norm, I suggest that a communal practice of naming guiding virtues for a specific community using the Christ hymn of Phil 2:6-11, Paul's master story, and Rom 12, Paul's most programmatic list of moral instructions, could be a fruitful and clarifying spiritual exercise. Using these texts as guides could possibly give shape to words like "patience," "forbearance," "humility," and other virtues in a way that can perhaps help expose misunderstanding about what makes something a specifically "Christian" virtue and invite reflection on what our communities should be like in practice. Specifically, naming and defining these virtues using the boundaries of these texts should give much needed clarity for younger Christians who are just beginning to live into the story of Jesus and do not yet have a wealth of biblical knowledge from which to draw or engage with regularly. Chapter 3 follows with a description of the process by which one Christian community named and defined a relevant set of virtues for its context.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Paul's work in his churches was about the transformation of a community of believers that would live into the story of Jesus and be able to discern moral virtue for the time and place in which they lived. Virtues were redefined and debated in light of the Christ event and used as a means to spiritual maturity alongside spiritual friends. Paul's strategy was the two fold approach of cultivating a theological imagination through story and providing specific lists of ethical instruction. For the purposes of this project, chapter 2 explored the texts of Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12 as representative of these two ways. Using Paul's approach of story and ethical instruction, this project sought to engage youth and adults in a process of discernment using these two texts and various other tools that provoked conversation to choose Christ like virtues for a guiding document. This document would represent a vision for the type of people the youth ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church seeks to produce over the course of their time in the program.

The teenagers in the youth program at Cookeville First United Methodist Church are quite similar to those early Christians who made up the communities that Paul tried to cultivate in the first century. They debate ethical issues, claim various levels of allegiance and belief in Jesus, and are searching for a story to make their lives intelligible. The main difference, however, is the lack of a lens that can help clarify and identify the virtues of a life well lived. The hope is that this guiding document contains several Christlike virtues

that will be a help for planning, programming, and evaluating in this context for years to come.

Overview of the Project Intervention

The sessions for this project occurred over the course of eight weeks in the spring of 2019. Due to scheduling conflicts, we were unable to meet consecutively, but instead met eight times in twelve weeks from February to April. We met in a room called the “coffee room” downstairs in the youth group ministry space. The room has five small tables, each of which can seat four people comfortably, but one of the tables is home to a coffee maker and supplies in relation to it. The group sat at these tables every time we met, and I stood in the front of the room by a portable white board. We met during the Sunday School hour from 9:45 to 10:45 a.m. Before the first session, each participant signed an informed consent form¹ that described the project and indicated their willingness to be a part of the group.

Description of Participants

Eight different types of people from our congregation comprised our group of participants; these types made up a purposive sample.² Three participants were youth group members (two high school seniors, one male and one female, and a female freshman who was finishing her first year at the high school); three were parents of current youth group members (one a man in his mid-forties and two women about the same age); and two were parents of children transitioning into the youth group in a few

1. See appendix A for the informed consent form given to each participant.

2. Purposive sampling is a means of data collection that pulls from a group that are considered to “meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to [the] research” (Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* [Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011], 83). Specifically, this intervention includes sampling of those who would have a vested interest in the research and its outcomes, those that fit certain demographics, and those who may or may not have certain opinions.

years (both of these were women in their early forties). I, as the resident expert, was also a part of the group and provided illustrations and questions each week to stimulate discussion; I also worked with the group in wordsmithing the final document. The group, while not ethnically diverse, did have a range of different ideologies and political leanings and represented several different professions. Attendance to the group was not consistent across the entirety of the intervention, but there were never fewer than five in attendance.

Description of the Project Sessions

The sessions for this intervention were structured to provoke conversation and thought on what virtues would be most desirable in students that graduated from our program. Furthermore, each session was also meant to encourage all participants to deepen their understanding of their own spiritual formation. This dual emphasis was present in every session, but each session had a different focus building up to the formation of the guiding document. An overview of the sessions follows, with a detailed description of each session afterwards.

Overview of the Eight Sessions

Session 1: The main goal was to make the participants aware of the need of such a guiding document by exposing them to different ways that organizations clarify values and how our church could improve our efforts in the area of spiritual formation by getting specific on what kind of person we were giving our members an opportunity to become.

Session 2: The main goal was to show how everyone is wired differently and that, consequently, the unconscious preferences of the leader affect the way that churches

construct their programming. Additionally, this session wanted to put forth an evaluation tool that could help in the planning of a more balanced ministry.

Session 3: The main goal was to demonstrate the connection of Pauline theology to virtue using the texts of Rom 12 and Phil 2:1-11. Using an exercise known as “dwelling in the word,” the group was meant to begin the process of connecting their own ideas about virtue to these Pauline writings and seeing how the two differ and how they cohere.

Sessions 4-6: The main goal was critiquing our youth ministry’s programming using the evaluation tool presented in session 2 and to ask how our programming might be unbalanced or skewed toward certain types of spirituality. Additionally, these sessions were meant to point out what types of virtues each event or program tended to produce or not.

Sessions 7-8: The main goal was to begin and finish the process of creating the guiding document. In the end, six virtues were needed to correspond with the six years that a student spent in our program, thus providing a way forward for possible programming, teaching, and evaluating. Having presented an overview of the eight sessions, a detailed description of each session follows.

Session 1: Getting Specific on Values and Virtue

I began the first session by handing out an informed consent form, describing the project and obtaining signatures from all group participants. After this, I began with a question: what is the point of a youth ministry? Discussion was quick but engaging, often centering on how a teenager is vulnerable, needs a place of protection from the harsh realities of the outside world, and is in a “unique population” as one participant put it.

Next, drawing on the work of business consultant and author Simon Sinek,³ I asked what our “why” was. The point was not to ask what we were doing, but what our reason for existing was in reality. Having already given several answers as to the purpose of a youth ministry in general, the group then discussed the development of character traits such as grit, the importance of healthy friendships, and the value of diversity as central to youth ministry. This discussion seemed to show how good ideas can come quickly but also revealed an inability to focus or narrow things down to a select group of values.

After that, I laid out a vision of what a value-driven youth ministry could look like as opposed to an event-driven one. To help with this, I passed out an example from another youth ministry that had narrowed their focus down to six core values. I had the group discuss these values at their tables and offer critique. This discussion lasted about ten minutes. The group, in general, liked the idea of narrowing values down to an understandable few that could assist in the development and evaluation of curriculum and programming. However, several group participants mentioned they would choose different values than these.

Next, I explained how virtue is closely related to value. Rather, what people value is in some way who they become. This would become a theme of our discussions over the next few sessions as we leaned more into defining virtues as opposed to values with the understanding that focusing on virtue would help our youth develop values. In short, we questioned the idea that character development was linear in any sense of the word but is instead a constant reframing of who we are and what we value based on the person we are trying to become. Our group thus concluded that the virtues in our guiding

3. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

document served the dual function of values as well as virtues because our role as a youth ministry is to help cultivate a certain type of people.

This led to one of the biggest surprises of the first session when I reminded the group of the “why” of the United Methodist Church.⁴ In the UMC, there is a universal statement of mission adopted by all churches. It reads “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” After I wrote this on the white board in the front of the room, there was an uncomfortable silence. Almost no one in our group could bring this phrase to mind when asked what the UMC mission statement entailed. More than that, the majority of them were unsure if they had ever really heard it explained at length. One of the women who has a youth in the ministry commented, “Talk is cheap.” I explained that this statement was our youth ministry’s “why” and our “what,” but what remained was the “how.” How were we going to make disciples of Jesus? What needed transformation in the world?

At this point I drew upon the work of Carol Dweck, who coined the term “growth mindset.”⁵ Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, has elucidated the idea that the character or personality traits that lead to success are not innate but rather learned. Thus the difference between a “fixed” mindset and a “growth” mindset is the idea that incremental growth and even failure are the hallmarks of success as opposed to natural ability. A couple of people in the group had heard of this concept and mentioned that they were familiar with it in educational circles. After a brief discussion of the how a growth mindset worked in the various arenas of life, I asked why the church had not

4. The United Methodist Church, “What We Believe.” 4 Jan. 2020. <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe>.

5. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House: New York, 2006).

applied this construct to discipleship and spiritual growth. Could they grow in humility if they had the right mindset? I then challenged the group to answer whether they thought the church operated out of a fixed or a growth mindset. They all agreed that spiritual growth seemed to be talked about in a “lightning bolt” sort of way, in other words, that God transformed people all at once and not slowly and without great effort on the part of the Christian. I suggested that perhaps people grow into goodness instead of naturally being good or evil.

This led to our final activity where I provided a long list of virtues.⁶ After passing out the list, I asked each person in the group to pick what they would consider the top five virtues needed in a good person today. Many commented at the difficulty of such a task but also noted that several of the ones they like overlapped and that some even provided a foundation for others. After a short time, I had the participants give their top five virtues to the group and explain why they chose the ones that they did. What followed was an incredibly lively discussion on what each person valued in relation to what others in the group had picked. Several of the adults also noted how interesting it was to hear the youth in the group give voice to the virtues they valued and why. Many of the virtues chosen by the adults were not picked by the youth, and vice versa. This led to a brief discussion on the meaning of tolerance and how words can be slippery and confusing (specifically tolerance, which can sometimes sound like it means the opposite of what it is trying to communicate). Also discussed was the idea that maybe different virtues should be introduced at different ages, based on needs and culture, which would necessitate the process of helping youth discover their spiritual gifts.

6. See appendix D.

In the end, the discussion and the overall tenor of the first meeting was lively, energetic, and positive. I encouraged the group to take home their list of virtues and spend some time looking over and critiquing the five they chose, asking whether they would change one for another or if they had possibly overlooked one that was central to their belief system. I closed the session by asking the group why people would focus on the virtues they do in such an exercise. I suggested the possibility that people might select things that come easier to them. Rather, that people gravitate to virtues that they already have or those with which they have positive experiences. This, if true, means discussions on virtue are by nature most productive in community. The group seemed to have a collective moment of enlightenment, to which one of the older female participants said, “I wish you hadn’t said that.”

Session 2: Ministry Planning That Sees Individuals as They Are

The second session opened with my presentation of the idea of God languages as articulated by Myra Perrine⁷ and administering the test as found in her book. Perrine’s work builds off the work of Gary Thomas⁸ and suggests that true growth in the spiritual life can happen only when people are able to identify or discover their own spiritual temperament or “God language.” Perrine posits nine of these temperaments and provides a test to aide her readers in their discovery of said God language. Thus after administering this test, which took around ten minutes, I asked all in the group to voice their top two God languages and their bottom two as well. Of the six in attendance, the

7. Myra Perrine, *What’s Your God Language? Connecting with God through Your Unique Spiritual Temperament* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2007), 21-26.

8. Gary L. Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul’s Path to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

God language most mentioned was “caregiver,” with four of the six in attendance listing it among their top two. The God language of “activist” was second among our group, though none of the adults listed it. This was a theme of sorts as the God languages that were most present in the adults (intellectual, traditionalist, contemplative, and naturalist) were often in the low range for the youth. There was, however, a consistent theme among the group in that the “enthusiast” God language was low for everyone.

This led to a discussion about how our own denomination shapes the way people see God and connect to spirituality. In short, it might be that there are not a lot of enthusiasts in UMC churches because of the liturgical emphasis of our worship. More than that, the group seemed to agree this was a positive thing because different churches can minister to and grow different types of people.

The next exercise we did as a group centered on the ideas put forth by Urban Holmes on spiritual categories.⁹ Holmes’s work put forth the idea that there are four types of spiritualities based on historical movements within Christianity. Those four types are variations on the terms apophatic (a spirituality based on negation) and kataphatic (a spirituality based on affirmation) while addressing the excesses and shortcomings found in historical movements. For Holmes, this was a way to think through the different types of communities produced within Christianity and how they differed. It was also a means for encouraging greater ecumenical efforts, with churches and denominations being willing to learn one another. For our purposes, I simplified these ideas into a four-quadrant grid using Scripture, particularly the great command as found in Mark 12:30

9. Urban T. Holmes III, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2002), 4.

instead of looking at historical movements.¹⁰ Each quadrant thus represented a different type of spirituality. Using Jesus's definition of the greatest command in Mark, I defined a complete or balanced spirituality as one that incorporated heart, mind, soul, and strength. David Garland illuminates the theological angle here when he says, "God does not love only certain portions of us, but the whole person; therefore, we are to love God with our whole selves."¹¹ This framework is thus an attempt to capture what "whole self" spirituality would look like in practice. This grid also serves as an evaluation tool for our ministry as a whole in the same way the God languages illuminated spiritual health for the individual. Only here the concern was how the ministry was balancing the experience of the individuals who make up the community with all their various spiritual proclivities. The community is made up of all these various God languages as found in each person, making balance essential from an organizational standpoint. Thus this grid helps critique whether programming or a ministry is functioning in a way that individuals would have opportunity to discover or live out their particular spiritual temperament within the community.

Consequently, these four categories became the four categories in the grid. One focused on the heart, defined as a spirituality centered on relationships. Another emphasized the mind, defined as a spirituality centered on thinking. Yet another stressed strength, defined as a spirituality centered on serving others. And the final quadrant was attentive to soul, defined as a spirituality centered on prayer and worship. Once this was briefly explained, I charted the top God languages for everyone in the group as found in

10. See appendix F. I have flipped the usual presentation of Holmes' model.

11. David Garland, *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 483.

the test taken at the beginning of the session into the appropriate quadrant using the white board at the front of the room. Using this simplified version of the grid, our group of participants charted as quite diverse and balanced, perhaps reflecting a healthy overall communal spirituality.

At this point, I led a discussion on the ways that God languages and spiritual types affect the ways leaders shape their ministries. I gave the example of how I was low in the “traditionalist” God language so I would not be naturally inclined to focus on that area in leading or shaping a ministry if left to my own devices. Rather, ministries often reproduce what they already are, especially if there is no articulated vision of what they want to be. My point here, which received several affirmations, was that shaping a ministry that is not personality based requires this kind of communal discernment. One of the participants noted her own surprise in this vein because she had thought, because of her profession, her top God language would be something other than it actually was. Reality turned out to be something entirely different. Additionally, the group all agreed that a lack of people who have the “traditionalist” mindset among youth and youth leaders may have led to a blind spot in explaining the traditions of our church, maybe even the most important ones, such as baptism and communion.

This led me to talk about the need for balance and how people learn from one another. Spirituality, specifically in a church or a youth group, is ideally where we discover the way we relate to God and learn from the ways others relate to God. I then asked what sort of spiritualities or God languages the group thought the average youth group had already and what they might need to learn more about. What followed was a discussion about the prevalence of depression and anxiety among teenagers, with the

youth actually leading much of the discussion. The overall point was that the ministry of the church might actually be adding to the stress of the average teenager by assuming they desire a high energy, high activity ministry setting when what they might actually need is guidance on slowing down, prayer, and reflection, things that do not come naturally to them. As one youth put it, there is “a sense of guilt” when we are not busy or accomplishing something. I proceeded at this point to talk about the practice of Sabbath and how it is a spiritual practice to know our limits and trust that God can take care of the world without us.

In the end, I transitioned into talking about the point of the group, to select and define Christ-like virtues that we agreed upon as a guide to help our youth grow a balanced spirituality. I emphasized that the point was to select virtues that were Christ-like because our mission, our why, is to create disciples of Jesus Christ.

Session 3: Connecting Paul and Virtue

To start this session, I led the group through a “dwelling in the word” exercise using two texts, Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12. I read slowly through each text twice. The first time through I asked the group to focus on a word or phrase that stood out to them that was applicable to themselves. The second time through I asked them to focus on a word or phrase that would be applicable to our church or our youth ministry. This was the pattern for all subsequent dwelling in the word exercises. In a marked change from the way that we started the process during the previous two weeks, the group tone, usually more playful, shifted to more meditative. Someone commented that the shift in tone was reflective of our conversation about helping people slow down and reflect. I did not have the group individually share what they had heard in the text with the whole group, but

rather told them to share with those at their tables and to make a mental note of what they shared there as a guide for the rest of our time together.

After this, I had the group go through the text and note, using the virtue list previously passed out, the virtues that they could find in both Rom 12 and Phil 2:1-11, picking out their top five. These virtues turned out to not be decidedly different from the ones chosen merely with the virtue list alone, with the notable exception that humility was more emphasized after reading these two texts. Furthermore, many in the group noted how one could find almost all the virtues on the list in one of these two texts of Scripture. Humility factored in almost everyone's list, as did wisdom. Of note, however, was that diversity was mentioned only once, by a youth, and forgiveness was also mentioned only once, by an adult. Of the two texts, however, Rom 12 was most referenced in the discussion.

At this point, I pressed home that this group sought to pick out Christ like virtues. I gave the example of being an actor as an illustration. Specifically, I gave the example of different kinds of acting by talking about Tom Cruise as an actor versus Daniel Day-Lewis as an actor. I asserted that the difference between these two actors was that one shapes the story to fit his personality and strengths (Tom Cruise) while the other (Daniel Day-Lewis) allows the story to shape him, what is often called "method acting." In one approach, the actor is playing a role but is still recognizable through his personality and persona. In the other method, the actor enters his role so deeply that the character and not the actor becomes the focus. In truth, the actor almost seems to disappear into the character. This, I contended, is the problem with discipleship today: the church shapes the Jesus story instead of being shaped by it. The church tends to be more Tom Cruise than

Daniel Day-Lewis. The group then discussed how to best be true to the Jesus story in choosing our virtues. From this, the group concluded that humility had to be a core virtue of the document because without it one could not develop other virtues that would be truest to the Jesus story. Additionally, one youth suggested that Phil 2 was a great model of empathy and should be strongly considered as core to our discussion.

Session 4: What Do We Do Well?

This session was an appreciative inquiry into the programming at our church specifically tailored to youth. Appreciative inquiry is “a collaborative and generative process of organizational learning and change emphasizing building on an organization’s assets rather than focusing on problems.”¹² After another “dwelling in the word” exercise, but this time with only Phil 2:1-11, I set up the session by explaining what appreciative inquiry entailed and how it was meant to expose the ways in which God was working and how we could join in God’s work. To do this, I handed out a list of all our activities, and we charted each based on the framework above (head, heart, soul, strength) that was also used to chart the group’s God languages. The point of doing this exercise was to follow the appreciative inquiry framework but to also have a visual of the specific ways that our programming was shaping our youth spiritually. The exercise started by having them do this in smaller groups at their tables but then all together as a larger group as I charted the events on the white board in the front of the room. To do so, I read the name of the event and then asked the group, “What does this event do well?” This type of question is at the heart of appreciative inquiry, an approach that builds on positives rather than focusing on

12. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 168.

negatives. After some discussion, I charted it in one of the four categories mentioned above.

While the overall tone of the exercise was positive, there was immediate tension around the high school bible class that meets on Sunday mornings. This class meets in the back room of a nearby coffee shop and is thought of as a rite of passage according to the youth in the group. The problem came when the group had trouble identifying where exactly to chart it as an event. There seemed to be no understanding as to what this class was trying to accomplish. Originally, the tradition had been to use that time as a time to discuss current events and how they related to the Christian life. In recent years, however, the class had become a time to mostly socialize. In the spirit of the exercise, I reminded the group this was not necessarily a negative but could be appreciated for the positive thing it is since relationship building is an important part of discipleship. However, the longer the exercise continued, there emerged an understanding that the great majority of our programming was found in the heart quadrant. This again led to a discussion about leadership, as the previous youth director had many great gifts in that area and thus it should be no surprise that the bulk of the programming from that time would reflect that reality.

At some point, when the group began to see that our programming was lacking in almost every other part of the grid, especially the strength quadrant that represented our service to others, a conversation emerged about what sorts of virtues our programming helped create. One youth thought that our fall retreat helped grow courage because of the outdoor adventures that typified that event. Another youth commented that people were very loyal to our events because older students wanted others to have the same great

experiences they had had previously. Overall, the virtues centered around community were the ones our group agreed were the main thing that our youth ministry programming was built around.

Session 5: What Could We Do Better?

After starting with another dwelling in the word exercise focused on Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12, this session continued the discussion from the previous session with the added element of critique of current events or programs. The result was a conversation that had some people, especially some of the youth, admittedly feeling a little defensive. Some of this defensiveness, I posited, was because of the loyalty that our youth feel to one another. While a good thing, loyalty improperly formed could be used to justify inflexibility and fight possibly good changes. The group responded positively to this with the older adult male adding that “the death knell of an organization” is the phrase “we’ve always done it that way.”

I used this as an opportunity to press into a further discussion about the high school bible class. What virtues was this class allowing or creating? What vices? Was inflexibility one of them? I then quoted from Phil 2, where Paul reminds the church to “do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit.” The collective response was an immediate silence in the room. I asked what sort of virtues does the rite of passage to the senior high bible class grow or encourage? What vices? One youth suggested it could not be changed because the high school students involved would simply not come to any other class offering and would just “sneak over” to the coffee shop anyway. I then asked, “What does that say about the kind of people that class is making?” The group agreed that it was an area that needed a closer look.

Other areas of contention were how to make our year-end senior banquet less exclusive and more of a community building event, how to make a large conference style event we attend in the early months of the year more of a relationship building event, and the need to have more balance in our programming overall. Of all the events we charted, only one hit three of the four parts of the grid (the notable exception being the strength component) and only four others out of sixteen total hit multiple categories. The strongest category by far was heart, and the weakest was soul.

Session 6: Who Do We Want to Be?

This session began with another dwelling in the word exercise in Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12 and we also continued our analysis of our events. One of the areas we discussed was the idea of self-awareness. One of the youth stated that this was maybe the most important of all the virtues we had discussed and wondered how much our programming allowed for the growth of this particular virtue. This led to a discussion about the importance of church members and youth being able to both communicate and have opportunities to share their own faith stories with one another. I added that it also might be a good thing for people to have access to some of the tools we used in our group as a means of self-reflection.

Midway through the session, we began the discussion of what virtues we would like in our guiding document. I let the group know that our conversation would take place over the course of the next two weeks and that our last week would be one for reflection and evaluation of the project. I stood in the front of the room and wrote down on a white board any virtue that was spoken out loud in the following discussion.

The rest of the session could be described as “passionate discussion,” as one of the parents observed. There was very quickly agreement on virtues such as respect, wisdom, purposefulness, and authenticity. The conversation after that pursued ways to define the terms. Wisdom, for example, was defined by one parent as “maturity.” Another parent, however, brought up the point that wisdom is “the ability to know the difference between an action that hurts someone and something that is personal preference.”

The discussion of virtues also continued to bring in programming ideas and reflections. One parent brought up the point that unity was a great virtue but wondered how much unity could be created across the wide age range of our group. For example, how unified in goals and vision can the typical seventh grader (our youngest age) be with a twelfth grader (our oldest age)? We ended the session with several virtues on the white board but not quite enough to meet our goals. Additionally, some of our virtues seemed to overlap or repeat, such as acceptance and compassion, and we agreed we needed to be clear on our definitions of these terms.

Session 7: The Vision Takes Shape

After beginning again with another dwelling in the word exercise out of Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12, our group continued to name and define virtues for our guiding document with the goal of naming six, one for every year that a youth group member is in our program. I once again stood in the front of the room and wrote down on a white board every virtue that was named in the conversation, often writing agreed upon definitions beside them as well.

The group started with a discussion about what virtue was most needed or lacking in youth today. One parent brought up the fact that there is such a desire not to hurt a child's self-esteem that parents may not allow their children to fail and thus learn from it. This led to further discussion on the previously discussed growth mindset and the need for the church to help teach that failure is not a bad thing. I asked what the word was that named that need. After a short pause, someone said "perseverance," to which the entire group said an audible "Yes!"

At this point, our group had narrowed the virtues for the guiding document down to eight: humility, purposefulness, acceptance, compassion, wisdom, perseverance, authenticity, and service. I pushed the group to narrow the list and think about what virtues build on one another. That is, what other virtues come more naturally if one possesses what I called a "root virtue." To this end, one of the youth said that compassion could be a root virtue that leads to both acceptance and service because people cannot accept others if they do not possess compassion, and they cannot serve others without compassion as well.

This then, left our list at six virtues. I asked how we felt as a group about selecting these six. One of our youth again made the case for awareness, to which the group said an audible "Yes!" for the second time. This, however, left our document with seven virtues and not six. In the end, the group agreed that purposefulness could be dropped because it was a virtue that could spring from the wisdom virtue and that the document itself could mention the idea of focus or purposefulness in our selection of our guiding document virtues.

In the end, the group chose six virtues: humility, compassion, awareness, authenticity, perseverance, and wisdom. At this point I explained that I would spend some time looking at different Scriptures and biblical characters that would embody each virtue and help build curriculum. The group then also discussed a visual for the document, which ultimately did not find its way into the final product. The image was that of a body, with each of the six virtues we named corresponding to a different part. We closed by asking one of the youth, an artist, if she could sketch something for us by the next meeting, our last.

Session 8: The Final Touches on the Document

The final session began not with a dwelling in the word exercise, but with a reading of the guiding document as I had prepared it. Having spent time going over my notes from the previous session, I had incorporated various definitions and conversations into the shaping of the document as well as adding both Scripture and biblical characters to every virtue on the document. The opening paragraph read:

Believing in the United Methodist Church's Mission Statement, which is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," the youth program at Cookeville First United Methodist Church has chosen to focus our programming on specific virtues or character qualities that would be found in a disciple of Jesus Christ. These six virtues have been chosen by a group of parents and students, highlighting the areas most needed and desired in the students that go through our programming. While realizing that this list may need to be revised from time to time, these six virtues represent a shift from thinking about our program as informational to a program that is transformational. Rather, we seek to cultivate Christ-like characteristics in our youth instead of teaching them the entire scope of the Bible or the Christian tradition. This new focus will help us to narrow our teaching to focus on essentials, teach to the whole of life using spiritual disciplines, and provide a foundation for evaluating all programming. These six virtues are thus also values and provide a vision of the kind of person we would like to see at the end of their time with us. These will also provide us with a rotating six-year vision, each year focusing on one of these six virtues, one for every year a student is on our program.

Many commented on how they preferred the language of “transformational and not informational” and that the opening paragraph was good overall. One parent added that a possible edit could be added to the phrase “we seek to cultivate Christ-like characteristics in youth “for this time and place in their spiritual journey” instead of teaching them the entire scope of the Bible or the Christian tradition.” The group agreed to include this edit and made it part of the final document.

Next I read the definitions for each virtue and our group spent some time looking at scriptures and Bible characters that corresponded with each virtue. In the end no changes were offered, but there was an affirmation of the effort to include female exemplars in the biblical characters listed. We ended the session when I handed out a questionnaire to each person present and asking that they fill it out and return it to me as soon as possible or to fill out the same questionnaire online when I sent out a link to the group. This questionnaire was meant to serve as the insider evaluation of this project but was replaced later with individual face to face interviews due to the lack of response.

Qualitative Research

This project utilized qualitative research as opposed to quantitative, but defining qualitative research exactly is at times difficult. As John Swinton and Harriet Mowat have said, “One of the difficulties that confronts the newcomer to qualitative research methods is the wide range of approaches and the rather vague definitions that make up the field.”¹³ It is by nature somewhat slippery and undefinable because it encompasses such “a wide range of perspectives: empirical, political, sociological,

13. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 29.

pastoral, gender-oriented, and narrative-based.”¹⁴ For our purposes, Swinton and Mowat’s affirmation of John McLeod’s definition is adequate:

Qualitative research is a process of careful, rigorous inquiry into aspects of the social world. It produces formal statements or conceptual frameworks that provide new ways of understanding the world, and therefore comprises knowledge that is practically useful for those who work with issues around learning and adjustment to the pressures and demands of the social world.¹⁵

In this project, the tools of qualitative research helped analyze the type of conversation that the participants experienced as they attempted to create a guiding document of Christ like virtues for the purposes of clarifying ministry and evaluating programming.

Participatory Action Research

The tools of qualitative research used in this project helped investigate a group setting where I, as the youth minister, led eight members of the congregation through a process leading to the creation of a guiding document for the youth ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. This is commonly known as participatory action research which Tim Sensing defines as “social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network (‘stakeholders’) who are seeking to improve the participants’ situation.”¹⁶ This particular group was a cross section of interested stakeholders of the youth program at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. The communal nature of participatory action research empowered the group to incarnate the theology mentioned

14. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 29.

15. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 31.

16. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 56.

above and test its viability as a usable methodology. If the communities Paul formed were places of communal discourse and deliberation, so should any group seeking to emulate them. For this project, I was the facilitator of the group and also a participant.

Data Collection

I gathered data from three different angles in an effort to find what themes emerged (insider, outsider, and researcher). This is a concept known as triangulation.¹⁷ Triangulation is a way to “cross-check your data that provides breadth and depth to your analysis and increases the trustworthiness of your research.”¹⁸ In short, having multiple angles on data insures a thick description of what took place in this intervention instead of a thin and unreliable one.

First, as the researcher, I took field notes¹⁹ during and immediately after each session based on observations I had as a participant of the group utilizing a three-column approach of observation, reaction, interpretation. Second, at the conclusion of the sessions, the participants (insiders) in the study were given a questionnaire,²⁰ either in person or by email, to gauge the experience of the respondents and their thoughts on the viability of the project. This angle was later amended as the initial data yielded minimal results and was replaced by face to face interviews with each participant using the same questions used on the initial questionnaire. Third, I submitted the completed guiding document to an expert in the field of youth ministry for critique (outsider). For this project, the expert was Brad Fiscus, the director of Next Gen Discipleship in the

17. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

18. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

19. See appendix B for field note protocol.

20. See appendix C for research participant questionnaire.

Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church. Fiscus's role in overseeing and executing programming for youth across the state for the United Methodist Church while also serving as the resident youth ministry expert and primary coach for churches in the Tennessee Conference makes him ideally suited to comment on the usefulness of this document. His position has not only allowed him to coach churches in how to better shape youth ministries but has also enabled him to interact with youth in leadership contexts where he has led multiple groups of teens into deeper discipleship with the goal of their returning to and strengthening their churches. Upon seeing the completed document and session descriptions, Fiscus provided a two-page analysis evaluating the guiding document's usefulness for youth ministry.

Data Analysis

To further aid this process of analyzing data, I developed coding methods²¹ that helped sort language related to virtue, story, and moral growth as it appeared. This allowed me to determine themes, silences, and slippages.²²

Initially, coding methods focused on three major themes (virtue, story, moral growth) and sorted the data from the project under each of these three categories based on words and phrases that surfaced during the project. These categories represented Paul's two-fold virtue formation strategy for his churches as articulated above with the third theme of moral growth being the hopeful outgrowth of the other two. These broad categories were used in the beginning in the hope that other themes would arise that

21. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 202-9.

22. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 197.

could be recorded as sub themes.²³ In the course of the project, two of these sub themes rose in importance to the level of the three original themes: diversity and what I coined the “arena,” a place where words and ideas were contested for meaning and clarity. Diversity was initially coded under virtue and the “arena” under moral growth. Other sub themes that emerged but were not as influential included the world (story), tradition (story), community (virtue), growth mindset (moral growth), and character (moral growth). The project thus became one where categories had to “be modified or replaced during subsequent stages of analysis.”²⁴

Additionally, I coded under the virtue category all extended comments or conversations on a particular virtue, the virtue chosen as most important by the participants in their interview, and what virtues were espoused in the outsider evaluation. These virtues, in order of times coded, were compassion (12), authenticity (12), humility (8), wisdom (5), awareness (4), unity (3), purposefulness (3), acceptance (2), and perseverance (2). Considering this, the top two virtues were emblematic of the two new themes that emerged, compassion as key to diversity and authenticity as necessary for the “arena” to exist. All six virtues that would eventually make their way into the guiding document were found in this list.

Silences include the voices of older Christians (sixty years old and older) speaking into the process, though this silence was recognized twice in the data by participants, and slippages centered around a common definition of virtue and how important of a role Scripture played in the formation of the guiding document.

23. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 204.

24. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 203.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

One of the theoretical frameworks of this project was that words find their ultimate meaning in a story. Thus one of the most important tasks for a person or a group that seeks to unify people with language is to discern what stories are in play within a certain group. This project was no different. Yet the process of this intervention proved how easy it is to underestimate the complexity of such a task. Indeed, one of the great themes that arose from all the data was the struggle to find common ground as to what words meant and how they were to be used in the document. Difficulty arose in three areas.

First, confusion arose in our group at the outset because team members were defining the same virtue in different ways. The malleability of words such as “authenticity” showed that participants could be saying the same word but meaning something different entirely. This often led to miscommunication in the group but also was a means of sharpening communication because there was continual conversation about the meaning of words. I described this space as the “arena” and considered it to be one of the larger themes that emerged from the data. Second, the age diversity of the group also led to a different valuing of certain virtues over others, often along age-specific lines. This was more evident in the early stages of the project when participants chose their top five virtues. This led to a better overall document but was a limiting factor because the number of adults was greater than that of youth throughout the project. Third,

it became clear that personal and professional experience, the latter in the case of the adults in the room, won out over biblical narrative as a means of choosing virtues. In this sense, the efforts to provide a unifying biblical common ground from which to choose virtues for the document was not unfruitful but was most assuredly not the primary voice in the room. The reasons for this will be engaged later in this chapter. The difficulty in this case was avoiding eisegesis, the process of reading meaning into a text instead of deriving meaning from it when the biblical text was engaged. These findings and others result from a triangulation of the qualitative data from three perspectives: an expert outsider, insider participants, and the researcher.

Outsider Evaluation

Brad Fiscus, the director of Next Gen Discipleship in the Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church led the outsider evaluation for this project. His two-page evaluation summarized ways he thought the finished guiding document would be helpful for youth ministry and offered critique of the process and the document. Various themes emerged from his evaluation as well as one possible silence. The themes centered on the importance of community and diversity in the visioning process, the importance of integrating virtues as a part of ministry experiences, how this guiding document could help critique and give a guideline for successful ministry, and the importance of Scripture in creating a vision for ministry. Of these, diversity was the one that could be most seen in other data from the project while community was a sub theme that emerged under the broader theme of virtue. His theme of the importance of Scripture, however, was not a consistent theme elsewhere in the data. However, the silence Fiscus notes, the lack of a

voice in this process for those of retirement age and older, is one that is consistent throughout.

First, Fiscus praised the age diversity of the project by pointing out how “each person and life stage has a different viewpoint that is valid in developing a real vision and direction.” The overall experience of the group leads me to say that this statement, while general in nature, is true. The process of creating this document revealed that any effort to create a comprehensive vision for a ministry without the participation of all affected parties is only a partial seeing at best. Different ages see the world differently. But not only that, the virtues needed to navigate their very different worlds vary across generations. This turned out to be one of the significant learnings of this project, that different virtues serve us better in different areas of life. Consequently, people see the need for different virtues depending on the life stage in which they currently find themselves. Practically speaking, parents or ministers may force a virtue that they see as vital from their point of view on those in a life stage who need something else entirely. For example, children struggling with self-esteem may need to learn the virtue of courage instead of the virtue of humility. In this way, it is important to note when virtues develop and not just how they develops. Different virtues are needed at different life stages and should not be universally applied with no regard for individuals.

The way in which these virtues develop, either through unconscious habit or spiritual discipline, can thus vary according to the personality, strengths, weaknesses, and spiritual proclivities of individuals. Too often the church universal has taken a “one-size-fits-all” approach to spirituality and virtue, often disillusioning many along the way and engaging in a type of theological malpractice that forgets the apostle Paul’s vision of the

church as a body with different parts.¹ David Csinos seeks to mitigate one-size-fits-all ministries. For him, the work is to “create environments that are inclusive and welcoming of children who express each and every spiritual style.”² This should be true of youth ministries as well. Fiscus’s admonition here also suggests that a discussion about virtue including multiple voices can mitigate some of this miscommunication. For this project, the importance of teaching younger disciples how they connect to God personally and showing them how that will affect their discipleship was found to be of great importance even down to the way they choose to engage in these type of visioning discussions. In this way, even if a community decides a certain virtue is important to its spiritual growth, individuals can engage that virtue from their own story and bring a nuance to its application that those in a different stage of life may not. Preferably these adjustments emerge from a conversation with the community, not as isolated participants. One possible silence of this project, according to Fiscus, was the lack of voices from those considered to be of retirement age and above. These voices could be useful guides if used in the proper context of such an effort. This turned out to be a legitimate silence of this project.

Second, Fiscus pointed to the idea that a guiding document centered on virtue could provide a lens for discipleship in planning and evaluating ministry events and experiences. As he put it, this sort of “examination is a crucial step in making sure that any gaps in opportunities for development will be addressed.” While this is yet to be seen, the hope of this project builds on the idea that one cannot hit what one does not

1. 1 Cor 12:12-30.

2. David M. Csinos, *Children’s Ministry that Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children’s Spirituality* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 8.

aim for. Much youth ministry programming is either built toward high energy events or knowledge-based classes. The means of critiquing said programming become limited to a desired level of attendance or knowledge. Unfortunately, neither of these is an accurate measure of how young people might be developing as disciples of Jesus. If this guiding document is well implemented, it might provide a means for evaluating progress in Christlikeness and the effectiveness of certain programming in doing so. One example might be to ask if an event such as a conference or retreat creates young people who are consumers or contributors. How would this affect the way meals are planned? How could youth serve or be led to serve even in small ways that might create virtues such as patience or humility? These are some of the questions ministry leaders could ask if given a platform for evaluation such as this guiding document, and it stands as a hope for this project that it would be an effective tool for such a task.

Third, Fiscus applauds the use of Scripture in the creation of this guiding document. He believes that “this process asked each member to study the Scriptures as the source of vision instead of asking each person to give their vision for the ministry.” In his eyes, this meant a focus on application instead of information. While his latter comment is true in that the focus of Scripture study in this group was more based in application rather than information, it may not be as true that individuals used the Scripture as a source of vision instead of their own vision. The reason for this is discussed briefly above in that personal experience seemed to win out even when Scripture was engaged. Some of this may be because the method of engaging Scripture was experience based, dwelling in the word, rather than exegetical study. While I as the facilitator attempted to bridge the gap as best I could, something seemed lost in

translation. The group often were in danger of shaping the story instead of the story shaping us.

To that end, the final product may appear to value Scripture more than it was in the course of the intervention. Many of the Scripture references related to each virtue were additions in the last session as a means of gesturing toward some sort of curriculum. Yet the constant effect of beginning a session with the same readings over and over again was not without affect. One of the youth involved even quoted from Phil 2 during our discussions to make a point about empathy. If one were to replicate this process, it might be beneficial to include more traditional Bible study as part of the sessions.

The silence mentioned by Fiscus of the lack of older voices as a part of this project is an important one. Though beyond the scope of this intervention, it stands as a legitimate critique of the process. For the conversation about virtue formation to be most effective, the gifts of older generations must be heard. Recent research by the Fuller Youth Institute shows the important connection between intergenerational relationships and youth maintaining their faith into adulthood.³ Moreover, the themes that emerged from this project, specifically those of diversity and the “arena,” provide space for such an effort if so desired.

Insider Evaluation

Collecting questionnaires from the project members turned out to be a difficult task. I made multiple attempts to get feedback from the eight that participated over the

3. Fuller Youth Institute, “What Is Sticky Faith?” 9 Oct 2019. <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>. Fuller Youth Institute not only makes intergenerational relationships one of their four keys for faith to “stick” but suggests churches aim for a ratio of 5:1, that is, a team of five adults that are willing to surround every teen.

course of the eight weeks. First, I gave a written copy of the questionnaire⁴ at the end of the last session. Next, I sent the questionnaire as an online form. Finally, I sent the questionnaire as an online survey. After multiple attempts to make this questionnaire available, I received only two completed responses. As this was a poor sample size, I pivoted into scheduling individual interviews with each participant using the questionnaire. These interviews took place in my office at Cookeville First United Methodist Church and consisted of the participants responding verbally to each question on the questionnaire as I recorded their responses on a blank piece of paper. I also made notes on themes that emerged and documented important quotations as the group members provided their answers. In line with the themes mentioned above, diversity, the “arena,” compassion, and authenticity factored heavily in the questionnaire responses. Of the eight interviews, six mentioned diversity directly, five mentioned compassion, four mentioned instances or concepts related to the “arena,” and three mentioned authenticity. As mentioned above, compassion seemed to be a sub theme of diversity and authenticity a sub theme of the “arena.” Diversity and the “arena,” however, also overlap at points in the data set since they need each other to function. It is these two themes I have chosen to highlight here.

First, the theme of diversity was easily the most mentioned theme that emerged from the questionnaire interviews. Participants mentioned the importance of having “multiple perspectives” in the room and even said it was one of the primary blessings of the entire experience. As one participant said, “I enjoyed the opportunity to meet other people that are different than me and started to really see the value in understanding

4. Appendix C.

perspective.” Additionally, one participant noted how awareness, one of the virtues eventually chosen for the guiding document, could lead to greater diversity. And though not specific in regard to the inclusion of older voices in the community, one participant at least seemed to be open to the idea of more intergenerational dialogue by suggesting there should “be more conversations with people of different ages in the church.” This is an important finding because the assumption that youth would not be interested in such a conversation with older adults is challenged by this project. While age-specific programming doubtless has its place, there exists a space, at least in this context, to grow intergenerational relationships around conversational pieces as thorny as virtue if facilitated properly.

Second, the theme of the “arena,” a place where words and ideas could be contested for meaning and clarity, emerged in the questionnaire interviews as significant. This theme emerged during the sessions of this project and is explained in greater detail in the next section, but it was also evident in the questionnaire interviews. One of the youth participants noted that it was “interesting to see the parents’ point of view” and one of the parent participants responded in kind by saying “it was a blessing to work with the youth and see their thought process.” These are not insignificant statements. There is an acknowledgement of understanding and mutual respect in the data even if there was not agreement. In fact, one parent pointed out how the group “didn’t always agree which was fine.” The arena made this possible. Furthermore, there was even recognition on behalf of the parent participants that their opinions could be skewed because “we all want the best for our kids” and can get “tunnel vision” when it comes to these kinds of discussions. The arena thus allowed for a space to debate how virtues could be valuable in specific

contexts, this one being the life of a teenager. The result was that many of the parents noted their own “blind spots” when it came to perceiving the needed virtues for a teenager today. However, none of this would have been possible without the group focus on authenticity. This virtue, which connected to “honesty” for one participant, was unwittingly decided on as a means to have these discussions and thus created what I dubbed the arena. Ironically, one of the parents observed in the interview the irony that teens and adults are often “quick to do whatever it takes to be a part of a group” when what creates real community in a group is an authenticity such as what the participants experienced in the sessions of this project.

Lastly, the insider evaluation did have a silence worth mentioning. While the words “church,” “congregation,” and “ministry” were all a part of the respondents’ answers, words relating to “Scripture” or “Bible” were entirely absent. Considering that one of the thrusts of this project was to use the biblical text to provide a common ground for defining virtue, this was a surprise. Yet it is not necessarily a sign of failure. The method of Scripture use in this project was primarily experiential not exegetical. Dwelling in the word exercises required group participants to use Scripture in a way that allowed the text to speak into their lived experience instead of inviting them into the world of the text. This is a subtle nuance, but an important one to note. The result is a more conversational relationship with the text as opposed to one that might be more authoritative in tone. There is no doubt that the text was engaged, but the silence here evokes curiosity as to the effect Scripture had on the overall process. If the guiding document at present stands as a product of the sum experience of the group, would a different group produce a more vocal support of Scripture? Or could this silence merely

be a product of a group that connects with God through more communal means as opposed to the study of the text? Whatever the case, perhaps multiple ways of engaging the text could be a part of the process if replicated in the future as a way to magnify the importance of Scripture to the overall final product.

Researcher Evaluation

The final perspective for project evaluation was my view as the researcher and based upon the field notes I recorded while serving as the participant researcher. I took these immediately after every session, often using the notes written during the session on the whiteboard in the front of the room. In addition, I often made notes during the session, particularly if I wanted to capture the exact wording of a statement that a participant made during the discussion. These field notes encompass the most detailed data from this project and thus are a source of more themes than the previous two sources. Moreover, these field notes provide a much more comprehensive window into the overall experience of the project. In many ways, these field notes are at the heart of this project's learning. To that end, the three main themes that emerged were diversity, what I will term the arena, story, and character growth. Of these four, only character growth would not be seen as a key overall theme found in all three data points.

First, the field notes testify to a consistent theme of the importance of diversity. All the participants mentioned the importance of hearing different voices at one point or another during the sessions, and several mentioned how vital it was to hear from someone in the group who might share a different viewpoint. In this way, the theme of diversity was present from the very first session as several participants mentioned it as a

possible value for the ministry when shown a similar youth ministry's value statements in the first session. It is worth noting, however, that this happened after one of the youth mentioned it as a possible core value when noting what was absent from this list of core values. It was also in that first meeting that one of the adults mentioned how "interesting" it was to hear the youth group members in the group speak to what sort of values they thought the youth group should exhibit during this discussion on the importance of diversity. This theme continued into the second session after each group member completed the God languages assessment. The diversity of ways in which our group connected to God in different ways was bracing for some, but generally celebrated. The third session also saw a diversity of opinions about what virtues the group found in the biblical texts of Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12.

Looking back, I think perhaps the structure followed in this project led the participants to celebrate diversity, though this was not planned in any overt way. Rather, the opening sessions were meant to show the danger and difficulty of the task ahead of us because of the lack of a coherent narrative from which we could discern virtues for the guiding document. What happened instead was a celebration of difference and an excitement around the prospect of creating something with a diverse group of people.

Second, and building on the first, the field notes revealed something I have decided to coin the arena. The arena is the space that group members would enter when trying to discern the meaning of a word, specifically a virtue. As mentioned above, the age diversity of this group often led to misunderstanding, but it also provided a type of forced communication. There was a space that group members seemed to enter

when discussing the importance of a virtue, especially in the latter sessions, that was blunt, honest, and, according to the field notes, “contested.” This word shows up multiple times in the field notes and was often accompanied by a breakthrough in clarity. One example was in session 6, when the team was trying to name a virtue that could combat entitlement on one side and the fear of failure on the other. After a heated discussion, there was an audible “Yes!” from the group when someone mentioned “perseverance” as a possible core virtue. This arena is likely the result of the first sessions’ having such an emphasis on diversity, as the community created after the first few sessions was able to be honest and open with their opinions. Despite this, the arena was also a place of confusion. Often team members had such divergent understandings of virtues that agreeing on a communal definition was difficult in the time available. Team members also often had different ideas about what virtues a specific ministry event or program helped create. But the arena created by the first theme of diversity did at least allow for the possibility of clarity. These two themes intertwined regularly though they represented two separate realities.

Third, story was a major theme that emerged from the field notes. Multiple times in different sessions there was mention of listening to the stories of others. This theme, however, did not have a cogent pattern. Sometimes, story connected to the importance of tradition. In that specific instance, there was an argument made that a healthy respect of tradition was a core virtue because it is a means to “tell the story” of our church. It behooves a ministry to make this respect a core virtue because it ensures the symbols a church holds as important are clear and celebrated. Other times, story spoke to the importance of self-awareness. There, the group argued that persons who understand

themselves can better live out their story. These two examples highlight the tension of the group in how they related to the idea of story. The first, proposed by one of the adults, is using story to call individuals further into the bigger story of a church whereas the second, proposed by one of the youth group members, is calling individuals out of the crowd to understand themselves better.

In the end, one of the more interesting moments of all the sessions had to do with this theme of story. In a discussion about how youth ministry might be failing the twenty-first century youth group member and in response to the low number of “enthusiasts” in the room after the God languages test, I asked if the typical high-energy youth programming was helping or hurting. One of the youth said that there was “a sense of guilt” if they were not constantly doing something. I suggested that a possible need was not entertainment or more noise, but perhaps a time where students learned contemplative practices that could help them process their day as opposed to adding more to it. This received a resounding “Yes” from the students in the room. Pressing further, I asked our group if the message, or the story, that they were getting from church was any different from the broader culture at large. Some said “Yes,” but could not articulate how that was true. Others said “No.” In the field notes, however, this conversation is highlighted with the words “countercultural story.” There seems to be a need for a countercultural story that produces real freedom in students instead of guilt. But there is not just a need for a better story; there is a desperate need for the cultivation of virtues that would allow a student to enter that story and live out of it. The third session featured such an attempt when the group sought to find virtues in Rom 12 and Phil 2:1-11

that were “most true to the story.” This led many to comment on the comprehensive nature of these texts, saying “you can find almost all of these in here.”

The last theme that emerged from the field notes was that of character growth. One of the most consistent themes of discussion in this vein over the course of the sessions was about the concept of a “growth mindset,” as mentioned previously. There seemed to be great interest in virtues that could facilitate this type of mindset, as evidenced by the inclusion of perseverance as a virtue in the final vision document. Lots of the discussion around this topic and others related to it used phrases such as “building muscles” or “courage.” This begs the question, however, if the connection between spiritual growth and character growth was clear. In the final document, for example, perseverance serves as a bridge to the Christian virtue of hope. This connection was not explicitly made in our sessions but added to the document by me. There were no objections in the final session to this addition, but there were also no affirmations of this theological leap.

One of the more interesting developments of this project happened in the latter sessions when the team had to restrict the number of virtues they could add to the final document. This led to a discussion on what the team would call “root virtues.” What virtues naturally lead to others and thus can be of more importance? The group experienced this phenomenon of root virtues in trying to decide between the virtues of service, acceptance, and compassion. There, compassion took priority in the document because the other two flow from it. In this way, cultivating compassion opens other realms of possible growth but is of primary concern because acceptance and service do

not happen without first having the virtue of compassion. This is not to say that a virtue always emerges from something positive. Service, for example, can rise from vanity. But ideally, positive virtues lead to others. This understanding of character growth is quite true of spiritual growth as well⁵ and provides a different way of thinking about teaching spiritual formation beyond getting all the information to the student on the front end. Instead, another approach could be to ask what virtues the student needed to cultivate first that would lead to others as they grew into adulthood. With that in mind, a possible silence in this data point, as it was in the outsider evaluation, is that of older voices being able to speak into this process.

Interpretations

After I looked at all the data from these three angles, a few areas emerged to support the idea of triangulation. This term represents a closer look from three different angles in a way that “provides a complex view of the intervention enabling a ‘thicker’ interpretation.”⁶ This is helpful because so much happens in the course of a project that it is impossible to capture from one angle. However, when engaging an intervention such as this from multiple angles, overlap between the sources of the data begin to show possible conclusions that are available. Of the themes above, there seems to be convergence around the importance of diversity, the idea of what I have termed the arena, and the silence surrounding the lack of older voices providing input.

First, the theme of diversity was the strongest of any that emerged from this intervention. All three data sets (insider, outsider, and researcher) speak to the importance

5. Rom 5:1-5 and 2 Pet 1:5-8.

6. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

of diversity in attempting such a task such as forming a vision document. This may seem to be a simplistic finding on the surface. Having different viewpoints is one of the more obvious values when creating a document for a diverse organization. Yet the surprise of the participants at how important this was to the task at hand was hardly a surface reaction. Many participants were amazed at how differently the thinking was between the older and younger members. At one point during the sessions, there was an exercise that showed completely divergent values between the young and the old. This again may not be groundbreaking in any way but is not something that is wrestled with as much as it is acknowledged.

Thus the process that started with diversity, though not to the extent that it probably could have, allowed the older adults in the group to not just hear a younger persons' thoughts, but to receive an explanation of why they think them and how they think the way that they do. This was also true of the youth group members in coming to understand the older adults. Diversity then, as it emerged from this intervention, was not so much about giving every voice a turn as it was about valuing every voice and seeking to understand it from its own point of view. This became even more evident the further the intervention encouraged self-reflection. In this way, even the older adults and the youth group members found diverse opinions among themselves.

One wonders then how all of this happened. Meaningful conversation between the young and the old is not a hallmark of modern society. Often, assumptions about how we see the world remain unspoken, and there is little to no shared learning. Yet our small group of eight engaged in meaningful discussion about virtue, morality, and difference in a way that allowed them to produce something together. One interpretation might be that

instead of talking about issues, our group talked about the values that are beneath individual beliefs and often drive how one thinks about an issue. On top of that, there was then a call to imagine what sort of virtues would be useful or beneficial from each person's point of view. The similarities that came from that, though hard won sometimes, created actual excitement and agreement between the ages, even if they came at it from different angles. In many ways, this project is a challenge to the idea that diverse ages cannot speak in a cogent and beneficial way about morality. Perhaps then the question could change from, "Tell me what you think about this issue," to "Tell me what sort of things you value in a person." Could it be that discussing virtue provides a space and a common language for mutual understanding in churches and beyond?

This conversation is revealing in its very nature. As mentioned before, many modern churches have seemingly abandoned transformation for belief. "I believe these things therefore I know myself to be _____." How one chooses to finish that sentence, whether it be as a Christian or as someone with allegiance to a political party still does not get at *how* one holds one's beliefs. Therefore, one can believe many things, but never actually have to *become* anything. The conversation on virtue thus gets underneath belief claims and asks what sort of person one would like to become, not necessarily what one would like to believe. Could it be that Christians are called, first and foremost, to *become* something, not to *believe* something? These are no doubt related of course, but if Christians discuss virtue, they might just find themselves believing differently. Or at the very least more congruently. Defining core virtues forces a group to ask what they value most about the people they are trying to become when ethical and organizational questions arise. It provides a clearer image and a reminder of what we

think God is calling us to become and begs us to act on such a vision instead of acting from a non-reflective place, open to manipulation from all spheres. But when such reflection happens in a diverse community that reaches a vision together, both a group and individuals are inclined to live into that character and that story. That is a basic assumption of this intervention to which it offers some evidence, though this is also beyond the scope of it in many ways.

Another congruent theme is what I have coined the arena. The arena is the creative space that formed after the first few sessions that focused on the diversity of opinions, stories, and different God languages” in the room. In a strange way, the large amount of diversity gave energy to the group and emboldened participants to speak more honestly to one another. This space is where the participants did the work of the intervention. Ideas were contested, challenged, and informed by personal experiences. Almost every word or virtue was debated in this space. Yet, there often emerged a common understanding after a time of contesting. The arena made this possible. It was a space understood to be safe for diverse thought and open to the perspective of the person who was contesting another idea or statement. There were many times when the atmosphere of the group shifted from relaxed to serious during a discussion. When this happened, participants physically moved forward in their seats and took a stance of active listening. Everyone seemed to know when the group had entered the arena. Frederick Aquino’s work in understanding “thick” and “thin” virtues in educational settings is instructive in understanding how this occurred. He suggests that this sort of space is not natural but cultivated. There, a group starts with

agreement on a set of intellectual virtues (e.g. interest in truth, intellectual honesty, concern for evidence, capacity to listen to and follow counterarguments,

and the ability to see how things hang together) opens up the possibility of exchange between people of differing commitments.⁷

This possibility of exchange seems to be what happened among the participants in this group. Though there were no clearly defined virtues at the outset, the exercises and discussion created an environment that valued diversity and authenticity as part of the process, opening participants to the possibility of such an environment as Aquino describes.

The data testified to this in two ways. First, there was constant mention of the blessing it was to hear from different viewpoints. Second, there was a continual assertion about the difficulty of choosing virtues and agreeing upon definitions. These two data points seem to make clear that for a conversation such as this to take place requires a community that respects all viewpoints and allows space for individuals to wrestle with a divergent idea from their own. However, this arena was only entered after weeks of self-reflection, biblical engagement, and the sharing of learnings from the exercises that encouraged self-awareness. Participants thus were often self-policing their opinions because they had been exposed to the ways that they allow their story, profession, or personality to color their vision. In this way, the arena was not just a place of contesting with the ideas of others, but with one's own self.

This might lead one to conclude that any productive discussion around ethics must provide a vehicle for vulnerability. If all sides can experience how differently they think from others, it creates a space for humility, something often very lacking in such conversations. To use the language of chapter 2, it asks participants to ask themselves

7. Frederick Aquino, "Thick and Thin: Personal and Communal Dimensions of Communicating Faith" in *Communicating Faith* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 207.

whether the story they are living into is a truthful or helpful story that matches what they believe about themselves at their best. If the church is thus to become a moral community that can discern the most truthful or faithful way to live, the self-reflection of participants' motives and personal stories must always illuminate the broader discussion.

Lastly, the convergence of these three data points all held a silence, the lack of older voices. As mentioned before, the participants recognized this silence on two occasions in the data. Still, awareness of the problem does not make it less of a silence in this project. Even though two major themes of this project, diversity and the arena, allow for possibility of voices over sixty to speak into this guiding document, their voices were not part of this effort.

However, the success of this project gives hope that future efforts such as this could be more representative of all age groups. Chapter 3 of this project made the claim that proper friendships make the kind of moral communities of discernment seen in the New Testament possible. This is no less true when it comes to intergenerational friendships. Hauerwas and Pinches point out that Aristotle believed friendships among young people were often short-lived because they were based on pleasures that come and go quickly.⁸ If this is also true today, then one possible alternative would be intergenerational friendships centered on something such as a discussion of virtue or discipleship that is more stable and lasting. This assumes a type of arena where mutual respect and learning could occur alongside vulnerability and openness. Maybe this would look like the type of familial discipleship Paul had in mind in passages such as 1 Tim 5:1-2. Perhaps it would look like the mentoring relationship between Paul and Timothy.

8. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues*, 35.

Either way, the lack of these voices in this project is a silence worth noting and seeking to improve upon should such an effort happen again.

Slippages

As mentioned above, one possible slippage would be the definition of virtue as understood by the participants. I posited a definition of virtue at the beginning of this project as “habits or elements of character that are deeply connected to and rooted in Christlikeness, specifically the theology of transformation as put forth in the letters of Paul.” I also mentioned that virtue is a slippery term to define even in academic literature. Yet there seemed to be no coherent understanding at the end of the process. The interview given as part of the insider evaluation asked the participants how they would define their present understanding of the word virtue, with divergent results. Two participants focused on the idea of virtue as something “more than a value,” four honed in on the idea of virtue as “character qualities,” one communicated virtue as a desire, and another as “a goal.” None mentioned Christlikeness or the theology of Paul. Some of this slippage is related to the fact that sessions moved quickly past the definition of virtue into the exercises that would create a sense of diversity. But one wonders how to bridge the gap between respecting personal understandings and defining a group direction. Perhaps this slippage is no more than the result of asking a group to define a difficult and unfamiliar concept after only a few sessions, but it still stands out as an inconsistency at best.

Maybe even more bracing is the slippage around the use of Scripture. One of the theoretical claims of this project were that a sustained reflection on Scripture would help a group to discern virtues of a Christ-like nature for a guiding document. This turned out

not to be the case, with Scripture mentioned only one or two times in the field notes, during the virtue choosing process. The interpretation of such a slippage could be twofold. First, most of our group does not connect with God primarily through Scripture. In fact, of all the participants, only one besides me exhibited a God language that made Scripture study a primary means of connection to God. Rather, when pressed into making decisions on virtues for the document, our group defaulted to experience and relationships as the primary means of informing their virtue choices because this was representative of how they connected to God. This was not to say that Scripture had no voice but was only one of several voices in the room.

This again reflects the importance of the theme of diversity in such conversations as I assumed that Scripture would play a much bigger role due to my own spiritual inclinations. Second, the mode of Scripture engagement being more experiential as opposed to cognitive during the sessions set it up to have a smaller influence than desired. It is possible that a more exegetical approach may have enhanced the presence of Scripture in the data, but that may not have been successful either due to the spiritual makeup of the group. Additionally, the group sessions introduced the Scriptures into the discussion only after the self-examination of the first two sessions. Perhaps this ordering set up an unintentional hierarchy of importance. Whatever the reason, Scripture's importance in the overall creation of this document was significantly less than desired at first. Whether this was the result of the shape of the project or the shape of the participants is a subject for debate.

Conclusion

In the end, the process of selecting the virtues for this vision document was almost as important as the final product itself. The final product is reflective of the diversity of the group in its language and the selected virtues. Each virtue contains language representative of the group as a whole and is itself the product of the arena as described above. This work offers clarity for the youth ministry of Cookeville First United Methodist Church by defining these virtues for the purposes of future programming and evaluation. Moreover, this guiding document has built into it the need for evaluation after a few years and invites another process like the one above to meet the needs of the group. One immediate need or next step, however, is the addition of specific spiritual disciplines to complement each virtue and provide a means for development of those virtues chosen as most important to focus on for the youth ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. With this vision in hand, this ministry now has a clear target in mind beyond the typical standards for success in twenty-first century youth ministry and can perhaps transcend them by truly making “disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁹

9. The United Methodist Church, “What We Believe.” 4 Jan 2020. <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe>.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

At the outset of my ministry with the youth at Cookeville First United Methodist Church, I sought a common language and goal from which to build. This, in a circuitous way, led me to the discussion of virtue. However, this was not just a matter of finding a new subject to teach or discuss; it was a question of how to do ministry from the ground up. Thus the goal of this intervention was a guiding document that could articulate six foundational virtues to highlight one at a time over the course of six years, the length of our youth ministry programming. This document would also play a significant role in the creation of curriculum and evaluation of programming.

Yet one of the significant learnings of this project was the effectiveness of the actual process by which this document came into being. There, a space emerged where both young and old could articulate opinions on morality and have their ideas challenged while participating in a larger purpose. The ministry implications of such a reality are an encouraging alternative to the age-specific ministries of many churches that tend to isolate the young from the old. Moreover, this intervention asks questions about the shape of ministry to youth in coming years considering the trend of people who no longer see the Bible as an authoritative guide for spiritual life.¹ I explore these implications here, not

1. Barna Group, "The Bible in America: 6-Year Trends." 16 Nov 2019. <https://www.barna.com/research/the-bible-in-america-6-year-trends/>.

at great length, but in a general way as a possible bridge to further learning and application to ministry.

Personal Learnings

Such an intervention often reveals blind spots for the researcher. In this case, I learned the truth of how one's personal understanding of discipleship, particularly how it helps us connect to God, can affect the shaping of a ministry. This idea became a jarring reality when I discovered Scripture may not have been as vital to the formation of the final product as I would have preferred. My personal preference, as exemplified in my choice of God languages, shows that I connect with God through the study of Scriptures. This is, of course, one of the historically prevalent ways that Christians have connected with God. Yet it is not the only way. In fact, many have come to an understanding about how to approach Scripture that is not as much mind based as heart based. These ways often reflect a more relational perspective rather than a cognitive one and tend more toward a knowledge rooted first in experience. I assumed when formatting this project, which was unrecognized by me at the time, that a consistent exercise that engaged the text such as dwelling in the word would keep the text at the forefront of the discussion. That turned out not to be the case as most in our group did not have the same connection to and familiarity with the Scripture that I do.

This was a stark reminder of how personal preferences can shape a ministry if one is not self-aware. Indeed, ministry leaders may unwittingly end up programming in ways that best serve their own needs instead of those in their congregation. This requires a minister to be vigilant in exploring different means of spirituality and discipleship outside of their own natural inclinations. Churches too should beware of such a mistake lest they

end up reflecting only a small portion of the person and character of Christ as opposed to a healthier and more holistic vision of the body of Christ. To that end, the tools used in this intervention are helpful guides to discern exactly what sort of disciples we are making, disciples of ourselves or of Jesus Christ.

Implications for Ministry

Ministry as presently construed in the popular culture is often one of a “plug and play” mentality. Conferences, books, and experts exist primarily on the assumption that what works over here must work everywhere. That may be true to a point, but the nature of ministry is a much more contextual and complex reality. This is specifically true in the area of discussions on ethics, as discussed in chapter 2. Therefore, any implications for ministry that I propose here are context dependent, with the hope that some universal themes will materialize amid naming what is happening on the ground in the ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church.

The Experience of the Bible

One of the realities of ministry in the West at present is a low biblical literacy. More than that, the amount of people that claim the Bible as an authoritative text in the broader culture is shrinking as well, and the numbers will drop precipitously in the next few years as older Christians pass away.² The result is that those who would use the Bible as a tool in educational circles, be they churches or families, are often speaking a language that their hearers are unfamiliar with or cannot yet understand.

One implication then might be that our starting point is wrong. This is not to say that the Bible is not an important tool, maybe even the primary one, but that the

2. Barna Group, “The Bible in America: 6-Year Trends.” 16 Nov 2019.
<https://www.barna.com/research/the-bible-in-america-6-year-trends/>.

assumption of a shared importance of Scripture is wrong-headed, especially in the twenty-first century. This claim thus becomes a nonsensical and circular affirmation that Scripture is important because it is important. This then is the shift as found in this project in gathering around virtues as opposed to values. Values communicate a common belief, but virtues can more strongly communicate an aspiration to become something, not just to believe it.

Much of this failure to reckon with the Bible and its usage comes to a head with how churches respond to the importance of experience in human transformation. One helpful tool in the theology of United Methodist Churches is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The quadrilateral provides four means of interpretation: Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* suggests, “that all four guidelines be brought to bear in faithful, serious, theological consideration.”³ To be clear, the *Book of Discipline* does say that Scripture is the primary or most important means of interpretation, but importance does not necessarily always mean first. I am not saying that experience trumps Scripture as much as I am saying that experience leads us to Scripture, especially in our present context. *The Book of Discipline* says it this way, “Our experience interacts with Scripture. We read Scripture in light of the conditions and events that help shape who we are, and we interpret our experience in terms of Scripture.”⁴ This seems a healthy and more fruitful alternative for ministry than assuming the Bible as an authoritative text in itself. This is the context in which we find ourselves

3. United Methodist Church. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*. The United Methodist Publishing House, 83.

4. United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline*, 87.

today. Ministers are not prophets calling people back to a shared story as much as they are missionaries showing how the story of Jesus can make sense of one's own narrative.

Practically speaking, this means that the use of the Bible must change. Experience must be engaged first in this kind of environment because there is no shared memory of Scripture, even among most Christians. In this way, experience becomes the initial means of calling people into the story of Jesus because it provides a platform to discuss what they value about life and themselves. Once these claims are made and stories are shared, Scripture can then be used to show how the story of Jesus both validates and better explains their experiences. My experience in this intervention found this to be a profound truth. The discussion of virtue provided a platform to talk about experiences and personal stories, but Scripture, or at least overarching theological ideas as found in Scripture, could provide meaning, coherence, and direction for how to live out desired virtues. Rather, everyone seems to be concerned about how to be a good person and even has an idea of what that might look like but little guidance on how get there. This, in my estimation, is how Scripture and theology will be most effective in the years to come. This means the church must not fear similarities in other stories or ethical systems, as Paul was not, but must be willing to validate and show how they specifically apply in the Christian story. It could very well be that Bible is more truthfully engaged by letting experience speak first as opposed to letting the Bible speak devoid of a context.

This is yet another implication of this intervention. That the application of Scripture might best be used in the service of broader theological ideas as opposed to working first from specific texts. Rather, a conversion of imagination comes before a knowledge of specific texts. In this, a focus on the larger narrative of Scripture,

specifically the eschatological ideas related to virtue and becoming a genuine human, might have been more effective in shaping the conversation in this intervention in a way that leaned into Scripture. Thus the experience of wondering what a genuine human could or should look like provokes the imagination in a way that Scripture has a foot in the door already, especially as it relates to the discussion had in this intervention around virtue. Then, and only then, should specific texts be engaged. This then could be the virtue of an exercise such as dwelling in the word, an accompaniment to the effort of shaping biblical imagination. In this intervention, a further step could have been to show where the chosen virtues existed in Phil 2:1-11 and Rom 12. In this way, the Bible becomes another voice, preferably the primary one, in defining the meaning of these virtues. In this intervention an additional session could point out how Rom 12 and Phil 2:1-11 connect to the selected virtues. The content for that discussion would look something like this:

- Wisdom (Rom 12:1-2, Phil 2:6)
- Authenticity (Rom 12:4-8, Phil 2:3)
- Awareness (Rom 12:2, Phil 2:1)
- Humility (Rom 12:3,10,16; Phil 2:3-4, 7-8)
- Perseverance (Rom 12:9-12, 21; Phil 2:8)
- Compassion (Rom 12:9-10, Phil 2:3-4)

Yet this is not an idea without danger. As mentioned before, the ever-present danger is that of eisegesis, of forcing an interpretation on the text of Scripture. In cultivating virtue, however, one could hope that disciples would have the self-awareness to know when they were tempted to such an action. This is not always the case, however, and it is the primary reason that the Christian journey is not one to be made alone but in the

company of others. To be a Christian is to submit to the community in a way that is open to correction, and the arena as referenced here in this intervention is an example of such a space.

Diversity and Discernment

One of the major learnings and themes of this intervention has been the importance of diversity in the shaping of a communal vision. Unfortunately, many churches would argue that diversity is not a strength of their present fellowship. In many ways they would be right. Ethnic diversity and even diversity of thought both seem to be a struggle in the church as constituted in the United States. These are areas of great need if the church is to truly be a body, and there must be platforms built for minority voices to contribute to the conversation. However, diversity, at least as understood by this project, is often even a struggle among those that assume they have much in common. The participants in this project, for example, were diverse in gender and age, but other than that seemed to typify the middle class white American experience. Yet upon being exposed to a self-reflective tool such as the God languages paradigm as articulated by Myra Perrine, the participants in this intervention found that they were very different indeed. Several expressed shock as to the degree of the different ways that people in the room connected to God as opposed to their preferred ways. This was also true in the selecting of the virtues for the document. Therefore, when I say that diversity is important to visioning and discernment, it is because the modern church has failed to reckon with the diversity of gifts and needs among its people. This then makes the process of visioning and discernment less fruitful because dissenting voices either are not in the

room or are not empowered to speak. For leadership and for ministry leaders, this means possible blind spots can abound.

However, a process such as the one undertaken in this intervention allows for the possibility that different kinds of voices can both be in the room and be comfortable in the room. Thus everyone opens to the fact that no one person is designed to communicate with God in the same way, and this allows for participants to fully explore themselves in such an environment as well as the ideas of others. Allen Verhey sees this as key to Christian discernment,

Discernment, or the perception of what is fitting to the story we love to tell, is not the task of the ethicist or the pastor alone. It is the task of the church in discourse. Christian ethics is not a substitute for that discourse. Discernment involves the diversity of gifts of the congregation—the gifts of wisdom and creativity, the gifts of indignation at injustice and sympathy with the suffering, the gifts of knowledge of people and places, the gifts of awareness of opportunities and obstructions, the gifts of technical knowledge and special skills—all enlightening the way to particular and specific needs that are worthy of the gospel in the place and times in which we live.⁵

If one looks closely, one can see in Verhey's wording the very model used in this intervention to separate the participants' God languages, that of mind, heart, soul, and strength. The point is that God has already provided the gifts of diversity that can lead to discernment in the people of any church or ministry. It is the ministry leader's job then to bring these out and provide a space where they can interact. This, more than anything perhaps, makes ministry contextual. The gifts will vary because the people will vary.

However, this task will not be easy. Verhey gives some advice in this vein, saying that a church that wants to walk this path, as all should, needs to be aware of the temptation of boasting. As he puts it, "There is no room for boasting in the community of

5. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 168.

discourse, neither by one member over against another, nor by the Christian community over against other communities.”⁶ Rather,

The Christian community does not have a corner on moral truth. Indeed, it acknowledges that the Truth is not its possession but its Lord. It receives and celebrates (however imperfectly) the gifts the Lord gives to his church, including this one, that the Lord fills it with goodness and knowledge and enables mutual instruction. The church is given a particular identity to which it may and must be faithful. That gift does not provide a place for pride or room for sloth, but it still calls us to discernment.⁷

For Verhey then, the type of boasting and posturing seen in typical discourse about morality and ethics are anathema to the church because it possesses the gift of participation in God’s great story. To swell with pride is forget that no one person sees the picture fully and that all are needed to glimpse a way forward.

The question then is what this would look like in practice. This intervention provides a small window into what this might look like. Communities of faith should thus consider gathering around and celebrating difference as a starting point for ministry. To do so would require a humility not readily seen from church leaderships. But there appears to be a need on the ground level for this in a culture that is mistrustful, and rightfully so, of institutions. While it will certainly be quite messy, it might just help the church to recapture its story and its ethics in a way that is clearer than it has been in the recent past. To this end, Verhey speaks again,

If we can recover this vision of the church, if we can receive with gratitude the gifts of God to the church for discourse and discernment, and if we can receive joyfully the demands upon us correlative to God’s gifts, then perhaps the church will look less like an archaic museum piece to some of our contemporaries and

6. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 168.

7. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 169.

more like a confident community that knows why it exists and why it acts, more like its Lord, whose story is its story, whose life is its life.⁸

This would require a much more relational, and likely slower, view of ministry. Yet as the church transitions into the twenty-first century, the virtuous approach of inviting more voices to the table should be more commonly practiced.

Communities of Experimentation

For a community of faith to be able to apply their faith in a twenty-first century context, it must prioritize diversity and experience. To do so, a new understanding of discipleship needs articulation. Stanley Hauerwas, as mentioned above, has put forth an understanding of narrative and discernment that is helpful in this regard, speaking of how Christians “cannot know the story simply by hearing it, but only by learning to imitate those who now are the continuation of the story.”⁹ This is key. Christian discipleship is thus not only rugged adherence to the previous chapters of the story but of helping the faithful write new chapters through the virtues acquired in fidelity to the story. This means casting out into an unknown with the known in what Samuel Wells calls “improvisation.”

For Wells, this means acceptance of the reality that present generations are in a much different situation than Christians of the past. There is a longing for “old certainties”¹⁰ in such a space, but they are not easily grasped. The script once provided has run out, so to speak, and new ideas about how to engage the world must emerge.

8. Verhey, *Able to Instruct One Another*, 170.

9. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 152.

10. Wells, Samuel, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 64.

Wells posits,

There is a dimension of Christian life that requires more repetition, more even than interpretation—but not so much as origination, or creation de novo. That dimension, the key to abiding faithfulness, is improvisation.¹¹

Wells goes on to describe precisely what this type of repetition would look like:

My contention here is that the notion of improvisation, as understood and practiced in the theater, meets all the concerns that the notion of performance was intended to fulfill, without the drawbacks of the notion of performance that I have highlighted in this chapter. When improvisers are trained to work in the theater, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance. This is exactly the goal of theological ethics.¹²

This, as one might imagine, sounds like virtue. Unfortunately, virtue and thus discipleship have been often too tied to the past. These new communities will look to redefine virtues in their time and place from their present realities while being true to the character of the story and not necessarily the specifics of the story.

The challenge to Christian discipleship is finding an approach where discovering a well-intentioned choice to be wrong is an expectation and part of the process of experimentation. This also might mean that Christian education needs to be reoriented around practices in such a way that it allows deeper levels of meaning to emerge beyond the typical classroom setting. In this way, learning becomes real, embodied, and contextualized.

For example, instead of creating a typical class around the Sermon on the Mount where the text was studied, parsed, and debated, a group could imagine creative ways to

11. Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.

12. Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.

live out the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount first, and then come together to discuss what virtues they found themselves living out in the process. This style of education would happen through an experience of experimentation in real life but could also be complemented by discussions on virtue or Bible study on the back end as a means of explanation. These discussions could give shape and definition to the experiences in the room. This utilizes the major themes of this intervention, diversity and experience, and helps them become partners with the biblical text instead of enemies.

Furthermore, a group of people unfamiliar with the biblical text could join a group based around the discussion of virtue and what sort of practices one needs to become a good person with the possibility of exposure to the story of Jesus as a means of explaining and clarifying their experiences. These new modes will of course require a more patient and humble stance for those who would facilitate, but also open up the possibility that the Holy Spirit could have something to say through the experiences of participants. It is helpful to note the work of Miroslav Volf, who argues,

In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow—or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engaging of practices themselves.¹³

This is a risk that must be taken if the church is to recapture its own story. Failure then is not fatal as much as it is part of the experimentation process.

Contextually speaking, ministry leaders would do well to ground themselves deeply enough in the story to know when their fellowship might be going astray while also be open to new ways in which the story could be illuminated among the people. This

13. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 256.

is but one path among many that ministry leaders could take, but our twenty-first century context suggests the need for new paths if our story is to survive. In this way, perhaps the church could become more than a community, but a “school of virtue”¹⁴ for the world.

Sustainability

The sustainability of this intervention is yet to be seen. It is my hope that this document will become a guide for ministry programming and evaluation for years to come. In that, there is a built-in suggestion that a group meet every two years to assess the effectiveness of the document in selecting the most helpful virtues for the programming and ministry of Cookeville First United Methodist Church to their youth. This process, only loosely envisioned to this point, would not only evaluate the virtues themselves, asking whether a more appropriate virtue could replace another as ministry needs arose and shifted, but also determine if the definitions as presently constructed communicate a desirable vision. Moreover, this would also be an opportune time to hold up the document to Scriptural sources, asking if there is coherence or discontinuity that needs addressing. I believe that the youth ministry as presently constituted at Cookeville First United Methodist Church is up to this task and can provide willing and able leadership to do such work.

As for the final product of this intervention and its overall trustworthiness, I believe that the triangulation of data as presented here and the theological framework that was tested and evaluated was effective in this setting. This is not to say that the intervention went completely as planned, as the emphasis on Scripture in regard to virtue selection in itself proved not as helpful as hoped in this case. This may not be the case if

14. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 281.

applied in a different way and in a different context. Nevertheless, the overall framework of this intervention as presented I believe is one that would be beneficial to ministries looking to engage the idea of virtue and is thus trustworthy in its execution, though of course not flawless.

Future Actions

The guiding document at present is just that: a guide. Future actions thus center around bringing into reality the picture as painted by it. One immediate revision would be to add accompanying spiritual disciplines to each virtue on the document as a way to further increase its effectiveness in implementation. Another step would be to select a venue in which to unveil the work of the vision team, the document itself, to the ministry at large. Such a venue would need to include both students and parents and would ideally be at the beginning of the year when the document is implemented. Specifically, there would be a focus on which one of the chosen virtues was to be the focus of programming and learning that year. In this way, the vision as put forth in the document becomes a goal for discipleship, education, and ministry and not just something to put on a brochure or a website, though following through on the visual of these virtues as placed intentionally on a body as explored briefly in one of the sessions could be useful for communication. This would be my hope and desire when it came to the future actions of such an intervention.

Potential Application in Other Contexts

Though the outcome of this intervention is contextual, the process by which it arrived at its conclusions is potentially universal. The pattern and style of the sessions as constituted in this project seem to help facilitate discussion on difficult or contested

topics among different types of people and age groups. Of particular note is the use of God languages and the simplified version of Urban Holmes's work to invite reflection among participants before getting to the work of forming a document. These tools shape the identity of the group itself in a way that encourages humility and appreciates diversity. Though not as structured as mentioned in the work of Frederick Aquino, it is nonetheless effective.

Additionally, the practical theological work here on the use of the Bible could be helpful for churches looking to understand how to engage younger audiences who may have a low familiarity with the text and stories of Scripture. It is one way, not the only way, a ministry can rethink how it teaches the important tenants of the faith.

Conclusion

In the end, the guiding document that is the product of this intervention signals a shift in tone when it comes to planning ministry, at least at Cookeville First United Methodist Church. This tone is a move that could be more helpful for disciples in this church, particularly youth, who are struggling to live out the story of Jesus in effective and transformative ways. Now equipped with a vision of what sort of person they could become, the ministry can now go about the business of how to shape lives in this direction. That this will be hard work there is no doubt. However, if we are to grow the types of disciples that exhibit the virtues of Jesus that this world needs, the ground from which they spring will require much work and preparation. This is the work of ministry, to cultivate the ground. The growth is up to the God who calls us into his story and is the one who sets the time for the harvest, where all things are seen for what they are, what they were, and what they could be.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form for Participants of Project

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of the study is to help develop a Guiding Document for the Youth Ministry at Cookeville First United Methodist Church in Cookeville, TN. You have been specially selected for this study, and your participation, comments, and ideas will be treated as an important reference. You will be part of a diverse group of people from the congregation that will meet together for 8 weeks and discuss what type of virtues we want our graduating seniors to have after being in our program. The time allotted for each session will be approximately one hour.

You can withdraw your participation at any time and without penalty. All the information gained from these sessions will be used in a study, however, your identity will be secure from identification and not used in any way besides for the study itself. Your thoughts on this subject are important to us and your participation will increase our understanding of how Cookeville First United Methodist Church can shape the minds and hearts of youth in the years to come.

If you have questions about this research, you can contact Adam Daniels at 931-808-6804 or addaniels7@gmail.com. You can also contact his thesis adviser, Dr. Ron Bruner in the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University at 325-674-3792 or rkb01a@acu.edu. Thank you for your participation.

I have read and understand the information written above.

Participant's signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Blank Field Note Protocol

Observation	Reaction	Interpretation

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire for Research Participants

Questionnaire for Research Participants

1. Having participated in the creation of a guiding document of virtues for Cookeville FUMC Youth, what is your present understanding of the word “virtue?”
2. What particular virtue do you feel is most important for youth to develop together that was included in the document? Why?
3. What particular virtue do you feel is the least important for youth to develop together that was included in the document? Why?
4. What about this experience blessed you? How?
5. What about this experience challenged you? How?
6. What was the most interesting or helpful thing you learned in this process?
7. How could other ministries in this church benefit from such a discussion? Which ones and in what ways?
8. How could a discussion about virtue in the larger, universal church would be a worthwhile endeavor? In what ways?

APPENDIX D

List of Virtues as Provided to Intervention Participants¹

The Virtues			
Virtue	Definition (Merriam-Webster)	Complements	Transcends
Acceptance	The act of accepting something or someone	Contentment, Forgiveness	Denial, Rejection
Assertiveness	Disposed to or characterized by bold or confident statements and behavior	Confidence, Courage	Self-doubt, Shyness
Authenticity	True to one's own personality, spirit, or character	Honesty, Integrity	Low self-esteem
Beauty	The qualities in a person or a thing that give pleasure to the senses or the mind	Joyfulness, Peace	Ugliness
Caring	Feeling or showing concern for other people	Compassion, Kindness	Cruelty, Insensitivity
Cleanliness	The practice of keeping yourself and your surroundings clean	Orderliness, Purity	Dirtiness
Commitment	An agreement or pledge to do something in the future	Loyalty, Perseverance	Lack of Direction
Compassion	Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it	Caring, Understanding	Grief, Judgment
Confidence	A feeling or belief that you can do something well or succeed at something	Assertiveness, Courage	Self-doubt, Uncertainty
Consideration	The act of thinking carefully about something you will make a decision about	Caring, Compassion	Selfishness

1. Virtues for Life, "Virtues List." 20 Dec 2020. <https://www.virtuesforlife.com/virtues-list/>.

Contentment	The state of being happy and satisfied	Fulfillment, Joy	Dissatisfaction, Restlessness
Cooperation	A situation in which people work together to do something	Teamwork, Unity	Defiance
Courage	Mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty	Boldness, Confidence	Fear, Self-doubt
Creativity	The ability to make new things or think of new ideas	Joy, Purposefulness	Ordinary
Detachment	Lack of emotion or of personal interest	Faith, Freedom	Control
Determination	A quality that makes you continue trying to do or achieve something that is difficult	Commitment, Tenaciousness	Complacency
Dignity	A way of appearing or behaving that suggests seriousness and self-control	Honor, Respect	Egoism, Selfishness
Encouragement	Something that makes someone more determined, hopeful, or confident	Support, Caring	Self-doubt, Discouragement
Enthusiasm	Strong excitement about something; a strong feeling of active interest in something that you like or enjoy	Energy, Motivation	Boredom, Indifference
Ethical	Following accepted rules of behavior; morally right and good	Fairness, Respect	Immorality
Excellence	Extremely high quality	Dignity, Honor, Integrity, Respect	Mediocrity
Fairness	Treating people in a way that does not favor some over others	Equality, Justice	Grievance, Injustice
Faith	Strong belief or trust in someone or something	Confidence, Hope, Trust	Apprehension, Doubt
Flexibility	Willing to change or to try different things	Detachment, Understanding	Stubbornness
Forgiveness	The act of forgiving someone or something	Freedom, Peace	Anger, Bitterness

Friendliness	Acting like a friend; kind and helpful	Kindness, Tact	Shyness
Generosity	Having or showing a kind and quiet nature; not harsh or violent	Patience, Peace	Aggression
Graciousness	Very polite in a way that shows respect	Dignity, Tact	Disrespect, Rudeness
Gratitude	A feeling of appreciation or thanks	Hope, Joy, Peace	Disappointment, Pain
Harmonious	Having parts that are related or combined in a pleasing way	Unity	Hostility
Helpfulness	Making it easier to do a job, deal with a problem, etc.; giving help	Graciousness, Service	Negativity
Honesty	The quality of being fair and truthful	Integrity, Truthfulness	Deceitfulness
Honor	Respect that is given to someone who is admired	Dignity, Respect	Shame
Hope	To want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true	Faith, Joy, Trust	Despair, Frustration
Humility	The quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people	Modesty	Arrogance, Pride
Idealism	The attitude of a person who believes that it is possible to live according to very high standards of behavior and honesty	Confidence, Hope	Cynicism, Pessimism
Integrity	Firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values; the quality or state of being complete or undivided	Honesty, Trust	Corruption, Deceitfulness
Imaginative	Having or showing an ability to think of new and interesting ideas; having or showing imagination	Creativity	Ordinary, Rationalism
Joyfulness	Feeling, causing, or showing great happiness; full of joy	Hope, Peace, Love	Discontent, Suffering

Justice	The process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals	Fairness, Integrity	Discrimination
Kindness	The quality or state of being kind; a kind act	Caring, Compassionate	Cruelty, Loneliness
Love	A feeling of strong or constant affection for a person	Caring, Forgiveness, Unity	Fear
Loyalty	The quality or state of being loyal	Honesty, Trust	Betrayal
Moderation	The quality or state of being reasonable and avoiding behavior, speech, etc., that is extreme	Diligence, Responsibility	Obsessions, Overindulgence
Modesty	The quality of not being too proud or confident about yourself or your abilities	Humility	Self-importance
Optimistic	Having or showing hope for the future; expecting good things to happen	Hope, Joyfulness	Pessimism
Orderliness	Arranged or organized in a logical or regular way	Cleanliness, Purity	Chaos
Passionate	Having, showing, or expressing strong emotions or beliefs	Enthusiasm, Purposefulness	Indifference
Patience	The ability to wait for a long time without becoming annoyed or upset	Determination, Peace	Frustration
Peace	A state of tranquility or quiet	Love, Serenity, Unity	Anger, Cruelty
Perseverance	Continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition	Commitment, Determination, Resilience	Laziness
Preparedness	Having a purpose as in something set up as an object or end to be attained	Creativity, Commitment, Joyfulness	Boredom, Indifference
Reliability	The quality or state of being reliable	Integrity, Loyalty	Untrustworthy

Respect	An act of giving particular attention	Dignity, Reverence	Inconsideration
Responsibility	The quality or state of being responsible as in moral, legal, or mental accountability	Courtesy, Tact, Trust	Selfishness
Reverence	Honor or respect that is felt for or shown to (someone or something)	Respect, Worth	Hatred
Self-discipline	Correction or regulation of oneself for the sake of improvement	Commitment, Determination	Chaos, Unruliness
Service	Contribution to the welfare of others	Compassion, Generosity, Purposefulness	Lack of concern, Self-centered
Sincerity	The quality or state of being sincere; honesty of mind	Authentic	Disingenuous
Tact	A keen sense of what to do or say in order to maintain good relations with others or avoid offense	Graciousness, Responsibility	Clumsiness
Temperate	Habitual moderation in the indulgence of the appetites or passions	Moderation	Excessive
Tenacious	Persistent in maintaining, adhering to, or seeking something valued or desired	Discipline, Perseverance	Indecision
Thankfulness	Conscious of benefit received	Gratitude, Thoughtfulness	Unappreciative
Tolerance	Capacity to endure pain or hardship; sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from one's own	Patience, Tenacious	Narrow-mindedness
Trust	Assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something	Loyalty, Respect	Doubt, Skepticism
Truthfulness	Telling or disposed to tell the truth	Honesty, Faith, Trust	Corruption, Deceit
Understanding	An agreement of opinion or feeling; adjustment of differences	Kindness, Tolerance	Egoism
Unity	The quality or state of being made one	Harmony, Love, Peace	Loneliness

Visionary	A thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination	Imagination, Leadership	Lack of Inspiration
Wisdom	Accumulated philosophic or scientific learning; knowledge	Idealism, Visionary	Lack of Intelligence
Wonder	A feeling caused by seeing something that is very surprising, beautiful, amazing, etc.	Creativity, Imagination	Boredom

APPENDIX E

Outsider Evaluation

I have had the opportunity to review Adam Daniels' DMIN project.

I am impressed that Adam chose to involve young people, parents, and key stakeholders in the ministry at Cookeville First to develop this project. That can be a challenge in itself to wrangle schedules, input, opinion, and focus. Adam's use of a list of virtues to develop in each student is a wise starting point as the ministry strives to prepare every student for life beyond the ministry. These virtues are essential for character development and when rooted in scripture has the potential to develop whole-hearted disciples of Jesus Christ. Adam's process while simplistic in design is based in scriptural study, implication, and application. I believe it is a model that should be utilized not only in youth ministry but throughout the church.

I will expand on each of these points as I discuss the project in the remainder of this response.

Involving the Community of Faith

I have led multiple vision retreats and visioning processes throughout my time in education and ministry. What I have found over those experiences is that only those groups which involved the whole diversity of the community truly benefited from the process. Each person and life stage has a different viewpoint that is valid in developing a real vision and direction. Without this diverse perspective, the visioning process becomes short-sighted and often self-serving. Adam's intentionality of including youth, parents of youth, and parents of children not yet in youth group, provided a diverse set of view points. I would suggest that he also include persons of older generations who value ministry with young people on these teams in the future.

Virtues

Starting with the set of virtues that each student should develop before graduating provides a clear goal. As the group studied scripture and the best way to establish each virtue, they examined how those virtues were rooted in the stories of the Bible. It is essential in faith formation that integration of virtues are a part of every experience. Through the process of examining the current programming of Cookeville First, the group could identify how each component helped add to the achievement of the vision. This examination is a crucial step in making sure that any gaps in opportunities for development will be addressed. As a result, they were able to discern which virtues would become the focus of the ministry to be complete the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Grounded in Scripture

This process asked each member to study the scriptures as the source for vision instead of asking each person to give their vision for the ministry. As a result, the vision for ministry is much stronger as it becomes less about the information shared and more about the application and implementation experienced. Through examining real persons in the stories and how their virtues were on display in both positive and negative ways, the implications for personal faith can be discussed, learned, and integrated.

Closing thoughts

I think Adam has created a reliable framework to help guide ministries through a visioning process that will genuinely center the ministry on a God-focused vision. I am excited to see how the ministry at Cookeville First will embrace this direction. I look forward to seeing the faithful disciples developed through a ministry that is focused less on knowledge alone but also on real Christlike character development.

I am grateful for the opportunity to review this project.

Brad Fiscus

Director of Next Gen Discipleship

Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church

brad.fiscus@tnumc.org

615-327-1533

APPENDIX F¹

Grid of God Languages as Applied to Intervention Participants through Discipleship Grid of Mind, Heart, Soul, and Strengths found in Mark 12:30.²

<p style="text-align: center;">Mind</p> <p>(Spirituality as Centered on Thinking)</p> <p>Intellectual God Language in Top 2: 2 Intellectual God language in Bottom 2: 4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Strength</p> <p>(Spirituality as Centered on Serving Others)</p> <p>Activist God Language in Top 2: 3 Activist God Language in Bottom 2: 1</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Heart</p> <p>(Spirituality as Centered on Relationships)</p> <p>Caregiver God Language in Top 2: 4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Soul</p> <p>(Spirituality as Centered on Prayer & Worship)</p> <p>Sensate God Language in Top 2: 1 Contemplative God Language in Top 2: 1 Naturalist God Language in Top 2: 2 Traditionalist God Language in Top 2: 1 Enthusiast God Language in Bottom 2: 4 Ascetic God Language in Bottom 2: 3 Contemplative God Language in Bottom 2: 1 Traditionalist God Language in Bottom 2: 1</p>

1. This work owes a great debt to the work of Urban Holmes and has adapted his ideas from his work on Christian spirituality. Urban T. Holmes III, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2002).

2. The numbers at the top of each quadrant represent the number of participants in this project who identified as having that particular God language. These God languages are then distributed on this grid according to what type of spirituality best fits that particular God language (Thinking, Serving, Relationships, Prayer and Worship). The definitions are also included.

God Languages Definitions

The Activist-loving God through confrontation with evil

The Ascetic-loving God through solitude and simplicity

The Caregiver-loving God through serving others

The Contemplative-loving God through adoration

The Enthusiast-loving God through mystery and celebration

The Intellectual-loving God through the mind

The Naturalist-loving God through experiencing Him outdoors

The Sensate-loving God through the senses

The Traditionalist-loving God through ritual and symbol³

³ Perrine, *What's Your God Language?*, 8.

APPENDIX G

Final Guiding Document

Believing in the United Methodist Church's Mission Statement, which is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," the youth program at Cookeville First United Methodist Church has chosen to focus our programming on specific virtues or character qualities that would be found in a disciple of Jesus Christ. These six virtues have been chosen by a group of parents and students, highlighting the areas most needed and desired in the students that go through our programming. While realizing that this list may need to be revised from time to time, these six virtues represent a shift from thinking about our program as informational to a program that is transformational. Rather, we seek to cultivate Christ-like characteristics in our youth for this time and place in their spiritual journey instead of teaching them the entire scope of the Bible or the Christian tradition. This new focus will help us to narrow our teaching to focus on essentials, teach to the whole of life using spiritual disciplines, and provide a foundation for evaluating all programming. These six virtues are thus also values and provide a vision of the kind of person we would like to see at the end of their time with us. These will also provide us with a rotating six-year vision, each year focusing on one of these six virtues, one for every year a student is on our program.

First, HUMILITY. In many ways the quintessential Christian virtue, we believe that almost all other virtues spring from this one. If a student is not humble, they will not be open to growing in any other area. We believe this virtue is needed in our time and place in a world that hates to be wrong, has trouble hearing different viewpoints, and glorifies self above all things. By imitating Jesus, we learn that greatness is humble and not boastful, serving instead of dominating.

Key Biblical Passages: Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 11:29; Key Biblical Characters: Jesus, Moses, Mary (Mother of Jesus)

Second, COMPASSION. In a world seeming to lack empathy, compassion asks that a student consider the feelings, position, and thoughts of another. More than that, it allows a student to explore the resources they have to forgive, to be patient, and to sacrifice for the good of others. Through this, the student also learns the meaning of love in the Christian tradition.

Key Biblical Passages: Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 15; Key Biblical Characters: Good Samaritan, Tabitha/Dorcas, Yahweh

Third, AWARENESS. In a world distracted by distraction, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know what is going on inside yourself, with others, and the world. The virtue of awareness helps students to see things as they are, and not as THEY are. It also helps them to discern how God is at work in the world and how they can join Him in what He is doing.

Key Biblical Passages: Genesis 28:10-22, Ephesians 6:10-17; Key Biblical Characters: David, Mary Magdalene

Fourth, AUTHENTICITY. In a world that builds facades and fake personas, being authentic to who you are is difficult. But the virtue of authenticity encourages an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses and trusts that God has made you as you are for a reason. Knowing this, and with our help, a student can find their place in the world and not pretend or desire to be someone other than themselves.

Key Biblical Passages: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 2:1-10; Key Biblical Characters: Jacob, Peter, Esther

Fifth, PERSEVERANCE. In a world that quits quickly on projects and on people, the virtue of perseverance encourages a student to stay the course in the things that matter, to learn from failure, and to realize that all the best things in life take time, effort, and commitment. Learning this helps a student to prioritize their life and to be willing to sacrifice for the things that matter to them and to the world. Through this, a student comes to also know the meaning of hope in the Christian tradition.

Key Biblical Passages: Romans 5:1-5, Hebrews 12:1-2; Key Biblical Characters: Job, Joseph, Ruth

Sixth, WISDOM. In a world that is quick to make choices based on either emotion or knowledge, wisdom encourages an integration of the mind and the heart, experience and tradition. Biblical wisdom is about how to live life well and to determine what is true and appropriate for the situation. A student who learns wisdom thus can make choices that benefit themselves and others while also able to see the negative consequences of an action.

Key Biblical Passages: Romans 12:1-2, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, James, Matthew 5-7 (Sermon on the Mount); Key Biblical Characters: Solomon, Jesus, Deborah