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### Creating an Action Plan to Increase Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ

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## ABSTRACT

This project was designed to meet a need at the Northwest Church of Christ in Oklahoma City to help the church transition from a church that values diversity to one that realizes its vision of being diverse and inclusive. The scope of this project was to create an action plan to increase diversity and inclusion to present to the church leaders for their consideration. The theological foundation for the project comes from Paul's convictions, expressed in Gal 1–2, that any who are in Christ should not be excluded or treated as a lower-class member of the community based on their race or ethnicity. Paul's views and context provided insight into Northwest's plans in our present context.

The intervention was conducted using a purposeful sample of members at Northwest. The diverse development team was selected from a group of members who had some level of experience with or had demonstrated willingness to discuss difficult topics regarding race and ethnicity. The intention was to empower members who were already aware of racial tensions and growth opportunities to suggest actionable plans to church leaders. The process initiated with a study of Gal 1–2, especially Paul's teachings on Jewish and gentile relations in the first century. The process then focused on exploring ways to improve our practices of inclusion to increase diversity and make it more likely that minority community members be full members at Northwest without feeling pressured to edit their identity. The list of ideas was then formalized into the final action plan after considering the effort required for implementation and potential impact of each idea. The study of Galatians and our church context did lead to the creation of short-term

and long-term actions items, which were evaluated as both helpful and challenging by church leaders.

Creating an Action Plan to Increase Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of  
Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

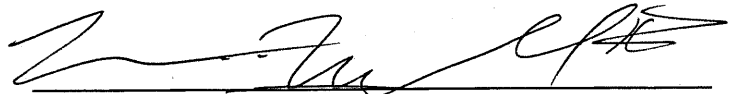
By

Kenton Reeves Brown

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate  
Kenton Reeves Brown, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene  
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Doctor of Ministry

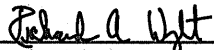


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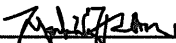
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To my beautiful wife Leah, who is my companion in every chapter of life. You are my best friend and provided me with endless support and motivation throughout this endeavor. I will never stop looking forward to the next page in our story.

To our incredible children, Carter, Mackenzie and Harper, you are my pride and joy. Each of you is brilliant in your own way and has a heart that will make the world a better place because you are in it. Young people like you give me hope for the future of the Kingdom of God.

To Northwest Church of Christ, you raised me, taught me, shepherded me, loved me, blessed me, encouraged me, and empowered me to be the man of God I am today. You are my family in ways few ministers ever get to experience. I am forever grateful.

To my parents Rick and Rhonda Brown, who impressed upon me from the earliest age the importance of learning, leading, and loving people from all walks of life. Their legacy lives on in me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first encounter with leaders of race relations in Churches of Christ came as an undergraduate student at Oklahoma Christian University when reading copies of *The Christian Chronicle* and *Twentieth Century Christian* published in the late 1960s. In these publications, Christian leaders took a stand for unity, diversity, and racial reconciliation during those tumultuous years. The work I do in writing and in ministry continues their work and honors the sacrifices they made.

Bill Day taught me the importance of preaching racial reconciliation from the pulpit and demonstrating it through relationships and leadership. The elders at Northwest have always supported these priorities and created room for ministers to lead the church. I believe God has great things in store for Northwest Church of Christ.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This project thesis details a ministry intervention which was seeking to develop an action plan to increase diversity and practices of inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ in Oklahoma City. A participant group was formed to study the Apostle Paul's writing in Galatians 1 and 2 and then develop an action plan informed by the study of that text. Chapter 1 provides a description of the ministry context at Northwest and a statement of the project's problem and purpose. Chapter 2 provides the theological framework for the project. Chapter 3 describes the intervention, including the data collected and the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 interprets the data collected from field notes, evaluative surveys, and research notes. Chapter 5 concludes with a consideration of the project's significance, including next steps for Northwest.

#### **Title of the Project**

The title of the project is "Creating an Action Plan to Increase Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ." The title describes both the objective and the location of the project. The objective of the project is to remove obstacles, define next steps, and create opportunities for future growth in the area of improving unity and relationships among diverse populations.

#### **Description of Ministry Context**

Northwest Church of Christ is located in the northwest part of Oklahoma City, and in recent years around 250 people attend Sunday morning services. The church is on

the fringe of the Oklahoma City Public School District, the largest in the state, serving over 43,000 students.<sup>1</sup> Fifty years ago dozens of Churches of Christ were located in the OKCPS district, but today Northwest is one of only a handful of Churches of Christ still actively serving this enormous community.<sup>2</sup> The congregation has a unified and stable leadership that includes four elders, sixteen deacons, two full-time ministers, and two-part time ministry staff.<sup>3</sup> One of those elders is among a few remaining charter members from the church's founding in 1956. Ten years ago the church was made up mostly of long-term members with few young families. Today, half of the congregants have been members for fewer than ten years, and children under age five make up over 10% of the weekly attendance. This resurgence of young families has allowed the congregation to maintain its size, as the growth of young families has matched the decline of aging members.

Over the last year, during the tumultuous circumstances surrounding Covid-19 and the many forms of unrest and anxiety in our country, Northwest met in Zoom rooms, on YouTube, in modified seating arrangements, in parking lots, and at outdoor church camps. One elder resigned due to age and family circumstances, and the church appointed six new deacons. The lack of physical attendance and in-person engagement and disruption to normal processes means that we are currently unsure how many members are waiting to come back until an unknown future time and how many have left

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1. Oklahoma City Public Schools. <http://www.okcps.org/domain/96>.

2. This statement considers Churches of Christ with more than 100 members regularly in attendance.

3. Ministry roles include: Preaching Minister, Youth Minister, Children and Family Minister, and Administrative Assistant.

the congregation. However, during the late spring months it appeared that weekly engagement in Sunday morning worship (including those online and in person) was similar to or possibly even higher than church attendance at the beginning of 2020.

A number of identifying phrases that are often repeated from the pulpit and by the members reveal a great deal about how Northwest views itself. The sign at the street and in many publications prominently features the church's slogan, "A family for you." Relationships matter at the church, and members are often involved in small groups in homes, all-church fellowship meals, and shared holiday events. The church, although not known for possessing great wealth, celebrates its history of generosity. This is especially true when it comes to local and foreign missions and evangelism, which receive over 20% of the church's annual contribution. Finally, and most relevant to this project, the church values the diversity of the members that meet at Northwest. Guest speakers and visitors frequently comment on this diversity to church leaders, who proudly relay the compliment to the congregation. Members, especially those who drive from the suburbs, often mention the diverse Christian community as a reason they continue coming to Northwest despite the distance from their home.

While this diversity is widely seen as a blessing, it can also present challenges, many of which remain unknown to many members. Members of minority groups sometimes struggle to have their voices heard or become frustrated with comments others make regarding race or social justice issues. At times, members whose first language is Spanish are left out because worship, signage, and church communication are only in English. Recent reliance on technology means that some members who live in poverty or who are elderly are overlooked by church communication. These are just a few examples

of how Northwest is a church that values diversity, but also often has institutional and systemic obstacles that fail to increase or promote greater diversity in the church or to build better relational bridges between diverse groups.

This project will examine similar challenges faced by Paul and the church in Galatia. In Galatians, Paul writes about his trip to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders there regarding gentile conversion, his conflict with Peter in Antioch regarding eating (or not eating) with gentiles, and the implications those events have for the gentile converts in Galatia. For Paul, the social barriers of ethnicity and race should not create divisions or hierarchical structures within the church. However, Paul also resists the erasure of ethnic, racial, or cultural distinctiveness within the church. He envisions a diverse Christian community that is first and foremost “in Christ” and therefore behaves as a family of diverse yet united siblings. This project group studied how Paul navigated the challenges of diversity, inclusion, and unity in early Christianity; then, using Paul’s foundation, the group was charged with casting a vision of actionable steps Northwest can take to navigate our similar challenges and to bridge existing gaps between diverse individuals and groups, ultimately creating a united family of Christians in which no one feels the need to edit their ethnic or racial identity.

#### My Ministry at Northwest

The church motto, “A family for you,” has been more than just a slogan for me, as I have attended Northwest since my parents placed membership in 1984 when I was a baby. My employment at Northwest began in 2003 when I began working as a youth ministry intern while attending Oklahoma Christian University. The next summer I became the part-time youth minister until I transitioned to full-time ministry following

my graduation in 2006. In 2008 I stepped into an Associate Minister role. In 2013 the ministry staff and eldership agreed on a five-year transition plan in which I would step into the Preaching Minister position at the beginning of 2019. That role developed into the Executive and Preaching Minister, and I have served in that role since then.

Ministering at the church where I grew up means that I frequently teach Bible classes to the people who first taught me the Bible, and I am now charged with spiritually forming those who have had such an important role spiritually forming me. The story of Northwest and my story are thus connected and often inseparable in many ways.

### The History of Northwest and Its Community

Founded in 1958, Northwest was originally named 25<sup>th</sup> and Geraldine Church of Christ and was located in what was then an emerging suburban community known as Windsor Hills just outside of Oklahoma City limits.<sup>1</sup> The nearby Windsor Hills Shopping Center included fine upscale shopping such as BC Clark's Jewelry, Streets Fine Clothing, and the C. R. Anthony Department Store. The church grew quickly and even bought adjoining lots to allow for anticipated future expansion. A two-story education wing was added in the late 1960s.

However, the suburban nature of the community began to change quickly. In the five years after Northwest was founded, Oklahoma City began a rapid annexation process that saw the city limits expand from 80 square miles to over 600 square miles.<sup>2</sup> In the decades that followed, the suburbs continued to move farther west and north. The

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1. The name of the church was changed to Northwest Church of Christ in 1980.

2. Doug Loudenback, "Oklahoma City History." 2 December 2008.  
<http://dougdawg.blogspot.com/2008/12/5oklahoma-city-area-history.html>.



residents of the upscale housing additions around Windsor Hills watched apartment complexes being constructed nearby. The city placed one of its major bus lines on the district's main artery, NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. The fine shops moved to new locations and today have been replaced by Goodwill, Dollar Tree, American Check Cashing, and DD's Discount Clothing. As the community changed, churches in the area had to choose to move, adapt to their new neighbors, or slowly dwindle. Northwest's history shows that it has chosen to stay where it was planted and to continually reach out to new neighbors in new ways, being in the city and for the city.

### The Lasting Influence of Past Interventions

As many of the nearby congregations moved or dwindled, Northwest continued to look for new ways to connect and build relationships with the community.<sup>3</sup> Some of these ministries were very formative for the church and the culture of inclusion that was beginning to emerge. In 1974 the church launched its bus ministry, which sent two school busses, or Joy Busses as they were called, into some of the poorer neighborhoods surrounding the church to pick up children to bring to church every week. The children's ministry and youth ministry saw massive increases in attendance, and the energy at the church was very high. However, not everybody was excited about this type of growth or energy. Some members felt that the children were a distraction, that they were there for the wrong reasons, or had other negative feelings about the bus ministry. This eventually led to a church split in 1977, when many members who disliked the bus ministry left to attend other local congregations. Ultimately, this produced two significant outcomes for

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3. The stories in this section were obtained through interviews and conversations with members of the church who have attended for over fifty years as well as old church records in order to determine not only what happened but the impact these changes had on the congregation.

the church. First, the bus ministry brought many of the church volunteers into meaningful relationships with kids from the community who struggled with poverty, family problems, and other issues. These relationships had a positive impact not only on many of the children, but also on the volunteers and other children involved in that ministry and contributed to a willingness among church members to include others long after the initial bus ministry ended. Secondly, while a church split is certainly not a desirable outcome, many of the members who left were individuals who were resistant to change, uncomfortable with outsiders, and often unable or unwilling to be empathetic toward people who were different from them. The members who remained tended to be those who were more open to welcoming those who others might consider outsiders. The experience of showing hospitality to children through the bus ministry produced a lasting impact on the church and truly opened the door for future opportunities to build relationships and connect with the community.

The next major ministry that influenced the church began in 1996 when Northwest hired Joe Hale, a Christian counselor, to develop and implement a Divorce Recovery program at Northwest. At this time there were no other Church of Christ congregations in the Oklahoma City area that were offering any kind of support to people who had been through a divorce. This meant that the church received letters and phone calls from other congregations and local church leaders who were concerned that this was encouraging sin and harmful to God's plan for marriage and families. However, Northwest was resolved to show kindness, forgiveness, and love to people who were in need of healing. Further, the entire congregation was encouraged to get involved with registration, bringing snacks, and building relationships with people who attended the

class. The Divorce Recovery class was intentionally scheduled on Wednesday evenings during the regular Bible class time so that church members could build relationships with and encourage the participants of the recovery classes through fellowship after classes. In the next couple of years, the church added Grief Support, Anger Management, and Search for Significance classes. The church grew numerically from these programs, but just as importantly, the church grew in compassion and mercy as it welcomed people who were clearly broken by life's struggles and going through recovery. During this time many church members intentionally began relaxing the unofficial church dress code so that visitors could be comfortable coming as they were. The desire for people of all walks of life to feel comfortable and welcome permeated many areas of church life throughout this time due to the influence of the recovery ministries.

In 2009 church leaders challenged church members to come up with new ideas to reach out, connect with, and serve our community. Two groups stepped forward with ideas that took hold and generated significant church involvement. The first was a ministry called "RAS Attacks," which challenged members to come up with monthly random acts of service that would take members away from the church building and into the community to serve unknown people in unexpected ways. The second idea had a much longer and larger impact on the church and community. One small group came up with the idea to serve breakfast and give away clothing at an event they named "Pants and Pancakes." Intended to be a one-time event, it was so successful that it became a quarterly and eventually monthly event. The leaders were insistent that church members should not only serve from behind a table; therefore, some volunteers were intentionally assigned to sit down and eat with people, listening to their stories and building

relationships, especially with people who were recognized as “regulars.” During the holidays for over five years, Northwest worked through this ministry to provide fifty to seventy-five Thanksgiving meals for families and Christmas gifts for children. Families have been invited to join our Fall Festival and Easter events. During these events, the church has been a place where members of our community, especially some of the neediest, gather and spend time with the members of our church.

In 2017 several church members launched a ministry called “Highways and Byways” that continues to grow and evolve. Each weekend, this ministry takes chili to communities with a high level of homelessness in order to build relationships and invite people to visit church on Sunday. Early experiences with homeless strangers attending worship services in larger numbers made many church members uncomfortable. However, in recent years some of those strangers have become friends and involved members of classes and other ministries. Today, Highways and Byways is a thriving ministry that baptizes many people each year, serves food to hundreds, and connects those individuals with the ministries at Northwest, which then help to build relationships and provide opportunities for further discipleship.

Although few of these ministries produced significant increases in church attendance, they have influenced the church culture. Perhaps most importantly, the timeline shows that as new members have come into Northwest, they have heard the stories of past ministries that connected church members to the community and have recognized that being a member at Northwest means building relationships with people who might be different or struggling. About once every ten years a new group of servant leaders steps forward, seeking its own ministry and method for accomplishing connection

with the community, and they each do so knowing that this is foundational to Northwest's identity. As each successive group then participates in their ministry of connection and inclusion, their eyes are opened to the importance of building relationships with people who are different from them. These ministries have been the classrooms where the members of Northwest have learned empathy, compassion, humility, and tolerance.

### Diversity at Northwest Today

Northwest as a community and the individuals that are part of the Northwest congregation have demonstrated the desire to be part of a diverse Christian community through not only mission statements but also over several generations of practice. In order to assess how well the church has achieved this goal, the church took two evaluative approaches. The first step featured a demographic study of the racial diversity at Northwest which was then compared to the community around Northwest as well as to demographic trends in churches nationwide. Second, a group of six Northwest church members from various minority racial backgrounds were interviewed, using ethnographic research methods to determine the strengths and growth areas of the church.<sup>4</sup>

The membership at Northwest consists largely of three racial/ethnic groups:<sup>5</sup> white (84.5%), Hispanic (8.6%), black (5.4%), and other (1.5%). Of course, whether this

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4. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 39. When a congregation struggles to be faithful to its own theology or there is a disconnect between stated theology and regular practices, the reasons are probably deep and complex. This requires further exploration and "excavation" through ethnographic methods to interpret the congregation and understand reasons for the disconnect.

5. The terminology used in this paper to describe race and ethnicity was taken from the U.S. Census Bureau. The information on racial groups can be found at <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>, and the explanation of the ethnic description of Hispanic can be found at <https://www.census.gov/population/hispanic/>. For the purposes of this paper,

represents a diverse Christian community is a matter of opinion and comparison, so multiple observations on that matter will be made here. First of all, those demographics should be compared to those of the church's community. The most recent data from the American Community Survey indicate that the area around Northwest has the following racial demographics: white (51.2%), Hispanic or Latino (25.8%), black (10.8%), Asian (4.1%), Native American (3%), and other (6.5%).<sup>6</sup> In a perfect world, where a church could reach out to its community without the obstacles of bias or exclusion from either the church or the community members, one could expect the racial diversity of the congregation to be very similar to the corresponding diversity in the community. Considering the different demographics at Northwest and in the community, one can easily conclude that whites are over-represented in the church while other minority groups, especially Hispanics, are under-represented. Certainly it would be easy to argue that comparing a church to a utopian vision is an absurd standard. However, if the church is going to make the faith claim that God is ultimately restoring humanity and his creation to the perfection he created, then this high standard seems more than appropriate and reveals that the church has room to improve.

In addition to comparing the demographic breakdown of Northwest to its local community and in order to fully evaluate Northwest's attempts to achieve greater diversity, it is also helpful to compare it to the broader culture of Christian churches in the United States today. The number of multiracial churches in the United States, defined

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racial and ethnic descriptions of groups will both be used to best communicate the people groups represented.

6. These data were compiled from the four zip codes nearest Northwest Church of Christ, since it sits very near the border of all four. The data were from the 2019 American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau and available at

as having at least one in five members of a minority race, has increased from 6% in 1998 to 16% in 2019. However, within multi-ethnic congregations, the ratio of minority members to white members has remained mostly the same.<sup>7</sup> This tendency toward homogeneity in churches is not limited to race, but extends to many other areas such as class, lifestyle, language, and politics, to name a few. People prefer feeling comfortable to feeling uncomfortable, and being around people who think like you, look like you, live like you, spend like you, and talk like you certainly feels more comfortable. When it comes to choosing a church family to worship with, spend time with, and go through life with, the desire for comfort is evident. When considered alongside these national trends, Northwest is among the top 15% of racially diverse churches in the country. It is worth noting, though, that if Northwest were able to reach a level of diversity that mirrors its local community, the church would be approaching the top 4% of diverse congregations nationwide, those which are so diverse that they lack a single racial/ethnic majority.

Considering demographics, Northwest is doing better than most, but has plenty of room for improvement. Both Paul's epistles and the early Restoration Movement plea called Christians to overcome various barriers in the name of Christian unity. The larger American culture today demonstrates the full range of perspectives on social barriers, from groups crying out for racial and social justice, to groups that deny there are problems, to groups that are actively racist. Certainly in this current climate, a church actively and intentionally pursuing a Christian vision for diversity and unity can be a great example of the church's beauty and potential.

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7. Tom Gjelten, "Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide," NPR, *All Things Considered*. 17 July 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/891600067/multiracial-congregations-may-not-bridge-racial-divide>

## Who Is Our Neighbor?

One of the challenges that Northwest faces is the distances its members live from the church, anywhere from down the street to a thirty-minute drive away. This means that when the leaders come together and talk about the “church’s community,” there are two very different ways of understanding the community’s makeup. If “the church” is understood to mean the brick building that is located at 4301 NW 23<sup>rd</sup>, then one could pretty easily draw a circle from there and begin discussing the neighbors. However, if “the church” is defined as the people who worship at the building, then their home addresses are scattered all over Oklahoma City and its suburbs. A recent study of where church members live identified three regions: the “urban area,” which consists mostly of the Oklahoma City Public School District, the “old suburbs,” which remains partially urban and includes the parts of Oklahoma City that have newer and more highly ranked school districts, and the “new suburbs,” which includes the mostly newer residential areas on the outskirts of the metropolitan area with the highest ranked schools. Northwest members are divided almost equally into thirds among these three regions, presenting significant challenges to ministry at times. For example, almost all of the Sunday evening small groups that meet in homes are located in the new suburbs. The youth group of approximately twenty students is spread out at so many schools that no three students attend any one school, making it difficult for the youth minister to develop a ministry center or focus. Many of our volunteers for Pants and Pancakes live twenty minutes from the people they are serving, making it very unlikely they will run into each other in their neighborhood, at a grocery store, or at community events. Highways and Byways drives away from the geographic center of most Northwest members to meet and provide



transportation for families and individuals living in poverty. Further, these dynamics do not even take into consideration the addition of new people or movement of people from in-person worship to online worship during the pandemic or the unknown implications this will have on the future of Northwest as a church family. All of this means that creating relationships and community with the people who live near the church is rarely organic and often requires the church to create its own opportunities to connect with people. It is important that, though scattered, the members of the church continue to see the neighbors of our church building as their neighbors, so that we are not simply a place people drive to without serving and connecting with those nearby. This ambition is consistent with the stated values of Northwest, which desires to be diverse and a light to the part of the city where it is located, but it requires more than ambition to overcome the geographic and community obstacles to relationships that are common in commuter churches.

Several types of community resources have recently begun to re-emerge in the Windsor Hills community. With changes in demographics, shopping, retail, politics, and so much more, many areas between the urban core of Oklahoma City and the suburbs have begun to experience differing degrees of urban renewal. These renewal efforts have largely been carried out through partnerships among local government, businesses, and residents. In the last five years, Northwest's own residential neighborhood has developed an increasingly active voluntary homeowner's association that has rebranded the neighborhood as "Skyline." Many local businesses have joined together to form the Windsor Area Business Group to try to build relationships and improve the community they serve. Kaiser Elementary, located in the same neighborhood as Northwest, is among

the poorest in the Oklahoma City Public School District. Recently Northwest has reached out to serve the teachers, partner with the Parent Teacher Student Association, and make donations in cooperation with the school's parent and community liaison. Also, the city is in the final stages of a \$13.2 million streetscape project along the NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Corridor that will improve the street and add decorative lighting, district markers, sidewalks, and other image- and identity-improving features. While the members of the church might be spread far and wide, each of these community groups provides an opportunity for church members to connect with our neighbors and build strong relationships that will improve the community we all share together. In the past several years, several church members have committed to occasionally attending the meetings and functions of these community groups to demonstrate our church's care for our community. These community groups provide a great opportunity for our church to demonstrate that, even though our members come from all over, we are truly in the city for the city.

#### The Experience of Inclusion at Northwest

Ethnography, which seeks to study the culture of groups and organizations through qualitative methods,<sup>8</sup> was another tool used to evaluate the culture of inclusion at Northwest. While Northwest claims to be a proudly diverse and inclusive church, from time-to-time in classes and conversations, church members who are racial minorities would push back against those claims. Thus, the following question needed to be asked: "Is there a disconnect between people's stated beliefs and their actual practices?" For this project, personal interviews were conducted with six members of Northwest who

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8. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 4-7.

represent racial minorities in the congregation. I used three criteria for choosing the members for this interview process: individuals who have been members for years and thus know the congregation well, are members of a racial minority group, and have a trusting enough relationship with me to speak honestly and openly. During the individual interviews, I asked the same six questions and took detailed notes on participants' responses, only offering clarifying questions when needed.

Participants responded to the following six questions:

1. What was it that originally caused you to want to be a member at Northwest?
2. Considering the membership at Northwest, would you consider it to be a diverse group of people? How so or why not?
3. Based on your experiences, what are some of the advantages and blessings of being at a church that has diversity?
4. Based on your experiences, what are some of the challenges to being at a church with diversity?
5. Has there ever been a time at Northwest or interacting with its members that you were made to feel uncomfortable based on your race or ethnicity?
6. If this church made it a goal to celebrate diversity and to increase it to better reflect the community around the church, what are some things we could or should do to achieve that goal?

After collecting the responses from the interviews, I discovered several narratives and themes that arose in multiple interviews and that show both the church's strengths and some areas that need improvement. One surprising finding was that the majority of those interviewed said that although they considered Northwest to be diverse in many ways (thought, faith background, socioeconomic status, education, age), they did not consider Northwest to be very racially diverse. This is surprising because, as mentioned previously, racial diversity is often espoused as a valued characteristic of the church. And yet, all of the respondents responded positively to the church's intentions and desire to be racially inclusive even though the respondents' standards for "racial diversity" are higher than most church members. One member stated, "I believe Northwest has diversity of

color, but is not diverse in mentality when it comes to people of color. Cliques won't let people in, and relationships with people of different races are only surface deep."

Another said, "People here want to welcome everybody, but then they don't want to talk about the history of racism in America or police brutality or Black Lives Matter. You can't say you love all of me without caring about my black body." One member said that "Northwest attempts to be diverse and it is trying." The message seemed to affirm that Northwest values diversity but struggles to practically reach the heights of its aspirations.

When asked about the advantages of being in a diverse Christian community, the most common response was that it opens the door to greater inclusion and evangelism in the future. When people visit a church and walk in and see people that look like them, they immediately feel more comfortable and more welcome. Several also talked about how Christians who have strong relationships across traditional social barriers develop the skills to listen to and understand people and perspectives different from their own. They also have access to more ideas and solutions to solving problems and growing the church because there are more diverse backgrounds and perspectives involved in all church discussions.

The racial diversity of the church leadership represents another major strength. Northwest appointed its first African American deacon almost ten years ago and three African Americans have served in that role in the following years. The church has had a Hispanic minister, although does not have one presently. Also, about four months prior to the interviews, the church appointed its first African American elder. In every interview, members shared how important it was for them to watch the congregation put its faith and confidence in these men to serve and lead the church. One parent with a young son

said, “It is so important for my son to see examples at church who look like him. I love that I am encouraged to lead here and that there are other Black men in the deacons and the elders.” They also talked about how important it is for future members to see people of their ethnicity involved in congregational leadership. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, one of our African American deacons moved out of state for work, and our African American elder stepped down for health and family reasons. However, the church was excited to add our first Hispanic and bilingual deacons in a special parking lot worship service in the fall of 2020. Thus, the church continues to seek qualified servant leaders to be examples to all members at Northwest.

Almost all of those interviewed mentioned one or two experiences in which they had been singled out or made to feel uncomfortable about their race, but overall participants were quick to say that they ultimately saw the church as home and as a family and did not feel isolated. One member reported that when he arrived at a social event in another member’s home, he was introduced to a stranger as “our token black friend.” When another African American family began worshiping at Northwest, they were far more expressive and vocal in their worship style and remembered hearing people whisper, “When is he going to shut up?” They also reported that when they hosted their LifeGroup at their house, only a handful would attend, but when other families hosted, ten to fifteen people would attend.

Additionally, they discussed other challenges diverse Christian communities face. Although every black church in the city has talked and prayed about the problems of police violence against black men, our members came to church every week knowing it would not be mentioned once from the pulpit. Some talked about English-speaking

members who assumed that the Hispanic or Latino members of the church could not speak or understand English without ever taking the time to find out because “they looked like they probably spoke Spanish.” There is a need for the church to develop a willingness to be uncomfortable for the sake of helping minorities, visitors, and new members feel comfortable. Several also discussed problems arising from a few church members who posted divisive and sometimes even racist content on social media. These incidents reveal that deep inside there is still work to be done when it comes to attitudes and racial reconciliation.

The interviews provided several good suggestions for ways Northwest can become more inclusive and diverse in the future. The church needs to continue to incorporate Spanish into its signage, especially outside, so that the community knows that we welcome people regardless of language. The church also needs to continue providing more Spanish content during the worship service.<sup>9</sup> Not only does this include our Spanish-speaking members, but it also communicates to all members and visitors that we go out of our way to make sure all people are welcome here. The responses also provided a number of suggestions for ways to continue developing additional ministries that take place outside of the building and in the local community and are very visible to those that live nearby. In addition to serving those with needs in the community, we should also seek to empower them by inviting them to serve alongside us and work together to improve the community. And finally, members of the church who are “insiders” should always be seeking ways to help those who are “outsiders” feel welcome and included.

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9. Daniel A. Rodriguez and Manuel Ortiz, *A Future for the Latino Church: Models for Multilingual, Multigenerational Hispanic Congregations* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 173–80.

The conversations that occurred during these interviews allowed members to share some very difficult things they have experienced and overcome at Northwest. It also gave them time to share the many blessings they have experienced and now attempt to share with others. They did see the diversity of Northwest as a strength, but also more of a value and aspiration than a realized goal. They also provided great insight into ways church can grow and improve in reaching out and connecting with people from many different walks of life in the future. This project will seek to close those gaps between virtue and reality by finding intentional and actionable ways to remove obstacles and create opportunities for greater diversity and inclusion among current and future members at Northwest.

#### Northwest in a Larger Christian Context

Northwest Church of Christ certainly values inclusion and diversity both for its members and in its attempts to reach out to others and to serve the community. However, there is still room for improvement toward creating a diverse Christian community. There is a temptation for the church to suggest that if we just love each other and build strong relationships with people from other racial and ethnic groups, all problems will go away. However, in their research on religion and race, Emerson and Smith reported variations of this idea from many evangelicals and came to call it the “miracle motif.” They described it as “the theologically rooted idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically.”<sup>10</sup> In other research, Emerson has also addressed a social dynamic in systems whereby minority groups do not actually

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10. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

have an influential voice in a group until they make up more than 20% of the group's population.<sup>11</sup> These two principles are vitally important for a church like Northwest, which has two minority groups that collectively make up about 15% of the membership. It means that Northwest cannot simply rely on our shared Christianity and relationships to miraculously solve all problems. Instead, the church and its leaders must take intentional and purposeful strides to grow in some areas and to make sure that all members have an influential voice in the church.

### **Summary of the Context**

Northwest Church of Christ was established in a suburban area of Oklahoma City over fifty years ago; in the years since then, the neighborhood has become increasingly urban, multiracial, and multilingual. During that time, the church has become increasingly welcoming to people of diverse backgrounds and has sought to create ministries to build bridges into the community. Today, the church places a high value on diversity in the church, and many members commute from other parts of town because of their personal commitment to this vision.

However, there are still gaps that reveal growth areas for the church in welcoming all people, especially minority groups. The church remains significantly less racially diverse than the area around the church and less diverse than other churches in similar situations. Interviews with members who are minorities also show that, while the church considers itself to be diverse, these minority members recognize the church's stated values while simultaneously recognizing that there is still much room for improvement.

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11. Michael O. Emerson, "A New Day for Multi-Racial Congregations," *Reflections*, Yale University, 2013. <http://reflections.yale.edu/article/future-race/new-day-multiracial-congregations>. Accessed 5 July 2016.



Finally, there is a need for study and conversation among church leaders, who have little experience or training in leading diverse communities. The church needs to find ways to become more intentional about practices and conversations that promote diversity and inclusion and even encourage the public demonstration of distinct cultural identities, practices, and conversations. The intervention group described in this project will consider the vision of multiethnic community in Paul's letter to the Galatians, cast a vision informed by Paul's letter for the current Northwest community, and develop a proposed action plan for increasing diversity and inclusivity. This will help church leaders become aware of the gaps and growth areas at the church, guide leaders through future decisions, and create opportunities to build bridges into the lives of people from all walks of life.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A gap exists between the church's stated value of racial inclusion and the experienced reality of minority members at Northwest Church of Christ. The church proudly considers itself a diverse community in areas such as race, socioeconomic status, educational background, and church background. However, racial minorities who are asked do not consider the congregation to be racially diverse. Furthermore, Northwest's regular attendees do not reflect the racial diversity of the neighboring communities or the racial diversity of some other churches in similar communities. All of this reveals the gap between intention and reality. Forming a group of church members to create a concrete action plan to increase diversity and inclusion at Northwest will create future opportunities to address this problem.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

In order to close this gap between intent and reality, I formed a team to create an action plan to increase ethnic diversity and inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ. The idea of casting a greater vision for a diverse yet unified community will be anchored in Paul's work in Galatia, where he sought to create a new community welcoming of Christ-following Jews and gentiles.<sup>12</sup> The team consisted of ten members of the church who met for six weeks to study Paul's approach to creating a vision of community in Galatians and develop a similar vision for Northwest Church of Christ today. The team was tasked with turning this vision into a proposed action plan and presenting that plan to the church elders.

### **Basic Assumptions**

Racial diversity is an often-stated virtue of the leaders and the congregation, so it is assumed that the participation group and the elders are already in agreement with the virtue of racial inclusion and the need for improvement. This is readily known because of its presence in teaching and preaching and in both public and private conversations. This is not a normal assumption of most churches and should not be assumed in all contexts.

### **Definitions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

Delimitations: The resource will be evaluated by the elders of the church as an outside group, and due to congregational practices, this group will consist exclusively of

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12. James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 18–19. Thompson references several times here the importance of Paul's alternative vision of Christian community, especially as evidenced in Galatians and Romans.

older men, as is a common although not universal tradition in Churches of Christ.<sup>13</sup> The project is also delimited to a focus on including African American and Hispanic community members since these are the two minority groups represented at Northwest Church of Christ and most present in the surrounding community. While complexity in the terminology associated with minority groups exists, this project will utilize terminology that is common and accepted at Northwest. As such, Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, and other communities may be referred to collectively as “Hispanic” or “Latino,” and African American communities may be referred to as “African-American” or “Black.”

Limitation: The creation of an action plan does not, in and of itself, form a community of racial inclusion. The participation group can only create and suggest ideas and values. It will be up to leaders and church members to discern whether to implement and how to do so. These ideas may begin shaping the community only through casting a detailed vision and then putting it into practice. Limitations and challenges also exist when making comparisons between Paul’s work with gentile and Jewish Christ-followers and the work of racial inclusion in churches today. It is important that this project and future readers not attempt to make direct connections between the diverse communities in Paul’s churches and diverse communities in churches today

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13. Everette Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 323–27.

## CHAPTER II

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Northwest Church of Christ aspires to be a more diverse congregation and needs to develop a detailed plan to create more opportunities for minorities to become involved with the church without feeling that they must edit their identity to truly belong. Paul's conviction that gentiles should be able to become full members of the early Christian community without giving up their ethnic identity provides a biblical mandate for this project. In Galatians 1–2, Paul describes how the meeting with Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem, as well as his conflict with Peter in Antioch, gives insight into ways the Galatian church should expect non-Jews to relate to the God of Israel and the implications these expectations have for the people of God, now that they are all united in Christ. I will demonstrate that Paul's insistence on unity and inclusion in the face of conflicting social pressures in the Galatian church is a call for Northwest Church of Christ to make similar efforts at inclusion today.

When churches today fail to make intentional efforts to be inclusive and diverse, they fail to reenact Paul's vision of Christian community. On the other hand, a church that is able to demonstrate unity and diversity becomes an embodiment of the mission of God in the world. Gorman describes this type of living as one of the ways churches today "become the Gospel" by participating in God's mission:

In the present, God's mission is about far more than individuals . . . God's mission is the work of rescuing the world from the powers of Sin and Death so that a newly created humanity—Jew and Gentile—is released for the praise of

God in community. God is therefore at work creating an international network of multicultural, socio-economically diverse communities (“churches”) that participate in this liberating, transformative reality *now*—even if incompletely and imperfectly.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Paul’s churches had to overcome the social barriers between Jew and gentile, the church today must discover the specific social and ethnic barriers exist both within the church and outside of the church so they might again join in the mission of God by destroying the dividing walls of hostility and creating multicultural churches (Eph 2:14).

Northwest Church of Christ desires to be this kind of diverse and inclusive Christian community but needs to develop an action plan to transform this desire into a reality. This chapter provides the theological underpinnings for this project. The first section describes the social world of the Galatian church and explains why Paul’s inclusion of gentiles among the Jewish Christians was such a disruptive challenge to the status quo. The second section considers Gal 1–2, in which Paul argues against any effort to segregate the gentile Christians or to assign them secondary status in the Christian community. Finally, this chapter argues that Paul’s vision for multicultural churches remains a mandate for churches today.

### **Reading Galatians in Light of the Gentile Question**

It is essential to this study of Galatians to begin with an understanding that Paul’s primary concern is not to answer the question, “What must I do to be saved?” Rather he focuses on resolving the question, “How can Gentiles be brought into a right relationship with God, and what implications does this have for their inclusion in the people of

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1. Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24–25.

God?”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s letter is likely written sometime during the period of the late-40s to mid-50s of the first century CE, only one or two generations after the life of Christ.<sup>3</sup> During this time, “Christianity” had not yet become a distinct religion or independent community distinguishable from Judaism. Christ-followers were a subset of believers within Judaism who had unique ideas about the identity and role of the Jewish Messiah, specifically their belief that Jesus of Nazareth was this Messiah.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when large groups of gentiles became followers of Jesus, they had to work out how they would function within the Jewish community of Christ-followers, as gentiles-in-Christ. Johnson Hodge describes how this caused Paul to focus extensively on ethnicity:

For Paul, kinship and ethnicity cannot be merely metaphorical, for lineage, paternity, and peoplehood are the salient categories for describing one’s status before the God of Israel. It is in these terms that Paul articulates the central theological problem of his writings: gentiles are alienated from the God of Israel. And it is in these terms that Paul presents the solution: baptism into Christ makes gentiles descendants of Abraham. Paul’s universalizing—by which I mean his invitation to gentiles to be made right with the God of Israel—is expressed through notions of peoplehood, lineages, and familial relatedness. Thus, the notion of an ethnically neutral “Christianity” in Paul makes no sense.<sup>5</sup>

For Paul, then, baptism into Christ made gentiles descendants of Abraham, solving the problem of their separation from God and the people of God. However, Paul did not

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2. James D. G. Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:1–11),” in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 201. See also Paula Fredriksen, *Paul the Pagan Apostle* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 6–7, for discussion on how the study of Galatians has progressed from being about faith and grace (Lutheran view), to Stendahl’s explanation that Paul should be understood as a Jew and not a Christian, to E. P. Sanders writing that Paul’s primary concern is not “justification by faith” but rather the standing of gentiles before God, to Gaston eventually claiming that Paul is only addressing gentile Christians in his epistles.

3. Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

4. Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch,” 201.

5. Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

imagine that this made them ethnically Jewish. One way to think about this is to consider Paul's remarkable statement in Galatians 3:28 that, as a result of baptism into Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul certainly did not imagine that baptism removed one's gender, but rather that it should remove the social prejudices associated with gender. In the same way, baptism did not remove or change one's ethnicity but instead removed the barriers between Jew and gentile and united them in Christ.

Further complicating Paul's belief was the fact that no religion had ever made such an attempt to "convert" people to their religious views without changing their ethnicity. Ethnicity and religion were so intertwined in antiquity that if you desired to change one you would need to change the other.<sup>6</sup> Hurtado describes this dynamic of the ancient world:

The world Jesus was born into believed that you inherited the gods of your family, city, and Empire in the same way you were born into your ethnicity and gender. And yet, very early in the Jesus-movement Christianity became transethnic. Christian religious identity was not tied to one ethnicity and did not involve connection to one ethnic group.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that that the ancient world was not interested in the religious practices of other groups. People often added religious practices of other groups to their own personal or family rituals. What was unique for Paul and his Christ-following contemporaries was the instruction to no longer engage in the cultic practices or worship of idols or deities that gentiles inherited from their family at birth.

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6. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in a Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 78–79.

7. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 78–79.

The resulting “transethnic” community of Christ-followers then became something completely new and controversial in both history and their own neighborhoods. This community of people maintained their previous familial and ethnic identities but were held together instead by a shared belief system rooted in obedience to and worship of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> The challenge for Paul, as well as for the other early Christian leaders, was to determine what this new multi-ethnic community would come to look like, how group members would interact with one another, and what impact all of this would have on those who lived alongside them in their communities.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Conflict in Galatians 1–2**

The letter from Paul to the Galatians begins with his familiar introduction and greeting but then immediately shifts tone when Paul states his great concern, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6–7). Paul then proceeds to say that it is his desire that anybody teaching such a false gospel be placed under God’s curse (Gal 1:9)! Clearly, Paul views the conflicting position of his opponents in Galatia as a major confrontation to a core element of his gospel message. At the same time, Paul insists that he did not receive his gospel from any human but by direct revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11–12). There is no doubt that Paul is gravely concerned about the false gospel spreading among the Galatians and that he is completely

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8. James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 19–20.

9. The use of the word “community” is not intended to imply that there was any kind of universally practiced form of multi-ethnic communal practice across the many geographically and culturally diverse places early churches were developing. Certainly, the multi-ethnic communities functioned in a variety of ways in different regions and perhaps even within regions.



certain that his gospel is correct and true while this other one is clearly false and a complete perversion. What could possibly be such a serious challenge to the message of the good news about Jesus Christ?

Paul does not answer that question immediately. Instead he launches into a twenty-eight verse retelling of events from the past, ranging from his past life as Christian persecutor, to his travels, which include two trips to Jerusalem and a confrontation with Peter regarding his withdrawal from table fellowship with gentiles in Antioch (Gal 1:11–2:14). Esler describes this biographical section as a “narratio,” which in ancient rhetoric was used to make a judicial or political argument by stating how events in the past make a clear and compelling argument about what should be done in the future.<sup>10</sup> Two of those past events stand out from the others: Paul’s second trip to Jerusalem with Titus and Barnabas and the confrontation with Peter in Antioch. Paul understands these two events to be intrinsically connected with one another and believes they have significant bearing on the spread of this false gospel in the Galatian churches at the moment of his writing.<sup>11</sup> In the Jerusalem event, the question focuses on whether Paul’s version of the Gospel, presumably that gentiles can be in Christ through faith and baptism without circumcision, is acceptable to the Jewish leaders. His indication that Titus was present and not compelled to be circumcised and that they only asked him to continue to remember the poor, strongly suggests that the Jerusalem leaders did not think Paul’s presentation of the (circumcision-free) gospel for gentiles was lacking or incorrect

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10. Esler, *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998), 117.

11. Philip F. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement Mediterranean Style: A New Reading of Galatians 2:1–14,” in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 260.

in any way.<sup>12</sup> In Antioch, the situation largely centers around Paul confronting Peter when his practices of table fellowship with gentile believers of Jesus changed when he was pressured by some brothers from James and “ones of the circumcision.”<sup>13</sup> If the only interest Paul had in his Galatian correspondence was the relationship of gentiles to the God of Israel, there would be no need to recount his confrontation of Peter at Antioch. Paul brings up these past discussions and conflicts regarding circumcision and table fellowship because they both deal with the reason Paul is writing to the Galatians. It is evident that Paul’s primary focus is helping the Galatian Christ-followers develop a proper understanding of how gentiles can be in a right relationship with God. However, if part of that relationship includes forsaking one’s ethnic cult and deities, it would have placed them in great tension with or even outside of their own community or family of origin. And if they were not able to establish strong and inclusive kinship relationships within the Jewish Christ-following community, they would remain in a social no-man’s land.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, Galatians cannot simply ask about gentiles’ relationship with God without necessarily exploring whether Jews-in-Christ can fully welcome gentiles-in-Christ to their homes and tables as equals or only as guests or with conditions.<sup>15</sup> For this

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12. Esler, *Galatians*, 33. While there are other perspectives, this paper finds Esler’s view on the similarities and differences between Gal 2 and Acts 15 compelling: “Acts 15 has too many features in common with the Jerusalem council as described by Paul in Galatians 2:1–10 to be based on another meeting in the holy city, yet Luke seems to have retrojected it back into an earlier period in Paul’s career and to have conflated with it information of a later compromise on the problems of table-fellowship between gentiles and Israelites, which produces an impression of harmony on this issue much earlier than it could ever have been established.”

13. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement,” in *The Galatians Debate*, 261.

14. Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagan Apostle*, 91.

15. Nanos, Mark D, “What Was at Stake in Peter’s ‘Eating with Gentiles’ at Antioch?” in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 304–5.

reason, Paul considers both the council in Jerusalem and the confrontation at Antioch immediately relevant to the situation in Galatians and so consideration of each of them is necessary.

Esler makes a compelling argument that the events described in Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1–11 are likely describing the same interaction and that it is a confrontation with significant implications for the honor of the involved parties.<sup>16</sup> Of course, we do not have a record of the events from the perspective of the Jewish leaders nor even the “false brothers” but only Paul’s point of view. There are several indications that this interaction was not as straightforward as modern Western eyes might perceive. Paul states that the entire matter arose because of some false brothers who sought to sneak among them to steal their freedom in Christ (Gal 2:4). As has been discussed above, at this point in its early history, Christianity was still functioning as a subset within Judaism. So these “false brothers” could be either Jews who were not Christ-followers or Jewish Christ-followers who were encouraging gentiles-in-Christ to undergo circumcision to become proselytes. Galatians 6:12 states that those who are trying to compel the gentiles to be circumcised are doing so to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. This suggests that at least some of those promoting circumcision are followers of Jesus, but also implies that they are doing so because of outside pressure, most likely from Jewish leaders in the community who are not followers of Jesus Christ. Paul’s inclusion of the gentiles at the table without requiring conversion to Judaism found opposition from those both within and outside of the Jewish Christian communities, and in an attempt to remove this

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16. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement,” 269–71.

opposition, Paul has travelled to Jerusalem to meet with those esteemed by some as pillars of the early church, namely Peter, James, and John.

Paul's description of Peter, James, and John as pillars of the church is undercut by his subtle implication that, while some hold them in such high esteem, he does not, since "whatever they were makes no difference to me" (Gal 2:6). Even more striking is the following phrase, "God does not show favoritism." Paul confronts the idea that these three men are more important than he is or that their ministry is more sanctioned by God than his own by pointing out that he and God do not give preferential treatment to these men above and beyond any other. To conclude his description of the confrontation, Paul provides two assessments of the Jerusalem leaders' response to his request; that they initially added nothing to his message, and that finally they only asked him to remember the poor, which he desired to do all along (Gal 2:6, 10). Paul wants to make very clear that the leaders recognized him as the specially designated missionary to the gentiles, that they had nothing to add to his message, and that they made no request of him that he did not already intend to accomplish whether they asked or not. Paul seemingly got everything he wanted from the exchange without making any concessions. By the end of the meeting, they agree that circumcision will not be required for gentiles to receive full inclusion in the community of believers since nothing needs to be added to Paul's message, and Titus is not compelled to be circumcised.

If the Jerusalem event reveals a conflict between groups regarding gentile inclusion in the people of God, then the implications for the Antioch conflict become even more dramatic, as the groups seem to be continuing to contest or renegotiate the terms of their agreement to determine whose plan will be put into action in the mixed

communities of Christ-followers. Several centuries after this event took place, Ambrosiaster described the actions of Peter and the “certain men from James” in Antioch as a breaking of the agreement previously made with Paul.<sup>17</sup> However, it is not necessary to infer that Peter and James have reneged on the Jerusalem arrangement. Perhaps when they made their initial decision they failed to appreciate the complex implications for actual social dynamics, and later they began to question their decision or at least struggle to put it into practice.<sup>18</sup>

For Paul, denying table fellowship to gentiles-in-Christ is an unacceptable way to proclaim or live according to the gospel. He strongly condemns Peter to his face in Antioch and curses anybody who agrees with Peter in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:9, 2:11). He has been proclaiming to gentiles that they can come into Christ through faith by grace upon their baptism and that they can remain ethnically gentile, not having to live according to the halakhic laws or dietary restrictions, as long as they stop participating in sexual immorality and idolatry. Paul rejoiced when the leaders in Jerusalem had nothing to add to that message, and in Acts 15 he wrote a letter stating that circumcision, and with it proselyte conversion, was not necessary to be in Christ.

However, when the certain men from James arrive in Antioch and when Peter and Barnabas and many other Jews stop eating with the gentile Christians, everything Paul has preached and worked for is in danger. If the gentiles who have been baptized into Christ are being treated as gentile guests at times of table fellowship with the Jewish brothers and sisters, then they are stuck in a form of ethnic, cultural, and religious limbo.

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17. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement,” 281.

18. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 57.

They cannot belong to their former pagan communities and avoid pagan cult worship and idolatry. They cannot exist within the Christ-following subset of the Jewish community if they are treated as unwelcome strangers or second-tier members. The implied instruction from Peter and the others at Antioch would have been, “if you want to be one of us you must conform by becoming a converted Jew who follows Jesus, just like us.” Unity would require ethnic conformity. The only alternatives would be a return to their former pagan life or to exist as an isolated and separate community of gentiles-in-Christ apart from the Jews who were in Christ. For Paul, all of these options are a rejection of the gospel he has preached and are in opposition to the cross of Jesus Christ.

It is often assumed that Peter repented and fell back in line with the Jerusalem agreement after Paul confronted him. However, that is a bold assumption since Paul likely would have been happy to inform his Galatian audience that Peter, certain ones from James, Barnabas, and other Jews in Antioch all changed their ways and returned to table fellowship with the gentile Christians there. But that information is never given, and when writing to the Galatians, Paul knows that this unresolved crisis of division, exclusion, and second-class status for gentiles remains a great social pressure on gentiles who want to be fully welcomed into their new community of Christ followers. This pressure would constantly tempt them to be circumcised and become proselyte followers of Jesus, living by the Jewish law, and no longer considered gentile in any way. Paul rejects this entirely and writes to the church in Galatia, encouraging them to learn from his experiences in Jerusalem and in Antioch, so that they can learn the truth of the gospel: people of all nations, tribes, and tongues can come to Christ as they are and be united by nothing other than their allegiance to Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

## Understanding the Social World of Galatians

In order to understand the conflicts that arose from allowing gentiles to relate to the God of Israel and his people without becoming Jews, it is necessary to understand the social dynamics of the ancient Near East during the time of Paul's ministry. It is not possible to summarize the relationship between Jews and gentiles in the first century in a single narrative or description. At different times and in different regions, the relationship ranged from open hostilities to neighbors engaging in trade, communal activities, and sociable relations with one another. While there is not significant information about the relationships between Jews and gentiles at the specific time and region of Paul's writing, more information from the larger region around that time provides insight into the complex social dynamics addressed in Paul's letter.

Early in the Roman period a large enough population of Jews lived in the Roman province of Galatia to warrant Augustus issuing a decree protecting the rights of Jews.<sup>19</sup> This decree allowed Jews to live according to their own laws and with a certain amount of cultural autonomy, largely without fear of Roman harassment. This protection was also significant because, as long as Christ-followers were a subset of Jews, this legal protection under Roman law would later extend to those early Christians as well. It is likely that during times of peace, Jews and gentiles in this area would have interacted often as neighbors and guests in one another's homes, worship spaces, and commercial settings.

However, things were not always peaceful. There were no fewer than four periods of violent outbreaks between the Greeks (gentiles) and Jews between 100 BCE and 100

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19. Esler, *Galatians*, 30.

CE in this region.<sup>20</sup> These kinds of conflicts could leave lasting animosity. The Jewish historian Josephus wondered if there could possibly be a morally good gentile, and rabbis would frequently join in this debate.<sup>21</sup> None of this would have come as a surprise to Paul, who was a Roman citizen and a Jew who grew up in a Greek city, likely having experienced and participated in various forms of interethnic animosity and contempt throughout his lifetime. He would certainly have known the challenges that would accompany his unique plan to remove social barriers restricting gentiles from relating to the God of Israel, with all of the baggage and ethnic prejudices of both groups.<sup>22</sup>

In most cases, the most defining characteristic of the Jew and gentile interaction would have been social segregation with limited spheres of overlap. The Jewish “Letter of Aristeas” was probably written two to three centuries prior to Paul’s ministry but speaks about the wisdom of avoiding or limiting interaction with gentiles.<sup>23</sup> Aristeas claims to have visited and learned things from the High Priest Eleazar, including the observation that people are influenced by those they spend the most time with, so Jews are cautioned that they will become miserable and perverted if they spend time with the wicked (gentiles). If the gentiles change their ways, though, they can leave ignorance and make things right by spending more time with the wise and prudent (Jews). Aristeas

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20. Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 74–75.

21. Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 237–38.

22. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, 76.

23. Esler, *Galatians*, 82.



explained how the purification and holiness laws provided a barrier between Jews and their immoral neighbors:

The law giver [Moses] . . . fenced us about with impregnable palisades and walls of iron, so that we might in no way mix with the other nations, pure in body and soul, released from vain ideas, reverencing the one almighty God over the whole creation. Therefore, lest we should become perverted, by sharing the pollution of others or by associating with evil people, he hedged us around on all sides with types of purification in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and seeing as legal requirements.<sup>24</sup>

Another Jewish document from about the same time, Jubilees, offered the same instruction to Jews: “separate yourself from the nations and do not eat with them.”<sup>25</sup> The Roman historian Tacitus recorded that “the Jews eat separately and sleep separately,” confirming that separation was not only encouraged by Jewish leaders but actively practiced by community members so that even outsiders found it worthy of remark.<sup>26</sup> Although Jews likely interacted with Gentiles in public spaces and commercial settings without much hesitation (during times of peace), table fellowship and the holiness codes provided boundaries intended to produce cohesiveness for the in-group and separation from the out-group.<sup>27</sup>

This summary of the Jew and gentile relationship in the time and region in which Paul did his mission work gives a glimpse into the many deeply rooted biases Paul and his early churches would have faced as they attempted to create a multiethnic community.

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24. Esler, *Galatians*, 84.

25. Jubilees 22:16, as found in Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch,” 213.

26. Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch,” 214.

27. It is important to note that in any time and culture it is not possible to describe the complex ways that in groups and out groups interact with one another. So while the description of the context is helpful it is not universally accurate in all of the churches or communities of Paul’s time.

It will also be helpful in understanding the biases that influenced Peter, James, John, Barnabas, and others throughout the Galatian narrative. The complexity of ethnic divisions run deep and are rarely easily overcome.

### **The Dawning of the Age to Come and Gentiles Among the Jews**

In this complicated cultural milieu of relationships and tensions between gentiles and Jews, there was some belief among the Jews that it would not always stay this way. There were many expectations of the promised Messiah's identity and what kind of kingdom he would usher in. Among these expectations was the prophesied "age to come" when Israel would be fully restored and returned from exile, the Temple would be restored, and the monarchy would be established.<sup>28</sup> On these matters there was a great deal of agreement. But when it came to the role of the gentiles in the new age, there were two very different views which both originated in the Old Testament prophecies. On one end of the spectrum was the belief that the gentiles would be destroyed or at least enslaved. Foreign kings would lick the dust of Israel's feet (Isa 49:23); gentile cities would be destroyed or emptied and repopulated with Jews (Isa 54:3); God would destroy the nations and their idols (Mic 5:9, 15).<sup>29</sup> On the other end of the spectrum was the expectation that in the new age the gentiles, in part or in whole, would somehow participate in Jerusalem's exaltation, streaming toward Jerusalem and worshiping the Jewish God (Isa 2:2–4); sharing a feast on God's mountain, Zion (Isa 25:6); ten gentiles for each Jew asking to hold to their robe as they travel to Jerusalem (Zech 8:23). So while

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28. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 81.

29. Fredriksen, "Judaism and Apocalyptic Hope," 235.

it was unclear how the gentiles would be involved in the “age to come,” it was clear that it would change the relationship between Jews and gentiles, and in the new age God’s plan would include bringing the entire world to him.

When Paul became a disciple of Jesus Christ, it became evident to him that the events of Jesus’s death and resurrection and the arrival of the Holy Spirit were clear indications that the restoration of Israel had been fulfilled, and, therefore, the new age had officially dawned. And if this age to come had arrived, then it was time for the gentiles to come in. This conviction was the theological foundation of Paul’s ministry to the gentiles.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Paul understood his ministry to be a continuation of the work of the Israelite prophets who were sent to the nations. In Gal 1:15–16 he describes his prophetic call: “But when he who set me apart from the womb of my mother and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his son in me, in order that I might proclaim him among the gentiles, I did not confer with any human being.”<sup>31</sup> This call echoes the prophetic calling of both Isaiah and Jeremiah, linking Paul to their missions to go to the gentiles (Isa 49:1, 6; Jer 1:5). In this way, Paul does not see his ministry as any kind of radical break with Jewish prophecy, tradition, or belief. Rather, his ministry to the gentiles is the direct result of his continuation of the prophetic tradition of going to the gentiles as well as the necessary mission that the dawning of the new age required.<sup>32</sup> Paul even seems to expect that the church, made of Jew and gentile, confident of one another’s legitimate

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30. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 81–82.

31. NIV.

32. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 120–21.

place in the people of God, will indicate to the world that the age to come has officially dawned, and the entire world must now turn to God through Christ.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that gentiles could become Jews or join in some level of worship to Israel's God was not new to Paul's ministry. The Jews were accustomed to different levels of gentile engagement in their Jewish communities and even in their religious life. The most committed form of gentile engagement was the proselyte who fully converted to Judaism. As noted above, in the ancient world you could not take on the religion and gods of another ethnic group, forsaking the religious practices and deities of your birth without completely joining that ethnic group. So proselytes would cease to identify as their previous ethnicity after their conversion—which for the males culminated in circumcision—but would be Jewish in both faith and ethnicity.<sup>34</sup> As such, proselytes would obey Torah, observe the Sabbath, practice food and other purity laws, worship God exclusively, and receive full table fellowship and community inclusion among the Jews.<sup>35</sup> They would be respected by the Jews and treated as an insider to the community in every way, as described in Isaiah 56:1–8. The practice appears to have been common enough that it was worthy of comment in the satires of Horace and Juvenal.<sup>36</sup> Juvenal describes proselyte conversion:

Some who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine's flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practice and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses committed to his secret

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33. Nanos, "What Was at Stake?" 316.

34. Dunn, "The Incident at Antioch," 214.

35. Dunn, "The Incident at Antioch," 214.

36. Fredriksen, "Judaism and Apocalyptic Hope," 238.

tome, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life.<sup>37</sup>

As Juvenal shows, proselytes observed the Sabbath, followed dietary laws, received circumcision, and flout the laws of Rome in favor of the laws of Moses. Jewish proselytes would experience community life, not as gentiles among the Jews, but truly as former non-Jews, now fully Jewish, living life and practicing faith as both religious and ethnic Jews.

Another group of gentiles would spend time among the Jews who had less commitment than full proselyte conversion but still had some level of both admiration for the Jews and their God and involvement with their practices. This group was known as the “*ger tashov*” or “God-fearers.” Unlike proselytes, God-fearers remained members of the ethnic group into which they were born, but they would take on some level of Torah obedience. They were voluntary practitioners of some level of Jewish religious observance and were often found in large numbers in any urban area with a large Jewish population.<sup>38</sup> God-fearers would have been allowed in most synagogue activities but would have been treated as guests or tourists; likewise, they would have been able to join the Jewish table fellowship only as a guest and not as one receiving full inclusion.<sup>39</sup> While there was a wide range of “Judaizing” that a particular God-fearer might prefer, a

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37. Juvenal complains about sons converting to Judaism, *Satires*, 14.96–106.

38. Fredriksen, “Judaism and Apocalyptic Hope,” 242–43. Fredriksen is referencing both Philo and Josephus on this matter. She also describes in detail the list of God-fearers on the Aphrodisias Inscription and how that indicates gentile involvement with the local synagogue while still maintaining interaction with their gentile identity, community, and cult.

39. Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:1–11),” 215–16.

few things are clear. God-fearers were not a threat to the status quo because they would simply add some level of Judaism to the ethnic worship of their own pagan gods, and it was not offensive for the Jews to have them around as respectful guests. They were not given table fellowship as Jews and were not expected to cease worshipping their own gods.

This discussion of proselytes and God-fearers is important to understanding some of the ways non-Jews related to Jews. As mentioned above, some in Israel expected the gentiles to be destroyed or enslaved. Still others thought they might become gentiles who worshiped God and had some role in Israel's redemption. This range of expectations made the position of the proselyte in the people of God complicated at times, but remained an option for those gentiles who desired to become Jews ethnically and religiously. What Paul begins proclaiming as the gospel in his Christ-following communities is that gentiles may now live as full members of the people of God, with a full relationship with God himself, rejecting their former pagan cultic practices, without first becoming Jews. They were former worshippers of their ancestral gods, still ethnically non-Jews, but included in table fellowship alongside Jewish followers of Jesus, simply because of their baptism and mutual belief in Jesus as their shared Lord and Savior. The problem with Paul's teaching that table fellowship (and everything that comes with it) should be given to gentiles-in-Christ was precisely that they were being treated as equals without conversion. This constituted a major and threatening challenge to the well accepted status quo for many in the Jewish and surrounding gentile communities. It is worth noting here that many have argued that the offense of Peter eating with gentiles centered primarily, if not entirely, around the dietary regulations and

purity laws that created social barriers between the Jews and their gentile neighbors. However, it has been shown above that Jews had practices that allowed them to regularly eat and interact with gentiles when they needed to, so long as they did so in a manner that made it clear that the gentile joined the table as guest and not as the recipient of full table fellowship.<sup>40</sup>

It is important now to turn to the many complex motivations of the parties invested in the status quo and their reasons for opposing Paul. We know these groups existed because of Paul's critique of their opposition to him and his insistence that his own refusal to promote circumcision of gentiles in Christ is cause for his ongoing persecution. As their fears and motivations are revealed, their proposed solutions to the dilemma caused by Paul's multiethnic Christian communities will make more sense, as will Paul's opposition to them. The Jewish communities (predominantly not disciples of Jesus) would have been concerned that the fragile peace with their pagan gentile neighbors would be shattered if they began encouraging gentiles who were not actively in the process of becoming proselytes to stop practicing their ethnic and local cultic worship. Nanos describes it well:

These Jewish communities are embedded within the dominant pagan communities of Galatia; they are not entirely free of concern with the pagan ordering of communal identity and life. The addressees represent pagan guests claiming admission on terms that threaten the prevailing norms of both the pagan and Jewish communities, for until they have begun the ritual process of transformation from pagan to Jewish proselyte identity, the addressees are understood to be pagans. They are still obliged as pagans to observe, for example, the public practices of imperial and local cults. If the addressees remain pagans on the prevailing terms of identity yet fail to participate in pagan activities based on a claim to the rights of Jewish privilege to abstain, apart from proselyte conversion,

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40. Mark D. Nanos, "The Inter- and Intra-Jewish Political Context of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 301.

this represents a threatening proposition for which the leaders of the minority Jewish communities would have to answer to the leaders of the pagan communities.<sup>41</sup>

This explanation begins to reveal not only the Jewish fear that a disruption to the long-established communal norms could threaten their status in the community, but also the anxiety caused in local gentile communities that their own deities would become offended and angry with the lack of cultic practice from those whom they expect to participate. If those early Jewish missionaries would simply preach circumcision then their gentile converts would simply be a newer version of Jewish proselytes who follow Jesus. It is the demand that gentiles stop their traditional forms of pagan worship that caused them to become what Paula Fredriksen terms “deviant pagans:”

Because these nonsacrificing pagans of the Christian movement refused to honor their gods, the Tiber might overflow or the Nile might not, the earth might move or the sky might not (Tertullian, *Apology* 40.2,2). “No rain, because of the Christians!” (Augustine, *City of God* 2.3). Divine wrath risked havoc. Gods struck with flood or famine, with drought and disease; they could level cities with earthquakes or allow foreign armies to invade. For this reason, uncoordinated local initiatives pre-250, and occasional imperial ones during the “crisis of the third century,” attempted to coerce gentile Christians’ cultic conformity. Whatever their new religious practices and preferences, these people in the eyes of their own family members, neighbors, and civic authorities were still obligated to the gods of the city and of the empire. It was as *deviant pagans* that these gentile Christians were coerced. These unprecedented persecutions were motivated, quite simply, by traditional piety – that is, by fear of the gods.<sup>42</sup>

As a result of their perceived threat to the stability between heaven and earth, these Christ-following gentiles would have been in a difficult position. Without becoming a Jewish proselyte, fully immersing into the Jewish community, and yet completely

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41. Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 8.

42. Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagan Apostle*, 90–91.



forsaking the native cults and deities of their previous communities, these Christ-following gentiles existed in a social and religious no-man's land.<sup>43</sup> As a result of those tensions, there was outsider pressure from both Jews and gentiles to cease this experiment in allowing people to be religiously Christian (a subset of Judaism) while remaining ethnically gentile.

Within the Christian community, two forms of opposition arose to Paul's solution. The first was an active campaign to get gentiles to do what they had always done if they wanted to worship the God of Israel without any obstacle: become a Jewish proselyte through conversion and ultimately circumcision for the men. Paul refers to advocates of this position as "those of the circumcision" and is extremely opposed to their approach. In Galatians 6:12 he writes, "Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ."<sup>44</sup> The statement that they want to avoid being persecuted for the sake of the cross suggests they are insiders of the Jewish Christian community who are trying to avoid persecution from outsider groups. For Paul, their idea that gentiles-in-Christ should simply become converts to Judaism negates the power of the cross. It provides a solution that was already available to them before Jesus was resurrected; if it is still necessary, then it is unclear what purpose the sacrifice of Christ accomplished (Gal 5:11).

The second group that opposed Paul from within the Christian community was most embodied by Peter's actions once the certain men from James arrive in Antioch.

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43. Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagan Apostle*, 91.

44. NIV.

This group's actions indicate their belief that those gentiles who are in Christ but who are not willing to go through the process to become proselytes should be treated as guests at table fellowship. Similar to the way Jews treat God-fearers at the table, it appears this group is only willing to interact with gentiles-in-Christ as guests who are not fully welcomed or included in the Jewish community of believers in Jesus.<sup>45</sup> This practice would produce two likely outcomes. First, it would provide significant social pressure for gentile men who want to follow Jesus to be circumcised, to which Paul is completely opposed. Or second, it would create social pressure for gentile followers of Jesus to forsake their newfound faith and return to the social comfort of their original pagan worship of gentile deities and communal inclusion.<sup>46</sup>

Paul describes these opponents as proclaiming a “different Gospel” than what he preached, and accuses those who ascribe to such thinking as having forsaken the Gospel they were given (Gal 1:6–9). This is far more than a simple difference of opinion or different approach to missions and church makeup. For Paul this is a core issue that he will not concede. The age to come has dawned, and gentiles are now joining Jews as God's people, but they do not have to become Jews to do so. They are becoming members of the people of God and worshiping God *as gentiles*. The multiethnic and united community of Christ followers is evidence that the new age has arrived and that Jesus has caused it to explode into this world. Paul is completely unwilling to consider alternatives to his vision, to compromise, or to give in to the extensive pressure being applied to him and his Christian communities. He even declares that views on gentile

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45. Nanos, “The Inter- and Intra-Jewish Context,” 301

46. Nanos, *Irony of Galatians*, 317–18.

inclusion in the Christian community are the sole reason he continues to be persecuted (Gal 5:11; 6:17). Paul is fully aware of the alternative approaches to allowing gentiles to join this Jewish subset of Christ-followers in the dawning new age. He could join others in encouraging gentiles to be circumcised to be in Christ, leaving behind their former ethnic identity and their former worship of pagan idols. He could come alongside those who are willing to welcome gentile believers in Christ to table fellowship as guests, or even worse, to insist they use different tables in different homes. But Paul refuses every one of these solutions because he believes they are in opposition to the gospel. He is convinced that unity does not require uniformity and that separation and segregation would demean his gentile converts and eventually send them back to the inclusion they could expect in their former pagan communities. For Paul, the gentiles-in-Christ must be allowed to bring their full ethnic identity (leaving behind polytheism, sexual immorality, and idolatry) into this new diverse and unified body of Christ-followers who are united by their belief in Jesus Christ.

### **Paul's Vision of a United Diverse Community in Christ Then and Now**

While the ethnic groups involved in Christian churches and the types of divisions that creep into them have changed many times since the days of Paul's writing, the temptation to reject or abandon unified diverse Christian communities has always been strong. In light of this historical and present realization, the impact of Paul's reflections on his conflict with Peter in Antioch must be observed: he is opposed to the separation of gentile and Jewish believers into exclusive communities, especially those who were able to eat together in the past or in other contexts. Not only is he opposed to this in Antioch, he seemingly offers the story as a warning to the church in Galatia as they struggle with

issues of ethnicity and inclusion as it regards to gentiles' relationship to God and to the church.<sup>47</sup> Further, Paul is adamant that the unity of the church does not require uniformity, and he expects cultural identities to be preserved—rather than erased—for the sake of unity.<sup>48</sup> Even though some in Paul's ministry context in Galatia and elsewhere insisted that gentiles become Jews in order to be included among the people of God, and others who encouraged two separate churches, Paul proclaims that the gospel calls those in Christ to pursue a shared identity that transcends their differences without ignoring or erasing them.<sup>49</sup> Beker describes the result of Paul's vision:

Sacramental participation in Christ and union with Christ do not mean an undifferentiated “oneness” of the church. The equality of all in Christ does not suspend the multiformity and variety of the members. The ontological aspect of participation in Christ only seemingly suspends and diffuses the personal identity of people. In reality, ontological participation intersects with the distinct multiformity of the individual members and their several charismatic gifts and talents.<sup>50</sup>

The Pauline vision has always been for churches to humbly come together in worship and around the table, accepting one another's differences while praising God with one voice. In the past, Paul's letters have often been used to call Christians to a new racial, ethnic, and cultural utopia, wherein the differences between Christians are erased. Johnson Hodge refers to these approaches as “fusion theories,” which offer a myth of innocence,

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47. The idea of “church” here is not similar to a congregation or membership group as is common today. It is more in line with the idea of a “kinship group” or community of people who fully accept one another and care for one another as an extended family or close knit community. Kinship is an essential part of life in the first century world as described in John J. Pilch, and Bruce J. Malina. *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993).

48. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 148–49.

49. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 149.

50. Johan C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 309.

neutrality, and naturalness to Christianity that allows it to transcend ethnic or cultural differences.<sup>51</sup> Fusion theories are dangerous because they often make it comfortable and easy for dominant culture groups to ignore the cultural and ethnic challenges minority individuals and groups can face when trying to be fully welcomed and included in the community without having to edit their own identity. For this reason, and because fusion theories remove the theological impetus for seeking diversity in community, they can also lead to segregated homogenous churches. Fusion theories can often present as people insisting they are “color-blind,” that there are “no black Christians or white Christians, but Christians-only,” or many other well-intentioned statements. These statements imply that people must erase their ethnicity or aspects of their identity in order to receive full inclusion in the body of Christ.

Fusion theories are difficult to reconcile with Paul’s own sense of identity in the years after his conversion. In his letter to the Philippians, he writes that he is “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless” (Phil 3:5–6).<sup>52</sup> Toward the end of Acts he tells the Sanhedrin he is only on trial for *being* a Pharisee and tells a Roman Centurion that he *is* a Roman citizen from Tarsus (Acts 22:25–29; 23:6). As a result of his conversion, Paul also begins to describe himself as one who is in Christ and who is an Apostle. He feels no compulsion to leave behind his past cultural, ethnic, and political affiliations in order to become a follower of Jesus Christ. His Jewishness or citizenship in

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51. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 126.

52. NIV.

Rome need not be forfeited to become a disciple of Jesus, but they must become identifiers in submission to his primary identity, which is now one who is in Christ.

What Paul does with his own identity demonstrates what some scholars have come to call “nested identities,” where individuals negotiate many sources of affiliations that give a person their identity, belonging, and cultural makeup.<sup>53</sup> However, those many nested identities can be prioritized according to their significance in determining who the person is and how they interact with the world around them. This model of nested identities helps us understand what Paul is doing with his early Christian communities as he helps them maintain their ethnic identities (Jew, gentile, etc.) as long as they are prioritized below the most significant identity of being in Christ. Johnson Hodge describes Paul’s use of this approach:

This model of Paul’s untidy theological solution is shaped by particular insights about how identity is not only flexible, as I have discussed, but also multifaceted. A model of multiple identities offers an alternative to the notion that ethnic identities are monolithic and one-dimensional. It suggests that individuals and groups might embody several ethnic or other identities, situationally emphasizing one while downplaying others. This interpretive framework helps us understand Paul’s careful construction of Jews and gentiles, now descended from the same founding ancestor and belonging to the same God, but not collapsed into one group. Paul’s rhetorical task, especially in *Romans* and *Galatians*, is to explain to gentile believers how their new composite identity works: how they must rearrange previous components and make room for new ones. Paul becomes an “interpreter of identity” for gentiles-in-Christ.<sup>54</sup>

This model allows us to understand how Paul was so deeply convicted that Jews and gentiles-in-Christ could be completely united while still maintaining so much of their

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53. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 126, refers to these as multi-faceted or nested. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, 60, refers to these as situational or nested identities.

54. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 117, 126.

complex and multi-faceted identities that made them who they were prior to their conversion to Christianity.

This Pauline vision still has much to offer Christianity today, as the church must recapture this commitment to peacemaking, reconciliation, and humility for the sake of diverse and inclusive unity in churches. When churches reject this vision, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they reveal that their nested identities have become disordered and that identity sources such as race, ethnicity, political affiliation, or social class have a higher priority than shared belonging to Christ. On the other hand, when Christians today fully submit to Christ and commit to the vision of unity with diversity, they reveal to the world that God's redemptive plan still transforms his people. This transformed group of people living and loving together can then become witnesses to the world of God's plan to restore and draw to himself the fractured, hostile, and violent world.<sup>55</sup> In his book *Becoming the Gospel*, Michael Gorman challenges the church today:

The church need only open its eyes, and enlarge its imagination, to find ways to imitate the example of these more dramatic cases of peacemaking in the community, the home, and the church in more modest ways. As events that continue to transpire in the United States (and elsewhere) make painfully clear, injustice to ethnic and racial minorities persists, and reconciliation is needed at the national and local levels . . . If, for instance, "11 a.m." is still the most segregated hour in the U.S., then the church has failed to become the gospel in a radical and highly significant way. But there is still hope in examples of Christian unity today. Such unity in diversity is both a gift and a demand for those who participate in God's peacemaking mission.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly the challenges in the contemporary world of homogeneous segregated churches do not carry the theological weight of Paul's inclusion of gentiles in the family of

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55. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 194.

56. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 210.

Abraham as a way to solve their separation from God. His solution opened the door for the nations to join God's family as adopted children in Christ. But many of Paul's resulting conclusions and deeply held convictions must continue to challenge churches today. Inclusive and diverse Christian communities are proof that we live on this side of the dawning of the new age, in a time when Jesus prayed that the world would know his disciples by their love for one another.

Diverse and united Christian communities provide one of our greatest ways to live out this prayer. There are still churches that intentionally or unintentionally communicate to minorities in their midst, "You are welcome here as long as you try to be like us and not like 'your people.'" These churches continue to push God's adopted children into a lower social standing, which will eventually send them fleeing to pagan communities that will welcome them back home with open arms. There is no doubt that many Christians simply choose to worship every Sunday with people who look like them, dress like them, and talk like them because it is easier and more comfortable. It is not difficult to imagine that if Paul had a message for those churches today, it would be to confront them to their faces because they stand condemned.



CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW AND PROJECT FORMAT

**Overview of the Project Intervention**

In December 2021 ten members of Northwest agreed to participate in a project to study Galatians to see how Paul passionately resisted attempts to divide the church in Galatia ethnically or to create hierarchies between groups. This team was tasked with evaluating to what extent Northwest Church of Christ shares Paul's conviction for unity in Christ in word and action, or if there are characteristics of Northwest that are more similar to those who were indifferent or antagonistic to diverse unity in Antioch and later in Galatia. The group spent three weeks in December 2021 studying Galatians 1–2 and the social world of Paul's early churches. Throughout these early sessions, members were invited to reflect on their understanding of the New Testament church and on connections with Northwest today. In January 2022, the group had three more sessions that were focused on evaluating the strengths of and potential areas of improvement for Northwest, regarding its current status as a diverse and united church. At the end of these sessions, the group developed an action plan with two sections. The first section comprised ideas to begin implementing as soon as possible, while the second section included ideas to develop for future implementation. The final action plan was then presented to the elders and church staff for their feedback and evaluation.

## The Diversity Team

I purposively selected eleven members of Northwest to join what we called the “Diversity Team.”<sup>1</sup> Ten joined the group, while one declined due to work commitments. The group members were selected based on several criteria. First, I chose individuals who were experienced and familiar with the topic of diversity and who have had opportunities to be involved in conversations like this in the past. While this limited some representation from groups who would potentially resist the goals of the group, it was helpful in creating a group that could spend more time discussing potential solutions rather than debating whether there actually was a problem. However, it would not be accurate to say that the entire group was like-minded; a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives provided meaningful opportunities for listening and growth throughout the project.

I also sought a group that included voices representing a variety of the racial and ethnic groups at Northwest. Three team members were Hispanic, five were Caucasian, and two were African American. Two of the Caucasian participants have families that are mixed-race, one through marriage and the other through adoption.

Four of the participants had been at Northwest for fewer than five years, with one being a very new member, so their newer experiences with the church could help us evaluate the current state of the church. The other six members had been at Northwest for more than fifteen years and had knowledge of where we have been and how we have gotten to where we are today.

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1. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 83–85.

I recruited a non-participant observer to attend all of the meetings and take notes, make observations, and track themes throughout the project. I provided her with a field note protocol, which she used on her computer to take notes.<sup>2</sup> After each meeting she compiled her notes and sent them to me. I was then able to add my own observations and notes and discuss with her any questions I had about her observations. This set of observational data was one of three data sets, alongside insider and outsider analysis, providing different points of view. These data were then triangulated to provide a fuller understanding of the project and results.<sup>3</sup> I intended to only use one non-participant observer, but Covid-19 quarantines required me to use a substitute on three occasions.

The original plan for the team was to meet in person for one hour a week for six weeks, taking off one week for Christmas. It became apparent very quickly that the team desired for sessions to go longer in order to have more time to process the content with one another. Therefore, each session typically lasted one-and-a-half to two hours. The team developed strong relationships throughout the project, and team members often stayed and visited for a long time after sessions. The team faced many disruptions from Covid-19, with at least one member being at home sick or in quarantine every week except the first session. In order to navigate this disruption, the last five sessions had one member on Zoom each week while the rest met in person. We had to postpone one meeting in early January when I was directly exposed to Covid-19.

As the spiritual leaders of the church and as a group that has great insight into both the individuals and the church as a whole, the elders served as key informants

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2. See Appendix C for field note protocol.

3. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 73.

throughout the project and provided their outside evaluation.<sup>4</sup> I also made an adjustment to the outsider evaluation group near the end of the project. As the final action plan was coming together, it became apparent that some of the ideas for implementation would directly impact our children and youth ministries. In order to get the best feedback, I requested that our youth minister and children's minister join the elders on the outsider evaluation group, and they were happy to do so. This was also beneficial when one of our elders could not attend the evaluation session because he was hospitalized with Covid-19. Following the evaluation session, participants and evaluators were given an electronic survey to evaluate the action plan and its potential impact at Northwest Church of Christ in the future.

## **The Sessions**

### Session 1

The first session began with a shared meal at the tables where we would be meeting for the next two months. After we ate, I provided all of the members with informed consent forms and discussed the time commitments, expectations, scope, and goals of the project.<sup>5</sup> We discussed how the team would function both in the context of my academic project and also in the life of the church. They were instructed that their commitment would extend only through the presentation of the final action plan to the elders in January.

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4. For more information on the role of key informants in qualitative research see Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72, 84–85.

5. See Appendix D for Informed Consent Form.

At that time, we read Gal 3:26–29 aloud, had a moment of prayerful reflection in silence, and then I led them in a prayer for our team and its future impact on the church. This is how we began all of our sessions together.

After the meal I told them that the meal we had shared earlier accomplished something that Peter struggled to do, that Barnabas had a tough time with, and that Paul fought for so defiantly that he claimed it was the only reason he was still being persecuted.<sup>6</sup> We did something that only fifteen percent of churches do regularly today.<sup>7</sup> We had a multiethnic meal between brothers and sisters in Christ who do not look alike and who come from different backgrounds. We then took turns as a group reading Gal 1:1–2:14 out loud to hear how Paul confronted Peter in Antioch. I encouraged group members to listen for clues as to how individuals and groups felt about each other in the text, what challenges existed, and what solutions to those challenges were being considered.

The group discussed the tensions between Jews and gentiles in the New Testament world and the resulting tensions between Peter and Paul regarding how they should interact with gentile Christians. We discussed how Paul’s opponents in Galatia had a conditional willingness to welcome and include gentiles that required gentiles to edit their ethnicity in order to be treated as full members. We then explored how churches communicate that conditional willingness to minority group members today. Several members shared their personal experiences of being made to feel unwelcome at

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6. In Gal 5:11, Paul suggests that if he continued requiring circumcision for Gentile converts, he would no longer be persecuted. His conviction that Gentiles could be Christ-followers and full members of the Christian community without editing their ethnic identity was the cause of his ongoing persecution. He makes a similar claim regarding his opponents’ desire to avoid persecution in Gal 6:12–13.

7. Gjelten, “Multiracial Congregations.”

Northwest or other churches because of their race or ethnicity. Multiple members talked at various times about the need to create more safe spaces for conversations about past hurts to take place. The group was very supportive of those members who shared painful experiences and recognized that, while these events were infrequent at Northwest, they revealed a real need for growth and improvement. Members discussed both the importance of healing from past problems and the need for plans for future improvement in the areas of diversity and inclusion at Northwest.

## Session 2

The second session contained the most teaching content from me of all of the sessions. I talked about how Jews and gentiles interacted with one another, the differences between “God-fearers” and “proselytes,” and other social dynamics of the first-century world. We discussed how the concept of converting to faith in and obedience to another people’s deity without converting to that people’s ethnicity was unheard of prior to the events described in Acts.<sup>8</sup> We looked at the two meetings of the Apostles in Jerusalem to consider gentile inclusion in the early Christian movement.<sup>9</sup> The group then returned to the Antioch incident described in Gal 1–2 to consider the implications of Paul’s confrontation of Peter and how this would have affected the gentiles in those churches.

We discussed how there appeared to be three approaches to dealing with gentile Christians in the church. The first approach was to deal with gentiles the way Jews always had, by allowing them full inclusion only after the process of proselytizing and

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8. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 76–78.

9. Acts 11:1–18, Acts 15:1–35.

circumcision, at which time they would follow all of the law and be given full welcome at the table of fellowship. This approach was rejected by all of the Apostles but continued to be pushed by some in the community. The second approach, embodied by Peter and those with him at Antioch, recognized that gentiles can be saved and be in Christ through baptism and faith, but that does not mean they are full members of the Jewish community of Christ-followers. They can no longer worship idols or be sexually immoral, but they also cannot become full members welcome at the table with Jewish Christ-followers. They are essentially second-tier Christians. Finally, the third approach was Paul's view that gentiles are baptized into Christ and given full inclusion and privileges within the church without giving up their previous ethnic identity. They are, for example, Greeks or Romans in Christ, granted full welcome and inclusion at meals with Jewish Christians.

The group spent a while discussing which individuals or groups of people might feel like they have to "edit themselves" to fit into a church today. They discussed language, clothing and social status, family type and style, race, and many other characteristics that are either welcomed or shunned in different churches. Two key ideas came out of these discussions. The first was that people notice which visitors get the most attention and affection shown to them. If we are going to become a more diverse church, we need to make sure that we immediately welcome all people from all groups as soon as they walk in the door. Secondly, the types of people who are leading on Sunday morning and who are in leadership positions at the church can shed light on whether certain groups get "first-tier" status while other groups have "second-tier" status in the church.

One group member suggested that if the church were better at this, we would be less like a melting pot and more like gumbo or a good salad. This opened the door for the

team to really explore what the strengths of a church that did this well would be. The group believed it would help us impact the world around us and be a witness of God's love. Multiple members talked about the value multiple backgrounds and perspectives can bring to leadership, planning, and overcoming challenges. One member also talked about how much richer and vibrant our worship would be with more diverse worship leaders and a more diverse worshipping body of believers.

### Session 3

The third session first focused on reviewing what people had learned from the previous weeks' conversations and then progressed to discussing past teachings and mindsets about race and unity at Northwest Church of Christ. The most significant conversations about race and Christianity at Northwest prior to this project came from a series of sermons by the previous preacher, given on several occasions, which called the church out of racial conflict and tension and into a new "Third Race." This idea came from the "new humanity" described in Eph 2. Many in the group remembered these sermons and were grateful to be at a church willing to talk about this topic even at that time. But some implications of that approach are problematic.

The basic idea previously argued that in Christ we are no longer Jew or gentile, black or white. We are simply Christians and our former divisions fade away. The first problem with this argument is that Paul does not actually live or talk that way. Long after his conversion, he continues to talk about his own identity as a Jew, even identifying as a Pharisee descended from Pharisees.<sup>10</sup> In the same way, Paul continues to refer to gentile converts as gentiles throughout his letters. There is no ethnically neutral "Christianity,"

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10. Acts 23:6.



and being in Christ does not erase our ethnic identities. During the session, I shared with them a quote from a Midwestern Church of Christ member who told a Christian researcher who was studying race, “If everybody was a Christian, there wouldn’t be a race problem. We’d all be the same.” The statement drew responses of discomfort and disgust from all present in the room. The team discussed how this mentality not only promotes sameness over diversity but also discourages meaningful conversations and efforts to improve unity among different groups.

The group also considered the “miracle motif” that often comes up in race relations conversations in churches.<sup>11</sup> This idea assumes that if people will just become Christians or grow closer to God, they will automatically grow closer to each other. One church member suggested to me recently a version of the illustration often used in marriages, that two groups or individuals are like the two bottom angles of a triangle and God is the top angle. As the two individuals move closer to God, they are naturally drawn toward each other. Everything else sorts itself out. Unfortunately, real-world experience indicates otherwise. In spite of renewed calls for racial reconciliation and unity in our churches, individual churches remain largely homogenous, and our society continues to wrestle with issues of race and diversity.

After considering the “third race” approach and the “miracle motif” approach to healthy diversity at Northwest, the team divided up into three groups to read about a different approach to diversity and to answer questions about how Northwest is doing in this area. Groups were given an excerpt from *A Fellowship of Differents* by Scot McKnight, which argues that the church should be like a good salad, where the different

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11. Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 117.

ingredients complement and improve one another but do not become the same.<sup>12</sup> The excerpt concludes:

God has designed the church—and this is the heart of Paul’s mission—to be a fellowship of difference and different. It is a mixture of people from all across the map and spectrum: men and women, rich and poor. It is a mix of races and ethnicities: Caucasians, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, Indian Americans—I could go on, but you see the point. The church I grew up in, bless its heart, was a fellowship of sames and likes. There was almost no variety in our church. It was composed entirely of white folks with the same beliefs, the same tastes in music and worship and sermons and lifestyle; men wore suits and ties and women wore dresses and not a few of them wore church hats. Getting the church right is so important. The church is God’s world-changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and different to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family.<sup>13</sup>

This excerpt concisely describes in contemporary terminology, the vision of a church that is full of unity without requiring conformity. After reading the excerpt, the groups spent time answering questions about which different people groups are represented at Northwest and which are missing. We also talked about the quality of engagement and interactions among different groups of people and continued exploring strengths and potential growth areas. We came back together as a larger group and shared each group’s major reflections and takeaways and discussed how we can continue to improve as a church that wants to be like a really good salad. The group also decided our next meeting must include a salad dinner.

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12. See Appendix E for book excerpt and discussion questions.

13. “The Church Is a Salad - an Excerpt from a Fellowship of Differents by Scot McKnight,” Zondervan Academic, September 30, 2016. <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-church-is-a-salad-an-excerpt-from-a-fellowship-of-differents-by-scot-mcknight>. (Accessed December 14, 2021)

## Session 4

The fourth session was delayed a week due to a Covid-19 exposure and began with everybody eating salad together. This session was the first time we began trying to come up with the plans and ideas that would eventually make it into the final action plan to increase diversity. To start, I presented to the group feedback received during a series of listening dinners that church leaders hosted for church members in the summer of 2021.<sup>14</sup> When asked what members loved about Northwest, the second most common answer was something about the diversity at the church. When asked what obstacles were keeping Northwest from being the church God wants it to be, the most common response was that there were not strong relationships between people from different groups. Clearly, our own members realized that God desires diversity and that our church is not as good at living out that vision as we want to be. I asked the group to begin exploring ways to help Northwest move from being a church that values diversity to being a church that lives it out.

One of the major themes of the session was the recognition that Covid-19 and the related shutdowns have made improving relationships significantly harder. We had lost events and practices that used to enable and strengthen relationships. The group expressed a strong desire to begin bringing back Sunday morning donuts, more ministries that have fun activities, ministries that build relationships through dialogue and serving together, and special events around the holidays. In addition to those spaces where

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14. The entire church was invited to participate in one of a series of dinners where individuals sat at tables of six to eight people and worked together to answer three questions that were then shared with the other tables present. Over 80 members participated in 14 table groups at five dinners. The questions were: “What do you love about Northwest? What obstacles are keeping Northwest from being the church God wants it to be? What dreams do you have for Northwest in ten years?”

relationships can naturally develop and grow, there is also a need for intentionally creating safe spaces where difficult conversations about race and diversity can take place and people can truly learn from one another's experiences and stories.

The group also talked about how Northwest needs to make sure that these values are lived out on Sunday mornings at worship services. When people walk into the room, they are going to immediately check to see how many people there look like them. But they are also going to see how many people welcome them and whether all types of people are greeted equally or whether some visitors get more attention than others. Once worship starts, people watch to see who gets up and leads the church in worship and what that says about how inclusive the church is and desires to be. Several members talked about the ideas of increasing Spanish signage around the church and in church publications and including more Spanish in the worship service. The group was also very interested in developing and providing diversity training to people who focus on meeting and greeting visitors.

Some of the discussion focused on finding ways to address biases and prejudices that exist in the church. Group members talked about the need for programs that help people expose unknown biases and confront prejudices. We acknowledged that these attitudes and behaviors may be learned from wrong-minded adults in our past, from our communities, and from our past experiences. If we want to change these, we need to teach new lessons and have new experiences that confront those divisive attitudes. This need is especially apparent on social media, which both reveals biases and radicalizes prejudices, all without relational dialogue to learn or grow from each other.

At one point, while discussing representation in leadership and the importance of all voices being heard, the group discussed how the exclusion of women from formal leadership means that we are really only talking about diverse male voices being heard and that if Paul includes men and women in his discussion of equality in Christ, perhaps we should as well. I suggested that topic is likely outside the scope of this particular project but agreed that if we are talking about representation in leadership that the desire to begin having those conversations in the future is important to many in the church. The session closed with a prayer and invitation for group members to keep thinking about these challenges and plans and other practical ways to address them as we continue working on our plan over the following two weeks.

#### Session 5

The fifth session jumped right back into the formation of ideas to go into the action plan. This session started out focusing on people's biases and how to confront them as a church. The key idea was that the first step to solving a problem is to admit you have a problem; the group agreed that our church has a problem. Some members have unconscious biases, others have conscious prejudices, and some people can even be overtly harassing. The group talked about the different approaches that may be helpful in each of those different circumstances. For example, harassment should be confronted, while unconscious biases need to be lovingly exposed and explored. The group also recognized that everyone is going to be in different places at different times on this journey; we need to have room for grace and empathy along the way.

Several group members suggested exploring ways to worship or participate in events with churches or youth groups made up of different demographics than Northwest.

These interactions would help us experience other church cultures, connect with people who are different from us, and demonstrate a serious commitment to diversity to the entire church and community. Even if it was too much for the entire church to participate, our youth group or kids' ministry could visit other churches and see how others worship as well as build relationships.

There was some extended conversation about the importance of representation in leadership. We acknowledged that currently we may not have qualified minority members who are ready to step into leadership, but this lack only exposes the need for leadership development programs and ministries that can raise up the next generation of leaders. The group also focused on ways leadership can be demonstrated and developed not only in meetings and during worship, but also in classes, service projects, and mission efforts. Perhaps most importantly, the group expressed a desire for current leaders to mentor younger leaders from all walks of life so the church is better led and better represented in the future.

The group expressed a desire for a formal diversity training program at Northwest. This program would need to have scriptural and theological roots and would be offered to church leaders first. Once they have experienced it, we hope is to offer it as an optional resource for all church members. Not all group members were comfortable with this idea and worried it might promote the divisions of the world and not the unity of the church. But all agreed that it would be good to provide training for all worship leaders on how to talk about diversity and race when in front of the church so that their good intentions would not accidentally cause offense.

Finally, the team wanted to come up with a new type of small group ministry or interaction that would help to organically build relationships but with intentionality toward connecting people from different groups, races, or backgrounds. Some suggested conversation classes, others suggested a Spanish and English Bible class, and a few liked the idea of committing to meet with a randomly drawn partner weekly for six weeks. While different approaches were recommended, what was evident is the need for programs that make surprising friendships easier and more likely.

### The Action Priority Matrix

As we were leaving session 5, one participant approached me and shared her concern that we had too many items and too many directions to sort out in our final meeting. She asked if I would consolidate the ideas into the most concise list possible and send it out to group members early in the week so they could begin prioritizing them before our next meeting. I thought this was a great idea and quickly worked our list of goals and actions down to twenty-six items. Realizing this was too many for us to rank and evaluate in a short time, I decided to use an Action Priority Matrix.<sup>15</sup> I created a Google form that asked all team members to rank each idea according to its anticipated impact using the scale: very important, somewhat important, somewhat less important, and less important. They also evaluated every idea according to its anticipated difficulty using the scale: easy, somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, and difficult. I assigned a point value to each answer, calculated the responses and found the average score for each idea

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15. This tool for making organizational decisions and priorities is sometimes attributed to a method developed called the Eisenhower Principle which came from a quote from Dwight D. Eisenhower about the helpfulness of considering a decision based on urgency versus importance. The Action Priority Matrix is more often associated with Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon and Schuster, London: 2020). For the purposes of our evaluation I modified the matrix to consider an idea's importance (anticipated impact) and difficulty to implement (anticipated effort).

and then plotted them on a chart with “Impact” as the y-axis and “Effort” as the x-axis.<sup>16</sup> To help team members interpret the quadrants, I labelled the top left “Quick Wins,” the top right “Major Projects,” the bottom left “Fill-ins,” and the bottom right, “Thankless Tasks.” I sent this chart to team members two days before our final session so they could process their collective responses and be ready to develop the plan when we met again.

### Session 6

With the list of concise ideas and the Action Priority Matrix, the group was ready to start working on the final “Action Plan to Improve Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest.” We began by going over the results of the survey and the resulting chart and discussing what was noteworthy or surprising.

Several of the action items received extra attention from the group. First, considerable focus was given to providing more opportunities for people to create new relationships in comfortable social settings, such as small groups, service projects, and other ministries. In addition to creating new relationships, these settings also provide opportunities for people to grow and develop already existing relationships.

The team also discussed at length the best way to develop a program or resource that provides formal diversity training for church leaders. We decided that if the action plan moved toward implementation, the first step in this area would be for a small group to begin researching programs, books, and experts that could guide us through this process. One or two members expressed discomfort with the idea of worldly programs, which they viewed as potentially dangerous to the church, so we agreed that programs

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16. See the chart in Appendix F.



should have scriptural or good theological foundations, even if that meant we would need to modify or write parts of it.

Three of the “Quick Wins” ideas were very popular with the team. They decided that bilingual signage would be part of our short-term and long-term plans. In the short term we could add interior signs with directions and descriptions as well as temporary outdoor signs. The group wants to eventually replace the large permanent street signs to include Spanish and also to consider logo or graphic changes that will communicate that we are a diverse community. The idea of building a new greeters ministry with volunteers who have been trained to greet all people with warmth, enthusiasm, and respect was a major priority. It was important to the group to assure that anybody who speaks into a microphone at Northwest has had basic training in how to speak responsibly about diversity. They were also very excited about the idea of finding programs or mentoring opportunities that will help us train up new leaders, with some extra attention to raising up minority leaders in the church.

Again, when talking about leaders, several team members brought up that current leadership training may or may not include women. Leaders at Northwest have frequently stated in recent years that conversations and changes about women’s roles are coming in the near future, but that has not yet happened. The team agreed that this was not on their list of short-term goals but thought it important to communicate to the elders the necessity of a planned timeline for these conversations to take place. The team reiterated that these conversations need to be guided by Scripture, while also making sure that we empower women to do anything at Northwest that we see women doing in Scripture.

One of the most important action items came up at the end of the meeting. The team's current assignment would conclude with the upcoming presentation to the elders. The team determined that it wanted to continue meeting in the future in order to begin working on these initiatives and launching these ministries. They decided that at the next meeting, the group would determine how often they wanted to meet, whether some team members wanted to retire from the team, and to determine if other members might want to join. The team would then decide if it wanted to start dividing up tasks, determining priority action items, and begin partnering with existing ministry leaders at church whose areas will be included in future implementation. One team member expressed discomfort with the name "Diversity Team," since the word diversity might be perceived as having a loaded or political meaning for some. The group agreed that they would come up with another name more directly tied to the biblical or Christian vision for being a unified community with all kinds of people.

The full list of action items that were on the board at that time were divided into "ideas to implement immediately" and "ideas to begin developing for future implementation." It was agreed that I would formalize that plan and send it out with the Action Priority Matrix to all of those who would be attending the final evaluation session with the outsider group of elders and ministers.

### The Evaluation Session

The evaluation session was held in a large fellowship area with one team member and one elder attending via Zoom. One elder was in the hospital with Covid-19 and could not attend. The outside evaluation group that was present consisted of three elders, the youth minister, and the children's and family minister. I began the meeting as we had all

of our previous sessions by reading Gal 3:26–29, having a moment of silent reflection, and then speaking a prayer. After the prayer, I explained the Action Priority Matrix and how it represents the meaningful work the team put in to evaluate their ideas and consider how they would impact Northwest. I then presented the “Action Plan to Increase Practices of Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

I then opened the session to questions, comments, and feedback from the evaluation group to the project team members. The two elders in the room took the lead in asking probing questions of each member of the team about their experience through the process and what they anticipated the impact would be if we implemented the ideas presented.

The first three or four team members talked about their excitement for the potential of the group’s ideas to create opportunities for new and deeper relationships to form at Northwest. The many dynamics of last two years have reduced relationship building interactions, and this proposal provides several short- and long-term plans to turn that around. Three group members also acknowledged their own personal need to overcome reluctance to get more involved in ministries and other people’s lives and also the need to focus on the church as people rather than something we go and watch on Sunday. One of the members of the evaluation group pointed out that many others at the church lack a desire for increased involvement and commitment right now. She cautioned that four of the top priorities of the group require volunteers and time commitment, and the group needs to be aware that both of those have been in short supply at Northwest recently.

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17. See Appendix B for the Action Plan.

While reporting on their experience through this process, two members shared difficult interactions they have had at church in the past because of their race. Everybody was appreciative of their sharing. Three other group members described how much they learned by listening to other people's experiences and feelings throughout this eye-opening process.

Four of the women on the team shared at different points how hopeful and excited they were about the importance and value of these efforts for their kids and grandkids and the future generations at Northwest. One member shared that she is going to be at Northwest no matter what and believes the church will be stronger if we put these ideas into practice; if we do not put them into practice, she is certain her kids will not stick around as adults. A letter written by one of the teens, which had been recently shared with a church leader was shared and voiced urgent support for including all people at the church and opening up leadership opportunities to all people. The evaluation group was encouraged by this feedback.

One team member expressed concerns about some of the ideas in the action plan. He had always appreciated how our country has been cohesive and united even during difficult times, but he felt that recently there has been great polarization in our country and in some parts of Christianity. He was concerned that some of the group's ideas could bring the polarizing influences of our current culture into the church and cause divisions rather than unity. However, he appreciated the hearts and ideas of the other team members and was encouraged that the team was going to leave behind the "Diversity Team" name, which might have loaded connotations for some people. He was pleased that the group desired a name with origins in Scripture. Several of the evaluators

responded that they also thought the name change and the shift in focus that accompanied it were wise and would be helpful for future implementation with the church at large.

At this point in the evaluation session, the focus began shifting to women's roles. As the facilitator and researcher, I tried to delay that shift temporarily while I finished getting direct feedback from the evaluation group specifically on the "implement immediately" ideas, including the shifting the team toward becoming an empowered implementation team. The tone of the conversation and the mood of the room was increasing in intensity as the conversation about women's roles kept coming up. I was able to table this discussion for a moment and get direct feedback from each of the evaluators on whether they would support and endorse all of the items in the "implement immediately" section and remain interested in learning more about the "future development" ideas in the months and years to come. They each agreed that they were in favor and none were opposed.

The conversation at this point shifted to women's roles and increased in intensity, with most people in the room becoming some combination of frustrated, defensive, or uncomfortable. It is important to note that the only action item regarding women's roles on the plan was to, in the future, talk about when conversations about women's role in church leadership would take place. As the facilitator, I oscillated between allowing people to share their thoughts and feelings so they could feel heard and intervening to lower the intensity and mediate when I felt people were misunderstanding or mischaracterizing one another. On one or two occasions I commented that it was confusing to me why individuals who were so close to one another in where they want to see this issue go at Northwest were having such a hard time seeing one another as allies

and not opponents. After several rounds of clarifying positions and mediation, several voiced that they were glad to hear that leadership has plans to address this in the near future.

At that time I summarized the evening, directing focus back to the significant number of items on the action plan that received enthusiastic support from the evaluation group. I asked all of those present to complete their insider and outsider evaluation forms online in the next twenty-four hours. One of the elders thanked them for all of their work and expressed his excitement about what is to come. I notified them that the survey would complete their involvement in the academic side of this project but that it would only begin their active work of implementing these ideas at Northwest in the future.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Throughout the sessions, data were collected in two primary ways: field notes and the document of ideas created by participants. I provided field notes, and I also had a non-participant observer take field notes. I provided a protocol for the non-participant observer to take notes on what was said, the tone with which things were said, and body language of group members. I also asked her to make personal observations and identify themes that emerged. Following each session I collected the observer's notes and added my own observations. The participation group developed an ongoing and evolving document of values and practical ideas for implementation that was completed in the final session and then presented to the elders and staff for feedback and evaluation.

Insider evaluation was received by asking members of the participant group to respond to the following prompt via a Google form after the last session:

If you would, please take a few minutes to reflect on the values and potential implementation ideas created by this group. Considering the values and practical suggestions, if you were to imagine that many of the suggestions in this document were put into practice at Northwest Church of Christ over the next five years, how do you envision that this community would be different? In other words, do you believe the resource this group has created, if put into practice, would help Northwest to better reflect the values of racial unity and inclusion we have studied during this project? What makes you excited or apprehensive about the plan?<sup>1</sup>

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1. See Appendix G for the Research Participant Evaluation Form and Appendix H for the Outsider Group Evaluation Form.

Outsider evaluation was accomplished following the final small group interview between the participation group and the elders. I presented the action plan to the evaluator group (elders and ministers) and answered a few questions. Then, the evaluation group spent over an hour getting and giving input and feedback to the participants regarding the process, the action plan, and what plans they were most excited about if implemented.

A non-participant observer was present and took field notes throughout this small group interview. Following the presentation to the elders, they received the same written prompt as the participants for evaluating the plan and its potential value to Northwest.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were gathered throughout the project through the taking of field notes, responses of participants and evaluators, and notes and observations by the researcher. Researcher observations responded to the initial non-participant observer notes, focusing on what was familiar, what I wanted to learn more about, and what was surprising. At the end of the project, a survey prompt was given to project participants and to the outside evaluation group. As the data accumulated and themes emerged from the grounded researcher observations, those themes were grouped into higher order categories.<sup>2</sup> A multitude of data sources collected and analyzed throughout this study (e.g., observers, participants, outsider evaluators) allowed for within-method triangulation of the data that resulted from this project.

### **Limitations of the Project**

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2. Dennis A. Gioia, Kevin F. Corley, Aimee L. Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology," in *Organizational Research Methods*, 2013.



The project did have some limitations as a result of the project design and the context of the church.<sup>3</sup> Some of the limitations involved the demographics and ideological makeup of both the research participant and outside evaluation groups. The decision to utilize a purposefully selected participant group, instead of a randomly selected group of participants, increased the possibility of ideological bias. A randomly selected group of participants would have more accurately reflected the wider range of opinions and perspectives present in the church. This may lead to some of the ideas facing resistance at the implementation stage as a broader range of individuals are introduced to the ideas in the plan without as much familiarity and prior agreement with the goals of the project.

The outside evaluation group consisted of two ministers and three elders of Northwest Church of Christ. This group included four men and one woman and all of them were Caucasian. Further, as the project leader and researcher, I am also a Caucasian male. While the research participant group was purposively selected to include racially and ethnically diverse members, the leaders both inside and outside of the group did not have diverse representation. Unfortunately this was unavoidable based on the context of the church. This may have created undesirable power dynamics or limited the leadership's ability to view and evaluate the participant group and their work with a diverse set of perspectives and personal backgrounds.

The project was anchored in the idea that pursuing practices that increase diversity and inclusion at Northwest is rooted in Paul's recounting of events in Gal 1–2.

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3. Brannen, M.Y., & Peterson, M. (2009). "Merging without alienating: Interventions promoting cross-cultural organizational integration and their limitations." *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40(3), 468–489.

This created a limitation in the resources considered and utilized by the group. Many contemporary methods, resources, and practices that exist to help churches navigate issues like diversity and racial reconciliation were not considered by the participant group in order to focus on Paul's convictions and rather than modern approaches. As the team transitions into implementation efforts in the future, this work of exploring contemporary resources for accomplishing their biblically-informed purpose will be an essential part of their task.

When it comes to diversity, Paul's letter to Galatians largely deals with the challenges raised by ethnicity and inclusion. As a result of sharing that focus, another limitation of this project was that it did not go significantly beyond that narrow aspect of diversity that needs to be considered by churches. Churches that truly desire to be diverse must also consider age, education level, socioeconomic status, gender, family type, and all other forms of enriching variation that are present in community. Some of the tools and approaches suggested by the participant group in this project will likely enable the church to improve the building of diverse relationships in these other groups as well, but further study and consideration will be needed in order to do this larger work more intentionally. Most importantly though, a church that values racial and ethnic diversity is likely to value diversity and inclusion in other areas as well.

### **Findings and Results**

There are two parts of the project that were very informative for me as a researcher and contributed to my findings. The first is the actual process of working with the team through the study of Gal 1–2 and the development of the action plan. The

second is the action plan itself. I will consider the process and the action plan separately in the sections below.

### Learning from the Process

The most familiar piece of data I repeatedly recognized in my own notes, the non-participant observer's notes, and the evaluations is that Northwest is a church and a community that truly values diversity. Northwest is proud of the strides it has made toward being a multiethnic church family in the past, and yet it remains convicted that it needs to take more intentional and active steps forward if it wants to continue to improve in this area. This finding affirmed my prior expectations about Northwest and the members of the team; whenever somebody shared a story of pain or exclusion from their past, they were met with kindness and compassion and at times anger toward the situation they described. The space this team formed was safe and supportive of all the individuals and views represented there.

One of the recurring familiar pieces of data that will challenge future attempts to implement the plans of this group is that people are tired, overcommitted, and not looking to invest significant amounts of time and energy in anything other than their present responsibilities. Multiple group members on multiple occasions voiced concerns about creating ministries that they were excited about, but that they themselves might not have the time or energy to attend. One of the evaluators gave feedback suggesting that although this all sounds great, currently we lack the volunteers to do it. This dynamic will certainly be an obstacle to future implementation of the action plan.

Another theme that emerged in many of the sessions that I want to continue thinking about and studying in the future. When our group was focused on topics that

dealt with relational or language barriers between Hispanic members and other individuals or groups at church, the conversation frequently focused on present and future challenges. They then would suggest ways to overcome those forward-facing problems, leading to a better future. When our group focused on topics that dealt with the relational or systemic barriers between African Americans and Caucasians, the conversation frequently focused on challenges and wrongs from the past and how dealing with the many wrongs of the past will help us to understand one another and lead to a better future. While the group was considerate of others' views, there were times I could detect an undercurrent of two different perspectives: "We can't move forward if we are so focused on the past" versus "We can't move forward if we don't acknowledge and deal with our past." This dynamic will need to be monitored and perhaps acknowledged going forward to create continued moments of empathy and cooperation.

Another trend in the data revolved around whether we were discussing diversity as something that is important to Paul and Scripture or whether we were discussing programs and resources used in community organizations, business, or non-Christian entities. Whenever the group talked about how desperately Paul wanted diverse Christian communities where no one was left out or pushed into a second-class standing, the group would all nod along and agree. Whenever we discussed looking for resources to help train leaders or launch programs, with implications that these might be found outside of church resources, several group members immediately expressed discomfort and distrust. There was a concern, sometimes verbalized, that the church might go to a political or potentially divisive approach toward diversity that could cause problems in the future. Because of reasons related to this concern, the "Diversity Team," as it was often referred

to in group emails and correspondence, will develop a new name in the future that will anchor its purposes in Scripture and not in culture. Going forward, especially as they begin implementing action items in the church at large, the team will need to be even more sensitive to a larger group of individuals who might share these discomforts. It is very important for the group to obtain a few early wins that establish its credibility and intentions, building trust for future projects that could be more challenging.

The most discouraging and surprising data received from the process came during the evaluation session. As mentioned previously, on two or three occasions during the sessions, multiple group members would point out that while we were talking about increasing representation and getting more diverse voices in leadership conversations, we were only talking about male voices. While the increased involvement of women in leadership roles at Northwest was somewhat outside the scope of this project, it was very much in line with the desire to bring more diverse voices to the table for casting vision and resolving challenges at church. It is also consistent with previously stated goals of church leadership and even recent decisions to invite women who are leaders to an upcoming elders, ministers, and deacons vision casting meeting. Since leaders have been saying for a long time that a serious conversation and study of women's roles is coming, the project group wanted to state that their long-term goals include asking the elders about a timeline is for those developments.

Unfortunately, during the evaluation session, a series of questions and comments by several individuals (both team members and evaluators) were worded strongly and delivered strongly which put the elders, at least for a while, into a defensive posture. The team members' attempt to explain that they just wanted an idea of when this conversation

could happen seemed to result in a defensiveness that appeared to be more of the same reaction they have come to expect from church leaders in the past. The elders then felt cornered. As the facilitator, it took me several rounds of attempting to lower anxieties and pull some clarifying comments out of the involved members before we were able to calm down and realize that those involved were closer to being on the same page than they had thought a few minutes earlier.

Even though it was resolved with a better understanding of where both sides were coming from, it did take some of the excitement and enthusiasm away from the evaluative work being done. Encouragingly, though, the insider and outsider evaluations indicated a resiliency about the uncomfortable interaction. Multiple people said that it was a reminder that, even among people of similar minds, conversations about changing things can be hard and that many of the things we have suggested will be difficult but still worth doing.

The data also revealed one other significant surprise for me as the researcher. Although I knew that Covid-19 had a significant impact on our relational ministries and opportunities to be involved in one another's lives through meals and special events at church, I had completely failed to realize that it had wiped out our greeters ministry. Four of our most wonderful and enthusiastic members who would wander the building hugging and greeting everybody and meeting anybody new had become "Covid shut-ins," unable to leave their homes for health reasons. Three others continue to attend but took mask and social distance seriously due to their own health concerns or those of an immediate family member. They no longer approach others because they do not know who is vaccinated. As a congregation, we no longer begin worship by "taking a moment

to meet or greet the person next to you.” People are unsure whether it is kinder to approach somebody or to give them space. In recent listening dinners hosted by our church leaders, the overwhelming top response about why people love Northwest is its loving and family-like atmosphere as soon as you walk in. This team helped to accurately assess that Covid-19 has deeply affected our habits of welcome and hospitality, and they are excited to quickly and intentionally bring those habits back.

### Findings in the Action Plan

The action plan consists of seventeen ideas—nine to implement immediately and seven to develop for future implementation.<sup>4</sup> The ideas for immediate implementation can be categorized into five groups. Two of the ideas are intended to increase the amount of Spanish language visible on physical, printed, and virtual spaces in and around the church. This is to serve two significant purposes: first, to help Spanish-speaking visitors and members have the same information that others have, and second, to visually communicate to everybody who enters our building that “eres bienvenido aquí.”<sup>5</sup> Two of the ideas involve creating more opportunities to meet people at times and in spaces where church members can connect and get to know each other better. Relationships were recognized as extremely important in helping Northwest navigate the challenges of maintaining a diverse congregation. Two of the ideas involved training leaders to be more informed about how to think and talk about diverse groups of people, thus increasing the likelihood of diverse people filling our church in the future. One of the immediate items is the development of a social media covenant that all formal church leaders sign and

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4. See Appendix B.

5. “You are welcome here.”

hold each other accountable to, and that the rest of the church be invited to join if they would like to hold themselves to the biblical standards described in the covenant.<sup>6</sup> The final two items for immediate implementation involved the “Diversity Team” transitioning from a planning and proposing group into an acting and implementation team, beginning with the creation of a new, yet-to-be-determined, Bible-based name for the group.

When the evaluation group was asked to consider just the top immediate implementation items, they gave very enthusiastic endorsements and expressed excitement about the work this group will be doing in the future as well as the impact it can have on Northwest and the community. One outside evaluator said that he thinks it is the best thing to come out of Northwest since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several commented on how much of an impact this kind of an initiative can have on the next generation and on our community. This leadership endorsement formalized the team as an ongoing implementation group with the elders’ blessing.

The longer conversation regarding the ideas for future implementation was unsurprisingly more complicated with questions and feedback about potential issues with some of the items. This was not a surprise to the team members because these items were placed on the longer-term list because we know that we have much to learn, other ministry leaders to involve, and resources to explore before implementation. Additionally, some of these decisions are owned by other Northwest leader groups, who will need to be sold on future changes and developments. The two ideas receiving the

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6. A group of the deacons developed the Northwest Online Kindness Covenant; all of the elders, ministers, and deacons have signed it; and it has been presented to the church. See Appendix I.



most positive attention from the evaluator group were to develop new future leaders for all areas of the church and to bring in outside Bible teachers or experts to guide us through some of these conversations through workshops, seminars, or even consulting.

### Summary of Findings

It was encouraging to me that, through the action plan, the team was able to create short-term and long-term plans that will have small- and big-picture implications. The team was appropriately ambitious and realistic in its priorities and received very affirming feedback on all of the action items that pertained to creating a church with increased diversity and practices of inclusion among people of different racial or ethnic groups.

The tense exchange at the evaluation session provided both a reminder and foretaste of the difficult changes and conversations ahead. However, the exchange also revealed the resolve of the team members to have the tough conversations and not give up the first time their ideas are challenged. It will be important for the church to continue to find more and more ways to draw closer to God and closer to one another in order to create relationships strong enough to weather the challenges ahead as we continue trying to grow to look more like the fully diverse kingdom of God.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: WHY IS THIS STUDY SIGNIFICANT?

#### **Galatians as a Lens to Evaluate Diversity**

Every week throughout the project our group began our sessions by reading and meditating on Gal 3:26–29:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This diverse unity represents the eventual reality for the kingdom of God. And yet the church, which embodies the kingdom of God in our world today, struggles to enact that vision in this present time.<sup>1</sup> The majority of churches remain homogenous, and even those with diversity struggle to ensure that minorities in the community are never treated like second-tier members. Northwest Church of Christ is a church that occupies a special space in that tension. On the one hand, its leaders and members constantly declare their love of the diversity present in the congregation and desire for it to increase. On the other hand, there are some challenges and gaps that must be addressed if the church is to continue growing more diverse and more inclusive in the future.

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1. For a history of past racism struggles in Churches of Christ, specifically see Douglas A. Foster, “Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ: A Historical View” in *Unfinished Reconciliation: Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ*, edited by Gary Holloway and John York (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2013), 115–134.

Studying Gal 1–2 and the social world of early Christian communities proves to be helpful for initiating and guiding our conversations at Northwest regarding diversity and unity. First, at our church it was necessary to anchor the conversations about diversity to Scripture. In our country’s current climate on matters of race and diversity, even saying that there are problems or that we want to address them is considered by some to be a politically motivated point of view. However, pointing out the Northwest characteristics that are similar to the behavior and attitudes that Paul confronts in Galatians provides a biblical mandate to address these issues and improve as individuals and as a church.

During the study, considering how the gentile Christians would have felt at Antioch, and perhaps Galatia, created a meaningful entry point into conversations with minority group members about their experiences in today’s church. Our study highlighted Paul’s insistence that outsiders converting to Christianity must leave behind the immoral aspects of their past pagan lifestyle. However, in any other aspect of their ethnicity, their full inclusion as members should not be conditional upon their editing their identity. Recognizing this reality allowed us to ask, “Have any of you ever felt that you were a second-tier Christian unless you edited some part of your identity or went to worship somewhere else altogether?” Stories of past hurts and implied messages of inferiority or exclusion were able to be shared in the safe space that was created for the team to listen to and learn from one another. While other approaches to conversations about racial or ethnic identity might cause some people to feel attacked or to respond defensively, in our context this biblical approach allowed us to bring our work alongside Paul’s work in Galatians.

This approach also reveals problems with other approaches to resolving racial tensions in churches. Some churches might feel that these issues are only a problem if we talk about them. Others might desire solutions that are in pursuit of conformity and sameness in order to achieve unity, rather than actively pursuing and celebrating diversity in the midst of unity. Some churches and individuals might prefer separation in order to ease the discomfort of growing together. And some buy into the idea that if we all simply keep getting closer to Jesus and focusing on God, we will become more united over time.

When Peter withdrew from table fellowship with gentiles-in-Christ by following some level of peer pressure, he either intentionally or unintentionally advanced a solution that has echoes in all the approaches to racial unity mentioned above. When Paul saw his withdrawal, he confronted Peter to his face publicly and called on him to change. Separation, treating people as second-tier Christians, and conformity were not acceptable solutions for Paul. Today, this text challenges churches and Christians to look into the mirror of Gal 1–2 and decide if their commitments, conversations, relationships, and actions look more like Peter or more like Paul.

### **Did the Project Reveal Unknown Problems?**

Going into the project I wanted to determine if this project would simply provide a space for people to share what they already thought and knew about diversity at Northwest or whether working through the study and engaging with one another in the group setting would reveal some unknown strengths or challenges for me and the group. In other words, would looking at our church together reveal some individual and collective “blind spots” regarding diversity at Northwest? Several of these blind spots did become apparent through the project.

One of the big surprises for the group was the current status of our greeting and hospitality ministry to visitors. Going into the project, I think everybody in the group would have described it as a strength. However, while we were discussing how minority visitors might feel their first time at Northwest, we realized how much that ministry has been affected by Covid-19. We also then realized how important it is that all people, no matter race, class, language, or life stage, should be greeted with equal respect, enthusiasm, and attention. These realizations led to one of the most popular action items for the future: the development of an active greeter ministry of individuals who enjoy welcoming people and who have completed a diversity training program.

The other dynamic that I did not fully appreciate before is that among those who are in favor of working toward being a diverse and unified community, significant differences of opinion exist regarding how we get there. Two examples of these differences arose on several occasions. First, as the group spoke openly about multiple times, there are some people who would like to go find best practices in the world, wherever they come from, and bring them into the church to help us grow. Others who are skeptical of the world only want Christian or biblical practices and solutions to improve racial and ethnic diversity at church. Secondly, a dynamic that was not directly addressed by the group but was evident and helpful to me was the feeling of some that racial unity cannot be achieved without addressing the problems of past hurts. Others think it is divisive and unproductive to talk about the past and would rather focus on improving in the present and the future. At times these two perspectives caused tension in the group as they developed an action plan for the church. It is a testament to the work of the project group that the plan includes some items from each of these perspectives, and

that group members developed a plan that includes different approaches yet is still cohesive.

### **The Project's Impact on Participants**

The process of studying this topic, listening to one another's stories and ideas, and working together to form an action plan helped individuals grow and the group to draw closer to one another. Several participants expressed that this project helped to open their eyes to the difficult experiences of others and that it helped them understand some of the reasons we need to change and grow. Others shared their enthusiasm for the potential of the plans and the impact they would have on future generations.

There were several indicators that the group made a significant impact in the lives of its participants. First, multiple group members had or were exposed to Covid-19 throughout the project, and an overwhelming majority of them ensured they would be able to attend via Zoom because they cared about the project and did not want to miss anything. Also noteworthy was that while the group sessions all lasted longer than originally expected, many group members also remained for up to an hour or more after the sessions, processing the conversations or simply connecting and building relationships. At the evaluation session, a couple of members mentioned that they had been sharing the group's plans with friends and conveyed their friends excitement and interest in joining the conversation, thus demonstrating a level of excitement that is contagious. Most significant though was the group's unprompted decision and commitment to continue functioning in the future as an implementation and leadership group, carrying out the plans they have already put in place and learning and improving as they go.

## **Future Significance at Northwest**

The most significant development from this project is the upcoming transition of the planning team into an implementation team. The current enthusiasm of this group, the balance of manageable first steps and ambitious long-term goals, and their belief that the work they are doing will make a generational difference at our church provides an incredible starting point for this newly empowered group of members. It will be important for the group to choose a few early visible action items that will get the attention of the congregation, create more contagious enthusiasm for their efforts, and build trust in the group and the work they are doing. It will also be essential for the group to intentionally include the eldership as they make and develop plans so that the elders are informed allies rather than surprised questioners.

The group made a plan to meet again in one month with four objectives. First, to determine how often it will meet, how it will choose which action items to tackle, and how the group will function. Second, to provide all current group members an opportunity to step out, thanking them for their hard work in launching this group. Third, to consider other members who may want to join the group and to determine the new-member onboarding processes. Finally, to develop a new name that is both rooted in Scripture and effective for communicating the group's purpose and goals.

It is expected that the group will have some early successes and some early setbacks. One of the most telling moments in the future of this team will be seeing how it learns from, grows from, and reacts to early failures. The other potential threat to the group's success is a return to weariness or burnout, as has become common among church members and leaders in recent times. However, a return to relational ministries

and activities and the activation of a new group of enthusiastic leaders has the potential to activate other members to step back into greater involvement in the future.

### **Implications for Other Churches**

This project was designed specifically for the context and community of believers at Northwest Church of Christ in Oklahoma City. Some aspects of the project design and implementation would likely not be effective at some churches with different contexts. For example, some churches have a high regard for the biblical appeal for social justice and equality of all people and are engaged in many social justice programs in their communities. Those groups might find this approach too moderate in its willingness or ability to bring about change in both the church and the surrounding community. This approach would also not be effective as designed in a church with little to no minority representation or voices. This project depends on listening to the voices of those minority group members with empathy and a willingness to learn, grow, and improve. Without their presence in a space that is safe for them to share, this project is unlikely to have much impact.

For churches that value diversity and inclusion and are able to include minority voices who trust the group to be a safe place to share and learn from one another, this project can be adapted and implemented to help other churches or Christian communities. Coming alongside the social challenges of Peter, Paul, and the gentiles and seeing their different approaches as well as Paul's conviction that Christians should not have to edit their ethnic identity to be full members of the church can be very helpful for churches which want to evaluate themselves and to develop an action plan to be better.



## **Final Remarks**

Too many Christians and churches today have accepted the idea that doing the reconciling and connecting work of forming multiethnic family-like Christian communities is a new trend inspired by contemporary cultural influences. Rather, this is in fact one of the earliest Christian practices and habits. Carrying out this work was not always easy for them, and it will not always be easy for us. They failed and fell short at times, and we will, too. Paul resolutely believed that the root cause of his persecution was his insistence that gentiles could be Christians and fully welcomed to the table without first giving up their ethnic identity. Today, the church has too often conceded on matters of racial unity and diversity without a second thought. We need to reclaim Paul's conviction and willingness to confront wrong attitudes and behaviors in the church and create new opportunities for learning, relationships, and empowerment in churches. Since we know unified diversity will be evident in the throne room of the Lamb, we should start living into the future reality in this present moment so that by our love the world will know that we are truly Jesus's disciples.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB Approval Letter

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
326 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



Dear Kent,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

- (IRB# ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:
- Non-research, and
  - Non-human research
- Based on:

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

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

## APPENDIX B

### Action Plan to Increase Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ

#### Ideas to begin implementing immediately:

- Develop a welcoming and greeting team that welcomes people to church before services and invites them back after services. This team would need to do training about how to engage with people from all socioeconomic groups and races, including those who speak Spanish.
- Increase the amount of bilingual signage inside and outside of the building.
- Increase the use of Spanish in bulletins and other printed materials used at Northwest.
- Bring back Sunday morning breakfasts and other social events as soon as possible.
- Provide worship leader training and include some education about how to talk about minority groups and racial unity at Northwest. Continue to offer this periodically.
- Develop a social media covenant for church leaders and invite members to join.
- Form a small group of members who explore resources, experts, and programs that Northwest can use to provide some formal training about diversity in the near future. This program would be for leaders first and potentially for interested members later.
- Empower the “Diversity Team” at Northwest to continue working on these initiatives and begin launching ideas and ministries. Many of these will involve team members partnering with existing ministries (i.e., worship leaders, children’s education, etc.) in order to be implemented.
- Come up with a new name for the “Diversity Team.”

#### Ideas to begin developing for future implementation

- Redesign the church’s logo to a design that communicates our values of unity between all people.
- Replace large permanent outdoor signs with new signs that include Spanish.
- Begin developing and training new leaders for worship, church leadership positions, and leading church ministries. This would need to include all ages and would likely involve mentoring and other training methods.
- If we are going to communicate the need to include more voices and develop new leaders, we must also determine when we will begin real conversations and begin studying biblical ways to include women in leadership at Northwest.
- Create more opportunities for mission and service for people to work alongside one another and build relationships. Create small group opportunities (probably

- not LifeGroups) for people to build relationships with people who are different from them.
- Seek out strong Bible teachers who are experts in some of these areas to come in and provide short-term lessons or workshops on special topics.
- Provide teacher training for Bible classes of all ages on how to interact with children from diverse communities as well as ways to interact with children from potentially troubled backgrounds or who have suffered trauma in their past.

APPENDIX C

Field Note Protocol

**Blank Field Note Protocol**

Date:

Time:

Session #:

Notes	Researcher Comment	Themes



## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Creating an Action Plan to Increase Diversity and Inclusion at Northwest Church of Christ

Please let the researcher(s) know if you are participating in any other research studies at this time.

Also, please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. This contact information may be found at the end of this form.

### **Purposes and Procedures**

**Purpose of the Research** – The purpose of this project is to develop a set of principles and potential practical applications to enhance racial diversity at Northwest Church of Christ. This resource is intended to be a guiding document for church leaders and may be helpful toward creating or influencing future church initiatives, ministries, and leadership decisions. It may or may not be used as a published document for the church at large. The project will include a series of sessions which will present a biblical theology of racial unity for Christian communities from the biblical writings of Paul.

**Expected Duration of Participation** – If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend 8 sessions with the study staff during the summer and/or fall of 2021. Each visit is expected to take around 60 minutes. There will be a final session where the participant group will present the final resource document to the elders for feedback and evaluation of the resource.

Description of the Procedures – Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

Study Procedures – This project will use qualitative methods with a group of 8–10 participants from Northwest Church of Christ, forming a purposively selected group. The first week will be an introduction to the project. Each of the next five sessions will begin with guided prayer and Scripture reading and then spend time studying Paul’s theology of racial inclusion in Christian community. The first session will include a shared meal, and others may or may not. In the final sessions, the group will begin putting together a plan with actionable suggestions that will remove obstacles to diversity and increase opportunities for future diversity in the Christian community at Northwest Church of Christ. Upon signing this document, you understand that your ideas may be incorporated into this project thesis including the resource document that may be utilized by Northwest.

Evaluation Procedures – Following the completion of the study procedures there will be a brief survey for all members of the participant group. Additionally, there will be an evaluation session where the participation group will present their resources to the elders of Northwest Church of Christ for feedback and evaluation.

## **Risks and Discomforts**

There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

In any conversation about race, there is a possibility of painful memories or disclosures occurring. This risk will be minimized whenever possible, and the study group will begin with a group discussion on how to safely discuss such topics.

While there is always a risk of information shared in community being disclosed, participants will be instructed to maintain confidentiality for study sessions. All published quotations will remain anonymous unless permission is given by the quoted individual.

The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks associated with this study. However, if you experience any problems, you may contact the Principal Investigator (contact information below).

The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

## Potential Benefits

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include 1) Understanding more clearly God's will for you as a Christian; 2) Enhancing relationships with other members of the congregation; 3) Helping the leadership especially and the congregation generally to form better practices and procedures of racial inclusion. The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the researchers hope that the information given and experiences of Christian community afforded participants through this study will help others in similar situations in the future.

## Provisions for Confidentiality

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the participant group, such as the elders or members of the staff at Northwest Church of Christ or members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by: 1) any personal information or quotations you provide will be reported anonymously in the study findings unless permission is given otherwise; 2) All notes obtained during the course of this study will be kept by the Principal Investigator in a locked file cabinet behind two locked doors.

## Contacts

You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator is Kenton Brown, Preacher at Northwest Church of Christ, and may be contacted at (405) 420-5783 or [kentonreeves@gmail.com](mailto:kentonreeves@gmail.com).

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact the ACU faculty advisor for this project,

Dr. Richard Wright – Associate Professor  
Abilene Christian University  
[\(325\) 674-3708](tel:(325)674-3708)  
[raw15a@acu.edu](mailto:raw15a@acu.edu)

If you have any concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885

[megan.roth@acu.edu](mailto:megan.roth@acu.edu)

320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103

Abilene, TX 79699

### Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

## APPENDIX E

### The Church Is a Salad

#### An Excerpt from *A Fellowship of Differents* by Scot McKnight

"We have smothered all differences in the church so that everything is the same: designed for one gender, one socioeconomic group, one race, one culture, and one theology." (17)

In today's excerpt from *A Fellowship of Differents*, Scot McKnight challenges the church to consider ways we should be a mixture of people from all across the map and spectrum: men and women, rich and poor, black and white, and everything in between.

There are three ways to eat a salad: the American Way, the Weird Way, and the Right Way. The American Way of eating a salad is to fill your bowl with some iceberg lettuce or some spinach leaves, some tomato slices and olives, and maybe some carrots, then smother it with salad dressing — Ranch or Thousand Island or Italian or, for special occasions, Caesar.

The Weird Way is to separate each item in your salad around on your plate, then eat them as separate items. People who do this often do not even use dressing. As I said, weird.

Now the Right Way to make and eat a salad is to gather all your ingredients — some spinach, kale, chard, arugula, iceberg lettuce (if you must) — and chop them into smaller bits. Then cut up some tomatoes, carrots, onions, red pepper, and purple cabbage. Add some nuts and dried berries, sprinkle some pecorino romano cheese, and finally drizzle over the salad some good olive oil, which somehow brings the taste of each item to its fullest. Surely this is what God intended when he created “mixed salad.”

#### **THE CHURCH IS A SALAD**

In our last chapter, I highlighted just how important the church is in our spiritual formation, so if we want to get the church right, we have to learn to see it as a salad in a bowl, made the Right Way of course. For a good salad is a fellowship of different tastes, all mixed together with the olive oil accentuating the taste of each. The earliest Christian churches were made up of folks from all over the social map, but they formed a fellowship of “different tastes,” a mixed salad of the best kind.

Understand that these early Christians did not meet in churches and sit apart from one another in pews, and then when the music ended get in their chariots and go home. No, their churches were small, and they met in homes or house churches. A recent study by a British scholar has concluded that if the apostle Paul's house churches were composed of about thirty people, this would have been their approximate make-up:

- a craftworker in whose home they meet, along with his wife, children, a couple of male slaves, a female domestic slave, and a dependent relative
- some tenants, with families and slaves and dependents, also living in the same home in rented rooms
- some family members of a householder who himself does not participate in the house church
- a couple of slaves whose owners do not attend
- some freed slaves who do not participate in the church
- a couple homeless people
- a few migrant workers renting small rooms in the home

Add to this mix some Jewish folks and a perhaps an enslaved prostitute and we see how many “different tastes” were in a typical house church in Rome: men and women, citizens and freed slaves and slaves (who had no legal rights), Jews and Gentiles, people from all moral walks of life, and perhaps, most notably, people from elite classes all the way down the social scale to homeless people.

Do you think these folks agreed on everything? (Impossible is the right answer.) Were they a fellowship of “different”? (Yes is the right answer.) Was life together hard? (Yes, again.) That's the whole point of what it means to be a church. The Christian life is not just about how I am doing as an individual, but especially about how we are doing as a church, and how and what I am doing in that mix of others called the church.

God has designed the church — and this is the heart of Paul's mission — to be a fellowship of difference and different. It is a mixture of people from all across the map and spectrum: men and women, rich and poor. It is a mix of races and ethnicities: Caucasians, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, Indian Americans — I could go on, but you see the point. The church I grew up in, bless its heart, was a fellowship of sames and likes. There was almost no variety in our church. It was composed entirely of white folks with the same beliefs, the same tastes in music and worship and sermons and lifestyle; men wore suits and ties and women wore dresses and not a few of them wore church hats.

Getting the church right is so important. The church is God's worldchanging social experiment of bringing unlikes and different to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family. When this happens, we show the world what love, justice, peace, reconciliation, and life together are designed by God to be. The church is God's show-and-tell for the world to see how God wants us to live as a family. But there's something deeper going on too.

## CHURCH LIFE SHOULD MODEL THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

My claim is also that local churches shape how its people understand the Christian life, so let's think about this briefly. If the church is a mixed salad, or a fellowship of differents, then. . .

We should see different genders at church. Do we?  
We should see different socioeconomic groups at church. Do we?  
We should see different races at church. Do we?  
We should see different cultures at church. Do we?  
We should see different music styles at church. Do we?  
We should see different artistic styles at church. Do we?  
We should see different moral histories at church. Do we?  
We should see different forms of communication at church. Do we?  
We should see different ages involved at church. Do we?  
We should see different marital statuses at church. Do we?

Even more, if the church is a mixed salad in a bowl. . .

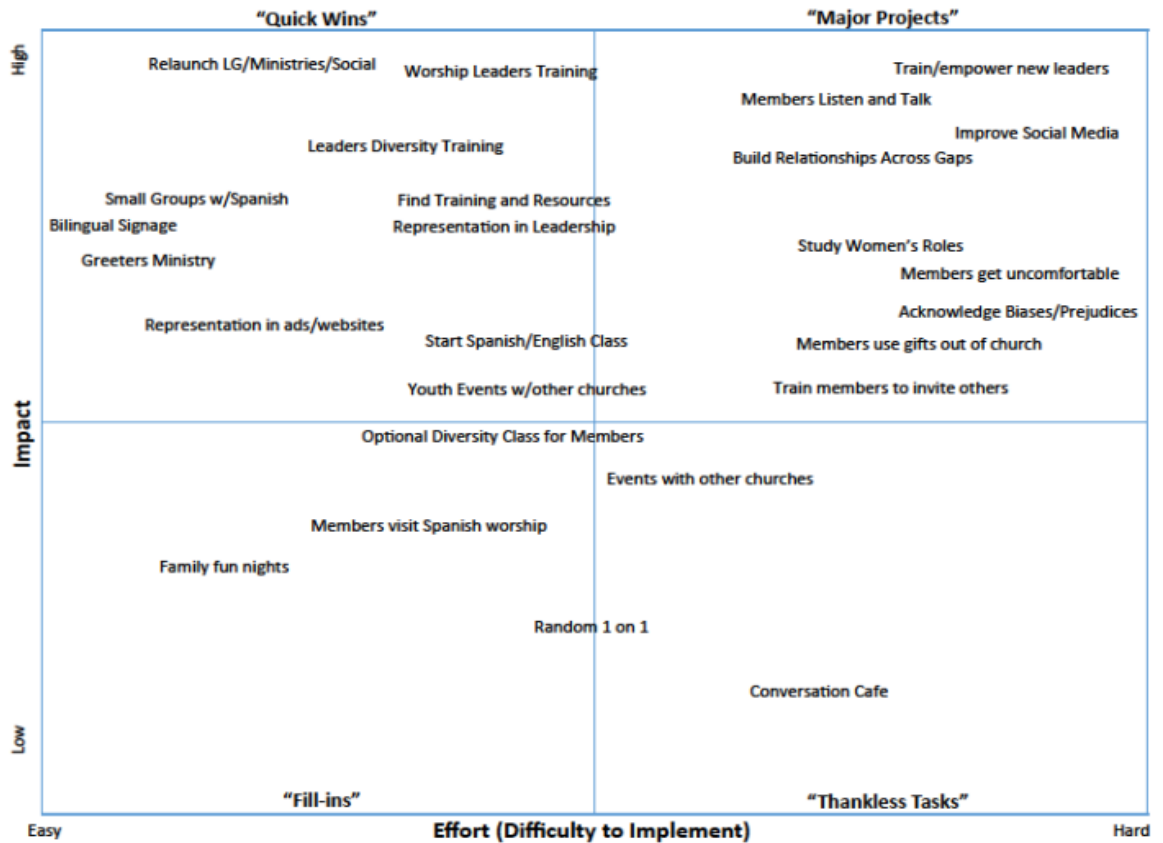
We should understand the Christian life as a fellowship. Do we?  
We should understand it as a social revolution. Do we?  
We should understand it as life together. Do we?  
We should understand it as transcending difference. Do we?  
We should understand it as honoring difference. Do we?  
We should understand it as enjoying difference. Do we?  
We should understand it as love, justice, and reconciliation. Do we?

No, in fact, we don't. We've turned the church, as we have done with some of our salad making, into the American Way and the Weird Way. What does that mean? If the American Way is smothering the salad with dressing so that it all tastes like dressing, we have smothered all differences in the church so that everything is the same: designed for one gender, one socioeconomic group, one race, one culture, and one theology. We have become ingrown, like a toenail. Anyone who doesn't fit becomes invisible, gets ignored, is shelved, or goes AWOL.

Put differently, we've made the church into the American dream for our own ethnic group with the same set of convictions about next to everything. No one else feels welcome. What Jesus and the apostles taught was that you were welcomed because the church welcomed all to the table.

## APPENDIX F

### Action Priority Matrix





## APPENDIX G

### Evaluative Prompt for Research Participants

If you would, please take a few minutes to reflect on the values and potential implementation ideas created by this group. Considering the values and practical suggestions, if you were to imagine that many of the suggestions in this document were put into practice at Northwest Church of Christ over the next five years, how likely is it that Northwest would be different as a result of this vision? In other words, do you believe the resource this group has created, if put into practice, would help Northwest to more or less reflect the values of racial unity and inclusion we have studied during this project, or have little to no effect at all? What makes you excited or apprehensive from the plan?

## APPENDIX H

### Evaluative Prompt for Elder and Minister Outsider Group

If you would, please take a few minutes to reflect on the values and potential implementation ideas created by this group. Considering the values and practical suggestions, if you were to imagine that many of the suggestions in this document were put into practice at Northwest Church of Christ over the next five years, how likely is it that Northwest would be different as a result of this vision? In other words, do you believe the resource this group has created, if put into practice, would help Northwest to more or less reflect the values of racial unity and inclusion they have studied during this project, or have little to no effect at all? What makes you excited or apprehensive from the plan?

## APPENDIX I

### Online Kindness Covenant

In an effort to be the most effective servants to God, the Northwest Church of Christ, and our Christian siblings worldwide, we commit these things to each other. We desire to hold each other accountable, in success and failure, and endeavor to improve our ability to communicate with each other both online and face to face.

Please read over the following pages first. Pray and meditate over these words for at least 24 hours and then initial each of the lines on pages 2 and 3 and then put your signature below.

The church offers a message of hope and reconciliation to a world deeply divided by political, theological, and cultural differences. Too often, however, our communication has reflected the divisions of our cultures rather than the unity we have in the body of Christ. We unite to urge those who claim the name of Christ to *"get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"* (Ephesians 4:31–32).

*"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak"* (1 Corinthians 8:9). All too often people think because they have the right to post, that nobody has the right to tell them they shouldn't. But this passage reminds us that if it harms another person's faith then Scripture advises we not post it. *"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer"* (Psalm 19:14).

Signed by: \_\_\_\_\_

In an effort to fulfill Christ's purposes:

\_\_\_\_\_ I affirm that each of us is created in and reflects the image of God. The respect we owe God should be reflected in the honor and respect we show to each other in our common humanity. *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be"* (James 3:9–10).

\_\_\_\_\_ I recognize that we cannot function together as brothers and sisters of the Northwest church unless I am mindful of how I treat others. In pursuit of the common good in our life together, each of us must therefore *"put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body"* (Ephesians 4:25). *"Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves"* (Romans 12:10).

\_\_\_\_\_ I commit that my dialogue with others will reflect the spirit of the Scriptures. We are encouraged to be *"quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry"* (James 1:19). I will carefully guard my heart and the language I use in expressing our differences. *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"* (Proverbs 4:23).

\_\_\_\_\_ I pledge that when we disagree, I will do so respectfully. I will not falsely impugn others' motives, attack others' character, or question others' faith. Humbly recognizing that in our limited, human opinions, *"we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror"* (1 Corinthians 13:12), I will therefore *"be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love"* (Ephesians 4:2).

\_\_\_\_\_ I will embrace Christ's admonition that I speak confidentially "to" others prior to speaking "about" them to the church. *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you"* (Matthew 18:15).

\_\_\_\_\_ I commit to pray daily for our leaders, and for those with whom I may agree politically and spiritually, as well as those with whom I may disagree. *"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness"* (1 Timothy 2:1–2). I believe that it is more difficult to hate others, even my adversaries and my enemies, when I am praying for them. Together we strive to be faithful witnesses to our Lord, who prayed *"that they may be one"* (John 17:22).

\_\_\_\_\_ I pledge to God and to others that I will lead by example in a time where civil discourse seems to have broken down. I will model a better way of treating each other in our faith communities, even across religious and political lines. I will strive to create safe congregations that are sacred spaces for common prayer and community discussion as we come together to seek God's will for our future together. *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves"* (Philippians 2:3).

\_\_\_\_\_ I commit to bear witness to Christ's presence and the kingdom of God in this world. Recognizing that the world is watching, I seek to be an authentic Christ follower who recognizes, *"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"* (Psalm 133:1).

\_\_\_\_\_ I commit to avoid any speech (or endorsement or promotion of speech) that is derogatory toward a group of people. This can include race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, caste, gender, or disability. For example, I will avoid posting anything

that would make members or potential members of Northwest feel disrespected, looked down on, or unwelcome because of their belonging to any of the groups mentioned above. *“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving”* (Ephesians 5:4).

## BRIEF VITA

Kenton Brown was born in Edmond, Oklahoma on September 29, 1983. He graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in Bible from Oklahoma Christian University in 2006. While attending Oklahoma Christian University Kenton began working as the youth and family minister at Northwest Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, OK (2004–2009). The day after graduating he married his wife, Leah. He completed a master of science degree in Family Life Education from Lubbock Christian University in 2008 and became a Certified Family Life Educator with the National Council on Family Relations (2008–2010). Kenton transitioned into the associate minister role at Northwest Church of Christ in 2009. In 2015 he completed a master of arts degree in Family Life Ministry at Oklahoma Christian University. He then became the preacher and executive minister at Northwest Church of Christ in 2019. Kenton and Leah have three children, Carter (2009), Mackenzie (2011), and Harper (2015). Kenton entered the Doctor of Ministry program at Abilene Christian University in 2016.